Deception

by BriEva, KizuKatana

Summary

"It says here that you were sent along with the proposal to demonstrate Orochimaru's... deep appreciation of my special consideration and attention to this matter," Sasuke said, his voice inflectionless.

Sasuke eyed him with seeming disinterest. "Is there a problem?"

"No," Naruto said sinking fluidly to his knees, his hand slowly raising to Sasuke's zipper.
Obligated service

Chapter by KizuKatana

Warning: Hard Yaoi (Boy x Boy) slight non-con feel in the beginning, a LOT of SasuNaru sex, violence, language, etc. Not appropriate for young readers. 18+

Disclaimer - It wouldn't be fanfiction if I owned Naruto, now would it? And I wouldn't still be working my day job if I made any money writing this, that's for damn sure.

Author's note - This will be BY FAR the most sexual fic I have ever posted. Sex will all be SasuxNaru with probably no major side pairings (but there will be many side characters that will be very important). It will also be the darkest fic I have written so far. Not angsty, just dark in other ways which will become clear pretty much immediately in this chapter. If you don't like the first chapter, you will not like the rest of the fic.

In terms of this story, I am breaking out of my crutch of having Naruto and Sasuke already having a strong bond from childhood tying them together. They meet for the first time as adults in this fic. As always in my stories, neither of these guys is submissive or girlie so if you are looking for a girlie Uke, please just skip anything I ever write. This will be a heavily plot-based fic, despite lots and lots of sex. Also, this story will take place in New York, not Japan, since I don't know enough about how big cities run in Japan to make this work. If this is the first fic of mine that you are reading, you should just know that I am mildly allergic to sweetness, so if fluff is your thing there probably won't be much here for you to enjoy.

-xXx-

Uchiha Sasuke looked up from his desk in his home office and stretched to release some of the tension in his muscles that had accumulated from working at his desk for so long. His office spoke of both power and influence, and a casual observer would have been shocked by the relatively young age of the man who occupied it. But a closer look would reveal the confidence, intelligence, and control that had propelled the twenty-five-year-old to finish college by the age of 19 and law school by the age of 21. He had started his career by joining one of the most powerful law firms in New York, and moved on from there. While still not quite equal to the resume of his older brother, there were few who could say that Uchiha Sasuke was anything other than impressive.

Despite it being after 9pm on a Friday evening, he was alone in his home, still dressed in the expensively tailored suit that he had worn to work that day. His solitary state certainly wasn't for lack of willing company, but rather a strong sense of privacy and low tolerance for most people outside of the forced socialization that his job demanded. His face was masculine and beautiful, with pale skin and fine black brows, but it was his deep, velvety black eyes that captured most people's attention. While it benefited his career to be photogenic, he also found it rather annoying to be stalked and coveted by literally throngs of admirers. He had chosen the building he resided in due to its location on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, as well as its formidable security to protect his privacy in his rare moments of down time.

He was finishing up a draft of a speech he had to give at a charity benefit the following night. While he didn't love public speaking, he excelled at it, as he did with almost everything else. His voice was a deep baritone, which people found compelling, and he had a magnetic presence that drew literally every eye in the room when he took the podium. Combining that with a ruthless intellect and instinctive feel for people's motivations it was no wonder that at twenty-five, he had become the
youngest city council member in New York. His looks alone had guaranteed him the women's vote (and at least 10% of the men's), but he had more than earned their confidence within his first three months of office by his work ethic and determination.

The phone on his desk rang discreetly. A strong but elegant hand picked up the phone.

"Uchiha," he said tersely.

"Good evening, Uchiha-sama," the voice of the security officer from the luxury apartment complex Sasuke lived in said politely. Despite being an American, the man attempted to show Japanese style respect to the influential man residing in the top floor of their building. Sasuke had lived in the US for most of his life, but he appreciated the gesture. "There is a man here who says he has a message that must be delivered to you. He says it is from Sanin Orochimaru, and that he has been instructed to deliver it to you personally. He is not from one of the registered courier services. What do you wish me to do?"

Sasuke paused. Orochimaru was someone both he his brother Itachi disliked instinctively. They socialized in the same circles, all being wealthy, powerful men who had emigrated from Japan. But Orochimaru had some very shady connections and an obsessive and power-hungry nature that the brothers recognized and knew to distance themselves from. The man had been trying to curry favor with them for years given their influential family name and significant fortune. But once Itachi had become an Assistant District Attorney, the man had become almost obsessed with the brothers. Itachi had at one point threatened to put a restraining order on him, which had caused Orochimaru to temporarily back off. With Sasuke recently entering public service as an elected official, he found himself needing to be more cautious of how much he alienated the distasteful man. Orochimaru had strong connections within the Asian community in New York, and it was dangerous to insult him out-of-hand. Not to mention the fact that the man had a significant fortune which could be used to help unseat Sasuke or even cause problems for Itachi's boss if deployed against them in the next election cycle. Sasuke therefore had been forced to maintain cautious relations with him.

But that was different from actually allowing a representative of the man into his private home. Sasuke's analytical mind quickly ran down the options and associated risks.

"Take the messenger's name and send him up, Jugo," Sasuke said. Orochimaru would not be foolish enough to attach his name to this visitor if the man had ill intent. The reason that Orochimaru was still accepted in the business and political arenas was precisely because he managed to distance himself from the illicit activities he was involved with, though he was unable to fully suppress the rumors that circulated about him. In general, Sasuke had little fear of physical confrontations, but he didn't seek them out as they were typically counterproductive. Both he and his brother had taken up martial arts as children and had continued into their adult lives as a nod to their cultural heritage and a way to release stress and keep fit. The ancient katana that was mounted on the wall above his living room fireplace was not entirely for decoration. The guard would ensure that his visitor was not carrying a weapon, so Sasuke had little to worry about. An attack from Orochimaru, if it happened, would likely be much less direct, and much more subtle. Such was his style.

"Yes, sir," Jugo said.

A short while later, the elevator chimed. Since Sasuke lived in the penthouse, which took up the entire top floor of the building and had it's own private elevator which required a key and was accessible only past the security desk in the building.

Sasuke stilled when he saw the blond man who exited the elevator, shocked recognition flooding him. It was the man from the holding cell he had seen three weeks ago at the police station. The blond had been brought in with the remnants of Nagato's crew after the raid. Itachi had told him that
there had not been enough evidence on several of the people who had been arrested at the time to hold them, and the police had been forced to let a few go. How had this man ended up working for Orochimaru? As far as Sasuke knew, Orochimaru had severed ties with Nagato years ago, when Nagato had become bolder with his illegal operations and Orochimaru had decided it was too risky to remain affiliated with him. There was definite hostility between the factions, but he supposed that with Nagato dead, perhaps Orochimaru had been able to absorb some of the remaining members of the other's group into his own.

While the logical part of Sasuke's brain was processing these observations, another part of his brain was busy memorizing the way the blond moved as he walked towards him. There was no fear or hesitation. He had a strong, fluid stride, and Sasuke felt a slight instinctive prickle as he wondered if he actually would be able to take the man before him in a fight. It intrigued him in a way that surprised him. All of Sasuke's battles were fought on an intellectual level. His sparring partners were really more just exercise companions, except for Itachi, who took it more seriously. Somehow, Sasuke found himself physically aware of the blond in a way he could not quite explain. Certainly he would not be asking this man to be his sparring partner. He supposed it was due to the unusual circumstances under which he had first seen him.

Sasuke and Itachi were midway through their weekly dinner at their favorite Italian restaurant. While most people had to wait almost two months for a reservation, the Uchiha brothers enjoyed a standing reservation at the best table in the house.

They both had hectic, high pressure lives, but Saturday dinner was the one thing that they both made sure to hold sacred on their calendars. They discussed the events of the week, politics, and family. But mostly they just enjoyed the presence of each other's company and wit.

Itachi's phone chimed that he had received a text and he flicked a casual glance. His brows drew together and he immediately picked up his phone to place a call. Sasuke wasn't offended. It had to be a major emergency for his brother to interrupt their dinner.

"When did it happen?" Itachi paused listening to the voice on the other line.

"He's dead?"

That pricked Sasuke's attention.

"When are they being brought in?"

"I'll be right there. Do not allow anyone to be questioned until I arrive."

Itachi looked at Sasuke apologetically. Sasuke just raised a brow as he signaled to the waiter to bring their check.

"Nagato's dead. His entire crew was just arrested in a raid and they're all down at the station in booking."

Sasuke looked at Itachi in a bit of shock. Nagato had been a major criminal mastermind, with roots that connected back to powerful Yakuza factions in Japan. He had been responsible for at least ten undercover policemen being killed, not to mention a ring of illegal sex trafficking and antiquities smuggling. Itachi had been building a case against Nagato for the past three years, but somehow the man always seemed to get off on a technicality. Rumor had circulated that a special task force that even Itachi did not have access to had been able to get a man inside the secretive organization. The
rumors were apparently true as evidence began to surface that had enabled them to take down the entire sex trafficking part of Nagato's organization. Itachi had been frustrated that none of the evidence could be tied directly back to Nagato, but he was still hoping to turn a few of the people and file an indictment against Nagato that would stick. It would have been a major feather in his cap to achieve this in his early days in the D.A.'s office.

And now the man was dead, leaving his organization in chaos. If any of the lieutenants escaped custody, they would likely immediately take over the operations, so time was of the essence to ensure that no one slipped through the cracks.

"I'll go with you to the station," Sasuke said. The case had been an obsession of Itachi's for so long, Sasuke wanted to see his brother in action as he brought things to a close. Itachi had just nodded and they strode to the door, aware but uncaring as numerous pairs of eyes followed the fluid beauty of the powerful brothers.

When they arrived at the police station, it was clear that things were in chaos. Several of the people in the holding cells were injured, but the flight risk was so great that only the most severely injured had been allowed to go to the hospital, and even then had been put under heavy guard. The rest were receiving medical treatment at the police station.

Sasuke stood back, out of the way, simply watching his brother talk with all of the officers, ensuring that everyone was properly mirandized before any statements were taken, and insisting on being part of all interviews of the top lieutenants. Some of the faces Sasuke recognized from newspaper articles, but most were people he had never seen.

Sasuke's attention was drawn to a blond male that was sitting on the floor of one of the cells. He was wearing a black T-shirt, and dark jeans. He was sitting with his arms wrapped around his knees, chaffing his hands on his upper arms as if cold. There was something about him that drew Sasuke's gaze, though he wasn't quite sure what it was. He wondered idly what he had been arrested for. He seemed younger and more innocent-looking than the others in the cell, with large blue eyes in a face framed by golden hair that - even in the horrible fluorescent lighting of the police station - seemed to glow.

There were people in the jail that had been brought in that night on charges not related to Nagato's organization, and Sasuke briefly wondered if the blond were perhaps brought in by mistake for something else. The blond turned to speak with a woman with blue hair who seemed to be worried about him, and seemed to be trying to look at his shirt. Sasuke knew for a fact that the blue-haired woman was known to be Nagato's consort. Konan, he thought her name was. If she knew the blond, that must mean that he had been a part of Nagato's organization.

Part of Sasuke felt a sense of disappointment at that knowledge, though he wasn't sure why. He supposed it was due, in part, to the fact that he generally had a very good sense of the character of a person, and somehow it just didn't seem to fit that the golden boy he was looking at would be part of an organization as ruthless as Nagato's had been.

"Can we please get some medical attention here? He needs a doctor," Konan called out.

The policeman standing near the holding cell door ignored her request, rolling his eyes. Itachi looked up at her words, his face showing concern. He excused himself from the officer he had been speaking with and walked over, looking down at the blond. As far as Sasuke could see from where he stood, there were no obvious injuries.

"How old are you?" Itachi asked.
The blond looked at him, amusement written on his face. "Why? Wanting to see if you'd get charged with statutory?" Several people in the cell snickered at the sexual implication, presumably members of Nagato's gang, but perhaps just anyone who wanted to get some amusement at the expense of the man likely to be prosecuting them.

Itachi's eyes lit with amusement at the younger man's daring. The boy clearly knew who Itachi was, and it would take some serious balls to challenge him personally and directly like this, especially for someone who appeared so young.

No. I just want to know if I will be trying you as an adult or sending you down to juvie."

"How old would I have to be to be guaranteed juvie?" Blue eyes twinkled with humor, looking directly into the generally intimidating stare of one of the most accomplished ADA's in the city.

Sasuke smirked. He had never seen anyone outside of the family challenge his brother, much less be laughing about it. Itachi narrowed his eyes as the blond continued.

"Because whatever that age is, that's how old I am. Give me three hours and I can come up with an ID to prove it."

There was more laughter from within the cell. Itachi sighed and stood. The blond appeared to be in reasonable health, except for a smear of blood he saw on his arm. Itachi went back to the arresting officer he had been talking with. Sasuke found himself continuing to watch the blond, noticing the golden hue of his skin, and the toned muscles of his arms that the tight T-shirt did nothing to conceal.

Evidently there was another person who found the young blond as compelling as Sasuke did. A large man, significantly older and larger than the boy, walked up behind him, looking down with a lustful gaze. The boy didn't notice, continuing rubbing his arms and starting to rock somewhat back and forth. He seemed to be shaking now. Sasuke found the blond's movements somewhat disturbing, but wasn't sure what to do at this point.

Konan had gone to talk to a man that Sasuke recognized from the news as Hidan, another of Nagato's known lieutenants. "He needs medical help," she insisted. "He's bleeding all over. They won't listen to me."

Sasuke frowned, realizing that Itachi was once again talking with one of the arresting officers and hadn't heard Konan's comment. He took a step towards the cell to see if he could detect any injury, but given that Itachi had been within a foot of the blond, it was unlikely he would have missed seeing a major wound if it existed.

Hidan looked over to where Naruto was sitting and saw the older man approaching him from behind, his intent clear.

"I wouldn't fucking do that if you don't want your ass handed to you," Hidan said loudly, a grin spreading on his face. The blond apparently didn't hear him, as he continued his small rocking motion, his eyes now closed. Sasuke thought he looked slightly paler than he did a few minutes ago. "Blondie's a fucking psycho when he's injured."

The older man ignored the warning, and crouched down right behind the blond man. "You look cold, sexy. I'd be more than happy to warm you up."

With that, the man wrapped his arms roughly around the blond, one of his meaty paws sliding right down to grope the boy's ass. Itachi had turned to see what Hidan had been talking about, and his eyes narrowed in disgust at the older man who was clearly trying to molest the blond, hoping no one
would notice in the chaos.

"Hey -" Itachi began, using his most biting tone to get attention.

But before he could complete his sentence, the blond's eyes flew open as he realized what was happening. Before anyone could even move, the boy had launched to his feet, dragging the much larger man up with him then slamming him into the concrete wall with such force that the man lost consciousness.

"Holy shit!" one of the officers said. "Did you see what that kid just did? That guy is almost twice his size, and he picked him right up off the ground!"

Hidan and several other of Nagato's crew laughed and catcalled to the blond. "I told you, you fucking pussy. Out with one hit!"

"Get him off the guy! He's going to kill him!" another officer said, frantically opening the cell as the boy continued to hold the man against the wall, gripping his throat.

"Call a doctor!" Itachi shouted. "They boy's shot and going into shock!"

Sasuke noticed the red pool that had been hidden beneath the blond where he was sitting. The dark color of his clothing had disguised the blood, but when the boy had stood and turned around, Sasuke could see the small bullet hole in his left shoulder. It had not gone all the way through, so there was no wound visible from the front, and in the confusion, it had been missed. Sasuke wondered why the hell the kid hadn't said something about his injury, since he clearly needed immediate medical attention. Six officers poured into the room, detaching the blond from his assailant, just as the blond lost consciousness.

Sasuke remained where he was standing in his living room, leaning against the counter of the bar and making no move to greet this unexpected arrival into his lair. He noticed that the blond seemed to be moving without discomfort, so whatever the nature of the bullet wound had been, he had apparently made a full recovery in a relatively short time.

The blond paused at the lack of greeting, then simply removed his shoes and walked into the living room. He was dressed casually, wearing dark jeans and a thin, relatively tight-fitting white Henley that showed the play of the lean muscles of his torso. A blue crystal pendant tied by a leather thong around his neck, but otherwise, he wore no jewelry. He's beautiful, Sasuke found himself thinking, surprised by the observation, especially directed towards someone who apparently possessed an almost animalistic strength and violent tendencies. Sasuke generally had little reaction to others in terms of attraction. He found most people boring or annoying, and growing up with a family of superior genes, he was relatively immune to physical beauty.

But there was something about this person that resonated with him.... and drew his interest.

Naruto walked over to Sasuke and bowed in the traditional Japanese style, greeting him in flawless Japanese. "Uchiha-sama. I am Uzumaki Naruto. Orochimaru-sama requested that I deliver this proposal to you personally, and see if you have any reply you wish me to give him."

Sasuke's native language sounded strange coming from someone with blond hair and electric blue eyes. No recognition showed in the blond's face. It was clear that he didn't remember Sasuke. Given the events that had unfolded, it was likely the man had not even seen him at the station. Somehow, it annoyed Sasuke. The image of the blond had stubbornly stuck with him for weeks.
Usually the situation was reversed. In fact, Sasuke could never recall a time when he had noticed someone and they had not noticed him back. Not that he was obsessed with the blond... Naruto, he said his name was. But he had... remembered the look of him.

Why does he have a Japanese name, and speak the language like a native? None of Sasuke's interest showed on his impassively cold face.

"Hn," Sasuke said, accepting the offered folder but not returning the greeting or the polite bow. He noticed the blond's eyes narrow at his rudeness and found that it amused him. Does he have any idea who I am? Most people worked hard at ingratiating themselves with Sasuke. Evidently the blond was one of the few who wouldn't, or was simply to ignorant to understand the need to do so.

Sasuke flipped open the folder that Orochimaru had sent and began reading the introductory letter. His eyes widened imperceptibly as he got to the end, then flicked over the blond, wanting to gauge his reaction. Naruto stood there, his gaze wandering around the apartment. If anything, he looked bored, as though he were simply a messenger awaiting a reply.

Sasuke skimmed through the content of the actual proposal that Orochimaru had sent. It appeared to be supporting a minor zoning change in the district that Sasuke represented. He had heard some discussions about it, but honestly had little opinion on the matter since it seemed like such a minor adjustment. Apparently, Orochimaru had a vested interest in the outcome and was trying to buy Sasuke's vote.

But not with money. That would be too overt, and - if Sasuke rejected it - could land Orochimaru in jail. No, he had been much more subtle.

Sasuke didn't in general like sex. He found it messy, both physically and emotionally. The very few times he had briefly engaged in sexual relationships he had been bored almost immediately and then had to suffer the stalker-like attentions from his partners for months (in one case years) afterwards. He avoided physical intimacy like the plague. But somehow...

How had Orochimaru known? Sasuke wondered. Many people had tried to offer or garner sexual favors from Sasuke. They had all been rebuffed without a thought.

Of course, it wasn't going to happen this time either.

He was going to tell Naruto that his reply to Orochimaru was that he would consider the merits of both sides of the discussion and vote accordingly in the best interest of all his constituents.

His gaze flicked back to the letter and the paragraph that intrigued him the most. He wouldn't be tempted by it. He was not tempted. Yet somehow, he heard his voice reading that section out loud, his eyes latched onto the messenger that Orochimaru had so very carefully selected to deliver the request.

"It says here that you were sent along with the proposal to demonstrate Orochimaru's deep appreciation of my special consideration and attention to this matter," Sasuke said, his voice inflectionless.

He noted the surprise and wariness that flashed across the blue eyes. He truly had no idea what Orochimaru was asking of him when he sent him here, did he?

Sasuke stood there, wondering how Naruto would respond. Having seen the boy's reaction to what had happened at the police station, he had absolutely no doubt that Naruto was not a paid escort. Would he become violent? Would he leave? Had Orochimaru used him for service like this in the
past? Had Nagato? Somehow, the thought made Sasuke's blood boil.

"I'm here to demonstrate Orochimaru's... deep appreciation?" Naruto said, his mouth seeming to almost hesitate forming the words. He didn't sound afraid, more like... puzzled. He clearly didn't know what to do, but Sasuke could almost see the boy's thoughts racing as he tried to determine what course of action to take.

"I see," Naruto said after a moment.

Sasuke eyed him with seeming disinterest. "Is there a problem?"

"No," Naruto stated as he took three steps forward, effectively closing the distance between them, then sinking fluidly to his knees, bringing his face level with Sasuke's groin. His gaze locked onto Sasuke's as he slowly raised his hand to the belt that was in front of his face. There was neither lust nor revulsion in the blue eyes. In fact, Sasuke could read nothing but wariness. He had to admit it was a first for him. Usually people who had the chance to touch him intimately were nearly incoherent with desire. Naruto was looking at him almost analytically.

Tan fingers slowly undid the belt of Sasuke's pants, then pulled it smoothly out and tossed it aside. Sasuke felt every muscle in his body clench as he felt the leather belt slither out of its loops. He was going to stop this. He had just been curious to see what the man would do.

He had to stop this.

He had no idea what had possessed him to read the letter and issue the challenge to the blond. Ok, that was maybe a little bit of a lie, but for all he knew this kid could be under eighteen. He should have swallowed his pride and asked Itachi what had happened with the blond, but knowing his brother that would have been the equivalent of sending up a nuclear flare signaling his interest, so he had held his tongue.

After all, he wasn't interested in the blond.

This could be Orochimaru's way of finally getting dirt on him in order to bend him to his will. Sasuke tried to look objectively at the man to ascertain his age. Usually he was a pretty good judge, but he felt uncertain. Naruto's face looked young and somewhat innocent... it really could be that of a 17-year-old. But his eyes seemed to hold a darkness that spoke of more years of experience. Sasuke just wasn't sure, and given that the age of consent in New York was eighteen, it was a pretty fucking important piece of information.

Sasuke licked his suddenly dry lips, trying to focus on the facts and impropriety of the situation. But all his senses were focused on the man kneeling between his thighs. He could feel the heat radiating from the tan body, and the growing insolence and amusement looking up at him from the blue eyes centered now inches away from his increasingly sensitized groin.

Sasuke watched as the same nimble fingers undid the fastening on his trousers, then slowly pulled down the zipper. He met the steady blue gaze that was looking up at him, as if waiting for... permission or rejection of the offer that was clearly being made. Sasuke knew he needed to tell the man to stop, to throw him out of his apartment and send him packing with a message to Orochimaru that he could not be influenced in this way.

Instead, he simply raised a perfectly arched brow, as if asking the blond what he was waiting for.

A look of surprise flashed across Naruto's face, but immediately was replaced by one of almost condescension. Sasuke knew that the blond was not exactly doing this of his own choice, but there
was no sense of 'victimhood' about Naruto, no visible reluctance. He seemed totally unfazed as he shifted his gaze back to the front of Sasuke's pants where, despite Sasuke's cool and expressionless face, his arousal was showing rather impressively. Naruto tugged the boxers and pants down together, looking as Sasuke's large, fully engorged cock bobbed free of its constraints.

The blond wrapped his hand slowly around the base of Sasuke's erection, letting his grip settle finger by finger. Sasuke hissed quietly, but otherwise showed no reaction to the extremely intimate touch. It had been a very long time since he had allowed anyone to touch him this way. Naruto pulled Sasuke's cock forward, letting his tongue swirl slowly around the head, delving into the slit then tracing the underside of the ridge.

Sasuke felt the blue eyes watching him and did his best to maintain his relatively impassive façade. He couldn't disguise the effect the blond's actions were having on his leaking erection but he didn't have to reveal the fact that it was taking every last shred of his willpower to prevent him from shoving the blond down and fucking him into the floor. He was pretty sure that would go well beyond the bounds of 'showing appreciation'. Not to mention it would put him in danger of being arrested if the boy were in fact under-aged and this was some sort of trap.

Sasuke gripped the counter he was leaning against in a white-knuckled death grip to prevent his hands from latching into the blond hair and thrusting into the pink mouth. He would remain a passive receiver of this sexual favor, not an aggressor. Not an instigator. Not until he was absolutely sure the boy was legal. He knew he was already neck deep in shit as it was if the boy was a minor.

He felt teeth scrape along his head, followed by a long, slow suck taking in a significant portion of his length. Sasuke tried to not let his eyes roll back into his head. He had never done anything this monumentally stupid in his entire life. What the hell was he doing? Why was he allowing this?

Allowing this? A little voice in his head said. You fucking asked for this.

Sasuke's last coherent thought was that the blond had either given or at very least received some amazing blow jobs in his young life, because he was unbelievably skilled. He then proceeded to have the most mind-blowing orgasm he had ever had in his life, his grip on the counter the only thing that kept him from collapsing to the floor when it was finally over.

He really hoped he hadn't just thrown away his career because of it.

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to be continued...

This story is one where I want to take time with the writing because the tone is a little tricky, so I am expecting to update closer to every other week rather than every several days the way I do with Nice Guys (which is more of an 'off the cuff' type story). It might be more frequent, I just want to set expectations just in case. Please let me know what you think of the story so far. Next chapter will show more about Naruto and how he got into this situation and what he thinks of Sasuke at this point.
Author's note - Now you can see how Naruto got involved with Orochimaru. Of course, I'm not giving you his entire back-story right here, so exactly what he is doing and how he got involved with Nagato will come later. Because what fun would it be to know everything all at once? Also! Recommended listening for this story so far from BriEva is a song called Animal by the Cab... it fits things pretty well so far emotionally.

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Naruto knew he was going into shock. But he hated hospitals. If the choice came between bleeding out in jail or going to the hospital, he didn't know which one he'd choose. Actually, it seemed he had chosen jail. He wondered if Kakashi knew he had been brought in yet. He closed his eyes, feeling his shaking increasing. He was starting to feel cold. He knew the bullet was still lodged in his shoulder, and it hurt like hell. He was losing blood, but hopefully not enough yet to be dangerous. Yet. He had half hoped that the guard would take Konan's request for help seriously and maybe get him some medical attention in jail without going to the hospital, but they guy had just assumed it was some sort of trick. Or more likely, he just didn't give a crap if one of Nagato's crew were hurt. The assistant district attorney had seemed like a decent enough guy. Itachi, Naruto had heard someone call him. Naruto was glad. It meant there would be a fair trial for everyone if he was the one in charge.

It would be different if that fucker Kabuto were involved, but so far Naruto hadn't seen him. Naruto was broken out of his thoughts when the smell of rancid breath came from directly behind him.

"You look cold, sexy. I'd be more than happy to warm you up."

He felt heavily muscled arms vice around him, and a clumsy hand grope his crotch. All thought processes basically shut down as he went into full defense mode. He vaguely knew he was having an episode, but there was no point in trying to control it. The good thing was that the adrenaline pounding through his body pretty much erased all feelings of pain from his wounds.

"Hey -" he vaguely heard someone shout, presumably at him. But maybe to the guy behind him. But Naruto wasn't thinking more about it.

Before he even knew what he was doing, he was grabbing the man who had grabbed him and was slamming him hard against the concrete wall. He could hear people shouting around him. And Hidan laughing. Crazy motherfucker.

He felt pairs of arms grabbing him and everything faded to black. Just before he passed out, he saw a familiar shock of silver hair, and a face covered by a thin cloth. Kakashi. About fucking time. The bastard was always late.

Naruto hadn't seen the attractive young man with the tailored suit and onyx eyes watching him intently. And neither boy had noticed the older man with yellow eyes and snakelike features watching them both with great interest from the back of the room.

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The smell of antiseptic told Naruto where he was before he opened his eyes. Fucking hospitals.
He fought to keep the panic down. He wasn't eight anymore. He wasn't going to wake up to the nightmare of seeing his mother dead and his father dying while doctors rushed around uselessly. Part of his brain knew that. The other part was making sure his eyes stayed closed.

"Open your eyes, Naruto," the low, seemingly emotionless voice got through to Naruto. Gaara. He was here. Naruto realized that there was a warmth against his arm.

Naruto opened his eyes, and found clear green eyes looking back at him, steadying him. He glanced down, surprised to see that the redhead's hand resting on his arm. Gaara loathed physical contact. He had told Naruto the reason once, and the story had caused Naruto to empty the contents of his stomach violently. Naruto knew that the seemingly casual gesture was a momentous effort for his best friend.

"Gaara," Naruto said, the single word filled with his emotions - gratitude, fear, pain. There was a gentle pressure from Gaara's hand. No one understood Naruto like Gaara. The reverse was also true. Both of their childhoods held memories of hell. As adults, they each had found ways of coping, but the demons of their past still haunted them. Gaara was the one person Naruto truly cared about. He had a lot of casual friends and a few occasional lovers. But Naruto could walk away from any of them if he had to. Except Gaara. He was the only person Naruto truly trusted.

Naruto asked the most important question first. "Did I kill that guy?"

"No." It wasn't Gaara that answered. Naruto turned his head to see Kakashi leaning against the wall. "They pulled you off before you killed him."

Naruto nodded, feeling relieved. One less charge he had to worry about.

"For future reference, killing someone right in front of a room full of cops and someone from the district attorney's office is probably not a good idea," Kakashi said dryly, humor touching his eyes. "But at least enough people saw him go for you first, so a self-defense claim would be pretty easy to make."

"Don't you have some doughnuts to eat, Mr. Police Officer?" Naruto asked, pretending to be annoyed. "Besides, you shouldn't be here. If someone from your department sees you, they're going to wonder why you're talking with me."

"Brat. You're lucky you aren't dead. What were you thinking?" Kakashi asked, ignoring Naruto's last comment. He knew the risks of getting caught.

"Pervert," Naruto retorted automatically. "Which time? During the raid with Nagato, or in the holding cell?"

"Any thoughtful explanation of pretty much any of the major events in your life would be shocking but helpful. But I doubt we're going to have enough time to get through it all before we're going to be interrupted. So let's get to the important parts first. Why is Orochimaru interested in you? How does he even know who you are?"

Naruto just blinked. "Orochimaru? Isn't he some guy that used to do business with Nagato like ten years ago or something? That was way before I got recruited. As far as I know, I've ever even met him. Why?"

"Because I just found out that he's planning to post bail, pay your medical bills, and cover your attorney fees. No one else from Nagato's organization, just you. And I want to know why. We had a deal, Naruto. No secrets. I can't help you if you keep things from me."
" Seriously, Kakashi, I've never met the guy. At least, I don't think so. Do you have a photo of him? Maybe I met him and I just didn't realize it. Did he say anything about why he wants to help me?"

"Orochimaru doesn't help people. He buys people." Kakashi pulled out his phone and pulled up a photo, handing the device to Naruto. "Look familiar?"

Naruto looked, his face blank. "No. I've never seen him before." Naruto couldn't always remember names, but he had a good memory for faces. If he had met this man even once, he would have remembered it. Kakashi looked at him consideringly, then at Gaara.

"It makes no sense that Orochimaru would single out Naruto. Naruto has none of the skills that Orochimaru values in his organization from what I know about how he operates," Gaara said flatly.

"Gee thanks," Naruto said dryly.

"No offense, Naruto, but what Gaara said is true. Orochimaru is about subtly, strategy, and corruption. Your style is more..." Kakashi trailed off, but Gaara picked right up.

"Loud, confrontational, and unpredictable."

"Fuck you, Gaara," but there was no heat behind the insult. He knew Gaara was right. Naruto had served as Nagato's body guard. He was good at observing situations and reacting to physical danger instinctively. When it came to direct confrontations, Naruto was almost unbeatable. He was good with his hands, a gun, a knife, a piece of yarn... pretty much any weapon. But Orochimaru didn't handle things that way. He used blackmail, manipulation, and obfuscation.

Naruto was straightforward and not a very good liar. He would be a liability to most of Orochimaru's operations, not an asset.

"Of course," Kakashi began cautiously, "Orochimaru's interest in Naruto might have nothing to do with his organization."

There was a heavy aura of imminent death emanating from the redhead at Naruto's side. Naruto turned and looked steadily at his friend, and chose his next words carefully. "Look, Gaara. Kakashi and I have to talk through this. Why don't you go to the waiting room until we're done, then you can help get me the hell out of here. Scout the place out and tell me what the security is like."

"Naruto, you've just come out of surgery where they dug a bullet out of you. You're not leaving the hospital today," Kakashi said.

Gaara and Naruto exchanged amused glances. "If my bail has been posted, then I am not staying. Gaara, I'll be down in a few minutes. Let Kakashi and me finish up here."

Gaara stared flatly at Naruto. "I want to hear what Kakashi has to say about why he thinks Orochimaru is interested in you. And more specifically why Kakashi seems to think that you should agree to this."

Naruto knew there would be no forcing Gaara to leave if he had made up his mind to stay. Gaara was extremely protective of Naruto, and vice versa. They had both saved each other's asses on more than one occasion since they met years ago.

"Ok, Kakashi. Tell me what you think Orochimaru wants me for," Naruto said, already pretty much guessing the answer.

"He likes pretty young men," Kakashi shrugged. "For the obvious reasons. Though physically,
you're not really his type. He tends to prefer Asian-looking men, with finer bones."

Naruto thought about this. "Can I refuse his money?"

Kakashi nodded slowly. "Of course. Or you can let him bail you out and then skip town for a bit, though he's dangerous to double-cross."

"What aren't you saying, Kakashi?" Gaara asked directly.

"I know you just spent the last three years working with Nagato. But we have an unexpected opportunity to get someone inside Orochimaru's operation. We've been trying for years. Yagura was killed three months ago in a failed attempt. Fu and Utakata have been positioned as sex-trade workers, trying to catch his notice, but he hasn't gone for it. Out of the blue, he has taken an interest in you."

"No," Gaara said flatly. "You know what happened in that cell last night. Naruto had another episode. Plus he has just been fucking shot, taking a bullet for Nagato. By cops in your department. He's not ready for this. He needs to recover."

"I know that. But..." Kakashi trailed off. "Fu or Utakata would be a better choice. Orochimaru is twisted. They have had experience in the types of machinations that Orochimaru tends to use. Unfortunately, neither of them has drawn his interest. But you have. And I don't know why."

"It seems the best way to figure out why is for me to agree," Naruto said simply. "I'll do it. At least until we figure out a little bit more about what he is after."

"Shut up, Naruto," Gaara growled. "You don't even know what you are signing up for. Just because you're not his usual type doesn't mean he isn't looking to try a new flavor."

Naruto laughed. "I'm pretty sure I can defend my chastity. If he thinks he can overpower me, he is a poor judge of character," seeing Gaara's glare intensify, Naruto sighed. "Look, it's not like I went looking for this. But Orochimaru asked for me. And we don't know why, but with Nagato dead and almost everyone else in jail, I'm definitely looking for new employment. My options in jail aren't so great, either, given I'll be one of the youngest guys in the yard. If I get into too many fights, it will be bad for me with the guards, even if I was just defending myself. And who knows... it's possible Orochimaru wants me for a specific purpose. And he might lead me to the person I need to find."

Naruto didn't say the words out loud, but he knew Gaara would guess what he was thinking.

Kakashi nodded. "I agree. If Orochimaru is wanting Naruto for his fighting skills, he must have a specific target. And that would imply a shorter timeframe. Naruto declines, we likely won't have time to find someone else suitable to take his place. We don't know what criteria he was using to pick Naruto in the first place."

"It could be just because of my ties to Nagato," Naruto offered.

Kakashi looked thoughtful. "It could be. But I doubt it. He's not interested in anyone else from the Akatsuki."

"Let's try it. If it turns out he's just after my ass, I'll either disappear or take him out. I'll play it straight with him and let him know where I stand. I'll also ask Hidan to see if he has any idea what Orochimaru wants with me, in case it isn't the obvious. How long do you think it will be before they allow Hidan and Dei to have visitors?"

"Naruto -" Gaara began, but was cut off when the door banged open.
A woman walked in carrying a briefcase and wearing a business suit. She looked to be in her late twenties, with black hair pulled up into a spiky ponytail. She would have appeared to be dressed in standard lawyer attire except for the mesh camisole that was clearly visible beneath her jacket, drawing attention to her cleavage. "What are you doing in here talking to my client?" She glared at Kakashi.

"I am his attorney, and I specifically instructed the police that no one is to talk to Mr. Uzumaki without my presence. Leave this room immediately. Any statement that he has given will be inadmissible," the woman then turned to Naruto, and extended her hand. "My name is Anko Mitarashi. Orochimaru has retained me to represent you on all charges. I posted bail for you while you were in surgery."

Anko turned and glared at Kakashi, who simply raised his hands placatingly and walked out of the room. Anko then rounded on Gaara. "Who are you?"

"Gaara is my roommate," Naruto said, deciding not to mention any of their other connections.

Anko nodded brusquely. "He still needs to leave. I need you to answer a few questions for me before the police come to take your statement."

"Gaara - it's fine. Evidently this is my attorney. Just go to the waiting room. I'll be out shortly."

Anko raised her eyebrows at that pronouncement, looking at the various tubes and bandages attached to the blond's body, but said nothing. Gaara sent a silent warning to Naruto, then left the room. Anko ran her eyes over Naruto, the thin fabric of the hospital gown and light sheet doing nothing to conceal the toned muscles of his body. The bright lighting in the hospital also revealed six thin scars on the man's face, three on each cheek, that were probably barely noticeable in regular lighting. They looked old and faded. Despite being just awakened from surgery, she could tell instinctively that Naruto would be dangerous in a fight. So few of the men in Orochimaru's circle were. She found it very attractive.

"What did you tell that cop, and why was he here?"

"I just woke up from surgery. I asked Kakashi if I had killed the guy in the holding cell, and he told me no. He also told me that some guy I've never met has paid my bail, my medical bills, and evidently hired you to defend me. He asked me why, and I said I had no fucking clue. Which is true. Who is this Orochimaru person, and why is he helping me? Nagato is dead, and I'm not selling out any of the people I worked with in his organization. If that's what your boss wants, then you might as well just pack up and go home."

Anko looked at him, slightly amused. "You are not the type of person Orochimaru usually selects. I find you very interesting." She walked over and sat down on the chair next to the bed. "But you didn't answer my question. How do you know Captain Kakashi?"

"He arrested me several years ago."

"What were the charges?"

"My record's been sealed. I was a juvenile."

"That's not what I asked."

"I was accused of killing a man," Naruto said, his voice suddenly cold and expressionless.

Anko watched in fascination as the innocence she had initially read in her young client's face was
replaced by something hard and ruthless. And she had no doubt whatsoever that those charges were true. She would probe more on this later, but kept the information filed away to tell to Orochimaru. There was more to this boy than what he had expected, and it wasn't necessarily good news. He would be much more dangerous and less easy to manipulate than they had assumed.

"What is the status of their case against me?" Naruto asked. "How much was my bail?"

"Your bail was three hundred thousand dollars, but the case seems fairly week. Most of your friends are set at over a million each, though the top five are remanded without bail. The evidence on them is much stronger. Unless the DA's office makes a mistake, they won't be seeing the outside for a very long time."

"Hidan and Deidara?"

"Remanded."

"Shit." Naruto tried to take stock of his situation. Being cut off from the Akatsuki members he trusted would make things significantly more difficult, and more dangerous. They had connections and knew players that he didn't. But he could play along for a bit with Orochimaru. He had no way of raising that kind of cash to post his own bail. But first he had to have some sort of sense of what he was being purchased for. "What does your boss want with me? I was Nagato's personal body guard. I won't sell out my friends, and I wasn't running any of Nagato's operations, so I don't have detailed information that Orochimaru could use if he is planning on doing some kind of land grab to take over."

Anko laughed. "Orochimaru wouldn't need help from someone like you if he wanted to take over Nagato's dealings. I believe he wants you for other reasons."

"I won't fuck some old guy just to make bail. Kakashi said Orochimaru likes younger men."

"No... you are not his type, handsome though you are. And young. Are you even legal yet?"

Naruto smirked at her question. "What do the police reports say my age is? If they say I'm underaged, let's go with that."

"Do you have any documentation proving your age?"

Naruto shrugged. "I have lots of documentation proving lots of ages. But I am not really sure what would stand up in court. So let's just go with what they have."

Anko was clearly displeased, but guessed that Naruto didn't trust Orochimaru enough to give his real identity and age... probably because there was a risk associated it.

"Are we going to keep playing 'read my fucking mind' or are you going to just tell me why he wants me?" Naruto asked tiredly.

Anko laughed, something she rarely did. "I don't know why he wants you. But he has already paid for you. So I suggest you play along."

"I'll play along up to a point. I don't have a lot of options right now, since my previous job ended rather abruptly, but if he tries to get in my pants, or get me to testify against my friends, we're done."

Anko smiled in amusement. She wondered how much the boy knew about the man he had just casually threatened. Her guess was not much. "I'll be sure to let him know. Now, when the police come to take your statement, you just keep your mouth closed and let me do all the talking. We'll
have you out of here in an hour, since I gather from your earlier comment that you dislike hospitals."

"Heh, yeah, you could say that," Naruto rubbed a hand over his face. His body ached and he was exhausted, and the meds were wearing off. But at least he was able to think clearly. "So when I'm done here, where do I go?"

"You can go back to your apartment. Orochimaru will contact you and let you know your duties once you are healed. In the meantime, I would not try leaving town. Orochimaru is a very well-connected man. You would not be able to find a place he could not track you."

Naruto shrugged. He wasn't easily intimidated. He had hidden from scarier people than Orochimaru. And he had even killed one of them.

"I have no reason to run right now. If Orochimaru is willing to spend all this money on me before I even agree to anything, I won't feel bad turning him down, though. I appreciate it, but this doesn't mean he owns me."

Just then, two police detectives entered. As Anko instructed, Naruto let her do all the talking. She clearly intimidated the hell out of the two men, who left after an hour of getting exactly nothing from him. Anko smiled and licked her lips. She loved putting weaker men in their place. She took one last look at Naruto. He was not weak. He was... quite interesting.

After she left, Naruto lay there for several minutes, gathering his strength. God he hated hospitals. Gritting his teeth, he pulled out the IV needle from his arm and holding a tissue over it until the bleeding stopped. He slowly sat up. The room was spinning slightly, but he just waited for it to slow before going over and finding his clothes that were folded neatly on the table by the bed. They were crusty with blood, but he didn't have a lot of options. It was better than trying to walk out of the hospital with his ass hanging out of the open back of the hospital gown he had on. He was just about to get dressed when Gaara walked in, throwing a plastic bag on the bed.

"I saw your freaky attorney leave, so I figured you'd be heading out. Here are some fresh clothes. No point getting an infection right away by wearing the old ones."

"Thanks," Naruto said, wincing has he pulled off his hospital gown and pulled on the clean clothes. He left the bloody ones there. They already had his DNA, and everyone else's that had been involved, so there was really no extra evidence to be gleaned from the clothing.

"Let's go home and you can sleep it off. I called Sakura. She's going to swing by after her shift at the hospital today and check on you. She said you're an idiot, and if you bleed to death, she's going to hunt you down in the afterlife and kick your ass."

Naruto snorted. He had been Sakura's first ER patient when she had been interning. As soon as Naruto had regained consciousness, he had walked out of the ER. She had been so pissed off at the thought of potentially having her first patient die due to his own stupidity, rather than anything she did wrong, that she had called the police to get his address and shown up at his door, medical kit in hand.

Naruto had been passed out again, but fortunately Gaara had been there and explained Naruto's phobia of hospitals, saving Naruto from being attacked by the surprisingly strong physician and forcibly readmitted. She had patched him up on his couch, and since then, had been Naruto's 'go-to' person for medical treatment if things got bad. Naruto tried to avoid contact with her as much as possible, not wanting to get her dragged into his life. But he appreciated her help.

He really didn't want to end up back in here.
It had been almost three weeks since he had been released from the hospital. Or, to be more accurate, since he had escaped from the hospital. Orochimaru had called his cell and told him he would send a car to pick him up in an hour. The phone call had worried him, since he only ever used the burner phones that Nagato gave him. How the hell had Orochimaru gotten his number?

Naruto hadn't been allowed to visit Hidan or Deidara yet in prison. He had heard that Konan had been released, but she had disappeared, and Naruto hadn't been able to find a trace of her. Naruto didn't trust the other members of the Akatsuki enough to seek them out, so he had just been waiting for something to happen.

And two hours later, he found himself standing in front of a man with long, black hair, pale skin and yellowish eyes. Naruto wasn't exactly afraid of him, but something about him made Naruto's skin crawl. He knew instinctively that he could not trust this man.

"So, you're saying all you want me to do is deliver these documents to the little brother of the assistant district attorney?"

"Yes. And of course, show him your respect. Uchiha Sasuke comes from one of the most prominent families in all of Japan. He is... a remarkable young man."

Naruto suppressed a shudder when the older man licked his lips. It was pretty clear from what Kakashi said that - while Naruto was not Orochimaru's type - this Sasuke guy definitely was.

"If I get stopped by the police, should I destroy the package?"

Orochimaru smiled. "Naruto, you have been working with Nagato for too long. There is nothing illegal in these papers. If someone asks to see them, then by all means let them."

Naruto stared at the man for a moment. "You know, I can do my job a lot better when I know exactly what it is. You could hire a courier service to deliver this if it's just a simple document. Or you could deliver it yourself."

"No, I need you to deliver it for me. A courier service wouldn't be able to read Sasuke-kun's reaction in the way I am hoping you will be able to. I hear you are a good judge of character. It would interest me to hear your thoughts on his response to the proposal. But it is too trivial a matter for me to be seen delivering myself. It would not reflect my stature in quite the right light."

Naruto sighed and shrugged. "If you're not going to tell me, then I guess there's nothing I can do. But don't blame me if something goes wrong just because you chose not to give me any information. I can't work off the bail money if I'm dead or back in jail."

"I don't make foolish mistakes like that. Just deliver the message, and see if he has any reply."

"Is there anything that you want me to say to him?"

"Nothing in particular. You speak Japanese, yes?" Orochimaru said, slipping into that language.

"Yes," Naruto replied, also speaking in Japanese. "I speak it fluently."

"Excellent. And so interesting. I will be awaiting your return. Oh, and you should leave any weapons you might have on you here. They will search you at the door, since you are a new face."

Naruto felt his nerves twitch. This could be a set-up, but he was too small a fish to warrant such
measures. The one man who wanted Naruto dead enough to do something like this would confront Naruto directly. He didn't fear Naruto enough to bother with a trap. Blowing out a breath, he pulled out the knife he had in a sheath inside his jeans by his right hip. It could be thrown, or wielded at close-range, and didn't carry the penalties that a concealed fire-arm did.

He took the package from Orochimaru, noted the expensive address, and headed out.

Naruto looked around cautiously as the elevator opened, taking in the luxurious penthouse suite that Uchiha Sasuke lived in. There was complete silence in the room, and for a moment, Naruto thought maybe no one was home. But a small movement drew his attention to the tall, black-haired man standing in his living room, leaning against the counter of the wet bar in the corner of the room. It was spacious and well-appointed, clearly suited to entertaining groups of important people.

He had heard about Sasuke, of course. It was big news when someone so young had been elected to the city council. The tabloids were always filled of rumors about his (or his brother's) various lovers, their current business activities, what they had eaten for breakfast... Sasuke was known to be intelligent and charismatic, but reserved. He guarded his privacy intensely, and was thought of as a bit of an enigma.

Naruto's opinion was that he was less of an enigma and more of a snob, just like every other spoiled rich kid Naruto had had the misfortune to meet. The bastard didn't even acknowledge him as Naruto stood there at the entryway. Naruto was tempted to just drop the folder on the floor and walk back out, but he had agreed to deliver the message from Orochimaru and he wouldn't risk messing up such a simple first assignment out of spite. So he politely removed his shoes in the Japanese custom, and walked toward where the man stood watching him.

Naruto had walked over to Sasuke, and bowed in the traditional Japanese style, greeting him in Japanese. "Uchiha-sama. I am Uzumaki Naruto. Orochimaru-sama requested that I deliver this proposal to you personally, and see if you have any reply you wish me to give him." When the asshole didn't even respond other than to just take the envelop from Naruto and open it, Naruto almost lost his patience.

"This guy is a total asshole."

Naruto smirked, feeling definitely superior, at least in that arena. Naruto was a very physical guy, and he'd led a pretty dangerous life. He definitely believed that life was too short to hold back in anything, including in bed. If you found someone you wanted to be with in that way, then you gave it everything you had, even if it was just for a short time together.

Sasuke was still reading through the materials Orochimaru had sent, and Naruto's attention began to wander. He looked idly around the room, taking in the décor. It wasn't his specialty, but he had to admit to a certain desire to steal Sasuke's fancy katana. A spoiled princess like him probably didn't even know how to hold it. He snapped out of his larcenistic daydreaming when he realized the man was finally speaking to him.

"It says here that you were sent along with the proposal to demonstrate Orochimaru's deep appreciation of my special consideration and attention to this matter," Sasuke said, his voice
Naruto heard the stress that the man had put on 'deep appreciation', leaving their implication quite clear. This guy... expected Naruto to... what? Fuck him? Suck him off? Naruto cursed Orochimaru and perverted politicians to hell. Sasuke was gay? He was pretty damn sure he'd never read anything about that. Was Orochimaru wanting to get naked pictures of Sasuke and some guy to blackmail him? If so, where were the cameras? Naruto had looked pretty thoroughly around the place when he had entered out of habit, and aside from the security cameras by the elevator entrance, he hadn't seen any other cameras. I mean, it's not like you can just climb into the window of a room on the 40th floor.

"I'm here to demonstrate Orochimaru's... deep appreciation?" Naruto said slowly. He supposed this was less of an ask than being told to kill someone, or being tortured for information about his employer. Both had happened in the past. But he was still going to chew Orochimaru out for this. No wonder the asshole had sent him. Clearly he must be Sasuke's 'type'. It seemed weird, though, because a guy like this shouldn't need help getting laid, even if he was a drag in bed. He was rich, powerful, famous, and good-looking. Maybe he just liked having sex with people he was in a position of power over. Naruto almost laughed at the thought of someone as pampered as this guy actually thinking he could control someone like Naruto. What a joke.

"I see," Naruto said, trying to decide how to play this. If the guy liked control, then Naruto would just make sure Sasuke lost control. Then he wouldn't ask for this shit again.

Sasuke eyed him with seeming disinterest. "Is there a problem?"

"No," Naruto said, as he took three steps forward, effectively closing the distance between them, then sinking fluidly to his knees, bringing his face level with Sasuke's crotch. He looked up at the young politician, waiting to see if this was in fact what he was asking for. He didn't want to get thrown back in jail for sexual assault. At least the guy is clean. And he's not bad looking, though he's probably had work done. No ones face is that fucking perfect.

The taller man's face seemed so disinterested, that Naruto hesitated. Had he gotten this wrong? Would they guy throw him out?

But then the man had simply raised a brow, indicating he was losing patience waiting for Naruto to proceed. Naruto undid the fastenings of the pants, and was a little surprised to see the state of the man's arousal. Evidently Sasuke had fairly good control of his facial expressions. Naruto smirked. But as with most men, Sasuke's downfall was his cock. There was just no concealing desire beyond a certain point when you're a guy.

Naruto looked up at the man. He would enjoy shaking this asshole up a little bit. Naruto knew he was good at this, though he had never done it as part of his job. But Naruto definitely liked it rough and intense, and some frigid princess like this guy definitely wouldn't be able to handle that. This guy has no idea what he just asked for. Naruto wouldn't go too far, but hopefully just enough that this ass would complain to Orochimaru and Naruto wouldn't be asked to do something like this again.

Naruto pulled Sasuke's heavy erection into his mouth. He ran his hands over the pale thighs that he had exposed, surprised to find them well-muscled. He had expected the rich man's body to be soft. Experimentally, Naruto slid his hands up under the politician's shirt, feeling the hard muscles of the man's abs as he continued to suck and slide his lips over the hard dick repeatedly.

Naruto hummed, sending vibrations along Sasuke's cock, gratified to feel the stomach muscles clench beneath his fingers. Naruto gripped the man's hips hard, likely leaving bruises. He heard a ragged groan in appreciation, and was surprised. He had expected a complaint.
Curious now, Naruto used his teeth. It was definitely something he himself enjoyed, but fully expected the man standing over him to pull back from. Instead of scaring the man off, Naruto was surprised to instead find the guy thrusting aggressively into his mouth. This wasn't going as he had expected.

Naruto heard the man's breath become more labored as he continued, and watched the flush spread across his cheeks. He could see the spasms in the taut abdominal muscles, and saw how hard the pale hands were gripping the countertop.

Naruto pulled Sasuke's erection deep into his mouth with a long, hard suck that he knew would border on painful, but also was intensely pleasurable. He repeated the motion over again, adding teeth, and waiting for the man to shove him off.

The choked back groan the man gave when he climaxed caught Naruto by surprise. It was definitely one of the sexiest sounds Naruto had ever heard someone make. He looked up at the man, slightly stunned. The beautiful face was twisted with pleasure and release, the soft black bangs damp with sweat.

Sure, he was still a rich, spoiled, bastard. And probably still useless, despite the muscled body. But... he was actually potentially also... pretty damn appealing.

Naruto stood and walked behind the bar to pour himself a drink. He rinsed his mouth, then swallowed the rest. He watched as the black-haired man's breathing began to slow. Eventually Sasuke pulled up his pants and refastened them, then turned to Naruto, his face still flushed.

Naruto noticed the man's glance at his crotch, and the slight annoyance that flashed across the beautiful face at the fact that Naruto showed no signs of arousal. Naruto guessed correctly that it was not a common occurrence for someone to show no physical response to the flawless man in front of him. He was beginning to see why, though he was not about to admit it.

"Orochimaru asked me to deliver any reply to his request. Do you have any message you want me to give him?" Naruto was careful to keep his voice as bored as possible, as though he had just mowed the guy's lawn rather than sucked his dick.

Sasuke narrowed his eyes at the perfectly composed blond standing in front of him. "What if I tell him that I have no interest in helping him out on this matter?"

Naruto laughed. "Then my guess is he wouldn't try to trick me into doing something like this shit again. So I suppose I'd be grateful."

Grateful? This was... 'shit'? Sasuke knew his brain was still recovering from the mind-blowing orgasm, but he knew he'd just been insulted.

"Get out," Sasuke said, his voice steely.

Naruto shrugged. "With pleasure."

As Naruto was pulling on his shoes, Sasuke asked him the question he knew he should have found out the answer to earlier. "How old are you?"

"A little late for that question, eh, Councilman?" Naruto said tauntingly as he stepped into the elevator.

-xXx-
To be continued...

So... what did you think? please comment! I know this is quite a bit darker of a characterization for both these guys than what I normally write, so I am super curious about what you think about it.
Sasuke poured himself a drink after the blond had left.

He felt... unsettled. He was a man who did not act rashly, and thought things through. A man of self-control and drive. It was what had enabled him to achieve what he had in such a short period of time. Like his brother, Sasuke did not make mistakes.

Yet tonight... he had allowed himself to be manipulated, and it had caught him by surprise. He was quite sure that this had been a test run, like all the other failed attempts in the past. Orochimaru probably had some interest in the outcome of the zoning vote, but if this approach had failed Orochimaru surely had either a back-up plan, or the matter was too insignificant to mind the minor loss.

No, the real test was always whether Sasuke could be bought through some means. He didn't know what Orochimaru's end goal for all this was, but he undoubtedly had one. If Sasuke voted against Orochimaru's interest, it would send the signal to Orochimaru that he would not be influenced by this. This was far from the man's first attempt at such measures. Orochimaru would offer something, it would be refused, he would come back later with something else.

By engaging in sexual activity with the boy, Sasuke had already tacitly accepted the offering. The question was now: would he follow through with the implied payment or not?

If he didn't follow through, it's possible that Orochimaru would try to get the boy to testify to some indecent acts with a minor (if he was a minor), or simply reveal Sasuke's sordid relationship with him to the press to try to damage him politically. And of course, if Sasuke refused to play, Orochimaru would not send Naruto again. He would continue searching for another route in.

If Sasuke did 'return the favor' in the upcoming council meeting, then Orochimaru would likely continue to use Naruto to try to garner favors from Sasuke.

It would probably be smarter to cut this off before it started. Sasuke poured himself another drink, swirling the amber liquid slowly in the glass before taking a drink, thinking about the events of the evening.

But then again, Sasuke thought, he could always sever the... 'relationship'... when he chose to. As long as the boy was legal and Sasuke was careful, it would simply be Sasuke's word against his if they decided to go to the press. And Sasuke was a city councilman, while Naruto had just gotten out of jail in one of the biggest takedowns in the past five years.

Yes. He could control this situation. All he needed to do was ascertain the boy's age. He could mitigate the other risks. Even if the boy were a minor, perhaps...

Sasuke thought of the insolent expression on the boy's face as he had knelt between his thighs, and felt his trousers tighten. He would enjoy having a chance to turn the tables on the blond... on Naruto. If Orochimaru's requests became too much, Sasuke could always refuse. He finished his drink, and set the glass down on the counter.

He walked to his large, marble bathroom, and turned the shower on. Within seconds, steam was
billowing out from the large glass doors. He stepped in, allowing the multiple jets from the walls to spray his body, while the massive showerhead above him drenched his hair. He felt the heat and flow of the water to drain some of the tension away as he washed himself.

Surely the risks were manageable. As long as he wasn't a minor... Sasuke mentally shrugged as he stepped out of the shower, feeling relaxed. He grabbed a fluffy, perfectly white Egyptian cotton towel and dried his body, then slid on his black silk pajama pants, tying the drawstring at his waist. His groin was still sensitive from the evening's earlier activities, and the slither of the fabric over his organ had him closing his eyes briefly at the unexpected intensity of sensation.

He smirked. Yes, as long as the boy wasn't a minor. He could always just say no if Orochimaru's demands became too high. He didn't expect this minor infatuation he had with the blond to last very long anyway. Surely it was purely physical, just some sort of unusual chemistry between them. It would be short-lived and out of his system quickly, so he could get back to focusing on other things. And Naruto seemed to not have too much of an issue with it the whole thing. He wasn't some cowering child. Sasuke could allow himself this one deviation, and still maintain control of his life. He just needed a little more information to be sure he wasn't walking into something unexpected. He strode into the large, spacious bedroom adjoining the bath.

Picking up the phone next to his king-sized bed, he dialed. "Karin," he said, not surprised that she would answer a call from him on the first ring, despite the very late hour on a Friday night. "I need you to find out everything you can on the implications of the zoning change in my district that is coming for a vote next week, and any connections it might have to business or personal ventures for Orochimaru Sanin," he said, using the English positioning of the name. "I want to know any possible interest he could have in the outcome of the vote." He listened while she assured him that she would have everything by Monday morning, then hung up.

The second call he made was more difficult, but it had to be done. "Nii-san," he said, his voice calm. "Sorry for calling so late. I hope I am not catching you indisposed?... Still at the office? ... Yes, I suppose the Akatsuki case is keeping you quite busy... no, I'm home. Just getting ready for bed... yes, alone... how about I take you out to lunch tomorrow? You need to have some time to clear your head... no, there was nothing I needed tonight. I just wanted to see how you were doing with everything... great, see you at noon at your office."

Sasuke hung up. Of course, Itachi would know there was a reason for his call. It was impossible to hide anything from the man, but he could potentially at least minimize what he revealed. If anyone knew Naruto's true age, it would be his brother, who was prosecuting him. And if even Itachi doesn't know Naruto's age... well, it would be hard for the legal system to hold Sasuke accountable if even the State of New York couldn't figure it out.

Sasuke slid between the silk sheets on his bed, clearing the matter completely from his mind for the night. He'd make his decision once he had all the information.

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Naruto pressed the buzzer on the Manhattan brownstone that Orochimaru had told him to return to when he had finished delivering the package. He wondered if the man lived here or if it were just one of his bases of operations. Naruto was still pissed off. He wasn't a sex trade worker, and he felt as though this task had been beneath him. It didn't make use of any of the skills he had developed.

A young man with spiky dark hair and dark eyes opened the door. He looked at Naruto with seeming annoyance, but motioned him inside. When Naruto had been there earlier in the evening, the boy had not made an appearance.
"I'm Uzumaki Naruto. I was told to meet Orochimaru-sama here," Naruto said, his tone and posture clearly indicating he was not intimidated by the other man.

"I know who you are. Follow me," the young man said arrogantly. He led Naruto down the corridor to the library where he had met Orochimaru earlier.

"Zaku - leave us," Orochimaru said, waving the brunette away with the flick of a pale hand. The man slanted a final glare at Naruto, then left, closing the door softly behind him. "Please forgive Zaku. He was somewhat annoyed to have someone else deliver important messages for me. He is my usual courier for political matters."

Naruto crossed his arms over his chest, knowing his temper was showing and glad for it. "And should I guess why you chose me instead of Zaku?"

Orochimaru looked at him, expressionless. "You seem upset, Naruto-kun. Did something happen this evening?"

Naruto narrowed his eyes. "Don't play with me. I made it very clear to Anko that I wasn't willing to sell my ass to make bail. If you took me on expecting me to change my mind, then you have made a poor investment."

Orochimaru looked intently at Naruto and licked his lips. "So something did happen. This is... pleasantly unexpected. May I ask who initiated it?"

Naruto rolled his eyes. "Like I'd have any interest in some spoiled, rich asshole."

Orochimaru looked at him, his excitement showing though he was clearly trying to evaluate the truth of Naruto's words. "I want you to tell me exactly what happened. Every word, every gesture."

Naruto suppressed a shudder. The fervor that lit the older man's eyes as Naruto described the encounter was just fucking creepy. Naruto didn't go into every detail, despite the man's probing. He just gave the basic summary: he delivered the package, Sasuke read through it, Sasuke read the part out loud about Naruto's role in this whole thing, Naruto was pissed off but still serviced him, and Sasuke didn't commit to agree to Orochimaru's terms when Naruto left.

"I won't do this shit again. If you were looking for someone who was good at this, you didn't look at my resume closely enough. If you need a bodyguard, someone to do recon, gather information or someone to intimidate someone, then I'm your guy. If you need a sex partner... look somewhere else. You pull a stunt like this again, and I'll just go down to the precinct and turn myself in for prostitution, naming you as my pimp." That would cause more trouble for Orochimaru than it would for Naruto, and they both knew it.

Orochimaru narrowed his eyes. "Surely you know what happens to pretty young men in prison. You might be strong, but you can't be on guard all the time. And there are only so many you can take down at once, no matter how tough you are. And then of course, there are always the guards. Don't think they don't like fresh meat either."

Naruto gave a feral smile. "I'll take my chances."

Orochimaru decided to switch tactics. If he forced Naruto too much, he would be less effective. Orochimaru didn't have leverage of the right kind on the blond yet. But he was expecting Anko to find some. There was always something that people cared about, or something that they wanted... always some way to tie them to you. Naruto would not be too hard to figure out. He didn't strike Orochimaru as a particularly complicated individual. Unlike the Uchihas.
"I heard some interesting rumors concerning Nagato's death," Orochimaru said, noticing the way the boy's face seemed to freeze at the mention of his former employer's name. Intriguing. "I heard that he wasn't killed by the police in the raid. I heard that he died by his own hand. And that his body guard was the only one with him at the time."

Naruto's face was completely blank.

"I am curious. The Nagato that I knew was extremely passionate and dedicated to his... work. It is hard for me to imagine him taking his own life."

Naruto stared at the pale man for a moment, but when he finally spoke, his voice was absolutely emotionless. "I have nothing to say to you or anyone else. If you want to know how Nagato died, or what he was thinking at the time, hold a fucking séance. I'm leaving. Don't contact me unless you have a real job for me."

"I can have your bail revoked," Orochimaru said coldly.

"Go ahead. I know what they have on me. I'll be out in less than a month, even without Anko's help." With that, Naruto walked out of the library to the front door. Zaku approached, looking as though he would intercept him, but a gesture from Orochimaru had the man standing down.

"Let Naruto-kun leave for now, Zaku. I'll be contacting him again soon, I'm sure."

Orochimaru could definitely ensure that Naruto was arrested and held longer than the boy seemed to realize. But he let the blond go without another word. He needed Naruto more compliant. He had waited years trying to find a chink in the Uchiha brothers' armor. Itachi had proven invulnerable. His only weakness was his little brother. So Orochimaru had focused his efforts there. Nothing had worked, until now. He wouldn't let Naruto go easily. He would build on this weakness. There were many ways he could play this. He didn't want to outright destroy them. No... one doesn't destroy such masterpieces.

He realized his hands were sweating. He took a breath and calmed himself. It would happen. There was no rush.

. . . . .

The heat in the subway was stifling as Naruto walked down the steps into the tunnel. Smells of garbage left in the sweltering sun wafted past, but he didn't mind. He loved the City in the summer. It was hot, sweaty, and gritty. But it was vibrantly alive.

There was a small group of street musicians playing on the platform. Naruto threw a dollar into the open guitar case as he waited for his train. You could disappear in this city from people trying to find you. Everyone minded their own business and stayed out of your way. No one looked twice at the person standing next to them. Nothing stood out as unusual, no matter how unusual it was.

He took the subway to the run-down apartment building where he and Gaara lived on 99th street in Spanish Harlem. They had originally lived in Chinatown, but after Nagato's group had some territory conflicts with one of the Tongs, they had relocated. It ended up being more convenient for Gaara anyway, given the organization he was working for was based at the very northern edge of the Upper East Side.

Naruto didn't mind that it was an 8th floor walk-up apartment. He and Gaara both hated elevators (floating death traps). The heat of the summer was full on, and he was sweating by the time he reached his door. He walked into the small studio apartment. As with most New York apartments, it
was cramped, but clean. There was a small open room, where both Naruto and Gaara kept their pallets for sleep, and folded them up for seating during the day. There was a tiny kitchenette and a cramped bathroom. Naruto considered them lucky that the bathroom was not in the kitchen. It was a configuration they had actually encountered when looking for an apartment.

He was not surprised to see Gaara waiting up for him. He was slightly more surprised to see the man standing clad all in black, including the black cloth covering the lower half of his face.

"Kakashi. You're getting careless," Naruto said, walking over to open the window and checking the fire escape to see if there was anyone watching from outside.

He didn't need to see the man's mouth to know Kakashi was smirking. "As if anyone could follow me without my noticing. Naruto... have you really forgotten?"

Naruto just sighed. He was tired. It had been a strange day.

"What does Orochimaru want you for?" Gaara asked flatly. He had already assessed Naruto's condition when he had walked into their apartment. Naruto looked fatigued, but there was no sign of injury on him.

"Well, it looks like we were both right," Naruto said, looking at Kakashi.

Kakashi simply raised an eyebrow.

"He wants me for a specific target. But he also wants my ass. Or I guess, more accurately, he wants to use my ass to get the target."

"Who's the target?" Kakashi asked, trying to figure out why Orochimaru would have chosen Naruto.

"Sasuke Uchiha. The ADA's baby brother."

Kakashi gave a low whistle. "I didn't even know he was gay. Did Orochimaru tell you why he chose you?"

"No. He must just know Sasuke's type, I suppose. And I guess I'm it," Naruto said, sighing wearily.

"I didn't know Sasuke had a 'type'. As far as I heard, he was pretty much asexual," Kakashi said thoughtfully.

Naruto snorted. "If that guy's asexual, then you're a Puritan."

Kakashi gave an amused look. "So... I take it that means he expressed interest in you?"

Naruto glanced over at Gaara, who's face was cold and expressionless.

"Yeah. He expressed himself just fine."

"Did Orochimaru make you have sex with him?" Gaara spoke, his words almost crystalline with danger.

"No," Naruto said. Not yet, anyway. "Just... some servicing." He didn't go into detail.

Kakashi snickered. "Oral or hand?"

Naruto glowered at the older man, unable to prevent a flush of embarrassment from creeping up his neck and across his cheeks. "Fuck you, pervert. Go read your porn if you are so desperate to hear
about some action."

"You need to set up your new rate card. Five dollar sucky sucky, ten dollar fucky fucky. If you need any pointers, I can set something up with Fu. Or Utakata," Kakashi was still laughing at Naruto's embarrassment. Naruto casually threw a roundhouse at the man's head. As expected, Kakashi dodged it, but Naruto swept his leg, landing him on the floor. He didn't continue, feeling his point was made. Kakashi nimbly rolled up (still snickering somewhat) and simply returned to his position leaning against the wall clearly unfazed.

"Had you met Sasuke before?" Kakashi said, continuing as though there had been no disruption. "It seems like quite a leap for Orochimaru to randomly guess you would trigger something in the man, given Sasuke's reputation for being pretty aloof in that regard."

Naruto shook his head. "I've never met Sasuke or Orochimaru before tonight. I've met Sasuke's brother, though."

Kakashi shifted away from the wall. "And you're going to meet him again. Itachi was in the station today, talking to the officers who were complaining that the address we have on file for you is no good. It's still Nagato's. They sent some officers around to ask you to come down to the station to talk about Nagato's death, and what you know about it. But they couldn't find you. It seems there is more to the story than what you originally told me, Naruto."

Naruto sighed. Of course it would be too much to ask that they leave him alone on this. "Aren't they supposed to direct any questions to Anko? Or has Orochimaru already taken her off my case?"

Kakashi decided he would not press Naruto just now on the details of Nagato's death. The relationship the blond had with the man had been complex. He knew he'd have to tread carefully. "They were supposed to talk to her first, but they wanted to try to get you without her. After what she pulled in their last interview with you, they were hoping to 'accidentally' bump into you and ask you for a favor. But when they couldn't find you, they sent a request over to her office. But now they know you're not living at Nagato's, and they want a current address. Watch yourself."

Naruto nodded. He paid cash under a different name for the rent here, so there would be no paper trail. He and Gaara didn't have any credit cards, bank accounts, or phones other than the disposable ones they got replaced every month. None of their group did. They were ghosts. Only Kakashi knew how to find them all.

"Did Orochimaru say he was going to have your bail revoked?" Kakashi asked, taking a cigarette out.

Naruto pulled out his lighter and lit it for him. Kakashi took a long drag, right through the thin fabric of his mask. "He threatened to when I said I wouldn't do more jobs like that. I told him to go hire a pro if that's the kind of work he needed done," Naruto grabbed Kakashi's cigarette and took a drag, then handed it back. Occasional smoking was Naruto's only vice. Alcohol or drugs dulled the senses, which was something Naruto couldn't afford.

Plus, smoking the silver-haired man's cigarettes had the added bonus of annoying the man.

Kakashi glared at the cigarette that Naruto handed back, but continued to smoke it anyway.

"So... are you fired already?" Kakashi said, blowing out a stream of smoke.

"Dunno," Naruto said, also exhaling a thin stream of smoke. "I told him I'd do other work for him.
But I'm not going to let him pimp me out to everyone he's trying to milk for political favors," Naruto said. "The case against me is weak. No one in Akatsuki will testify against me, and there were no outside witnesses to anything involving me.

Kakashi narrowed his eyes slightly. "You kill any of them?"

Naruto looked flatly at him. "I didn't say that. I just said there were none. Anko told me that all records involving Konan and me were destroyed before the raid."

Kakashi narrowed his eyes further at that, but didn't comment. "Don't quit quite yet if you don't have to. See what Orochimaru comes up with. Maybe he'll find other uses for you."

Gaara stirred at Kakashi's words. "Just watch your back. That guy has a habit of turning on his 'allies'. Especially the ones on the other side of the law, where he knows he can get away with it."

Naruto nodded. "I figured that. The guy's a snake. He's totally obsessed with Sasuke... it's fucking creepy."

Kakashi nodded. "He went after Itachi hard a while back. Itachi had to get a restraining order put on him. Looks like he thinks Sasuke might be easier prey. Did he say anything specific about what he was planning?"

Naruto shook his head. "No... it seemed more like... he just wanted to hear about any sort of sexual activity involving Sasuke. I actually felt more grossed out telling him about it than I did actually doing it with Sasuke."

Kakashi's eyes twinkled. He knew Naruto had taken both men and women as lovers in the past, though he'd been very selective in that regard. "Well, the Uchihas are very attractive, after all."

"Yeah, if you like assholes with sticks up their asses," Naruto grumbled. "Seriously, you should have seen this prick. He treated me like I was his fucking servant."

Kakashi shrugged. He had only met Sasuke once, but he knew Itachi and liked him. He found it amusing how much Sasuke seemed to have gotten under Naruto's skin. He was a little surprised that Naruto had gone along with what Orochimaru had asked of him. It certainly wasn't the first time that someone had tried to push the blond into that kind of activity. But it was the first time Naruto had actually gone through with it in the course of business. "Well, just play it by ear. If you end up back in jail, I'm sure Hidan and Dei will look out for you once they are out of solitary."

"They're still not allowed visitors?" Naruto asked. He was beginning to feel a bit desperate to talk to them and find out if either one knew what was going on with Orochimaru. If Kakashi didn't even know about it, he didn't know who else possibly could. And he didn't like being in the dark on something like this.

"They'll have to let them have visitors soon, or they'll run the risk of letting them get released on grounds of 'cruel and unusual punishment','' Gaara said.

"In the meantime, Naruto, you need to get in touch with Anko and have her meet you down at the station sometime tomorrow. If you are accessible, they might deprioritize trying to locate you," Kakashi advised. "You have enough people trying to find you. No need to add to the list. Once your actual address is on file..." he didn't bother to finish. They all knew how 'secure' the police records were. He might as well list himself in the phone book.

"Fine. I'll call her."
"She came to see me a couple of days ago, wanting to hear the details about your first arrest," Kakashi said, looking at his fingernails.

Naruto stilled. "Those records are sealed."

Kakashi looked up, "That's why she came to see me. She wanted to... persuade me to tell her about what I saw that day. She's a beautiful woman."

"You wouldn't rat me out for a piece of ass after all this time, Kakashi, so don't even pretend."

Kakashi snorted, and ruffled Naruto's hair. "But I'm sure I'm not the only one she's asked. Just look out. Orochimaru is looking for leverage on you. And he's looking in the right place."

Naruto nodded, heeding the older man's warning.

Kakashi gave a mock salute, then opened the window to the fire escape. "Contact me if something happens." And with that, he vanished into the night.

Gaara watched Naruto in comfortable silence for several minutes.

"You ok?" The redhead asked finally.

Naruto shrugged. "It was weird. But... it's fine. Whatever."

Gaara pulled off his shirt. "Let's go to the roof."

Naruto followed suit, throwing his dirty shirt into the corner of the small room on top of his pallet. It was their ritual. At least three or four times a week, they would pick the lock on the door to the roof and spar late into the night. It served the dual purpose of keeping their skills fresh, and relieving the tension. Gaara had never taken a lover, but the physical intimacy of sparring did not bother him the way other touches did. Gaara knew that Naruto needed something to steady his mind and release the stress. They had grown up learning very different methods, but they were equally skilled, making their sparring a challenge regardless of how long they had been together. They were brothers in every sense except DNA.

It was several hours later when Naruto, slick with sweat, walked into the bathroom and turned on the shower. There was a spurt of rust colored water and a sputtering noise as the pipes rattled. After a couple of minutes, the lukewarm water ran clear and Naruto stepped into the thin stream. The water never got hot, but at least it wasn't cold. And given the heat of the night and the fact that their apartment had no air conditioning, Naruto was more than happy with the temperature.

He lay down on the floor on his pallet while Gaara took his turn in the shower, thinking about the events of the day. He hadn't been lying when he said it had been more disturbing talking to Orochimaru about the interaction with Sasuke than it had actually doing it with the councilman. Mentally, Naruto shrugged. He supposed Kakashi was right. The Uchihas were very attractive. At least, physically.

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Sasuke had just reached the main entrance of the district court building when he received a text from Itachi saying he had to run down to the station for an interview of someone they had been having a hard time locating and wouldn't be able to meet him for lunch. Itachi was coming out of the elevator just as Sasuke reached it.
"Sorry, little brother," Itachi said apologetically. "We've been trying to track this guy down for almost a week, and he just walked into the station out of the blue. We can't keep him long, since this is purely a voluntary interview. I want to be there to monitor it so they don't mess something up. Ibiki is gone for the weekend, and I don't know who they have on point today."

Sasuke shrugged. "I'll walk with you," he said, falling into step with Itachi as they strode towards the police station. "How are things going with the case?"

"It's going. We have enough evidence to put the main players away with no problem, as long as no one messes up. No one turned, though, which is unusual, but I guess Nagato was a pretty charismatic leader. There were only a few who we had to let go because we just didn't have enough evidence."

Sasuke decided there would be no way to slip the question in completely unnoticed, but this was as good a chance as he was likely to get. "What about that blond kid that went crazy in the holding cell?"

Itachi slanted a glance at him, and Sasuke mentally cursed. But Itachi answered the question, "He was one of the ones we had to let go. Orochimaru sent his top attorney to handle his case, but it was hardly worth Anko's effort. I am curious as to the connection there, but so far we haven't uncovered a history between those two."

"So he didn't end up going to juvie?"

"No. All evidence points to him being an adult. Though we don't really have a firm ID on him yet. It's like the kid just dropped out of the sky five years ago enrolled as a freshman in high school here."

Sasuke pretended only vague interest. Clearly there wasn't going to be a firm resolution on the matter, but it was good enough for now.

"Actually, he's the one that I'm going to observe the interview with," Itachi said, noting the brief flash of interest on his little brother's face before it was masked. "Sorry I won't be able to make lunch. But we'll catch up over dinner."

Sasuke simply nodded, noticing the shadows under his brother's eyes from exhaustion. Concern for his brother pushed out other thoughts as he touched Itachi's shoulder, causing the man to stop. "Itachi... let me know if there's anything I can do. You look exhausted. It's been a while since I clerked for someone, but I'm more than qualified."

Itachi laughed, but his eyes had softened at the offer. "Modesty doesn't become you, Otouto. You have enough on your plate as it is. But thanks," he pushed two of his fingers into Sasuke's forehead. It was a gesture that used to infuriate Sasuke as a child, but now he only smiled.

"Just be careful, nii-san."

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"Anko's still not here?" Naruto asked the policeman sitting across from him in the interview room. "Orochimaru said she'd be here an hour ago."

The policeman shrugged. "We could always get started without her. She probably just decided that - since this is a voluntary interview rather than an interrogation - her presence was not necessary."

It was a lie and they both knew it. Naruto thought it likely that Orochimaru had decided not to send her. Either to try to teach Naruto a lesson for being insolent the day before, or because Orochimaru also wanted to learn the answers to the questions the police were going to ask today.
Naruto yawned and stretched lazily. " Seriously. I gave my statement. I have nothing more to say."

" Where you there when Nagato committed suicide?"

Naruto's face closed up. " It's been ruled a suicide?"

The policeman seemed to realize he had revealed something too soon. " Nothing's official. We just want to talk to you to get your side of the story."

Naruto smirked. " To compare with Nagato's side of the story? Damn, you guys are good if you can talk to a dead man."

" Look, kid. I don't think you realize what kind of trouble you're in. You better start talking, " the officer blustered.

" Or what? I'm here voluntarily. I can walk out the door any time I want. So play nice, " Naruto said, his voice mocking.

The officer looked non-plussed, and glanced nervously towards the mirrored glass. Naruto caught the glance, and turned to face it, knowing who was likely standing behind it.

" Hey, Itachi', if you wanted my number that badly you could have just asked me, " Naruto said in Japanese. The officer looked puzzled, clearly not understanding the language that was spoken. " I know I came on a Saturday unannounced, so I didn't expect the top line-up for interviews, but seriously where did you find this guy? He couldn't interrogate my sandwich."

The door opened, and Itachi walked in, clearly surprising the officer. Naruto just smiled.

" How did you know I spoke Japanese? " Itachi asked calmly in that language. Clearly Itachi was Japanese American, but he had been in this country so long that his English was accentless. Most people would not assume he could speak Japanese out of hand. But there had been something in Naruto's expression that felt like... it had been a deliberate 'slip' of knowledge showing he knew this fact about him.

Naruto shrugged, pretending the question was casual and meaningless. Itachi wasn't fooled. " Are you kidding? I just got hired by Orochimaru. He knows whether you and your brother dress to the right or the left*, " Naruto said, still in Japanese, as he stood to leave. " Of course I know you speak Japanese fluently. " He knew that if the interview was being recorded, Orochimaru would find out about this last exchange and likely be unhappy. But the man had stood him up, and Naruto owed him no loyalty. Plus, Naruto liked the ADA. Itachi seemed like a decent human being. There weren't very many of those in positions of power as far as Naruto had seen. The guy deserved a heads up. Something about Orochimaru set Naruto's teeth on edge.

Itachi simply waved a hand to the officer who stood to stop Naruto from leaving. The interview was over.

. . . .

Itachi returned to the observation room, looking at the man who had been watching the brief interview with him.

As usual, the brunette's hair was tied up into a spiky ponytail. The man had appeared to have been half asleep throughout the duration of the interview, but Itachi knew better. " Well, Shikamaru? What did you make of it?"
Shikamaru rolled his shoulders. He was a criminal psychologist brought in to assist on major cases, and Itachi had called him in as a favor on this one on instinct. "That was no ordinary kid. He was completely at ease and unintimidated by authority. Not hostile. Just unintimidated... it wasn't a front. He didn't even seem to care that his attorney left him dangling in the wind, even though he was clearly aware of the implications that Orochimaru could be withdrawing his support."

He looked to Itachi, who simply nodded. He had read the same thing in Naruto's expression.

Shikamaru continued, "He's been through something much worse that makes any tactics we have here seem like child's play. If you want to get anything out of him, you'd need Ibiki, or my dad. And even then... I doubt you'd get much. He knows we can only go so far. This is definitely not his first time through the system."

Again, Itachi nodded in agreement.

"Did you notice the faint scars on his face? Those were not accidental... too parallel and symmetric. My guess is that the guy has been tortured at some point. The clip from the security tape you showed me about the event in the holding cell where he attacked the fellow prisoner looked like a post-traumatic stress response. It seemed to be more from the physical attack rather than the sexual assault," Shikamaru sighed, "Net net, my read is this kid is dangerous and he knows way more than what he has said so far. But he's not loyal to Orochimaru, and is clearly conflicted about getting pulled into his organization. He gave you a veiled warning to watch out for Orochimaru because he seems to respect you, despite you being the ADA on his case. But you aren't going to get him to talk about something he doesn't want to talk about."

Itachi had let the interview end because it was clearly going nowhere. Naruto's parting words bothered him, though, especially since the blond had made a point of adding Sasuke into the warning. He got the sense that it was a message he should not take lightly. For some reason that he couldn't quite explain, he trusted the blond.

"I'm deleting the recording of this interview. We didn't learn anything from it," Itachi said. Shikamaru simply raised a brow. He knew Itachi was trying to prevent Orochimaru from hearing the tape. The police officer in the interrogation room would only be able to say that a few words of some other language had been exchanged, but nothing more than that.

-xXx-

There was a knock on Sasuke's office door. "Yes," Sasuke said tersely, checking his watch. He had less than ten minutes before he had to leave for his next appointment.

A redhead with glasses poked her head in. "I'm sorry to interrupt you, sir, but you have a call from Orochimaru Sanin. He asked to speak with you," Karin recognized the name from the search Sasuke had had her do over the weekend, but she was careful to let no recognition color her voice.

"Put him through," Sasuke said briefly, then picked up his phone as it rang. "Orochimaru-san, I was expecting your call."

"Sasuke-kun. It's good to hear your voice. I heard that the vote went through today?"

"Yes. I'm sure you will be pleased with the outcome," Sasuke said.

"So you appreciated the way I made my case on this matter," Orochimaru said, slightly taunting.

Sasuke's voice turned hard. "I voted in the interest of my constituents. Don't read too much into the situation."
He could hear Orochimaru's smile as he said, "But of course. I would expect nothing less from you, Councilman Uchiha."

-xXx-

_to be continued..._

yes, I know I have added more complications to the plot, but I promise I am keeping track of all the threads. But I think it's clear where this is going to go in the next chapter, yes? In terms of SasuNaru, anyway.

*for my non-native English speaking readers, this phrase "dressing to the right or the left" implies very intimate knowledge of someone. It literally is referring to whether a man places his penis to the left or right side of the crotch seam of his trousers for comfort when he dresses.
Leverage

Chapter by KizuKatana

-xXx-

Orochimaru looked at the paper that Anko handed him. It was a photocopy of the hand written notes in the pages of a police officer's notebook, documenting an interview with a homeless man that had taken place four years ago.

Orochimaru stared at it for several minutes, then looked up at the female attorney. "Why did Kabuto never bring this to my attention? Who was the prosecuting attorney on this case?"

"Kabuto. But the records went missing before there was even an indictment. He might never have seen this. Plus the boy was deemed to be a minor midway through the case preparations and the case was transferred to juvie."

Orochimaru frowned. He would have to reprimand Kabuto for this oversight. If not for Anko, it would have cost him his leverage over Naruto, and in turn over Sasuke.

"If the records went missing, how did you get this?"

"The officer's widow kept all his notebooks."

"Widow?" Orochimaru asked sharply.

"The officer was killed in a hit and run three months after this interview took place."

"And the homeless man, this witness?"

"Found dead of a drug overdoes three days later," Anko said. "There is also something you should know about the interview you had me skip last weekend with Naruto. It seems he and Itachi had an interesting exchange."

Orochimaru drummed his fingers on his desk while he listened to Anko describe what she had learned about the events of last weekend from her discussion with the interviewing officer. His gaze was drawn back to the paper in front of him. Orochimaru definitely had leverage over Naruto now. This knowledge... with this knowledge he could make the boy do anything.

The question was... was it worth the risk? There were few people that Orochimaru could say he truly feared. The name mentioned in this interview, though, was at the top of his list.

-xXx-

Sasuke was surprised that Itachi had been able to keep their weekly dinner on Saturday. The Akatsuki case had Itachi so busy that Sasuke hadn't heard from him in days. Itachi looked exhausted, and Sasuke was worried. Mostly for his brother's health, though Itachi always seemed to be able to handle anything.

A small piece of his worry was also that Itachi would somehow find out about what had happened between him and Naruto through the course of the investigation. Sasuke didn't feel apologetic about what had happened... Naruto was (apparently) and adult, and Sasuke hadn't forced him. But he also knew how his brother would react, and didn't want to deal with that. He also admitted to himself that
he didn't want Itachi to find out because he would likely confront Orochimaru to ensure that there was no further interaction between Sasuke and Naruto. And after not seeing the blond for more than a week, Sasuke knew he wanted it to happen again. Badly enough that twice he had almost contacted Orochimaru rather than waiting for the man to call him. Almost. But in the end, his pride and sense of self preservation had stopped him. Orochimaru would come to him. Sasuke would wait.

Sasuke happened to glance up as two men walked into the restaurant. And froze.

_Naruto._

Sasuke's eyes raked over the blond, taking in how he looked in his tight black jeans, fitted burnt orange T-shirt, and black blazer. The restaurant had a dress code. Men must wear a jacket. Most came in suits, but many of the younger men pulled off the same look as Naruto, managing to look both casual and formal at the same time. Naruto looked older somehow, his face serious and alert, scanning the faces that surrounded him as Orochimaru approached the hostess likely to inquire about the readiness of their table. Sasuke wondered if Orochimaru were taking the blond on a date, or if this was business. While the notion of Naruto involved sexually with Orochimaru sent a wave of nausea through him, the business-like expression on Naruto's face said it was doubtful.

Sasuke belatedly realized that Itachi had stopped talking and turned to see what had so fully captured Sasuke's attention. Orochimaru had noticed them, and started to walk over with Naruto following behind. A brief concern settled in Sasuke's stomach as he considered the possibility that Orochimaru was here to disclose Sasuke's indiscretion with the boy to Itachi, and demand some sort of additional favor for keeping his silence. But if the state of New York viewed Naruto as an adult, the downside was minimal. Sasuke had already laid out contingency plan, and it would ensure that Orochimaru came out with more damage than Sasuke. It would be unpleasant, but he wasn't worried.

The creepy, yellowish eyes of the older man had latched onto them as he approached them.

Naruto's eyes met Sasuke's and they widened in shock. Clearly Naruto at least had had no idea that they would be meeting this evening. He saw the blond shoot an angry glare at Orochimaru, but the older man either didn't see it or chose to ignore it. Sasuke felt some relief that Naruto, at least, was not trying to set him up. Whatever was about to happen, the blond wasn't orchestrating it.

"Itachi-san, Sasuke-kun," Orochimaru said, bowing politely. The two men murmured their greetings, standing to return the polite gesture before returning to their seats. "What a pleasant surprise to see the two of you here this evening. Are you finished with your meal or just getting started?"

Sasuke narrowed his eyes, willing to bet anything that the man already knew the answer to this, but Itachi simply said, "We just sat down. Would the two of you care to join us?"

"Thank you, Itachi-san. I believe you already know Uzumaki Naruto," Orochimaru said smoothly, observing the reaction of the two men closely.

Naruto greeted the brothers briefly, wondering whether Sasuke had told Itachi of his dealings with him or not. Sasuke's face was impassive, revealing no sign of discomfort or surprise at seeing him here.

A waiter appeared and added two place settings. Orochimaru took the seat next to Itachi, and Naruto sat across from him next to Sasuke.

"Naruto-kun is serving as my personal security. I asked him to accompany me this evening as things have been... unsettled... in the community since Nagato's unfortunate passing."
Sasuke noticed Naruto's hand tense at the words, and he wondered what Naruto felt about the death of his former employer. But Orochimaru had already dropped the subject and was moving on to something else.

"Itachi-san, I hear that you and Naruto-kun had an interesting conversation just the other day. It seemed... very intimate."

Sasuke glanced sharply to his brother, whose eyes were fixed on Orochimaru. "I was observing a fruitless interview with him at the station, if that is what you are referring to," Itachi said with seeming disinterest.

"Yes, but then I heard that you spoke together in Japanese. Was there something that you didn't want the interviewing officer to hear, I wonder? Somehow the recording of that session was erased. I heard that there was some concern over why that was."

"You hear many things for a man not employed by either the police department or the district attorney's office, Orochimaru-san," there was a slight warning in Itachi's voice, but Orochimaru simply smiled.

"I am just looking out for my employee. My attorney represents him, after all, and I had wanted to hear the interview. I would hate for Naruto-kun to say something that would get him in trouble. He is so young, after all." Orochimaru slanted a knowing glance to Sasuke, and Sasuke had to steel himself from reacting. Itachi saw the exchanged glance and it made him pause. There was only one reason Naruto's age would be an issue for Sasuke.

Naruto rolled his eyes at all the double-speak. He hated shit like this. He understood now completely what Gaara had meant when he said Naruto would not be a good fit with Orochimaru's approach. "Look, I told Itachi that I thought the guy who was interviewing me was an idiot. I didn't exactly want the cop to hear, and it was a pretty safe bet he couldn't speak Japanese. And if you were so worried about my well-being, Orochimaru-sama, then you should have let Anko come instead of telling her to wait three hours before showing up."

Orochimaru frowned. He hadn't been aware that Anko had disclosed this piece of information to Naruto. Of course, the boy probably would have figured it out without her help, but it gave Orochimaru pause. He had never fully trusted her the way he did Kabuto, but she was incredibly useful. He would need to watch her more closely. Especially with Naruto.

"I didn't know that you had such a close relationship with Itachi-san that you would feel the need to discuss something like that with him," Orochimaru said, watching both Itachi's and Naruto's expressions. Itachi's face was inscrutable. Naruto knew his was not, but he needed to play this properly. By now he had realized the purpose of this 'coincidental' meeting with the Uchihas. It was this conversation. Orochimaru was suspicious, and wanted to see if there was a relationship between him and Itachi.

"Itachi was decent at the station when they brought us in," Naruto said, looking down at his napkin. It was the truth. Naruto had remembered the man, and been surprised by how honorable he had seemed. Most of the cops would have been just as happy to see them die, and save the taxpayers the expense of the trial. "He was the only one who seemed honestly concerned about us. And he's been fair, especially with Konan. So..." Naruto's gaze flicked to Itachi, then back to his napkin. "... thanks. Anyway, I just figured he should know the guy he had interviewing me was an idiot and wasting his time." Naruto had a small blush on his cheeks, seemingly embarrassed by what he had said. In truth he was embarrassed. He could count on one had the number of people who had ever shown concern for his safety and well-being without wanting something specific in return. Itachi had been one of them. He remembered the panic in the older man's voice when he realized Naruto was injured and
bleeding. He had been surprised, and slightly grateful, even if it had led to him landing in a hospital.

Itachi knew that - in part - Naruto was being truthful. He was explaining to Itachi why he had warned him and at the same time trying to calm Orochimaru about the nature of their conversation and relationship. And Naruto was telling just enough of the truth that it came across as completely honest. All he had left out was the implicit warning about Orochimaru's interest in Itachi and Sasuke. Through his career as an attorney, Itachi had developed almost a sixth sense at detecting deception. He knew that Naruto wasn't a good liar, but evidently the boy had found a mechanism for getting around the issue by using statements close enough to the truth that they disguised the lie.

Orochimaru seemed satisfied. Itachi noticed, though, that Orochimaru's glance had shifted to Sasuke. When Itachi turned to look at his brother, he was shocked at the burning look that was leveled at him. It was one that he hadn't seen in years. Why is Sasuke jealous?

A tiny smile appeared on Orochimaru's thin lips, and it made Itachi shiver. Something was very wrong.

Just then their waiter appeared. "Could I get you gentlemen some drinks while you look at the menu?"

Itachi, Sasuke, and Orochimaru all ordered drinks, but Naruto shook his head. "I don't drink, thanks," he said, indicating he'd stick with just water.

Sasuke raised a brow, clearly remembering the drink Naruto had had in his apartment the other evening. "I only use alcohol in mouthwash. Good for killing germs or whatever," Naruto drawled slightly, his eyes glinting with suppressed laughter.

Sasuke felt his eyes narrow, but realizing that both his brother and Orochimaru were watching him intently, he schooled his features to his usual mask of indifference.

Orochimaru felt positively gleeful as he watched the nonverbal exchange between the two younger men. This was far better than he could have hoped. Naruto had not only apparently captured Sasuke's interest, but he seemed to be creating friction between the brothers, something that Orochimaru had not ever thought would be possible.

He decided that it was in fact worth the risk to use the information he had gleaned to bind Naruto to him. He would just be extremely careful to create a good enough plan that the significant risks could be mitigated. If he could have both Sasuke and Itachi, he would no longer need Kabuto's services. Any of them. He fought hard to keep his feral grin concealed behind his polite demeanor.

Naruto's attention was drawn to a man in a corner table by the rear exit to the restaurant. He had noticed him arrive shortly after he and Orochimaru had. The conversation between Orochimaru and the Uchihas had shifted to business and political matters, neither of which were of interest to him. Naruto shot a glance to Orochimaru to get his attention. "The man at the corner table. Is he yours?"

Orochimaru didn't even glance over. "Why would I have brought secondary protection?"

Naruto simply nodded, then placed his napkin on the table. "Please excuse me for a moment," he said, rising and walking casually over to where the man was sitting, aware of three pairs of eyes following him.

The three watched as Naruto bent and, placing a hand on the man's shoulder, whispered something to him. The man paled, and his glance shifted fractionally to where Orochimaru was sitting, then down to where Naruto's other hand was resting in the pocket of his blazer. He stood, and followed
Naruto out the rear of the building. Orochimaru resumed the conversation to draw attention away from Naruto's actions. Fifteen minutes later, Naruto returned to the restaurant. He called the water over and - after a brief conversation - paid what appeared to be the other man's bill before heading to the men's room.

He returned a few minutes later and took his seat next to Orochimaru.

"Was there a problem?" Orochimaru asked casually, glancing at the scrapes across the back of Naruto's knuckles.

"No," Naruto said calmly, but with a hint of annoyance. "Though next time you set a test for me, you might want to consider the costs."

Orochimaru raised a brow. The man he had paid to follow them to see if Naruto would notice him was not one of his regulars, but had come highly recommended. The fact that Naruto had spotted him almost immediately, and had been able to make the man reveal his employer annoyed him. Itachi and Sasuke watched the exchange with interest. Orochimaru wondered if Naruto had killed the man, which would be problematic for him. But he would have to wait until the privacy of the car ride to find out. Aside from the social impropriety of the topic, one does not discuss a potential murder in front of someone from the district attorney's office. And if Naruto was truly foolish enough to have killed him with so many witnesses to their interaction... then Orochimaru would leave him to his fate.

The rest of the dinner passed relatively uneventfully. Orochimaru, Itachi and Sasuke continued their discussion of business and politics, which Naruto largely ignored in favor of scanning the restaurant and its inhabitants. He felt Sasuke's eyes on him, particularly when he'd place a bit of food in his mouth, but he was careful to avoid making anything but fleeting eye contact with the man. He had to admit that Sasuke was an amazingly attractive man. Seeing him next to his brother, he realized that Sasuke's looks might actually be natural, and not enhanced, given the similarity between the brothers. But he was not about to indicate by any look or gesture that he found the man anything other than pampered and useless. He didn't want Orochimaru to take it as a sign he had enjoyed his previous assignment. And he also... just really wanted to piss the younger Uchiha off. He didn't know exactly why, but somehow, he got great pleasure in seeing the flashes of annoyance in Sasuke's nearly expressionless eyes that Naruto's refusal to fawn over him was creating.

When they were in the limousine heading back to Orochimaru's brownstone, Orochimaru finally asked him.

"Is he dead?"

"No, but he will be sending you his medical bills."

Orochimaru decided not to press the matter further. "I was pleased with you tonight. I have decided to keep you on."

Naruto turned, narrowing his eyes. "Why would I agree to that? It was clear you didn't really need my protection. If you want to avoid being followed, it seems the easier route would be for you to simply quit paying people to follow you. You've been refunded my bail money since the charges were dropped. I can get the police department to pay my medical bills, given that they were the ones responsible for my injuries. That leaves just Anko's fees. And I can pay for those."

Orochimaru looked at him, and Naruto was disconcerted by the fact that he seemed amused. "So, are you turning in your resignation?"

"I think it's pretty clear after tonight that you don't need me, and it's also clear that I don't work the
way you do. I'm not good at deception and political double-speak. It honestly just annoys me."

"We came away from this evening with very different conclusions, but that is not surprising," Orochimaru said, still seeming completely confident. "I think that you will find working for me to your great advantage. And walking away... extremely dangerous."

Naruto waited, knowing that Orochimaru was withholding something from him, but not sure what it was. In his experience, staying silent was the best approach in these situations. After a few moments, Orochimaru spoke.

"I know who is hunting you. And I know why."

Naruto's blood froze, and he went perfectly still. He glanced surreptitiously at the door of the limousine. They were locked. He wondered where the button was to release them was, or if he should just kick the window out and jump. If Orochimaru was delivering him to that man, he would be an idiot to remain in the car. They were still in midtown, and only going about 20 miles per hour on the Hudson River Parkway due to the heavy weekend traffic. It would be a tough landing, but his chance of survival was better than it would be if he was right about what was going to happen.

"I don't know where he is. I have never had the occasion to meet him. But I can help you find him," Orochimaru said quickly, correctly reading the tension in Naruto's body as being posed for flight.

Naruto paused. He wasn't being handed over? No one would willingly involve themselves in this situation. "Why would you help me?"

Orochimaru smiled. "Because I want the Uchihas more than I fear the person you are playing cat and mouse with."

Naruto looked at him flatly. "Then you are an idiot."

"Perhaps. But I have vast resources and networks that I will make available to you, as long as you do what I ask. You are trying to find him before he finds you. It is your only option. I don't know yet how the two of you came into contact, but I know that you saw his face and can describe him. And I know you killed his partner, even though the charges were dropped. As you said, I would be a fool to want to involve myself too much in this situation. I won't actively help you against him, but I will allow you to use my contacts to gather information and try to find him on your own."

"Those charges were dismissed," Naruto said, knowing it was irrelevant, but feeling exposed and defensive.

"I read the officer's interview notes."

"I thought those went missing."

Orochimaru just smiled.

Naruto took a breath, then blew it out slowly. He knew he could not trust this man. "And if I refuse?"

Orochimaru's smile thinned maliciously. "Then I will use all my considerable resources to be sure that he knows exactly where you are at all times. Your picture will be in every newspaper, and there will be people following you every minute of every day, cataloging every friend and acquaintance you have. You know how... thorough... he can be. All he'd have to do is look up, and he'd see you. And everyone you have ever cared about will die before he finally kills you as well."
Naruto sat there. He couldn't trust what Orochimaru said, but he knew the man would make good on his threat. He could hide himself and probably Gaara. But there were others... Sakura, Kakashi, Hidan, Dei, Konan... even Itachi and Sasuke. Some of them had actual lives that couldn't be walked away from, and they would be killed just for having even tentative associations with him in the fear that Naruto had said something. Of course, Orochimaru didn't seem to realize that he would also be on that list. Naruto wondered if the man were stupid, or bluffing. Or crazy. "So, what do you want from me?"

"For now, I simply want you to live in my brownstone. Things have progressed further than I had anticipated with your interaction with the Uchiha brothers, and I need to decide what the best course of action will be."

Naruto slowly nodded. "Ok."

"We can go to your place now and get your things."

Naruto's face hardened. "No. There's nothing I need there. You can purchase whatever clothing or weapons I require."

Orochimaru was displeased, but he knew that Naruto simply wanted to ensure that he did not discover where he lived. Likely because he was protecting someone who lived with him, or visited frequently.

"Very well. Out of curiosity, though, why did Nagato take you into his organization after you killed one of his lieutenants?"

Naruto looked at him, but remained silent.

"Are you refusing to answer the question? I thought we just discussed the price of disobedience."

"Honestly..." Naruto's face softened slightly, "... I didn't understand why he didn't just kill me when we first met. When he picked me up from the courthouse when I was being released, I assumed that's what was going to happen."

"But he didn't?"

"No. He offered me a job instead. Look, I'll do what you want. But in addition to access to your network, I want you to get me access to Hidan and Deidara. They won't let me visit them. You fix that, let me use your organization's resources, and I'll do what you want."

-xXx-

Three days later, Sasuke opened a large envelope that was in with his mail. He pulled out the contents, and stared, a frown marring his brow. Inside were photos of him. Walking to his car, getting coffee across the street from his office, there were even photos taken of him in his kitchen, though clearly they had been taken through a telephoto lens from a building nearby through his penthouse window. With them was a simple note. "Leave town."

He stared at it for a bit. It was not the first time he had been stalked. He picked up the phone in his apartment and called down to security.

"Jugo. Has anyone tried to come up to my apartment, or been asking about me in the past month?"

"No sir. I would have reported anything unusual to you immediately."
"It appears I have another stalker. Just let me know if you notice anything unusual. And go through the security cameras for the past week or two... just double-check that there is no one hanging around that shouldn't be."

"Do you wish me to inform the police, Sasuke-san?"

"Not at this stage. All that was sent were some photos and a note telling me to leave town. I've definitely had worse."

There was a slight pause, as Jugo clearly didn't agree with this decision. But the guard said, "Ok. But if I see anything suspicious, I'm calling the police immediately."

"Of course, Jugo."

Sasuke hung up, put the letters in a file and stored them in his desk. Then he finished getting ready for bed.

The next morning he was awoken by someone sitting on his bed. He didn't need to open his eyes to recognize the presence. "Itachi. Let me guess. Jugo called you," Sasuke slowly opened his eyes.

"I would have preferred if you called me. Since I know you won't, I ask Jugo to keep me informed."

Sasuke sighed. Being angry at Jugo was pointless. No matter who it was, he knew his brother would always find a way to be informed on all aspects of his life. Although there was one significant event that Itachi had not yet managed to learn about. Thank god.

"Have you had any run-ins with Orochimaru recently?"

Sasuke briefly wondered if his brother were literally able to read his mind. "You mean aside from the dinner that we had with him a few nights ago?"

Itachi looked at him. "What are you not telling me?"

Sasuke closed his eyes. It was too early in the morning for this. "Itachi, I have no idea who sent the pictures. It's not like this is the first stalker I've ever had. There has been no sign that anyone has actually been in the apartment building at all. As long as this is just some crazy person from a distance, it doesn't meet the bar for going to the police. All they will say is 'if I see anything suspicious, call them'."

Itachi just looked at him flatly. "What are you not telling me?" he repeated.

"Nothing related to this. Itachi, I'm twenty-five years old. You don't need to monitor my every move anymore."

Itachi place two fingers on his brother's forehead, pressing his head slightly deeper into the pillows. "But you're still my little brother. I'm always going to worry about you," he shifted on the bed so he was reclining on a pillow next to Sasuke. "Naruto warned me that Orochimaru is... still fixated on us. I think we should have the police look into this."

"How well do you know Naruto?" Sasuke asked, his tone causing Itachi to raise his brow in question.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Orochimaru implied that there was something going on between you. He's
Itachi regarded his brother for a moment. There were six years separating them, but sometimes Itachi felt more like Sasuke's father then his older brother. "You find him attractive."

Sasuke stood. "Don't be annoying. He's a felon who probably didn't even finish high school. I'm going to take a shower. I have work this morning. I am assuming you do as well."

"Fine. But I'm going to talk with the police. I want someone watching your apartment."

Sasuke didn't answer. He knew it would be fruitless to argue, and he doubted that the police would consent to monitoring him with no clear threat even if Itachi requested it.

-xXx-

Orochimaru stood in Itachi's office. "Thank you for seeing me, Itachi-san, Sasuke-kun" Orochimaru began smoothly.

"I was surprised to receive your request to meet with my brother and me this morning," Itachi said, his face cold as he skipped the formalities of greeting the older man.

"Yes, I heard some disturbing news that someone has threatened Sasuke-kun, and I wanted to discuss the matter with you and offer my assistance."

"Are you the one who sent the photos to Sasuke?" Itachi cut to the chase, his voice cold and hard.

"No. It actually goes directly against my interests to try to drive Sasuke away," Orochimaru said, knowing that any attempt at evading Itachi's query would be counter-productive.

"And what exactly are your interests when it comes to my brother, Orochimaru?"

Orochimaru noted the absence of the honorific, but didn't comment. He knew how dangerous Itachi was when it came to protecting his brother. Orochimaru honestly felt lucky that he was merely being watched by the police if Itachi suspected him of this. Itachi was known for always playing by the rules, and winning due to his ruthless intellect rather than under-handed means. But Orochimaru knew that all bets were off when Itachi's brother was involved.

"I have only the highest regard for you and your brother, Itachi-san. All I have ever desired is a closer linking of our interests. Anything that threatens either of you I consider a personal affront to my own. I want to help to identify who is behind this. The police have informed me that they will have someone monitoring Sasuke-kun's apartment building. But I have... avenues of search that are not open to them."

Itachi narrowed his eyes that the police had chosen to inform Orochimaru of their surveillance before they had consulted him. But he wasn't surprised. Orochimaru had several informants on the squad.

"I also would be willing to volunteer the services of one of my men to serve as Sasuke-kun's personal security until this matter is resolved," Orochimaru said.

"Absolutely not," Itachi stated flatly. He had actually tried to talk Sasuke into hiring some personal security earlier that day, but Sasuke had brushed it off as an over-reaction at this stage. He noticed, though, how Sasuke had stiffened at Orochimaru's offer.

"It is someone you are already familiar with, I believe. Uzumaki Naruto."
Itachi was watching his brother's face. And the look that flashed across at the mention of the blond's name was... possessive.

Itachi narrowed his eyes. Somehow, Naruto and Sasuke had met, and something had happened between them. Itachi wondered what the circumstances had been, and how Orochimaru was involved. But he knew better than to ask the question directly, especially in his office where the answer could be overheard.

"Very well," Sasuke said, earning a sharp look from Itachi. "But he doesn't stay in my house, and he only accompanies me to events when I deem protection necessary."

Itachi studied first his brother, then Orochimaru in the silence that greeted this statement. Orochimaru was clearly waiting for Itachi's reaction. Itachi knew that Orochimaru very well could be behind this threat. If so, then likely his entire purpose was to get Naruto and Sasuke together. But Itachi knew that Naruto was not fully under Orochimaru's influence, and that Orochimaru was not aware of this. And Itachi had learned more about the boy's history. Naruto was dangerous. Though in these circumstances, that was almost a benefit.

He took a quick breath as his mind raced through the thoughts and potential scenarios. In the end, Itachi trusted Naruto. And whether Orochimaru was behind this or not, if someone was targeting his brother with physical harm, Naruto was more qualified than anyone else Itachi could think of to protect him. What was the old saying? *It takes a crook to catch a crook.*

"I thought you didn't want protection," Itachi said, making one last minor push to derail this, though he could see in Sasuke's eyes that the decision was already final.

"I'm tired of wasting any more time talking about this. Everyone seems to think I need more security for a brief time. Fine," Sasuke turned to look at Orochimaru. "Just make sure to dress him properly. If he is going to be accompanying me, I can't be seen with an Abercrombie reject."

Sasuke worked to keep his features impassive. He wanted this. He was used to getting what he wanted, and the fact that he had to resort to less-than-savory tactics might have stung his pride slightly, but in the end that only fueled his desire to do it. Part of it, perhaps, was the lack of interest that Naruto had shown. It was possible that this was simply the old cliché of the thrill of the chase. Sasuke had never had to chase. Never.

Besides, he didn't want a relationship with the blond. He just wanted to work him out of his system. This was the perfect opportunity to do so.

Orochimaru smiled, as though reading Sasuke's thoughts. "Of course. I will have him come by your office this afternoon to review your schedule and discuss your needs."

Sasuke frowned. "I have a tight schedule for the rest of the day. I don't want to waste my time with this, or have him disrupting my office."

"Very well. I can have him drop by your home after dinner. You can let him know of all your requirements at that time." With that, Orochimaru took his leave.

"Sasuke," Itachi said when they were finally alone. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I thought you wanted me to have protection."

"Yes, protection. You have no idea who this person is. Naruto could be an assassin. You certainly wouldn't be the first person he has killed."
Sasuke stilled, but found himself curious rather than afraid. "Really?"

"Despite what we have on file, we really don't know what this guy's identity is, much less his age."

Sasuke didn't miss the implication that Itachi had clearly figured out Sasuke's intent to use this situation for more than security purposes.

"Well, I hardly think it would be fair to hold me to a higher standard than the state of New York. If our entire police and legal departments can't figure out this guy's age, I'm not going to worry about it."

"I hope you know what you're doing," Itachi sent his parting shot as Sasuke walked out his door.

Sasuke grabbed the silver tongs and dropped two ice cubes into the tumbler, pouring an amber liquid over them. He swirled the liquid in the glass for a moment, looking at Naruto as the boy removed his shoes. It was 10pm, and Sasuke had to be up by 5am for a meeting the next morning. "Take off your shirt."

Naruto narrowed his eyes and didn't move. When he first walked in and saw Sasuke standing behind the bar, he had thought the Uchiha was naked. He was shirtless, but Naruto then noticed the waistband of what looked like black silk sleeping pants he could barely see from above the black granite countertop.

"Take off your shirt and come here," Sasuke repeated, taking a slow swallow from his glass. Naruto did not allow his eyes to linger on the sight of how the pale man's throat muscles moved when he swallowed, nor the finely sculpted form of his chest and arms. Much more defined than Naruto would have expected.

"Why?" Naruto asked casually, though he already knew the answer. Had known it from the second that Orochimaru had told him to meet Sasuke in his home late at night to discuss his schedule and 'other needs'.

Sasuke walked out from behind the bar, the impressive tent in his silk pants clearly evident. He stood casually, leaning back against the counter much as he had the last time Naruto was in his apartment.

Sasuke watched Naruto, reading the glance that the blue-eyed man slid over his body, noting that there was no surprise registered. Naruto had accepted the assignment of being his temporary security. Given their previous interaction, he must have guessed, or been informed by Orochimaru, what that would entail. Sasuke felt no need to beat around the bush about it.

"Hurry up. I don't have all night to wait around."

"Fucking asshole," Naruto breathed out, quietly, but loud enough that it was clear Sasuke was meant to hear it.

Naruto did as instructed, slowly unbuttoning the white dress shirt he wore, revealing the black tank top beneath it as he tossed the shirt to the floor. He grabbed the hem of the tank top and pulled it over his head. He could feel the heat of Sasuke's eyes slide over him. Naruto knew his body was toned and attractive, though he usually didn't go around shirtless. He had two tattoos, one on his right arm, and one on his navel. Each had significance, and were potentially recognizable to people in certain circles and could be used to identify him, or at least people he was associated with. Sasuke was not likely to know their meaning, though, so he simply complied.
"I take it you like tattoos," Naruto said dryly, noting the damp patch that had appeared where Sasuke's cock was straining against the silken pants. The sight was more arousing then Naruto cared to admit, so he forced himself to think of Orochimaru's tongue, a sight that never ceased to revolt and disturb him. He felt the slight tightness in his jeans instantly vanish. "I'm surprised that a guy like you would enjoy something so low class," Naruto continued as he walked toward where Sasuke was standing. "But I guess rich guys can have kinks, too."

"Stop talking and put your mouth to better use," Sasuke said emotionlessly.

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to be continued

Note - while there will be a lot of sex in this story, I am not going to do full lemons for all of it, since that would be... annoying. I will show significant events in their sex life, like first time they have full sex, first time they kiss, first time it means anything, etc but not every time with all the details. This won't be PWP, which will probably make some people happy and some people annoyed, but it is what it is.
"I take it you like tattoos," Naruto said dryly, noting the damp patch that had appeared where Sasuke's cock was straining against the silken pants. The sight was more arousing then Naruto cared to admit, so he forced himself to think of Orochimaru's tongue, a sight that never ceased to revolt and disturb him. He felt the slight tightness in his jeans instantly vanish. "I'm surprised that a guy like you would enjoy something so low class," Naruto continued as he walked toward where Sasuke was standing. "But I guess rich guys can have kinks, too."

"Stop talking and put your mouth to better use," Sasuke said emotionlessly.

Naruto wasn't sure if Sasuke expected 'full service' or if they could basically proceed like last time. He plan was to bluff his way through. Worse come to worse, Naruto had had one night stands in the past, and he supposed he could look at this as something similar. But at least with those, there had been some connection where he had felt actual liking for the person in some way. He had never done it based on looks alone. More importantly, it had been Naruto's choice to sleep with them. He knew next to nothing about the man before him, except that he was handsome, wealthy, hung, and a complete asshole. And most importantly Naruto was obligated to do this. Not free to choose for himself. It pissed him off, but he knew Orochimaru would make good on his threat to publicize his location and identity, which would be exceedingly dangerous to Naruto.

So Naruto would do this. But he would make sure Sasuke knew this was nothing but a chore for him. He didn't want to give Sasuke the satisfaction of acknowledging that he was attractive. If at all possible, Naruto hoped that hand jobs and blow jobs would satisfy this part of his 'service'. He'd just have to make them satisfying enough to make it sufficient. He didn't want to give the level of intimacy that actually fucking Sasuke would bring. Hopefully, whatever this stalker situation turned out to be, he'd be able to resolve it in a week or two. Even if the stalker was a pro, Naruto figured he shouldn't have too much trouble.

He regretted that he had misjudged the councilman the last time. Rather than putting Sasuke off by being rough and aggressive, Naruto had evidently turned him on. He would be lying if he said he didn't find that intriguing, and in any other circumstance...

But this was not Naruto's choice. And Sasuke knew it. Naruto was not going to get emotionally involved with this. He had talked with Fu and Utakata about their work, and knew that was the number one rule when sex was part of your job. Keep it impersonal. So that was his goal. No kissing, and – if possible – no actual fucking. Minimal conversation outside of what he needed to know about Sasuke's schedule and potential stalkers.

Naruto laughed softly, walking up to stand directly in front of Sasuke, "What, your regular fuck got tired of your frigid personality, or are they just out of town for the week?"

Sasuke ignored the comment, and simply took another drink from his glass, his eyes locked on Naruto, looking almost bored. The front of his pants said otherwise.

"You're still talking?" Sasuke drawled.

Naruto snorted, but slid his palm along Sasuke's length, letting the silk slide along acting almost like
lubricant. Standing face-to-face, he could see the black eyes darken with lust as Sasuke's lids fell to half mast. Naruto felt the heat of the breath expelled from Sasuke's lips at his touch.

Naruto slowly increased the pace of his strokes, feeling the dampness growing in the fabric with Sasuke's arousal. This close to the man, he could see the pulse in Sasuke's throat and the subtle flare of his nostrils as he fought showing any sign of pleasure from the ministrations to his cock. Naruto smiled wolfishly. He would change that.

The fabric was becoming so damp that the friction was making the motion almost painful against the delicate skin sheathing Sasuke's marble-hard erection. Naruto tugged the silk drawstring of the pants to untie it, and reached inside for direct skin-on-skin contact. Sasuke's precum served as sufficient lubricant. Again Naruto was struck by the man's control of his emotions, to clearly be this turned on while standing seemingly casually holding his drink.

But he couldn't conceal all reaction. Sasuke's breath was now coming in shallow pants, his eyes still locked with Naruto's. Naruto saw Sasuke's pupils dilate, the knuckles whiten as his hand viced around the glass, and the black head fall back slightly. It was the only indication that Sasuke was about to cum. Naruto quickly stopped pumping and gripped his fingers tightly around the base of Sasuke's cock, acting like a cock ring and preventing him from cumming.

"Not yet," Naruto breathed. Sasuke's eyes narrowed, but he didn't say anything, his breath still coming in rapid pants. Naruto could see the sheen of sweat now on Sasuke's pale chest, and briefly admired the play of light against the smooth muscles defined there. Naruto kept his grip tight around Sasuke's cock with his right hand while his left reached two fingers into the glass Sasuke was holding and pulled out one of the ice cubes. He placed it in his mouth, between his back molars. He saw that the pulse in Sasuke's neck had slowed somewhat, so he released his grip and sank to his knees.

Immediately he pulled Sasuke's erection into his mouth, knowing the exquisite contrast Sasuke would feel between the freezing ice and the heat of his mouth against his sensitized flesh. He felt satisfaction at the hiss he heard escape the chiseled lips. Naruto thought briefly of the on and off affair he had had with Fu, when she had shown him this. He knew it would increase the sensation ten-fold. Sasuke's shuddering groan was cut off, but still audible. Naruto rotated the position of the ice with his tongue, the melting water in his mouth necessitating more suction to keep the seal of his lips around Sasuke's flesh.

"Fuck," he heard Sasuke's soft curse.

With a shivery groan, Sasuke pulled out of Naruto's mouth, his hand fisting around his dick as he came, shooting ribbons across Naruto's collar bone and throat. Sasuke's eyes darkened as he saw his cum bead up and drip over the tan flesh.

Naruto swallowed as a rush of lust spiked through his body and coiled in his groin. There was something almost... animalistic in the way Sasuke had marked him. Naruto drew a breath, forcing his thoughts on something else before Sasuke could read any desire in his expression.

"I can return the favor, if you give me a minute," Sasuke said, his voice rough as he straightened his clothing.

"Nah, I'm good," Naruto said, standing and grabbing a cocktail napkin off the bar counter and cleaning himself off. "Spoiled rich guys don't really do it for me. If you want someone who will be more into it, you should ask Orochimaru for a pro. This isn't really my line of work."

Sasuke narrowed his eyes. He hadn't missed the flash of lust in the blue eyes before they had cleared.
It annoyed him that Naruto had been able to suppress his reaction so quickly. At first Sasuke had thought all he really wanted from the blond was another quick release, assuming that it would assuage his lust for him. But now he realized he wanted much more than that. He wanted to see the man writhing and sweating beneath him. He wanted Naruto to beg for him. It wasn't just the physical satisfaction anymore. Sasuke wanted to overcome the mental and emotional challenge that Naruto presented.

But he would bide his time. This stalker situation that Itachi and Orochimaru were so worried about was likely just some bored housewife who'd fallen in love with his picture on the TV. It wouldn't be the first time. It would probably take a week or two to track her down and set her straight. He'd have that time to get what he wanted from Naruto. It didn't have to be right this second.

Plus, he wasn't sure his knees would fully support him at this precise moment. His elbows were braced against the counter top, and he probably would have slid to the floor without them. His whole body was still shaking from the intensity of his orgasm. What was it about this boy? They hadn't even had sex yet.

At least Sasuke was able to control his voice. "What is your line of work, then?" He knew that Naruto had served as Nagato's bodyguard, but he didn't really know what that meant. Assassin? Lover? Simple security?

Naruto laughed. "Seriously? What kind of answer do you really expect me to give you? Your big brother works in the district attorney's office. My line of work is flower arrangement, asshole. That's why Orochimaru is having me serve as your security detail. Are you going to give me your schedule for the week, or is this whole thing just a front until your real date gets back in town or whatever?"

Sasuke slanted an annoyed look at him, but handed Naruto a sheet of paper that had been sitting on the counter. It had all the dates, times, and locations of places Sasuke needed to be for the upcoming week. At least, the locations that Sasuke thought additional security could be beneficial.

He was intrigued the way Naruto's expression shifted to all business. He pulled a pen out of his pocket, and started to mark some notes. "Which of these are things you do regularly, who knows about them, and when were they scheduled?"

Sasuke answered for each event as Naruto made marks. Sasuke noticed that he wrote with Kanji, not in English.

"Where will you be before and after each of these, and what route do you typically take for each one?"

Sasuke again answered, then said, "You're just going to accompany me anyway. You don't need to find your own way."

Naruto rolled his eyes. "Before each of these events, I'm going to map out the route and see what I would do if I either wanted to kill you or kidnap you along the way. Depending on what I find, we might alter the routes."

Sasuke looked at him for a moment. "You're taking some photos from a desperate housewife very seriously."

Naruto looked at him. "These are not shots from some housewife. If you look at the angles of these photos, most are taken from rooftops or possibly out the window of a building through a telephoto lens. That means they were planned in advance, after studying your pattern of movement. It also means that they could just as easily replace the camera with a rifle and take you out without you ever
even seeing them. Each one had a clear head shot... a kill shot. This is a warning. Whoever did this
knows what they're doing. Your brother and Orochimaru are right. You should take this seriously."

Sasuke frowned, letting the blond's words sink in. He doubted Itachi had recognized the type of
photos the way Naruto did. Itachi was just over-protective in general, given their family history.
Sasuke didn't blame him... he was the same when Itachi was in trouble. Orochimaru's concern...
could be due to many things, if it wasn't Orochimaru himself behind the camera. But Naruto's words
actually made sense, and made Sasuke take this slightly more seriously. As he thought back to the
photos, he had to admit that they felt different from the ones he had received from past stalkers. They
did seem... more professional.

"Alright. So aside from giving you my schedule, what else do you need from me tonight?"

"Well, I'd ask if you have any enemies, but that's clearly a stupid question. You are in politics, which
means you have enemies all over the place. I'm assuming if any stood out in particular you would
have had sense enough to tell the police."

Sasuke nodded. "Honestly, the person who I would consider the most likely threat is Orochimaru,”
he said, wanting to see the blond's reaction to his words.

To his surprise, Naruto snorted lightly then smiled. "Then maybe you're not as stupid about all this as
I thought," he ignored the hard glance Sasuke shot him at the comment. "I've got your schedule now,
and your... other needs have been taken care of. So I'm gonna head out. I'll see you in –" he glanced
at the schedule "– two days. You're working from home tomorrow?"

Sasuke nodded tersely and finished his drink. Naruto pulled his clothes back on, and left.

Naruto stopped at the security desk in Sasuke's building on his way out, and asked if there had been
anything suspicious. Jugo assured him that there hadn't, and Naruto asked if he could come by
tomorrow and look through the video footage. Naruto had learned to recognize the tattoos of the
various Yakuza and Tongs, the colors and hand signs of the major gangs, knew who most of the top
Russian and Italian mafia hitmen were and could generally identify an undercover cop almost on
sight. He might find something Jugo had missed. Jugo agreed, and Naruto said he'd be back
tomorrow to have a look, then headed out.

It was quite late, but there was always traffic in New York. It was one of the many things he loved
about the City. You could be completely anonymous, but you were never alone.

He felt a presence behind him and turned. He still had the pen in his hand along with the schedule,
and he slipped the metal pen between his index and middle fingers as he made a fist in under a
second. A blow to the throat with the pen held this way would now puncture the jugular or the
trachea. Either would be sufficient.

Naruto froze instantly as he recognized the face of the person behind him. He lowered his arm, but
didn't release the pen from its position.

Itachi noticed it, and smiled slightly. "Very clever. You have good instincts, Naruto-kun."

Itachi was wearing black jeans and a black T-shirt. Somehow seeing him materialize out of the
shadows in regular street attire made Naruto reassess the nature of the man in front of him. He could
see the lean muscles of his arms, the same unexpected strength he had observed in Sasuke's form. He
also recognized the way Itachi's knees had bent slightly, his weight shifting to the balls of his feet
when Naruto had spun to face him with his arm raised to attack.

"You've been trained," Naruto said.

Itachi shrugged. "Sasuke and I both follow some of our family traditions."

Naruto thought about that for a minute, waiting for Itachi to disclose more, but not surprised when he didn't. Naruto shrugged. He didn't discuss his training either.

"Did Sasuke give you his schedule?"

Naruto nodded, showing the paper to Itachi. A small breeze stirred the air, and in their close proximity, Itachi caught the smell of cum on Naruto, and narrowed his eyes. "What is your relationship with my brother?"

Naruto looked at him for a moment, then looked around. No one was close enough to hear their conversation, a fact he was sure Itachi had checked before broaching the subject with him. "Orochimaru has asked me to serve has Sasuke's security and address whatever other... demands... Sasuke might have."

Itachi studied him. "You don't like him."

Naruto shrugged. "Sasuke or Orochimaru?"

"I already know how you feel about Orochimaru. I was talking about Sasuke."

"I don't know him. But... no, I don't like people like him."

"What are 'people like him'?"

"Rich, spoiled, entitled, arrogant..." Naruto trailed off. "No offense. I know several of those apply to you as well, but you seem more human about it all."

Itachi just looked at him. After a moment he smiled slightly at Naruto's brutal honesty. He found it refreshing, though odd considering most people found him even more intimidating than Sasuke. 'More human' wasn't something he had ever heard applied to himself. Perhaps this directness was what his brother saw in the man. "Hm. But you will do what needs to be done in terms of Sasuke's protection."

Naruto looked insulted. "Of course. That's the part of this job I'm actually good at."

Itachi didn't miss the level of annoyance and... embarrassment that Naruto apparently felt at the non-security portion of his assignment. He was glad to see, though, that there was not fear or shame. He would have had to intervene if there had been, regardless of how angry Sasuke would be.

"I want you to inform me of any developments. Sasuke will likely tell you not to. Orochimaru may or may not agree. But I want you to tell me anyway. Call me first, before even the police."

Naruto paused. "Why?"

"Because I will know what the right course of action is to protect my brother. The police will have their own agenda, as will Orochimaru."

"What makes you think I don't have my own agenda?" Naruto asked, honestly curious.

"I'm not sure," Itachi said. "But I don't think you do, at least not with respect to Sasuke. I have
learned to trust my instincts about people, regardless of circumstance. And given my other choices, I've decided to place my bets on you."

Naruto nodded, feeling both flattered and puzzled that someone in the district attorney's office would place more faith in him than his own police force. But then again, Naruto knew of enough dirty cops on the force that he knew Itachi was right.

However, Naruto knew he came with his own risks. He had noticed at least one person following him to Sasuke's this evening. Probably someone sent by Orochimaru, making sure he went where he said he would go. But there were other possibilities. Ones that would pose significant danger to Itachi if they thought Naruto had a connection with him.

"I'm not a safe acquaintance to have, Itachi. Aside from anything serious happening with Sasuke, you should keep your distance from me."

Itachi looked at him levelly. "I know."

"Do you? I doubt that," Naruto pulled a flattened pack of cigarettes from his back pocket along with a lighter. Cupping his hands in front of his face, he pretended to struggle lighting the cigarette. "I was followed on my way here. Probably still being watched."

Naruto successfully lit the cigarette, but didn't smoke it. Itachi understood the warning that there could potentially be photos of the two of them together that could surface. He wasn't concerned, though. Naruto hadn't actually been convicted of anything. Just arrested a few times, though on pretty serious charges. There was a small possibility that their conversation was being listened to, though that would require high tech surveillance equipment given no one was in near enough proximity to overhear them.

Itachi nodded. "Just let me know if you find anything out about who sent the photos. You can call my cell." He motioned his fingers at the pen and paper that Naruto was holding. Naruto gave them to the older man, who wrote down his number.

Naruto realized that Itachi would likely be in daily contact with the police department. That could be convenient. He took the paper back and wrote down the address of Orochimaru's brownstone, then tore off the corner and handed it to Itachi. "The cops were ragging me that I didn't have my address updated with them in case they wanted to follow up on the Akatsuki case. Here it is. Orochimaru has me staying with him for now. Can you let them know so they get off my back?"

Naruto knew that Kakashi and Gaara would be worried by now when he had gone off to see Orochimaru and not returned home. But he didn't dare go back until whoever was watching him started to relax, and he could slip away. If Itachi gave the cops his updated address, Kakashi would see it and know where he was. And would tell Gaara to not level the city looking for him. They wouldn't know why he had not come back, but they were smart. If they knew Naruto wasn't dead, then they'd figure out other likely reasons for his staying away pretty easily.

Some of Naruto's nervousness must have shown on his face, because Itachi asked in a low voice. "Is he forcing you into this?"

Naruto took a drag on his cigarette. "I'm a big boy, Itachi. I made my choices."

It wasn't an answer, and they both knew it. But this wasn't the place for the discussion, when they knew they were being observed. "Is there anyone in particular I should give your address to?" Itachi said, taking a stab in the dark that maybe there was someone Naruto was trying to send a signal to. Maybe someone who would help him.
Naruto hesitated, almost giving in to the temptation to say Kakashi's name. It would ensure he got the information as soon as possible. Kakashi had been Naruto's arresting officer that first time. It could seem natural. But he was not involved with the Akatsuki case, at least not officially. And Itachi was too fucking smart to not sense something if Naruto gave a specific name that wasn't related to the current case. "Nah, just whoever keeps the books," Naruto said, trying to pass it off as a casual thing. "Anyway, I better get back. It's getting late."

"Yes, it is. Goodnight, Naruto-kun," Itachi said, both face and voice expressionless.

"'Night, Itachi-san," Naruto returned, then headed off to the subway station.

Itachi watched him walk away, sensing a shadow following the blond, but not seeing anyone.

Naruto had a friend in the police department. Itachi was sure of it. The question was who. And why. Given that Naruto was becoming involved with his little brother, Itachi decided he needed to find out.

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Naruto sat across the glass partition from Hidan. He had finally received notification from Orochimaru that morning that he had gotten permission for Naruto to visit Hidan in Sing Sing, the maximum security prison where he had been placed. Naruto had gone to Grand Central and taken the next train on Metro North on the Hudson Line and arrived just as visiting hours were starting. He presented his ID and was searched and interviewed. Orochimaru had submitted the proper paperwork, however, and finally Naruto was allowed into a room that had a long counter divided into sections that looked almost like phone booths. He was directed to one of the booths, and sat down on the metal stool. Across the orange counter from him, behind a glass divider, sat Hidan. They grinned at each other for a second, then Hidan reached for the phone on his side of the glass, and Naruto did the same.

He felt relief seeing the man. They had worked together for three years, and he knew him better than most people. He had been warned that this first visit would be short, and was only being allowed as a special exception.

"Blondie. I kept telling them I wouldn't say a fucking thing unless they arranged conjugal visit with you, but it looks like this is the best we could get."

Naruto laughed. "Damn, I've missed you guys. How are you holding up?"

"Fuckin' sucks in prison. Food is shit. But the ass isn't bad," Hidan grinned. "It's good to see you're out. I don't get much news in here. Was wondering what happened to you after you went ape shit in the jail."

"Yeah. Not one of my better decisions, but it worked out. It's a little weird, though. This guy, Orochimaru, paid my bail, and hired an attorney for me," Naruto said, both men aware that their conversation was likely being monitored and possibly recorded.

"Let's do phone sex," Hidan said, which was the signal that he was going to use the code he'd developed. Hidan got a kick thinking about the police and lawyers typing down all his obscene words. He had been one of Nagato's top hit men, and he and Naruto had used the code whenever they spoke about 'business', especially if it was over the phone.

Naruto grinned, and started. "Alright. Take off all your clothes for me." Tell me what you know about this.
Hidan laughed. "No foreplay today, blondie. I'm already naked and waiting for you. I'll wear something special next time." I don't know anything about this yet, but I'll try to get some information for you next time.

"Ok, so I'm not wearing much either. But I'm totally hard for you." I don't know much either, but I think there is something going on.

"Fuck yeah, bitch. How hard are you? How worried are you? How serious is this?

"Pretty hard. But I'd get even harder if my ex-boyfriend were watching us." Hidan stilled at Naruto's words. There was only one person they referred to as Naruto's ex. And as far as Hidan knew, there was no connection between that man and Orochimaru. So what the hell was going on?

"Is he watching us? You know how hard it makes me when people watch us. Especially your ex. You know he'll fuck you raw if he catches you." You know he'll kill you if he finds you.

"Maybe I'll fuck him raw instead, if I catch him watching. Who knows if he is or not," Naruto said. I'll kill him first, but I'm not sure he knows where I am. I haven't seen him.

"And cheat on me? Nah, you're mine. I won't share you." I'll protect you if I can.

"I know. I won't share you either."

Just then, Naruto felt a hand on his shoulder. "Time's up," the guard said.

Naruto and Hidan exchanged a look. "Tell Dei," Naruto said. "They won't let me see him yet."

Hidan nodded. "I'll tell him next time I'm bending him over in the showers."

Naruto rolled his eyes. "Fucking perv."

Hidan cackled. "I just love my blonds."

. . . .

Later that day, Itachi played Shikamaru a recording of the conversation they had recorded between Hidan and Naruto. "What do you make of this?"

Shikamaru scanned through it. "It's code."

Itachi raised his eyebrows. "What are they saying?"

Shikamaru shrugged. "I don't know. It's a simple code, but not like the ones where you just replace the number one with the letter A. This code is just tying words and phrases to stand for something else that they both already know. I'd have to see more of it to figure it out."

"How do you know it's a code, then?"

"Did you hear Hidan's voice when Naruto mentioned his ex? That was fear. Hidan is a stone cold killer. He isn't going to be afraid of some kid mentioning an ex boyfriend in some fantasy sex scenario. My guess is the ex is code for a particular person that Naruto and Hidan both find dangerous. But I have no idea who. The rest of this is probably code as well, but I just don't know for what."

"We were going to stop allowing Naruto access to Hidan after this."
"If you do, we won't be able to break the code. Let them talk enough, and I can translate it, at least some of it."

Itachi nodded. He remembered what Naruto had told him last night outside his brother's apartment building. That someone had followed him. He wondered now if he should have taken the warning more seriously. He seriously doubted that Hidan would be afraid of Orochimaru. It had to be someone else.

. . .

Naruto spend the rest of the day walking around the City, checking potential routes for the places he needed to escort Sasuke to during the week. He had burned the paper before he'd gotten home, committing it to memory, but making sure that he didn't make the stalker's job easier by simply documenting all the information and having whoever it was steal it.

Naruto knew which buildings had good security, making it harder to get inside or on the roof. He also matched the location from where he estimated the photos had been taken from, figuring at minimum they should avoid places where the stalker had obviously already gotten access. His final stop was the parking garage under Sasuke's building. Naruto made a note of where the security cameras were located, then talked to the garage attendant about which car was Sasuke's and who had access to it.

He was shown a shiny, black Lotus. Naruto just stared at it for a second, taking in the sleek machine, along with all the electronics inside. Electronics that monitored every place you went, and relayed signals to some GPS satellite continuously telling anyone who wanted to listen where you were located. Naruto hated modern cars. Almost as much as he hated smart phones. They recorded every event in your life, every place you went and how long you stayed. Not what someone in his line of work liked.

"Damn, it looks brand new. Does the bastard even drive this thing?" Naruto looked, noting there was not a single smudge, a single spec of dust visible on the exterior or interior of the car.

The attendant laughed. "Actually, he drives it most days, but he has me detail it every night... interior and exterior. He's very particular. No dust, no fingerprints, no dirt."

Naruto rolled his eyes. "So he's not just a bastard, he's evidently OCD about his car as well." Naruto tried to ignore a brief fantasy of fucking Sasuke hard in his pretty car, smearing the entire interior with cum. He snickered, then thanked the attendant and headed back to Orochimaru's.

. . .

When he finally returned to Orochimaru's brownstone, he could hear heated voices coming from the man's library.

"You told me you would be added to the team prosecuting the Akatsuki. You told me you would get me access to all the proceedings. Why have you not been able to deliver on this?"

"Orochimaru-sama," Naruto cringed at the familiar voice. A man he hated with a strange passion. It somehow didn't surprise him that Kabuto was connected to Orochimaru. They both had that same oily way about them. "Itachi has refused my help. I put in a special request, but it was denied. Unless Itachi says he needs additional assistance on this case, I cannot -"

"I don't want to hear it, Kabuto. You failed me once already by not following up on the arrest record of Naruto-kun and missing a key piece of information. If Anko had not been so thorough, we would
have lost our leverage over the boy. You know how dangerous it is to become useless to me, Kabuto. I could ruin you."

"Please, Orochimaru-sama. Allow me to make amends," Kabuto's voice had dropped to a seductive tone. Naruto heard the sounds of clothes rustle, and felt bile rise in his throat. He sped up walking past the closed door of the library and headed to his room.

He flopped face first his bed, wishing he could talk to Kakashi. Kakashi would know what this meant, and what Naruto should do. But there was no way to contact Kakashi without raising suspicion. There were too many enemies, with too many hidden agendas. Naruto scrubbed his hands over his face as he got up, stripped off his clothes, and headed to the small shower that adjoined his room. This was not his strength. Nagato and Konan had always been the masterminds behind the Akastuki. Naruto was just a foot soldier. He needed someone he could trust to talk through all the pieces on the game board and figure out what the plays in motion were.

He wondered how he could contact Konan. When the police had foolishly swallowed the tale that she was simply Nagato's lover and let her go after a few days of interviewing her, she had vanished from the face of the earth. The only people Naruto had access to now that had a head for strategy were Orochimaru - and Naruto already knew he couldn't trust that guy as far as he could throw him - or potentially Itachi. Or even Sasuke. But the Uchiha's weren't players in this kind of game. Naruto would probably just find himself arrested if he disclosed anything to them.

He really needed to get in touch with Kakashi. He just needed to figure out how.

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to be continued...
Author's note - This chapter is mostly Naruto's POV, but we will hear from Sasuke next. Thanks to everyone who has commented, especially my regular reviewers whose comments make me so motivated to keep writing even with work making me go in early and stay late.

-xXx-

One week. One whole week had gone by and Naruto had learned absolutely nothing about whoever had sent the photos to Sasuke. Lying in his bed in Orochimaru's brownstone, Naruto scrubbed his hands over his face in frustration.

He was beginning to wonder if the bastard had sent them to himself just to get Orochimaru to send Naruto over to him. Every day, Naruto escorted Sasuke when he needed to make a public appearance somewhere. Naruto scanned the crowds, the rooftops, the passing cars, opened every piece of mail (over Sasuke's seething protests) and looked through video footage of every security camera from every location that Sasuke frequented more than three times a month.

Nothing.

It was like someone had sent the photos, then given up. Which would be great, except that they needed to have some sort of confirmation about that before life could go back to normal for Sasuke and Naruto could stop 'protecting' him. And Naruto really wanted this assignment to be over.

First, it was cutting into his time to try to make use of any of the contacts Orochimaru had given him access to. The more time passed under Orochimaru's thumb, the greater the risks of Naruto getting sold out. He wasn't a fool. He had now wasted an entire week, getting no further on his personal project, nor on his assignment with Sasuke. And Orochimaru had continued to have someone follow Naruto, so he hadn't been able to contact Kakashi. His only consolation had been that Kakashi had walked right past him one block from Orochimaru's house when Naruto was on his way home from Sasuke's one evening. Neither had made eye contact or acknowledged the other in any way, but he knew that Kakashi wanted him to know that he had gotten the information on Naruto's new address that Itachi had given the department. They couldn't talk, but even that tiny contact had calmed Naruto somewhat. It meant that Gaara would also know he was ok.

His second issue with his 'Sasuke babysitting assignment' was that it was becoming increasingly difficult to remain detached about the whole thing with Sasuke, and that was not something Naruto wanted to pursue.

He tried to write it all up to the fact that - whatever his personality - Sasuke was physically about as perfect as a human could get. So of course spending time around him was starting to take its toll. Plus, the level of intimacy of their interactions made maintaining distance extremely difficult. Naruto wasn't a sex-trade worker. So for him to be so intimately familiar with someone and have no feelings for them at all was unnatural. He knew the intimate scent of Sasuke, the sounds he made when aroused, what his face looked like at the moment of orgasm. He knew where the man's sensitive spots were, and that Sasuke liked a little pain with his pleasure. All the little details a lover would know. But with no love.

So of course his brain was trying to invent things. Pretending that the way that Sasuke looked at him when they were out at a public event conveyed some message of need. That the way he had started
to say Naruto’s name when he came was a sign that he wanted Naruto specifically, not just the sexual release he was offered. And then there were the rides up to the penthouse in the elevator. The last time, Sasuke had stood directly behind Naruto, letting Naruto feel the heat and hardness of his body the entire ride up to the 40th floor. Naruto had been almost shaking by the time they arrived. Sasuke had grabbed him by his waist, spinning him around and leaning in to bring their mouths together, and for a second, Naruto had almost let it happen.

Almost.

But instead he had ducked his head and placed a small bite on the sensitive spot on Sasuke's neck (careful not to leave a mark... he wasn't foolish enough to leave any marks of ownership on Sasuke), then sliding down to relieve the obvious tension between Sasuke's thighs. Naruto didn't miss the flash of disappointment in the onyx eyes that watched him, clearly wanting more than what Naruto had been willing to give so far. But Sasuke hadn't forced it. He'd accepted the unspoken ground rules of no sex and no kissing. So far. The invitation was there in those black eyes, though. And it was starting to become harder to ignore.

And that was a major problem because it could distract Naruto from actually being able to focus on looking for whoever was potentially trying to hurt Sasuke. Naruto couldn't afford to let his eyes drift to the man who looked both powerful yet elegant in his expensively tailored suits. He needed to stay focused the other people in the room, looking for unnatural interest or potential danger. Or even just a constant face that shouldn't be there.

Not to mention the fact that there was no possibility of any sort of relationship between a man in Sasuke's position and someone like Naruto. For so many reasons that Naruto didn't even bother to lay them out. It was impossible, and there was no point even considering it.

The first assumption to fall was that Sasuke had bought his way to success, from his seat on the city council, to the fancy degrees that were displayed in simple black frames in his office. Harvard Law School. Princeton undergrad. Top honors everywhere.

But listening to Sasuke speak in these meetings and debates, he realized that Sasuke would never have needed to buy anything. The man had a fierce, ruthless intellect, leaving much more seasoned opponents gasping in its wake despite the fact that Sasuke was often the youngest in the room by at least a decade. Naruto's favorite moment had been the time when a man who had been flaunting his tenure and experience and trying to belittle everyone else had tried to intimidate Sasuke into changing his position when they had clashed. Naruto had glanced over at Sasuke and the older man, wondering if the animosity between them was enough that Naruto should examine the older man more closely.

And there had been a look that had flashed across Sasuke's face, one of intense predatory anticipation like a tiger playing with a rabbit. Then Sasuke proceeded to verbally grind the man to dust, methodically picking apart every element of the man's argument and leaving him flushed with humiliation at being taken apart in front of his peers.

That look... had been hot as hell. Naruto had been glad Sasuke's attention had been focused on the older man in front of him, and Naruto had been careful not to look at Sasuke the rest of the meeting. But when Naruto had undone the fastenings of Sasuke's trousers later that evening, the image had flashed across his mind and he had had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from ripping Sasuke's...
shirts off and seeing if he could get that expression to come again. But he had stuck to the rules he had set for himself. In the end, Naruto had found himself sweaty, frustrated and hard when he had brought Sasuke to release. Awareness had flashed through the velvety black eyes as Sasuke realized Naruto's reaction. Awareness and an invitation.

But Naruto had walked away, determined to not take it further beyond the boundaries he had already set out in his mind.

Yeah, he really needed this stupid fucking job to end.

-xXx-

Two days later, Naruto was walking from Sasuke's apartment building on his way back to Orochimaru's. It was still early enough in the evening that the summer sun hadn't set, and the heat baking off the concrete was still full. He felt a prickle along the back of his neck, one he had learned not to ignore. He slowed down, pretending to remove a stone from his shoe. As he bent down, he quickly scanned the faces around him that were reflected in the window of the coffee shop he had paused by. No one he recognized; seven of them had glanced at him. He walked another block in the direction of the nearest subway station. He knew all the men Orochimaru sent to watch him. This wasn't one of them. So whoever this was, it was new. He could lose him in the tunnel if he had to, but first he wanted to know who it was.

He paused again at a bus stop, pretending to read one of the advertisements posted on it. He stretched up, seeming to look around casually. Only one of the seven faces was still around him. In the rapid pace of life in New York, the only reason someone would still be there given Naruto's multiple pauses would be if he were following him. The man turned to look the other way as soon as he noticed Naruto's glance.

That was a fatal mistake.

Naruto noticed the tattoo of a bull in black/green ink on the man's neck. He recognized the art work immediately: a Russian mafia tattoo. The mark of a hit man. There was a second tattoo of an orthodox cross on the man's forearm, meaning he was relatively high in rank. Naruto's body froze and panic snaked along his spine. He had no connections to any of the Russian organizations, and as far as he knew neither did Orochimaru. But there was one person who did.

Gaara.

His body was in motion before he even had a plan. The organization Gaara belonged to had been having conflicts with a Russian syndicate, and rumors had been swirling before Nagato's organization had been taken down that a major turf war between Gaara's boss and one of the Russian crime lords was in the works. If that were going down, Gaara would be high on their list of people to take out.

But Naruto should have been completely unknown to them. The only reason they could be keeping an eye on him today was if they had been watching Gaara for some time. Naruto hadn't been home in more than week, but this person following him was new. Which meant either Orochimaru was somehow involved and had given them his location for some reason that likely had nothing to do with Gaara, or the Russians had been searching the City to find him to make sure he didn't interfere with whatever they had planned when they went to deal with his friend. He wasn't going to take any chances on the second option.

Naruto turned abruptly and began walking quickly to the subway station. There were three stations he had mapped out where the entryway to 'dead' tunnels or stations that were no longer in use was
within running distance from the platform. His pursuer likely knew he had been made, so Naruto had to assume the man would act as soon as he had an opportunity. Likely not with a gun, given the full streets. The platform was crowded with the evening rush hour. But that was fine. Naruto didn't need speed at this point. He only needed to keep out of arms reach of the much older hit man. Naruto dug a $20 bill out of his pocket and tossed it on the seat of a shoe-shine station and grabbed a tin of black shoe polish without breaking stride, ignoring the surprised shout from the shoe-shine guy. The twenty should more than cover the cost.

Naruto's two most identifying features were his hair and his eyes. He wished he had brought some sun glasses, but he just squinted his eyes as much as possible to conceal their color, and kept his head down. The trains ran frequently during rush hour, and one was just letting out passengers when Naruto slid his metro pass and went through the turnstile. He squeezed between people, opening the can of shoe polish as he walked and digging out a clump of the black, thick polish and smearing it through his hair. No one even glanced at him as he shouldered his way through the crowds, boarding the train and continuing to walk to the interior door that would lead him to the next car. He had to make it two stops. Which meant he had to keep moving or he'd end up likely with a knife between his ribs.

By the time he reached the next car, his hair was black. He thumbed some over each eyebrow for good measure, then slid the tin in his back pocket and kept walking to the next car, wiping his black-smeared hand off on his jeans. They had just pulled into the second stop, and Naruto exited with the other passengers in a crush of bodies. He made his way to the far edge of the platform and crouched down as casually as possible, his eyes slitted but alert as he scanned the crowd for his prey.

The older man with the tattoos got off the subway, and Naruto could see him scan the crowds, searching. He crouched down further, out of the man's line of sight. The train had emptied out and the remaining passengers were now boarding. Soon the platform would be clear.

A lesser opponent would have simply followed the sweep of the bodies out of the station and searched in the street, but the man obviously had good instincts and soon Naruto saw the pale eyes lock on his. The train was leaving the station, and as soon as the last car passed Naruto jumped down onto the tracks. Naruto heard one or two shouts. He turned his head just in time to see his pursuer reaching behind under his jacket.

Shit. Gun.

Naruto took off at a dead sprint down the tracks, careful to avoid the electrified rails. He had one minute to reach the abandoned platform. It was boarded up from the street entrance, so the only people who frequented it were homeless or criminals. There would be no witnesses at this time of day, and no one who would call the police. He heard a bullet ricochet off the cement wall just to the right of him, but not the shot itself.

Silencer.

No surprise. The guy was a pro, and now that they were away from witnesses he didn't need to hold back. Naruto rounded the corner, and easily jumped the five feet up onto the old platform, rolling away and staying low so the man couldn't get another shot off. He lay flat, breathing hard and waiting for the man to appear. Naruto pulled his knife out of his pocket. He'd take him out here, then go back to his apartment to see if Gaara was the actual target, or if it was only Naruto to begin with.

The man jumped up, trying to pull himself up onto the platform, but he was likely in his late forties and his agility had suffered. He slid back down, but he had seen Naruto laying on the ground. Rather than trying to jump up again, he simply stood on the tracks and started firing shots over the edge of the platform as Naruto rolled then ducked around a corner. They both heard the sound of the
oncoming train at the same time.

Naruto waited to see if the man would be able to pull himself up or not. He hoped he made it. Subway deaths always drew so much media attention. That was the last thing he wanted. There was only a two inch clearance between the train and the platform. If the man didn't make it up... well, Naruto wouldn't have to worry about being followed.

The sound of the approaching train grew louder. Naruto could hear the frantic scrambling of the man trying to pull himself up. Naruto heard the screech of the train going past. He poked his head around the corner to see if the man had made it or not.

He hadn't.

Naruto didn't bother looking down on the tracks to see the body.

Instead, he turned and kicked out three of the boards that covered the entrance to the old station. Luckily, there was no one paying particular attention to him as he exited, and he turned his way toward 99th street, running.

. . . . .

Gaara was chopping lettuce for his salad, the long knife making quick work of the stalks. Due to the heat, he was shirtless, wearing grey sweatpants, his feet bare, the swirled tattoo around his navel identical to his roommate's.

He stilled as he heard unfamiliar footfalls stop outside the door to his apartment. He had only been paying half attention, but he counted at least four distinct sets. Possibly five. His grip shifted on the knife, the muscles in his forearm taut. He grabbed a second knife from the cutting block and crouched behind the counter, his body poised but absolutely motionless.

If these were some simple thugs looking to do some easy breaking and entering, they had picked the wrong apartment.

He glanced at Naruto's bed pallet, where the one gun they kept accessible in the apartment was hidden. Not enough time to get it. The others were under the floorboard with a series of false passports, cash, and drivers licenses. They wouldn't help him now.

Gaara didn't even flinch as door was kicked in. Two men with masks entered first, both holding guns with silencers. Not simple thugs, then. As they took an instant to scan the apartment looking for their target, Gaara threw the knives in a single fluid motion before rolling back behind the counter. The three men who had stood behind them in the hallway didn't have a chance to respond before he heard two bodies hit the ground, and knew that his knives had found their marks in the throats of the first two attackers.

But the three men Gaara had seen waiting in the doorway now knew where he was, and likely that he was currently unarmed. Unless they were incredibly inept, he would be in serious trouble.

He heard them enter the apartment at the same time he heard the sound of a new set of running feet in the hallway. Gaara's head snapped up. The tread sounded heavier than usual, but he knew who was coming.

And he grinned.

The door crashed open again just as Gaara launched himself at his nearest opponent.
Naruto burst through the door and threw the dead body of the man he had been carrying onto the assailant closest to him, knocking him down, then instantly swung around to face the third attacker.

While both Naruto and Gaara had studied as many martial arts forms as they could given their line of work, they knew when you were up against multiple opponents with guns you had to skip the audition for the Bruce Lee movie and go for fast and brutal. Together they had crafted their own form of fighting drawing heavily on Krav Maga* and other commando styles designed to kill an opponent in two moves or less, ideally when those two moves happened at the same time.

The man rushed Naruto. The blond let him get in close, lightly blocking the man's arm to keep him coming closer, ignoring the knife that slid along his arm up to his shoulder. He grabbed the man by the chin violently arcing his head backwards smashing it toward the ground and breaking his neck using the man's own momentum. He turned in time to see Gaara spin, snapping the elbow of one of the men who had managed to grab one of the fallen guns, then kicking him directly in the throat with the toe of his foot, crushing his windpipe and rupturing his carotid artery. Gaara twisted the gun from the man's now limp hand and in one fluid motion fired a shot into the head of the man Naruto had knocked down beneath the body of the man Naruto had killed in the hallway standing guard before the man could even get up.

It was over in under a minute.

Naruto was standing with his back to the fire escape, grinning at Gaara. They rarely got to fight for real together. But when they did... it was awesome.

"How did you know - " Gaara began. Naruto watched Gaara's smirk vanish to an expression of fear, then everything went black.

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Naruto woke up to an intense wave of nausea. He felt something warm beneath his head. Soft, wet and sticky. He knew that if he opened his eyes he'd throw up from the pain in his head, so he took a minute to try to focus on remembering what had happened to him. He slowly remembered being followed, the subway, the fight in their apartment. He thought they had finished it. But then, how did he end up on the ground with a throbbing head?

He breathed in, the cloying metallic smell of blood giving him a hint of what all the stickiness was.

"Are you done playing dead?" A low voice drifted down to him, immediately settling a feeling of panic he hadn't even realized had begun to brew.

"Gaara," a wave of relief washed through Naruto. Gaara was ok. That was all that mattered. "Don't kill me if I puke on you, 'kay?"

He heard a soft snort. "Well, given that you already bled all over my pants, I don't think it matters much at this point."

Naruto slowly opened one eye, then hissed as the light in the room seemed to stab directly into his brain. But it was enough. He could see that he was laying on the floor, his head resting in Gaara's lap.

His throat worked convulsively as another wave of nausea washed over him. He had a concussion, that was pretty clear. It wasn't his first, so he was familiar with the symptoms. Intense sensitivity to light. Pounding nausea. Dizziness. Fucking head pain.

"What hit me?"
"Bullet," Gaara said flatly. "Grazed your head."

"Who?"

"The lookout. You got the one out front, but evidently they had another in the back. Came to see where the rest of the gang went."

"You got him?"

"Hmpf. Of course," Gaara looked down at his friend. The relief that flooded through him when Naruto first started speaking made him glad he was already sitting down. Gaara's hands were shaking. He had still had the gun in his hand that he had taken from the last assassin, so it had been a simple matter to shoot the figure that had appeared on their fire escape. But the dread of seeing Naruto hit the ground with blood pouring from his head... Gaara closed his eyes, feeling them burn. Slowly he put his pale fingers into Naruto's hair, avoiding the places that were clotted with blood. Head wounds always bled like a bitch.

Naruto sighed, feeling the soft stroking. "If I'd known all I had to do for you to let me in your lap was get shot in the head I would have done it along time ago."

Gaara snorted softly. They both knew that Naruto was only half joking. They loved each other. But Gaara had been damaged beyond the point of repair in terms of physical interaction. Naruto knew it would only ever be a brotherly bond that they could have, but he treasured it. Even if he had wished at various points in time that it could have been more. This was enough.

"You can't die, Naruto," Gaara said, his voice low and raspy. "Especially not for me."

"I'm ok. Just a concussion," Naruto breathed, relaxing further into the touch. He didn't bother addressing Gaara's last statement. He would die for Gaara in a heartbeat. And Gaara would die for him. It was understood. They were all each other had. "Did you call Sakura or Kakashi?"

"No."

Naruto would have nodded if his head didn't hurt so much. He was relieved. They still had to clean up the mess. Kakashi couldn't get dragged into a crime scene with seven dead bodies. Even if it were a hit squad, there's no way that someone with Naruto and Gaara's history wouldn't go to jail. And he didn't want Sakura to become a target. He'd have to stay clear of her until they knew who was after them and took care of it.

"Did you know them?" Naruto asked, gritting his teeth through the pain. This wasn't the time to be napping.

"No, but they're Russian. Could be business. I have to get to the compound and see if it's an all out take-over attempt, or if it was just me. How did you know?"

"One of them was following me home from Sasuke's. Saw the tats. Worried about you," Naruto whispered, trying to find a bearable method of talking.

Gaara frowned. The people Naruto worked for didn't know about Gaara. The people Gaara worked for weren't supposed to know about Naruto. Gaara was careful, and would have known if he had messed up. That meant that someone had informed the Russians. Some third party. Unknown players were dangerous.

He would worry about that later, though. For now, they needed to dispose of the bodies, avoid detection, and keep Kakashi out of it.
Eventually, someone would come to check to see what had happened to the team that had been sent. Gaara and Naruto needed to be out of here before then. They had at most six hours. Probably less. It was possible that someone was watching the place even now.

"How long was I out?" Naruto said, feeling the nausea spike as he spoke, but knowing they needed to get a move on things.

"About thirty minutes," Gaara said, trying not to recall the agonizing way that those thirty minutes had seemed to stretch for days as he waited to see if his only friend would wake up.

"We need disposal supplies. Construction trash bags, bleach, gloves, and duct tape," Naruto whispered the list they both knew by heart. If someone had called the cops, they’d have heard by now. Despite the extreme violence of the fight, it had been relatively silent and over quickly. None of the neighbors had decided to call the cops. That was one less thing to worry about.

"I'll go. You probably can't walk yet." Gaara's voice was brusque, but he gently picked Naruto up and laid him down on his pallet. Naruto smiled at the smaller man, still amazed at his disproportionate strength despite all the times he had witnessed it.

"Rest," Gaara said, keeping the worry from his voice as he handed Naruto the shoebox he had placed the three guns that the hit men had brought with them. "But don't sleep. You might not wake back up if you do."

Naruto understood the warning to be both about sleeping with a relatively severe concussion, but also the very real chance that more 'visitors' could arrive, and Naruto needed to stay alert. Their eyes met in brief agreement, then Gaara was gone.

Naruto slowly drew a deep breath, willing his body to recover. He could hear the sounds of music floating up from the window over the fire escape. There was a block party going on somewhere below. Naruto closed his eyes and let the muted Latin rhythms wash over him. He thought about Maria, the curvy girl with the molten chocolate eyes who called him 'papi' when she held him. Another set of darker eyes flashed across his consciousness, and he tried to push them away.

He still felt the room spinning, and knew it would be a bit before he could walk. He just hoped he recovered fast enough to be able to help carrying the makeshift body bags down to the trash room. One of them would have to be waiting down to collect them while the other put the bodies in the chute on their floor. And if one of the bodies got stuck... Naruto didn't want to think about it. They needed to make this crime scene completely disappear.

But a nice wide trash chute had been one of the main criteria for a place to live. That, and proximity to the subway. Hopefully things would go ok.

Gaara came back within twenty minutes, carrying two shopping bags full of supplies. He was glad to see the body count unchanged from the last time he had been here.

"I'll prep the bodies," Naruto said, slowly sitting up. "We still have a couple of hours before rigor sets in, but I don't know if we have that long before reinforcements arrive. You go get the truck."

Gaara hesitated. There were several reasons he didn't like this plan. He didn't think Naruto was physically up moving and packaging the bodies, for starters. He also knew that the staying stationary in this apartment was much higher risk then jacking a garbage truck was. Naruto just looked at him. "You can drive. I can't. We don't have time to wait for my headache to go away."

Gaara walked slowly over to him, and squatted down. "If I come back and find you dead, I am going
to resurrect you just so I can rip you to pieces."

"I love you too. Now go steal a garbage truck."

Gaara snickered despite himself.

As soon as Gaara left, Naruto forced himself to get up and slowly begin prepping the bodies. To get them into the bags, he had to bend their knees, then fold their chests down to their knees, into a fetal position. He used the duct tape to secure them in position, reducing the chance of the bodies shifting and getting stuck in the chute. He knew it would require roughly four garbage bags per body to prevent the bags from tearing under the weight, so he quadrupled up the bags and set to work. The garbage bags were then secured with duct tape, both for reinforcement and to keep them closed. Gaara showed up just as Naruto was finishing wiping up the obvious pools of blood, throwing all the rags into another trash bag. The apartment would now pass a cursory glance if the police showed up later tonight. As long as the bodies were gone.

"Ready?"

Naruto nodded. "We'll bleach the floors and walls after we get rid of the bodies. I mopped up the majority of it, but haven't had time to get rid of trace yet."

Gaara nodded. "I've got the truck in position. Just toss them down the chute, and I'll load them in and drive them to the municipal waste incinerator."

No one would question a garbage truck with a permit dumping trash. Trucks ran late in the evenings and early mornings to avoid causing traffic problems.

And garbage incinerators ran at temperatures that left no remains.

They both removed their blood-stained clothing stuffing it into an extra garbage bag, then they took turns showering off the blood. Naruto washed his hair as best he could, getting most of the shoe polish out, but avoided the part where Gaara had tied some cotton gauze over the wound in his head.

Gaara threw him a black bandana. "Cover your head with this. It will hide the bandages and blood won't show through."

-xXx-

Eight hours later, Naruto walked into Orochimaru's house and was greeted by the man himself. Gaara had driven the garbage truck to the nearest incinerator while Naruto had cleaned the apartment and removed all their documents and weapons from the hiding space under the floorboards, packing them into two ratty-looking backpacks. Naruto had waited in a church that was on the other side of town. Gaara had met him there when the truck had been 'returned' and Naruto had handed him one of the packs. They had parted ways agreeing to meet up at the same location in three days when hopefully one of them would have learned what the hell had just happened.

Naruto's first task was to find out if his current employer had tried to kill him.

"Where were you last night?" Orochimaru asked coldly. It was almost seven in the morning.

Naruto studied his face intently. Orochimaru really didn't appear to know what had just happened. Naruto didn't know whether to be relieved or more concerned. Orochimaru wasn't the one who had put out the hit. But that meant someone unknown had. "I went out. Got a little action." Not the kind that Orochimartr would assume, but it was truth enough.
"I thought we agreed that you'd live here."

"And I do. But there are some... forms of companionship that I want to seek elsewhere. I'm assuming that's not a problem? I'm keeping my times with Uchiha. This doesn't effect you."

Orochimaru examined Naruto closely. "You look like you haven't slept all night."

Naruto wondered if the man could smell the bleach on him, and if he would connect that with the likely reasons for it. Or if he would say anything about the bandana covering his head. "It was a wild party. I ended up getting sick, and had to stay and help clean up."

"I thought you didn't drink," Orochimaru said, narrowing his eyes.

"Who said I was drinking?" Naruto countered, knowing that his eyes were bloodshot enough to pass for almost any kind of drug.

Orochimaru just looked at him silently. "Don't let it interfere with your work. I'd better not hear a complaint from Sasuke-kun on your... performance."

Naruto nodded once, ignoring the wave of nausea that rolled through him at the motion.

"Go wash up and change. Get a little sleep, but remember you're supposed to be at his home in a few hours."

Without a word, Naruto turned and went to his room to change. He was lucky that Orochimaru didn't know him well enough to know how ridiculous the notion of Naruto partying himself sick was. Nagato and Konan would have seen through it in a second. Somehow knowing that Orochimaru was not a good judge of character made Naruto feel better, slightly more in control of the situation. The man had obvious weaknesses. Naruto could handle him.

Of course, he still didn't know who had connected him with Gaara. And that bothered him. You can't fight an enemy you can't see.

He lay down on the bed. His head was still pounding sickly, but he knew he needed to stay awake, then go to Sasuke's home. It was possible that this had been architected to distract him from Sasuke. While it seemed like Gaara had been the primary target, Naruto was taking no chances until he knew for sure. They had picked him up coming out of Sasuke's apartment after all.

He decided to head to Sasuke's early. Given that Itachi had basically forbidden Sasuke to leave his home without Naruto with him, Naruto was pretty sure he'd find the man home. Hopefully in one piece.

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Sasuke looked up as the elevator chimed.

"Why are you early?" His eyes widened as Naruto stepped out and he took in his appearance. The blond looked like hell. His normally tan complexion was pale and waxy, his movements stiff and awkward. "What's wrong with you?" Sasuke asked, his eyes scanning the empty elevator to see if Naruto had been attacked.

"Rough night," Naruto said, his half-hearted grin not reaching his eyes.

Sasuke studied him for a moment. Something was very wrong. Naruto was wearing a white button down shirt and khakis, with a black bandana tied around his head covering his hair completely.
"Take off the bandana. You look ridiculous," Sasuke said flatly.

"I'm having a bad hair day. Bandana stays," Naruto said, his voice soft and his eyes scanning the apartment as if expecting an attack. "Has anyone called you? Come by? Anything unusual at all?"

"No. And you can't accompany me to my lunch meeting with a do-rag on. Take it off."

Naruto hesitated. The walk in the bright sunlight had caused him to throw up in the gutter twice on the way over. He really doubted he'd be able to make it through a lunch meeting without vomiting or passing out. Eventually Sasuke was going to figure things out, so Naruto decided there was no point in prolonging it. He pulled off the bandana, revealing the bloody cotton gauze that the bandana was holding in place.

"Holy shit! What happened to you?" Sasuke strode over, grabbing Naruto by the shoulders and looking at bandage on his head. Naruto winced when Sasuke had grabbed over the shallow cut where the knife had reached him.

He instantly dropped his hands. "Sit," he snapped, glaring at the blond as if daring him to disobey.

Naruto looked at him for a moment, then slowly walked over to the sofa and sat down. The room was spinning a bit, and he didn't want to make it obvious that he needed to. So he glared back at Sasuke.

"Take off your clothes," Sasuke said flatly.

Naruto would have rolled his eyes if he thought he could without puking. "Sorry, honey, but I'm not quite up to a romp on the couch just now. I'll have to give you a rain check."

"Don't be an idiot. You are injured, and I can either call 911 right now and have someone check you out at the hospital, or you can take off your clothes and I can see what the fuck is going on."

Sasuke didn't miss the way Naruto had paled further at the use of the word 'hospital', and he remembered that Naruto had not even admitted to being shot to avoid going there when he was in jail. He mentally filed that away for later.

Naruto glared, but started undoing the buttons of his shirt. Sasuke stood there for a minute with his arms crossed. After a several seconds, he came and gently lifted the bloody gauze away from the wound on Naruto's head. Naruto hissed as the gauze stuck and pulled. Sasuke looked in shock at the wound. He had seen enough of the evidence photos from crime scenes his brother had been examining for his cases that he knew what he was looking at.

"This is a graze from a bullet," Sasuke said quietly.

Naruto just looked at him.

"You were shot in the fucking head."

Blue eyes just looked steadily back.

"Well, I certainly have to acknowledge your commitment to your job. Normally, when someone is shot in the head they'd consider that a valid excuse for calling in sick."

"Yeah, well... I had to avoid sleeping for the first twelve hours. And I figured I'd check in on you to see if anything exciting had happened here since we last chatted."
Sasuke narrowed his eyes, then batted Naruto's hands away from the buttons that he had been clumsily working on. "Idiot," Sasuke hissed under his breath as he peeled the shirt off to reveal several purpling bruises and one long cut.

Sasuke pulled out his phone and dialed. Naruto panicked but realized that Sasuke was punching in more digits than just '911'. "This is Uchiha. Please cancel my appointments for the rest of the day. Yes, tell the Chairman I will reschedule, but I have had a health issue arise that has made me unable to attend." He flipped his phone closed.

"You need a doctor," Sasuke said, already knowing what the response would be.

"No. I've had concussions before. I'll be fine in a day or two. The bleeding had stopped till you ripped the gauze off. It will be fine."

Naruto felt the room spinning again. He had overdone it on the way here. He was going to pass out. And Sasuke was definitely going to call an ambulance. Then he'd end up in the hospital, where they'd call the police to report a gunshot wound.

*Fuck* was his last coherent thought before everything went black.

-xXx-

*to be continued...

next chapter will be mostly Sasuke, and what he thinks about all this, and how he feels about Naruto at this point. Do you think Sasuke will send him to the hospital?

*Krav Maga is a form of self defense developed by Israeli special forces, but used much more widely now. Not pretty, but very lethal.*
Trust

Chapter by KizuKatana

Summary: "It says here that you were sent along with the proposal to demonstrate Orochimaru's deep appreciation of my special consideration and attention to this matter," Sasuke said, his voice inflectionless.

Sasuke eyed him with seeming disinterest. "Is there a problem?"

"No," Naruto said sinking fluidly to his knees, his hand slowly rising to Sasuke's zipper.

Warning: Hard Yaoi (Boy x Boy) sex, violence, language, etc. Not appropriate for young readers. 18+

Author's note - Haha, yes, most of you guessed right and had some faith in Sasuke. I really enjoyed all the comments and reviews... it is so fun to read and PM back and forth with many of you on this. Especially since right now I am annoyed at most of the people I work with (since they are dumping extra stuff on my desk and making me work late) I am especially grateful to you guys. Sorry this chapter is sooooo long. But I didn't want to cut the last scene in half. Actually, I had already written the next part, but then the chapter was just humongous, so I will leave that for next time.

-xXx-

Sasuke looked at the man passed out on his sofa. Panicking would not be helpful. He placed his fingers at the side of Naruto's throat and immediately found a strong, steady pulse. He could see the blond's chest rise and fall with each breath. Sasuke let out a breath he hadn't been aware he had been holding.

The logical thing to do at this point would be to call the police or an ambulance. Probably both. That was clearly a gunshot wound in Naruto's scalp. Just a graze, but enough to leave a hell of a headache. And potentially more serious damage. It would be a pretty big scandal if the boy died on Sasuke's sofa while he just stood there and watched.

But he hadn't missed the flash of panic in Naruto's eyes at the word 'hospital'. And somehow... he knew he wasn't going to call the police. He thought about calling Itachi, but if things really went to hell Sasuke knew his phone records would be examined and the last thing he wanted was to drag his brother into his own stupidity. Because if there was one thing that was becoming increasingly clear to Sasuke, it was that he was not logical when it came to anything that had to do with Naruto. Not from the first second he had laid eyes on him.

Added to all that, it was entirely possible that the whole reason Naruto was injured was because he had gotten involved protecting Sasuke. Sasuke had wanted to have access to Naruto and had agreed to let Orochimaru 'loan' Naruto to him to deal with the potential threat. At the time, Sasuke had assumed the threat was just a nuisance, nothing serious. So he hadn't really thought much about Naruto actually being at risk because of his whim. But if he was wrong, and the blond had gotten seriously injured because of it... the thought left an unsettled feeling in Sasuke's stomach. He considered the head wound, and remembered Naruto telling him that the photos looked like 'kill shots' from a professional, because each gave a clear path for a shot to the head. Just like Naruto's wound.
The latent guilt was enough that, instead of calling 911, he called down to Jugo and asked the man to have someone from the concierge desk fetch him several packs of medical gauze, antiseptic wash, salve, and some large bandages. He then googled 'how to treat head wounds'. Sasuke went to the kitchen and grabbed several washcloths and a bowl of clean water to cleanse the wound.

Losing consciousness and vomiting were 'red flags' that it was time to call a doctor. He decided that if Naruto didn't wake up within an hour, he'd call his own physician and see if he could bribe the man into making a house call. It was a risk, though, because a doctor could lose their license if they failed to report a gunshot wound to the authorities. Sasuke wasn't sure he knew his physician well enough to take that bet.

Sasuke brought the water and washcloth over, sitting down on the coffee table in front of the sofa where Naruto was laid out. For a moment, he simply looked at the shirtless blond laying motionless there. He had never had the opportunity to study Naruto up close without being observed in return. Sasuke set the supplies down and raised his fingers to Naruto's cheek, tracing over the thin scars there. The skin was smooth under the pads of his fingertips, with only a very subtle change in texture at the markings. In regular indoor lighting, the scars were almost invisible.

Sasuke's eyes drifted down across the lithe, muscled arms and chest, then over the tattoo swirled around Naruto's navel. He frowned when he noticed a second set of thin scars that the tattoo concealed. They looked old and well-healed. But there was no mistaking that Naruto had been stabbed in the stomach repeatedly at some point in his life.

He let his fingers slide down the tan throat, over the dips and contours of the collar bone. He ran his fingers along each rib concealed beneath the hard muscles of the smooth chest, hoping he would be able to tell if one was broken. The skin was soft and warm to his touch... the ribs feeling intact. He allowed his hands to explore the texture of the skin around Naruto's navel perhaps a bit more than absolutely necessary, finding the scars there similar to those on the boy's cheeks. Faintly visible, and detectable by touch only with a focused attention. And Sasuke's attention was nothing if not focused.

The heat of the Naruto's skin made Sasuke wonder briefly if the boy had a fever, but then he remembered the intense heat of Naruto's mouth and was reminded from experience that the boy's body temperature tended to run hot. The vivid memory of that wet heat wrapped around his cock caused Sasuke to shift, alleviating only slightly the growing pressure in his groin. How many times in how many ways had that wicked mouth made him nearly scream in pleasure?

Deciding that thoughts like that would only lead to a painful state of arousal which Sasuke knew Naruto would be in no condition to alleviate, he tried to school his thoughts back to checking for injuries. He slid one arm under the blond and lifted him forward, checking his back.

The position was distractingly intimate, with Naruto's naked torso supported in his arms, and Sasuke had to force himself to ignore the heat and scent of the man. The only injury he could see on Naruto's back was the mark from the gunshot wound from the first time he had seen him. It already looked fully healed, and likely would fade into only a small, faint scar. He gently laid the boy back down on his back.

Satisfied that at least Naruto's upper body injuries had been fully identified, Sasuke efficiently set to cleaning the blood from the gouge in Naruto's scalp, not needing to go carefully since his patient was unconscious and thus unaware of any pain he might cause. As he washed the blood away, he noticed that the hair closest to the wound was coated with some sort of black coloring. He took a lock of black/blond hair between his forefinger and thumb, and rubbed it. An oily, black substance came off on his hands. Sasuke smelled it, and realized it was shoe polish. He frowned, wondering what it was doing in Naruto's hair. Mentally he added that to the list of questions to ask the blond when he woke
Satisfied that he had done the best he could with the most serious wound, Sasuke decided he would remove Naruto's pants to check the rest of him. Naruto hadn't been limping, so he wasn't overly concerned, but Sasuke wanted to be sure. He had planned to leave the boy in his boxers for modesty's sake, but his hands stilled after undoing the zipper of Naruto's pants and discovering that there was nothing beneath them. Evidently his young criminal preferred to go commando.

Sasuke felt sweat prickle on the palms of his hands as he looked down at where the open zipper had revealed nothing but more smooth, tan skin with an almost invisible line of fine blond hair that disappeared at the base of the zipper. *No tan line in sight*, Sasuke thought distractedly. *Definitely a natural blond.* All he'd need was a little tug on the pants...

He dipped his finger into the side of the waistband of Naruto's pants, hooking the fabric down slightly to reveal one of Naruto's hipbones. Still no tan line. Sasuke resisted the urge to go further, not so much out of consideration for Naruto's potential feelings, but more because he refused to sneak like a beggar in the night to get a glimpse of the parts of Naruto's body he hadn't seen yet.

Still, he couldn't resist sliding the palm of his hand up over the hip bone and across the hard, flat stomach... the softness of the boy's skin at odds with the hardness of the muscle beneath. Sasuke felt his erection return full force, and removed his hand.

He could have forced Naruto on the very first day and demanded everything, had he wanted to. But it wouldn't have satisfied him nearly as much as having Naruto give in because the blond *wanted* it. Sasuke needed complete capitulation from Naruto. The blond loved to throw the fact in Sasuke's face that he only touched Sasuke because Orochimaru had assigned this 'task' to him. Insisting that this was all just part of some unpleasant job that had been foisted on the blond. Sasuke would not be satisfied with that. When the time came, Sasuke didn't want to give Naruto the luxury of hiding behind something like that. He wanted a full admission.

He had seen the changes in the way Naruto looked at him over the past few days. The blue eyes were no longer full of cool disdain and mockery. Sasuke had seen flashes of admiration and lust in them when Naruto let his guard drop. Their last three encounters had ended with Naruto leaving Sasuke's home hard and unfulfilled. Sasuke knew Naruto was close... so close... to giving in.

Sasuke's attraction was purely sexual, of course, he reassured himself. Some sort of intense chemistry... weird pheromones or something. It would fade like it always did. Once Naruto had yielded, surely Sasuke's interest would wane. And he would be able to get back to his normal life without distraction.

With brusque efficiency, he zipped the pants back up and simply felt along Naruto's legs, looking for lumps that didn't belong or signs of a bandage. But there was nothing, so Sasuke assumed the only two serious injuries were the head wound and the cut on his arm.

. . . .

The chime of the elevator sounded, and Sasuke stood quickly to take the medical supplies from Jugo, ignoring the man's questioning gaze.

"You will not call my brother regarding this," Sasuke stated flatly.

Jugo seemed to hesitate, and Sasuke narrowed his eyes. "Very well," the large man said, clearly torn about which Uchiha he should fear more.
Sasuke wasn't entirely confident he had won that battle, but he knew there was nothing more he could do without actually tying the head of security up in his apartment.

He turned back to Naruto, and removed the antiseptic and bandages from the bag and quickly disinfected and dressed both wounds. Once finished, he sat back and looked at the blond for a moment, considering. What was it about this person that fascinated him to this extent?

It was true that the boy was beautiful. But Sasuke had met many physically beautiful people, and never felt this strong a pull. Part of it was the strange almost angelic quality of his looks contrasting with the knowledge that he was so dangerous... had even killed. Sasuke had watched Naruto while they'd been together the past week. When they were in a new place, or one with many people or many points of access, Naruto had this focus, this intensity that came over him. Sasuke got the sense that Naruto remembered every face, every voice, analyzed every potential angle of attack in those meetings. Sasuke found that... compelling. And attractive.

Of course, in other meetings where it had just been Sasuke and one other person in a small office with only one entry point, Naruto's eyes had glazed over with boredom. Clearly politics were not his interest. Sasuke wondered if the boy had even finished high school.

But it didn't diminish his attraction. Unconsciously, his fingers gripped the blond's chin tightly as he tilted Naruto's face up. "Why?" He asked, his voice annoyed but bemused.

He released Naruto's chin and stood abruptly. He had work to do. And if the blond didn't wake up soon, then he had a decision to make.

Sasuke turned on the news to run in the background while he worked at his desk. As a politician, he needed to stay on top of what was happening in the community. After a few minutes, though, the words that were coming from the TV penetrated his thoughts and captured his full attention.

"... where police say he was struck and killed by a subway train yesterday evening. Reports say he was affiliated with a Russian mafia syndicate, but no further details are being released. Police are still looking for the black haired youth that the man was seen chasing at gunpoint into the subway tunnels. Several witnesses recalled shots being fired by the deceased after the fleeing youth. It is unclear if the boy was killed or escaped. Anyone with information on the whereabouts of this person is asked to contact the NYPD.

In other news, green gardening on rooftops has become a growing fad in New York City this summer..."

Sasuke let the rest of the reporter's words wash over him. Black hair... or shoe polish?

Naruto's first thought was that he wasn't in a hospital. There was no antiseptic smell, no beeping of medical equipment. He could hear a TV on somewhere. He cautiously opened his eyes. He was alone in Sasuke's living room, laying on one of Sasuke's leather sofas. He had never seen Sasuke dressed casually. He had to admit that the man looked good in just about anything.

"So you finally decided to wake up. I was just about to call a doctor. Saves me the trouble," Sasuke said, his voice emotionless as he walked out from his office into the living room. Naruto noticed that Sasuke changed out of his work suit, and was now dressed in a simple T-shirt and jeans. Since Naruto only ever escorted Sasuke for work, he had never seen him dressed casually. He had to admit that the man looked good in just about anything.
Naruto focused on arranging his thoughts. He remembered coming in, Sasuke noticing his injuries, then nothing. He must have passed out. And strangely, Sasuke hadn't called an ambulance, or the police. Tentatively, he reached up and felt a bandage on his head. He noticed another on his arm.

"You... you put these bandages on me?" That was a mental image Naruto just could not conjure, but there didn't appear to be anyone else in the apartment.

"Your head was leaking blood onto my sofa. I didn't want it to ruin the leather. It's Italian." Sasuke had reached the couch where Naruto was sitting, and stood just in front of him, looking down on the blond with seemingly little interest. But he hadn't called 911.

For the first time since Naruto had met Sasuke, he wondered what the raven thought of him. What he wanted from him. If it were a simple, transactional relationship, Sasuke would simply have called the police and been done with him. It was definitely the safest course of action for a public figure to take in a situation like this. But he hadn't. Naruto couldn't understand why, but he was grateful.

"Bastard," Naruto said, a small smile on his face as he compared the man's words with his actions. "Thanks. For not calling an ambulance, or the police, or whatever. Hope I didn't mess up your fancy couch too much. At least I didn't throw up on it."

Sasuke frowned. "Were you throwing up earlier?"

Naruto shrugged. "Sunlight sucks right now. As long as I stay indoors it seems pretty ok."

"How do you feel now?" Sasuke asked.

"I'm ok, I guess," Naruto said.

Sasuke bent down, looking closely at Naruto's eyes. He had read online that constricted or unequal pupil dilation was a sign of brain injury. He wasn't sure he would really be able to tell, but thought he'd try.

At the closeness of this new position, Naruto could smell Sasuke's aftershave. His face was so close that he could feel Sasuke's breath on his cheek. A wave of dizziness washed over Naruto. "Actually, I guess I'm still feeling a little dizzy. Can you... give me some space here?"

Sasuke paused, a small smirk forming as he took in the possible implications of Naruto's unguarded words. But he pulled back. This wasn't the time. Naruto's pupils looked like they always did, which Sasuke took to be a good sign.

"You should see a doctor. Do you have someone you use?"

Naruto hesitated. He didn't want to call Sakura until he knew just how much danger he was in. And anyone else was out of the question. Sasuke frowned at Naruto's lack of response.

"Look, I'm not trying to get involved in your business. But it would be bad for my PR if I had someone die in my home. Especially from a gunshot wound to the head that looks many hours old. I'd probably have to fill out paperwork, and that would be annoying," Sasuke said, standing casually but his eyes intense. Almost... worried?

"Well, I'd hate to inconvenience you with paperwork by dying," Naruto said drily. "If you promise to stay in your home until I find out what the hell is going on, I'll head out and save you the trouble."

Naruto started to stand, but found a hand on his shoulder pressing him back down. "No. Not until you tell me whether this had something to do with me or not."
Sasuke didn't really know why, but he didn't want Naruto leaving. Finding out what Naruto knew about this situation was only a part of the reason, but it was definitely the part he felt most comfortable addressing. The part that made him feel like he wanted to keep Naruto here so he could protect him and keep him safe made less sense to him, so he ignored it for the moment.

"I honestly am not sure," Naruto said, carefully choosing his words, but wishing his head wasn't pounding so much. It was hard to be careful with what he said when his brain was barely back to functioning. He couldn't forget who Sasuke's brother was, or he'd wind up in jail.

"Let's start with something basic, like do you know who shot you?"

Naruto looked at Sasuke, then shifted a bit under the scrutiny.

"It's a simple question, Naruto. Yes or no."

"I don't know their names, but I know who they were," Naruto said, wishing his head was clear for this conversation. Sasuke was not someone who would miss any slip-ups Naruto might make.

"They?" Sasuke asked. He also noted the tense of the verb 'were', and wondered if he should read into that what he was. But he knew better than to ask that directly.

"Yeah. Look, all I know is that someone started following me after I left your place yesterday, which is why I am not sure if it has something to do with you or not. He wasn't someone I recognized... not someone I have had trouble with in my past. I ran into more people he worked with and it got ugly, and I got shot. But I don't know why they were after me," Naruto ran his words through his head one more time, and decided he hadn't given anything away that was dangerous. "I don't know if it had anything to do with you, which is why I came over today. In case they were just trying to get me out of the way to get to you."

Sasuke frowned at that, not liking the apparent lack of concern on Naruto's part about the boy's own safety. Naruto should have been hiding, or going to the police for protection, not coming to check on Sasuke. The feeling in Sasuke's stomach twisted further.

"Ok. So you were shot last night after leaving my place. Where?" Sasuke asked.

"In the fucking head, bastard," Naruto said, glaring at Sasuke. Evidently his nap had returned his ability to glare.

"No, moron. I mean what address. Where were you shot? In the subway tunnels?"

Naruto's expression of shock gave him away though he quickly tried to mask it. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You had black shoe polish in your hair, and a bullet wound. You were followed on your way back from my place, and I know you usually take the subway home. The police are looking for a black-haired youth who was chased at gunpoint through the subway tunnels last night by a man killed by a train."

Naruto stayed stonily silent. Sasuke looked at him for a moment. "Naruto... by all accounts the man was chasing you trying to kill you. The police found the only signs of injury on him were caused from the train."

Naruto leaned back on the sofa and closed his eyes. "I can't think straight right now. But I'm not dumb enough to believe that someone with my background could ever be involved in anything like that without going to jail for it. So my official statement is that I have no idea what you are talking
about. And if you don't stop asking me about it, I'm going to leave."

In Naruto's current state, Sasuke was pretty confident he could keep him here by force, but he didn't say anything.

"Look," Naruto said. "The only piece that you need to know is that I am not sure why someone tried to kill us, but -"

"Us?" Sasuke said.

"Me... I meant me. I don't know why someone tried to kill me, but given that one of the men started following me right after I left your place, at minimum we should assume they know I am working for you. One possibility is that they were trying to get me out of the way because they are the people behind the photos. Another possibility is that I am the primary target, but even then they could still target you because of your association with me. I came here this morning because I wanted to find out if anything unusual had happened, and also to warn Jugo to look out for anything strange. But so far... it doesn't look like anything is happening here."

Sasuke paused, trying to think things through. "Could it be someone that Orochimaru sent?"

Naruto felt his head spinning from lack of food and all the talking. He didn't really think much about his answer. "No, he doesn't have connections with the Russians. I know all the guys he has follow me and... oh, shit!" Naruto's eyes flew open as he realized something important that he had missed yesterday.

"What?" Sasuke asked.

"The... the guy that Orochimaru usually has follow me back from your place. He wasn't there yesterday. The guy who followed me must have taken him out. Fuck! No wonder Orochimaru was so pissed at me when I came home this morning. If he decides I was the one who did it, he's totally going to..." Naruto stopped himself, his mind racing painfully. If Orochimaru thought Naruto had killed the person he had tailing him, would he consider that a breach of contract? Would he find all his friends on the evening news tonight?

"Orochimaru has someone following you?"

"Yeah. He wants to make sure I show up here when I'm supposed to, and don't talk to people I'm not supposed to," Naruto said, clearly unconcerned about it at the moment relative to everything else that was happening.

Sasuke was more disturbed, however. He had assumed that Naruto was working for Orochimaru relatively voluntarily. That the blond needed money, or something, and that was why he did it. The fact that Orochimaru was having him followed suggested something much more coerced. That sat less well with him.

"Is it possible that Orochimaru's guy noticed this Russian and left voluntarily to either get out of the way or get new instructions?"

"I... have no idea. I guess I can ask Orochimaru when I get back tonight and see what he has to say."

"You're staying here tonight," Sasuke said flatly.

"What? Why?" Naruto asked. "I'm not full strength yet, so I don't know how useful I'll be as protection. And I'm probably not going to be able to suck you off or anything. I haven't been able to hold anything down since before I got shot, and I can barely move my head without feeling like I'm
Sasuke sighed in annoyance. "Idiot. I don't expect sex with you tonight. You look like hell, anyway. I just don't want you going out and getting shot. This is a very secure building. And there is a good chance that your attackers don't even know where you are right now."

"Well excuse me for not looking awesome today. But I'm pretty sure my job is to protect you, not the other way around."

"Fine. Then stay and protect me. Apparently, there are roving gangs of gunmen in the City. Jugo might not be able to take them all out at once before the police get here. I'll call Orochimaru and say I received a new threat, and am insisting that you stay until we clear it up."

Naruto thought for a minute. He certainly didn't want to go back to Orochimaru's right now, given that he wasn't sure if the man thought he had killed one of his lackeys. And he couldn't go back to his own apartment, now that that had been found by the Russians. He didn't know why Sasuke was being so nice about it, but he wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth at this point. "Ok, fine. But I'm sleeping on the couch."

"I have a perfectly functional guest room. Three, in fact."

"If my job is to protect you, and the only entry point is that elevator, then I am sleeping between you and the elevator."

Sasuke rolled his eyes. "Whatever. Though if you really want to keep me safe, sleeping in the same room seems like the best bet," Sasuke's mouth didn't actually show the smirk, but Naruto could hear it.

"In your dreams, princess," Naruto retorted, though it was half-hearted. He looked exhausted.

"So... do you think your stomach could hold anything down?" Sasuke asked.

Naruto considered it. "I don't know. I'm willing to try, though. I can't afford to have my strength this low for long."

Sasuke went to the kitchen and came back with a tall glass of an amber liquid.

"I don't drink," Naruto said, annoyed.

"You don't drink apple juice?" Sasuke said, raising a perfectly arched brow.

"Oh, sorry... it looked like beer or something."

"Why would I give a man with a head injury alcohol?" Sasuke said disgustedly.

"Because you're a perverted lush?" Naruto asked, accepting the glass from his host.

Sasuke snorted. "Right. I've only been drunk like three times in my whole life."

"Really? You always seem to have a drink when we come back here. And I noticed you didn't deny the pervert part," Naruto said, grinning.

"I have one drink in the evenings. And it gives me something to do with my mouth and hands, since you have intimacy issues, or something."

Naruto choked on his juice. They hadn't ever really discussed it. Naruto had simply let his actions..."
indicate what he would and wouldn't allow. Was Sasuke going to try to renegotiate terms? Part of Naruto felt a dark swirl of desire at the thought. If Sasuke demanded it, then Naruto would have to do it... and the thought of having sex with Sasuke was becoming increasingly more appealing. But he didn't want to admit that... didn't want to give the confidant, successful man in front of him that kind of power or acknowledgement.

Sasuke simply looked at him, watching Naruto drink the juice, an unreadable expression on his face.

The elevator chimed, and both Sasuke and Naruto jumped slightly and looked towards the door that was opening.

Itachi walked out, stopped dead in his tracks at the sight of Naruto naked from the waist up with a bandage on his head and arm, then shot a glare at Sasuke.

"And why is it that I have to find out third hand that my brother has cancelled all his meetings for the day due to health issues, and is instead locked in his penthouse with a potentially injured visitor?"

"I'm going to fire Jugo," Sasuke muttered.

Itachi smirked as he removed his shoes. "Please, otouto. You know I will simply influence whoever you hire next in exactly the same way. Jugo is good at his job. He is just able to tell which of the two of us it would be more dangerous to displease. And he is not the only one who called me this morning about your actions."

Itachi walked into the room, then sat down next to Naruto, ignoring the way Sasuke's eyes narrowed at his proximity to the blond.

"What happened to your head, Naruto-kun?" Itachi asked, reaching a hand to touch the bandage on Naruto's head, keeping his amusement at his baby brother's reaction concealed from his voice.

"Naruto was shot in the head," Sasuke bit out, placing an almost proprietary hand on the boy's shoulder.

Itachi's eyes widened, and his amusement fled despite his brother's ridiculous show of possessiveness. "When did this happen?"

"Last night," Sasuke said, again answering for Naruto. In any other circumstance, Naruto would have been annoyed, but right now he was glad to be able to take a break from talking.

"Does this have to do with the person stalking you?" Itachi asked Sasuke, "Is that why you cancelled your meetings today?"

"We don't know. And yes. Partially," Sasuke replied, glancing down at Naruto. Itachi followed his glance, noticing the pallor of the blond's face.

"They released him from the hospital so soon?" Itachi asked skeptically. Naruto didn't look ready to be out of the hospital in his opinion.

The silence that filled the penthouse at Itachi's comment was deafening.

Itachi shot Sasuke a sharp glance. "He hasn't been to a doctor yet?"

"I fucking hate hospitals," Naruto muttered, setting his empty glass on the coffee table.
"We need to call -" Itachi had been reaching into his pocket for his phone when a tan hand had shot out and viced around Itachi's wrist, stopping him with surprising strength.

"You are not going to call 911. No hospitals," the intensity in the blue eyes gave Itachi pause.

"Ok, no hospitals," Itachi said placatingly. He twisted his wrist slowly until Naruto let go, noting he was likely to have a bruise, making a mental note of Naruto's physical strength even in his weakened condition. "If you have such an aversion to those places, then I am guessing that you have someone else you call when you need medical assistance. In your line of work, it must be a fairly regular occurrence."

"Nagato had someone at the house, but he's long gone," Naruto said. "I don't know if Orochimaru has someone, but I wouldn't trust them if he did."

"You mentioned there was someone else," Sasuke said, ignoring the glare Naruto sent him.

"I don't want to bring her into this. She isn't a player in this stuff. She's just a regular person. I don't want her to become a target."

"You could at least call her and talk to her over the phone. If she's a doctor, she'll know the right questions to ask to get a sense of how serious this is," Itachi said.

They could see Naruto hesitating. Itachi pushed his advantage, handing Naruto his phone. "Use my phone. Call her."

Slowly, Naruto took the phone and dialed. Sasuke looked at his brother, knowing the man had purposefully had Naruto use his phone so that he would have an easy way of getting her number and finding out who she was. Itachi never missed a trick.

"Hey, Sakura," Naruto said, forcing his voice to sound normal.

"Naruto! Are you ok? Why are you calling?"

Naruto could hear the instant worry in her voice, and felt guilty for it.

"I'm ok. I just... I had sort of an accident," Naruto ignored Sasuke's snort at his choice of words, "... and I was wondering if I could ask you a couple of questions just to be sure it's nothing serious."

"Why don't I just come over and check you out? I just finished my shift. Just let me know the type of injury, and I can grab my bag and -"

"No! Sakura, whatever you do, do not come by the apartment anymore. We've moved out, and... it's not safe." Itachi and Sasuke simultaneously narrowed their eyes at Naruto's words, correctly guessing that Naruto was not referring to Orochimaru's place.

"Naruto, what is going on? Are you in trouble?"

"I'm ok. I just... I had a... bullet grazed my head last night," Naruto said in a rush, knowing the explosion that was likely to result. He pulled the phone away from his ear just in time.

"NARUTO YOU IDIOT! ARE YOU TELLING ME YOU WERE SHOT IN THE HEAD AND YOU DIDN'T GO TO THE HOSPITAL OR CALL ME UNTIL ALMOST A DAY LATER?"

Sasuke snickered, clearly able to hear every word that was shouted out of the phone.

"S-Sakura-chan, no need to be angry," Naruto said, reflexively tacking on the Japanese familiar term
without realizing it, despite the fact that Sakura didn't speak Japanese. "You know how I am with hospitals, and I didn't want to get you involved..."


"I'm at a..." Naruto searched wildly for a word that described Sasuke's relationship with him. "... a friend's place. But I'm not sure it's safe for you to come. I'd rather try to just talk it through on the phone and see what you think. I want to keep you out of - "

"Please put your friend on the phone."

"Ah, I'm not sure that's a good -"

"I'M NOT ASKING YOUR OPINION. PUT YOUR FRIEND ON THE PHONE NOW."

Sasuke reached down and took the phone, having heard the request perfectly clearly from two feet away.

"This is Sasuke," he said, his voice smooth.

"Hello, Sasuke. This is Dr. Haruno. I am Naruto's physician. Evidently, he got himself shot in the head last night, and I don't trust him to answer my questions honestly because he can be a complete idiot when it comes to his own health even without a bullet lodged in his thick skull. Can I ask you a few questions about his injury?"

Sasuke smirked a bit. "Of course." Sasuke proceeded to answer questions Sakura had about the size and depth of the wound, signs of potential infection, the amount of bleeding, and what Sasuke observed about Naruto's ability to speak, remain conscious, and hold down food.

Naruto rolled his eyes. "Sasuke, I thought you were supposed to be a pervy politician. You trying to role-play Nurse now?"

"Quiet, Dobe. It's either this or I tie you up and drag you down to the hospital."

"Didn't I say I wasn't up for sex tonight? No bondage for you."

Sasuke just looked at him for a moment, and Naruto swore the temperature in the room jumped by about a thousand degrees.

"Sorry, what was that?" Sasuke said into the phone, snapping himself back to the matter at hand. He gave Sakura his address, then hung up.

"She's coming over," Sasuke said.

"What? Why? I said I didn't want her to come here. What if they connect her to me?"

"Naruto, do you have any idea how many hundreds of families live in this apartment complex? She said she was aware there were risks, but didn't care. She also said to tell you she would be careful and to stop treating her like she can't protect herself. You need to be seen by a doctor. She volunteered. End of story."

Sasuke paused, handing the phone back to Itachi, then looking carefully at his fingernails. He casually asked, "So is she your girlfriend?"

"What? No... she's... it's complicated. But no. We were involved briefly a long time ago but... I'm not in a position to have relationships. Especially not with people who aren't involved with the kind of
people I work for. We've been friends for a few years."

Sasuke simply nodded, not wanting to admit that he felt relief. The concern and banter between the two had taken him by surprise. To be honest, he hadn't really considered that Naruto might have an actual relationship with someone. He was relieved to hear the blond basically admit that he wasn't dating anyone. Not that Sasuke wanted to date Naruto. He just was glad that there wasn't someone else that would get in the way of what he did want to do with Naruto.

"Naruto, do you think that whoever attacked you followed you here?" Itachi asked.

"No. They didn't follow me," Naruto said flatly.

Itachi studied him, noting that Naruto's answer was one hundred percent confident. And there was only one way that could be true. "Am I going to be dealing with bodies that tie back to you, Naruto-kun?" Itachi asked. He really wouldn't want to prosecute the boy if he could avoid it. Hopefully they could make the case for self-defense, though if Naruto refused to be treated by a hospital there would not be medical records to confirm it.

"No," Naruto said, again without inflection.

Itachi frowned. "Look, Naruto, no matter how well you think you've hidden a body, or the crime scene, modern forensics -"

"I said there are no bodies. I have no idea what you are talking about." Naruto lay back on the couch and closed his eyes again, more to shut out the conversation than because he actually felt ill. The sugar from the apple juice had made him feel significantly better.

Itachi looked over at Sasuke, who shrugged. "I don't suppose you are going to tell me who your roommate is, or what happened to them."

Naruto didn't even bother to open his eyes to acknowledge Itachi's question.

Naruto was surprised that Sasuke didn't tell Itachi everything that Naruto had told him. Sasuke didn't mention the subway incident, or the Russians. He told Itachi only that Naruto didn't know who had attacked him, except it didn't appear to have come from Orochimaru. They were leaving all other possibilities open.

Sasuke called down and ordered up some lunch. There was an awkward silence in the room, with Itachi clearly wanting to ask more questions, but also understanding that Naruto would be foolish to answer most of them. Jugo brought lunch in, and Naruto discovered that Sasuke had ordered him chicken noodle soup.

Somehow, Naruto found that sweet. He hid a small smile when Sasuke set the bowl in front of him.

"What?" Sasuke asked, sounding irritated. Evidently he had noticed the smile after all.

Naruto just waved his spoon in dismissal and proceeded to eat. Cautiously at first, then with increasing confidence as his stomach made no moves to reject the food.

They ate in silence. Finally Itachi spoke.

"Look, Naruto. I understand that - because I work in the district attorney's office - there are a lot of things that you can't or won't tell me. I am not trying to get you arrested. Right now, I just want you
to tell me, as Sasuke's older brother, is there anything I need to know? I'll keep your name out of it, even if I have to lie. I just really... want to make sure nothing happens to him."

Naruto appreciated the direct appeal, and somehow took Itachi at his word that he wouldn't use information Naruto gave him to prosecute him. He had the sense that Itachi was not someone who normally was as open about his objectives as this, and he appreciated that the older man had not tried to intimidate or manipulate him. Naruto thought about what he knew about the situation, wanting to answer the Itachi's question as best he could.

"My gut tells me that these guys were after my roommate, not me, and not Sasuke. The only problem with that theory, though, is that they shouldn't have known where I was. The only people who knew where I was last night should have been Orochimaru and Sasuke. And I am pretty sure that neither of them set this guy or his pals on me. That's all I know for sure. But... I have some very dangerous enemies from my past. And they will target anyone associated with me if they find me. Unfortunately, it looks like whoever is behind the attack last night already knows about Sasuke. If not, I wouldn't have come here until I was sure one way or the other," Naruto said seriously.

Sasuke looked displeased with this, but Naruto just shrugged.

"There is one other thing that you should know, though I don't think it connects with this. Itachi, you need to watch your back with Kabuto."

Itachi looked slightly surprised at the comment. "Why?"

"Because he is working for Orochimaru. He practically worships the guy. He had promised to get on the Akatsuki case and give information to Orochimaru about the trial and stuff. I don't know if he was supposed to influence things, or just keep Orochimaru informed. But Kabuto failed, and blamed you. Orochimaru was unhappy with him. And Kabuto... is obsessively loyal to Orochimaru. So watch your back. That guy is messed up. And he is jealous of you."

Itachi had never liked Kabuto. It was part of the reason he had denied the request for Kabuto to join his team. That, and the fact that he knew that the case would be high profile and tricky, and he needed to minimize the number of people who could be influenced, bought, or just fuck things up.

Itachi nodded slowly. "Ok. I will make sure not to involve him in the investigation."

Naruto hadn't needed to tell him this. It was a symbol of trust. Itachi and Sasuke both recognized and valued it as such. Itachi wanted to ask more questions, but was respectful of the trust Naruto had shown and didn't want to push too far too soon.

"So you think that there are at least two different groups involved... the one who sent the photos and the people who shot you?" Sasuke asked.

Naruto sighed tiredly and scrubbed his face with his hands. "Fuck if I know. Nagato and Ko -"

Naruto cut himself off. "Nagato was the master-mind... not me. I wish I could ask him what the hell is going on. He always was able to figure out the situation, know what players were involved, and what they were after," Naruto said. Sasuke and Itachi both caught the sadness in the boy's voice. Whatever they thought of Nagato, they respected the fact that the people who worked for him had loved him.

Itachi had noticed the slip the boy had made. He had been about to say 'Nagato and Konan'. He remembered the beautiful, blue-haired woman from the night the Akatsuki had been brought in. Everything had pointed to her being no more than Nagato's lover, not involved with the business outside of his bedroom.
She had fooled them all. There had been not a single shred of evidence connecting her to anything. Very few people ever got the better of him. Itachi had to admire that about her.

Sasuke’s phone rang. It was Jugo letting him know that a Dr. Haruno had arrived.

-xXx-

to be continued...

Soo... Naruto and Sasuke did something together that had nothing (much) to do with sex. It only took seven chapters. LOL.
The elevator chimed, and Naruto pulled himself up to stand. He swayed slightly.

Sasuke scowled. "What the hell are you doing, idiot? You're supposed to stay laying down."

Naruto didn't even look at him. He started walking over to the elevator. "My friend is coming up. And I know from experience that you have no manners for greeting someone who comes to your home."

Itachi threw Sasuke a questioning look, which Sasuke promptly ignored.

Sakura was just stepping out of the elevator, her eyes going wide as she took in the size and luxury of the penthouse. This was definitely not her or Naruto's part of town.

"Sakura. You didn't have to come. I'm really fine," Naruto said, loud enough for his voice to carry to the two dark-eyed brothers watching from the living room. He dropped his voice to a low whisper as he pretended to kiss Sakura's cheek. "Watch what you say," was the only warning he had time for before he felt another presence coming up behind him.

"I am Itachi Uchiha, and this is my brother, Sasuke," Itachi said smoothly, shaking her hand. Sasuke stood beside him, a frown in his eyes as he had noted that Sakura's hand still rested lightly on Naruto's shoulder. He also hadn't missed the kiss. What kind of doctor was she? She had pink hair and kissed her patients. But he observed the formalities of greeting her politely. Not just to prove Naruto wrong.

"Sasuke," he said, offering his hand as well. Sakura shook it, her eyes widening slightly as they flicked between the two impossibly beautiful dark-haired men. People should not be allowed to look like that in real life, she decided.

"I'm Dr. Haruno. You can call me Sakura. Nice to meet you," Sakura said smoothly. Normally she wouldn't use her title, but she had immediately recognized the two men in front of her from seeing them on the covers of magazines and newspapers, and she wanted to assert her authority in whatever insane situation Naruto had managed to get himself into. Though she didn't know if it would do much good with either of them.

She gave Naruto a small shove in the direction of the living room. "To the couch, mister. Even a head as hard as yours isn't meant to go up against a bullet."

Naruto stumbled, and her eyes flashed true concern. "You're dizzy," she said accusingly, immediately grabbing his arm to keep him from stumbling further. "What are you doing standing? Are you trying to make it worse by passing out and hitting your head?"

She heard a snort of agreement from one of the men behind her.

Naruto let her lead him to the couch and he lay down obediently. He had had enough experience with Sakura in the past to know that it would only end badly for him if he resisted. She might be a good six inches shorted than him, but she had no problem using her considerable strength to overpower an injured man if she deemed his actions stupid enough to warrant it.
She leaned over to examine the bandage, and whispered as soundlessly as possible, "Naruto, what the hell are you doing here? Do you know who these guys are? They are insanely rich and seriously connected and you have to be careful." She shot a nervous glance over to where Sasuke was watching them intently, clearly displeased at the whispered conversation that was happening.

Naruto flinched as she pulled off the bandage. "This wasn't exactly my choice. But don't worry. It's under control," he whispered back.

"Under control? Under control? You have a bullet hole in your head, Naruto. How is that under fucking control?" Her voice had risen well out of the whisper volume towards the end, to the point where Itachi and Sasuke could clearly hear what she was saying.

She blew out a breath. First things first. "Who treated the initial wound?"

"Umm... my roommate," Naruto said, glancing at the two men watching. He prayed that Sakura would not say Gaara's name. He needn't have worried. She had clearly gotten the message at the door.

Her hand froze. "Is... your roommate... ok?"

He could see her swallowing down her worry, potentially wondering if the absence of Gaara's presence here meant he was more seriously injured. He reassured her, "Yes. He's fine."

Naruto saw the tension ease from her expression. Naruto continued. "He put a quick bandage on me, but then we had to... go to work. Sasuke cleaned the wound more thoroughly and bandaged it for me when I got here."

Sakura looked over at the man with some surprise. Sasuke didn't seem like a person who would know how to change bandages. Or one who would bother to do so for someone else. This whole situation made no sense to her. Naruto didn't let people near him when he was seriously injured. The only exceptions to that rule had been a few members of Nagato's crew, Gaara, and Sakura. She didn't know Naruto's history, but she knew that he had people after him who would be ecstatic to find him in a weakened state. Naruto didn't trust easily. Why would he have willingly come here when he was this injured and vulnerable?

Why would Naruto have trusted these two men who so clearly didn't belong in Naruto's world? Sakura was intelligent enough to keep those thoughts and questions to herself. Instead she turned to Sasuke and simply said, "You did a good job. The wound is clean and the bandages have slowed the bleeding. But it will still require stitches."

This earned an annoyed grunt from Naruto. "Oh, fucking hell, Sakura. I don't care if I have a scar. Can't we just leave it?"

"Don't be a baby. If you weren't so obsessed about 'no anesthetics', it wouldn't have to hurt. Now suck it up and lay still."

Sakura went to the bar area and washed her hands, then rinsed them with antiseptic. She walked back over to where Naruto was looking at her apprehensively, and reached into her bag and pulled out a sterile pack of suture thread and unwrapped a clean needle.

"You guys don't have to watch," Naruto said tensely to Itachi and Sasuke, not taking his eyes off Sakura and the objects she was holding in her hands. "Sakura likes to drag out these little torture sessions. She's a total sadist. It was her whole reason for becoming a doctor."

"You know," Sakura drawled. "We could make this thirty stitches instead of six."
"We could make it zero and I could give you an express ride down the elevator shaft," Naruto countered, a small smile reaching his lips. This was clearly not their first time having this discussion.

"I could open the bottle of antiseptic and re-cleanse your wound with a scrub brush."

Naruto clamped his jaw closed. That was a threat that held serious weight. Sakura had the grace not to smirk, and simply began stitching his scalp. Naruto gritted his teeth and closed his eyes, counting each stitch as he felt the needle pierce his flesh.

While she worked, Itachi asked Sakura questions about where she was currently practicing, where she'd gone to medical school, what area of medicine she focused on. The questions could have passed for casual conversation. But both Sakura and Naruto knew it was more probing than that. She knew that if Naruto thought that Sasuke or Itachi were dangerous, he would never have called her in their presence. So Sakura answered his questions directly. He didn't ask about her relationship with Naruto, or anything personal.

Sasuke watched in silence. It was unclear if he simply had a fascination for the process, or if he were trying to make sure that Sakura didn't do anything suspicious. It annoyed her somewhat, both professionally and personally. As a doctor, she knew what she was doing. She worked in the busiest Emergency Room in New York City. She could put battlefield medics to shame.

On a personal level, she resented the proprietary air that she was sensing from the younger Uchiha towards her friend. She didn't think that Naruto was oblivious to it, but he seemed to be tolerating it. That surprised her somewhat. Naruto avoided relationships of any sort the way oil avoided water. With the notable exception of Gaara. The vibe she was getting between Naruto and Sasuke made no sense to her. Sakura found herself wondering once again what the hell her friend had gotten himself into, and what the nature of his relationship was with the younger Uchiha. Naruto had said he had come here to work, but somehow it didn't feel like that.

But she knew she wouldn't be able to ask Naruto about anything here. If he even would tell her anything, which was doubtful.

However, that didn't mean she couldn't throw a little jab at the wealthy politician to test her theory. So when she finished up, she washed her hands again then sat down on the sofa where Naruto was resting. She ran her fingers through his blond hair playfully. Slightly sensually. She noticed amusement spark in blue eyes at the same time she noticed icy displeasure emanate from black eyes.

"Poor baby. Why don't you come back to my place and let me take care of you. You shouldn't be working today," she kept her voice ambiguous. It didn't exactly sound like an offer for sex. But it also didn't sound like it wasn't one.

"He's staying here," Sasuke said coldly. "Walking outside made him sick. He will rest here."

Sakura looked innocently at Sasuke. "Won't it be an inconvenience for you? Surely a man in your position doesn't have time for -"

"It's fine. I'm working from home today. Are you done?" Sasuke asked, his clipped tone a not-so-subtle dismissal.

Sakura smiled. She didn't miss the amusement that flashed across Itachi's eyes. He clearly knew what she was doing. And wasn't averse to it.

"Sakura," Naruto said, his voice serious. "Be careful."

At first Sakura thought he was referring to her baiting of Sasuke, but she quickly realized he was
talking about whatever was behind his injury. And she took it seriously.

"I will," she said softly, letting understanding show in her eyes. "I need to follow-up on your condition. What is the best way to reach you?"

Naruto never had a consistent cell number. Now that he wasn't living in his old home, she realized she had no way to contact him. "I'll call you in three days?"

Sakura nodded. "Call me sooner if you have increases in dizziness or vomiting, or if you lose consciousness again."

She knew he wouldn't tell her everything. But they had been friends for several years now. And he knew she was worried. He would tell her what he could, and she would have to accept it. She sent one last glance to the two men silently observing their conversation, then leaned down and placed a close-mouthed kiss on Naruto's lips. Naruto's eyes widened in surprise, then crinkled in amusement. He wondered why Sakura was feeling the need to flaunt their closeness. But he didn't mind. Maybe Sasuke would think he was straight after this. He wasn't sure if that would help him or hurt him in his goal to avoid any further emotional entanglement with the councilman. And he didn't like the fact that he was no longer sure which outcome he was hoping for.

Sasuke cleared his throat to get their attention. "Dr. Haruno. Thank you so much for your services. How much do we owe you for this house call," he said, standing. There was something insulting about the way he said it, and Sakura was glad she was able to refuse the offer.

Sakura also stood, deciding not to push anymore. "There is no charge. Naruto is an... old friend."
Again she left her tone not openly suggestive but definitely open to interpretation.

Sasuke didn't say another word as he escorted her to the elevator. Itachi simply watched with wicked amusement as his brother stiffly waited until the doors had closed behind her.

. . . .

"This gives new meaning to the notion of a 'personal' physician. You seem quite close with Dr. Haruno," Itachi said, failing to conceal the smirk as he glanced at his fuming younger brother.

Naruto shrugged. "We go way back," was all he offered. There was a moment of awkward silence.

Sasuke finally broke it. "We need to find out who was behind this."

"And who the actual target was," Itachi added.

Naruto paused. It felt strange to have this conversation with people like Sasuke and Itachi. They weren't exactly playing for the same team.

"I have access to police reports, but it doesn't sound like police were involved with any of this," Itachi said, looking at Naruto.

Naruto paused for a second... and decided it was worth the risk to talk about this, at least partially. "I'm pretty sure no one heard it go down. They had silencers. And these aren't the kind of guys who get reported missing. So I am guessing you won't be getting a call on this one."

"How many were there?" Sasuke asked. Naruto just shrugged. It didn't matter. It wouldn't get them closer to answers to talk about dead men.

But there was potentially something Itachi could help with.
"Tomorrow I'll go talk with Orochimaru and see what he knows. It would also be good if I could talk to Hidan and Dei... Hidan was going to look into a few things for me. If anyone in Sing Sing is connected with the group that did this, they can find out," Naruto said.

Sasuke frowned at the mention of Naruto going to talk to Orochimaru, but Itachi was already speaking. "I can clear you to have another visit with Hidan. But getting in to see Deidara will be problematic."

Naruto didn't blink at the knowledge that Itachi knew he had visited Hidan. He had assumed the police would monitor that. His comment about Dei had Naruto more concerned. "How long are they going to keep him in solitary? Aren't there rules about that shit?"

Itachi sighed. "They let him out of solitary three days ago. But there was an... incident... in the showers and now he's back in solitary again."

Naruto rolled his eyes. "Jesus! Every fucking time. People think that just because the guy has long blond hair, he likes it up the ass. What did Dei do this time, break his arm?"

Itachi cleared his throat, as though slightly embarrassed. "Ah... no. That would have probably not have landed him in solitary given the situation. It appears that there was some sort of... explosion. And a certain part of the man that had been bothering Deidara..."

"OH MY GOD ARE YOU TELLING ME DEI BLEW THE GUY’S FUCKING DICK OFF? THAT IS SO AWESOME!" Naruto burst out in deep, unrestrained laughter despite the agony it causes in his head. Sasuke had never seen Naruto laugh. The blond's entire being seemed to light up, and suddenly he looked so much younger and more innocent. Until he thought again about what it was that the blond found so funny. He realized it was the first time he was seeing the blond with his guard down while he was conscious. There was something contagious about Naruto's laugh, and Sasuke found his own lips turning up at the corners in response.

"It nearly killed the man. He's still in intensive care," Itachi said, knowing he should not be finding this funny. But somehow seeing Naruto's reaction to the situation did make the whole thing seem much more amusing than it had seemed when he first read the prison medical report.

"Good, I'm glad," Naruto said, gasping for air. "Fucking rapist. If the penalty for rape in New York were getting your dick blown off, I bet you'd see a pretty sharp drop in the rape rate. You should let the criminals be in charge of the punishment. We have much more effective approaches for these things. Besides, they guy must be a complete idiot if he decided to try to take Dei in the showers. Dei is a fucking legend in Nagato's organization. No one could take him down. Girly hair or no, the guy is a beast. Stories about him have been in all the papers since his arrest. The guy deserved what he got. If he dies, he should win the Darwin Award for taking himself out of the fucking gene pool."

Itachi couldn't argue with that. And he didn't deny that he didn't feel a lot of sympathy for the man who had met with such an... unfortunate turn of events.

"But seriously, how did Dei even get the explosives in there? Can they pin this on him?" Naruto asked, not really expecting Itachi to answer.

Itachi surprised him by actually answering. "That is a bit problematic. They have no clue how the explosives were smuggled in, placed in that sensitive location without the victim noticing, nor how they were detonated. But given that the man had tried to rape Deidara in the showers just hours before it happened and that Deidara is known to be an assassin that uses explosives, they are pretty sure that he did it."
Naruto was laughing again, holding his head against the agony his concussion was causing. "Gah, you're fucking killing me. That is just too hilarious. They'll never pin this on him. He's too good. He's a fucking artist when it comes to this."

Rubbing his temples and finally catching his breath, Naruto looked at Sasuke, then Itachi. "Well, I am guessing Dei wouldn't have heard anything anyway, being locked in solitary all the time. But get me in to see Hidan tomorrow. He might know something. Orochimaru took care of all the paperwork."

"What about your roommate?" Sasuke asked.

Naruto hesitated. "I'm meeting him in two days. I'll find out what he knows then."

"I'll come with you," Sasuke said flatly.

"No way," Naruto said, all amusement gone from his face. "First off, there is still a good chance you are the main target. And the safest place for you is here. People won't notice me, but you are too well-known. I've been going with you out in public the past week. Half the people on the street recognize you, and in a city where no one looks at each other, that's saying something. And even without that, I might have decided to trust you somewhat, but if I'm wrong then the only person I want to get screwed by my bad judgment is me. If it is relevant to you guys, I'll tell you what my roommate says. But I'm going alone. If you try to follow me, I'll know. And you won't like what I do about it."

Sasuke held his gaze for a minute, but didn't really see a way to change the outcome. "Fine, but you come back here when you're done talking with him."

"Ok," Naruto said easily. It wasn't like he had a better place to go. At this point, he trusted Sasuke more than he trusted Orochimaru. It was a low bar, but true nonetheless.

Itachi looked at his watch and stood. "Well, as fascinating as this all is, I have work to return to." He nodded to Naruto. "I'll get you in to see Hidan tomorrow. Deidara... will be a while."

Naruto smirked. "You'll never pin this on him. It's all circumstantial."

Itachi smirked back. "Hn. Let's hope so." And Naruto knew the man meant it. And liked him for it.

Sasuke went to call Orochimaru and inform him of Naruto's new living arrangements.

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Orochimaru sat in his library, looking at the man standing in front of him. He sighed. "You said you would be able to bring me the files on the Akatsuki activities. You said you were going to get access to Itachi's investigation."

"Orochimaru-sama, I haven't been able to -"

"Enough. Lucky for you, I am close to being able to work with Itachi directly. Then your incompetence won't bet in my way. Things are progressing well with his little brother. He called me just now, letting me know that he had wanted Naruto to move in to his penthouse until the situation has resolved. Evidently there has been another threat to Sasuke. Either that or he is simply wanting an excuse for the boy to stay in his house. Either works for me, though I will not be willing to overlook Naruto's transgression from last night in the long run. Hopefully he will become expendable within a week or two."
Kabuto's eyes narrowed. "But I don't understand. Why would Naruto staying with Sasuke give you leverage with Itachi? Even if it were revealed publicly that Sasuke were gay, that would only be a minor scandal. He wouldn't be the only openly gay politician in the City. It wouldn't damage him. With current public sentiment, it might actually help him."

Orochimaru smiled. "You underestimate me, Kabuto. My goal isn't to destroy Uchiha Sasuke's career. What is the point of having powerful allies if they lose their power? No, my goal is simply to have him make him understand that he is not above me. And that I can be... helpful... in providing services that only I control, or cleaning up certain types of mistakes. Mistakes that normally he would not make, being the controlled, refined, and untouchable perfection that he is." Orochimaru ran his tongue over his lips.

Kabuto looked at the man, envy coursing through him at the way Orochimaru spoke of the Uchiha brothers.

Orochimaru shrugged. "Right now, the Uchihas consider themselves above me. They view me as neither an equal, nor an ally. If they become less than perfect, and I offer my assistance in certain ways, both of those things can change."

Kabuto said nothing as he watched Orochimaru pick up the phone and motioned with his hand for Kabuto to leave.

"Kimimaru-san. How are you feeling? I am glad that the kidney donor I found for you last year was a perfect match... yes, actually there is something very small that I would ask you to do for me at this Friday..."

Orochimaru waved Kabuto toward the door again, clearly not wanting the man privy to his conversation. He didn't need to know the details of what Orochimaru had planned. He had already made plans of his own.

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After Itachi left, Naruto sat on the couch, unsure of what exactly to do. Every other time he had been in Sasuke's apartment, there had been a specific task he was here to perform. A message to deliver, a place to escort him, even the sexual part. It had been part of a job. This felt more like... he was visiting. He wasn't here on anyone's orders, and he really didn't need to stay if he didn't want to. Yet he wasn't leaving. He looked around the room, searching for something to say.

Sasuke seemed to have no such difficulties. "So, do you have religious beliefs against modern medicine or something?"

"Huh?"

"You know... no hospitals, no anesthetic, fear of antiseptic."

"Oh. Yeah, not really. Anesthetics have weird side effects on me... I can't seem to wake up even with small doses. And given I pretty much need to stay alert in my line of work, it's a bit of a hazard. Hospitals and antiseptic smell go together for me. Just... bad associations," Naruto said, trying to play it casual.

Sasuke saw the shadow behind the blue eyes, though, and knew it was a front. But he decided that whatever memory made Naruto fear hospitals worse than death, literally, he would not try to force out of him.

"Why are you so concerned about us knowing your roommates name, or even where your old
apartment is?"

"What is this, twenty questions?" Naruto asked, instinctively going on the defensive.

"Actually, I only have seven questions at the moment," Sasuke said. Naruto couldn't quite tell if he was serious or being sarcastic.

"So... do I win a prize if I answer all your questions?" Naruto said sarcastically, hoping Sasuke would take the hint and lay off the questions.

Sasuke walked slowly over to where Naruto was sitting, then squatted down directly in front of him. "What kind of prize do you want?" His deep baritone voice had taken on a husky tone that Naruto knew very well by now. Naruto decided he must have been hit on the head harder than he thought, because he was unable to look away from the onyx eyes that were pinning him to the couch, and his mouth suddenly felt dry.

"Umm..." Naruto's mind was refusing to pony up a suitable comeback. He almost flinched when Sasuke placed a hand on Naruto's thigh, then slowly slid it up almost to his crotch. He left it resting there.

"Anything that you're wanting, Naruto?"

Naruto was suddenly intensely aware that he still didn't have his shirt on. And somehow the knowledge that he had been unconscious and alone in the apartment with Sasuke and nothing bad had happened to him came flooding back on him. At that moment he had no idea what he wanted anymore, or where his boundaries were. And the panic in that thought alone was enough to snap him out of his trance.

He grabbed Sasuke's hand and lifted it from his thigh. "Ask me your questions. If I answer them, I want to take a shower and rest in a dark room by myself for eight hours. Tell Jugo to not let anyone other than your brother come up. Not even the pizza delivery guy."

Sasuke shrugged, and walked over to sit in a chair near the sofa. He honestly didn't know if he would be able to stop from touching Naruto if he stayed where he was. And he had already told Naruto he wasn't expecting any sexual favors tonight.

There was always tomorrow.

Sasuke called down to Jugo and told him to not let anyone up under any circumstances except for Itachi.

He closed his phone, then looked at Naruto expectantly.

"Ok, so to answer your second question, it is because my roommate is similar to me. And having the police or the ADA know anything about him puts him at risk. He is my best friend, so I go out of my way to not put him at risk."

Sasuke nodded, accepting that answer.

"Are you the black-haired youth that they are looking for in connection with the subway death?"

"I think you already know the answer to that," Naruto said. It was a confirmation, but not one that could be used in court.

Sasuke understood that as well, and wasn't bothered by it. "How many men went after you and your
"Jesus, you really do have a fucking list, don't you?"

Sasuke just raised an eyebrow, waiting for an answer.

"Why does this matter? All I do by telling you this is give you information that your brother could use to prosecute me."

"I didn't tell Itachi about the subway. And like you said, I'd already figured that out on my own. I didn't tell him that you had mentioned that your attackers were Russians, or that Orochimaru had been following you."

Naruto hesitated. Then answered. "Eight. Seven in the apartment, and Mr. Subway Safety Boy."

Something flickered in Sasuke's eyes, but it was gone before Naruto could identify the emotion. Sasuke said simply, "You must be quite good if you survived an attack from seven armed men."

"What's your fifth question?"

"What kind of food do you like to eat?"

Naruto paused. He had been expecting a much tougher question. Like his address, or how many people he'd killed or... something that wasn't so normal sounding.

"Um, I eat just about anything. But at home, I make a lot of Mac & Cheese. Why do you want to know that?"

"Well, if you're going to be staying here for a few days, presumably you will need to eat something. I'm not going to babysit you and make all your meals, so I figured it would be less annoying if I just had Jugo bring some supplies."

"Why do you try to always sound like a bastard even when you're actually doing something nice?"

Sasuke smirked at that. "Habit. And I am a bastard. Don't let my occasional slip-ups fool you into thinking otherwise."

"Alright, you have two questions left. Let's get them over with," Naruto said, chuckling.

"Fine. How long ago did you stop sleeping with Sakura?"

"Wow. That's personal. Um... I guess it would be about two years ago? Maybe three?"

Sasuke seemed pleased by that answer, though Naruto wasn't sure exactly how he knew that... the bastard's face was as stoic as ever.

"Last question?" Naruto prompted.

Sasuke stood. "Come here."

"What?"

"Come here," Sasuke repeated.

"Ok?" Naruto said, standing and walking over so he was directly in front of Sasuke.
They looked at each other in silence for a moment. Sasuke’s hand reached up and he slid his fingers under Naruto’s chin, then rubbed his thumb over his lower lip.

"Why were you willing to let her kiss you, when you haven’t had sex with her for years, but you won’t kiss me?"

Naruto felt his brain seize up again. All the reasons why this was a bad idea seemed jumbled around. Sasuke slid his hand along Naruto’s jaw, down his throat, and around to the back of his neck. But he didn’t pull Naruto in. Instead, he just rested his hand there, waiting to see what Naruto would do.

"I..." Naruto tried to remember what he was going to say. "... I don’t mix my personal life with my work."

"Is it still work?" Sasuke asked, his voice low, his fingers tensing at the back of Naruto’s neck fighting the urge to simply crush their mouths together.

But Naruto pulled back. Because he honestly didn’t know the answer. He had only slept an hour in the past two days. He knew he was not in a state of mind to make a decision like this. No matter how foggy his brain was, he knew that this would be a path where there was no turning back once he started to go down it. "Sorry... that would be eight questions. The deal was seven. I want my shower now. Then my sleep."

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The next morning Sasuke insisted that he drive Naruto over to Orochimaru’s. Naruto grumbled, but decided that it would be better if Orochimaru knew that there was a witness to seeing him enter the man’s home. That way he couldn’t claim that Naruto had somehow gone ‘missing’ on the way over.

They were walking towards Sasuke’s car. It was parked in its usual spot, and Naruto opened his mouth to crack some joke about Sasuke’s OCD regarding the shininess of his car as Sasuke reached for his keys to push the unlock button. Naruto felt the itching between his shoulder blades, and scanned his surroundings quickly to try to understand what was setting him off. Then he saw it. Smudges. All over Sasuke’s shiny car. At the driver’s side door, and more importantly on the hood by the latch.

Without a word, Naruto spun and flicked a crescent kick directly at Sasuke’s wrist, knocking the keys from his hand.

"Naruto, what the fuck are you -"

"Sasuke. Get inside the building now. Do not come back into the garage until the police tell you to."

"What?"

"Go inside and tell Jugo to seal all entrances to the parking garage. And call a bomb squad."

Sasuke ran his eyes quickly over the parking garage and his car, why Naruto thought there might be a bomb. Then he noticed. "The fingerprints."

"Yeah. Now go inside."

"We’ll both go," Sasuke said, grabbing Naruto’s arm.

"Sasuke. I am only going to say this one more time. Go. Inside. Now. The detonation device is likely triggered by the electronic sensor in this key. There are two kinds of these. One that just goes bang
when you get too close or push the button to unlock the car. The other is more sophisticated, but it
tracks the proximity of the key to the bomb, and if the key approaches then backs away, the device
will detonate. I don't know which one this is. Can we do 'bomb school' later and can you please trust
me that I know what I am talking about and go call the fucking cops?"

"Let me hold the key. You can go in and call the cops."

"So help me god, Sasuke, I will detonate this right here if you don't go inside. Or worse. I'll call
Itachi."

With that, Naruto knew he had won, though Sasuke looked furious. "If you blow yourself up, I'm
going to be really annoyed," Sasuke said, then turned and pulled out his cell to call the bomb squad
as he walked in to warn Jugo.

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to be continued...

god, I wish the penalty for rape was getting your dick blown of by Deidara. LOL

Oh, and I decided that Mac & Cheese is the US version of Ramen... so that's where that came from.
**Playtime's over**

Chapter by KizuKatana

**Author's note** - SORRY, SORRY, SORRY! I know this is late. It was a combination of work grinding me to dust, and me wanting to take a minute to re-think the sequence of a few key things that are starting to happen. I know that many of you are wanting to hear more about Sasuke's back story. There were a lot of hints in the first chapter, but a lot is still to come. This story is unfolding in layers, and different elements of people's pasts will be told when they become relevant, rather than just showing all the cards at once.

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Sasuke hung up after calling the police as he calmly strode into the entrance of the building and signaled to Jugo that his presence was required. He knew that his last name alone would ensure the fastest possible response time from the police with their most qualified squad. Which was good, because Sasuke was pissed. Someone had put a bomb in his car. He didn't like it when people touched his property. Or smudged it.

He assumed that if Naruto knew enough about bombs to know the different types of detonation devices likely at play, he would not be dumb enough to accidentally set it off by sneezing and pushing the button. He was still a bit annoyed that the blond had decided to play hero and take the key from him. Despite the fact that protecting Sasuke was technically Naruto's job, it wasn't actually what Sasuke had employed the blond's services for. He had been interested in... other things. But given the events of the past 24 hours, Sasuke would have to re-evaluate the situation.

If there really was a bomb, then Naruto had just saved his life. Not that he didn't still want to fuck the blond into the wall. But it did put a new perspective on things. The kid did actually know what he was doing in his 'official' part of the job. Being an Uchiha, Sasuke had appreciation for those who excelled in their given field. Respect for it.

Jugo walked over and Sasuke quickly apprised him of the situation so he could evacuate anyone who might still be in the underground parking facility and begin evacuation of the building. Luckily it was a weekday, so most people would be out at work or at school.

With those things done, Sasuke took the opportunity of being out of hearing range of Naruto to place two additional calls.

"Suigetsu," Sasuke said tersely in greeting.

"Sasuke. It's been a long time since you called me directly. Usually you sic Karin on me instead. What's up?"

"I haven't given you anything challenging to work on recently. I was worried that you might be getting bored. There is going to be a lot of police activity at my address over the next two days. I want you to get me every piece of information in their systems on this. Hack into the city street cameras in a two block radius from my building and see if anything showed up from the past two days. And don't tell anyone what you're working on. Not even Karin."

"I never tell that crazy bitch anything. How careful do I need to be with this one? It's been a while since you had me take a peek into the police systems."
Sasuke smirked. Suigetsu and Karin loved to pretend they hated each other. But Sasuke knew whose bed Suigetsu slept in most nights.

"Extremely careful. There are unknown players here, but assume they could be on the Akatsuki level of skill. So you will have to be better. I want updates every six hours," Sasuke said, glancing at the door to the garage to be sure Naruto hadn't decided to follow him in. "I also want you to start digging and get me everything you can on a 'Naruto Uzumaki'. Search both in New York and Japan. He was definitely living in Japan for a good part of his childhood. And I doubt this is his real name, or that he emigrated legally. His age is somewhere between 17 and 24. Blond hair and blue eyes."

"Blond hair and blue eyes... and from Japan? How do you expect me to find a guy when you don't know his real name, where he's originally from, or when he arrived in New York?"

"No idea, just start digging. Recent associates include the Akatsuki, Orochimaru Sanin, and Sakura Haruno. Don't you always tell me that low level politics is a waste of your considerable abilities? Well, now you have something more challenging to work on. Impress me."

Sasuke hung up, a small smirk on his lips. Suigetsu was invaluable. He worked for Sasuke because he paid him exceptionally well, even when he had no work for him. And Suigetsu was placing his bets that Sasuke would quickly move up the political ranks to be either a senator or a behind-the-scenes lobbyist some day with significant influence and in a position to reward those who helped him get there. Suigetsu was one of the best hackers he had ever met, and better yet, he'd never been caught so he was completely off everyone's radar. Sasuke simply employed him openly as an 'IT consultant' was able to get any information he needed on almost any topic, even from government agencies. It ensured that Sasuke was never at a disadvantage in terms of knowing an opponent's weakness or hidden agenda. But Sasuke was careful not to overuse it. He had learned from the mistakes of his parents. It was just a different lesson than what Itachi had drawn from those same experiences. Who was to say which was right?

Sasuke dialed an international number from his mobile, "Shisui-san, it's been a while." Sasuke knew that Itachi would be beyond furious when he found out that Sasuke had kept in touch with Shisui. He was part of the 'old world' family that Itachi had tried to extract them from by immigrating to the US. Sasuke also suspected there was more to his brother's history with their distant relation than that, but he had left it alone. After all, who was he to criticize other's relationships?

It was past the time of playing around. Sasuke wasn't going to constrain himself by playing by the rules. He had never pretended he was as good as Itachi.

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Naruto hadn't been standing in the parking garage for more than five minutes before he heard the sirens arrive. Six squad cars and a van holding the bomb squad sealed off the entrance and exit to the garage. This was a luxury building on the Upper East Side, with a bomb threat called in by an influential person. They were clearly taking no chances.

An officer not much older than Naruto approached him wearing a shield over his face and a Kevlar suit. Naruto quickly explained the situation, and happily relinquished the key to the man. It was kind of a unique experience for Naruto to have the cops show up and not get arrested.

A strong hand landed on his shoulder, and he turned to see Kakashi standing there.

"I need to interview you to see if you saw anything suspicious," Kakashi said. Naruto knew that the captain would not be wasting his time taking witness notes unless there was something more going on. He walked casually with Kakashi out of the garage and across the street, away from prying ears.
and surveillance cameras. He quickly filled him in on the photos, his assignment from Orochimaru, and everything he had noticed walking into the garage.

Kakashi looked at him, noticing the bandana tied around his head. "What's with the rag?"

Naruto paused. He trusted Kakashi, but he didn't know how much he wanted to disclose about what had happened. In the end, Kakashi was still a cop.

"Ok, then, do you want to tell me why your apartment is cleared out and reeking of bleach?" Kakashi was clearly low on patience today, and Naruto's hesitancy to talk was not going over well.

Naruto glanced over where the other officers were helping Jugo with the evacuation with the building. Evidently a bomb had been confirmed. Part of Naruto was glad that he wouldn't look like an idiot by over-reacting about some dirt on a car and calling the bomb squad, but the other part of him was on edge. This just made no sense to him at all. Taking someone out with a sniper rifle from a roof was a different skill set than planting a bomb in a car. Did that mean it was an organization and not an individual that was after Sasuke? Why use both approaches?

Bombs were messy and drew attention. Why use them to take out one person?

Kakashi snapped his fingers in front of Naruto's face to get his attention. "Where is Gaara and what is going on? Yagura was killed three months ago, and we thought that was an isolated incident even though it isn't Orochimaru's usual approach to dealing with threats. But now Roshi and Yugito are missing, and they had no connection with him. I went by to warn Gaara, and he was gone, too. Then I hear over the police scanner that a bomb got called in by the guy you are supposed to be protecting from a stalker. I want to know what the fuck is going on."

Naruto's didn't know Roshi or Yugito well, but he knew they wouldn't be easy to take down. "Gaara's fine. I got shot but I'm fine, too," Naruto said, and Kakashi's eyes flickered to his head with concern. Naruto quickly told him what had happened, leaving out the details of the body disposal, but otherwise laying it all out. It was a relief, in a way, to finally tell someone everything.

"I'm meeting with Gaara tomorrow. He's going to see if the hit came from his operations while I track back to see if it came from mine. I don't think Orochimaru was involved in the gunmen, but I don't know about the bomb. That guy is a fucking psycho, especially about the Uchihas."

Kakashi frowned. "It's not Orochimaru's style. He's subtle, and he's never done anything that would run the risk of him getting arrested. That's why his hiring you made no sense. He isn't like Nagato. He doesn't run a criminal organization. His is more focused on political and influence peddling and trying to control things behind the scenes to his own financial advantage. If he doesn't like you, you wake up in jail for tax evasion, or with your mistress giving an expose' on you on the front page of the paper. You don't wake up dead."

Naruto shrugged. "But you thought he might have taken Yagura out."

Kakashi glanced at the swirling activity around them. "We can't discuss this here. I'll meet you tomorrow with Gaara. Which meet point are you using?"

"Meetpoint eight, at noon."

Kakashi nodded. "What do Itachi and Sasuke know?"

"Itachi only knows I was shot. Sasuke knows about the Russians, the subway, and what went down at the apartment, but I didn't tell him about Gaara. Or you."
Kakashi stilled, looking at Naruto carefully. "That's uncharacteristically chatty of you, to disclose that much to someone not involved." He was still pretending like he was taking interview notes on the bomb.

"Well, I walked into his place with a bloody head wound. It's not like he wasn't going to ask about it," Naruto said, knowing it didn't really explain his actions. Hell, how could he explain to Kakashi what he didn't understand himself?

Kakashi looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, but didn't pursue it.

"Watch your back. Tell Gaara the same thing." Kakashi looked up as Sasuke was walking over.

"Councilman," Kakashi said in a friendly greeting. "I was just finishing up discussing the situation with Mr. Uzumaki here. I'd like to take your statement as well."

Sasuke looked at Naruto for a moment, his face inscrutable. A flash of unease crept along Naruto's spine, but he wasn't sure why. There was a focused intensity about Sasuke that Naruto had only seen when the councilman had been focused on some political maneuvers. Naruto had never had that focus directed at him. He shot Kakashi a glance, as if warning the man to be careful.

"Of course, Captain Hatake," Sasuke said smoothly, turning his attention to Kakashi. "Any way I can be of help in this matter."

Naruto frowned. There was no possible way that Sasuke could have overheard any part of their conversation. He had been standing across the street, and their voices had been low. Still... something had changed.

Naruto watched as Sasuke and Kakashi walked back to where a group of officers was discussing the status of the bomb disposal.

Naruto was somewhat surprised that Sasuke showed no signs of panic at the thought of someone planting a bomb in his car. If anything he looked... annoyed. Most civilians, even the 'macho' ones, would be hysterical. Or at least afraid. Why wasn't Sasuke either of those? It didn't fit with the reaction of a pampered socialite whose most difficult decision in a given week would be whether to wear Armani or Canali to a gala.

Naruto couldn't hear the words that Kakashi or Sasuke were speaking, but he could read their body language. Sasuke was clearly asking as many questions as he was answering, not in the least intimidated by the older officer. Kakashi seemed quite amused, and even shot a wink at Naruto when Sasuke had turned to question a member of the bomb squad that had come to give Kakashi an update.

Naruto had no idea why that wink seemed to indicate approval of a sort. Or why he suddenly found himself blushing.

Annoyed, Naruto jammed his hands into his pockets and drew a breath, trying to think through what could be salvaged from the day. He still needed to go see Orochimaru and Hidan. He wondered when the police would allow him to leave. At least Sasuke wouldn't be able to insist on driving him, since his car was going to be impounded as evidence. Naruto could just take the subway, finish his business with Orochimaru, then catch a train up to Sing Sing. Hopefully Hidan would have heard something about what the fuck was going on.

He wondered if he should try to find Fu, and check in on her. Naruto thought he had a pretty good idea where she was working these days. Kakashi would have contacted her, but Naruto liked Fu,
and wouldn't mind seeing her. And of course, two weeks of providing sexual favors to Sasuke with no satisfaction for himself had left Naruto undoubtedly wound tightly. Naruto found his gaze following Sasuke's subtle movements as he spoke with Kakashi. *Yeah, that would explain things.* Naruto was just feeling sexually frustrated. And with Sasuke being attractive, and somehow less of a princess than Naruto had originally thought... it was just distracting him. Naruto found his eyes following the Uchiha's movements again, and forced himself to look somewhere else. He was absolutely *not* hoping that Sasuke would require his services tonight.

He would catch up with Fu on his way back from Sing Sing. Then he would feel much better, and be able to focus again.

And then tomorrow, he could see Gaara. Naruto felt his body tense slightly at Kakashi's implication that they could be being targeted by something relating to the Jinchurriki organization. And Gaara didn't know. But Gaara was smart, and he was good. And - after what had happened in their apartment - he was on guard. Hopefully that would be enough to keep him safe until Naruto could talk to him.

He felt someone's eyes on him, and looked up to see Sasuke walking across the street towards him.

"So... what did you tell the police?" Naruto asked. He had realized belatedly that the reason Kakashi had decided to interview Sasuke was so that he could censor the notes in case Sasuke knew more than he should.

"Just that you noticed the finger prints, suspected a bomb, and told me to call the police," Sasuke said simply.

"Did you tell them why I was there?"

"They already knew about the photos. Itachi had me call the police the day after I received them. I told them I'd hired you as personal security."

"Did you mention Orochimaru?" Naruto asked, wanting to get a sense of how open Sasuke was going to be about this. They hadn't discussed it in advance.

"No. He would find that inconvenient. And there would be no point in mentioning him. He owns too many people in the courts and in the police," Sasuke said. He glanced over to where Kakashi was talking with the head of the bomb squad. "Though you seemed particularly happy to be talking to that policeman that was interviewing you. Captain Hatake? I would have thought someone in your position wouldn't be so enamored with a cop."

Naruto noticed the edge in Sasuke's voice. He wasn't sure if it was suspicion or jealousy, but neither was good. He needed to not draw attention to his relationship with Kakashi. He hoped that no one else had noticed anything odd.

"Hey, when a group of guys shows up to take your place in front of a bomb, you can't help but feel a little gratitude," Naruto said, following Sasuke's gaze. "Plus its kind of fun to talk to one and not end up in the back of a squad car in cuffs."

Sasuke's lips twitched, but he didn't say anything.

"Have they removed the bomb yet?" Naruto asked, trying to change the subject.

"No," Sasuke said, walking over to stand almost directly in front of Naruto, their eyes level. "Evidently the device is quite sophisticated. It was as you said, Naruto. Backing off with the key would have detonated it," Sasuke was looking at him consideringly. "You know quite a bit about
bombs. Based on a few smudges on the outside of a car."

Naruto heard the subtle accusation, and it didn't bother him. Sasuke would be an idiot to trust Naruto in these circumstances. "Yeah. In Akatsuki, Dei was one of my best friends. He use to tell me all kinds of stuff about how that shit worked." Naruto slanted a glance at Sasuke. "Just in theory, of course."

"Of course," Sasuke said drily.

"Look, if I'd wanted you dead, a bomb wouldn't be the way you'd go, especially not one that would take me out as well," Naruto said simply, earning a raised brow in response. "But it is a little weird that you mention that the device was high end. I mean, I only was playing it safe by considering it, but it actually surprises me. It doesn't really fit with how it was done."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if you know enough to make and set that kind of a bomb, then you should know enough to wipe your fucking prints off the car. I mean... that's just sloppy work," Naruto sounded honestly affronted at the thought of such shoddy criminal behavior. "If bombing is your trade, then you should be good enough at staging the scene that someone doesn't notice anything is wrong until it goes boom. Why spend all the time building a fancy bomb if you're basically going to leave a neon sign behind saying 'bomb here, don't get too close'."

Sasuke smirked, despite everything.

"Though I suppose it was convenient enough for us that they did," Sasuke said.

"Yeah, I've wanted to be a lot of things, but a Jackson Pollock painting on a parking garage wall was not one of them," Naruto said.

Sasuke just looked at him.

"Sorry... Dei was really into art and I guess he rubbed off on me a bit," Naruto said, looking slightly sheepish.

"So, what's the equivalent in your line of work?" Sasuke asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you said bombers need to be good at making sure that no one notices the bomb before hand, so not cleaning up smudges and fingerprints was sloppy. What is it for you?"

Naruto shrugged, glancing around uncomfortably at all the people, "Body disposal."

"So you're a hit man?" Sasuke frowned, not really liking the reality that implied.

"No. Hit men usually need to leave the body to send a message. Nagato never used me like that."

"So what are you?"

Naruto looked at him thoughtfully. Then smiled, "Right now I'm your body guard... and service provider."

Sasuke was standing close enough to him that he could feel the temperature increase between them. "So is your headache is better today?" Sasuke asked, his voice slightly rougher than it had been a moment ago.
Naruto kept his eyes locked on Sasuke's. "Maybe."

Sasuke cursed under his breath. *Of course* the building is being evacuated. It would be hours before they would be let back into his apartment.

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After an hour, Sasuke and Naruto were told they could leave the area. "Let's take a cab over to Orochimaru's. The police aren't going to release my car in the near future, and I don't want to wait to have this conversation."

Naruto hid his surprise at Sasuke's insistence to accompany him. "Why? I can take a cab by myself, or just hop on the subway. I don't need you to come. I'm going to go up to Sing Sing to see Hidan after that anyway. I'm sure you have work to catch up on after yesterday and this morning."

"I think having a bomb planted in my car cuts me a little slack. My office will be flooded dealing with handling press inquiries for the next 24 hours anyway. Besides, Orochimaru will be more likely to tell what he knows to me," Sasuke said. "He views you as a newly hired minion. I doubt he trusts you yet, and even if he did, he'd never share information like this with you unless there was something specific he wanted you to do about it. You don't rate with him."

The statement might be true, but the arrogance with which it was delivered annoyed Naruto. "And you do, of course."

Sasuke just shrugged. "He is always looking for ways to curry favor with me. I will allow this to be one."

"You mean he looks for ways to get in your pants," Naruto snorted.

Sasuke raised an eyebrow. "I thought that was what he hired you for."

Naruto flushed slightly in embarrassment. Though some of the heat he was feeling didn't feel quite like embarrassment. It was centered somewhat... lower. Naruto forced himself to redirect his thoughts. This was not the time for *that*. "Seriously, you have no idea how creepy it is watching that guy lick his lips at the thought of you doing anything sexual," Naruto shuddered.

"Has he... shown any interest in you?" Sasuke's voice was carefully casual, but it didn't fool Naruto.

"Why... are you going to try to protect me, or would you be jealous if I'd fucked him?" Naruto asked, enjoying just a little the way Sasuke's eyes narrowed at the suggestion of Naruto having sex with Orochimaru, thought the thought itself was revolting. He was still a bit annoyed at Sasuke's comment earlier.

"I wouldn't be jealous," Sasuke said tightly. "I was just curious what else he employs you for, since he seems to want to redeploy you."

"This was my first job for him," Naruto said, not feeling any need to hide it. "So I have no idea what he'll want me to do next. But thankfully, having him interested in me hasn't been an issue. I'm not his type. He likes Asian-looking guys." Naruto looked Sasuke up and down pointedly. "So watch your back," Naruto said, finding it strange that he was giving Sasuke the same warning Kakashi had given him. "Literally."

"Hn," Sasuke grunted. Though it was unclear whether it was in acknowledgement of the warning, or approval of the fact that Naruto hadn't been involved with Orochimaru.
Naruto paused, trying to think of a way to convince Sasuke not to come with him. Sasuke didn't know what Orochimaru was holding over Naruto, and if he provoked the snake, Naruto would be the one to suffer the consequences. But he didn't know how to dissuade Sasuke from accompanying him without divulging more information than he was comfortable doing. Thinking Sasuke was hot was one thing. Trusting him with knowledge that could get his friends killed was something else.

Sasuke was heading out to the street to hail a cab, and Naruto stopped him by placing a hand on the pale man's chest. Sasuke's eyes narrowed, but Naruto didn't step back. "What are you going to say to him?"

"I am going to tell him that if he has someone following you, I expect to be informed on it as well since you are a de facto employee of mine through him. And I am going to ask if he knows anything about the bomb, or the other person who was following you."

"And you think he'll answer you?"

Sasuke smiled thinly. "You don't know Orochimaru. I do. I can tell when the man is lying, or when he's hiding something. I also have a much clearer idea of the hidden agendas he has going. This situation is no longer amusing. I am going to find out if he knows anything."

Naruto didn't say anything. It was true that Naruto didn't know Orochimaru well. But he was surprised at the implication that Sasuke might have some prior dealings with the man. He had assumed, being Itachi's little brother, that Sasuke steered clear of people like Orochimaru. Although, reflecting on it, it was pretty clear that Sasuke wasn't as squeaky clean as Itachi seemed to be. After all, he had allowed Naruto up to his apartment that first night. And made the deal for his 'services'.

Sasuke misread Naruto's hesitation.

"You are confusing Orochimaru with Nagato. Nagato was a crime lord. Orochimaru isn't. We won't be in danger by asking him what he knows. If he doesn't like being asked, he will just refuse to answer. Do you seriously think a man in my position could have anything to do with him if he were anything like Nagato? Orochimaru has never even been under formal investigation. He is subtle. And he appreciates subtlety in return. Just let me do the talking."

Naruto sighed. It was basically what Kakashi had said. But something about Orochimaru just didn't seem... sane. Which meant, to Naruto at least, that he wasn't predictable. Naruto knew better than most the unpredictability of madness. But he didn't argue. At this point, they were basically out of options. If Sasuke could get something out of Orochimaru, then it was at least worth a shot. He didn't want to show up to Gaara empty handed.

Sasuke hailed a cab for them and they rode most of the way in silence. Naruto tried to not focus on the sheer magnetic presence of the man sitting beside him. He forced himself to look out the window and think about what he was going to say to Hidan. He hoped to god that Sasuke didn't decide to accompany him to Sing Sing as well. Hidan could sense sexual tension from a mile away, and the guy had absolutely no filter on his mouth. Naruto didn't even want to know what the man would say if he knew that Naruto were seriously considering banging the ADA's little brother.

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They were greeted immediately by Orochimaru when they arrived at his home.

"Sasuke-kun. I just saw the news of the bomb threat in your building. I trust everything is alright with you?"
Sasuke and Naruto followed the older man into his home. "Yes. Fortunately, Naruto noticed the device before it detonated."

Something about the way Sasuke said Naruto's name didn't sit well with Orochimaru. Nor did the way the Uchiha was standing closer than necessary to his employee. Orochimaru narrowed his eyes.

"You were hoping it would have gone off?" Sasuke asked, his voice emotionless.

"No, of course not. I am just... upset with the situation," Orochimaru said smoothly. "While I am extremely pleased that my employee was able to help in this matter, it might be time to turn your protection over to the police. Surely at this point they would be willing to be involved. And they are trained in this, of course."

Sasuke didn't respond immediately to the threat of Orochimaru reclaiming Naruto and removing him from his service. He glanced at Naruto, whose face showed no reaction. Sasuke felt a flash of annoyance.

"I will discuss the situation with the police, but I think that - given recent events - I would prefer to keep Naruto in his current position," Sasuke stated. "If this is an inconvenience for you, I would be happy to hire Naruto directly."

Orochimaru's eyes narrowed further. He would not lose control of this situation. "No. Naruto-kun will continue to work for me. He doesn't want to quit. Do you, boy?"

The look Orochimaru sent Naruto was heavy with implied threat. Naruto knew he was being reminded of what Orochimaru held over him. Naruto simply shrugged. "It seems like you both want the same thing right now, which is Sasuke's safety. There doesn't seem to be a reason for me to change employers just to achieve that."

Orochimaru smiled smugly. Naruto was still firmly under his thumb.

"Naruto informed me that you have been having him followed since he began working for me," Sasuke's voice had a controlled anger lacing it. Naruto heard it and knew Sasuke was angry at Naruto's response. And the implicit rejection of Sasuke's offer. "Did your man happen to see anything about the attack on Naruto two days ago, or the bomb that was placed in my car last night?"

"Naruto-kun," Orochimaru showed his obvious displeasure. "You never told me that you had been attacked."

Naruto shot a hard glance at Sasuke. They had not discussed disclosing the fact that Naruto had been attacked to Orochimaru. Sasuke opened his mouth, but Naruto cut him off. "Just a minor knife-wound on my arm. It wasn't enough to keep me from going to see some friends," Naruto said, shrugging as though this were a casual thing.

Sasuke looked at Naruto for a minute, but didn't contradict him. Instead he turned and looked at Orochimaru. "If you have any information on this person, I would appreciate your cooperation. I'm sure the police would as well."

Orochimaru did not want the police to talk with any of the people he employed for surveillance. It was not something he wanted on record as tied to him. "Yes, well I had originally had a few trusted associates keep an eye on Naruto to be sure that he was not causing any problems for you, Sasuke-kun. Given his background, I wanted to be especially cautious. However when it became clear that he was performing adequately, I stopped. There was no one following him two nights ago, or last night, unfortunately."
It was a lie, and Sasuke knew it. But he decided he wouldn't let Orochimaru know that quite yet, as he didn't currently have any leverage to get Orochimaru to tell him what he knew.

Sasuke turned to Naruto. "Since we're here, and there doesn't appear to be anything else to be learned, why don't you go pack some clothes to bring back with you. You will need a formal suit for Friday night."

Naruto frowned. He knew that Sasuke was trying to get rid of him. But he decided if Sasuke thought he could get something more out of the creepy guy alone, he'd play along. "Whatever."

Once Naruto had left, Sasuke looked back to Orochimaru. "Given how things have escalated, I'm sure you agree that Naruto should stay with me for the time being, at least until the police are able to take over or have completed their investigation."

Orochimaru nodded reluctantly.

"Are you sure there is nothing you know about this, Orochimaru-san?"

"If I knew anything, I would have already informed the police. And I would have warned you before-hand. As I told you before, it is not in my interests to have you harmed."

Sasuke knew that Orochimaru was telling the truth this time. He didn't want Sasuke physically harmed, and he didn't know what had happened. But he had had someone following Naruto. And that person was likely dead or too afraid to disclose what they'd seen.

Naruto returned a few minutes later with a small suitcase. "All set."

"We'll take our leave then, Orochimaru-san. Please keep me informed if you learn of anything. Itachi and I both appreciate your help on this."

They said their farewells, then left.

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Orochimaru frowned. This was not supposed to be how it played out. They way Sasuke's eyes followed the blond spoke of more than simple lust. Lust was a commodity emotion that was easy for him to control and dispense, like a dealer to a junkie.

But Sasuke seemed to actually trust the boy, and have some real liking for him. That was unacceptable. He wanted Sasuke to desire Naruto, but only as a service that Orochimaru could provide, one without strings or emotional attachments. If Sasuke and Naruto developed an actual relationship, the 'dealer/addict' model would fall apart. Naruto might try to defy him, or call his bluff about exposing Naruto. Sasuke might be willing to take on reputational risks that he otherwise wouldn't to release Naruto from Orochimaru's control.

Orochimaru could not take that risk, not after finally finding a way in.

But more than than, Orochimaru was angry. Naruto was not Sasuke's equal. He was not a suitable companion for anything other than transactional sex. He was beneath them. And Sasuke needed to be reminded of that.

Naruto needed to be devalued.

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Naruto and Sasuke walked out of Orochimaru's house in silence. Naruto was curious about what Sasuke might have said to the older man when he was gone, and hoped Sasuke had gotten the hint and not discussed anything further about the nature or extent of his injuries. They walked a few blocks over to a busier street where they had a better chance of catching a cab.

"Why didn't you want Orochimaru to know you'd been shot? It would make it much less likely that he would suspect you of taking out whoever he had following you that night," Sasuke asked, clearly thinking along the same lines.

"So you think he was lying about that?" Naruto asked, hoping to evade the question.

"Obviously. But he wasn't lying when he said he didn't want me hurt. I don't think he is behind the bomb. He could be behind your attack, though. But you didn't answer my question."

Naruto stuck his hand out to flag a taxi. Sasuke looked at him impatiently. Finally Naruto said, "I don't trust him. In my line of work, it's dangerous to let people know when you are not at your best."

A cab stopped, and they climbed in.

Sasuke thought about that for a moment, a portion of the anger he had felt when Naruto had sided with Orochimaru over him slipping away. "But you told me. You came to my home knowing I would likely find out about your injuries. You'd never have made it through that lunch."

Naruto shrugged. "Impaired judgment."

Sasuke smirked. "No. You trust me."

Naruto hummed noncommittally. "Trust is a very strong word. Let's not use that yet. Let's just say, I preferred your company to Orochimaru's that day."

Sasuke rolled his eyes. That was not a very high bar. "You trust me," he persisted.

Sasuke's phone went off, saving Naruto from having to respond. Sasuke glanced at the caller ID, and saw it was Suigetsu.

"Yes?"

"Sasuke," Suigetsu's voice came over the phone.

"What have you found?" Sasuke said, conscious of Naruto sitting in the cab next to him.

"Who the hell is this Uzumaki guy? What are you involved with?" Suigetsu said, his voice for once not joking but sounding worried.

"What did you find?" Sasuke repeated, not liking something about Suigetsu's tone

"This guy doesn't exist. He's never had a phone bill, electric bill, cable bill, apartment lease, social security number... he's never even had a fucking parking ticket. I don't know who the hell he is, but there is no Naruto Uzumaki. Apparently, he enrolled in high school with some copy of a Japanese birth certificate that no one thought to check the veracity of, but even Karin could have told you was a fake. When he was in his junior year, he got arrested for killing one of Nagato's bangers, before Naruto had joined Akatsuki. Some guy called Zetsu."

"Is that his first name or last name?"

"Its his only name. He's another guy who doesn't seem to exist. I'm digging into him more, but the
Sasuke remembered the scars on Naruto's stomach. Jack-the-ripper style indeed. "Is there a chance it was self-defense?"

There was a brief silence. Then Suigetsu said, "I saw the medical examiner's photos, and the crime scene photos. I barely made it to the bathroom before I lost it. It wasn't self-defense. That guy was practically dissected. Looked like he was tortured. All the evidence connecting Naruto to it vanished. The homeless guy who witnessed it died of an over-dose, the physical evidence of the murder weapon with Naruto's prints disappeared, the computer system crashed and the reports were lost, and the cop who arrested him and interviewed the homeless guy was killed in a hit and run. Never went to trial. I can tell you this... your boyfriend is not a harmless little plaything. He was locked up when the cop and the homeless guy bought it, but there didn't seem to be any doubt about him being the one to slash Zetsu. Seriously, couldn't you find someplace safer to stick it?"

"Suigetsu," Sasuke said warningly. He wondered how the man had known about the sexual relationship between him and Naruto. But then he remembered that he had given the man orders to hack into the security cameras around his apartment building. He must have seen them walking in together. "Keep digging. I want the full background."

"I know, but it might take longer than we had originally expected, given that this guy has basically left no electronic trail. Oh, and one more thing," Suigetsu said.

"What?" Sasuke bit out.

"I'm not the only one who is messing around in the kid's files. They've all been modified recently. Looks like information has been changed and deleted. Some of it I was able to recover, but some of it I couldn't. Whoever did it was good. There was almost no trace. Sucks for them that I'm better."

Sasuke processed that, wondering what the hell was going on. "Just find out what the fuck is going on."

"Yes, boss," Suigetsu said sarcastically.

Sasuke fought the urge to look at Naruto, since it would be a dead giveaway that he had just been discussing him.

"Was that Itachi?" Naruto asked.

"Of course... he probably figures I was talking about one of his cases."

"Hn," Sasuke said noncommittally. "We're going to meet him for lunch, then go up to Sing Sing together."

Sasuke caught the displeased look Naruto shot him. But he wasn't going to back down. He had a feeling that Naruto had other reasons for wanting to go alone. He didn't know what they were, but he wasn't letting the blond out of his sight until he had some answers.

Though he was still annoyed that Naruto had rejected the opportunity to get out from Orochimaru today. He didn't understand it. He knew that Naruto didn't like the older man. Wasn't loyal to him. So why had he refused to let Sasuke get him out of there? What did Orochimaru have over him?
And what was Orochimaru going to use Naruto for if he pulled him off protecting Sasuke and had the police handle it instead? Sasuke wasn't going to let that happen. He wasn't done with Naruto yet. And that was as far as he was willing to think about it.

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_to be continued..._

The good news is I have more than half of the next chapter written. The bad news is I will be traveling in Asia for 2 weeks and won't always have internet access and I have no idea if I will be able to update before I get back. I will _try_, especially because we are close now to the first lemon and it is _killing me_, since I wrote it ages ago. In my outline, all this would have been covered by chapter 5. I don't know why it takes me so many words to get my stories out. _Grrrrrr_. Next chapter we will see Hidan, Gaara, and possibly the first kiss. Depends on how long the Gaara scene ends up being.
Author's note - Holy shit this is a long chapter. This is what happens when I am trapped on a 14 hour flight. I was going to split it, but then I decided I'd just crash all your phones with this long ass chapter instead. If I can get it to post with the tiny bandwidth of connection that I have here. And if this chapter pisses you off... well... its my story. And in my mind, this is just how it plays out. I said it was going to be darkish and not sweet.

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Itachi had insisted in getting together for lunch, wanting to see for himself that Sasuke was in fact ok, and also talk to Naruto about what he thought about the bomb. He told them that he had made arrangements for them to visit Hidan in the afternoon, and that he would drive them up himself.

"Are you going to talk to Dei?" Naruto asked hopefully.

"Not today, Naruto," Itachi said. "But maybe next week. I arranged to meet Hidan with his attorney. We'll make use of one of the interview rooms."

Naruto glanced at Itachi. "Hidan is... um..." Naruto began, trying to think of a way to warn them about Hidan's colorful style of communication.

Itachi smiled almost imperceptibly. "I have already had the pleasure of conversing with Hidan."

Sasuke arched a brow in question. Itachi's smirk grew. "You'll just have to wait and see, little brother."

Naruto closed his eyes briefly, bracing himself for the mortification he was sure would be coming. The only benefit of going with Itachi would be that if Hidan were helpful in this case, maybe the charges against him would be reduced. Naruto was willing to take the chance, though it would likely mean he would learn less about his own situation. Even with the code, he doubted very much his old comrade would want to disclose anything with two upstanding citizens such as the Uchihas in the room. Reading transcripts was different than seeing the nonverbals which would clearly give away the code. Naruto sighed.

"Let's get this over with then. But I want a separate meeting with him later this week with just Hidan and me," Naruto said.

"Feel free to discuss whatever you want in front of us," Itachi said feigning innocence.

Naruto just rolled his eyes. "Oh, absolutely."

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Naruto was not surprised when they passed through security in a tenth the time it had taken him when he had come alone. Naruto was the only one of the three men who was searched. He came out of the security room grumbling. " Fucking pervert grabbed my ass."

Itachi smirked when he saw Sasuke narrow his eyes at the guard. He had noticed the way his little brother's eyes followed the blond wherever he went. Whatever it was that was between them, it was obviously growing. Itachi knew he should disapprove, but somehow he didn't. Naruto's past would
cause endless problems for Sasuke on so many levels. But Itachi sensed that the benefits that the boy would bring to his brother's frigid, driven life would more than outweigh the costs. Though he had only the little flashes of humor and warmth that he saw in his brother's eyes as proof, they had been rare to the point of nonexistence since the death of their parents years ago. Itachi would support anything that brought his little brother back to life, and out of the cold, hard shell he had become.

They were shown to an interview room, with four chairs and a table. Hidan's attorney wasn't present.

Itachi frowned. "We aren't allowed to meet without your attorney present."

"I told him to go jack off the in the stalls for a bit," Hidan said. "See how helpful I can be? Even though you never arranged the conjugal I asked for. Plus I know blondie here wouldn't set me up. I saw you on the news this morning," Hidan directed his look to Naruto. "And you, too," he said, looking at Sasuke.

"Since when do you watch the news?" Naruto laughed, the sound slightly nervous. Naruto always tried to keep his face out of the news. He sincerely hoped that the story only made the local channels. If it aired on CNN, he was screwed. But since the bomb didn't go off, hopefully the event wasn't exciting enough to go that far.

"Since I've got nothing better to do. You ok?" Hidan asked carefully.

"Yeah. New job. Orochimaru has me watching out for the councilman because of some stalker photos he got. But as of this morning, the shit got real," Naruto figured this much information was safe to give Hidan. The bomb was already on the news, and he already knew he was working for Orochimaru.

Hidan shrugged, already guessing what they were here for. "Its fucking weird, though. Usually some jerk-off would be bragging some shit about knowing who did it, big publicity like that. But no one seems to know. It isn't one of the regulars."

"Maybe..." Naruto glanced at Itachi. "... maybe when the specifics of the device are known, we could show it to Dei and see what he thinks."

Hidan frowned at Itachi. "The assholes need to let him out o solitary again first. That guy fuckin' deserved what he got, and everyone knows it." Hidan smirked. "And they'll never pin it on Dei. They're just pissed off because he made the warden look bad."

Naruto snickered, "You gotta admit it was classic."

Hidan snorted derisively. "That fucker was an idiot. I mean, if you're going to get some ass in the fucking showers, do your homework first. There are rules in prison. You can't make someone your bitch if they are tougher than you. And Dei's fucking tougher than most of the pussies here. His ass is reserved for me."

Naruto rolled his. "You think everyone's ass is reserved for you."

"Don't you forget it. Yours included, blondie," Hidan said. Sasuke shifted slightly, and Hidan's eyes immediately latched onto him.

"In your dreams, psycho. You know you couldn't take me. We went through this before, remember?" Naruto laughed, not having noticed Sasuke's reaction.

"Hmmmm..." Hidan said consideringly, still looking at Sasuke and ignoring Naruto's comment "So, you're the little Uchiha's body guard, huh? He's not bad, I have to admit. So, are you fucking him, or
is he fucking you? I could actually see it either way."

Naruto glanced back at where Itachi and Sasuke stood, both looking rather expressionless. He felt his face heat and tried to control it. "Um... dude, you know his brother is like, standing right there and going to be the one across the bench from you at trial, right?"

Hidan just cackled. "Look, if I can't be pounding your ass, I just want to know who is. Or whose ass you're pounding. I mean, after seeing you in action with that hooker chick, what was her name? Fu? Fuck. You are such an animal in the sack."

Naruto face turned scarlet, and he let out a strangled choking sound. "What the fuck? You told me you guys weren't watching!"

"Kakuzo and I had security that night. There are cameras in all the rooms, including yours. What the fuck did you think we were going to do? It wasn't like there was anything else to fucking look at. Besides, she was really a hot piece of ass. Kakuzo had his meat whipped out and fisted before you guys even shut the door. The way you two were going at it I thought that you were going to end up knocking one of the fucking walls down."

Naruto couldn't decide if he were more furious or horrified at the thought of Kakuzo jerking off to him and Fu. "Kakuzo was... ? Ugh, man I hate that guy. He's lucky he already got busted or I would totally have sold him out. Child sex trafficking, drug dealing piece of shit."

Hidan just laughed. The extreme bad blood between the two was no secret. Naruto had no problem with the smuggling, money laundering or gun for hire parts of Nagato's operation, but he had been dead set against involving himself in the sex trade or child slave labor parts of the business. Eventually, he had even convinced Nagato to shut down those parts of his organization, despite their lucrative nature. "So what about you and Uchiha? He looks pretty fancy. He keep up with you, or do you just go gentle with him?"

"Shut it, Hidan. I'm just his security," Naruto grumbled, not even daring to look back at Sasuke at this point. Itachi, however, did not miss the absolutely predatory expression on Sasuke's face.

Hidan grinned malevolently. "Yeah right, and I'm Mother fucking Theresa. I can practically smell the sex on you guys. I'm surprised you aren't jumping each other right here. Prison sex is super kinky."

"Hidan! Jesus fucking Christ. Can we get back to business now?" Naruto said, starting to lose his temper a bit.

Itachi looked on in bemusement as one of most ruthless hit men on record proceeded to tease Naruto like a (perverted) older brother, though even he seemed wary of rousing Naruto's temper too far.

Finally, Hidan allowed the topic to change. "So... why are you covering up your goldie locks? Is this something with a new crew you're joining or what?"

Naruto shifted uncomfortably, and Hidan's eyes instantly narrowed.

"Nah, just -" Before Naruto could finish, Hidan had reached across and pulled the bandana off Naruto's head, revealing the bandage, which was immediately ripped off as well.

The temperature in the room seemed to drop about 30 degrees, and Sasuke had absolutely no doubt that Hidan was the cold-blooded killer that everyone described him to be.

"Who," Hidan said, his voice deceptively soft.
"Um," Naruto said, slanting a glance to Itachi. "Don't worry... it's handled."

Hidan narrowed his eyes. "You probably 'handled' the fucking footmen, not the general. Answer my question, blondie. No one touches one of the family without fucking payback. Who."

"I'm not sure. I don't think its related to the bomb, but... I was actually going to ask you if you'd heard anything."

Hidan paused, clearly trying to think through what was safe to talk about and what might end up biting them in the ass if disclosed openly. He decided not to risk it.

"Maybe. But if you want me to tell you, you have to give me what I want first. How about you talk dirty to me."

Naruto glanced at Sasuke, but couldn't read his expression. It looked like he was wondering if Hidan was actually serious.

"We can give you two some privacy," Itachi said, standing. Sasuke followed, looking as though he knew something was going on but not quite sure what. "Its the least I can do since I was not allowed to arrange conjugal visits with someone not legally your spouse."

Hidan smirked. "Yeah, I kept asking, but blondie always said no."

When the door closed behind Sasuke and Itachi, Naruto just looked at Hidan. "You know they will still be listening to this, right?"

Hidan shrugged. "True, but there are no cameras in here. Hearing isn't the same as seeing."

Naruto nodded, though he wasn't really sure how much of a difference it would make.

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Itachi and Sasuke went directly to the security room, where a guard handed them headsets to be able to listen in on the conversation between Naruto and Hidan. Sasuke hesitated before putting them on, feeling a little guilty about it.

"Hidan and Naruto are no strangers to the system," Itachi said. "They know we're listening."

Sasuke hesitated a second longer, then put his headphones on.

"Yeah, that's right. You promised me you'd wear something good this time," Naruto's voice came through clearly. Sasuke had heard Naruto's sexual teasing voice... this wasn't it.

"Well, I know you were hoping for leather, but mesh was all I could find," Hidan began, his voice sounding amused rather than turned on.

"Well, I'll be hoping for leather next time. But I'm wearing mesh, too, so I guess I'll let it slide."

"Hmm, you're a sexy bitch in mesh. Undress for me," Hidan said.

"Ok. I'm going to talk dirty to you while I take it off. Couple of nights ago my friend and I were at a party. I got wasted on Vodka. Freaking orgy of 8 guys. But all I could think about was fucking you. My friend and I fucked them raw, but none of them satisfied me like you do."

Sasuke had been fighting a growing sense of irritation at the conversation, but he froze as the number eight caught his attention. That was the same number of people who had gone after Naruto. And
Vodka clearly tied to Russian. Sasuke's mind quickly went through the translation. ' Fucking them raw' must be 'killed them'. Sasuke almost laughed when he realized that this was some crude sort of code. He looked up and saw Itachi's eyes waiting for him, already knowing. They showed approval when they recognized that Sasuke had figured it out as well. Sasuke wondered how much of the conversation Itachi was able to understand without knowing the context. He thought about it briefly, but decided he would keep Naruto's confidence and not disclose what he knew to his brother. He had no doubts that Itachi would figure it out on his own.

The code was simple, but only if you knew enough about the context to put the pieces together. He concentrated harder on the details of the conversation.

"Damn, I bet you looked hot with all those guys. Was the party at their place or yours? Wish I could have been there."

"Party was at my place, mostly. Though I hooked up with one on the train there -" 

"Fucking shit that was you?" Hidan said, stepping out of the code for a second before he remembered where they were. "I mean, I can't believe you hooked up on a train. Usually you're not such an attention whore."

Sasuke remembered what Naruto had said about body disposal being important for being good at his job, and recognized the reprimand from Hidan for what it was.

"Yeah. It was a little out of control," Naruto said sounding chastised. "Too damn much Vodka. Bull's head brand. Anyway, the party was a little wild. Sex toys everywhere." 

Sasuke wasn't sure what the Bull's head brand or toys referred to, but he assumed it was some further indication possibly of the faction or type of attackers or their methods.

"But so far I've done all the talking. Your turn. Any good Vodka stories from your side? What have you been thinking about besides me dressed in mesh."

Sasuke assumed Naruto was asking Hidan if he had heard anything from the Russians in prison about what had gone down.

"Nah, no Vodka stories, but now that you've given me the idea I will definitely be trying to come up with a few for next time. Mostly I've been imagining your mama," Hidan said with a perverted laugh. "I hear she's in town and I'm gonna look her up when I get out of here."

"Ha, my mama would kick your ass. But if she's in town, I definitely will go see her. Got an address?" Naruto's voice sounded tense. There was a brief silence, where Hidan was either shaking his head or writing down the address for Naruto. Sasuke wondered who they had coded as his mother. "Been thinking about anything else?"

"Your ex. Man, lately it seems like everyone is trying to hook up with him, but he's playing hard to get. No one's found him yet. I guess he's not in town." 

There was a pause, and Sasuke could feel the tension. When Naruto's voice came, Sasuke could hear the underlying fear in it.

"Good to know. If you hear for sure he's back in town, let me know right away. I'm always looking for a good hook-up. And he was the best."

The guard signaled to Itachi that their time was up. Sasuke and Itachi returned to the interview room to collect Naruto and say goodbye to Hidan. Itachi promised to offer consideration if Hidan proved
helpful, though the nature of the charges were such that even a lot of help would still result in a lot of hard time for the hit man if he was convicted.

"Blondie. Watch your back," Hidan said.

"Yeah. You, too. Watch out for Dei for me."

"I'll try. Come see me next week. I'll try to wear leather," Hidan said.

"'Kay," Naruto said.

Sasuke briefly considered asking Naruto about who the 'ex' was, or who his 'mother' was. He guessed that - like Vodka - it was referring to someone specific, but he had none of the context clues to help figure it out. He decided against it, at least while Itachi was with them.

He wondered if Naruto and Hidan had been lovers. Somehow he didn't think so, despite the banter. And he was annoyed at himself for the fierce wave of possessiveness and relief that flooded through him at that realization. He watched Naruto walk to Itachi’s car and climb into the back. His feelings for this boy were only increasing the more he learned about him, despite his better judgment. But the risks of acting on that attraction also were increasing. Sasuke sat in the front next to Itachi, forcing himself not to look back at Naruto. Itachi shot him a smug look, clearly not fooled by Sasuke's attempts at disinterest.

Naruto spent most of the ride just being grateful that neither Itachi nor Sasuke asked him about the conversation he was sure they had listened in on.

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When they returned to Sasuke's house, Sasuke immediately closed himself in his office, having a pile of press releases and a report for the budget committee due in the morning.

He told Naruto to make himself at home. Sasuke didn't know what Naruto would do… he didn't really seem the type to sit and watch TV, but he assumed the blond would be able to manage himself.

His first call was to Karin to find out how his office had been handling the situation so far. "I've scheduled you for a press conference tomorrow morning. You need to appear in public and address any concerns that this has affected you. One of the core things that voters admired you for in the last election was your perceived strength. We should play that up here. Also, if we can parlay this incident into any of the core elements of your platform, you might be able to get some mileage out of it."

Sasuke thought for a minute, knowing Karin was right. "Let's position this as a statement on needing to get tougher on crime, and also looking out for each other as New Yorkers and building community. Send me some of the questions I am likely to get from the press along with associated talking points this evening. The tone I want to deliver is that of being offended that someone put my fellow New Yorkers at risk by using a bomb rather than having the courage to deal with me directly. As you said, we need to come out strong, not fearful."

Sasuke paused, then pushed on ahead. "On an unrelated note, I also want you to test the waters with the voters on how they'd feel about a New York senator in an openly gay relationship. Also test the idea of a senate candidate who is in a relationship with someone with a criminal record - violent crime, not white collar."

There was dead silence on the other end of the line. Then finally, "Sasuke... is there... something you
"No," Sasuke said, and disconnected the call.

Curious to what his enigmatic houseguest had been up to over the past few hours, Sasuke walked out of his office to find Naruto nowhere in sight. He followed the slight sounds he was hearing to find that Naruto had discovered his sparring room and was working the heavy bag. Sasuke watched him for a minute. Naruto was shirtless, his body sheened with sweat. The lighting in the room played off the sharply defined contours of his chest, arms, and back.

Sasuke allowed his gaze to slide over the man's body, noting the skill and power with which the blond delivered his blows. Each one forceful enough to break bone. It wasn't surprising, but it reminded him that Naruto was far from tame.

Oddly, he found the thought went straight to his dick.

Naruto paused, clearly having sensed his presence, and turned to face him. Sasuke was sure that both the lust in his eyes and the tightness in his trousers were noted by the steady blue gaze. They stood there, eyes locked for a protracted moment. Sasuke was not going to settle for some one-sided blow job or hand job. He felt an almost primal need to test this man's strength, knowing that Naruto would be able to match him, possibly even best him. He would not need to hold back or give quarter. It was a heady thought.

Sasuke jerked as he heard his cell ringing from his office and was snapped back to reality. The rational part of his brain reasserted itself, reminding Sasuke of all the things he had learned about Naruto that raised more questions than they had answered. He had worked too hard in his career to let it take a back seat to whatever this transitory attraction was. He had more control than this. He would wait until he had more information on exactly who and what Naruto was. He turned and walked back to his office, missing the flash of disappointment and confusion in the blue eyes that followed him out of the room.

He called Karin back as they drafted his speech for the press conference tomorrow. Tonight, he needed to focus.

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Sasuke had left for his press conference first thing in the morning. Naruto accompanied him most of the way there, but faded into the crowds before they got too close to the cameras. This level of publicity had never been part of the deal. At first, Naruto was surprised that Sasuke didn't object. But then he remembered the fact that the man was a politician, and if he had aspirations of climbing up the ranks, he needed to avoid being associated with people like Naruto in too many uncontrolled circumstances. Naruto didn't have a good enough poker face to field any unexpected questions that could be thrown his way in a press conference. Evidently, Sasuke had already thought about that.

Naruto knew that Sasuke's career would take precedence over any relationship the man would ever have. You don't achieve what Sasuke had at this early of an age if you are the kind of person who allows distractions to rule you. Naruto might have thought briefly about what a relationship with Sasuke could have been under different circumstances, but if life had taught him nothing else, it was to accept reality as it was and not waste time whining about it. Sasuke might be attracted to him, but it would never go beyond a brief fling. Naruto would have to take it or leave it.

Naruto had found himself forgetting that fact the more he had been interacting with the man, seeing how easily Sasuke accepted elements of Naruto's world without flinching or prying.
But that didn't mean that their worlds could ever coexist.

The press conference was a good reminder for Naruto to keep his head on straight. He and Sasuke were working together for the moment. But the clock was going to run out sooner rather than later on their relationship.

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Naruto pushed open the heavy wooden door of the church. Inside was dim and quiet. His eyes took a moment to adjust from the bright light outside. There was only one person visible in the church, and despite the hood pulled over the figure's head, he recognized the outline and posture of the person immediately.

*Gaara.*

Naruto felt a wave of intense relief wash over him at this solid evidence his friend was ok. He drew a steadying breath and walked to the pew where Gaara was seated, then knelt down beside him, his hands clasped as though in prayer.

Gaara didn't turn to look at him directly. They knew their voices would carry in the hushed room, so Naruto merely breathed out, "Kakashi is coming."

The redhead simply nodded slightly, then stood and walked back further into the church, past the altar, and down a hallway with several small rooms at either side. At the end of the hall was a stairway that went up to the bell tower that was at the top of the church. The door was locked, but Gaara opened it in a matter of seconds. A few minutes later, Naruto followed.

When they reached the top of the bell tower, the two boys simply looked at each other, drinking in the fact that the other was still alive and unharmed.

"Where did you go to recover?" Gaara asked, his voice low and rough.

"Sasuke Uchiha."

Gaara's brows rose in surprise. "Why him? You don't know him. You were barely conscious when you left me."

Naruto heard the underlying worry in Gaara's voice, but it was overridden by the redhead's curiosity. "Yeah. I passed out on his couch."

Green eyes looked at him levelly. "You could have gone into the tunnels and rested until you healed. Why would you take such a risk?"

Naruto shifted uncomfortably at the questioning. "Sasuke's ok. After the incident with the subway, I wasn't sure if the tunnels were safe. The Russians definitely know we use them now. Plus, I wanted to find out if Orochimaru knew about this. I wanted to see if he would be surprised to see me or not. It was also possible that this was done to distract me from Sasuke, so I went to check up on him."

Another figure appeared through the narrow doorway. "We definitely have more questions than answers at this point," Kakashi said, standing next to Naruto, and looking at Gaara. "I'm glad to see you both still walking around."

Gaara looked levelly at Kakashi, "What's wrong?"

"Well, I'm not tracking you down just to exchange thoughts on the latest issue of *Playboy,*"
Kakashi’s eyes twinkled in amusement, but quickly turn serious. "Roshi and Yugito are missing. We haven't found any bodies yet, but it's not like them to just vanish. It throws Yagura's death in a new light. And potentially the attack on you two, unless you have heard differently."

Gaara shrugged. "The Russian syndicate that sent them isn't the one my group is at odds with. They claim it never happened, but of course, being short 8 members is not something they can cover up easily."

"Eight. That's impressive," Kakashi said. "Any speculation as to why they targeted you?"

Gaara shook his head. "But, I did run into someone who will be a problem for me."

Naruto instantly tensed at the tone in Gaara's voice. It took a lot to rattle the man.

"One of my uncles. I don't think he saw me, but there are not many reasons why my father would send his most trusted lieutenant. If he has found out I'm alive, it will make things difficult for me."

Naruto frowned. "We need to get you the hell out of here."

Gaara shook his head. "No. I'm not going to just blindly run away. The next time I run, it will be to go back and take him out." Gaara's voice was cold and emotionless, leaving absolutely no uncertainty that he meant what he said.

Naruto looked at Gaara. He knew exactly what Gaara's father had done to him, the horrible death he had assumed had been carried out at his order. The fact that Gaara had survived being sold into the sex trade at age seven to a ruthless child slave owner was nothing short of a miracle. One that his father would surely correct once it was revealed.

"I'm going with you," Naruto said, his voice like stone. "And so help me god, Gaara, if you try to do this without me, I will hunt you down and kill you myself."

Gaara looked at his friend, seeing the determination and conviction in his gaze. His mouth twitched into a tiny smile. He might have lost his family, but Naruto's fierce loyalty and protectiveness went far beyond even the strongest of blood bonds he had seen. He nodded. "As long as you let me return the favor when the time comes."

Naruto hesitated. But he knew that Gaara was serious. And not naïve about what the risks were. "Ok, fine. Orochimaru has given me access to his network. I know he wants to pull me off working with Sasuke and turn things over to the police since the bomb, so I might have more time depending on what he needs me for. Give me a week to see what I can find out about your father. I know Kakuzo used to have dealings with him. I still know some of his old contacts."

Gaara nodded. He had his own leads to follow up on, though he also needed to remain undetected for as long as possible.

"Give me two weeks," Kakashi said "You know the CIA has been itching for someone to 'accidentally' take out your father for years. He has grabbed too much power and land, and with oil recently being discovered in some of his territory, it has become political. They might be willing to provide an escape route if you take this one with their blessing. They won't assist you, since politically that just isn't possible with the US trying to maintain relationships with the legitimate government, despite its actual lack of authority. But they might be able to get you out of the country once the deed is done."

"I'm going to talk to Jiraya and see if he has any indication that the Jinchurriki project has been compromised. Until then, keep your eyes open."
With that, Kakashi headed back down and out of the church. Naruto and Gaara waited half an hour, spending the time in silence, just enjoying each other's company. Naruto wished that he could convince the man to go into hiding... maybe even to come back with him to Sasuke's. But he knew that his friend would refuse. He also knew that if the Jinchuriki were being hunted, they had better odds hiding separately. But the thought of not being able to contact each other or properly look out for each other clearly weighed heavily on both men. They were used to watching each other's backs. The best they could do was to arrange a time and place to meet in three days, but neither was happy about it.

Gaara reached a finger out and gently touched the place on Naruto's bandana that was above the wound on his head. "Be careful. I don't want to find any more holes in you the next time I see you." Then Gaara left, and Naruto was alone.

Sasuke had told him there would be a black tie event that he needed to attend with him that evening. He hoped the press coverage would be minimal. Given everything that was happening, he really needed to keep a low profile. If Orochimaru offered to redeploy him, it might be for the best if he accepted, all things considered.

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The gala was already a tremendous success. All of the top political figures and social elite were in attendance. Itachi, Sasuke, and Naruto had arrived about half an hour ago, fashionably late. Sasuke was of course immediately swarmed with attention due to the bomb and his very successful and inspiring press conference this morning.

Itachi and Naruto purposely faded to the background, letting Sasuke manage the crowd and field their questions and rabid curiosity with the deftness of the professional that he was.

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Watching from across the room, Orochimaru pulled a young waiter aside, and handed him a crisp one hundred dollar bill. The boy's eyes widened.

Orochimaru smiled. "I want you to pay special attention to a certain guest for me. If you do, you will get another two of these at the end of the night. Do you understand?"

The boy nodded mutely.

"Good. Now do you see that blond man standing next to the man with the long black hair?" Again the boy nodded. "Excellent, I want you to serve him drinks tonight. Whenever he finishes one, replace it. If he seems to not be drinking the champagne, offer him something else. Don't make it too obvious that you are singling him out. You can offer drinks to anyone else who is around him as well. But I want to be sure he isn't lacking in anything tonight. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes sir! He must be a very important person!"

Orochimaru smiled, but it held no warmth and the boy shivered, wondering what he had said wrong. He went off to do the older man's bidding, shaking off his sense of unease.

No. Naruto wasn't an important person. He was at the very bottom of the social ladder. And that was exactly what Orochimaru was going to show tonight. He knew that the Uchihas were fastidious about behavior and image. From what he had heard from the transcripts of Naruto's conversation with Hidan this morning, the boy did in fact drink. And evidently quite a lot. If he could get him drunk at the party tonight, it would show Sasuke that Naruto not only had lied about it, but that he
also had no sense of how to comport himself in the upper echelons of society that the Uchihas and
Orochimaru inhabited.

Combining that with what he had asked Kimimaro to do, it would underscore that Naruto was
nothing more than an attractive male escort. Someone to be used then discarded. It was unfortunate
that Naruto had saved Sasuke from the bomb. Orochimaru was glad, of course, Sasuke had not been
harmed, but he loathed the fact that Sasuke probably now felt some sort of inappropriate gratitude to
Naruto. After all, Naruto was only doing his job. It was only fitting for the peasantry to sacrifice
themselves for the nobility. People liked to dress it up these days and pretend that it wasn't like that
anymore, but Orochimaru felt no need for duplicity on this point. There were the few people that
mattered, and the vast masses that worked to support them.

Orochimaru smiled as he saw the waiter go up and offer Naruto and Itachi a drink. Itachi took one,
and Naruto at first refused. The waiter talked with him for a bit, then came back with an amber liquid
in a tumbler. Orochimaru wasn't sure what it was, but it looked like scotch. Perfect.

He turned his attention back to Kimimaro, giving the man final instructions. It wasn't necessary for
both plans to work. Either one would suffice.

. . . .

Naruto hated black tie events. Wearing a tux was uncomfortable, and the degree to which his
movements were restricted left him feeling vulnerable. He tried very hard to not let his gaze wander
to where Sasuke was standing surrounded by socialites, sycophants, political climbers all seeking his
attention. There should be rules about how good one was allowed to look in formal dress. Sasuke
was in clear violation.

Naruto stayed close enough that he could keep an eye on Sasuke and the people around him, but far
enough away that their association was not overt. A few people had recognized Naruto from the
news and come to speak with him about his role in 'saving Councilman Uchiha's life', but Naruto
simply said that the police were the ones to diffuse the bomb, and they deserved the credit.

He looked up to find Sasuke's eyes on him, and quickly looked away.

"You handled that very well," Itachi said from right beside him. "You are a natural at this."

Naruto was about to ask what this was, when a deep voice called out to Itachi from behind them.
Naruto turned and froze, instantly recognizing the man and realizing he needed to act like they were
meeting for the first time. "Jiraya. It is good to see you. I wasn't aware that the Police Commissioner
would be here this evening," Itachi said, a hint of respect showing in his voice.

"Well, Mayor Tsunade told me to come, and... I find it easier most times to just do what she says,"
Jiraya said good naturedly. His gaze shifted to Naruto, and seemed to freeze for an instant before he
spoke. "And who is your guest this evening, Itachi? I don't remember seeing him at any events in the
past."

Itachi noted the almost indiscernible strain in the Commissioner's eyes, and the slightly frozen look
on Naruto's face. Most would not have noticed either of these, but Itachi was not most men. He
didn't comment on it, but found it interesting. This was clearly not the first time these two men were
meeting, yet neither seemed to want that fact known. Itachi saw no reason to not play along. "This is
Naruto Uzumaki. Sasuke had hired him as personal security when he first received the threatening
photos. Naruto was the one who discovered the bomb that was all over the news yesterday. He
saved my brother's life."
"Um... nice to meet you... Jiraya," Naruto said, sticking out his hand awkwardly. Jiraya smiled, clear amusement showing in his face. To Itachi, it looked almost fatherly, which made no sense. "Yes, well I can see you must be quite the security guard. The City of New York is grateful for your service."

Naruto scowled at the slight mocking tone, but quickly schooled his face. A waiter appeared just then offering champagne, or taking orders for mixed drinks. Itachi accepted a glass, and Jiraya ordered something stronger. Naruto politely refused, but found the waiter oddly insistent. Not wanting to draw attention to himself, Naruto asked for apple juice on ice. The man nodded, looking pleased with himself and rushed off to fill the order.

After about an hour, Sasuke was finally able to extract himself from the throngs of admirers and join them. He had accomplished all the 'critical contacts' that Karin had mandated for him, and wanted nothing more than to wait the obligatory extra hour of face time at the event and then leave.

He had noticed people approaching Naruto, and the admiring glances that were often sent the blond's way. Fortunately, Naruto generally seemed oblivious to the overtures, and usually just spoke briefly with them before turning back to converse with Itachi. Sasuke got the feeling that his older brother was running interference for him on purpose, so that Sasuke wouldn't get distracted by people hitting on the boy. He felt both intensely grateful and extremely annoyed that he was that easy to read.

"Are you enjoying yourself tonight?" Sasuke asked, hiding his smirk when he saw Naruto's eyes slide over his body before coming back to his face. Sasuke was under no illusions about what he looked like in formal dress.

"Um... yeah. These things aren't really my scene, but people have been pretty nice so far. Security is tight, so that makes it easy."

Just then, Orochimaru approached with a man Naruto had never seen before. The man was handsome in an aristocratic way, with hair so blond it appeared white and clear green eyes.

Orochimaru greeted the Uchiha brothers formally, and Naruto less so before introducing the man. "This is Kimimaro Kaguya. He is a very influential business man from Boston." Orochimaru spent a few more minutes, praising the man's family and business acumen. Naruto knew from his work in Nagato's circle that the man was also making a mint off illegal ivory trade, but of course Orochimaru did not mention that fact.

"Naruto, as the situation with Sasuke seems to be requiring more involvement from the police, I think it would be good for you to spend more time with Kimimaro. He will be in New York for the rest of the summer quite frequently on business. His penthouse is just a few blocks from Sasuke-kun's."

Naruto felt Sasuke freeze behind him, and didn't look back to see the man's reaction. Kimimaro smiled slowly, looking Naruto up and down with frank approval.

"Orochimaru has said very positive things about your range of... skills, Naruto. I look forward to growing our acquaintanceship."

Naruto forced a smile, but inside he was seething. Orochimaru didn't even bother with a pretense of this being for security. He was treating Naruto like a straight up whore.

Taking a moment to imagine the 37 different ways he could kill Orochimaru where he stood with very minimal effort on his part, Naruto was able to nod and exchange pleasantries with Kimimaro.

The annoying waiter appeared again, handing Naruto yet another glass of apple juice and taking
Naruto was somewhat surprised that Sasuke ordered a vodka and tonic, but assumed that the man was probably tired of an evening of dealing with sycophants.

Orochimaru waved to someone across the room and left their group, leaving Kimimaro behind to 'get to know' Naruto.

Itachi and Sasuke were drawn into conversation with someone Naruto didn't recognize, and Naruto decided to take the opportunity to let Kimimaro know that things were not going to happen the way Orochimaru had laid out.

"You are a very attractive man," Kimimaro said, as if almost surprised. "You have a strength about you that is a bit unusual for someone in your profession."

Naruto smiled thinly, "Orochimaru may have misled you a bit as to the actual nature of my profession," Naruto leaned in, his hand on Kimimaro's shoulder as though in a friendly gesture. "But then again, he also left out that little bit about the fact that most of your money comes from smuggling Ivory, so I guess that makes us about even."

Kimimaro froze, then looked at Naruto consideringly. "You used to work for Nagato. I thought you looked familiar. What are you doing in this situation?"

Naruto felt some of his anger towards the green-eyed man melt away at the obvious acceptance that Naruto was not in fact going to be his male escort for the summer.

He smiled a little ruefully. "Let's just say I'm temporarily between jobs, but I don't expect to be working for him for much longer."

Kimimaro nodded. "Orochimaru doesn't know about my smuggling activities. I'd prefer to keep it that way."

Naruto shrugged. "Then just tell him what he wants to hear with regards to the two of us, and I'll call it even."

Now it was Kimimaro's turn to smile ruefully. "So I take it I won't be having the pleasure of your company over the summer?"

Unable to help himself, Naruto glanced back over to Sasuke, and was surprised to find angry black eyes locked on his. "Um... no. That's not very likely."

"A pity," was all the older man said.

... ... ...

Another hour passed with various people coming to talk to the Uchiha brothers, some of them also trying to draw Naruto into conversations out of sheer curiosity over who he was. Naruto did his best to be polite but not overly informative, simply saying that he was working for Sasuke at the moment. Itachi had been drawn away by some other members of the district attorney's office to the far side of the room.

A motion to Naruto's right happened to catch his attention, and he turned to see Sasuke stumble, almost spilling his drink. Naruto's eyes widened fractionally. Sasuke was drunk? When did that happen? He remembered Sasuke saying that he rarely ever drank to excess.

Naruto might not have been a politician, but he knew that getting staggering drunk at a black tie function was probably not something that would help Sasuke's career. Did Orochimaru have a waiter...
spike his drink? Did someone else, maybe someone who was going to try to abduct him?

Naruto looked around. No one had seemed to notice the state that Sasuke was in. Yet. Luckily, Sasuke didn't appear to be a loud drunk. He stood there, swaying slightly with his drink in hand, glaring at Kimimaro across the room. So far, the man seemed not to have noticed.

There was a bathroom close by. Naruto decided to take Sasuke there and get him out of sight while he figured out what had happened. Grabbing Sasuke's arm firmly, Naruto led him to the men's room, keeping him from stumbling and drawing attention to the situation. The strong scent of alcohol that wafted from the tuxedo-clad councilman told Naruto that Sasuke most likely wasn't drugged. He was just smashed. *What the hell?*

Luckily the bathroom was empty. Naruto pulled Sasuke into the handicap-accessible stall, which had the most room. If someone walked in, at least they wouldn't see him.

"Sasuke, what the fuck is going on? You're *wasted*. You can't walk around like this!" Naruto didn't know if he were more shocked or exasperated.

Sasuke crashed into Naruto, knocking him back against the wall of the stall. At first Naruto thought Sasuke had simply stumbled again, but when Sasuke's hands grabbed Naruto's wrists and pinned them up on either side of the blond's head, there was no mistaking his intent. The sheer aggression of Sasuke's actions caused Naruto's body temperature to spike. Gone was the controlled, aloof man from last night. And the less civilized side of Naruto responded to it instantly.

Sasuke's black eyes locked onto Naruto's, swirling with anger and lust. "Tell me you don't want this," he said as his eyes slid from Naruto's down to his pink lips. Naruto's lips parted, knowing this was neither the time nor the place for it, but not being able to deny that both those things only turned him on more. Hard lips crashed down on his. Unlike the past attempts, this time Naruto couldn't bring himself to turn away and avoid the kiss. He had wanted it for too long, and knew that time was running out to taste it.

Sasuke groaned when their lips made contact, and he slid his body against Naruto's, allowing the blond to feel his already achingly hard erection.

There was nothing civilized about their first kiss... no 'asking for permission' with gentle probes, no 'getting to know you'. Sasuke thrust his tongue into Naruto's lightly parted mouth without hesitation. Naruto broke free of Sasuke's grasp only to fist his hands into the soft black hair and thrust back with his own tongue. Their teeth clashed and their mouths sucked against each other.

Sasuke's hand slid down Naruto's back to grab his ass forcefully, adding even more friction between their groins.

Sasuke pulled back then leaned down and latched his lips and teeth to the junction of Naruto's neck. Naruto's cock went from half-hard to weeping in one second flat.

"*Fuck.***" Naruto hissed out, fighting to regain his bearings and figure out what the hell Sasuke thought he was doing. He didn't have to have known the man long to know that this was totally out of character.

"*Naruto,*" Sasuke breathed hotly into his ear. "I'm *not* going to let Orochimaru pimp you out to Kimimaro, or anyone else. I don't care what he is holding over you."

Sasuke ground his hips against Naruto, and Naruto could feel Sasuke's throbbing erection press against him. The sound of the bathroom door opening brought Naruto crashing back to reality. They
were *not* going to fuck in the stalls of the men's room at a black tie society event.

Sasuke seemed to have a different idea, though, as his hand slid down the front of Naruto's tuxedo pants, stroking the straining erection contained there. Sasuke let out a low growl of approval at this evidence of Naruto's interest, which Naruto immediately cut off by clamping his hand over Sasuke's mouth before the other occupant in the bathroom heard it and recognized it for what it was. Fortunately, the stalls had walls and a door that went completely down to the floor, so no sign of the fact that there were two men in one stall was visible.

It dawned on Naruto that the reason Sasuke was drunk was apparently because he was jealous of the fact that Orochimaru had offered Naruto out to Kimimaro. In other circumstances, it might have been amusing, but right now Naruto needed to find a way to bring the situation under control, since clearly Sasuke was not going to on his own.

Naruto remembered that there was an emergency exit near the bathrooms. It didn't have a sign saying 'alarm will sound if opened', so he was hoping they could escape without having to go back through the party. Neither was in a state to be seen in public at the moment. Naruto considered unzipping Sasuke's pants and finishing him off before they left to make the man appear more presentable (there was no missing the flagrant hard-on Sasuke was sporting at the moment), but Sasuke was much more vocal in his arousal when he was drunk, and Naruto didn't want to risk discovery. Instead, he simply took off both their jackets. Draping his over his forearm, it concealed the effects of their time alone in the bathroom.

He pushed Sasuke off him again and thrust the jacket into the older man's hands. "We're leaving."

Sasuke pushed back in protest, "Not yet," he growled.

Naruto tried to roll his eyes, but ended up shuddering instead as Sasuke slid his length against Naruto's. Naruto tried again. He didn't want to resort to force, since that would undermine the whole 'let's not get noticed' objective he was going for. "If we leave now, we can continue this in a less public place."

Sasuke considered this compromise acceptable, though his eyes let Naruto know that there would be no getting out of this promise later. Naruto cracked the door to the stall open and check to be sure they were once again alone, then walked with Sasuke out the door and down the short hall to the back stairs.

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to be continued...
Author's note - Yeah, this chapter is mostly lemon. Only thing more to say is that you all probably recognized that these two have a bit of a rough sex kink based on the earlier scenes. That will play out more explicitly here and will continue going forward. If it bugs you, skip the sex scenes. Oh, and the thing about Naruto's age actually has a reason beyond Naruto just liking to yank people's chain (which is also part of it). But I'm not going to explain it in this chapter... you will all find out at the same time Sasuke does. Feel free to speculate (hard core manga fans have probably figured this out already).

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"If we leave now, we can continue this in a less public place."

Sasuke considered this compromise acceptable, though his eyes let Naruto know that there would be no getting out of this promise later. Naruto cracked open the door to the stall and checked to be sure they were once again alone, then walked with Sasuke out the door and down the short hall to the back stairs.

Naruto had tried to catch Itachi's eye as they walked to the exit, but he was still engaged in conversation, his back facing them. Naruto breathed out a sigh of relief when the alarm didn't sound as they opened the door and entered the stairwell unnoticed.

Sasuke stumbled against him, this time on accident. Evidently Naruto's promise of continuing this elsewhere had had its desired effect, and Sasuke was now intent on getting them home as quickly as possible. "This leads to the parking garage," Sasuke said, grabbing Naruto's wrist and starting down the stairs.

Naruto went along, wondering if he'd have to catch the inebriated man at some point. "What were you thinking? How much did you drink?"

Sasuke shrugged. He was a little hazy on that. The waiter just seemed to always be there, replacing everyone's glass. Sasuke had been more focused on watching the interaction between Naruto and Kimimaro, and the way the other man's eyes seemed to follow the blond even after he had walked to another part of the room. He hadn't really paid attention to how much he drank. He vaguely realized this was something he should be concerned about, but right then he had other things on his mind. "Just shut up and keep moving. We're going back to my place. The valet will have Itachi's keys."

"There's no way you can drive in this condition, asshole. You can barely get down the stairs. And we're not stealing Itachi's car and leaving him stranded just because you got drunk off your ass and decided we needed to fuck in the middle of a black tie event. If you're even still going to be conscious by the time we get back to your place, that is."

They had reached a landing in the stairwell, and Sasuke tightened his grip on Naruto's wrist, jerking him against his still obviously aroused body. "I might be too drunk to drive, but I'm not too drunk for sex," Sasuke said. He wondered if the stairwell were private enough. Hazily deciding it seemed fine, he tugged Naruto closer and crushed their lips together, running his tongue across Naruto's lower lip then plunging deep into Naruto's mouth and sliding his tongue along his teeth. He could taste a slight hint of something sweet. Apple juice? his brain provided helpfully. He delved his tongue deeper, swirling it around Naruto's, focused on separating the taste of the man from the taste of his beverage,
memorizing it. Naruto wasn't fully kissing him back, and it was beginning to annoy him. He wanted to elicit the same reaction he had gotten upstairs. He needed to feel that explosive heat again.

Sasuke's fingers reached between them to fumble at the clasp of Naruto's belt. Naruto's hand viced around his wrist stopping him just as a door to the stairwell opened one floor down, and someone entered and began walking up the stairs.

Sasuke cursed succinctly.

"Just keep walking," Naruto said, his voice low as he nodded in greeting to the person who passed them.

They made it without further incident to the parking garage. "You'll have to drive," Sasuke said as they headed toward the valet stand.

"I can't," Naruto said quietly. Sasuke didn't seem to be paying attention and kept walking. With a frustrated sound, Naruto grabbed Sasuke's wrist. "Sasuke, stop. I can't drive Itachi's car."

Sasuke turned and blinked at him. "He won't be mad. Trust me, he'd rather have me out of sight in my current condition, and the fastest way to achieve that is to borrow his car. He can catch a cab or call a car service. It won't be a problem."

"No, I mean I can't drive. I never learned how," Naruto said, shifting his weight slightly in embarrassment. Sasuke looked at him nonplussed.

"How do you not know how to drive? There's no way you're under sixteen."

"Look, I live in New York. It's not like I could afford to keep a car here, and I can take the subway or bus to pretty much anywhere I need to go. There was never really a reason to learn. And it's not like I had a father waiting at home to teach me or something."

Even drunk, Sasuke registered the dark undertones of that last comment. "Ok. Then we'll catch a cab. I just figured, you know, with your life of crime and all you'd know how to drive in case you needed to get away or steal a car or something."

"I was never the getaway driver. And I know how to hotwire a car, just not how to actually drive one."

Sasuke rolled his eyes. "Seems like kind of a waste to know how to hotwire it if you can't go anywhere once you do."

"Fuck you," Naruto sighed. He reached into Sasuke's jacket pocket and pulled out his phone. Sasuke quirked a brow in question. "I'm calling Itachi so he doesn't freak out when he realizes that you're gone."

"I'm perfectly capable of calling my brother myself," Sasuke said, his visible show of dignity marred slightly by his swaying.

"Fine," Naruto said, jamming the phone into Sasuke's hands.

Sasuke dialed. "Itachi. Naruto and I are leaving early. We're in the parking garage, and going to catch a cab home."

"Why? Did something happen? Do you need to take my car?" Itachi's voice immediately showed concern.
"No. I just wanted to leave. We'll catch a cab. You can take your car."

There was a slight pause as Itachi listened carefully to Sasuke's pronunciation. "Otouto, are you... drunk?"

Sasuke sighed. "I'm going home with Naruto. We'll see you tomorrow. Hopefully by then they will have more details on the make-up of the bomb," Sasuke said in an attempt to distract his brother. Though even his muddled brain knew there was basically zero probability of that happening.

"Did anyone notice your condition?"

"We're fine. We left by the back stairs. Stop worrying."

"Just get in a cab and go sleep it off. But tomorrow you and I are going to talk."

Sasuke closed the phone, ending the call. Naruto had managed to flag down a cab, and they climbed in.

The call with his brother and the close call in the stairwell had made Sasuke cautious enough that he managed to keep his hands to himself and his mouth closed during the taxi ride. The last thing he needed was a tabloid getting a call from the taxi driver about a juicy scandal in the making.

But that didn't mean he couldn't look and think about all the things he was finally going to get to do to the boy who had been driving him crazy since the moment he had laid eyes on him. Sasuke leaned back in the cab against the door, making no effort to conceal how his eyes were studying Naruto's well-cut form in his formal attire, running his hot gaze over every feature, every part of the boy's body. The scene from the bathroom stall replayed itself in Sasuke's mind... the taste of Naruto's mouth... the taste of his skin. The feel of Naruto's erection pressed against his, finally responding to his touch.

Sasuke spread his legs slightly wider apart, feeling his groin stirring again. He didn't know why he had waited. It had been clear last night that Naruto was no longer disinterested. He could have spent the night doing much more entertaining things than sleeping. Why had he held back? All his concerns seemed pale and irrelevant at this moment. He was done over-thinking things.

Sasuke's eyes refocused on the blond across the seat from him, his mind playing out exactly what he wanted to do to Naruto to rebuild that flash of heat he had felt in the men's room. Naruto shifted under the weight of his gaze, licking his suddenly dry lips. Sasuke smiled a slow, predatory smile, wishing the cab would hurry up and arrive at his place.

Naruto's knee nudged his, and a tan finger slid up the outside of Sasuke's thigh to his hipbone. Sasuke let out a hiss, and noticed the driver glance in the rear view mirror. Mentally cursing, Sasuke gritted his teeth and closed his eyes, hoping that when he opened them next they would magically be through the traffic and at his building. He ignored the soft, mocking chuckle coming from the man sitting next to him.

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Sasuke had sobered up enough to walk without obvious signs of intoxication by the time they had reached his apartment building, so the two were able to enter without anyone suspecting anything amiss. As soon as the doors closed on Sasuke's private elevator, the councilman decided he had waited long enough.

"You said we'd continue when we were private. Welcome to my **private** elevator," Sasuke said, walking over to Naruto. He braced one hand on the wall beside Naruto's head and slid his other hand...
across the front of the blond’s throat, tracing his thumb down over Naruto’s Adam’s apple to the small hollow in the center of his collar bone at the base.

"What, you want to go for it right here in the elevator in front of the security cameras?" Naruto had meant for it to come out as mocking, but the heat pumping off Sasuke’s body and the intensity of the black eyes boring into his were causing his own body to respond. His voice sounded husky instead. But it didn’t matter. After all, he had decided that it was pointless to continue to deny this attraction anymore. Life was short, particularly for someone like himself. He’d grasp at the tastes of pleasure and companionship that came his way, even though they were fleeting. He wanted Sasuke, and Sasuke wanted him. It didn’t have to be complicated.

Sasuke pressed his thigh between Naruto's legs, sliding his hand back up Naruto’s throat so his thumb lightly pushed up on the blond’s chin, lifting it slightly. "We’ve had three weeks of foreplay. I don’t have much patience left." Sasuke’s fingers curled lightly around the back of Naruto’s neck, but he held off from pulling their mouths together.

"I got you off during those three weeks," Naruto said, fighting the urge to take the half step forward that would allow him to press himself against the growing bulge he saw in the front of Sasuke’s trousers. He made a mental note to make sure the recordings from the elevator security camera this evening ended up somehow deleted. The last thing he needed was to make the news again, and the only thing juicier to the media than graphic death was graphic sex. "It wasn't all just foreplay. I made you cum almost every night."

"Hn," Sasuke said, cupping Naruto’s chin and brushing his thumb across Naruto’s lower lip. "It was your choice to not accept my offers to return the favor," Sasuke looked at him consideringly, his gaze dropping to the front of Naruto’s pants where he was more than pleased to find visible proof of Naruto’s response to him. Heat flared in his bones at the fact that finally he was able to elicit such a reaction from his blond just with a light touch. "Did you go to someone else to help you out with that frustration, Naruto?"

"Would it matter if I did?" Naruto asked, wanting to provoke Sasuke further. There was something about seeing this cultured, poised man lose control. He had seen Sasuke’s control slip before. Tonight he would shatter it completely. He was gratified when he felt the man’s grip tighten around his chin, the implicit threat of violence going straight to Naruto’s cock, bringing it to full hardness.

"Don't play with me," Sasuke said warningly.

"I'm not playing yet," Naruto said, keeping his voice cool. "But don't think that just because we have sex that you own me... I'm not going to be some rich guy's pet. We both want this, but there are no strings. At the end, whatever it is, we both walk away."

Sasuke frowned. Of course, that was what he wanted. He was having Karin look into the possibility of the affair being discovered to assess how cautious he would have to be. But it could never be anything more than a brief, passing affair. Their worlds were just too different. So why did Naruto’s words send spikes of anger through him? Sasuke chalked it up to the alcohol. "Fine," he bit out. "But you're not walking away to go to Kimimaro, or any other person Orochimaru sets you up with."

Naruto smirked. "Why? Isn't that a bit hypocritical of you? I mean, how much difference is there really between you and Kimimaro? Orochimaru offered me to you, and you accepted. So would Kimimaro. This is only sex, Sasuke. Don't confuse it with dating. You and I both know that that would never be possible, even if we had the time to actually get to know each other."

Sasuke's temper snapped, and the alcohol he had downed earlier that evening prevented him from bothering to keep it in check. He dropped the jacket he was still carrying and, tightening his grip on
Naruto's chin, slammed him roughly against the wall of the elevator, his body following immediately to press fully against Naruto. "Enough talking," Sasuke said, bruising their lips with the force of the kiss that he drove against Naruto's mouth, pressing the pink lips open and thrusting his tongue in.

Naruto's cock fully agreed with Sasuke's statement judging by the way it jumped at the naked aggression Sasuke was displaying. This time, Sasuke felt Naruto's mouth immediately respond, attacking his own. Naruto's jacket joined Sasuke's on the floor as both Naruto's hands fisted in the black locks.

"You like to play rough. Good. So do I," Naruto's voice was already rough with arousal. He grabbed Sasuke's wrist and twisted the pale hand away from his throat, his grip tight enough to bruise Sasuke's wrist.

Naruto spun Sasuke around and shoved him face first against the wall of the elevator, pressing his body flush against Sasuke's and licking harshly just behind the pale shell of his ear. The hot, wet contact made Sasuke shiver in anticipation.

"Just tell me," Sasuke said, trying to corral some rational though as his breath created a foggy patch on the mirrored walls of the elevator. "Tell me you're really over 18," Sasuke gritted out.

Naruto kicked Sasuke's feet slightly apart, then slid one of his hands between the older man's legs from behind and cupped the rock hard erection he found there. Instinctively, Sasuke shifted his body forward, so the pressure against his groin increased. Naruto's hand happily complied with the silent demand for more friction, gripping him firmly through the fine wool and pumping steadily.

"Would you stop if I wasn't?" Naruto asked, not slowing the motion of his hand.

Sasuke didn't really have to think about it. "No," he said, flexing his hips further forward into Naruto's skilled hand. "No, I wouldn't stop."

"Fuck," Naruto shuddered at both the unguarded admission and the feel of Sasuke's aroused body. "Then it doesn't really matter then, does it?"

Sasuke turned to face the blond, leaning back against the wall as he grabbed Naruto's ass, pulling him close and sliding him up along the front of his body. "Just tell me."

Naruto ground his hips roughly into Sasuke's clothed erection, eliciting a soft grunt from the older man. "Fine. Yes, I'm pretty sure I'm over 18. So relax, councilman. This is consensual. Any other legal fine points you want to chat about this evening, or are we going to do more than talk tonight?"

In answer, Sasuke grabbed Naruto by the hips and rocked their groins together roughly. "We've had three weeks of foreplay. I'm done waiting," Sasuke repeated.

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Just then, the elevator chimed signaling that they had reached their destination. The doors slid open.

"Then let's go," Naruto said, reaching down and grabbing their jackets from the floor. He walked in to Sasuke's penthouse, tossing their tuxedo jackets over the back of a teak arm chair near the shoe rack. They had to pause to untie their formal dress shoes.

Sasuke's fingers fumbled with the laces, still uncoordinated from drink. Naruto finished first, setting his shoes aside.

"Tch," Naruto muttered, seeing Sasuke only finished with his first shoe, Naruto impatiently batted
the pale man's hands away, shoving him roughly into the wooden chair and kneeling between his feet.

Sasuke let out a grunt as he fell into the chair, but he simply watched as Naruto made short work of the laces and set the shoe aside. The annoying footwear removed, Naruto placed his hands on Sasuke's knees and pushed them apart, slowly sliding his hands up the inside of Sasuke's thighs. Sasuke let his head fall back as Naruto began palming his erection through his pants.

"Nngggg," Sasuke closed his eyes briefly and let the sensation flood over him. The heat was coiling between his thighs and the room spinning slightly, making him grip the armrests of the chair tightly. He felt Naruto's deft fingers slipping the button free of his pants, and before he could process it his pants were open and his erection pulled free. He breathed out at the relief of having the constriction removed. He felt a familiar wet heat swirl around his head, and he arched up into it, forgetting for the moment that he wanted much more than this tonight.

"Ahn, Naruto," Sasuke said.

Naruto hummed and swallowed, and Sasuke had to clench his own hand around his cock to keep from cumming right there. He pressed his bare foot against Naruto's chest and shoved, sending the boy backward. Naruto landed on his ass with a sexy laugh. "You're too easy, Sasuke. I know all your buttons by now."

Sasuke stood surprisingly fluidly, letting his trousers and boxers drop, kicking them aside. The look of sheer lust on Naruto's face as the blond ran his eyes over Sasuke's exposed form was more than gratifying. Sasuke stood looking down at the blond still sitting by his feet on the floor, and slowly untied his bowtie. He pulled the piece of black silk free and tossed it directly in Naruto's face. "Then why don't you come here and let me find yours."

No longer laughing, Naruto caught the tie, tossed it aside, and rolled to his feet. Sasuke's hand reached over and he began to undo Naruto's bow tie. But instead of pulling it free of the collar, Sasuke jerked hard on both ends, pulling Naruto forcefully to him as though on a leash, fusing their mouths together in a harsh kiss. Naruto slid his palms roughly over Sasuke's bare ass, feeling the hard, taut muscles there. Craving harder contact, Naruto quickly undid his belt and the fly of his pants, pulling his erection free and pressing it against Sasuke's, running his hand up and down their combined lengths.

They both groaned at the sensation.

Unable to wait any more, Sasuke kept one hand gripped on the ends of Naruto's tie, and fisted his other hand into Naruto's shirt dragging the boy towards his bedroom. He wanted Naruto laid out beneath him in his giant bed, twisting in his silk sheets. The mental image alone had his cock dripping. The problem was getting from the entryway to the bedroom, which suddenly seemed insurmountably far away.

"God, you have no idea how much I want to fuck you right now," Sasuke said with a particularly harsh tug on the blond's shirt that almost sent them both tumbling to the floor. They had only made it as far as the living room, and Naruto showed no inclination to wait any longer. Wanting more, and not particularly caring whether or not Sasuke had a specific destination in mind, Naruto pulled Sasuke to him roughly, delving into an even deeper kiss.

Naruto thought of all the times the cold, intellectual man before him had been debating some esoteric point of politics. To hear words like that come out of his mouth made Naruto unbelievably turned on. He knew that this was a side of Sasuke that he kept hidden from most people, and Naruto reveled in it. He remembered Kakashi telling him that most people thought Sasuke was asexual, and Naruto
laughed darkly. *If they only knew.*

"Ah, *shit*, Sasuke. You sound so fucking hot when you talk like that."

Naruto bit Sasuke's lower lip hard enough to draw blood, then licked the wound clean and sucked on it. Shocked that it was even possible, the action made Sasuke even harder. He felt Naruto's fingers close around his cock and gasped at the sensation, stumbling as his brain temporarily forgot how to keep him upright.

"Oh, god, *yes. Fuck*, Naruto," Sasuke said, almost incoherent with the need to bury himself into Naruto, to drive into him and break him apart. Their mouths sucked and bit, their hands gripped each other with bruising force, bodies pressed together aching for more friction.

Keeping one hand still wrapped around Sasuke's erection, he grabbed a fistful of Sasuke's hair and jerked his head back sharply to the side. Exposing the pale column of Sasuke's throat, Naruto latched his lips and teeth on it and suckled his way down to the well-defined collar bone. Frustrated by the fabric that still concealed it, Naruto grabbed both sides of Sasuke's fine cotton Armani dress shirt and shredded it in half, the fabric making a low, almost erotic sound as it tore, a few buttons clattering as they spun wildly on the nearby coffee table.

Naruto ran his gaze over Sasuke's naked form, his breath coming in shallow gasps. It was as though his metabolism had gone into overdrive, his body temperature spiking and sweat forming between his shoulder blades. Despite all their evening activities, this was the first time he was seeing Sasuke completely devoid of all clothing. Naruto felt his breath catch at the raw beauty of the sight. The alcohol had leached some of the coldness from Sasuke's expression, leaving his emotions closer to the surface and more easily read. Sasuke had always tried to hold himself aloof when they were together, the façade only cracking a bit at the moment of release.

But now, the depth of Sasuke's desire was laid bare, and the strength of it amplified Naruto's own response. Naruto released his grip on Sasuke's hair and dragged his blunted nails down Sasuke's back, marring the perfect flesh there. He slid his calloused palms up over Sasuke's bare chest, running his fingers over the hard ridges and contours of the muscles. Sasuke closed his eyes and swayed as the sensations rocked him. The calluses on Naruto's finger pads roughened his touch, sharpening the intensity of the contact with their slight abrasion.

Seeing Sasuke's reaction, Naruto directed his fingers to slide first lightly then harshly over Sasuke's nipples. He allowed his tongue to follow the path of his fingers, using his teeth to scrape and oversensitize the skin. Sasuke shuddered gripped Naruto's still clothed hips, pulling their bodies tightly flush with each other to provide more friction as he thrust against him.

Becoming frustrated that Naruto was still almost fully clothed, Sasuke tugged Naruto's hands away and jerked his shirt out from his pants.

"Off," he ordered sharply while his hands dropped to Naruto's waistband to tug the already loosened pants the rest of the way down over Naruto's hips and shuck them to the floor. Sasuke breathed out a short laugh as he saw that - once again - Naruto was wearing nothing beneath them.

Naruto's breathing had become harsher, and he simply nodded as his hands slid the buttons of his shirt free, his mouth refastening on one of Sasuke's nipples as he did. Impatient with the slow progress Naruto was making, Sasuke grabbed the shirt from the hem and pulled the rest of the buttons open by force, not caring that another shirt was destroyed in the process. Naruto didn't seem to mind either, judging by his growl of approval.

When the last article of clothing between them hit the floor, Sasuke placed both hands on Naruto's
chest and shoved him hard in the direction of his bedroom. Naruto took a few stumbling steps back before catching himself. "What the fuck, Sasuke?"

Sasuke didn't answer, he just let his eyes devour the sight of Naruto's body, finally bared completely to his view. He felt a heady rush of lustful pride at the sight. Naruto was lean and hard all over, his significant erection an angry red from arousal. Sasuke fought down the urge to simply shove the boy down on the floor of his living room and fuck him into it. He wanted Naruto in his bed, and it would be worth the minor wait to get him there. The contrast of the roughness of the boy himself and the delicateness of the silk of his sheets was something Sasuke craved, and he saw no reason to deny himself that pleasure.

Naruto simply stood there, allowing the perusal of his form, his chest heaving slightly. "You just gonna look or what?" he said, tauntingly.

"Oh, I plan on doing more than looking," Sasuke said, talking a purposeful stride towards Naruto. He slid his hands around Naruto's waist, feeling the heat of the tan skin against his fingers. His thumbs drew small circles on either side of Naruto's navel then slid into the indentations by Naruto's hip bones.

He closed his fingers around Naruto's rampant erection, physical proof that Naruto was not immune to him, wasn't disinterested as he had been in the past. Sasuke wasn't one for being insecure, but his first experience of unrequited attraction had been frustrating on many levels. There was definitely relief swirled in with the heady lust that was coursing through him at the sight of Naruto's naked and aroused body.

Naruto immediately reciprocated the intimate grasp, wrapping one hand around Sasuke's cock and the other around the back of Sasuke's neck, drawing his face down into a devouring, open-mouthed kiss.

"Bed. Now." Sasuke ground out, shoving Naruto roughly in the general direction.

"Floor's fine," Naruto said panting before closing the distance between them again, grabbing Sasuke's hair roughly and driving his tongue back into his mouth, pressing their naked bodies flush with each. Naruto grabbed Sasuke's wrists and pinned Sasuke's hands behind his back, shoving him up against the living room wall and grinding their erections together. The friction was sharp and exquisite.

"No," Sasuke said, his words almost incomprehensible through his groan. "Want you... ngh... in my bed."

It was so much harder for Sasuke to maintain a coherent thought when Naruto was actively participating. Sasuke realized that - by comparison - Naruto had just been going through the motion all those other times. The scalding ferocity of Naruto's touches and kisses had Sasuke's mind reeling. They blew away anything he thought he knew about foreplay from before.

Naruto tightened his grip, pushing Sasuke harder against the wall, scraping his back with the force of it, crushing his hands painfully behind him. Sasuke decided not to worry about the fact that the bit of pain made his cock jump. He could feel the aggression pumping off Naruto, and an answering rush of his own unlike anything he had ever experienced before. Sasuke twisted his wrists sharply breaking free of Naruto's grasp and pulling his hands from behind his back to grip Naruto's forearm.

He tugged roughly, pulling Naruto into his bedroom and shoving the boy down on his bed. He stood there for a minute, looking at the sight of all that tan skin laid out on his red silk sheets. Naruto's eyes danced with both amusement and arousal at Sasuke's apparent insistence that their first time be in his
bed. He sat up halfway, resting on his elbows.

"Nice bed," Naruto said. "You gonna join me in it, or do you just want to watch?" With those words, Naruto closed his fist over his own erection and began to slowly pump himself, keeping his eyes locked on Sasuke.

Shaking with desire now, Sasuke crawled onto the bed, grabbing Naruto's ankles and jerking them roughly apart. Naruto raised an eyebrow, but didn't resist nor stop the motion of his hand. He had assumed that Sasuke would insist on topping at least for the first few rounds. He hadn't had many male lovers, but Naruto was a pretty good judge in most cases and he knew that Sasuke had never bottomed. The man was way too much of a control freak. Naruto was up for either, though he only bottomed if the guy he was with was worth it and knew what he was doing. Running his gaze over the sheer physical perfection of Sasuke's body and the almost animalistic gaze the man was giving him, Naruto was more than sure Sasuke would make it worth his while.

Given time, Naruto was sure he could loosen Sasuke up enough for them to switch. But time wasn't something they were likely to have much of.

Naruto brushed off the unpleasant thought, and brought his attention back to Sasuke's hands, which were now sliding slowly up from his ankles along the inside of his legs. When they reached Naruto's groin, Sasuke grabbed Naruto's wrists and pinned them to either side of his body. He stared down at Naruto's body, taking in the straining muscles, smooth skin and tattoo. Bending his arms like he was doing a push-up, Sasuke slowly lowered his face to Naruto's stomach, licking along the pattern of the tattoo.

"Mmmmm," Sasuke could taste the salt and the subtle flavor of Naruto, and he closed his eyes to savor it. He continued to lave the skin with his tongue, adding pressure as he made his way slowly down Naruto's torso, following the thin trial of fine blond hair.

"Holy shit," was all Naruto could say as Sasuke's lips finally closed around his dick and he arched up, throwing his head back. Naruto's arms strained against Sasuke's grip in a sudden need to grab Sasuke's face and fuck his perfect mouth.

"Not yet," Sasuke breathed, his hot breath drifting around Naruto's cock before his lips and tongue went back to work.

"Sasuke, you teasing bitch. Didn't we both agree we'd had enough foreplay?" Naruto was beyond ready and wanted to skip to the main event as soon as humanly possible.

But Sasuke didn't let up. He simply sucked harder, using his teeth as Naruto had done so many times before to bring the blond to the edge and cast him over it.

"Fuck!" Naruto came hard down Sasuke's throat. He was fleetingly surprised that Sasuke had swallowed, but he had long since been proven wrong about Sasuke's likely performance in bed.

Sasuke smirked as though reading his thoughts and reached over to the nightstand and pulled out a bottle of lube and a condom. Not trusting himself to remember to use it once things got any further, Sasuke opened the condom and rolled it on to his erection before opening the lube and squirting a decent amount in his hand.

"I don't need a lot of prepping," Naruto said, feeling relaxed but far from satisfied by his recent orgasm.

Not bothering to hide his relief at that statement, Sasuke slid his middle finger, slick with lube, into
Naruto. He frowned at the tightness he found there, expecting Naruto would be somewhat looser. His eyes met Naruto's, questioning.

"Don't worry, Sasuke... I don't mind a little pain. You won't break me," Naruto smiled wolfishly. "Though I wouldn't mind if you tried to."

The words triggered a visual in Sasuke's head that had his muscles clenching and cock twitching. "God, Naruto, I just want to..." Sasuke thrust two more fingers into Naruto's tight entrance, working the ring of muscle to loosen it at least a little before he completely lost control and slammed himself inside the boy.

Naruto drew a leg up and pushed Sasuke's hand away with his foot. "Enough. Fuck me already."

Sasuke didn't need any further prompting. He grabbed Naruto's legs and hooked them over his shoulders, positioning his cock at Naruto's entrance then slamming himself all the way in with one hard thrust. They both gasped at the tightness and intense pressure. Sasuke's eyes rolled back into his head and he swallowed convulsively around a groan. Finally, finally, finally!

"Ngh, Naruto," Sasuke managed. "God, I..."

Naruto took a steadying breath, having forgotten the sheer size of Sasuke and how his own relatively little experience of bottoming was going to play out. But Sasuke had used sufficient lube, and was already slowly thrusting in and out, his large phallus stroking against Naruto's prostate with every motion. Slowly, the pressure eased as Naruto's body adjusted.

"That's it, Sasuke," Naruto said arching his hips up allowing Sasuke to penetrate him even deeper.

"Oh, fuck," Sasuke said, feeling Naruto's heat squeezing him from tip to base. The pleasure was almost unbearable.

Sasuke pulled all the way out and slammed back in, feeling the last shreds of his control disintegrating, his thoughts crumbling.

Naruto reached his arms over his head and braced them against the headboard, giving him better leverage to flex his hips up and meet Sasuke's thrusts. The increase in force had them both shuddering.

Sasuke looked down at Naruto's body sheened with sweat beneath him. The stretched position of Naruto's torso drew attention to every contour and ridge of the muscles in his arms, chest and abs as they flexed and contracted. He saw a bead of sweat trickle down the side of Naruto's neck, and lapped it up with his tongue.

"Stop holding back, Sasuke. I want you to try and break me," Naruto said, wrapping his legs tightly around the older man, briefly immobilizing him balls deep inside, then clenching his interior muscles around him. "If you can last that long."

With that last taunt, Sasuke completely let go. He reared up, grasping Naruto's legs and forcing them apart, allowing himself full range of motion again. He began thrusting again, putting his back into it, slamming their bodies together over and over in a crescendo of noise as his hips slapped against Naruto's ass and the back of his thighs.

Their bodies strained against each other, muscles flexing and sweat coming from every pore, slickening their skin. Sasuke's muscles began to burn with sheer physical exertion. He felt his body slide into the "runner's high" as endorphins pumped through him, combining with the alcohol and the harsh stimulation of his cock to make him disoriented in a haze of lust and hedonistic pleasure.
Sasuke lifted Naruto's hips up completely off the bed and thrust in fully, hard enough for his hip bones to leave bruises on the back of Naruto's upper thighs and ass.

"Fuck, yes!" Naruto said, his arms straining and shaking against the headboard as he fought to steady himself.

Sasuke pounded into him, pumping Naruto's erection ruthlessly. "Oh, god, Sasuke," Naruto came hard, arching up off the bed, his hands slipping off the headboard to fist into the silk sheets, twisting the fabric so hard that it tore.

He caught his breath and looked up to see Sasuke's face contorted in pleasure as he continued to thrust into him, clearly close to the edge himself. Running his hands down Sasuke's torso, dripping with sweat, Naruto slid one hand beneath their hips and between Sasuke's thighs.

Reaching further back, he pressed his thumb firmly over the skin of Sasuke's perineum, while he inserted his sweat-slicked middle finger into Sasuke's entrance. With practiced expertise, he massaged Sasuke's prostate both internally and externally.

Sasuke's eyes widened in shock at the intensity of the completely unfamiliar sensation, his body arching and breaking his rhythm. Naruto continued to stroke in time with Sasuke's increasingly erratic thrusts into him. In mere seconds, Sasuke completely broke apart, his entire body clenching in a seizure of agonizing pleasure. He threw his head back in a silent scream as his hips snapped forward one last time, burying himself into Naruto as his climax crashed over him in wave after wave. All Sasuke could do was ride it out, his body paralyzed from the sensory overload.

He collapsed on the bed next to Naruto, his mind completely wiped clean. He slowly became aware of Naruto stroking his chest. He lay there, dazed. Sex had never, ever been like this. The level of ferocity and satiation had completely blown him away. For the first time, he understood what the word ecstasy actually felt like. His blood was still hot and thick, and he could almost feel it flowing to every cell in his body, drugging him with the endorphins from this pleasure high in a way that was almost frightening. Vaguely in the back of his mind, he registered that his initial thinking that fucking Naruto would get the blond out of his system had backfired wildly. But he wasn't prepared to deal with that thought, so he let his brain shut back down again.

He felt rather than saw Naruto's steady gaze fastened on his face.

"God, you're fucking perfect, you know that?" Naruto said softly, his voice low and hoarse from overuse. Sasuke felt the pads of the tan fingers as they roamed over the contours of his stomach and chest, then teasingly circle one of his still pebbled nipples. "I've always loved watching you cum, but tonight you were just unbelievable. I'm definitely going to take that image to my grave."

Sasuke's brows pulled together slightly. He didn't want to hear any talk of Naruto dying tonight. Feeling some control of his body return, he turned his head to look at his lover. "That was... really intense." The phrase 'fucking someone's brains out' had taken on a new and very real meaning as Sasuke tried to come up with something more intelligent to say. He hoped the brain damage wasn't permanent, but if it was, it was a reasonable price for such extreme pleasure.

Naruto gave him a sloe-eyed look, and Sasuke felt his blood pick up pace in his veins again. "You know, when I first met you, I thought you'd be totally useless in bed."

Naruto chuckled at the offended frown that appeared on Sasuke's brow. "I mean, I figured that you'd be one of those typical 'beautiful people' who feel like all they need to bring to the table are their looks, and let the other person do all the work."
Naruto rolled onto his stomach, his side pressed up against Sasuke's as he propped his chin up on his hands, resting on his elbows. "Gotta say I was pretty wrong about that."

"Hn, I should hope so," Sasuke said, allowing his smirk to reappear.

Naruto just looked at him for a minute, enjoying laying naked in Sasuke's bed and the look of utter repletion on the man's face.

"You up for a shower yet?"

Sasuke thought about it, taking stock of his exhausted body. "I'm not quite sure I can move yet. Let's just lay here a minute."

"Mmmm," Naruto agreed, laying back down and letting his hands play along Sasuke's hip.

"Well... if I didn't break you, old man, I'd be more than up for another round after the shower," Naruto said, letting his index finger slide from Sasuke's hip bone into the shallow valley just on the side of his groin. "When you're up to it."

Sasuke narrowed his eyes at the 'old man' comment, but his groin stirred slightly at Naruto's words.

"I see at least one part of you is game for that," Naruto smirked.

"Hn," Sasuke said, feeling his body slowly heating back up despite its complete exhaustion mere seconds before. "I could probably be convinced."

Naruto lay next to Sasuke, feeling an uncharacteristic sense of melancholy flit through him. It was moments like these that he wished fervently that his life could have been different. He would never be able to have a relationship with Sasuke, or anyone else, given his past and his plans for his future. There was no changing what was, and no avoiding the path he knew he had to take. But right then, he wished that this could lead somewhere. He sighed, rolling onto his back and ignoring the questioning gaze from Sasuke when the raven noticed his change in mood.

Naruto shook it off. They had the rest of the night to enjoy. Reality could come with the dawn.

-xXx-

to be continued...

So I think this was the first lemon I have written for Naruto and Sasuke where they are not in love yet. Which is why it reads as much more physical I guess. *shrugs*

But that's just where they are right now. Deep in lust, with the seeds of friendship starting. And why do my first lemons always take an entire chapter?! I promise plot in the next one, but there will also be sex. And Deidara! (but not sex with Deidara...) Shisui may also make an appearance... depending on which flight he caught. :-)

Naruto woke, his entire body aching, but in a satisfied way. He stretched gingerly and his arm brushed against the warm, solid body still sleeping beside him. He rolled slightly to his side to get a better view. Given that Sasuke had told him that he rarely drank, Naruto assumed the man would sleep late this morning. After all, they had been up until almost dawn together. The stiffness in Naruto's body attested to the vigorousness of their activities. He yawned, scrubbing his hands over his face and into his hair.

He took the time to study the sleeping face of the man he had taken last night as a lover, not really sure how he felt anymore. Naruto generally had a good read on people he met... it was a survival skill he had honed early. But he could freely admit, at least to himself, that he had misread Sasuke at their first meeting. Yes, the man was arrogant and hard. But he wasn't shallow or naïve... not the typical pampered rich. Naruto sensed that the coldness of the man stemmed more from some sort of wound in his past rather than arrogance about his current station. There was a darkness in him that Naruto was drawn to and intrigued by, far beyond the pull of Sasuke's physical beauty. Last night had only drawn that into sharper definition.

Given time, Naruto would have liked to explore that side of Sasuke, find out the secrets of his past. Discover what it was about this man that attracted him, that resonated with him.

Naruto sighed, closing his eyes at his own foolish thoughts. There was no possibility of that. Even if Naruto weren't leaving in less than two weeks with Gaara, Sasuke was not someone he could involve himself with.

Sasuke was one of those few people in this world whose life will matter. Naruto had recognized that fairly quickly. Not for all the bloodline and money reasons that Orochimaru espoused, though. Sasuke was much more than that. He was fiercely intelligent, frighteningly charismatic, and had his own moral code. He wasn't afraid to cross swords with powerful people if they got in his way. He had his own purpose, and the drive and abilities to achieve it. Sure, he was only a City councilman now, but already his political party had earmarked him as a rising star and Naruto would not be surprised at all to find Sasuke rapidly rising through the political ranks over the coming years.

He didn't know if Sasuke had a particular goal that he wanted to achieve other than general power and success, but he suspected there were some.

If Naruto were in Sasuke's life at all, even as a friend, he would only be in the way of all that. There was no whitewashing Naruto's past occupations and associations. It would kill Sasuke's career dead in the water to maintain any sort of ties outside of the current narrow confine of 'security employee' with someone like Naruto.

And as much as Naruto might wish that things were different, the fact was that they weren't.

Naruto had one goal in his life. He was going to kill the two people who had killed his parents and destroyed his life. With Zetsu's death, his job was already half done. He'd finish the other half, and it didn't really matter to him if he didn't live beyond that accomplishment. His goal was small and narrow in the grand scheme of things, but it was his.
However, he wouldn't let his narrow existence interfere with something larger. He would seize this limited window of contact with an amazing man. Then release it, and walk away.

Naruto sat up and disentangled himself from the ruined sheets. He needed a shower. He'd wash away the evidence of the night before, and hopefully with it the strange wistfulness that had settled over him in its wake. He'd enjoy the next few days together with Sasuke. But when he left with Gaara, he would let it go.

Like smoke through his fingers.

. . . .

Naruto stood in Sasuke's enormous shower, steam billowing around him, making him feel almost claustrophobic from lack of oxygen. But the soothing effect it had on his sore body was worth the discomfort.

There was no sound, only a faint draft of cool air against his ankles that warned him he was no longer alone in the shower before he felt a presence behind him.

"Mind if I join you?" Sasuke's smooth voice came just inches behind his ear. None of the anxiety that Sasuke had felt upon waking to an empty bed showed in his voice or expression.

Naruto turned, not sure what to expect in terms of 'morning after' conversations from this man. They hadn't spoken of feelings last night, and he didn't expect to this morning.

"How's your head? I thought you'd sleep in today," Naruto said, keeping his voice low to not further aggravate what he was sure must be a massive hangover. He'd never had one himself, but he'd seen enough from Nagato's crew. Naruto grabbed the bar of soap from the granite shelf and slowly working it between his hands, giving them something to do by building up a lather. Sasuke had chosen to join him in the shower, but he hadn't touched him yet. Given that Sasuke had not been in full command of his faculties last night, Naruto wasn't sure if he'd have regrets now. So Naruto decided he'd let the older man dictate the way it would play out this morning, though he took the fact that Sasuke had joined him in the shower as a good sign.

Sasuke closed his eyes and sighed in relief as the stream of hot water pulsed into his neck and shoulders. "I've felt better, but a slip of judgment last night doesn't release me from having to meet my obligations this morning."

Sasuke closed his eyes and sighed in relief as the stream of hot water pulsed into his neck and shoulders. "I've felt better, but a slip of judgment last night doesn't release me from having to meet my obligations this morning."

Naruto wasn't sure what to say, whether Sasuke's reference to his lapse of judgment was narrowly defined to drinking, or if it included his activities with Naruto as well.

Seeming to realize that his words could be taken multiple ways, Sasuke clarified. "Though I can't say I'm not glad at the outcome," he said opening his eyes and looking directly into Naruto's blue gaze, making sure there was no mistake in his meaning.

Naruto gave him a crooked smile. "It was one for the record books, that's for sure."

Sasuke's lips twitched in response, then he closed his eyes again to focus on the soothing feel of the water.

"Turn," Naruto instructed, adding action to his words by grabbing Sasuke's shoulders and gently turning him so he was facing away from him. With his lathered hands, Naruto began slowly massaging Sasuke's shoulders and neck with deep, smooth circles of his thumbs. Sasuke groaned in appreciation. Naruto worked his hands over Sasuke's flesh until the soap had rinsed away.
He grabbed some of Sasuke's shampoo, and - lathering his hands again - worked his way up Sasuke's neck into his hair, massaging his scalp.

"God, you are amazing at this," Sasuke breathed, feeling the pounding of his head lessen with every slow, firm press of Naruto's fingers. As the pressure in his head decreased, Sasuke noticed a pressure building much further south.

Sasuke turned to face Naruto, the spray of the hot water sluicing down over them. He wrapped his hands in Naruto's hair and drew him into a slow, deep kiss. Sasuke felt the now familiar taste and texture of Naruto's mouth, already falling into the addictive nature of both. The keen edge of violence from the night before was gone, but the depth and heat that surged instantly between them had not lessened. If anything, it seemed only to have grown with familiarity. They both felt a sense of relief that neither was denying nor hiding from what had happened between them. There would be no false promises of forever or declarations of undying love, but the attraction, at least, was deep and acknowledged. Neither was willing to go back to the way they had been before.

Sasuke forcefully deepened the kiss, feeling Naruto's immediate response to meet him.

"You ok for this?" Sasuke asked, his hand sliding over Naruto's taut backside, knowing he had been far from gentle not too many hours ago.

"I'm not made of glass, Sasuke," Naruto said, sliding his hands down from Sasuke's hair to grip his pale hips. "You don't ever need to hold back with me."

The sensations no longer blurred by alcohol, Sasuke felt Naruto's words somehow pierce his gut, sending a shivering heat rippling out from that epicenter. Not able to put into words how he felt, he simply complied, losing himself fully in the fierce contact escalating between them. With the one man that was able to meet him, and match him.

. . . .

Later, they lay on Sasuke's bed, the ruined sheets from the night before pushed off to one side to make space for their clean bodies. They were both still naked and damp from the shower. Sasuke's hand was splayed across Naruto's stomach, lightly tracing the pattern of the tattoo found there. The motion of Sasuke's fingers shifted, and - rather than following the swirl of the tattoo - his fingers were now sliding along each of the thin scars hidden beneath it.

Sasuke didn't voice his question, but let it show in his eyes.

Naruto shrugged, but didn't shirk away from the questioning gaze. "It was a long time ago."

The silence stretched. Naruto thought about whether to say more or not, and somehow decided he wanted to. After all, they had let many barriers drop last night. But he didn't want to discuss it with Sasuke touching him. He pulled the pale hand off his stomach and sat up, shifting back to lean against the headboard.

"When I was younger, my parents were killed. I was injured as well," Naruto's hand ghosted over the scars as he briefly allowed the memory to surface, before shoving it back down again. "It was a long time ago," he repeated, his voice rougher.

"How old were you?" Sasuke asked.

"Eight," Naruto said tonelessly.

"Car accident?" Sasuke asked conversationally, though he was fairly sure he already knew the
answer.

"No."

When Naruto didn't say anything more, Sasuke didn't push. Sasuke wasn't ready to share that aspect of his own past, so he wouldn't force Naruto to discuss his either.

Almost in apology for not continuing, Naruto began gently massaging Sasuke's scalp with his right hand as they lay on the bed in companionable silence. Pieces of conversation from last night flitted through Sasuke's head as he lay there, enjoying the feel of Naruto's talented fingers easing away the remains of his headache.

A question surfaced that Sasuke had wanted to ask for some time, and he decided he wasn't going to push it off any longer.

"What does Orochimaru have over you?"

Naruto raised an eyebrow. "Why do you think he'd need to have something? I worked for Nagato, who - according to the police, anyway - was a much scarier guy, involved in worse things than Orochimaru."

Sasuke looked at him astutely. "At first I thought it was just another job, where you worked and got paid but it was your own choice. But it's not like that, is it? You respected Nagato. You don't respect Orochimaru, or trust him. Orochimaru is having you doing work you don't like. Work that you feel is beneath you. I can see the resentment and anger you have for him whenever his name is mentioned."

Naruto shrugged. He supposed it wasn't surprising that Sasuke had noticed this. "At first it was just money. While I was in the hospital after getting shot, he paid my bail, and medical and legal fees. Then he informed me of those facts and demanded I repay him by working for him."

"That was when you first came to deliver his proposal," Sasuke said.

"Yep," Naruto agreed, sounding slightly amused. "Man, I was so fucking pissed at him. I don't mean to brag, but I had a pretty decent reputation in Nagato's organization. To have him play me as messenger boy or sex toy was just... ugh."

Sasuke smirked. He could understand Naruto's reaction. He understood pride. "But you kept doing it. Seems like, with the case against you pretty weak and your bail refunded, you didn't need to keep working for him."

Naruto's face closed up. "He found new leverage. It isn't about money anymore."

Sasuke got the signal that Naruto wanted this conversation over, but he wasn't going to back down. He wasn't going to let Naruto be forced into virtual prostitution by the man, but he couldn't prevent it if he didn't know what was binding Naruto to Orochimaru.

"Did he threaten you? You seem pretty capable of defending yourself. Orochimaru doesn't have hit men in his employ."

Naruto looked directly at Sasuke, wondering if Sasuke knew that for a fact or was just assuming. "I'm not afraid of Orochimaru. I could kill him or anyone he sends against me without even having to try very hard. He's not a player in the world I live in."

Sasuke frowned. "Then?"
Naruto cocked his head to one side, clearly debating whether to tell Sasuke or not. In the end, he decided it was better to simply tell him rather than have Sasuke try to dig the information up himself, potentially stirring up trouble in the process. He had gotten to know the councilman well enough over the past weeks to know he wouldn't just let something like this drop, and he had the resources to pressure Anko or other of Orochimaru's associates to find out if Naruto didn't tell him. This was simpler.

"I'm not afraid of Orochimaru. But he found out who I am afraid of. And he made it clear that he'd... put us in touch if I didn't do what he wanted."

Sasuke connected the dots pretty easily. "This is the 'ex' that Hidan was talking about."

Naruto's eyes narrowed. "Careful, councilman. Don't try swimming too deep in unfamiliar waters."

Sasuke took the warning for what it was, but he wasn't going to back down. There were many reasons he wanted to sever the ties between Naruto and Orochimaru, but he picked the one that was easiest for him to explain. "I owe you. You noticed the bomb, and I wouldn't have seen it until it was too late. I don't like debts. If there is a way I can help you with this 'ex' of yours so that Orochimaru can't use it against you, I will."

Naruto laughed, his emotional defenses automatically going into place. "What, you're going to fight him for me? Be my hero? Fuck you, princess. You have no idea just how dark the underbelly of society can get."

Sasuke's eyes hardened. "Don't presume things about me, Naruto. You don't really know me at all. But no, I wasn't thinking about fighting him. I have enough money that I could buy off just about anyone."

Naruto let his eyes drop, in acknowledgement that at least part of what Sasuke said was true. He really didn't know the older man at all. At least... he didn't know the details of his life. But he knew the core of who Sasuke was, despite what the man might say. "This guy... can't be bought. He's not after anything except the pleasure of simply killing. He's not sane. He's not like Nagato or even Orochimaru, who do things for money or power." Unconsciously, Naruto's hand ghosted over the scars on his stomach.

Sasuke digested that. If the guy couldn't be bought or reasoned with... that was more of a challenge. He didn't delude himself that he could physically protect Naruto if the person was dangerous enough that both Naruto and Hidan were afraid of him.

Naruto continued, as though somehow finding relief in actually telling this to someone. "Even Nagato didn't want him, despite the fact that the guy is a killing machine and would basically do a job for free for the sheer pleasure of the kill. He wasn't controllable. He was even worse than his partner."

"Zetsu?"

Naruto's lips thinned. There was a prolonged silence.

"I need to stop underestimating you, I suppose, eh Sasuke? Itachi unsealed the records and told you." Naruto's voice sounded brittle, clearly uncomfortable with the amount that Sasuke already knew about him, or was able to piece together.

"No. I didn't ask Itachi. I have no idea if he knows or not. I have... my own sources."

Naruto considered this. "So you did a background check on me. You're looking into my past."
Sasuke didn't bother denying it. "Didn't you expect me to?"

"Was this before or after you decided to have sex with me?" Sasuke heard the slight edge in Naruto's voice.

"I wanted to have sex with you from the first time I saw you, in case you hadn't already figured that out. The only reason it took this long was that I wanted you to want it as well," Sasuke paused, wanting Naruto to acknowledge that fact. Naruto did so by kicking him lightly in the hip. Sasuke smirked, then continued, "But I started looking into you and everyone else more thoroughly after the bomb. I am going to find out what is going on. But I'm not looking for a way to blackmail you into anything, Naruto. I'm not like Orochimaru. Or Kimimaro. I wouldn't force you into it."

Naruto shifted. It made sense for Sasuke to look into Naruto's history. He would do the same in Sasuke's position. After all, Sasuke had the most to lose both from a reputational perspective and from a safety perspective. He was likely the target of that bomb, not Naruto.

"I guess," Naruto allowed, knowing that Sasuke wanted some sort of acknowledgement that he was different from the others.

Sasuke frowned. "Naruto. I'm not trying to force myself into your life or control you. But things got more serious, and I'm not going to keep walking around blindfolded."

Naruto shrugged, but wouldn't meet his eyes. It annoyed Sasuke that Naruto didn't fully trust him, even though he knew that the blond really had no reason to do so. And a lifetime of experience teaching him not to.

"What's his name, this partner of Zetsu?"

Naruto just looked at him for a minute. Then finally answered.

"He wouldn't use a bomb. He always kills by knife. He likes it up close and personal. He likes to feel the spray. See his victim's fear as they die. I don't know his real name. He had several aliases that he went by, and they vary by country. He likes to take the names of local monsters and legends to instill fear. But it doesn't matter. He's not your bomber. I would stake my life on that."

Sasuke knew that Naruto was trying to tell him that this guy was none of his business, but Sasuke didn't accept that.

"What are the names you know, then?"

"Does it matter? If you search for him, all it will do is draw his attention to you. It isn't the kind of attention you want. The guy has killed literally hundreds of people. Interpol has been hunting him for more than a decade."

"Why is he fixated on you, then?"

"He's..." Naruto took a breath, then blew it out. Given what Sasuke had already uncovered, it was only a matter of time before he pieced together the rest. "...he's the serial killer who killed my parents. He just wants to finish the job on me that he started more than a decade ago. I am the only one who ever survived. I am also the only one who knows his real face. He always wears a mask when he kills. But that night... my father got it off him before he died. I know what he looks like."

"Tell me his name, Naruto."

"To satisfy your morbid curiosity? No. Like I said, it doesn't matter. You can't buy him with your
money, and he doesn't want anything that your influence can procure. Any interference on your part will only serve to make him take an interest in you... and you don't want that." _And I couldn't live with that_, he added silently.

Sasuke frowned at Naruto, but he could sense that the blond had dug his heels in and wouldn't be budged on this point. It didn't escape Sasuke that Naruto was trying to protect him. He was both pleased and annoyed by it. Sasuke sighed, then tried another path.

"And so what is Orochimaru's threat on this? This guy doesn't sound like someone Orochimaru would have any connection with, if even Nagato wouldn't touch him."

"No. Orochimaru doesn't have contact with him. He just said he would make sure that my face is plastered all over the news, and that all of my friends and associates are made known as well, putting us in this guy's cross-hairs. Even though I'm older now, he'd recognize my face. I look a lot like my father."

"And this guy remembers the faces of everyone he kills?" Sasuke asked, sensing there was something more here.

Naruto paused again. Just when Sasuke thought he wouldn't answer, Naruto did. "I don't know. But my father's death caused problems for him. My father was... well-known. Before then, he had only killed people who wouldn't be missed I think. With my father's death, there was an all out manhunt, and he had to leave the country. It was the only reason he wasn't able to circle back the next day and finish me off when I was still injured and weak."

"In the hospital," Sasuke said quietly, suddenly realizing the magnitude of trust that Naruto had shown in him by coming to him that day when he was injured. Their gazes locked for a second, then Naruto dropped his back down to the bed.

"Yeah," he said quietly.

Sasuke thought for a bit, taking in what Naruto had told him about his "ex", and the nature of the threat that Orochimaru held over Naruto. "Call his bluff," Sasuke said, finally.

"What?"

"Orochimaru. Call his bluff. Given what I know of the guy, he is all about control and contingency plans. If this psycho is like you say, then he can't be bribed or controlled. Which means Orochimaru will not have a failsafe way to cover his ass and stay off this guy's hit list. He would never take that chance by revealing your location publicly, when it is also public information that you have been working for him. He'd be just as dead as your friends, and he must know that. He's bluffing. He's a coward when it comes to physical violence. He'd never take on a person like you're describing."

Naruto had suspected as much, but hadn't been willing to bet his friends' lives on it. But Sasuke knew Orochimaru much better than he did. His opinion carried more weight.

"If he pushes me, then I will. For now, I can manage him without direct confrontation. I settled things with Kimimaro. He agreed to tell Orochimaru that he is satisfied with our arrangement."

Sasuke's eyes sharpened at Naruto's words. "What did you promise him?"

Naruto sensed the underlying jealousy in Sasuke's question, and was as baffled by it now as he was by that emotion last night. The idea of someone like Sasuke caring enough to be jealous over him was almost inconceivable, unless it is just stemmed from general possessiveness. "I promised to keep his secret of where he makes his money from."
Sasuke raised a brow in silent question. Naruto smirked as he answered the unasked question. "Let's just say he's an old business associate of Nagato's."

"Hn," Sasuke said, feeling inexplicably relieved about the nature of the promise given.

Naruto leaned over and brushed a kiss across Sasuke's lips on impulse. Somehow the gentle nature of the kiss felt even more intimate than their earlier, more heated touches. Naruto pulled back, feeling emotionally off-balance. Covering his awkwardness, he got up. "I'm going to go get something to eat. Are you up for food yet?"

His back was to Sasuke, so he didn't see the small smile that appeared on the older man's lips. "I'll get dressed and join you in the kitchen in a few minutes," Sasuke said, his voice as expressionless as ever.

Naruto walked out, heading to the guest room where his own clothing was. He was surprised to hear the elevator chime, and looked up to see Itachi walk in.

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Naruto froze, knowing there was nothing he could do to disguise the fact that he was walking out of Sasuke's bedroom, naked. Naruto blushed from head to toe, but simply gave a small wave and continued walking briskly to the guest room where his clothes were.

"Sasuke's just getting dressed," Naruto called over his shoulder, pretending he didn't notice Itachi's smirk and raised brow.

Itachi followed the trail of abandoned formal wear that Naruto and Sasuke had left the night before. He walked into his brother's bedroom to find Sasuke pulling on a pair of jeans, still shirtless and hair damp from the shower. Itachi noticed the torn, ruined sheets in a pile on the side of the bed.

"So you had a good evening, then, little brother?"

Sasuke sighed. It was a testament to the amount he had drunk last night that he had forgotten his brother was going to come to see him this morning.

"I'm twenty-five years old, Itachi. You didn't really think I was still a virgin, did you?"

Itachi's smirk had morphed almost into a grin. "I've known you weren't a virgin since you got yourself a rather well-built blond bodyguard."

Truthfully, Itachi had been aware of Sasuke's other liaisons, brief though they were. If for no other reason than several of them had resulted in stalker situations that had required police intervention.

"So... where are things between you two?" Itachi asked.

Sasuke shot a glance at the obviously well-used bed. "I think it's pretty clear, don't you?"

"Well, of course I wasn't exactly surprised to see Naruto walking naked out of your bedroom when I arrived this morning. Though I must say I was quite impressed."

Sasuke's eyes narrowed dangerously, and Itachi chuckled. "Relax, Otouto. I am not going to try to seduce your blond away from you."

Sasuke frowned, annoyed that Itachi was reading him so well.
"But Naruto is not like your past trysts. I am wondering if you have thought through what kind of relationship you want with him, and what the consequences of it will be."

Sasuke turned back to his closet and walked in to find a shirt to wear, ignoring his brother's question. He wasn't prepared to have this conversation with himself, let alone his brother.

Itachi simply sat in one of the large, leather chairs in the room, waiting for his brother to come out. It wasn't often he was able to torture his little brother when his mental faculties were not at their fullest, and he intended to enjoy it immensely.

...  

Naruto finished dressing, but didn't want to interfere with whatever conversation Sasuke was having with Itachi in his bedroom. He was already feeling awkward enough. Naruto went to the kitchen and poured himself a bowl of cereal. He always woke up starving in the morning, and due to his... activities... with Sasuke in the shower this morning, he was eating much later than usual. He finished quickly, and loaded his bowl and spoon in the dishwasher.

Itachi and Sasuke had still not emerged from the bedroom, so Naruto wandered into Sasuke's office to see if the police had faxed over any of the information about the bomb that they had promised. He was hoping they would let him bring it to Dei for his opinion. No one knew bombs like Deidara.

There was a fax in the machine, and Naruto pulled it out and flipped through it quickly, then more slowly. It wasn't from the police department. It was evidently from someone in Sasuke's office. Apparently the result of some sort of survey, polling likely voters on their opinions of Senate candidates in certain types of relationships. Evidently there was little concern if the candidate was in a heterosexual or homosexual relationship, as long as it was stable and committed, ideally married. Single candidates were looked on much less favorably. But what made Naruto pause was the extensive list of other survey questions. Evidently, voters very much disliked the idea of a potential senate candidate involved in any kind of relationship with a criminal. Interestingly, white collar criminals were viewed even less favorably than violent criminals, but both scenarios looked bad.

The summary of the report was that - if Sasuke wanted to become a senator eventually - he needed to get married to either a man or woman with a good reputation.

Naruto placed the pages carefully back into the fax.

The results weren't a surprise, as much as Naruto felt a small pang at seeing it in such black and white terms. The real surprise was that Sasuke had evidently even been considering it. Considering an actual relationship with him.

And somehow, it made it even worse, knowing that Sasuke had thought about it, too.

Because it didn't matter what either of them wanted. It could never happen.

....

When Sasuke and Itachi emerged from the bedroom, Naruto was sitting on the couch reading the newspaper.

"I got the preliminary report on the device the bomb squad removed from Sasuke's car," Itachi said, holding up the folder that Naruto had failed to notice the man carrying with him earlier.

"Can you get us permission to see Dei and get his opinion on this?" Naruto asked hopefully.
Itachi smirked. "Already done. The department said they don't need his input, but everyone agreed he knows more than anyone else about bombers and the little signatures they use in building their devices. Maybe he can catch something that our experts missed."

Naruto breathed a sigh of relief. Finally. It had been way too long since he'd seen his friend. He hoped Deidara was holding up with the rough treatment he had been receiving in prison.

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Across town, Orochimaru was seriously annoyed. Sasuke and Naruto had disappeared in the middle of the party, before he had had a chance to see if either of his plans had born fruit. He had been hopeful when Kimimaro had said that Naruto had agreed to spend time with him over the summer. He had expected Sasuke to be disgusted by the fact that Naruto was basically just a paid whore.

But judging by the security tapes he had procured of the rear stairwell at the black tie benefit last the night before, Sasuke had been far from disgusted. It had almost appeared that the Uchiha had been drunk, but Orochimaru knew that was impossible.

Things had clearly not worked out as Orochimaru had planned. And to top it all off, he had heard from his source in Sasuke's office that the man had been floating the concept of whether being in a gay relationship or involved with someone with a criminal record would damage his chances for running for senate in a few years.

This was unacceptable.

Orochimaru went to his safe, and opened the package that his source at the police department had left him.

Weapons are often seized in the process of drug busts. They are all tested by ballistics and cataloged, then stored in the evidence lockers. But it is not unheard of for officers to pocket a gun or two on such a raid before they are processed, just in case they are needed as 'drop pieces' or for other activities. They are unmarked, and untraceable.

Orochimaru had only had to resort to using one twice. Murder was not something he could delegate, since it left him open to blackmail no matter how tight his hold was on the other party. He needed his position in society to remain unscathed. It was what all his efforts were for.

He had put too much effort into cultivating the Uchihas and all their wealth and position to have his chances destroyed by some worthless underling of Nagato's.

He looked at the medical reports that Anko had procured for him. It appeared that Naruto had some sort of allergy to many pain medications where normal doses made his system shut down into an almost coma-like state. If his arresting officer, Hatake, hadn't warned the hospital ahead of time, he probably would have died on the operating table when they went to take out the bullet.

That was perfect. Every warrior had an Achilles heel, after all.

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Naruto grinned as soon as they walked into the interview room at Sing Sing correctional facility. They had his friend shackled - arms and legs - to a metal chair and flanked by two beefy-looking guards. Despite the charges against Hidan being much more extensive (mainly due to more substantial evidence available), they had clearly deemed Deidara more dangerous. And the way the older blond arrogantly sprawled in his metal chair showed that he was clearly aware of his elevated status as 'most dangerous', and not in the least remorseful about his actions.
Deidara met Naruto's eyes and smirked, but turned his attention back to the two brothers who had followed Naruto into the room.

"Well... a counselor and a councilman. I should feel _so_ honored, yeah?" Deidara drawled, lounging in the surely uncomfortable metal chair. If he were standing, he would have been slightly taller than Naruto, but his frame was leaner. His orange prison jumper was rolled up to show lithely corded muscles of his forearms. His long, blond hair in its usual style covering one eye, but otherwise pulled back into a ponytail. If you didn't bother to look at his face, you could definitely mistake the man for being feminine. But one look in the cold, dead eyes removed any notion of sweetness. This man was a killer. Arrogant and clever. And completely unafraid.

Mentally, Sasuke agreed with Naruto's assessment that any guy dumb enough to try to jump this particular man in the showers pretty much got what he deserved.

"Deidara," Itachi greeted in return. "Thank you for agreeing to see us."

Deidara's attorney sat off to one side, silent, and clearly deathly afraid of his own client.

"Well, anything for Naru," Deidara said, giving Naruto a wink. "So... you making out ok, yeah? Hidan said you'd made some new friends."

Naruto knew that Deidara was obliquely letting him know that Hidan had gotten him up to speed on everything. Deidara had never used the code... but he didn't really need to. Everyone knew when Deidara did a job. The issue was always proving it.

"Yeah. It's been fun. Not as much fun as it sounds like you've been having," Naruto snickered, and the two guards frowned.

"What can I say. I've got a fucking guardian angle somewhere that's overenthusiastic about protecting my chastity, yeah?" Deidara said clearly enjoying Naruto's amusement and the guard's discomfiture. "Of course, I have _no idea_ how it happened," he said, his voice slightly falsetto with feigned ignorance.

Naruto was still snickering, but decided to change the subject before they got their permission to talk with him revoked. "Anyway, someone tried to blow up Sasuke the other day. We were hoping you might give your opinion on the device," Naruto said, knowing he wasn't going to get a chance to talk privately with Deidara in this visit.

Deidara's attorney shifted, finally daring to insert himself into the conversation. "Any information that my client might be able to provide should count towards some consideration in his sentence, or the charges against him."

Deidara ignored his attorney, and instead looked at Itachi. He leaned forward as far as his shackles would allow, and smirked. "So counselor... what would you give me to help protect your baby brother, _hn_?"

Itachi looked at the man impassively. "That would depend on whether you actually had anything useful to say, now wouldn't it?"

Deidara's eyes danced as he looked at Naruto. "God, he's fucking hot, _eh_, Naru? Just look at all that influence and raw intellect... in such a controlled, fucking perfect package. I bet half the guys this guy puts away in here wake up hot and sweaty just dreaming about him."

"Dei, cut it out," Naruto said, looking at Itachi but finding the man's face unfazed. If anything, Itachi looked amused.
"Don't be greedy, Naru. I know you're already knocking boots with the little Uchiha. Don't tell me you have dibs on both of them, yeah? Though that could be pretty damn hot, too, hn."

Naruto rolled his eyes, and pulled the folder out of Itachi's hands that had the details of the device that the police had removed from Sasuke's car. He thrust the folder into Deidara's shackled hands. "Just stop being a dick and look at this, will you?"

"Tch. Spoil sport. I've been locked in solitary for weeks. Let me have some fun, yeah?" But he took the folder and opened it, flicking through the photos and technical notes. When he got to the one of the car, he snorted in disgust. "Amateur," he sneered.

Sasuke glanced at Naruto, who gave him an "I told you so" look.

"Well?" Itachi said when Deidara had finished looking through everything.

"Like I said, Counselor. What's it worth to you?" Deidara leaned back in his seat, opening his legs slightly wider, though the motion was restricted by the shackles on his ankles. "Would you wrap your pretty lips around my dick if I could tell you who designed this bomb, hn?"

Itachi walked forward until he was standing just across the small table from Deidara. He leaned down, hands braced on either side of the folder Deidara had finished reading, his face inches from the felon's. "If you can tell me who designed it, and who built it, and who planted it... I can take twenty years off your sentence."

Given that the current deal for Deidara was sixty years to avoid a trial that could end in life without possibility of parole, it was a significant offer. Though forty years would still have the man coming out when he was seventy.

Deidara smirked. "I'm good, but not psychic, Counselor. I'll tell you who designed the bomb, and leave it to you to determine what sort of... good will... my cooperation would entitle me to."

Deidara's attorney shifted as though to object, but Deidara silenced the man with a wave of his hand.

"The man who designed this bomb is currently residing in Cell Block C, right here in Sing Sing. And has been for the past 7 years. His name is Hanzo Sanshouo. It's an early design of his, before he started adding in the poison gas that he is famous for. Probably why the dumbfuck cops missed it... they only look for the obvious. But it's definitely his work. You can tell by the way the C4 is set."

Silence greeted this statement.

"Are... are you sure?" Naruto asked.

Deidara snorted. "Fuck, Naruto. Who do you think I am, yeah? Of course I'm sure. But I'm also sure that he isn't the one who built it or set it. This was done by a lame-ass copycat, yeah."

Itachi narrowed his eyes. "How can you tell?"

"The twist on the wires. This bomb was made by someone who is right-handed. But the Hanzo is left-handed. Also, looking at the way in which the bomb was placed," Deidara sneered as he flicked the photo of the car with the obvious smudges. "It was done by someone with no experience. Like a child still learning to count who copies some fancy calculus formula he saw somewhere pretending he knows math."

Naruto thought about it. "So anyone who read about this guy's work in the past would be able to make this bomb?"
Deidara raised his eyebrows. "No. The technical details of the work, and the 'signature' elements are never released to the public. You'd actually need to get your hands on one of his old devices to be able to copy it in this kind of detail."

"But you know the details," Sasuke pointed out.

Deidara smiled condescendingly. "People like to brag about their work in here, yeah? I know all the details of most people's work. And I'd also know if Hanzo were involved in this. He'd be bragging for sure, since he's no longer top dog here. You've got yourself a copycat who has access to police reports and probably the evidence lockers."

"What about a prior accomplice?" Itachi suggested.

Deidara snorted. "No one would work with someone this sloppy, especially not someone with Hanzo's reputation," Deidara said, flicking the car photo contemptuously. "This is definitely a first-timer. Didn't even completely get to pop his cherry, since the shitty placement was such a dead giveaway it didn't even blow, yeah."

They thanked Deidara, and Itachi said he'd see what he could do in terms of cutting a deal with Deidara on his sentence, depending on how this played out.

Deidara just smirked, clearly not worried about the outcome. After all, there was no way in hell anyone was going to mess with the blond after what he had done to the first guy who tried it.

Which, Itachi supposed, had been the whole point.

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Naruto didn't comment when they returned to Sasuke's apartment to find that his housekeeper had cleaned the apartment and moved Naruto's belongings into Sasuke's bedroom.

Sasuke had finished his work in his office while Naruto had watched the news, then worked out. He wasn't surprised when Sasuke joined him in the shower for the second time that day. They ended up skipping dinner and going directly to bed. Neither of them minded.

Naruto waited until he was sure Sasuke was asleep. He ignored the twinge of guilt he felt as he carefully got out of bed and dressed silently. He'd only be gone for a few minutes, but there were some things he didn't want Sasuke involved with.

He walked four blocks down and pulled out a small handkerchief that he used to hold the phone and dial, more out of habit than out of any real concern that someone would be checking for his fingerprints.

"Hey, Sakura," Naruto said, knowing that tonight was one of the nights that she worked late, so he wouldn't be waking her up. He wasn't sure how many more chances he'd get to slip out and call her privately, and he wanted to let her know that he and Gaara would be leaving town for a while so she didn't get worried and start hunting through the morgues for their bodies.

"Naruto! I saw on the news about the bomb. Are you ok? What is going on?"

"We're fine... the police are all over it."
"Yeah, protecting the Uchihas. But you have to watch your own back. Naruto... there is something I need to show you. In person. It involves you and Gaara."

"What? Why?" Naruto asked, looking quickly over his shoulder to be sure there was no one listening.

"I don't want to discuss it on the phone. But I've seen two bodies in the morgue with tattoos like the one on your stomach. And their files are being doctored."

Naruto breathed out. *Fuck*. He did not want Sakura getting sucked into this.

"Meet me tomorrow at noon at the church on Park Ave by the Waldorf."

He'd have to find a way to ditch Sasuke and contact Kakashi before then.

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to be continued...

Next chapter might involve a sparring sex scene, which - if it happens - will probably be posted on an alternate site. But I will let you know. But there will be Shisui, Gaara, Kakashi and Sakura. Possibly Orochimaru, assuming I don't run out of space.
Countdown

Chapter by KizuKatana

Warning: Hard Yaoi (Boy x Boy) Lemon, angry rough sex, light asphyxiation, language, etc. Not appropriate for young readers. 18+

Author's note - FINALLY - another chapter. Sorry for the long wait. Thanks to all of the encouragement I have received from you all, I am done sulking finally.

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Naruto dialed Kakashi's work cell from the pay phone, and left a short coded message. "Emergency contact location eight at noon tomorrow," he whispered, careful to not engage his vocal cords enough for voice recognition software to identify him if the phone was monitored. It was only the second time he had ever had to use the system, and he knew Kakashi would take it seriously.

Having accomplished all he could that evening, Naruto returned to Sasuke's apartment. He silently shed his clothes and slipped back into bed, relieved to find Sasuke still seemingly asleep. Sasuke had rolled to his side, facing away from him. Naruto slid his body against him, allowing himself the luxury of wrapping his arms around his sleeping lover. He wouldn't have many nights like this, and he would indulge himself while he could.

Naruto let his eyes drift closed, forcing his mind to turn off and not speculate on what tomorrow would bring. Whatever was going to happen, Naruto knew from experience that he would be better prepared if he slept.

He didn't see the onyx eyes open, or the frown mar the smooth, pale brow as Naruto quickly fell into practiced sleep.

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Naruto woke the following morning, his legs tangled in his lover's. He opened his eyes to be met with a dark, intense stare. Unable to read the expression in Sasuke's gaze, Naruto ran his hand up over the pale hipbone, letting his fingers linger over the smooth flesh and hard body.

"Morning," Naruto said, smiling slightly, wondering how long Sasuke had been awake and looking at him. He was a very light sleeper, so he knew it couldn't have been long.

Sasuke allowed the touch, but didn't respond. Naruto saw a flash of lust in the dark eyes, but it was quickly shuttered.

Naruto quirked a brow, not sure how to read the situation. "Not in the mood?"

Sasuke looked at him flatly for a moment. "Where did you go?"

Naruto's hand froze. He had been so sure the other man had been asleep. He hadn't really done anything wrong, even though he had known it would annoy Sasuke. "I had to make a call."

"You could have used my phone," Sasuke said. He paused, waiting to see if Naruto would volunteer more information. Naruto didn't. "Who did you call?"

Naruto removed his hand from Sasuke's hip and rolled onto his back, looking up at the ceiling.
"I called Sakura. She had told me to call her to give her an update on my condition." Both those statements were technically true.

"And you couldn't have made that call from my phone?"

Naruto paused, trying to choose his words carefully. He didn't want to lie to Sasuke. But he also wasn't going to let the man take control of his life. There was only downside on that path, for both of them.

"I am not used to using traceable lines to make calls. There is shit in my life that doesn't involve you, and I'm not going to drag you into it."

Naruto didn't need to look at Sasuke to sense the anger flowing off him. "But you'd talk to Sakura about it. Didn't you say she wasn't a player in your world either?"

Naruto let out a growl in frustration.

So much for morning sex. It looked like Sasuke had selected the 'morning interrogation' option instead.

"I don't talk to Sakura about what is going on with you. And I don't talk to you about things that involve her," Naruto turned his head to finally look at Sasuke, his eyes immediately captured by the dark, possessive gaze that was fixated on him. Sasuke didn't like the implication that he was on equal footing with Sakura in Naruto's life. "You and I are having sex, Sasuke. We're not married. I don't owe you an accounting of my activities. If that's a problem for you, then I can start sleeping somewhere else."

Feeling pissed off, Naruto threw off the sheet and made to get out of bed. He was surprised when a pale hand viced around his wrist, and jerked him back to the bed.

"Don't leave my bed unless I tell you to," Sasuke said, his voice hard. He didn't even fully know why he was so angry. Naruto could have gone out and had sex with a prostitute, and Sasuke really wouldn't have had the right to complain. He knew this, logically, but he couldn't help the surge of anger that he felt. He wasn't really even angry at Naruto. But he was furious about Naruto's life. And the fact that the blond was pushing him out and holding things back. He had the sense that something was happening, that Naruto was involved with something else that Sasuke knew nothing about. Beyond Orochimaru, or even Naruto's parents' killer.

And it scared him. Sasuke was a man who liked to be in control. He needed to know all the information of what was going on so he could strategize his next move and ensure things came out in his favor. But Naruto wasn't telling him what was going on, making that basically impossible.

He had thought he would be able to let the blond go after a few nights together. But it was becoming harder and harder for Sasuke to imagine being with anyone else after Naruto. He knew he would have to let go eventually... he had seen the report that Karin had faxed over. He wasn't going to give up his life's ambition for amazing sex and interesting companionship. But he needed more time. Naruto hadn't actually been convicted of anything yet, though just his past associations would be damning enough. It might be possible to figure something out, if Sasuke could just have time and complete information. But he had a feeling that Naruto already was involved in something that was pulling him away more quickly.

He couldn't allow that. He wasn't ready.
"The fuck, Sasuke?" Naruto turned, looking down at the fingers wrapped around his wrist, feeling his own anger spike. The sheet had been fallen past Sasuke's hips when the man had lunged for Naruto, revealing Sasuke's surprisingly hard erection, pulsing and angry red. Naruto felt his temper mixing with a rush of lust in a volatile combination.

"Fuck you, Sasuke. I told you I wasn't going to be your plaything," his eyes still fastened below Sasuke's waist.

Naruto jerked his arm to break loose, inadvertently pulling Sasuke towards him as the man refused to relinquish his surprisingly strong grip.

"Who says I'm playing?" Sasuke said, anger clear in his eyes, lust clear in his body. He readjusted his grip on Naruto's wrist, grabbing the other one and twisting it painfully behind the blond.

The action made Naruto's hips flex, the feel of the silk sheet almost agonizing in how little friction it provided against his suddenly aching cock. Naruto opened himself to the rush of anger and lust, knowing that he could... that Sasuke could handle it. He strained his neck up to slam his lips harshly against Sasuke's, sucking the chiseled lips he clashed with into his mouth and biting them.

"Just because we're fucking doesn't give you permission to control my business," Naruto panted, reveling in the surge of anger that shone from Sasuke's eyes at his words. So far, Naruto had refrained from fighting back, toying a bit with the councilman to see how far he would push things... wondering if he could incite the older man fully over the edge into violence.

"You don't get to decide what I get involved with or not," Sasuke bit out, tightening his grip on Naruto's wrist, each finger marking a bruise as he drove Naruto's arms up behind him further, threatening to almost dislocate the shoulder.

Naruto hissed at the pain, but Sasuke didn't miss the way the younger man's cock had begun to drip. He didn't really know what to make of the fact that the rapidly escalating fight was turning them both on to such a painful extent.

Naruto's wrists twisted sharply, breaking Sasuke's grip and he abruptly he flipped their positions, Naruto's forearm now pressed against Sasuke's throat, his naked body flush against his lover's.

"Sasuke..." Naruto said, his voice low, almost caressing. He increasing the pressure on Sasuke's trachea, restricting Sasuke's breathing. Naruto smirked as he saw the pale face awash with lust, feeling Sasuke's hips thrusting against his. He leaned down so his lips brushed the ebony locks. "... don't forget what I am, Sasuke. Does it turn you on? Knowing what I've done... what I'm capable of doing?," Naruto spoke slowly, drawing out each word as he felt the effect that the reduced oxygen and edge of violence was doing to his lover. He could feel precum spurt from Sasuke's shaft, slickening the skin between them.

Sasuke arched his head back, lack of oxygen making black speckles appear in his vision. The sensitivity of his body seemed to have jumped exponentially. When Naruto released his forearm from Sasuke's throat, Sasuke didn't hesitate before roughly rolling them over, with Naruto now beneath him. He ignored his own dizziness, not bothering with prep, Sasuke hitched up Naruto's legs and drove into him, almost frenzied with his need to posses his lover. Desperate to control him in some way.

Naruto arched up, nearly climaxing at the initial thrust as Sasuke's cock drove against his prostate. He didn't understand his need to provoke this man, nor the endless flood of lust that overcame him when he succeeded. Naruto had never done drugs, but the descriptions he had heard of heroine seemed to capture what he felt when he was in bed with Sasuke. A pleasure so overwhelming that
you would sacrifice everything else in your life for just one more hit, regardless of the consequences.

The friction was intense without lube or prep, even given that Naruto was still stretched with some of the residual lube inside from last night's activities. Naruto closed his eyes, the sensation so acute that his breath came in short gasps and grunts as his lover pounded into him. Only wanting more of that ferocity, Naruto wrapped his strong legs around Sasuke's upper back, using his abs to pull up and meet the thrusts while his fingers dug into the pale forearms that were pinning him down brutally.

Nothing was resolved. They had no future together. But Naruto simply didn't care as he bit down on Sasuke's pectoral, his mind not able to retain any thoughts outside of the feeling of his lover and the torrent of need and aggression pumping between them, surging until it reached its breaking point and shattered them both.

They lay on the bed, dazed and panting, each slightly shocked at how quickly and violently it had escalated.

Sasuke felt his cum dripping down his length, which was still inside Naruto. He realized with a bit of shock that he had not used a condom. He never had sex without wearing a condom. It was a stupid risk, and he never allowed himself to be stupid. It shook him to know that Naruto was able to so completely destroy his thought processes that he lost all control over himself.

He had acted like an animal, even more so than that first night. And he didn't have alcohol to use as an excuse this time. He drew a shuddering breath, not sure if he should apologize to Naruto or not. He slowly pulled out, keeping his arms loosely around Naruto, wondering what to say.

Naruto shifted, and Sasuke lifted his head to meet Naruto's gaze. He was glad to see a similar mix of shock, confusion, and guilt in the blue eyes as what he felt in his own.

"What the hell are we doing to each other, Sasuke?" Naruto asked, sounding bewildered and a little shaken.

Sasuke didn't have an answer. He buried his face in Naruto's neck, breathing in the scent of the man and trying to bring order to his thoughts. His arms tightened unconsciously around his lover.

They stayed that way for more than an hour. Finally, reality intruded at the sound of Sasuke's office phone going off, and they showered together and breakfasted, neither bringing up the morning's events. Sasuke retreated into his office to work, leaving Naruto to think through what he was going to tell Sasuke when it was time for him to leave to meet Sakura.

It was two hours later that morning when the elevator chimed. Naruto walked into the living room to see who had come up. He had heard the phone ring in Sasuke's office shortly before, so he assumed Sasuke had given the OK for whomever this was entering his home.

A man stepped out, and the way he moved set off Naruto's instincts immediately. In his line of work, he had developed almost a sixth sense for the threat level of prospective opponents. The man who had entered Sasuke's apartment was absolutely lethal.

The visitor had obviously come to a similar conclusion about Naruto, freezing as soon as he saw the blond approaching him. The two men eyed each other, each subtly shifting into readiness for attack. The air grew thick with tension. If they had been dogs, they would have been circling each other, growling with hackles raised.

Naruto assumed that Jugo would have done his job and searched the man for weapons, but he
watched closely as the man slowly set his bag on the ground, likely to free up his hand in case Naruto attacked.

"Who are you?" Naruto said coldly, finally breaking the silence.

"Someone who was invited. Who are you? And where is Sasuke?" The man's voice was flat and emotionless, and somehow familiar. Naruto didn't allow his brain to speculate as he focused all his awareness on detecting the slightest motion or eye movement of the man before him that could signal an attack.

The door to Sasuke's office opened, and Sasuke stepped out. Naruto moved to stand between him and the stranger.

"Sasuke, if you don't know this man extremely well, I think you should go back into your office and let me handle this," Naruto said, not letting his gaze falter for an instant from the stranger.

Sasuke let out a soft chuckle. "Shisui. I see you're making your usual good first impression. Let's hope things go better at the Japanese Heritage Appreciation forum you will be attending with me later this week."

"Sasuke," Shisui said, greeting him, but not taking his wary eyes from Naruto and ignoring Sasuke's comment about the upcoming event. "I thought you said you were not entering the game in the US."

Sasuke's face held no expression. "Naruto is not a business associate of mine."

Naruto took in the implication, and felt shock run through him that Sasuke was apparently aware of exactly who and what this man was... and had some sort of connection with him. A connection that could lead to the possibility of Sasuke employing someone like him here.

Shisui observed the protective stance that the blond held towards his cousin, and noted the way that Sasuke's voice had been laced with possessiveness when he'd said Naruto's name. It had been subtle, but Shisui was adept at reading such subtleties.

"He is your lover," Shisui stated with some surprise, allowing his stance to relax somewhat. Naruto's gaze shifted slightly to Sasuke, letting him take the lead on how to respond to the statement. Sasuke simply raised a brow.

Shisui gave an honest smile, picking up his bag. "Interesting. He seems to be a good match for you, cousin."

Naruto shifted uncomfortably at the assumption the man was making that they were in some sort of relationship, and was surprised that Sasuke did nothing to clarify their status. Naruto knew that Sasuke must have seen the fax, showing the risk of any sort of relationship with someone like Naruto. But I suppose he doesn't want to come out and say it's just sex, Naruto thought. It would have been much simpler for Sasuke to simply explain that Naruto was there for temporary security. Naruto wondered why Sasuke didn't clarify this, but was willing to let Sasuke make the call. He knew more about man, after all.

Regardless of how the man interpreted their relationship, Naruto felt himself relax slightly as the stranger appeared to be family, and a known quantity to Sasuke. The similarity in their looks and voices suddenly penetrated, and clicked into place.

Sasuke said nothing, and merely turned on walked towards the kitchen. "You must be tired from your journey, Shisui. Come and have something to eat. You can freshen up in one of the guest rooms before we get down to business."
Naruto watched Shisui carry his bag to the guest room that Naruto had occupied during his initial stay with Sasuke.

And he realized that the words Sasuke had spoken the other day were completely true.

Naruto didn't know Sasuke at all.

. . . . .

Shisui took a quick shower and returned to the kitchen where Sasuke had just finished preparing a light lunch. The three of them ate with minimal conversation, Naruto and Shisui clearly still watching each other, sizing each other up but in a much more friendly fashion now that they had cleared up that they were all currently on the same side. Naruto felt an almost uncontrollable urge to ask the man to spar with him and test his skills, but refrained.

As they were finishing lunch, Sasuke stood. "Naruto, Shisui and I have some family business to discuss. We'll be in my office for a bit."

After their argument this morning, Sasuke expected Naruto to be angry with him for the statement. He had gone ballistic over Naruto stepping out to make a phone call, and here he was shutting Naruto out of a meeting he was having. The timing couldn't have been worse. Sasuke was therefore unsettled to see a flash of almost relief cross the blue eyes.

Naruto simply nodded. "No problem. I have a few errands to run."

Sasuke felt his stomach clench, but there was nothing he could say. While there were many things that he wanted to discuss with both Shisui and Naruto together, there were a few things that needed privacy, especially the inevitable questions Shisui was likely to have about Naruto. He only hoped that Naruto didn't come back with a fresh bullet wound. "Where will you be, in case we need to reach you?"

Shisui cocked his head to one side, noting the sudden tension.

"I'll be gone only an hour or two. If anything happens while I'm gone, we can just meet up at the police station. But somehow I think your cousin Shisui, here, can deal with whatever comes along," Naruto said, sending a smirk in Shisui's direction, but not hiding the edge to his tone. He was curious about the man's presence, and wondered about Sasuke's family ties. The thought of how someone like Sasuke could possibly be related to someone like Shisui was something that Naruto would need to think about. It held implications that he hadn't considered.

He should be relieved that Shisui was here. It would make leaving that much simpler. Now, even if they didn't find the bomber before Naruto needed to leave, he knew that Sasuke had someone who would know what to look for.

He should have been relieved.

But instead, he realized that the last fleeting hope he had had of finding a reason to stay, or at least return quickly, had been eliminated.

He put his dishes into the dishwasher, ignoring the holes being bored into the back of his head from Sasuke's stare.

Without further discussion, Naruto headed out to go meet Sakura and hopefully Kakashi.

. . . . .
Shisui observed Sasuke and Naruto carefully through lunch. When the blond had finally left, he arched a brow at his cousin.

"*He doesn't know your family history, does he?*" He switched into Japanese now that they were alone. Sasuke realized that - of course - Shisui would not have assumed Naruto spoke it also.

Sasuke looked flatly at the man. "*It hasn't come up.*"

Shisui chuckled. "*He'll think you're hiding it.*"

"*Well, it's certainly not something I advertise, given my life here. And I'm not actively involved... so it isn't an issue.*"

"*He won't trust you if you don't trust him,*" Shisui said simply. There was something familiar about the blond, but Shisui couldn't place it. He was quite sure he had seen his face before, but the memory seemed distant.

Sasuke frowned at the man's words. He knew Shisui was right, and had felt a growing need to close some of the distance between himself and Naruto. There just never seemed to be a way for him to do so. And opening up and talking about his past was not something Sasuke was practiced in. "Maybe. *But I try to avoid the subject outside of the family. You know how Itachi feels about it.*"

Shisui flinched at the name. "*How... how is he?*"

Sasuke sighed. "*He's successful. As expected.*"

"*Does he know I'm here?*" Shisui sounded almost hopeful.

"*No,*" Sasuke said, his voice softening. "*I didn't think it would be a good idea to inform him until it is absolutely necessary.*"

"*What constitutes 'absolutely necessary'?*" Shisui asked, his voice slightly bitter.

Sasuke didn't answer. He knew that there was a lot of history between his brother and his cousin. They had been so close when they were young, but when they had left for the US and Itachi had cut all ties with the family, they had had a huge falling out.

"*Tell me what's been happening back home,*" Sasuke said. Shisui bowed, acknowledging the statement for the order that it was, and began going through various activities and family associations.

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Naruto entered the church at five minutes before noon, and was not surprised to see a pink head of hair. Kakashi was always late. Sakura was always early.

It was the first time that he had ever used one of his coded contact areas to meet with Sakura. Her shoulders were slightly hunched with tension, and her face seemed tight with something Naruto couldn't quite discern, but it bordered on fear. Naruto wondered at it. It took a lot to shake his doctor.

Naruto and Gaara used churches and shrines because of their easy access, public schedules, and architecture that lent itself to secluded areas for private conversation. The religious significance of the locations played no role, but Naruto knew that others might not feel the same way.

Sakura had turned as the light from outside brightened the interior of the church, signaling his arrival.
She immediately crossed to Naruto, clutching a small folio to her chest. He could tell from her expression that she was worried, but she was all business when she spoke, letting none of her nerves show in her voice.

"Naruto, how are you?" she asked, her eyes immediately went to the location on his scalp where she had treated his wound what felt like ages ago.

"Fine... I don't even feel it any more. And my hair pretty much covers the gash, so no one notices anything."

Sakura grabbed Naruto's hair next to his healing wound to pull it aside so she could examine the wound, ignoring Naruto's huff and the manhandling. She was amazed once again to see how quickly his injuries seemed to heal. "If you weren't so afraid of hospitals, I'd bring you in to study your weird healing abilities. Your skin heals with almost no scarring."

Naruto blew out a snort at the notion of being a human guinea pig, even for Sakura. Sakura laughed softly, his reaction exactly as she had expected.

"So... I was thinking about your call last night," Sakura began, releasing his hair almost as an afterthought. "You never had a chance to tell me why you called me."

Naruto shifted, and Sakura narrowed her eyes, already knowing he was going to try to dodge her question. She pre-empted him as he opened his mouth to say something. "Don't give me some crap about your actually following instructions to call and update me on the condition of your wound. You never do the follow-up voluntarily."

Naruto glanced back toward the doors, wondering if Kakashi had received his message. An interruption would be welcome at this point. He had wanted to tell Sakura over the phone because he would be less likely to give anything away about the nature of their trip if she couldn't see his face. She had an uncanny ability to be able to tell when he was lying or hiding something, and he didn't want her to worry about them. But he drew a breath, figuring he might as well get it over with, especially if the contents of the folio she was still holding accelerated their departure.

"I just wanted to let you know that Gaara and I would be going out of town for a bit... maybe even for a couple of months. I didn't want you to worry."

Sakura's gaze instantly sharpened. "You're not the type to take a vacation, and I know you and Gaara don't work for the same people. Where are you going? Are you in trouble?"

A low, rough voice sounded from over her shoulder, making her jump. "We have to take care of some old family business."

Sakura turned to see Gaara standing behind her, and wondered where he had come from, since clearly he hadn't come in the front entrance.

Naruto frowned at him, worry showing in his eyes. He had seen Gaara approach from the rear of the church, likely having entered through the locked back door. "Gaara... what are you doing here?"

Gaara shrugged. "I was with Kakashi when he got the message from you. I recognized your voice, and thought I'd come and see if you need any help. It's not like you to set up a meeting by phone."

Gaara had extremely sensitive hearing, sharply honed from a lifetime of relying on his senses to warn him of attacks. It had saved his ass on numerous occasions, and evidently had allowed him to overhear Kakashi's voicemail. "What is Sakura doing here?" There was a definite edge in Gaara's voice, and Naruto wasn't sure if it was because he had invited a 'civilian' to one of their contact
locations, or if it was the fact that Sakura was likely in some sort of danger necessitating her presence here.

Sakura looked levelly into the clear, green eyes of the redhead. "I came across something that I think you both need to see. I didn't know how to contact you, but when Naruto called me last night to give me the heads up about your little trip, I told him I needed to show him this in person. I think... there might be someone in the police force targeting you."

Before she continued, Gaara held up a hand. "Not here. The cellars are basically sound proof. We can talk more privately there. Kakashi should be here soon."

As if his words had summoned him, the white-haired man appeared. He looked at Sakura curiously, having heard much about her but never met her. Sakura slanted a worried glance at Naruto, her grip tightening on the folio she was holding.

"Sakura - this is Captain Kakashi Hatake. He is the only cop I can absolutely guarantee you can trust. Based on what you told me on the phone, I think he needs to hear it, too. He will know what to do."

Sakura looked at Kakashi with interest. Other than Gaara, she had never heard Naruto give such a recommendation of trust-worthiness about anyone. She accepted his judgment, nodding slightly.

"Kakashi. Sakura has information about the matter you discussed with me after the bombing. It's not good news," Naruto said, sadness shading his voice.

Kakashi's face darkened. Without a word, he turned and headed towards the rear of the church to where the steps to the cellar were. Gaara, Sakura and Naruto followed.

Naruto closed the heavy cellar door behind them.

"Why do you meet in churches instead of the police station?" Sakura asked, looking around at the casks of wine and dusty shelves.

Kakashi smirked. "There are few places that the police or the feds would hesitate to bug. If listening devices were discovered in a place of worship, however, the fallout would give them a hell of a headache. Separation of church and state and all that. It's no guarantee, but it is the safest bet without time for a complete sweep."

Sakura gave a small shrug, accepting the argument. She handed the folio to Kakashi, repeating what she had told Naruto on the phone. Gaara and Kakashi both looked grim.

"How did you get these?" Kakashi asked, his eyes narrowing as he flipped through the files.

Sakura shifted slightly under his gaze. "I know one of the coroners well. He had done the initial autopsy on the first case, and when the second came through he recognized the tattoo. He went back to refer to his old notes to check for similarities, and found that the report had been modified." Sakura turned her gaze to Naruto and Gaara. "Why do two dead bodies have the same tattoo as you both do? What are you involved in?"

Naruto and Gaara exchanged a glance. Gaara simply crossed his arms, content to remain silent. Naruto wasn't. "Sakura... it's not something I can really talk about, but it isn't any sort of criminal organization. It's more of a... an affiliation based on our similar pasts, I guess."

Sakura snorted. "Like I'd care if it were a criminal organization, Naruto. I know who your last boss was, remember? I just wanted to warn you that someone is doctoring the files. I don't know if this is
coming from officially sanctioned channels or from the people who killed them, but I do know that witness protection does a better job of altering files than this, so they are not the ones behind this. Do you know who is?"

Naruto glanced at Kakashi and Gaara, then shook his head. "No. We don't. But it could be extremely dangerous. Sakura, don't talk to anyone except Kakashi about this. There are a lot of things happening and right now we don't know what's connected to what, or who's involved."

Kakashi took out a piece of paper and wrote his number on it. "This is my personal phone. Call me if you find out anything more or see any more bodies with the same tattoo. Or if you think someone is following you, or threatens you. Don't contact me directly at the office. If possible, don't call from your own cell or home phone."

Sakura took the paper wordlessly, no sign of fear showing in her face. She simply nodded at the instructions. Naruto grinned. He should have known that Sakura wouldn't be rattled by this. Anyone who could calmly face down Gaara when he was injured and force him to accept medical attention wasn't likely to be thrown into a panic of much this side of the apocalypse.

"Is this related to the two of you needing to leave town?" Sakura raked her fingers through her hair in a show of frustration and worry.

"New earring?" Gaara asked, looking at the small silver piece of jewelry that flashed in her right ear. It looked like a wolf or a dog.

"Don't try to distract me," Sakura snapped. "This is serious. Both of these people were tortured before they died, by a very experienced practitioner. And you know who they are, so don't try to bullshit me that this is all nothing."

"Yes. They were my friends," Kakashi said quietly. Sakura's eyes softened.

"I'm sorry," she said, dropping her eyes. "I just... Naruto and Gaara are my friends. And I don't know how to help them."

Kakashi smiled slightly. "You already have. These two have been missing, and we knew something had happened. Now we know what, and can start to look into it. Thank you, Sakura."

Sakura gave a small smile in return, then turned to look at Naruto and Gaara. "Can you at least tell me when you are leaving or where you are going? That way, if something happens, I can contact you."

"Going through Kakashi will be the most reliable. We are still figuring out our travel plans. We'll probably be around for another week or two planning the best way out of the country. After that... well... just keep an eye on CNN and in a month or so you'll probably figure out where we were," Naruto joked.

"Idiot," Sakura said, but gave Naruto a hug anyway. "I wonder if Kiba could help me find them if I needed to."

Sakura pushed the thought aside. She had known Naruto and Gaara long enough to know that they wouldn't tell her any more than they already had. She considered it a sign of their friendship for her that they had told her as much as they had already. And at least now she had Kakashi as a contact. It was better than nothing.

Sometimes having criminals as friends really sucked.

She wondered if Naruto had told Sasuke where he was going, or if the man would be left wondering. He didn't seem the type to sit back and wait patiently for news anymore than she was.
She wondered if she still had his brother's number on her cell.

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When Naruto returned to Sasuke's penthouse, he walked in to hear the sound of metal clashing against metal. Without thinking, he stepped out of his shoes and silently made his way toward the sound, reaching into his pocket and pulling out his butterfly knife, flicking it open with a practiced motion of his wrist.

He reached the sparring room, and breathed out a silent breath of relief when he saw that it was simply Sasuke and Shisui sparring with their katana. He closed the knife and slid it back into his pocket, watching the two men spar.

He had trained in formal martial arts, but focused more on their more practical application. But there was something mesmerizing by the sight of two highly skilled practitioners who followed the art to its fullest, the way the moves and stances flowed into each other.

Both men were shirtless, and Naruto was almost hypnotized by the fluid grace of their movements. There was beauty in their motions, but it didn't disguise the lethal strength that was behind it. Naruto had seen Kendo practitioners spar with wooden swords, but he had never seen sparring with actual katanas. Especially not at full speed and force the way the two men Naruto was observing were doing. The precision of their movements spoke of years of regimented training. Only true masters of a martial art like this could risk the use of a real weapon at full speed without risking injury or death. Even the slightest miscalculation could be fatal. Naruto held completely still so as to not distract either man. It reminded him of his sparring sessions with Gaara.

Naruto had never studied any of the sword arts, living in the reality of the old adage, 'never bring a knife to a gun fight'. But he wished suddenly that he had, so he could have sparred with Sasuke the way Shisui did. He ran his gaze over the other weapons in the room, deciding that - another day - he would challenge Sasuke to spar. His eyes landed on a bo staff. That was a weapon he was familiar with, since lengths of pipe were more common to come upon lying around in a street fight than stray swords.

The style of fighting they were using seemed to be a highly specialized blend of Shinkendo, Iaijutsu, and some Aikido, but there were other moves that Naruto was unfamiliar with. Shisui turned, his back now facing Naruto. A flash of color drew his eye, and he noticed a tattoo on the man's shoulder. It was shaped like a fan, half white and half red. Naruto had seen the symbol on the scabbard of the katana that Sasuke kept over his mantle. Naruto frowned. A mark of fealty? Or simply a clan association? He had noted the slight deference that the older man had shown Sasuke. If Sasuke were the acting head of the family, then that would make sense. But surely that would fall to either Sasuke's parents or - if they were dead - to Itachi as the elder.

Naruto's speculation was interrupted as he sensed rather than saw Sasuke's concentration sharpen further. Sasuke drew his sword in a fluid arc. Shisui anticipated the move, and lifted his own sword to counter, but in a move Naruto wasn't quite able to discern, Sasuke altered the momentum of his katana by turning his wrists and twisting. Shisui only had time for his eyes to widen before his own sword was wrenched from his grasp. Sasuke stopped the arc of the blade at the surface of Shisui's throat. Even a tenth of a millimeter more and the pressure of the sharp edge of the blade would have drawn blood. The precision of the motion was almost as exquisite as the threat of death that it carried.

Naruto's body instinctively pulsed with adrenaline at the display of strength and skill. Even though he knew that Shisui had restricted himself to only using moves that this specialized fighting style contained, there was no denying the lethal abilities Sasuke had displayed. He had not pulled back until the very last instant in the kill strike. Naruto felt his lust spike as he watched Sasuke stoically
sheath his katana in a practiced motion.

He grinned ferally. Who would have thought his little princess was so lethal.

Shisui watched expressionlessly as Sasuke sheathed his katana before reaching down to pick up his own. "I see Itachi hasn't quite abandoned all the family traditions."

Sasuke smirked. "No. He still insists on training me."

"Have you beat him yet?"

Sasuke looked over and saw Naruto standing quietly in the door.

Shisui laughed as he noticed that Sasuke had failed to answer his question. He could safely assume the answer was 'no'.

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_to be continued...

Someone dies in the next chapter! Any bets on who? (BriEva is barred from betting, as she has top-secret insider information LOL)
Ritual death

Chapter by KizuKatana

Warning: Hard Yaoi (Boy x Boy) Sex, Graphic depictions of violence, death, language, etc. Not appropriate for young readers. 18+

Author's note - So... the reason that this chapter is late is that I accidentally wrote the next chapter first, thinking I was including that scene here, but it ended up needing a chapter on its own. The good news is that 4K words of the next chapter are already written, so it should be pretty quick to get the next one up.

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Naruto offered to order dinner while the Uchiha men headed to their separate showers after their sparring session. The call took less than two minutes, leaving Naruto plenty of time to slip off his clothing and join his lover in the shower.

Sasuke smirked arrogantly when Naruto stepped into the shower, already clearly aroused.

"I take it you like watching people spar," Sasuke said, gasping as Naruto drove him back against the wall of the shower.

"You have no idea how fucking hot you looked," Naruto murmured, his lips against Sasuke's throat, licking the salty skin before the shower rinsed it clean.

Sasuke arched back, feeling his own body heat at the feel of Naruto's touch. Naruto's hands slid down Sasuke's water-and-sweat-soaked skin, sliding over his hips and finally closing around his rapidly hardening erection.

"Sasuke..." Naruto breathed out. He couldn't explain how seeing Sasuke expertly wielding his katana had turned him on so much. But he was nearly delirious with the need for him. And the fierce need seemed to be contagious as Sasuke's touches became more aggressive.

He knew that Shisui would be anxious to get down to business, but Sasuke couldn't hold back as he yanked on Naruto's hair and brought his lips and teeth to the exposed tan throat. Besides, at the pace at which things were escalating, they'd be finishing rather quickly. Restraint and patience were clearly not in either of their vocabularies this evening. Sasuke willingly let himself go, his need to bind Naruto to him only growing with each night they spent together.

. . .

Naruto and Sasuke had just finished getting dressed when the elevator chimed with their dinner. Ignoring Shisui's amused glance, the three men sat down around Sasuke's kitchen table to eat.

"So," Naruto began, looking at Shisui and trying to pretend that the man hadn't most likely heard them in the shower ten minutes ago. "I'm assuming you're here because of the bomb?"

Shisui slid a glance and Sasuke, then nodded. "Mostly. Sasuke's filled me in on what he knows, and I've seen the information on the device and the original photos from the stalker. But I'd be interested in hearing your perspective."

Naruto shrugged. "I've been completely open with Sasuke on what I think, so he's probably covered
it. I'm guessing that Sasuke's already given you my background. Do you... specialize in anything?"

Shisui smirked... it was clear he was an Uchiha. "I specialize in many things. But I am not a
demolitions expert, if that is what you're getting at."

Naruto nodded, ignoring the sinking feeling in his stomach. If Shisui wasn't an expert on the bomb, then he must be here for general security. Naruto squashed the sense of loss he felt, knowing it was inevitable. "So you are here to take over Sasuke's security."

Sasuke tensed, clearly not having anticipated Naruto simply handing over his task to Shisui and walking away.

"I could, if that's what the two of you want," Shisui said, turning to look at Sasuke.

Not wanting to hear Sasuke dismiss him, Naruto spoke first, hoping to just get it over with. "I guess it makes sense. There have been some... annoyances... that have cropped up, and it's hard to tell if they're targeting me or Sasuke. There is no sense in putting Sasuke at additional risk if I'm the one they're after."

"Naruto -" Sasuke began, his voice annoyed.

Shisui interrupted. "The bomb?"

Naruto didn't look at Sasuke and tried to force himself to think only about the job. Something he should have been doing all along. "No, that was definitely for the bastard here. No one who knew anything about me would have thought that such a stupidly placed device would get me. One of my closest friends is probably the best demo man in the world."

Sasuke leaned back in his chair, his face expressionless. The insult of Naruto's words wasn't lost on him. But he was more concerned about the fact that Naruto seemed to be about to walk out of his life and seemed perfectly calm about it, despite the fact that not ten minutes ago he had been screaming out Sasuke's name. "Your term of employment was not supposed to end until you caught the stalker. You're quitting?"

Naruto could tell he was being baited. It annoyed him that Sasuke had picked this particular nerve to strike. He was sure the man didn't know, but Naruto had never failed a job. He prided himself on always being able to complete a task assigned to him. "I'm not quitting," Naruto said. The sudden glint in Sasuke's eyes clearly showed that the councilman realized he had hit a sensitive spot. Naruto schooled his face, then continued, "I just assumed that's why you brought your cousin in, if he isn't here to consult about the bomb."

"No," Sasuke stated. "I brought Shisui in to make sure this has nothing to do with my family's history. He'll handle things in Japan. You can continue to handle things here."

Naruto raised a brow, trying not to get his hopes up. "Japan?"

Sasuke shrugged. "My family is an old one in Japan. It used to wield considerable power. With power comes powerful enemies. My parents were killed because of it. Itachi moved us to the US to start over, away from it all, when I was a child." He was clearly over-simplifying things, and it made Naruto curious about what was being glossed over.

"Your parents were Yakuza?" Naruto asked, surprised.

"No," Sasuke said, his voice flat, sounding slightly insulted. "They were descended from a Daimyo... a sort of Japanese nobility."
"But then -" Naruto began, confused. 

"But they weren't satisfied with their own power, as the influence of Daimyo's has declined in modern times. So they used various Yakuza factions to expand and deepen their power. In the end, it wasn't clear if it was the government or the Yakuza who took them out. It doesn't matter. The result was the same. " Sasuke's face was closed, but Naruto knew that Sasuke was lying about whether it mattered to him who had killed his parents. But he wasn't going to push for more. He knew he didn't have the right to.

Shisui looked at Sasuke, a bit shocked at how much the younger man had revealed. "You're being very 'open kimono' this evening, Sasuke."

Sasuke narrowed his eyes at Shisui for the implied reprimand. "Naruto would likely find out eventually. Nagato had Yakuza connections. It's better he hears it from me than from rumors."

Shisui bowed his head slightly in deference to Sasuke's decision, though he still clearly was uncomfortable with it. He looked again at Naruto, trying to understand how someone had come so deep into Sasuke's life so quickly. He was wary by nature, but he had learned to trust his instincts long ago. Naruto clearly cared for his cousin. And was clearly able to handle himself in dangerous situations. Pedigree didn't matter.

Shisui let his clenched hands relax fractionally. If Sasuke was to take a partner, this seemed quite a good one.

He looked up to see Sasuke's eyes on him. Shisui nodded slightly, indicating his approval of Sasuke's choice.

Naruto noted the non-verbal exchange between the two men, but didn't know what to make of it. Or the way that Sasuke's gazed heated when it met his, despite the seriousness of the topic they were discussing. But he was relieved that at least he wasn't being dismissed from Sasuke's life today. He knew they didn't have forever, but he wanted at least a little more time.

Seeing the slightly confused and relieved look on Naruto's face, Sasuke smirked. He'd be sure to show his blond in no uncertain terms later that night exactly how pleased with him he was.

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The next day, Sasuke had an early morning meeting and then back-to-back fundraising calls for the rest of the day as the campaign season was starting to gear up. Sasuke was a young, popular figure for his party, and they wanted to get as much mileage out of him as possible, especially since he would be out of reach at the Japanese Heritage event for the next two days.

Naruto and Shisui spent the time going into detail about how to divide surveillance over the next week, particularly for the upcoming Japanese Heritage festival that was being held in the Hamptons at an exclusive resort. It was a big event for the Japanese-American community as well as the general public, and a high profile source of networking opportunities for Sasuke.

Unfortunately, that meant that Sasuke's attendance would be widely publicized, making it an easy opportunity for anyone targeting him.

They discussed whether both Shisui and Naruto should attend with Sasuke, and in the end it was decided that they both were needed. Shisui would be most likely to recognize Yakuza members if that was the angle of play, while Naruto would be better able to identify other US-based factions. They were in the process of discussing the layout of the property when the elevator chimed.
They both looked up to see Itachi walk into the room. Shisui froze completely.

Itachi simply looked at him, his face set in stone.

"Shisui-san," Itachi said formally. Shisui flinched at the cold tone. "I heard you were in town, and thought I would verify it with my own eyes. I thought I had made it quite clear that you were to have nothing to do with Sasuke or myself after we left Japan."

Shisui stood, then bowed formally. "Itachi, I -"

Just then the door to Sasuke's office opened. "Itachi," Sasuke sighed. "How did you find out? I know Jugo didn't tell you this time."

Itachi shifted his cold gaze from Shisui to look at Sasuke. "How long?"

To his credit, Sasuke didn't flinch. "Seven years."

Hurt flashed across Itachi's face before it was concealed once again behind the cold mask. It hurt him to know that Sasuke had been in contact with Shisui behind his back for that long. But he supposed it was at least partially his fault for never explaining the reason behind the rift in the first place. But it was too late for that now. "You're a fool if you think you can involve yourself in our parents mistakes and not suffer the same fate, Sasuke. There was a reason why we left Japan and cut all ties."

"Itachi," Sasuke's voice softened. "I'm not following their same path. I'm just staying informed. We have a life here, and I'm focused on that. But that doesn't mean I forget where we came from. What our family is."

"There is no way to stay tied to the family without being sucked down into it all again, Sasuke. Not with who we are."

"There is unfinished business there, Itachi," Sasuke said cryptically. Itachi's eyes narrowed.

"Is this what the bomb was about? Your ties to father's old schemes?" A cold anger was filling the room. "How foolish can you be, little brother. Wasn't having your parents killed a harsh enough lesson for you?"

"Itachi, I said I'm not involved like that. Shisui just keeps me informed on what the rest of the family is doing. And any activity from the Yakuza factions that they had been dealing with. And Danzo. It's just information. That's all."

Naruto stirred, uncomfortable with the tension between the brothers. "Um... I don't know about most of this stuff, but I can say it is pretty unlikely that the bomb was from Yakuza or really anyone other than someone local. It was too amateur. And it required knowledge of a local criminal's bomb configuration."

Itachi's eyes lost some of their anger. He glanced at Naruto and nodded, but completely ignored Shisui.

"I asked Shisui to come to help me look into who could be behind it, and to see if there are Yakuza here who were tied to our parents. That's all. Itachi -"

Sasuke could see the pain in his brother's eyes, and felt guilt for it.

"Just promise me that you will tell me before you actually do anything," Itachi said tonelessly.
Sasuke sighed, but then gave a small smirk. "Like I could keep it from you anyway. Clearly, that isn't possible," he said, making a small gesture toward Shisui.

Shisui's eyes hadn't left Itachi since the man had entered the apartment. "Itachi..." he said, speaking softly, pleading for the man to look at him.

Itachi turned toward him, his eyes cold once again, though Naruto could detect deeper emotions swirling beneath their surface. "This is the second time you have broken your word to me, Shisui-san," Itachi said with icy formality. "We might still be distant cousins by blood, but I have nothing to say to you."

Shisui's face was anguished, but he bore the words in silence. Itachi held his gaze for a few moments, then turned to Sasuke. "I need to return to the office. I just had to verify with my own eyes that the information I had received was correct. But Sasuke, this conversation isn't over."

With that, Itachi turned and left.

-xXx-

They checked in to the resort the following day. Itachi had also decided to attend after he found out that Sasuke was going to be given an award at the opening dinner. For appearances, Sasuke had gotten a separate room from Naruto, though they did have an adjoining door. It would cover the proprieties while allowing for late night visitations without the possibility of being observed.

Settled in the elegant rooms, Naruto looked at the heirloom katana that Sasuke had on his dresser. It was the first time that Naruto had seen it down from the mantel in Sasuke's penthouse. Sasuke had explained that it would be on exhibit in the morning, where local Japanese families brought in family artifacts to display as a show of their shared heritage. There was a small note card explaining the history and significance of the katana to the Uchiha clan.

Naruto had asked if Sasuke and Shisui were going to do a demonstration of the family's fighting style with their katanas, but Sasuke had just scoffed. It wasn't something that was flaunted, but a secret part of his family's history... a fighting style developed by his ancestors and passed down for generations only to those of Uchiha blood.

Naruto thought that was just as well. He could only imaging the horde of swooning bodies if his lover went shirtless in the midst of the throngs of admirers that had already flocked to him at this event. His attention was pulled out of fantasizing about Sasuke sweaty and shirtless with the man's next comment.

"Itachi said that we should stay away from each other this evening when we are at the dinner unless we are ready to come out publically as dating."

"What? Why? Can't we just explain that I'm security? Everyone has heard about the bombing attempt. It is perfectly reasonable that you'd have protection after that."

Sasuke looked off to the corner of the room, a tiny blush forming across his cheek bones. "Itachi said that we're... too obvious about our... interaction." What Itachi had actually said was that Sasuke either looked like a love-sick school girl or some Japanese porn star about to rip his lover's clothing off whenever he got within twenty feet of Naruto. But there was no need for that comment to be repeated. Ever.

"Um, really? Ok. I guess we should play it safe. But if there is anyone suspicious, I'm going to have to get close to you to make sure nothing happens. But I'll coordinate with Shisui to have him stay
Sasuke just nodded, feeling annoyed. He didn’t like having to be secretive about their relationship, as though there was something wrong with it. He knew Naruto well enough by now to know what kind of person he was. Whatever Naruto had done in the past, Sasuke was sure it was for good reasons. But people in politics didn’t play clean, and he knew that – until he had had time to properly delve into Naruto’s past and have Suigetsu scrub a few things clean – he couldn’t risk Naruto coming under the scrutiny that would happen if he publicly claimed Naruto as his lover. He had slowly come to the conclusion that, whatever it was between them, he wasn’t going to just let it go.

He wasn’t sure what Naruto felt for him, but he knew it wasn’t just casual for him either. When the threat of the bomber was no longer hanging over their heads, Sasuke would talk to Naruto about it. But now wasn’t the time.

"Orochimaru is on the organizing committee for the event," Sasuke said, changing the subject. "He uses this event as a means to dole out favors and strengthen his ties with wealthy and connected Japanese-Americans. The people he invites will come from all spheres of influence... legitimate and... less legitimate."

Naruto grimaced. That man made his stomach turn. "So... what special favor does he have in store for you and your brother?"

Sasuke smirked, sliding his fingers into the front of the waistband of Naruto's trousers and tugging him closer. "I'm pretty sure he already considers me in his debt."

"And are you?" Naruto asked, his voice serious... his constant fear of his life tainting Sasuke's rearing up.

Sasuke's smirk didn't falter as he leaned in to brush his lips against Naruto's ear. "No. I already repaid him for introducing us. And whatever he might think, Orochimaru didn't have anything to do with what happened between us since then. If you had wanted to, you'd have avoided it like you did with Kimimaro."

Naruto blew out a relieved breath, allowing his hands to slide down Sasuke's back, then traced a path over his hips and around to the front of his pants in acknowledgement of Sasuke's statement. "Mmmm... Aren't you supposed to wear traditional Japanese clothing at this thing?" Naruto ran the back of his finger down the zipper on Sasuke's trousers, feeling the flesh beneath it jump.

"Ngh," Sasuke said, letting his head fall back slightly and Naruto repeatedly traced his fingers down rapidly growing bulge in Sasuke's pants. "Business suits... are the new traditional... Japanese clothing." Sasuke gasped out, glad that his was a corner room, so there would be no neighbors listening in.

Naruto chuckled as he slowly lowered the zipper. "Too bad. I'd love to see you in a Yukata. Just so I could unwrap you."

Sasuke was about to retort but Naruto's fingers had closed around his shaft, and Sasuke lost the ability to saying anything at all.

... Itachi and Sasuke looked like matching editions from a high end fashion magazine as they stood side-by-side in their custom tailored suits in the cocktail area for the evening’s dinner event. Their aloof air only partially dissuaded the throngs of people seeking audience with them. Uchiha was a
well-known name in the Japanese community, and the added draw of their rising careers, wealth, and looks made them a target for almost every attendee of the event with an eye to either bed them or gain their support on various political or financial agendas.

"Orochimaru told me that you will be getting the 'Japanese-American Citizenship' award tonight. I can't wait to hear your acceptance speech," Itachi said, amusement shading his voice. He knew how much Sasuke hated this sort of thing, but he also knew that - given his brother's political aspirations - it would be necessary to play along and accept the award.

Sasuke suppressed a sigh and sipped at his drink. It was the same drink he had had all evening. He had learned his lesson about letting his attention slip in public, though Itachi still teased him about it, asking him every once in a while if he'd like his drink refreshed.

Naruto was also in attendance, but followed Itachi's advice and stayed mostly across the room from wherever Sasuke was. Their eyes would sometimes follow each other, but it was subtle enough that it didn't draw attention to their relationship.

Itachi only had to kick Sasuke once for staring too long.

. . .

Dinner was going to start in just a few minutes. The staff were already shepherding attendees into the formal dining area. Naruto accepted his glass of apple juice from the waiter who had brought it to him, still in conversation with the owner of an import export business of Japanese antiquities. He took a sip, and happened to glance down at the glass as he did. There were a few granules of white powder at the bottom of the glass. He noticed a very slight bitter aftertaste in his mouth. If he hadn't seen the traces of the powder, he probably wouldn't even have noticed the slight flavoring.

His eyes snapped up, and he looked around the room to see if anyone was watching him drink expectantly, but no one stood out. He quickly ended his conversation with the businessman and walked casually towards the dining area, pretending to drink further. He didn't know what was in the drink, but he planned on going to his room as soon as possible and emptying his stomach. But first he wanted whoever had put it there to think they had succeeded. As he passed through a doorway that had potted plants on either side, he casually emptied the tainted drink into one of them.

Naruto assumed that whoever had doctored his drink would be watching him to see if it was successful. He had only consumed a small mouthful rather than an entire glass, so he hoped that whatever it was wouldn't have that much of an effect on him.

He made a point of walking back through the room, carrying his empty glass until a waiter came to relieve him of it. It didn't take more than two minutes, but a familiar sense of vertigo overcame him and he nearly stumbled. Panic started to seize him as he realized that the drink must have contained some sort of sedative. Likely not a dangerous dose to a regular person, but to him it could be a major problem given his body's allergy to it.

He ignored the occasional person who tried to catch his attention and engage him in conversation. Itachi and Sasuke had both been asked to speak at the dinner, and Sasuke was to receive an award at the end of the session. Naruto hoped that he wasn't being drugged to incapacitate him for an attempt on Sasuke during dinner. He had to let Shisui know. No one other that Itachi and Sasuke would know of Shisui's role in the family. They wouldn't be expecting him to be able to take Naruto's place.

He found Shisui, and made eye contact, shifting his head subtly toward the nearest exit signaling to the man to join him in the hallway.
Naruto grabbed a small cup of espresso on his way out, downing the burning liquid in one swallow, wincing as it scalded his throat. He hoped it would counteract the effects of the sedative enough to keep him alert for whatever was going to happen next.

"What's wrong?" Shisui got straight to the point.

"Someone put something in my drink. I don't know if I am the target or if it's to get me out of the way to get at Sasuke," Naruto said, his vision starting to blur slightly.

Shisui nodded. "I'll watch Sasuke. Can you handle yourself if they come after you?"

Naruto simply nodded, and didn't waste any more time before turning and heading to his room. He heard the chimes that dinner was starting, but knew that Shisui would take care of Sasuke.

Naruto entered his room and went directly to his bathroom and emptied his stomach, though it was clear the drug - whatever it was - had already at least partially absorbed in his system.

He quickly shed his suit and turned the shower on cold. The coffee was helping counteract the effects of the sedative, and the icy water should further hopefully keep the effects at bay.

Naruto stood in the freezing water, hoping that he had time before whatever was going to happen actually went down. His head was starting to clear. Luckily, the amount he had ingested had been small enough to only have a minimal effect. The sound of voices coming from his hotel room had him shutting off the water and grabbing a towel. He paused briefly, recognizing one of the voices, and opening the door.

"Sasuke? What are you doing here? You're supposed to be -" his words cut off as a bullet lodged in the doorframe right next to his head. He looked up just in time to see Sasuke's katana slice through Orochimaru's throat.

Sasuke had tried to focus on not looking at Naruto. He really had. But he knew that Orochimaru was here, and he wouldn't put it past that snake to try to pimp Naruto out again. The man had been decidedly unhappy when he had seen the blond accompanying Sasuke to the event. Sasuke was glad that they had bothered with the façade of separate rooms. It was just the kind of thing Orochimaru would use against him if he were careless.

Sasuke smirked as he saw Naruto accepting a glass of apple juice from the waiter. He found it oddly endearing that his killer didn't drink. He fantasized for a moment or two about how much fun it would be to get Naruto drunk one day, but he understood why the blond avoided it. He was such a mix of dangerous and innocent. The boy who doesn't drink and can't drive. The man who was able to take out a squad of eight hit men sent against him.

Sasuke's smirk faded as he noticed Naruto's expression after he had taken a drink of his juice. There had been a flash of panic before he quickly tried to mask it with a casual smile to the person he had been talking with. Sasuke frowned. Something was off.

He watched Naruto scan the room, and followed his gaze but didn't see anything out of place. Naruto walk towards the ballroom where the formal dinner would be served. Sasuke was just about to follow the younger man when Naruto returned, carrying a now empty glass with him. Naruto caught Shisui's eye and headed out to the hall.

Relieved that Shisui would handle whatever it was, Sasuke turned towards the dinner room. He wanted to look through his note cards one last time for the main talking points he needed to hit in his
speech. As he was doing so, he noticed Orochimaru heading out through the doorway Naruto had just exited. There was something in the man's expression that bothered Sasuke. He looked more predatory than usual.

Sasuke stepped back into an alcove just as Orochimaru turned back to look into the room, avoiding the man's sight. Sasuke went out the room's other entrance, deciding he would circle around and just be sure that the creepy older man wasn't giving Naruto any problems. He saw no sign of either Naruto nor Shisui in the hall, but Orochimaru was just entering the elevator.

Sasuke knew that the man always insisted on staying on the top floor in the largest suit at these events, as a symbol of his status. Watching the elevator tick up, he saw it stop on the 8th floor. That was where Naruto's room was, not Orochimaru's. Sasuke pulled out his phone and fired off a quick text to Itachi telling him to cover for him and that he would be late to dinner. Hopefully Shisui and Naruto were together, and everything was fine. But he needed to be sure.

He took the elevator up to the eighth floor, and knocked on Naruto's door. There was no answer. Chastising himself for being paranoid, Sasuke let himself into his room and slowly cracked open the adjoining door. He froze.

Orochimaru was in Naruto's room. There was no sign of Naruto, but Sasuke could hear the sound of a toilet flushing and a shower being turned on. His eyes widened as he saw Orochimaru lift his hand, a gun clearly visible in its grip.

Sasuke's gaze fell on the katana that was sitting on the dresser. They hadn't set up the cultural exhibit yet, so it was still in Sasuke's room. Not having any other weapon, Sasuke picked up the blade and pushed open the door.

"Orochimaru-sama," Sasuke said cautiously. "What are you doing in Naruto's room?"

Orochimaru spun around at the sound of Sasuke's voice, the gun pointing directly at him. Sasuke showed no sign of any reaction, and simply looked at the man. "You're pointing a gun at me, Orochimaru-sama?"

The older man paled, and quickly lowered his gun. "Sasuke-kun. I would never hurt you. But you shouldn't be here. You are supposed to be accepting the award downstairs."

Sasuke realized that Orochimaru had planned that in advance, to make sure Sasuke would not be able to come with Naruto. Orochimaru had clearly not expected that Sasuke would miss a good PR moment to check on Naruto. "What are you doing in Naruto's room with a gun?" Sasuke said calmly, taking a step closer to the man. If he could get in arms reach, he could disarm him.

"Sasuke-kun... you must understand. Naruto needs to be removed from your presence. He is a risk to you. I had no idea that he could be so conniving as to trick you into some sort of relationship with him. If he goes public with anything, it will destroy your career. This is all my fault for introducing him to you. Please allow me to correct my mistake."

Sasuke could hardly believe the man seemed to be serious. "Surely there are other solutions that would be less drastic. I trust Naruto. He would never try to damage my career."

"No!" Orochimaru shouted. "You don't know... you are too naïve, Sasuke-kun. Too pure. He is deceiving you. He is nothing... a criminal... a whore. He does not deserve you. He should not be allowed to touch your perfect body. He defiles it."

Sasuke felt a chill pass over him at the burning look in Orochimaru's eyes as they slid over Sasuke's
form. He had always felt that the older man had a strange affinity for him, but only now did he see the full extent of the man's obsession.

Sasuke drew a steadying breath. He had no idea what to say to this man, but he had to try to talk him into at least putting the gun down. "Orochimaru-sama, you cannot simply kill him. You will go to jail -"

Orochimaru laughed. "Sasuke-kun. You don't need to worry about me. I have several members on the police force here, as well in the City, who are loyal to me. And on the off chance that anything makes it to court, I have members in the district attorney's office as well as several seated judges who would ensure that I never got convicted. Especially not over the death of someone like Naruto, a known associate of a criminal organization. There is no risk to me. I will never go to jail for his death. If you prefer, I will simply do it at a different time, to ensure that you are not involved. I would not want to harm your political career by having you dragged into this. I hadn't realized that your rooms were adjoining."

There was a subtle threat in Orochimaru's words that Sasuke recognized. Sasuke heard the sound of the shower turning off, and mentally prayed that Naruto would not walk out of the bathroom yet, feeling a sense of rising panic. He had hoped that his mere presence in the room would be enough to dissuade the man from killing Naruto. But Orochimaru had no fear of the consequences of being caught in the act. He apparently believed he was untouchable by the law. Sasuke supposed that the man was wealthy enough to potentially have bribed his way quite far into the system. But was he truly untouchable? "Let's sit down and talk this through like the reasonable people that we are," Sasuke said placatingly.

But it didn't happen. Just at that moment, the click of the bathroom door unlocking was followed by Naruto's voice. "Sasuke? What are you doing here? You're supposed to -"

Orochimaru jerked at the sound, lifting his hand that was holding the gun as he turned toward Naruto's voice.

With practiced speed, Sasuke drew his katana in a single, fluid motion before Orochimaru had finished raising his weapon. The blade arced, slicing along Orochimaru's wrist and sending the shot wild. Orochimaru's cry pierced the air, but was cut short as the arc of Sasuke's blade continued, cutting off man's scream as it sliced through his throat. Sasuke stood there, frozen, as Orochimaru's now lifeless body fell to the floor.

The room seemed unnaturally still.

Almost in a trance, Sasuke wiped his blade off on his pantleg, removing the blood, then re-sheathed it in the ritual motion Naruto had seen him use in the sparring room. Sasuke's eyes had not moved from Orochimaru's body.

Naruto cursed as he saw the blank look on Sasuke's face. This was clearly Sasuke's first time taking a life. The shock of it was etched on his face. Guilt crashed through Naruto.

Sasuke had killed for him, and now would have to live with that for the rest of his life. No matter what Sasuke's family's past was, he should never have been exposed to this sort of situation. And it was all Naruto's fault.

On top of that, there was the body of a very prominent citizen dead at Sasuke's feet. There would be no way to simply cover up this death by hiding the body. The hotel was crawling with people and security. There was a good chance that Orochimaru had already been seen going into Naruto's room. Plus, people would notice that Orochimaru had disappeared in the middle of an event he was
running. If Sasuke were found out to have killed Orochimaru in the hotel room of his gay lover... his career would be over, even if he never went to jail. Used to dealing with violence and blood, Naruto simply focused on how to stage the crime scene to minimize collateral damage. Specifically, Sasuke's career. It was everything Naruto had feared would happen if he ever let himself get involved with someone. He should have left when Shisui had arrived. But Naruto had been selfish, wanting to have one more week with Sasuke before he left with Gaara.

And he may just have ruined the man's life because of it.

But this wasn't the time to wallow in regrets. Someone could have heard Orochimaru's shout and called hotel security. Luckily the gun had had a silencer, so it would be unlikely that the police would have been called at this point. Naruto walked up to Sasuke, whose expressionless gaze was still locked on the body bleeding excessively into the expensive carpet of the hotel room floor.

"Sasuke. I'm so sorry," Naruto whispered, brushing his hand almost lovingly through Sasuke's hair and down his back.

"What? Why are you -" Sasuke didn't get the opportunity to finish his words as Naruto brought his hand down hard on the side of Sasuke's neck, hitting a pressure point centered there and immediately rendering him unconscious.

Naruto caught him as he slumped and dragged him back, away from the body and blood. He laid him on the floor, far enough away from Orochimaru's body that they wouldn't disturb that crime scene. Naruto's mind was racing. He didn't have much time. He needed help.

He grabbed Sasuke's phone and cursed when he couldn't immediately find Shisui's contact information. He sent a text message to Itachi, praying the older man would understand and act immediately.

**ITACHI – I WILL NOT BE ABLE TO MAKE DINNER. NOT FEELING WELL. IN MY ROOM. CAN YOU SEND SHISUI?**

Naruto knew from screening Sasuke's e-mails that Sasuke hated all caps, and never used it. Itachi would realize that this note wasn't sent by Sasuke, and hopefully act quickly. He wasn't sure if Itachi would send Shisui, given that he had refused to acknowledge the other man's existence since their first encounter, but Naruto sincerely hoped he would.

Naruto realized that if anyone had heard the sharp cry followed by silence, they might become alarmed and call security if they hadn't already. The best way to prevent that was to pretend like nothing had happened. He could also use this to potentially firm up what he planned to use as his own alibi.

"Orochimaru! What the hell are you doing in my room! Get the fuck out of here or I'm going to call the police," Naruto shouted.

If anyone was in one of the nearby rooms, he needed it to seem that Orochimaru was still alive at the time that Sasuke sent the text. Whatever happened to himself, he was going to make damn sure Sasuke wasn't dragged into this.

Still wearing only a towel, Naruto gently lifted Sasuke and removed his blood spattered dinner jacket, then began unbuttoning his shirt. He had just finished when he heard the door to Sasuke's room open. He hadn't known that Shisui had a key, but was relieved that he did. It would save valuable time, and prevent contamination of Sasuke's room in case forensics decided to examine it later.
"In here!" Naruto called. "Watch your step."

Itachi opened the door and froze. From where he stood, all he could see was a mostly naked Naruto undressing his unconscious little brother, who appeared to be spattered with blood.

Naruto felt the temperature in the room drop by a thirty degrees, and quickly looked up to see sudden death waiting in Itachi's eyes.

"Whoa, Itachi, let me explain," Naruto said, using precious seconds to point over to the portion of the room that Itachi had not yet been able to see. Itachi said nothing, but stepped into the room further and saw the second body lying on the floor. Clearly dead.


Naruto had gone back to pulling off Sasuke's shirt, cursing when he realized that he had forgotten to unbutton the cuffs. "Orochimaru drugged my drink. I noticed it before I swallowed much of it, and came to my room to puke and shower. Orochimaru followed me. He came in and tried to shoot me, but I grabbed Sasuke's katana and killed him instead. Sasuke was feeling ill and had come to his room to lie down. He has a migraine and needs to rest. He might have taken a sleeping pill which made him groggy."

"Sasuke doesn't get migraines, and he doesn't take sleeping pills," Itachi bit out. His eyes followed Naruto's movements as he pulled off Sasuke's blood spattered shirt and put it on. Naruto then put on Sasuke's dinner jacket. They were similar in size, so the fact that Sasuke was very slightly taller and Naruto was slightly broader wasn't too obvious.

"He did tonight," Naruto said firmly, looking Itachi dead in the eye.

Itachi went to take another step into the room, but a hand on his shoulder stopped him.

It was Shisui.

"Don't. You'll get blood on your shoes," Shisui said, already understanding where Naruto was going with this.

"I don't care about my shoes, Shi! Sasuke is -" Shisui had stilled at Itachi's use of his old nickname, but what had cut Itachi's comment off was that Naruto's hand had dropped to Sasuke's belt and was unbuckling it. Itachi growled, his voice absolutely lethal. "What the fuck do you think you're doing, Uzumaki?"

Naruto didn't bother to look up, knowing that every second counted. If the police or hotel security came in to see this, it would all be over. "Somehow when I killed Orochimaru, all of the blood sprayed onto Sasuke. I don't want the police to get the wrong idea. Sasuke was absolutely not involved in any way in the violent death of a prominent citizen his gay lover's hotel room. He was NOT in the room when it happened. You were in his room looking after him. Shisui heard shouting and knocked on my door to see what happened. He found me shot and called the police immediately."

Itachi's eyes lit with comprehension. If he hadn't been so overwhelmed with fear for his brother's safety, he would have caught on sooner.

"Dammit Orochimaru - this is the last time I'm going to say it. Get. The. Fuck. Out. Now!" Naruto shouted.

"Naruto's going to establish a time of death consistent with our arrival as an alibi for Sasuke in case
anyone is in the adjoining rooms," Shisui murmured into Itachi's ear. "He has less than ten minutes, or the medical examiner will be able to find the discrepancy."

Itachi simply nodded, now fully on top of the situation. If there was any conflict in the assistant district attorney's mind about tampering with a crime scene to save his little brother, it was not evident. "Naruto - throw me the sheet from your bed," Itachi said as soon as Naruto had pulled on Sasuke's pants. Sasuke was now naked except for his boxers, but blood was still visible on his face and hands.

Naruto complied, and Itachi gently wrapped the sheet around his brother and lifted him, being careful to not step in any of the bloodied areas of the floor. "Get the shower running, Shi. We need to make him presentable. Naruto - how long before this 'sleeping pill' wears off?"

Sasuke groaned and shifted. "Any minute now. He might have a small bruise on the back of his neck. Perhaps he fell from the effects of the sleeping pill. Itachi - make sure he is completely clean. Get him dressed in another suit. All his clothes look basically the same, so hopefully no one will notice that he has changed. And whatever you do, do not let him talk to the police. He might be a little confused. I don't want him to get into trouble by making delusional claims that he killed Orochimaru while I was in the shower. Perjury is a crime, you know."

Itachi nodded. His gaze flicked to the sheathed katana.

"You need to unsheathe it," Itachi said. "And make it bloody."

"What?" Naruto asked, confused.

"Only someone deeply instilled in a sword art would clean their blade and re-sheathe it after killing someone. You are not. It would be inconsistent with the story you are going with." With that, Itachi turned and carried his brother out of the room. Naruto grabbed the blade and drew it out, carefully sliding the cutting edge through the blood pooled around Orochimaru, careful to not disturb it noticeably. He then walked over to where Sasuke was standing when he killed Orochimaru and dropped the sword, his fingerprints now clear along the hilt.

He turned to Shisui, who had just come back in the room after turning on Sasuke's shower. "Shisui. I need a favor from you."

The man raised a brow as Itachi took Sasuke to the shower. "I need you to shoot me, then go outside my door and knock. Make sure you lock the adjoining door from your side."

Shisui nodded in understanding. Self-defense claims were much easier if you had visible wounds. The savagery of Orochimaru's death would require some explaining. Sasuke could have stopped at severing the wrist. The threat was ended. But he had allowed the strike to continue through to kill the man. The courts frowned at that, especially from someone with enough experience wielding a sword that they could have controlled the strike.

If a man were shot while trying to swing a sword, that would excuse a lot. Shisui calmly took a tissue from the box next to the bed, and picked up the gun that had fallen next to the body. He lifted it and aimed at Naruto.

"Ready?"

Naruto nodded.

Shisui fired.
-xXx-

to be continued...

Next chapter has Naruto meeting up with 'the ex', and Gaara meets Sasuke. I am freaking out I am so excited. It is mostly written. BriEva is my muse. Expect darkness.
Encounters

Warning: Hard Yaoi (Boy x Boy) Sex, mental disorders, language, etc. Not appropriate for young readers. 18+

Author's note - Hopefully none of you forgot Naruto in the opening chapter... and his freak-out. And I'm fast with this one! Right? Less than a week! And really long. Though I cheated since the previous chapter was late and I had written most of this before then. This chapter was jointly written with BriEva. Kudos to her for helping me! Itachi, Shikamaru and Gaara are in this chapter... my three favorites, so I am REALLY excited.

-xXx-

Sasuke could hear muffled voices talking outside his room, but he wasn't focusing on what they were saying as he drifted between awake and asleep.

"And why was Mr. Uzumaki in an adjoining room to your brother, Mr. Uchiha?"

"Shisui and Naruto were in charge of Sasuke's security at the event. I'm sure you heard about the bomb that was placed in my brother's car recently?"

"Yes, Mr. Uchiha."

"Then you understand why we were taking precautions. Shisui has worked with our family for years before we came to the US, so Sasuke asked him to fly over and help. Naruto was referred to us by Orochimaru to work as Sasuke's personal security after he had received some threatening photographs."

"So that's why they had adjoining rooms?"

"It wouldn't do much good to have security that was on another floor."

The content of the conversation was slowly penetrating Sasuke's consciousness. That was Itachi's voice.

"Of course, sir. So Mr. Uzumaki was employed by Mr. Sanin?"

"Yes. It is my understanding that he has been working for Mr. Sanin as some sort of security consultant for at least the past month, though I do not know the details."

"Do you know why Mr. Sanin would have been in Mr. Uzumaki's room with a gun?"

"I have no idea. I find the entire situation shocking."

"We'll need to take a statement from your cousin, the other Mr. Uchiha. Officer O'Mally will be with you in a minute. Once Mr. Uzumaki is treated, we'll be taking his statement down at the station."

Sasuke shifted slightly and bit back a groan at the ache in his neck. Why was he in bed, and why did his neck and head hurt so much?

"Get the gurney. The hotel has asked us to take the body down the service elevator and out the back to not alarm the guests."

Another voice reached Sasuke through the walls. "I don't need to go to a fucking hospital! How
many times do I have to tell you that it's just a graze and they can treat me in the back of the ambulance. I'll go down to the station and answer whatever questions you want. But I am NOT going to the hospital. The EMTs can document whatever medical stuff you need from me."

Sasuke's eyes flew open as everything flooded back on him. Naruto. And Orochimaru. He had killed Orochimaru, and those were police outside his room door. How the hell had he gotten back into his room? He sat up and looked down at himself, expecting to still be covered in blood. But everything was clean.

Had he dreamed it?

There was no one in the room with him. Naruto's voice had come from the hallway. Following the sound of Naruto arguing with someone about whether or not he could walk, Sasuke opened his door and looked out onto a scene of chaos. Itachi was talking to a police officer who was frantically scribbling down notes. Shisui was talking to another officer off to one side. Police and men wearing black shirts with 'forensics' written in large block white letters were just entering Naruto's hotel room which was marked off with yellow police tape that said 'crime scene'. A man who appeared to be the hotel manager was standing off to one side wringing his hands.

But what drew Sasuke's attention were the two medics trying to force Naruto onto a gurney, his arm wrapped in white gauze with blood showing through.

"Naruto, what happened?" Sasuke was halfway to Naruto when Itachi grabbed his arm. A panicked look flashed across Naruto's face.

"Sasuke," Itachi's voice was low and urgent, and carried a warning that Sasuke didn't understand but made him pause. Something was not making sense. The elder Uchiha turned back to the officer who had been interviewing him. "Officer, please excuse me for one moment while I see to my brother." The officer looked about to protest when Itachi froze him with a forceful stare. "This will come as quite a shock to him. He might still be disoriented from his illness."

"Itachi -" Naruto's voice carried a panicked warning.

"I've got it, Naruto. You just get your wound tended to. I'll meet you at the station." Itachi then turned to look at the officer in charge of the crime scene. "I wish to be present when Mr. Uzumaki is interviewed. Given that he is an employee of my family, I want to be fully apprised of everything to ensure that he is treated fairly and nothing gets misconstrued."

The police officer opened his mouth to object, but re-evaluated that decision when he saw the cold look in the assistant district attorney's eyes. "Very well," he said grudgingly. "But just remember that you don't have jurisdiction here. This is not Manhattan. You will be allowed to sit in as a courtesy only."

Itachi gave a short nod. "You may consider me Mr. Uzumaki's attorney, if that helps matters." Sasuke opened his mouth to speak, but Itachi tightened his grip on his brother's arm, likely leaving a bruise.

"It will only be a moment while I check on my brother and let him know of the situation. Since he was asleep, he will have nothing to add to the investigation. I'll just see him settled back in his room then will join you at the police station."

. . . .

Itachi all but shoved Sasuke through the door to his hotel room and closed it behind them.
Sasuke immediately spun around, breaking free of Itachi's bruising hold. "What the fuck is going on? Why is Naruto bleeding, and why aren't the police wanting to talk to me about the fact that I -"

Itachi's hand clamped over Sasuke's mouth. "Stop talking," he said, his voice low so as to not be overheard. "Let me explain exactly what happened. Naruto's drink was drugged. He realized it and found Shisui, thinking it could be a ploy to leave you unprotected during dinner. Shisui went back to find you, but you had already left, presumably to come here. I received a text from your phone that you were feeling unwell and would not be able to attend dinner, asking me to send Shisui up to you. I was informed that you had a migraine and had taken some sleep medication. Sometime when you were sleeping, apparently Orochimaru slipped into Naruto's room and shot him. It only grazed him, and Naruto was able to grab your katana and defend himself, unfortunately killing Mr. Sanin. Shisui and I heard the confrontation from your room, and went to Naruto's room and discovered what had happened. This is the story that Naruto, Shisui and I have all told the police."

Sasuke felt disbelief overwhelm him. Itachi was an assistant fucking district attorney... he could not possibly be willing to go along with this. He would kill the blond for his part in this later, but...
"Itachi, you can't let Naruto -"

"There is a very good chance he won't even be charged, Sasuke. His case for self-defense is much stronger than yours. Orochimaru was in his room to kill him. They have already taken samples from the potted plant where Naruto dumped his drink downstairs. They will find traces of the drug. The hotel security cameras will show Orochimaru entering Naruto's room with a key he likely stole from one of the maids. The gun has only his fingerprints on it, and they will surely be able to trace it back to him once they run the serial numbers and find out how he got it. It was a pre-meditated murder attempt. Naruto was injured, making the threat to his life imminent and proven. Under normal circumstances, there wouldn't even be a question of Naruto's innocence."

Sasuke just stared at his brother, hearing him rationalize this.

"The only question is whether Naruto's past association with Nagato will make him automatically suspect. But I am going to try to use all my influence to make sure that doesn't happen. Do you know why Orochimaru wanted to kill Naruto?"

Sasuke felt the surreal nature of his last conversation with the dead man flood back to him. "For me. This whole thing is because of me, Itachi. He didn't want Naruto and me to be in a relationship. I never realized how obsessed he was. I have to -"

Itachi grabbed Sasuke's arm as he took a step towards the door. "Sasuke, if you go out there and tell them a different version of events, we will all end up in jail, including Naruto. It's called accessory after the fact, obstruction of justice, tampering with evidence... take your pick."

"Did you make him do this?" Sasuke bit out. "To save my precious fucking career?"

Itachi just raised a brow. "When I arrived in your room, he had already knocked you out and was stripping you of your clothes so he could put them on himself."

Sasuke remembered Naruto's gentle touch as he told him he was sorry... evidently just before he fucking knocked me out. Sasuke's anger surged, then abruptly was replaced by icy fear when he remembered something Naruto had told him earlier. "That idiot," Sasuke realized his hands were shaking. "Oh, god, Itachi... do you have any idea what he's done?"

Itachi looked steadily at him. "Look, I told you, Sasuke. It is very unlikely that he will be charged."

Sasuke let out a hollow laugh. "If Naruto went to jail, he'd just have a party with Hidan and Dei."
That's not what worries me. Naruto's face will be all over the six o'clock news. Orochimaru was a prominent citizen."

The counselor frowned, "Well, of course he will be in the news. It's annoying but -"

"Itachi... Naruto has been in hiding from the serial killer who murdered his parents. Orochimaru had threatened to put his face all over the news if he didn't play along. That was his leverage over Naruto." Sasuke sat down on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands. "Looks like he was able to carry out his threat even after dying."

Itachi's temper warred with his worry for the blond, but he kept his voice at a whisper, aware of the officers just outside their door. "What did you think was going to happen, Sasuke? You could have just disabled him. I know you have the skill. What were you thinking? Even if you had been the one arrested, Naruto would have been dragged into it, since it was in his room."

Sasuke looked at his brother, and Itachi knew he was suffering. The guilt was painful in his black eyes. "I didn't have a choice, Itachi. I didn't think Naruto would knock me out and try to take the blame! Orochimaru made it clear that he was going to kill Naruto eventually. He really believed that he had bribed enough police and judges that he'd get away with it. Because of who Naruto was," Sasuke's face hardened. "And he was probably right."

Itachi felt his stomach clench at his brother's words. He had hoped that somehow killing Orochimaru had been an accident... that Sasuke had been under a direct threat or had panicked or that somehow Orochimaru had moved unexpectedly and impaled himself on Sasuke's sword. But it was clear that Sasuke had calmly thought about it and made a calculated decision to kill the man who was threatening his lover. "We could have arrested him for attempted murder, Sasuke. You didn't have to take it this far."

"You know that's bullshit, Itachi. You of all people know that. Men like Orochimaru don't go to jail. Naruto would have been killed, and it would have been my fault for not acting when I had the chance. There was a clear threat to someone's life. I would have beaten the charge. Naruto didn't have to fucking step in like this."

"You know why he did it, Sasuke. It's not just the risk of jail for you. Even if you were acquitted, your career would have been over. Naruto is trying to salvage your life for you." At the cost of maybe his own. And I let him.

Itachi drew a breath. He knew that there was a difference between the law and justice. Was it right to kill Orochimaru before he could kill Naruto, when he had made is intent plain? Yes. Was it legal? No.

But Sasuke was his brother.

It didn't change the fact that he was doing the exact same thing that Itachi put people in jail for doing. The same thing, in fact, that his parents had done. He wouldn't excuse it. In then end, he would do whatever he had to for his brother. And find a way to live with the consequences.

Itachi could see the resolve forming in Sasuke's face, likely to go out and confess the truth to the officers standing just outside the door.

"He'll be on the news no matter what, Sasuke. More so if the sordid details of why Orochimaru was trying to kill him and the real nature of the death get out. It will be bad enough that the weapon was unusual, but if it appears to be a straight-forward case of self-defense, it won't make the national news. Add in a gay sex scandal with a public official, and it will take it to a whole other level of
media frenzy. If you get involved in any way, the truth of your relationship with him will come out."

Sasuke's fists clenched. There was no way of getting control on this situation. His brother's career would be over if the truth came out now. And Itachi was right, the scandal would only be worse, and therefore so would the publicity.

"At least let me go with Naruto while he gets his wound checked out," Sasuke said trying to force himself to think clearly about this situation that had spiraled out of control. He needed to be with Naruto.

"No."

Itachi put up his hand as Sasuke started to protest. "Right now we need to minimize the scandal and suspicion, for Naruto's sake and yours. If you go anywhere near him, people will pick up on your relationship and the media drama will spread like wildfire. It will complicate the investigation, and put Naruto at even more risk. Right now, he is an employee of yours who was defending himself. It's not that interesting of a story. Let's keep it that way. You cannot be seen with him in public until he has been cleared."

"Itachi -" Sasuke felt an almost visceral need to be with Naruto. "How serious is his wound?"

"Shisui is an expert marksman. He just barely grazed Naruto. Enough that he can claim he was shot, but he hardly requires medical treatment. He should be able to talk himself out of going to the hospital. It just needs to be documented that he was shot to substantiate the claim of self-defense."

Sasuke nodded, slowly seeing the plan that Naruto had laid out. It shouldn't surprise him. After all, eliminating or altering crime scenes seemed to have been a pretty large part of Naruto's past job. He likely knew all the ins and outs of forensics, and how to pull this off. He was going to have to trust that Naruto knew what he was doing.

He wished he could conjure Orochimaru back from the dead just to kill him all over for causing this much trouble.

As the door closed behind Itachi, Sasuke picked up his phone.

"Suigetsu. I have a job for you. Timing is critical."

-xXx-

Itachi sat next to Naruto in the interrogation room at the police station. So far, he had been content to play the role of passive observer. The police had grilled Naruto about his work with Orochimaru, his history with Nagato, and his employment with Sasuke. In general, Naruto had stuck to the truth. He knew his records from Manhattan would be accessible, so he hadn't bothered to lie that he had worked for Nagato as his security, and that Orochimaru had hired him when all charges against Naruto had been dropped. He said he'd worked as a messenger and a bodyguard for Orochimaru in order to pay off his debts, and when Sasuke had been threatened, Orochimaru had sent Naruto to work there.

They had been impressed to hear about the bomb (and called the police involved to verify that Naruto had in fact been helpful). Itachi knew that police spent a lot of time with people... criminals, victims, and bystanders. The good cops could spot a lie or a story from a mile away. And Naruto wasn't that good of a liar.

But it ended up working in their favor. When they questioned Naruto as to why Orochimaru would want to kill him, Naruto was honestly bewildered. He clearly had no idea, and the police believed
him. He didn't try to make something up, and he didn't evade the question.

"So what exactly happened after you went in your room?"

"I didn't know what had been put in my drink, so I went to the bathroom and made myself throw up. I was still feeling dizzy, and I was concerned that someone would use the opportunity to do something to Sasuke, so I took a cold shower to try to clear my head so I could go help Shisui. I came out of the shower and..." Naruto paused, the image of Sasuke slicing through Orochimaru's neck coming back on him. He swallowed as the guilt crashed over him again. "... and.. a bullet hit the door frame just above my head. Orochimaru was there, and the katana..." Naruto took a steadying breath. He needed to be more articulate. But he couldn't help wondering how Sasuke was dealing with having killed someone. Whether he was upset, or hating Naruto for having dragged him into something like this. Anguish filled the easy-to-read blue eyes.

The officer's face gentled, interpreting Naruto's guilt as guilt for killing in self-defense. As far as the police records showed, Naruto had never killed anyone. "Take your time. It's not your fault. We found the bullet-hole above the bathroom door. So far everything you've said checks out. If someone were coming at me with a gun, I'd grab whatever was handy to defend myself, too."

Naruto smiled wanly. Sometimes not having a good poker face paid off. "I... I don't know exactly what happened after that. I grabbed the sword and the gun went off..." Naruto brushed his hand over the bandage on his arm unconsciously.

"You were lucky the bullet only grazed you," the cop said, clearly on Naruto's side at this point.

"If the sword hadn't caught his wrist, I'd be dead," Naruto said, his mind going back again to the blank look on Sasuke's face.

Itachi felt himself relax fractionally. Things were going well. One mistake and it would have meant a lengthy and expensive trial. And more importantly, Itachi would have had to face the consequences of letting an innocent man take the fall for his brother. If Naruto were to be formally charged... Itachi didn't want to make that choice.

The two officers took a few more notes, then stood. "Well, Mr. Uzumaki. As of right now, you are free to go. Will you still be working with Mr. Uchiha?"

Naruto looked at Itachi, not sure what to say. "Yes," Itachi answered smoothly. "We are fully convinced of Mr. Uzumaki's innocence in this matter, and would not penalize him by taking away his means of employment. He will be reachable at my brother's address if you have any further questions."

"Very good. We would ask that you don't leave town, Mr. Uzumaki, until forensics has confirmed your story. We will need you to leave your clothing here as evidence. We have called the hotel, and they are sending over some items from your room to change into. Assuming everything checks out, we won't be pressing charges on this matter. Though the lack of motive is a bit concerning."

Naruto nodded, and said honestly, "I still can hardly believe that he did this. It just... doesn't make sense."

When the exited the police station, the press was swarming. Itachi stood by Naruto, simply stating that Naruto had been released after being questioned, and all evidence pointed to it being self-defense. Mindful of what Sasuke had said, Itachi tried to minimize their time in front of the cameras without making it look like they had something to hide.
Itachi called Sasuke and gave him a quick update as they drove back into the city, careful not to say too much over the phone in case the calls were being monitored.

Itachi dropped Naruto off, with a final warning to avoid being seen in public with Sasuke for a few days, when hopefully the media attention would die down.

"Aren't you coming up with me?" Naruto asked, not quite sure it was a good idea for him to be alone with Sasuke right now.

Itachi smirked. "I have a feeling Sasuke would rather discuss a few things with you privately. It's late. I'll come by in the morning, and we can all talk then."

Naruto looked at the clock in Itachi's car, and realized it was past two in the morning. "Um... ok, then. I guess I'll... just see you tomorrow."

Itachi raised an eyebrow at Naruto's clear show of nerves. "You can't run away now, Naruto. The police are going to be calling you over the next couple of days. You need to stay with Sasuke, or they will begin to dig deeper."

Naruto nodded, though hesitantly. "Thanks. I didn't mean to have you dragged in, Itachi. I had hoped you'd just send Shisui, so you'd be able to keep your hands clean."

Itachi didn't say anything for a minute. "Sasuke is my brother. Everything else comes second."

Naruto wondered what that kind of bond felt like. Then he thought about Gaara. "Yeah," Naruto said softly. "Brotherhood matters more."

Not noticing the suddenly speculative look that Itachi sent him, Naruto got out of the car and headed into Sasuke's building. Jugo simply nodded at him as he went up.

Naruto wondered just how pissed off Sasuke was going to be.

Sasuke was pacing back and forth in his living room when the chime of the elevator sounded. He had sent Shisui out to help Suigetsu, but neither man had contacted him yet. Sasuke stopped while the doors opened, his eyes roving over Naruto as the younger man stepped almost hesitantly from the elevator.

They looked at each other for a moment. Naruto tried to read the expression on Sasuke's face and failed.

"They... um... let me go. Itachi told you, right?"

Sasuke nodded curtly.

"So... how are you doing?" Naruto asked after another awkward pause.

"Well, I wasn't the one who was shot, now was I?" Sasuke said, his voice emotionless. "Of course, someone did knock me out. Is that why you're worried? I'm not going to press charges."

Naruto had been midway taking off his shoes, but stopped at the sound of the underlying anger that was in Sasuke's voice.
"I didn't... I didn't think you'd press charges. Though I guess you could. But it would be a bit awkward explaining the circumstances of your injury."

"Awkward. Yes, I suppose that's one way of putting it. Although given that it would lead to my brother getting disbarred, and the three of you in jail for various felonies, awkward is probably not the best word for it."

Naruto drew a breath. *Fuck.* He should have known Sasuke was going to be difficult about this.

"Sasuke," Naruto began again. "I'm sorry... none of this was supposed to happen. I am trying to make it right, but I know it's all my fault. I should have left when Shisui came, but I just -"

"Shut up," Sasuke fisted his hand into the front of Naruto's shirt and slammed him against the wall. "Who gave you the right to make that choice for me? I'm the one who killed him. I'm the one who should have been brought down to the station. Orochimaru was there because of me, not you. I'm not going to let you use this as an excuse to run away or paint a bull's eye on your back. You fucking idiot."

Naruto opened his mouth as his brain tried to think up a reply, but Sasuke simply crushed their mouths together and cut off any words that might have formed. The pale hands were almost frenzied in their haste to remove Naruto's shirt and unbuckle his pants. The shirt pulled slightly on the bandage around Naruto's arm, and the blond hissed slightly at the pain.

Sasuke drew his head back enough to look at the bandage, his fingertips running almost tenderly over the wound it covered before wrenching Naruto flush against him again.

Not five minutes ago, Naruto had thought he was too tired and too stressed for sex, but he almost came as Sasuke unzipped his pants and roughly slid his hand inside to close around Naruto's achingly hard erection.

"Sasuke, please," Naruto said, his own fingers now ripping the button off Sasuke's trousers and jerking them down.

They barely made it to the bedroom where the lube and condoms were before Sasuke was slamming into Naruto. They screamed their releases together only minutes later, with no control or finesse, just a blinding need to be together.

Naruto lay on the bed, gasping for breath, one sock still dangling from his foot.

Sasuke was laying on his back, looking at the ceiling. "I'm not going to let you leave me over this."

There were a million reasons that flashed through Naruto's head on why staying made no sense. "Sasuke -"

"No, Naruto. Just no. If you leave me because you're bored of this, then fine. But don't leave because you're afraid. That's just bullshit."

Naruto looked over at his lover. He cared about this man. There was no point in denying it now. It mattered to Naruto what happened to Sasuke. "I'm not going to be responsible for destroying your life, Sasuke. Don't make me live with that guilt. I won't do it."

"We can figure this out, Naruto. Just don't run away."

Naruto swallowed, closing his eyes and imagining for a moment that he actually could do what Sasuke was asking him to.
"I won't leave you because of Orochimaru." It was all Naruto could offer. Sasuke didn't blame Naruto for Orochimaru's death and Sasuke's part in it. He still felt guilty that he had pulled Sasuke into something so sordid, but evidently Sasuke was handling it. Better than Naruto had after his first kill, actually. But that wasn't the biggest risk, and they both knew it. "But, Sasuke, I won't stay and put you at risk if things get worse."

Sasuke lay still, not acknowledging the second part of what Naruto had said, though he understood its meaning. He felt like he was losing him... that no matter what he did, Naruto was slipping through his fingers.

-xXx-

The next morning, Itachi called to say that the police had a few follow-up questions for Naruto and would be coming by Itachi's office later that day to talk with both of them. Itachi wanted Naruto to come early so they could discuss how to answer the questions. Sasuke was told in no uncertain terms to stay home.

Sasuke was annoyed, but knew the reason for it. It was important for him to be removed from Naruto and this investigation in the public eye.

Naruto sighed. "Why does it have to be at his office?"

Sasuke smirked. "Scared?"

Naruto smirked back. "Let's just say that courthouses don't hold the fondest memories for me."

But in the end, Naruto went. Sasuke offered to call him a taxi, but with traffic Naruto preferred to just take the subway.

Naruto heard the call for his stop and stepped off the train with the press of fellow passengers. He hadn't gone two steps when he felt a sharp pressure at the base of his spine, and a soft voice spoke, cold lips brushing his ear, "So nice to see you again, my little fox." A breath of laughter whispered along his neck, laced with a hint of madness. "I saw you on the news yesterday, and just had to say hello. It's been far too long."

Everything began to spin as Naruto felt himself drowning in a rush of panic, and his vision blurred as images of his past collided and merged with images of the present.

That voice.

He would never as long as he lived, escape the nightmare of that voice. Instinctively, Naruto reached for the knife in his pocket, but it wasn't there. "I wouldn't move if I were you," the sing-song voice warned, a piercing sensation in Naruto's lower back accompanying the warning.

Naruto felt a warm wetness leaking from where the first blade had been inserted in his spine. Two bladed fingers followed the flow of blood almost as a caress before they, too, pierced his body. Any more pressure and they would sever his spinal cord. Naruto clenched his teeth as the scent of blood and the sound of that voice flooded through him. He knew without being able to turn and look that the hand pressed into his back bore a glove with five long razor blades attached, one over each finger like claws. Just as he knew the face of the black-haired man who wielded them.

The childhood name he had heard for the killer surfaced to his mind, even though he had long ago learned that was not his real name. "Kyuubi," he whispered.

The whispered laughter came again, almost gleeful. "I'm glad you haven't forgotten about me. But I"
am not using that name here." The final bladed finger drove in as the voice turned playful. "I'll see you soon. We have things to discuss."

Naruto felt a brush against his back pocket, then the pressure on his spine was released. Naruto staggered and fell to his knees on the platform, the throngs of people flowing past him and ebbing away. One or two stopped to ask him if he were ok, but Naruto didn't hear them. His head was filled with the screams from a night more than a decade ago, his ears no longer tuned to the present. Naruto's ingrained sense of self-preservation screamed at him to move.

Why hadn't he killed me? Naruto's body was shaking as he tried to force himself to stand up and protect himself. Save his parents. They needed him. The faces around him seemed to blur together, the language they were speaking seemed foreign. Where was he?

He had been so close. Why hadn't Naruto had a knife? Naruto knew somehow there was a reason, but he couldn't remember it. The wasted second he had spent reaching for it had lost him the opportunity. He could have killed him. Finally, he'd had a chance. But all he had been able to do was stand there. Again. Even if it had meant a severed spine, it would have been worth it. To see him finally dead.

"Gaara," Naruto whispered, wishing he had the power to summon his friend to him. His eyes focused somewhat as he realized that he had to get out of the open. He was wounded and basically a sitting duck. The man had said he'd be back, and just because he'd been allowed to live for the moment didn't mean that was a permanent decision.

Naruto forced himself to his feet despite the numbness in his body, glad to find it still responded to his commands. At least the blades hadn't penetrated deep enough to nick the spine.

He stumbled up the steps out of the subway, not sure where he was going. He had no cell phone, but he needed to make a call. Who could he call? Not his parents. Gaara? No, he had no way to reach him. He staggered into the first building he came to, not even registering what it was. His eyes didn't seem to be able to process anything, as scenes from his past continued to merged unpredictably with what his eyes were telling him was real. There was a security desk. His mother's bleeding body on the sidewalk. Metal detectors. A mocking voice, sick with pleasure. He reached back and touched his lower back. His hand came away red. His father's blood on the blades of the glove.

He saw a sign for the restrooms, and walked blindly towards it. He could hide there, he'd be able to see him coming from there. This time he would be ready. He would kill him. Was he still too late? His father. His mother. He looked down at the blood on his hands. Was it his? Theirs?

He felt eyes on him, not sure they were real or not. Somewhere in his mind he knew he was having an episode. It always happened when he was seriously injured, unless Gaara was with him. Gaara was the only one who could pull him back. But Gaara wasn't here. He needed him to tell him what was real. Gaara always knew.

"Naruto."

Was someone calling his name? With a slow, dizzy spin, Naruto realized he had made it to the men's room. He felt a hand grip his shoulder, and he spun on instinct, grabbing the man's hand. He heard the man's thumb dislocate with a pop while his free hand gripped the man's throat as he threw him across the room, the adrenaline that was pumping through his body blinding him to the pain the motion caused his injury, or the fresh wash of blood that ran down his lower back. He heard the man grunt as he hit the wall with a thud.

Naruto's whole body was shaking, whether from fear or blood loss he wasn't certain. He took a step
towards the still figure, then paused. He felt like he was watching the events from outside his body
"Naruto!"

The voice again. It wasn't the same one from the subway.
"Naruto, why are your hands full of blood?" The voice was calm. Almost soothing. He'd heard it before.

Who was talking? Naruto tried to concentrate on the person he had thrown. Was this a face from the present or an illusion from his past? The black-haired man wasn't getting up, but he didn't look injured. Black hair... but it was longer than the man who'd hurt him. This man seemed to just be sitting... not attacking. Naruto knew this person. Trusted him.

"Naruto. I'm calling Sasuke. It's ok."

Sasuke? He didn't want Sasuke to be hurt.

"Gaara. Get Gaara," Naruto countered, his voice sounding strange to his ears. Why did it sound so far away?

"I don't know who that is. Naruto, can you tell me how to contact him?"

Naruto just looked at him. There was no way for him to contact Gaara. He already knew that, right?

"Naruto, you're ok. We'll get you help."

The man kept using his name. If Naruto could just get his eyes to focus on his face, he'd know him. Why couldn't he focus? An image flickered across Naruto's mind. An empty street. His parents. So much blood.

Naruto pressed his back against the wall. He heard the man talking rapidly into his phone. Why were they speaking English? Wasn't he in Japan?

After a few minutes, another man entered the room. Naruto tensed up. He didn't know this new man. Naruto flexed his knees, his hands coming up instinctively to defend against an attack as the man with the spiked ponytail ran towards the man Naruto had thrown.

"Itachi. Oh my god, are you ok?" Ponytail bent to help the man on the floor.

"Sit down, Shikamaru. The blood's not mine. All I have is a dislocated thumb. Naruto's been injured. I grabbed his shoulder. He didn't know who I was when he attacked me. Sasuke's on his way, but Naruto is asking for someone named Gaara."

Shikamaru shook his head indicating that he also didn't know who that was.

Shikamaru had seen Itachi leaning against the wall with a blood-smeared throat and assumed the worst. He had just finished testifying in one of Itachi's cases, and luckily hadn't left the building when he got a call from the councilor.

Shikamaru took a step back from Naruto with his hands raised to show he was no threat and slowly sat next to Itachi. He had studied the outburst in the holding cell, and was fairly confident that the blond would only attack if he felt threatened.

"Naruto. My name is Shikamaru. I'm a friend of Itachi's," Shikamaru said, his voice almost sounding bored. He was no threat to Naruto.
"Itachi," Naruto said the name slowly, confusion slowly melting into recognition as he looked at the man he had thrown. He knew this man. He wasn't afraid of him. "Sorry."

Itachi nodded, and shifted to a more comfortable seating position now that it was clear Naruto was regaining some form of control. "It's ok. No harm done."

"Naruto," Shikamaru said, his voice carefully free of all stress, sounding casual. "Do you know where you are?"

"Um... I was... in the alley... going... my parents..." panic started to build as the memories flashed back. He reached for his stomach, expecting to find it bleeding. "Fuck..."

Shikamaru glanced at Itachi. "He's dissociative. He's having a flashback to a different event."

Itachi nodded. He could tell that Naruto was going in and out of focus. They needed to ascertain how serious the blond's wounds were, but physical examination was not going to be possible at this point. But it didn't seem like they were going to be able to just ask him either.

Shit. Sasuke's going to kill me if I let his boyfriend bleed to death in my office, Itachi sighed mentally as Shikamaru kept a calm dialogue with Naruto, having him describe the bathroom, what he was wearing, and other simple things. Naruto was able to focus as long as Shikamaru didn't start discussing what had happened to him. As soon as they got near that topic, Naruto would seize up.

This was taking too long. They needed to be able to ascertain the severity of his wounds. Itachi flipped open his phone. There was one other person he could call.

"Hello?"

"This is Itachi Uchiha. May I speak with Dr. Haruno?"

"Speaking," the voice on the other line immediately tensed. "Is everything ok?"

Itachi hesitated. "I was wondering if you happened to have the contact information for Gaara?"

"Oh my god, what's happened to Naruto?" Sakura's voice was panicked. Naruto would never have used Gaara's name unless it was an emergency.

"That's what we're trying to figure out. He's been injured, and he's having some sort of flashback."

"Damnit, Naruto!" Sakura's voice sounded worried, despite the angry tone of her words. "Where is he?"

"We're at the courthouse. He's asking for Gaara. Do you know who that is?"

"Gaara is Naruto's best friend. But he doesn't have a phone. He's the only one who can bring Naruto fully out of these episodes. But they usually only trigger if he's severely wounded."

"He appears to be bleeding, but I don't think the wound is severe."

"How can you tell? Where is the wound?"

"I don't know. But he picked me up and threw me across the room when I touched his shoulder and it didn't seem to faze him."

"That doesn't mean anything. He ran out of my ER with three broken ribs, a concussion and severe internal bleeding the first time I met him. I'm about forty minutes away. He should have snapped out
of it by then and I will be able to treat his wounds. If there is any way he can wait, then just stay there until it passes. If he loses consciousness, just take him to the nearest hospital and I'll meet you there."

Sakura hung up her cell, worry filled her as she rushed to clock out. She didn't bother taking off her white lab coat that would mean she's have to hang it in her locker. Luckily enough today she wasn't working the ER but was showing the interns around so her coat and scrubs were clean.

As she ran out of the hospital she bumped into her cousin, nearly knocking her over.

"Hey!" Ino complained. "Sakura, what the hell!"

Without even bothering to apologize the pink-haired woman continued her mad dash towards the exit. Memories of the few times she witnessed Naruto's flashbacks filled her mind as she hails a cab. Unconsciously, she raises a hand to her throat from remembering the time he nearly strangled her. If Gaara hadn't been there...

*Gaara,* she thought desperately with a clench of her teeth. *Even if by the time I get there Naruto will be out of it...there's no telling what he might do before then.*

With that in mind Sakura reached into her medical bag to the hidden pocket and pulled out the disposable phone with Kiba's and Kakashi's number saved in it. They had to find Gaara.

. . .

Itachi hung up and slowly rolled his shoulders, ascertaining that he hadn't received any injuries when he hit the wall. His thumb hurt like a bitch, but it was manageable. He slowly pulled it up and let it pop back into place, gritting his teeth against the pain. If Sasuke lucked out with the subway and didn't take his car, it should only take him fifteen minutes to get here. It had been at least five already.

Naruto and Shikamaru were still talking. Itachi focused back on what they were saying.

"That's right. We're in New York. Do you know what this building is?"

Naruto hesitated. "I... I didn't check when I came in. There were metal detectors. Lots of security. Government building."

"That's right. We're at the courthouse."

Shikamaru was able to keep up the non-threatening conversation while Itachi watched the slow drips of blood hit the floor at the blond's feet. As long as the pace of bleeding seemed slow, he wouldn't call 911. Shikamaru asked Naruto to tell him what color the wall was behind him, and succeeded in getting him to turn around, and they were able to see the large red patch in his shirt. Five narrow cuts in the fabric were visible as well.

The door flew open and Naruto spun to face the source of the noise. Sasuke walked in out of breath, his eyes moving between Itachi and Naruto. He took a step towards Itachi, a panicked look on his face at the sight of the blood on his throat.

"It's not mine, little brother. Naruto's been stabbed in the back. Literally. I think it was the person Hidan was warning him about."

Sasuke turned to Naruto, his eyes frantically running over the blond's body looking for the injury.

"Don't go near him," Shikamaru warned.
Sasuke could see Naruto's hands shaking. "Naruto," Sasuke said taking a step towards him.

"Sasuke," Shikamaru's voice sharpened in warning. "He can't recognize you right now. If you approach him, he'll view you as a threat."

"He's bleeding. We don't know how serious the wound is. I'm not going to wait until he passes out from blood loss to fucking find out."

"He threw Itachi across the room. If you trigger another flashback, he could hurt you."

Naruto's eyes had been locked on Sasuke's, but the flickered to Itachi at the mention of the man's name.

"Itachi," Naruto said, his eyes darted over to where Itachi was calmly sitting on the floor next to Shikamaru.

"Fuck, I didn't mean to... I didn't know it was -"

"Naruto, I'm fine," Itachi repeated, seeing Naruto's distress level rising.

"You're bleeding," Naruto said.

"No. I'm not bleeding, Naruto," Itachi said, careful to keep his voice calm.

"I think that is your blood on Itachi, Naruto," Sasuke said, matching Itachi's tone and bringing the blue gaze back to him.

"Sasuke?" Naruto said, his voice shaking slightly.

"Yes, Naruto. I'm here," Sasuke could feel Naruto's gaze focusing on him. Becoming more grounded. "Can you tell me what happened?"

Shikamaru slanted a glance at Sasuke, feeling that the topic was too risky. But Naruto nodded slowly.

"My back. He... he stabbed me in my back."

"Who?" Sasuke asked keeping his gaze locked on Naruto's and ignoring Shikamaru's kick to his ankle for pushing too fast.

"Fuck..." Naruto's eyes grew panicked. "You guys need to get out of here. You need to stay the hell away from me."

"We lost him," Shikamaru said, frustration tingeing his voice.

Sasuke narrowed his eyes, which were still locked on the blue gaze. "No. He's warning us. He's not flashing back. He's remembering. Right Naruto?"

Naruto kept his eyes locked on Sasuke like a lifeline. He slowly nodded.

"Naruto, I've called Sakura. She'll be here in less than half an hour now. She's trying to get a hold of Gaara," Itachi said. Sasuke didn't let his gaze shift from Naruto, but Itachi could sense his brother's question, and addressed it. "Naruto was asking for someone named Gaara. Sakura said he's the only one who is able to bring Naruto out of an episode when he's seriously injured."

"Sakura's coming?" Naruto asked, following their conversation, his eyes still on Sasuke's. "Fucking
hell. She's going to kick my ass."

Itachi smirked, wiggling his sore thumb. "Serves you right."

"Naruto," Sasuke took another step towards him. "I want to just check your wound. You were stabbed in the back. If it hit your kidney, you could bleed out."

Naruto tensed. "Sasuke... I don't... I don't always have control. I'm pretty sure I'm ok. He was just... reminding me."

Sasuke felt a ball of ice form in his stomach. "It was him... the man who killed your parents."

Shikamaru blew out an annoyed breath. "The objective when someone is flashing is to keep them focused in the present, not talk about the fucking event that set them off in the first place."

Naruto let out a nervous laugh. "You're a shrink I take it."

"Yeah," Shikamaru said, sounding bored again, hiding his surprise at how lucid Naruto was suddenly seeming.

"I hate doctors. Especially shrinks."

Shikamaru smirked. "Me, too."

Sasuke had reached Naruto, but hadn't touched him yet. "Naruto, I'm going to lift up your shirt so I can see the wound, ok?"

Naruto looked into Sasuke's steady gaze, feeling the panic and disorientation slowly ebbing away. "Ok."

Naruto stepped away from the wall as Sasuke lifted his shirt. Fury pumped through Sasuke's body and he had to physically hold himself back from punching into the tile wall. "That fucker," Sasuke hissed.

Naruto's back was marked with the exact same pattern of cuts as the scars on his stomach. The deepest one was over the blond's spine, positioned between two vertebra. If Naruto had moved at all, the cut would have severed his spinal cord and paralyzed him.

"Yeah... that pretty much describes him," Naruto said with a shaky laugh. "So... what's the damage?"

"Five small cuts. Not deep enough to hit an organ, but the one over your spine almost put an end to your career as a homicidal maniac."

"Pfft," Naruto snickered, amazed that he could. "So... can we call Sakura and tell her not to come?" Naruto asked hopefully.

Itachi grinned evilly. "Not a chance."

"Are we really going to hang out in the men's room until she gets here?" Naruto asked.

Itachi slowly stood, and Shikamaru did the same. The psychiatrist looked between Sasuke and Naruto, his interest showing.

"He's past the episode now," Shika remarked quietly to Sasuke. Naruto was washing his bloody hands in the sink. They were still shaking, but he could finally control them. "He trusts you to a
remarkable degree."

Itachi noticed the way Sasuke's eyes stayed locked on Naruto, even as he acknowledged Shikamaru's statement. Naruto pulled off his shirt and took a damp paper towel and wiped off some of the blood. Sasuke folded up a few sheets and pressed them against the wounds to slow the bleeding.

When they had done all the could, Itachi spoke. "Let's go up to my office. Sakura will be able to treat Naruto there."

The door to the bathroom flew open, and a red-haired man with glass-green eyes stepped in.

Naruto turned, and a wave of relief and something deeper flashed across his face.

"Naruto," the red-haired man ignored the others in the now extremely crowded men's room and crossed quickly to Naruto, taking the blond's chin gently in his fingers and looking into lucid blue eyes. "You're already back," the redhead said, his low, rough voice sounding slightly puzzled. His green eyes scanned the room, fixing on Sasuke's face thoughtfully.

Sasuke's eyes narrowed, and he took a step towards Naruto. "Who are you?" he bit out.

"It's ok... this is Gaara," Naruto said, scratching the back of his head sheepishly, then wincing at the pain as the motion pulled his cuts open again.

Gaara frowned and spun Naruto around, removing the make-shift bandages to reveal the familiar wound pattern.

"I'm going to kill him very slowly when I find him," Gaara said, his voice completely calm and factual as he stared at the wounds on Naruto's back.

No one doubted him.

-xXx-

to be continued...

So my description of Naruto's break is based on a family friend who has PTSD. This was how he described his flashbacks, and how his doctor recommended dealing with him when they triggered. I know there are many flavors and treatment ideas on this topic, but this is just one.

Oh, and Kuubi is not an OC. He is an actual character in the manga just borrowing the name. Hopefully the mask and black hair have let you all figure out who that is, yes? Not actually a demon fox. No magic in this story.

And you can also thank BriEva for convincing me not to kill off Sasuke in this chapter and turning it into an ItaNaru story after reading the latest manga chapter (692). Stupid Sasuke. I need to stop reading the manga now. I no longer want it to end in 'talk no jutsu'. I want blood on the walls. They can hook up in their next lives. Hopefully the stick won't make it through the afterlife, even though it is deeply shoved up Sasuke's ass, apparently.
Fallout

Warning: Hard Yaoi (Boy x Boy) Sex, language, etc. Not appropriate for young readers. 18+

Author's note - Thanks for the comments... I enjoy chatting with many of you about the manga, and this story, and random thing, so just... thanks! It makes is fun to be on this site, so I appreciate it. :-) Once again thanks to BriEva for constructive criticism and advice on this chapter.

-xXx-

"I'm going to kill him very slowly when I find him," Gaara said, his voice completely calm and factual as he stared at the wounds on Naruto's back.

The words hung heavily in the small room.

"Gaara," Naruto said softly, starting to turn, but Gaara's hand touched his shoulder, preventing the motion.

"Gaara," Naruto said again. "He's mine. It has to be me."

Gaara's fingers dropped to brush lightly over the skin just above the cuts in Naruto's back. His eyes were focused on the wounded flesh, and where it connected with his trembling fingertips. Naruto's eyes widened slightly at the uncharacteristic contact. Other than through the red-head's fingertips, their bodies did not touch, but the intensity of the emotion that flowed between them was almost tangible. Gaara knew how close he had come to losing Naruto. He was numb with the knowledge that he hadn't been there to protect the one person he cared for from the maniac who was hunting him. He didn't understand how Naruto was still alive, given that he clearly had not been in a state to defend himself. And while Gaara was grateful that Naruto had survived, he was deeply unsettled because he didn't know the reason.

All he knew for sure was that this wasn't over.

Sasuke took a step towards Naruto, unsure who this man was to his lover. His gaze was fixed on where Gaara's fingertips connected with Naruto's bare flesh. "Naruto," Sasuke said, drawing Naruto's attention away from the man still touching his back.

"Sasuke. This is Gaara. He's my..." Naruto struggled to find a word that could convey in any sense just what Gaara was to him.

"Family," Gaara finished for him.

Sasuke frowned. "Naruto never said he had a brother."

Gaara smirked very slightly, finally allowing his fingers to drop from Naruto's skin, but not moving himself away from the blond. He wouldn't fail to protect his friend a second time. "There's a lot we don't talk about with strangers."

Sasuke's eyes narrowed.

"And who are you to him?" Gaara asked, his eyes unblinking on Sasuke's.

"He's my employer," Naruto began, sensing the tension between the two and wanting to diffuse it as soon as possible. "Orochimaru hired me to-"
Gaara leveled a cool stare at Naruto. "I know exactly what Orochimaru hired you to do, Naruto, and I'm betting so does everyone else in this room. So let's avoid the dance." Gaara turned his unflinching gaze back to Sasuke. "What are you to him?"

"He's my lover," Sasuke calmly stated, more than happy to assert that fact to the man who was still standing within touching distance of Naruto. Sasuke felt the urge to physically insert himself between the two, but restrained himself. He didn't notice the slight smile that appeared on Shikamaru's face at his statement, nor the glance he exchanged with Itachi.

"You were able to bring him out of his episode," Gaara stated flatly.

"Yes," Sasuke replied, wondering if Naruto's friend felt envy that he was no longer the only one who could reach Naruto when he was like this, or whether Gaara was just glad that someone else had been able to help.

Gaara seemed to evaluate him for several tense moments. Finally he gave a small nod. "That's good. No one else has ever been able to help him."

"Except you," Sasuke said flatly, trying to control the surge of jealousy that flooded him at that statement. Naruto had had a life before Sasuke, and Sasuke needed to accept that. The only problem was that the connection between Gaara and Naruto didn't look like history. It looked to be very much still present.

Gaara just shrugged. "As I said. We're family. But now he also has you."

Naruto released a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding at Gaara's statement. Gaara approved of Sasuke, in as much as Gaara approved of anyone. But before Naruto could spend time thinking about why he was so happy about that fact, Gaara was speaking again.

"You need to file a police report about the attack."

Shocked, Naruto just stared at his friend as though he had grown another head. Fighting was just a part of their lives. It wasn't something you went to the cops about. Most police felt like if criminals killed each other off, it just saved them the cost of a trial as long as no civilians got caught in the cross-fire. But even if they did want to help Naruto, there wouldn't be anything they could do about it. Especially in this case. Cops had to play by the rules. Tobi never did.

"Gaara - you know who did this. Police from like ten different countries have been chasing him for over a decade on multiple counts of murder, some of which were high profile, innocent people. I seriously doubt that the fact that he knifed some two-bit criminal like me is going to make any difference to them."

Gaara just looked at him steadily. "You need to talk to the police."

There was a subtle stress on the word 'police' that Naruto picked up finally. *Kakashi wants me to go see him.*


Shikamaru looked at his watch. "Shit. I was supposed to be back at the station fifteen minutes ago."

Itachi nodded, releasing the man from further obligation to stay. "Thanks for coming. If you need me to send anything over saying it was an emergency situation, I'm happy to."
Shikamaru sighed. "Nah. I'll let you know if I catch any grief, but it's no big deal," he had the sense that the more they were able to keep this incident off the records, the better. He turned to look at Gaara and Naruto, then handed them each a card. "You should come see me."

Naruto took the card to be polite, but Gaara just stared at it. "Thanks, Dr. -" Naruto looked at the card. "Dr. Nara. But you know, Gaara and I don't exactly work at places with health insurance. I'm pretty sure we can't afford your fees, so..."

Shikamaru placed the card directly into Gaara's hand, his other hand touching Gaara's forearm as he did so. Gaara flinched slightly, and Shikamaru's gaze sharpened as he immediately withdrew his hand. "Sorry," Shikamaru said softly, cautiously.

Something flickered in Gaara's eyes... surprise that his reaction had been both noted and properly interpreted.

"You wouldn't need to pay me," Shikamaru said casually. "You're friends of Itachi's. That makes us friends by proxy. I don't charge my friends for talking."

Gaara looked at him consideringly, then placed the card in his pocket. Naruto simply shrugged.

Satisfied that he had done all he could, Shikamaru left.

"I'll take you down to the station when you're done here," Sasuke said.

"No," Gaara and Itachi said simultaneously.

Gaara turned to look at Itachi, wondering why he had also expressed disapproval of the idea. Itachi met Gaara's gaze, then turned to Sasuke

"Sasuke, remember all your *commitments*," Itachi reminded him. Sasuke couldn't be seen to be overly involved with Naruto, especially in front of the police. Naruto was an employee as far as the police knew. It needed to remain that way until the investigation was closed.

"There is a deranged serial killer stalking Naruto. I'm not just going to let him wander around by himself-"

"He's not," Gaara interrupted. "I'll be with him."

"Don't make me out to be some helpless child," Naruto said, sounding annoyed. "I don't need a body guard."

"Against anyone else you'd be right," Gaara said. "But this man is the one exception, Naruto. You can't control where your mind goes when you confront him. If you remain in the present, I have no doubt that you could take him out. But..." Gaara let the rest of the statement remain unsaid.

"Fine," Naruto said. "You can hold my fucking hand to the police station."

Gaara narrowed his eyes, but Naruto didn't feel guilty. If Gaara was going to throw Naruto's mental issues in his face, Naruto could remind Gaara that he wasn't without a few of his own.

"Are you up to talking with the police about Orochimaru before you go?" Itachi asked. "If not, I can have them meet you at the station."

"I'm fine," Naruto stated, just as the door to the men's room opened again.

A pink-haired woman walked in carrying a doctor's bag.
Naruto blinked at her. "Um... you do know this is the men's room, right?"

Sakura rolled her eyes. "And here I thought only girls were supposed to hang out in the bathroom together. It's not like anyone's using it for its intended purposes at the moment. And even if you were, none of you have anything I haven't seen before.

Gaara raised a hairless eyebrow. "Oh, really?"

Sakura flushed, but wasn't about to be intimidated. "Yes, REALLY. Working in an ER pretty much means bodily fluids and functions are no longer a mystery to me. Look, Itachi called me and said Naruto was bleeding all over the bathroom floor from some unknown wounds. I'm not just going to wait in the lobby for you guys to come out just to protect my 'innocence' about what the inside of a men's room looks like."

Naruto laughed, and Sakura looked at him, not able to hide her obvious relief that he seemed to be ok. She walked over to where Naruto stood by the sink next to Gaara. "It's a good thing you were able to get here so quickly."

Gaara reluctantly vacated his position next to Naruto to allow Sakura access, giving Sasuke another speculative glance. "Actually, he had brought Naruto out before I got here," Gaara said, tilting his head toward Sasuke.

Sakura's hand froze as she was reaching into her bag for the disinfectant. "What?" Her gaze fell on the marks on Naruto's back and she let out a small cry, immediately kicking herself for the unprofessional noise. She recognized the pattern of the incisions. "Naruto..." she said, real worry apparent in her voice. The wounds themselves were not life threatening. It was the person who delivered them that shook her. She had never asked Naruto where the scars on his stomach had come from, but she had known they were old, and not accidental. There were times when Naruto's hand would brush against the scars on his stomach, as though expecting to see them still bleeding.

Whatever they were, she knew that the depth of the wounds ran much deeper than the flesh. They were why Naruto was broken. And evidently the person who had done this had come back to finish the job. Anguish and fury coursed through Sakura, and she clenched her jaw against it. She drew a slow breath to steady herself. Right now she needed to focus on Naruto's wounds, not how they came to be. "So... Sasuke was able to talk you back, huh?" She put as much sisterly teasing as she could manage into her tone.

Naruto shrugged, uncomfortable that this was becoming such a major topic of conversation. It was exposing a level of trust for Sasuke that Naruto hadn't even really processed internally yet.

"Look, there was this shrink, Nara, here as well. And Itachi let me throw him against a wall. It was sort of a group effort. Who knows, maybe I'm finally starting to be able to control it more on my own, or something."

Gaara snorted skeptically. Naruto would have stomped on his foot but Sakura was already pouring disinfectant onto a gauze pad and swabbing at the wound.

"Jesus fuck, Sakura! Can you warn a guy before you do that stuff?" Naruto tried to close his mind off to the smell.

"Suck it up and stop being a baby," Sakura said, her words harsh but her eyes soft with understanding as she worked as quickly as possible then re-capped the bottle to minimize the spread
of the smell. "The wounds are deep, but not very long. I'm going to try to see if we can get away with using suture tape instead of stitches. But if it continues to bleed for more than two days, you need to call me and I'll have to stitch you up. That means no more throwing people into walls for the next couple of days."

Itachi snickered and Naruto breathed out a sigh of relief. He still felt totally off-balance after having come face-to-face with the man who had filled his nightmares since he was a child. He was a little worried that the pain of having the stitches would set him off again. He gripped the basin of the sink to stop the sudden shaking of his hands, leaning forward a bit.

Sakura noticed a piece of paper sticking up from Naruto's back pocket. She pulled it out, thinking only that it was likely ruined with blood but still might be salvageable.

She handed it to Naruto, who looked at it and frowned. "It was in your back pocket. You bled all over it, so I hope it wasn't important."

Naruto recalled the brush he had felt against his back pocket, and slowly took the paper and opened it.

Little fox.

You've grown up into such an interesting specimen. And so skilled. I enjoyed your display against the Russians. Your red-headed friend was quite good, too. It was hard picking which of you I wanted, but since you were the one to deprive me of my last partner, it only makes sense that you should take his place. Which is convenient, since you already bear my mark.

Your latest kill is my favorite. You used a sword... very creative. I wish I could have seen it. Did you feel the spray as you slit his throat? So much better than with a gun, don't you think?

You are almost ready.

Naruto was unable to drag his eyes from the paper. But at least he understood. He knew there had to be a reason why he wasn't dead on the floor of the subway station.

Tobi wasn't planning on killing Naruto. He was planning on recruiting him.

"In what world... would he think I would do anything other than drive my knife through his jugular?" Naruto's voice was dead calm. This was a perfect opportunity. It meant that he would have a chance to take his enemy out, because his enemy would hesitate where Naruto would not.

Gaara pulled the note from Naruto's hand, reading it quickly before handing it over to Sasuke. Sasuke hid his surprise that Gaara would have voluntarily done so.

Gaara gave a low laugh. "You might want to refrain from planning homicide inside in the fucking courthouse in front of someone from the DA's office, Naruto."

Naruto blushed and looked over at Itachi somewhat sheepishly. "I was... just joking?"

Itachi rolled his eyes. At this point, he was already guilty of criminal facilitation when it came to Orochimaru's death. But he'd rather not be involved in other deaths if he could help it. "Of course," Itachi said sarcastically. "But we already have another death to deal with. Our appointment with the officer leading the investigation into Orochimaru's death is in less than twenty minutes. I doubt they will want to hold that conversation here. Is Naruto patched up enough for the interview, Dr.
Haruno?"

Sakura nodded as she checked the suture tapes she had applied. "I can't do anything about the blood and holes in his shirt, but his skin should hold for now. If there had been spinal damage, he would already have had some numbness or tingling in his legs. But you have to watch for infection, Naruto. I don't know how close to the spinal cord the blade got. If it punctured the sheath, you might still run into serious problems."

Naruto nodded, pulling on his bloodied shirt, having nothing else to wear. He shot a glance at Gaara. "Wait for me in the coffee shop across the street."

Gaara nodded, and headed out immediately, clearly not wanting to spend any more time than absolutely necessary in a building full of cops, lawyers, and metal detectors.

"Naruto," Sakura began, glancing nervously at the two Uchiha brothers who were waiting for Naruto. "You shouldn't do any strenuous activity for at least two weeks with these injuries. Things like travel."

Naruto sighed. He was hoping Sakura wouldn't have remembered their last conversation. "I'll do my best to behave myself."

Sakura just rolled her eyes. "Yeah, like that's ever going to happen. Just..." her voice softened. "... just watch out. I don't want to get called in to ID your body. Or his," she said, moving her head slightly toward the door that Gaara had just exited.

Naruto gave a half smile. "I'll do my best," he repeated. There was really nothing more he could say.

Sakura leaned in and brushed a kiss across his cheek. She had an almost overwhelming feeling that she wasn't going to see either of them again, and she felt her throat close up. She was tired of death. But she knew there was nothing she could do right now to fix any of this. Nodding tightly to Sasuke and Itachi, Sakura headed out, ignoring the stares of people in the lobby at the sight of the attractive young woman exiting the men's room.

. . . . . .

"Sasuke, you need to leave as well. You can't be seen with Naruto right now. We don't want anything to draw attention to your relationship until things are stabilized," Itachi said.

Sasuke raked his fingers through his hair in an uncharacteristic show of frustration. "I hate this," he said, his voice seething. "I hate worrying about fucking appearances when something like this is happening. Naruto was just attacked by an international serial killer, who evidently is trying to recruit him. And I'm supposed to just go back to my office and work on my fucking campaign plan? This is bullshit."

"It's necessary bullshit, and you know it. Don't be a child. If you blow this now, it will only make things worse for Naruto," Itachi said, his voice harsh. Seeing the bleak look on Sasuke's face, he relented slightly. "I'll give you two a few minutes alone. But then you need to leave and Naruto needs to come up to my office."

Sasuke said nothing as Itachi left, finally leaving them alone in the men's room.

"Naruto..." Sasuke said, grabbing Naruto's wrist lightly and pulling him close, resting his forehead against the blond's. "... are you sure you're ok?"

Naruto relaxed into Sasuke's touch, letting the heat of his lover's hands soak into his skin. He tilted
his head back, bringing their lips together in a light brush. "Sasuke..." Naruto breathed out as Sasuke's mouth remained closed. "Kiss me."

Sasuke opened his mouth and pressed back lightly, not wanting to put any stress on Naruto's injuries.

"I'm not made of fucking glass, Sasuke. Don't kiss me like a girl," Naruto grabbed Sasuke by the back of his neck and crushed their mouths together in almost desperation.

He hadn't expected the attack today. But it could only end one way. Any time he spent near Sasuke was like painting a bull's eye on his lover. Naruto was still in shock from everything that had happened. Would today be his last day with Sasuke? Had the time already come?

He wasn't ready to let go. He just couldn't.

Naruto backed Sasuke into one of the stalls, their roles reversed from the first time they kissed in a public bathroom what seemed like forever ago, with Naruto now the aggressor.

"Naruto... your back..." Sasuke started, but was cut off as Naruto palmed his rapidly growing erection through his pants.

"Sasuke," Naruto said, untucking Sasuke's shirt from his pants and slipping his hands under the soft fabric. He hated that he sounded like he was begging but was not able to stop himself. "Please," he breathed, sliding his palms over the taut muscles of Sasuke's abdomen, feeling the heat of his lover's body spike in response.

Sasuke kissed back hungrily.

"Oh, god, yes," Naruto breathed the words, grinding his aching erection against Sasuke's, wishing more than anything that they were alone back in Sasuke's penthouse right then.

But they weren't, and there were police waiting to talk to Naruto probably already on their way up to Itachi's office. Naruto drew in a shuddering breath at the thought that this could be it. This could be the last time he saw Sasuke. He knew that he should step back and walk up to Itachi's office right then. Instead, he slipped to his knees, his fingers clumsy in their haste to open the fastenings of Sasuke's pants.

"Naruto, let's wait until, ngh fuck," Sasuke threw his head back as Naruto swirled his tongue around Sasuke's granite-hard erection twice then downed him deep into his throat.

Naruto breathed in the scent of his lover, feeling the vibrations of Sasuke's groan travel through his lover's cock and down Naruto's tongue. He soaked everything in, memorizing the taste, scent, texture and sounds of Sasuke. He felt his eyes burn and his throat close, but forced the emotions down. He had known this would come. Now it was time to pay the price of his indulgences.

But he would have one last memory to take with him.

Naruto began to bob his head, swallowing when Sasuke was deep in his throat and allowing him to thrust freely into his mouth. Naruto felt his own climax rapidly approaching and he quickly unzipped his own trousers and pulled his cock out, pumping it in time with his other hand around Sasuke's dick.

"Naruto," Sasuke gave a hoarse cry as he came, and Naruto continued to suck until every last tremor was finished before he allowed himself to come hard on the floor of the courthouse bathroom.

Sasuke was leaning against the wall as though he legs were not stable enough to hold him while
Naruto still knelt, panting, on the hard tile floor at his feet.

"Was that your way of celebrating still being alive?" Sasuke finally managed, his usual smirk appearing on his achingly perfect face.

Naruto didn't answer. He slowly pulled himself to his feet, ignoring the tug of the cuts on his back at the motion. He carefully tucked Sasuke's shirt in, then slowly zipped up his pants, brushing small kisses along Sasuke's jawline and throat with each action.

The gentleness of Naruto's touch as he righted Sasuke's clothing somehow set off a feeling of unease with Sasuke, as did the fact that the blond wouldn't meet his eyes as Naruto finally saw to righting his own clothing.

"Naruto?"

Naruto shook his head. "Don't. Sasuke I..." Naruto swallowed hard. "I need to go to Itachi's office now. They're probably waiting."

Sasuke gripped Naruto's chin and forced him to meet his gaze. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Sasuke. I have to go."

Their gazes locked for a pregnant moment before Sasuke released Naruto's chin, his anxiety building as he read the sadness and almost dread in Naruto's blue eyes. "Come back as soon as you've filed your report at the station. We'll figure something out. Shisui is waiting for me outside. I'll let him know what's happened. He might have some ideas."

Naruto didn't nod. "Sasuke, I want you to know..." Naruto drew a deep breath. "I want you to know that this wasn't just a job to me. With us. It isn't just..."

Naruto stopped. There was no point in continuing. All it would do was increase how hard this was going to be. "I have to go. Stay by Shisui. Don't leave his sight."

Sasuke frowned, but Naruto didn't give him time to say anything. He pulled Sasuke in for one last, hard kiss, then walked purposefully out.

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The officer had just arrived at Itachi's office when Naruto walked in. If Itachi noticed Naruto's flushed and slightly rumpled appearance, he made no mention of the fact.

"Mr. Uzumaki, Mr. Uchiha," the officer began. "Thank you both for taking the time to talk with me today. We only have a few remaining questions before we will be able to officially close the case."

Naruto and Itachi nodded in acknowledgement, waiting for the man to continue.

"Mr. Uzumaki, you stated that Orochimaru had directed you to take on Sasuke Uchiha's security when he received a threatening letter containing certain photographs of him in various locations, is that correct?"

"Yes," Naruto said, wondering where this was going.

"Do you recognize these photographs?" The officer asked, handing Naruto a packet of photos that he had carried with him.

Naruto flipped through them. "Yes, these are the same photographs. Did you get these from the
police here?"

"No. An officer found copies of these photographs on Mr. Sanin's computer when we searched his home yesterday."

Naruto's eyes widened in surprise. Sasuke had not given Orochimaru copies of the photographs. "Well..." Naruto began. "I know that Orochimaru was very concerned about the threat. He had asked the police to keep him informed. It is possible they gave him copies of the photographs as well."

The officer smirked at what he perceived as Naruto's naïveté. "We also found them on the memory card of a high end camera that was recovered in his apartment. We are verifying that this was the camera that the photos were taken from, but it appears likely."

Naruto just stared. This man was trying to say... that Orochimaru was Sasuke's stalker?

"We also found these papers in a locked drawer of his desk," the officer was continuing, handing Naruto a set of sketches and some photographs of an explosive device. Naruto recognized it almost immediately as Hanzo's work based on Dei's description. Itachi cleared his throat, and Naruto startled, then handed the pages to him so he could see what the hell it was that had Naruto looking so shocked.

"That isn't possible. This has to be some sort of plant. Orochimaru was almost... weirdly protective of Sasuke... Mr. Uchiha, I mean. He wouldn't... this has to be him just following the investigation," Naruto said, not wanting to expose the truly insane obsession that Orochimaru had had for Sasuke, but also wanting to make it clear that they were looking in the wrong direction.

"We also recovered some messages sent between him and an unknown person regarding concerns that you had figured out who had set the bomb, and that he needed to eliminate you."

Naruto's eyes widened. Orochimaru might have been bat shit crazy when it came to Sasuke, but he was not an idiot. He would never have sent an e-mail like that. Not under any circumstances. Naruto shot a glance at Itachi, whose face was inscrutable.

"Evidently he was mistaken in his estimation of your ability to uncover his activities," the officer said smugly, clearly enjoying his mental image of Naruto as a dumb security guard who had remained clueless of his employer's ruse. "He hired you to appear to be helping, when in actuality he was the main threat. It isn't that uncommon of a ploy. You'd be surprised how many killers actually dial 911 to pretend to have 'found the body'."

Naruto made a slight choking sound, but the officer wrote it up to the boy's embarrassment at having been played by his recently deceased employer.

Itachi stirred. "I take it that - in light of this recent evidence clearing up the motive issue - you will not be filing charges against Mr. Uzumaki in this matter?"

The officer nodded. "Yes, it is clearly a case of self-defense. The attack on Mr. Uzumaki's life was premeditated and intent has been established. Fortunately, your quick reflexes prevented the man from being able to carry out his plans."

Naruto nodded, not sure if he should keep insisting that the idea of Orochimaru being the stalker and bomber was a bunch of shit. He looked to Itachi... and kept his mouth closed.

Itachi was standing, thanking the officer for making the trip out to personally deliver the information, and then the officer was gone.
Naruto turned to look at Itachi. "You know that this is crazy, right? There is no way that Orochimaru is the guy who took those photos or set that bomb. And the message was clearly planted. Even if we didn't know the real reason Orochimaru was in my room that night, the guy was not a complete idiot. He would never have put something like that in writing. Someone is trying to use his death to cover their tracks."

Itachi was thoughtful. "I think you are probably right. But the police consider this matter closed. And it is currently convenient for us to allow them to do so, since it means your situation is resolved."

"But they'll stop the surveillance on Sasuke if they think the bomber is dead."

"Well, there is still the matter of the 'unknown person' he messaged. I could probably convince the police here that Orochimaru had a partner, who may not have given up upon the man's death. After all, it wasn't clear in the note if Orochimaru was doing this person's bidding or vice versa. And of course, Shisui will be here to help. He's worth more protection than whatever the police can offer, as I'm sure you've assessed on your own."

It took Naruto a moment to realize that Itachi was assuring him that there would be others to take over Sasuke's security. From him. "How did you know?" Naruto asked.

"Because I saw your face when Sasuke arrived. You were afraid. For him. Right now you have a target on your back, and anyone who is closely associated with you is in danger. I know what I'd do in that situation. And you know, too."

Naruto nodded slowly, feeling almost shy at the thought that Itachi thought they were the same on some level. "He's going to be really mad at me," Naruto said with a sigh.

Itachi chuckled. "That's an understatement. And he probably won't be happy with me, either."

Naruto gave a weak grin. "Well. Just tell Shisui that the threat is not over. And tell Sasuke..." Naruto paused, not sure what to say. "Just tell him I didn't want it to be like this. I knew it could never work over the long haul, but I had hoped..." Naruto trailed off.

Itachi placed a hand on Naruto's shoulder. "Don't give up so easily. When this is over, you two can talk and see what you both want at that point."

Naruto laughed hollowly. "What he's going to want will be to hand me my ass."

Itachi smiled. "Probably. But after that, he'll probably want something else."

"Ok. Well, I guess... I guess I should go," Naruto said, scratching the back of his head a bit awkwardly. "Thanks, Itachi. I... it was really good meeting you and everything. For a lawyer, you're actually not a bad guy."

Itachi actually laughed, the first time Naruto had ever heard the sound. "Yeah, for a killer, you're not so bad either."

With that, Naruto walked out Itachi's office. Itachi wondered if that was that last time he would see the blond. He quickly called Sasuke to let him know what the officer had said, but left out the final conversation he'd had with Naruto.

He sat back to focus on his work. And waited for the call from Sasuke that he knew would come at some point that evening.

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Sasuke never let his impatience show. He had sat through the most pointless, idiotic and sickening political debates without batting an eyelash. But if he didn't hear word from Naruto soon, he was going to explode. It was already almost eight o'clock at night.

He and Shisui had ordered dinner as they waited to hear from Naruto. Itachi had called to inform them of what the police had discovered at Orochimaru's home.

Shisui and Suigetsu had been at Orochimaru's earlier and knew for a fact that the so-called 'evidence' had not been there at that time, so there was little doubt that it was fake. It was a valuable clue, however, because the evidence must have been planted before the fact of Orochimaru's death had been released to the media. For the first 7 hours after the incident, the news had only said that 'a death' had occurred, but they hadn't said who or how, but the house had been searched three hours after his death.

So it was someone with inside information, though they already knew that due to the nature of the bomb. Sasuke's fingers drummed a rapid beat on his desktop as he forced himself to look at the notes that Karin had faxed over regarding his upcoming schedule and how to handle any potential questions about the Orochimaru incident. He would be meeting with her tomorrow to fill her in on more details about the true nature of events. Karin was one person that Sasuke knew he could utterly rely on to guard his secrets. But she wouldn't know what she needed to guard against if he didn't keep her informed. Though since Suigetsu had already largely figured most of it out, he doubted any of what he had to tell her would come as much of a shock.

Sasuke's eyes flicked in annoyance to his watch again. *Why wasn't the idiot back yet? How long could it possibly take to file a simple assault charge?*

His mind was avoiding thinking about the last time he had been with Naruto. He knew that there was an underlying reason to Naruto's voracity that Sasuke was denying. The possibility that Naruto had no intentions of coming back to him tonight.

Sasuke had Suigetsu monitoring the police communications and their internal systems. It was a risky move, but Sasuke's patience had run out over an hour ago. It worried him that there was no record at all of any complaint being filed resembling Naruto's assault in the subway station. No record of his even having entered the precinct.

The phone on Sasuke's desk rang, and he jerked slightly at the sound. "What," he said tersely into the phone, recognizing the number as Juugo calling from security downstairs.

"There is an NYPD officer here to see you. I checked his credentials. Is it ok to send him up?"

Sasuke's blood froze. There were several very bad reasons that an officer would be coming to his home at this time of night. He couldn't think of a single good one.

"Of course," Sasuke said, his voice smooth and calm.

He looked over his shoulder to see Shisui raising an eyebrow, questioningly. "It's the police. I want you to wait in your room. Leave the door open a crack so you can see and hear, but don't make your presence known. If they arrest me, call Itachi."

Shisui nodded and disappeared silently into his room, taking his glass and plate from the kitchen so there would be no hint that anyone other than Sasuke was home that evening.

The elevator bell chimed, announcing the visitor. Sasuke recognized the man. "Captain Hatake. To what do I owe the pleasure this evening?"
Kakashi smirked, able to read the well-concealed anxiety behind the man's tone, and knowing at least some of the reason for it. Kakashi let his gaze quickly scan the apartment, settling briefly on a partially closed door to what was most likely a bedroom. "Actually, I am here on a somewhat personal matter. A recent employee of yours asked me to inform you that he has been placed into protective custody, due to recent events that he assured me you are already aware of. This is quite frankly a violation of protocol, but the boy seemed quite distressed that he wasn't able to let you know directly, and he didn't want you to be concerned for his safety."

Sasuke didn't move or react at all as he studied the man in front of him. *He's lying.*

"Do you make a habit of violating protocol, Captain Hatake? It seems like not a very wise choice in your profession," Sasuke said, feeling no compunction about letting his skepticism show.

Somehow this only amused the police officer more. "Yes, well - not all of us are as flawless as you, Councilman Uchiha. However, now that my message has been delivered, I must return to those protocols that you seem so worried about."

Kakashi turned to go, but Sasuke's voice stopped him. "And when will he be able to contact me directly to verify the story that you just told me?"

"You seem awfully concerned about the safety of a temporary employee that has worked for you for less than a month. Given the circumstances, I would have thought you would have been glad to be rid of him."

Sasuke clenched his teeth together harshly. "Get out."

Kakashi shrugged and pressed the button for the elevator. When the doors had closed behind him, Shisui stepped out.

"He knew I was here."

Sasuke nodded. "And he was lying about Naruto."

Sasuke flipped open his phone. There was a small chance that Naruto *had* been placed in protective custody. "Suigetsu. I want you to check the protective custody status of -"

*I've been checking. No one has entered the program in the past 24 hours. Not even an enquiry."

Sasuke snapped the phone closed. Naruto had vanished into thin air. And Sasuke had no idea if he had left willingly, or if something had happened to him.

He turned and put his fist through the drywall of his office wall.

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*to be continued...*
Itachi walked in to Sasuke's penthouse well past midnight. Sasuke was seated on the leather sofa in his living room. The same sofa where Sasuke had treated Naruto's head wound. And fucked him countless times since then. A bottle of Jack Daniels and a shot glass was set out in front of him. By his disheveled state, Itachi guessed Sasuke had long since figured out that Naruto wasn't coming back.

Shisui had stepped silently out of his room at the chime of the elevator, but Itachi waved him away, wanting to talk with Sasuke alone. Shisui sighed but obeyed.

Crossing to the corner bar, Itachi selected a clean, crystal shot glass from the rack and walked back to where Sasuke was sitting and set his glass on the coffee table next to his little brother's with a clink. Without looking over at him, Sasuke silently filled his older brother's glass.

"You knew. This morning at the courthouse. That's why you gave us time alone," Sasuke said, his voice inflectionless.

Itachi didn't bother to deny it, downing the shot in one go, then setting his glass back for Sasuke to refill. The younger Uchiha topped off both their glasses, the lifted his in a mock salute to his brother. Itachi touched his glass to Sasuke's, and sipped his drink this time while Sasuke finished his own off.

"So your plan is to sit here and wallow?" Itachi asked.

Sasuke laughed bitterly. "Well, there's not much I can do if Naruto has decided he doesn't want my help."

"Doesn't want me."

Itachi touched his glass to Sasuke's, and sipped his drink this time while Sasuke finished his own off.

"So your plan is to sit here and wallow?" Itachi asked.

Sasuke laughed bitterly. "Well, there's not much I can do if Naruto has decided he doesn't want my help." *Doesn't want me.*

Itachi took another sip of his drink, watching his brother's expression. "Is that what he decided?"

Sasuke spun his empty glass on the table, watching it intently as though it contained some sort of information on the matter.

"If he had made any other decision, he'd have stayed and talked to me about things. He thinks I'm useless. I killed for him. I took my sword and sliced open Orochimaru's throat right in front of him, and he still thinks I'm *useless.*" Sasuke's mouth twisted into a sneer at the word.

Itachi reached out and pushed back some hair that had fallen into Sasuke's eyes.

"Sasuke. Did it ever occur to you that Naruto doesn't want you to have to be useful in that way again? That he might feel like he's dragging you down? Not to mention putting you in danger from a psychopath that has been stalking him for over a decade. I don't think this has anything to do with Naruto thinking that you couldn't help him. I think that the problem is that he knows that you can. And you would."

Sasuke considered Itachi's words. His brother was not one to say things just to make Sasuke feel better. If anything, Itachi prided himself on *not* coddling his younger brother and being generally brutally honest.
"I think he left with that Gaara person. They're more than just friends, that's for fucking sure," Sasuke stared at his glass, daring it to refute his claim.

Itachi read the tone beneath Sasuke's words effortlessly. "They are. But I don't think they are lovers."

Sasuke snorted out a derisive laugh, pouring himself another shot. "Yeah, right. I saw how Gaara looked at Naruto. And Naruto looked back."

Itachi nodded, taking another sip. "Yes. They looked. But Gaara had no jealousy towards you, even after you staked your claim as Naruto's lover. Shikamaru says congratulations, by the way. That was a big step for you."

Sasuke hurled his glass against the wall, annoyed when the thick crystal didn't shatter but simply landed on the carpet with a soft thud. A big step that got me fucking nowhere. "Idiot." Sasuke wasn't sure if he were referring to Naruto or himself.

Itachi looked over at his brother in amusement. "Feel better?"

"Fuck off, Itachi,' Sasuke said slurring slightly.

"Why don't you go to bed and sleep it off. In the morning, we can talk about what you want to do about it."

Sasuke looked at Itachi. "Do about it? There's nothing I can do about it."

Itachi took two fingers poked Sasuke in the middle of his forehead. "Don't be foolish, Sasuke. There are many things that you can do. And once your brain is no longer swimming in alcohol, we can talk through what those things might be. Starting with finding out what Naruto's arresting officer, Kakashi, really knows about Naruto, and why the Commissioner of Police, Jiraya, appeared to know him but lied about it. Then, of course, we have Sakura who clearly knows Gaara and Naruto quite well. And warned Naruto about the dangers of travel rather pointedly. And I'm sure Deidara and Hidan know a few things as well. And, of course, I'm sure Naruto won't be without internet access, wherever he might be. I'm sure there are ways you can let him know you're... doing just fine without him, if that's what you decide."

Sasuke blinked, the details of those events coming back, though a bit foggily.

"Of course, you were too focused on Naruto and most of your blood was located elsewhere, but I'm sure your brain was at least partially present for most of those conversations."

Sasuke glared. Itachi snickered. "You look so cute when you try to glare while drunk. Just don't make this your new habit," Itachi said, gesturing to the half-empty bottle sitting on the coffee table. "Now, go to bed. We'll talk in the morning."

Sasuke raked a hand through his hair, feeling tired and a little dizzy from the alcohol he had consumed. He stood and walked toward his bedroom. "Naruto can go fuck himself. Or go fuck Gaara. He made his choice," Sasuke stumbled slightly. "Are you staying over?"

Itachi rose, walking with his little brother to his room. "Yes, I'll stay tonight in the other guest room."

Sasuke tumbled into bed, not bothering to change. Itachi pulled back the sheet then tossed it over Sasuke. Sasuke smiled slightly as he closed his eyes. "I'm not a kid needing to be tucked in any more, Itach'," Sasuke's voice was low and rough with sleep already.

Itachi's lips turned up just a bit. "Tonight you're acting like a child, so I'll tuck you in like one. Now
go to sleep. I want you clear-headed in the morning."

"Hn," Sasuke said, already drifting off. Itachi sat at the edge of Sasuke's bed, watching his brother until Sasuke's breathing evened out in the slow, steady rhythm of sleep.

Adjusting the covers slightly around the sleeping form, Itachi stood and walked to the living room to find Shisui waiting for him.

. . . .

Itachi paused, then continued walking towards the older Uchiha. He had carefully avoided being alone with his distant cousin up to this point.

But there were things that needed to be said, and Itachi was no coward.

"Thank you for helping Sasuke, both at the hotel and tonight. The situation with Orochimaru would have been much more difficult to manage if you hadn't," Itachi said, somewhat formally. "I was against you being here, but in the end I was grateful you were."

Shisui gave a rueful, bitter smile. "Always the gentleman, aren't you, Itachi? You always have to have the moral high ground, no matter how distasteful you find it."

Itachi looked at him flatly. "I take it Sasuke wasn't the only one drinking this evening."

"I didn't drink. I'm working, remember? Now that Naruto has run off, I have to take over trying to figure out who is trying to kill him and why."

Itachi shrugged, not wanting to get drawn in to a longer conversation. "It would appear you're already used to working for Sasuke without any input from me. I'll assume you know what you're doing and leave you to it, then."

Itachi began walking toward the elevator. He'd explain to Sasuke in the morning why he didn't stay. But Shisui's anguished call stopped him.

"Itachi, please. Don't go."

Itachi stood still, his back to the older man. He had fought so hard to be strong in his decision to avoid Shisui. He knew he needed to walk out the door. But he found his legs somehow not responding. "You broke my trust, Shisui. It can't be undone."

Shisui swallowed convulsively, but walked over to stand behind his estranged lover, his eyes filled with hunger and longing. "I know. But I had to choose between betraying you to save you, or doing as you asked and letting you die."

"You lied to me, Shisui," Itachi said, his voice low with pain. "You lied and you took away my choices. It was my choice to make, Shisui. Not yours."

"And I've suffered for that, Itachi. For more than twelve years, I've had to live without you. Haven't I suffered enough? Haven't we both? I don't see a ring on your finger, Itachi. And Sasuke has never
mentioned a lover of yours."

Shisui's hand slid up over Itachi's bicep, then to the nape of the younger man's neck. Itachi closed his eyes at the remembered touch. Shisui had been his first. Itachi had taken lovers discreetly over the intervening years, but there had never been anyone he had allowed to truly get close to him after Shisui.

Itachi opened his eyes, locking his gaze onto black orbs as penetrating as his own. Unable to stop himself, he slowly brought his lips down against his former lover's, fleetingly thinking of his younger brother sleeping soundly in the next room and knowing he wouldn't wake soon.

When they had last been together, Itachi had been nineteen. But the feel of Shisui's lips was exactly the same. Itachi deepened the kiss, suddenly hungry to taste everything he remembered all those years ago. Back when he had thought they would be together forever.

Shisui groaned and arched back. "Pleases... Itachi. Stay with me tonight. It doesn't have to be anything more than that. I'm not asking for absolution. And I don't want your gratitude for helping Sasuke. Just don't go tonight."

Wondering if the alcohol was affecting him more than expected, Itachi answered by pressing Shisui hard up against the wall and kissing him ruthlessly, crushing their bodies together and feeling the insurmountable pull of need that had not faded in more than a decade drag them both in. There would be no fighting this tonight. Itachi stepped back, breathless, then turned and walked into the spare bedroom, pulling the band free that held his hair in a low ponytail, allowing it to spill down his back. He didn't look back as Shisui pressed the back of his trembling hand to his mouth, his eyes closed, then followed unsteadily after his lover into the dark bedroom.

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The following morning Sasuke woke to find Itachi and Shisui seated at his kitchen table drinking coffee. He raised his brow in question, but neither man responded.

"Feeling better this morning, little brother?" Itachi asked, his eyes showing amusement at Sasuke's slightly hung-over state.

Sasuke narrowed his eyes, noticing the relaxed and satisfied look in Itachi's overall appearance. "Clearly you are."

Itachi took a leisurely sip of his coffee, not bothering to respond. He knew that Sasuke had long been curious about his relationship with Shisui. But this wasn't the time for that discussion.

"So, have you decided if you're going to do anything about Naruto?" Itachi asked casually.

Sasuke shrugged. "Why should I? He left without saying anything. I understand what you said about his possible reasons for doing so, but in the end, it was his choice. He clearly either didn't need or didn't want my help. I'm not going to chase after him."

Shisui thought about the comment that the red-haired man had made to him when they had spoken briefly in the coffee shop outside of the courthouse. He wondered if he should bring it up now, or wait and see where Sasuke was coming out on his own feelings about Naruto. There was no doubt that any relationship with the blond put Sasuke in danger right now. After the threat had been dealt with... things could change. He shifted his gaze from Sasuke and caught Itachi eyeing him speculatively. Fortunately, Itachi didn't decide to press him at the moment on his thoughts.

"It's up to you. Your life will definitely be easier with him out of it," Itachi said, noting the way
Sasuke's jaw clenched at his words, and hiding his smirk at how transparent his little brother was when it came to his blond.

Sasuke shrugged. "True. He was definitely not a logical choice for a partner. Luckily he seemed to realize that on his own."

Itachi raised an eyebrow. "Yes, and we all know how these kinds of choices are always based on logic."

Sasuke didn't miss the glance exchanged between Itachi and Shisui. He wondered if he would find that the second guest room had been used or not. Somehow he doubted it. But for now, Sasuke wanted to change the subject away from his personal life. Everything had just felt too raw this morning when he had woken up in his bed alone. Naruto wasn't there to massage his headache away in the shower. And he wouldn't be there to make him forget the annoyances of the day when he went to bed at night. The void was palpable. And painful.

But a slow simmer of anger had set in, and Sasuke was not going to wallow in it. Naruto had made his choice. And if the blond thought he could just go off without a word and come back after a year or so and find Sasuke waiting for him, he was delusional.

"Karin is coming by today. The campaign season is back in full force and I've been asked to speak at a number of fundraising events. Shisui, I'll give you the list of dates and locations once we've finalized things," Sasuke said, indicating that the earlier topic of discussion was over.

"Do you know who attacked Naruto?" Shisui asked. "You mentioned it was someone from who had been following Naruto for some time. There is the possibility that you will be targeted just from your past association. What do we know about him?"

Sasuke ignored the tightness in his gut when Shisui had referred to his relationship with Naruto as a 'past association', but didn't refute it. "Naruto's parents were killed in Japan more than a decade ago by the serial killer who attacked him yesterday. He doesn't know the man's real name, but he is evidently wanted in several countries for a series of murders. Naruto is possibly the only surviving witness, so the man has fixated on him. He told me that his father had been fairly well-known at the time of his family's murder. Having access to the police records of his other murders would be helpful to let us know what we're dealing with. I have someone looking into deaths during that time period in Japan and sifting through the records to see if any had a child Naruto's age."

"Minato Namikaze," Shisui said, startling everyone including himself with his sudden recollection.

"Who?" Sasuke asked, while Itachi's eyes widened fractionally.

"I knew I recognized him from somewhere when I first saw him," Shisui continued. "But it really wasn't him I was remembering. It was his father. Naruto looks just like him. That's why I couldn't place the memory, because it was too long ago to really have been Naruto."

Itachi blinked but readily agreed, surprised that he hadn't connected it earlier either. "Of course. Sasuke, you're probably too young to remember this. But when you were around ten years old, Minato Namikaze was a very popular mayor with promising political aspirations in Japan. He was a very charismatic public figure. But he and his family were brutally killed after leaving a restaurant one evening. It was all over the news. There was a nation-wide manhunt for the killer, but there were no witnesses. The investigation revealed that there was a string of similar, unsolved murders in various regions of the country with the exact same profile. But there were never any witnesses, no descriptions of the assailant. There was some speculation as to whether the killer had a partner or worked alone. The police were leaning towards there being two that worked together, but it wasn't
known for certain. The press had nicknamed him Kyuubi. I can't remember if that was because the guy called himself that, or if they just made it up for the drama factor, but -"

"He chose it himself," Sasuke said lowly, remembering what Naruto had told him about how the man chose names of monsters from legends in the places where he killed, to further instill fear. Sasuke vaguely remembered the news coverage. It was two or three years before his own parents' deaths, and he remembered his mother not wanting him to see the pictures or hear the news commentators discussing it because she was afraid it would scare him.

And it had been Naruto - that boy that the reporters said had miraculously lived through the brutal attack that had claimed the lives of his parents only to disappear from the hospital never to be heard from again. Everyone had assumed that the killer had somehow managed to come back and finish the job so there would be no witnesses.

Sasuke remembered peaking into the living room as a child while his parents had watched the news, long after he was supposed to have been in bed. He remembered feeling sadness for the boy even younger than him who had died such a terrible death.

But that child had survived. And his name was Naruto Namikaze.

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**The previous day**

Naruto walked out of the courthouse and crossed the street to the coffee shop where he knew that Gaara would be waiting. His friend was already tossing his empty cup in the trash and walking towards him.

The bright sun and swarm of people around him left him feeling exposed to be out in the open a mere block from where he was attacked. Sliding his hand over his pocket, Naruto realized he was unarmed and remembered that he hadn't brought his knife, knowing it would only cause issues with the metal detectors when he went to meet with Itachi. The blood on the back of his shirt had dried, leaving the fabric feeling slightly stiff and scratchy, and his wounds ached when he walked.

"Where are we supposed to meet Kakashi?" Naruto asked, trying to keep his escalating anxiety in check. It felt like everyone was watching him.

Gaara observed him for a few seconds, trying to assess how stable his friend was at the moment.
"Teterboro airport in New Jersey. We have to get our bags."

Naruto didn't respond. Teterboro was mostly for private or chartered planes. The bags Gaara mentioned were the ones they had stored after abandoning their apartment and held their emergency cash, weapons, and passports. It meant they were leaving the country immediately, and not waiting the full two weeks as they had planned. Naruto would not be able to say goodbye to Sasuke. He wouldn't be able to explain. Sasuke would think Naruto just left without a backward glance. And he would hate him, given everything that had happened between them.

But then again, maybe that was for the best.

"When?" Naruto asked simply.

"As soon as we can get there. We have to get you out of the city. It's clear Tobi has been following you. Right now, he's probably gone to ground until he's sure you won't come after him immediately or have the police searching. Our guess is that he's watching Sasuke's place. Maybe Orochimaru's. You can't go back."
Naruto nodded, having reached the same conclusion seconds earlier, but felt his throat close up. Any contact with Sasuke right now would only underscore the importance of Sasuke in his life, making him more of a target than he already was. There was still a decent chance that Tobi thought Sasuke was just a job. Except for the one transgression in the society event they had attended when Sasuke had had too much to drink, and just now in the courthouse, they had been careful to keep their relationship out of view of the public. So far everyone had bought the 'employer/employee' version of their relationship. If Tobi did, then Naruto's leaving would make Sasuke safe.

And if Sasuke hated him for it, then Naruto would just have to live with that. It was better than Sasuke dying for him. Sasuke had already become a criminal because of him. Naruto couldn't allow it to go further. If Sasuke disliked Naruto now, then it would mean he wouldn't try to get any further involved. He'd go back to his life, and move on. Sasuke would be safe.

Naruto allowed the numbness to settle further into his stomach to avoid the twisting regret that the thought of Sasuke moving on brought. But this was always the way it was going to play out. The timing had been bumped up a bit, but there was no other ending possible between them. Naruto knew he needed to stop daydreaming and start focusing.

He nodded stiffly. "Then let's go. Are we splitting up, or sticking together?"

Gaara narrowed his eyes, not liking the vacant, hollow expression on his only friend's face. "Like I'd leave you alone in the condition you're in. We stick together."

They headed off in silence, Naruto lost in thoughts of Sasuke, and the fact that he was leaving. He didn't notice the softening of Gaara's eyes as his friend watched Naruto struggle to hold himself together.

. . . .

Naruto was basically on autopilot as he and Gaara took their emergency route to their safe drops, circling around, back-tracking down alleys, entering stores that they knew had hidden rear entrances, and in one case even entering one building that had easy roof access and jumping across to an adjacent building, exiting out the rear of that building. Paranoia came with the territory, and they were both good at it. In the end, they were absolutely sure they were not followed and - after picking up their last bag - they caught a cab to Teterboro Airport.

Gaara didn't speak or attempt to draw Naruto out during the cab ride, knowing they would have time to talk soon when they were away from unwanted ears. They paid in cash, waiting for the cab to depart before walking away from the small main entrance for passengers and around the back to the hangar where the private planes were stored. Kakashi met them there, handing them each a security badge that proclaimed them as part of the ground staff at the airport, along with some take-out for dinner.

It was late, and the hangar was deserted as Kakashi swiped his badge and entered the security code. They closed the door behind them, and the three men did a quick inspection to verify that they were alone and check for obvious surveillance devices.

When they were done, Naruto dropped his pack and sat heavily on an empty bench up against the wall. Kakashi looked first to Gaara, then back to the uncharacteristically subdued blond.

Seeming unconcerned, Kakashi pulled out a cigarette. Naruto automatically reached in his pack for the lighter, but with none of the usual banter that was associated with their small ritual.

Kakashi took a slow drag, then finally spoke. "You look like someone killed your puppy. But I
happen to know for a fact that you don't have a dog, so would you care to tell me what's going on with you?"

"Fuck off, Kakashi," Naruto said tiredly. "Tobi paid me a visit today, which I'm guessing you figured out from Sakura's call. He's taken a fancy to me and Gaara." Naruto handed Kakashi the note, taking some satisfaction in the slightly shocked expression on the older man's face at the content of the note.

"And that's what you're moping about? Doesn't really seem like you, Naruto," Kakashi asked, blowing smoke in Naruto's face. Annoyed, Naruto flicked the cigarette out of the cop's mouth making it land on his lap. Kakashi jerked his leg, knocking the cigarette to the floor before it could burn through his jeans.

Kakashi took out another cigarette, lighting it himself this time. He had watched Naruto moving around the hangar as they had searched the place, trying to get a read on the severities of the boy's injuries. He had learned the hard way not to approach Naruto when he was injured. And he had noticed the cuts and blood in the back of Naruto's T-shirt, but since the blond seemed able to move without too much difficulty, he had assumed the injuries were not serious. But something was definitely wrong with the boy, and Kakashi knew he wouldn't get an answer if he asked directly. The only person who could do that was Gaara. But it wouldn't keep Kakashi from trying. He had to know what was going on if he was going to be able to help them. "I would have thought you'd be excited about the potential advantage that this latest development offers you. You'll be in for the kill next time, while Tobi might try to talk first. Are you depressed that you're leaving the City when you know he's here?"

"No. We need to take care of things for Gaara first. Tobi will wait. Evidently he's decided I'm special," Naruto said sarcastically, tilting his head back against the wall and closing his eyes. There was also the chance that Tobi would follow him when he left. If so, it would complicate things in Paris, but draw him away from Sasuke.

His back ached where the cuts were. His mind felt completely drained and numb from the trauma and emotional stress of the day's events. All he wanted to do was sleep. It was one of the few nights he wished he could just drink or smoke something to wipe his mind clear for a few hours. But he'd never take that risk.

"Special is one way of putting it. But you're right. There are too many things happening at once. We need to eliminate some of the risks. Though you already took care of Orochimaru, who wasn't even on my radar as a threat to you."

Naruto froze, but with his eyes closed, Kakashi didn't notice the sudden tension. But Gaara's eyes narrowed.

"What aren't you saying about that, Naruto?" Gaara asked, his voice flat.

Naruto knew better than to open his eyes given the observation skills of the two men he was sitting with. He could feel their piercing gazes on him enough as it was. Whatever happened, he did not want Kakashi to know that Sasuke had been the one to kill Orochimaru. That would draw the policeman into conflicting loyalties beyond what he already was. "The cops came by Itachi's office today to say that they found evidence in Orochimaru's apartment that he was the stalker, and the bomber."

"But you don't believe them," Kakashi surmised.

"No way. That shit was planted. Sasuke's still at risk, but I told Shisui to look after him," Naruto
couldn't hide the worry in his voice, which caused Kakashi's eyes widen.

"You're worried about him," Kakashi stated, then started to laugh as realization dawned on him. "You fell for him!"

Naruto opened one eye, glared, then closed it again. Kakashi continued to laugh, ignoring the death glare that Gaara sent him. "I never thought I'd see that day that one of you gave a damn about anyone except each other. And definitely not someone like Sasuke Uchiha. I knew you were screwing him, but... do you have any idea how impossible an actual relationship with -"

Kakashi never finished his sentence, because Gaara had thrown a knife that embedded into the wall less than three millimeters from Kakashi's head.

"Stop talking, Hatake," Gaara said, his voice deceptively calm.

Kakashi got himself under control. He felt a little bad for laughing, but seeing Naruto - arguably the most dangerous killer that Kakashi had ever met - looking like a drowned kitten over having to leave his wealthy, socialite boyfriend behind to go take out a warlord (which likely was going to involve the pair of them killing at minimum twenty people including said warlord) was just too much for him.

Of course, Kakashi would make sure that Sasuke was protected while Naruto was gone. And potentially make sure Sasuke didn't get any ideas about letting Naruto walk out of his life based on this turn of events. Kakashi had a secret fetish for playing matchmaker, but he never thought he'd get to use any of his skills on Naruto. He smothered his grin, aware that his glee was not going over well with the two mentally imbalanced killers in the locked, deserted room with him.

"Ok, ok. I'll drop it. You two go take care of Gaara's business. I'm going to dig more into Tobi and see if I can find a location on him, or any known contacts. I also want to find out if he is tied to whatever is happening with Jinchuuriki being taken out. Based on his note, he might have been the one to set that whole thing up, which means he could have been involved with the other deaths as well."

"I don't think so," Naruto said slowly, forcing his mind to focus on what Kakashi was saying. "I don't think he would have taken the risk of someone else getting to kill me. He likes to be the one to take the kill, especially if it's personal. I think he has just been watching me."

"Hmmm," Kakashi said, clearly not convinced. "We'll find out. But that would mean that Sakura and Sasuke will be on his radar."

"And you," Naruto said, meeting Kakashi's gaze head on.

"I'm not a civilian," Kakashi said complacently. "I would know if someone were following me. But I will let Sasuke and Sakura know to be careful. I'll try to set up some sort of surveillance on them."

"Sasuke's cousin, Shisui, seems very capable," Gaara said. Naruto threw him a look that said they'd talk later about what that opinion was based on. "I doubt the cops could do anything he couldn't. Sakura is more exposed, though."

"I'll handle it," Kakashi said. "You two just focus on the task at hand. Hopefully I'll have everything set up when you get back for the next round."

Naruto shifted on the bench, trying to ease the ache in his lower back. "So what are we doing here? My contact won't have transport ready for us for another week."

"Jiraya found a faster ride, but it only takes you as far as Paris. The plane you'll be taking belongs to
some big wig diplomat. Onoki Tsuchikage will be spending the week in New York, and Jiraya has convinced him to let us use his plane during that time, which is registered as a diplomatic vehicle. Nothing like a corrupt politician to smooth the way."

"What did Jiraya bribe him with?" Gaara asked.

Kakashi smirked. "The country that Onoki represents has very strict pornography laws. Jiraya simply supplies him with what he needs. And we get a free trip to Paris on a plane that is guaranteed not to be searched. You told me that Kimimaro has smuggling routes that cut through Spain. You can lay low in Paris while you finish planning, then meet Kimimaro's contact in Madrid for your route to Suna."

Naruto sighed and closed his eyes. "Sounds good," he said, his voice apathetic.

Annoyed, Kakashi lifted his leg and shoved Naruto off the bench. "The fuck Kakashi?"

"You need to have your head in the game, kid. You've got a serial killer hunting you here, and a psychotic warlord that you're trying to assassinate in Suna. And we don't know if there is yet another person targeting the Jinchurriki. You're dance card is pretty fucking full. If your focus is on something else, you're going to get yourself and Gaara killed."

Naruto got up off the floor slowly, wincing as he realized the landing had caused one of the suture tapes Sakura had applied to tear loose. "Jesus, Kakashi. Just give me a break. It's been a long fucking day. I'll have my head right by morning."

Kakashi drew a breath to speak, but Gaara cut him off.

"Lay off, Kakashi," Gaara said, his voice low, but the tone an unmistakable threat. "Give him a day."

Kakashi sighed, trying to hide his worry. The situation in Suna would be no joke. Even at the top of their game, it was probably only a 30% chance of success. "If he's not fit to go, then you should leave him behind. This is going to be one hell of a run for you once you reach Suna. If his injuries slow him down or hold him back, it will put him at even greater risk. Naruto - will you at least let me look at your injuries? If they're too severe, I could put you in protective custody until you're healed or Gaara comes back."

"Naruto will be fine. We're going together," Gaara said in a voice that left no room for negotiation.

"If you were so concerned about my injuries, then you shouldn't have shoved me off the fucking bench. Sakura patched me up and gave me some extra supplies. Gaara and I will be fine. You just go track down who is hunting Jinchuurikis. There are still four others here that you need to look out for."

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After the details of the arrangement for use of the plane and the fake diplomatic documents had been given to them, Kakashi grudgingly left. The plane would arrive in the morning, and they would leave as soon as it was serviced and refueled.

Gaara re-taped the wound that Kakashi had opened while they ate their dinner on the cement floor of the hangar. When they were finished, they dug out some extra blankets and pillows from one of the offices to sleep on. Naruto tried to keep his mind blank, not wanting to deal with his emotions right now. But Gaara was tired of waiting.
"Sasuke wasn't afraid to call you his lover in front of me. A man in his position wouldn't take an admission like that lightly. And he wasn't afraid of you when you lost control," Gaara said, still finding that last bit fairly unbelievable. Even Kakashi was afraid of Naruto when he snapped.

Naruto drew a shaky breath. "All your doing is telling me how much I'm losing."

"After we take out my father and Tobi, you could go back to him. Explain things."

Naruto laughed softly. "Gaara. I have way too much blood on my hands to ever be safe for someone in politics. Some reporter somewhere would dig up my past and it would ruin Sasuke. This is where it has to end. I just need to suck it up and get over it. We have more important things to focus on right now."

Gaara watched as Naruto closed his eyes and buried his face into his pillow, forcing himself to sleep. It was something Gaara had always been slightly envious about... Naruto's ability to just turn his mind off and make himself sleep. It was definitely a useful skill. Gaara had been haunted by nightmares of his childhood most of his life, and though they faded now, the inability to sleep well seemed to be permanent. He watched the steady rise and fall of Naruto's breathing, reflecting on what Shisui had told him earlier that day.

Naruto had never given up on anything in his life. Gaara didn't believe for a second he would give up on Sasuke no matter what he was saying now. The question was, would Sasuke give up on Naruto?

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Kabuto sat in his office, staring at the wall. *It was all for nothing,* he thought numbly. So many years, he had put his career at risk to gain the favor and admiration of one man. He had pushed himself beyond his own personal limits to strive to be worthy, but never quite made it.

The funeral for Orochimaru would be in two days. It would be a major event, with hundreds expected to turn out to mourn the loss of the influential man. Many would be secretly glad to see their tormentor dead and gone. The pen that Kabuto held in his hand snapped, the sharp bits of plastic cutting into his flesh, blood blending with the black ink.

He looked at his hand numbly. Strange that he didn't feel any pain. Orochimaru was dead. Sliced down by a *sword* in a hotel room. And no one was going to jail? It was no one's fault?

No. That could not be right.

Kabuto picked up the phone in his office, dialing the number he had looked up earlier that day. "Hello? Yes, this is Kabuto Yakushi from the Manhattan District Attorney's office. Could I please speak with the detective in charge of the Orochimaru Sanin case? ... Yes, I'll hold... Hello. I'm calling from the Manhattan District Attorney's office. I understand that the case of the death of Orochimaru Sanin has been closed, and no charges will be filed on this matter?... Yes, I understand... We have an ongoing case on a related matter. Would it be possible to send over all files and evidence to my office?... Yes, I will coordinate with the police here for proper processing... It is rather urgent, so if you could start the process today, I'll send over the paperwork immediately... Yes, thank you."

Kabuto hung up the phone, his mind slowly calming now that he was able to focus on something concrete. Something wasn't right. And Kabuto was going to find out what it was.

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*to be continued*
So for those of you who have read my other stories, you will notice that this is the closest I have ever come to showing Itachi having sex with someone. LOL This is a big step for me. But Itachi needed a little love in his life. Dei isn't necessarily out of the running, FYI. I still haven't decided if I am leaving him in jail or not. So we'll see about that, and about how the ItaShi develops.
Naruto and Gaara breezed through customs in Paris with their diplomatic passports, having arrived on the pre-cleared plane courtesy of Jiraya and his porn. No one searched their bags full of cash, weapons, maps and fake identities. "Nathan Ukutski and Gerard Sabetski" went unremarked. They boarded the metro in Charles de Gaulle Airport and got off near Cite Internationale University. Neither spoke French particularly well, but they didn't plan on talking much. They didn't draw attention to themselves by looking at maps or gawking about like tourists. They had memorized the city map and subway lines on the plane over, and were able to navigate the narrow, cobbled streets like natives, blending in seamlessly with the student population there.

Naruto checked them into a cheap hotel, paying in cash, noticing the sly look the woman behind the counter gave them. He gave her a wink.

If she only knew.

They would stay at this hotel for no more than two days before switching locations. Their plan was to change hotels every four days after that, to reduce the chances of being found. Luckily, the summer had been cool, allowing them to wear hooded sweatshirts without seeming too out of place.

Gaara stored some of the fake IDs in the coffee maker. One gun went deep under the mattress (where a cleaning lady wouldn't discover it while making the bed) and the other taped behind the tank of the toilet with duct tape. He pulled out the bed and cut a hole in the drywall behind the headboard, and stored the rest of the weapons and the money there. Then he placed the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door, which would remain there for their entire stay and hopefully prevent any housekeeping staff from entering their room until they checked out.

Naruto scoped the halls and stairway for cameras, and whether there was access to the roof. He walked around and took note of the faces of the security guard and the two housekeepers that the place seemed to employ. Once they had at least three escape routes identified, he went back to the room where Gaara had already pulled the curtains closed. Gaara opened the small booklet where he had been detailing out every piece of information he had gathered on his father and the security behind which he had concealed himself over the past five years. Anything older than two years was marked with an asterisk as unreliable.

"Remember, Kakashi said he wants us to meet with a contact from the CIA in one week by the left elevator at the base of the Eiffel Tower between noon and 1pm," Gaara said.

Naruto sighed. "Ugh. CIA. I hate those fuckers. They're worse than cops. Even worse than the Feds.
There is no way we can trust this guy. Kakashi better be right that it's worth the risk." They both had had brushes with CIA agents in the past, and knew that there was always an angle that you weren't aware of when you got into bed with them. But Kakashi must have a reason for arranging it.

"Agreed," Gaara said. "Which is why only one of us should go, in case this is some sort of set-up. You need to stay here and -"

"No" Naruto's voice brooked no argument. "No way, Gaara. If anyone is going to get set up on something about your crazy dad, it's you. For all we know, the CIA is going to trade your missing ass for access to oil in your dad's desert or information on what the government is doing. I'm a totally worthless pawn in this deal. They wouldn't bother trapping me. You, on the other hand, would be quite valuable. Which is why you are going to be the one to sit this meet out."

Gaara glared at Naruto, but Naruto just blew him a kiss. "I love you, too. But you know I'm right on this. Save your glares for when I screw up."

Gaara absently took out the small knife he had strapped to his ankle and threw it into the wall. "I hate waiting. Why do we need to talk to Kakashi's stupid contact anyway? Like you said, we won't be able to trust a single thing he says."

Naruto nodded. "True. But Kakashi said the guy had satellite photos of your dad's compound that were less than a week old. We can see the facility, and get a better sense of what we're going up against. If they are close range and infrared we can see how many guards he has and how they're deployed. It's too good a chance to pass up. Plus, we're not going to tell this guy anything. I can promise to lie to absolutely every question he asks, down to the color of the sky. They already know we're in Paris, what we look like, and where we're going. There is nothing more they are going to learn."

Gaara nodded slowly. "Can you tell a fake satellite photo from a real one?"

Naruto grinned. "Nope. You?"

Gaara shook his head. "I've never even seen one before."

Naruto shrugged. "We knew how this was going to play out Gaara. We just have to bounce on the devil and ride it out. But we're both experienced killers with fairly large mental defects. On the scary scale, we rate pretty well, too."

Gaara's lips twitched up. "Only you would try to make this sound fun."

Naruto's smile hardened, reminding Gaara of just how dangerous his friend really was. "Helping you kill your bastard father is going to be fun. In a way, I want to kill him more than I want Tobi. I mean... Tobi's just psycho. It didn't start out personal. The only reason he took an interest in me is because I didn't die that night. But your father..." Naruto's voice took on an edge. "Your father has to be literally the worst fucking human being on earth. I'd be lying if I said I didn't almost get hard at the thought of gutting him, I want it so bad. Speaking of which..." Naruto said, his voice snapping back to almost cheerful as he drew out a thin metal wire that was held on each end by wooden pegs. He toyed with the deadly garrote as he looked at Gaara thoughtfully. "Have you thought about how you want to do it once we finally get to him? I'm guessing gunshot wound to the head would be far too quick."

Gaara drew a deep breath through his nose, slowly releasing it. "Yes. No guns." Gaara had thought about how he would kill his father for years. Fantasized would probably be a more accurate term.
"Do you want me to do it? Whatever he did, he's still your father. You don't have to be the one who..."

"No," Gaara's voice was hard and cold as ice. "I will be the last face my father sees. I want him to know that I am the one ending his life. I want him to see how much he underestimated me when he sold me off at seven years old to be raped to death. And I want him to suffer long enough to truly regret not killing me quickly when he had the chance."

Naruto looked at Gaara for a moment, then nodded. "Then he's all yours. I'll just make sure you have enough time with him to... resolve your issues. But in the end, if you can't do it, just give me a nod. I will not lose one wink of sleep by taking his life."

Truth be told, Naruto had never lost sleep from the people he had killed. They had all been either trying to kill him or one of Nagato's crew. He had never killed anyone that could remotely be considered 'innocent'. He was good at what he did, which meant no one ever got caught in the cross-fire of his kills. He killed the people he meant to, and that was that.

Gaara nodded. "Ok. But I don't expect it to be an issue. I have three years' worth of memories of the hell that bastard sold me into before you helped me to escape. Not to mention the fact he would slit my throat in a heartbeat if he had the opportunity."

Gaara looked at his watch. "Let's sleep. Tomorrow we need to scope out where our next hotel will be, and make contingency plans for the CIA meet in case it blows up in your face. And we need to find a public library. Kakashi wanted us to contact him via e-mail after the meet to check in."

"Sounds good," Naruto said, heading to the small bathroom to wash off from the journey.
-xXx-

Naruto was fast. Sasuke could hear the blond's feet pounding as he raced along the dark pavement ahead of him. But Sasuke was faster. They ran through the narrow streets of the shrouded, anonymous city, the streetlights doing little to lift the heavy darkness that surrounded them. Sasuke felt like a panther stalking his prey as he saw the blond turn the corner into what Sasuke somehow knew would prove to be a dead-end. He slowed his pace, knowing he had won. He would savor his victory, like any good predator would.

Naruto turned, his eyes already hooded with lust. "You caught me," he said huskily. The blond's hands slowly drifted to the base of his shirt, tan fingers toying with the hem. Sasuke's cock grew heavy between his legs in anticipation.

"Take it off," Sasuke said, his voice cold and threatening.

Naruto smirked, and slowly peeled off his shirt and threw it aside. Sasuke felt the ache in his groin intensify. The chase had only wet his appetite. His mouth was dry as he saw the way the muscles across Naruto's torso drew taut as the blond stretched his arms provocatively over his head.

"You should know better than to run from me, Naruto," Sasuke said, his thighs feeling lean and powerful after the chase, the blood pumping into his erection, pulsing with the rapid beating of his heart from the exertion of sprinting through the streets after his quarry. Finally running him to ground here in this dark alley. He would not let his lover escape again.

Naruto grinned at him cockily. "Maybe I just wanted you to work for it. Show me how much you want it, S'uke. Prove to me that you can really handle me."

Sasuke felt invincible as he moved with a speed he didn't know he had to slam Naruto into the brick
wall, the brick abrading the tan cheekbone and the palms of the tan hands. "Ahn, yes, Sasuke!"

Sasuke slid his hands over the hard contours of Naruto's back, feeling the muscles clench beneath his fingertips as he pressed the blond even harder into the wall of the narrow alleyway pushing his erection against the hard curve of Naruto's ass. He pulled down the blond's jeans just as he opened the fly of his own. Naruto instinctively arched back.

"I'm not going to prep you. Consider it your punishment for running away," Sasuke felt his throat constrict as he breathed in the achingly familiar scent of his missing lover. He had been terrified he'd never find the blond, never feel this way again. Sasuke's whole body was shaking with the need to consume Naruto, to fuse their bodies together so the blond would never be able to disappear again.

"Naruto," Sasuke breathed out, licking the side of the tan throat, reveling in the shiver it elicited. Unable to wait any longer, Sasuke positioned himself and drove in hard, feeling the unbelievable heat and virility of Naruto's body surrounding him. Naruto pushed back, bringing him even deeper. "Oh, god, Sasuke!" Naruto gritted out.

Sasuke's fingers bit into tan hips, leaving bruises. The mindless need to claim Naruto and prove his worth had Sasuke snapping his hips forward hard and fast with bruising force, focused only on wiping out any thought of anything else from his lover's mind.

"You are mine, Naruto. I'm never letting you leave again," Sasuke said, biting down hard on Naruto's shoulder and breaking the skin. "Sasuke!" Naruto screamed his name as he came, the sound of Naruto's voice ripping a release from Sasuke with such violence that he heard his own voice screaming Naruto's name as well.

Sasuke gasped as his eyes flew open, the sounds of their names echoing off the alley wall suddenly vanishing as the silence of his empty bedroom greeted him. He let his head fall back on his silk pillow-case, his body drenched in sweat and lying in soiled sheets. He needed a shower.

Karin was coming by today to discuss his series of campaign events for the next three weeks. There was a brief knock on his door, then it opened as Itachi walked in.

"Are you ok, Sasuke?" Itachi asked, taking in the flushed and sweat soaked state of his brother. "I thought I heard you call out -"

"I'm fine," Sasuke snapped out. "Could I have some privacy, please? Karin will be here in an hour, and I need to shower and get dressed."

Itachi sighed. "We could go and talk to Kakashi, Or Sakura. There is a good chance that one or both of them know where he is."

Sasuke glared at him. "We've discussed this. If he wanted me to know where he was, he would have told me. Since he didn't, I can only assume that he realized our little... 'fling' was not going to go much further and has moved on with his life. As have I."

"It's only been a week, Sasuke. That's hardly time to 'move on with life'."

"It is for me," Sasuke lied. "Now may I please have some privacy? Just because Shisui lets you see him naked doesn't mean all of your relatives will."

Itachi raised a brow, but wasn't surprised that Sasuke had figured it out. He and Shisui had been
discrete, meeting mostly at Itachi's place, but Sasuke was no fool. At least, not usually.

. . .

Itachi closed Sasuke's door behind him as he turned to find Shisui standing in the living room.

"How is he doing?"

Itachi shrugged. "He's fighting it. It hurt his pride that Naruto didn't tell him where he was going, or ask him for help."

Shisui sighed. Uchiha pride was not their most endearing trait. But it ran hard and deep, a core part of who they were.

Itachi eyed him for a moment. "So when are you going to tell me what you know about Naruto?"

Shisui blinked, then slowly smiled. "No one could ever read people like you can, Itachi. Sometimes I think you can look directly into people's minds with those eyes of yours."

Itachi simply waited, suppressing the snaking arousal that Shisui's smile had triggered. They both enjoyed the game of resistance. But Itachi wanted an answer. Shisui shrugged, then began, "Naruto's friend, the redhead from the courthouse -"

"Gaara."

"Yes. He came into the coffee shop you had told me to wait in when I escorted you there."

Itachi raised a brow. "And?"

"He recognized me. At least, he recognized the resemblance between the three of us. He asked me if I was working for you."

"And what did you say?"

Shisui smirked. "Absolutely nothing. But he sized me up pretty quickly. He told me I'd better protect Sasuke, because his friend in there had decided to be stupid and care about him. He said that when Naruto came back, if Sasuke wasn't still in one piece the blond would probably raze the city to the ground, myself included."

Itachi snorted out a short laugh. With his brief encounter with Gaara, that discussion sounded pretty accurate.

"He said it was a first for him, and I believed him. Whatever Sasuke is trying to tell himself, there was nothing casual about Naruto walking away. He didn't do it out of disinterest."

"Did you tell Sasuke?"

"No. It was clear why Naruto didn't want Sasuke to go after him. I happen to agree with his reasoning. You know as well as I do that Sasuke is close to the edge on this one. The slightest nudge might make him jump in and get himself killed or at minimum ruin his career. Naruto and Gaara seem competent. Let them handle their business, and we will handle ours. If we're all still standing at the end, then Naruto and Sasuke can get back to twisting up the sheets."

Itachi nodded. "I agree. I'm sure Naruto knew how Sasuke would react to this. He's prepared for whatever Sasuke will dish out to him at the end of it all."
"Or he's not expecting to make it out," Shisui said baldly.

Itachi didn't disagree, though he hoped for Sasuke's sake that the blond did. The hard, vacant look in Sasuke's eyes was something Itachi hadn't seen since the death of their parents. The difference was that this time, Sasuke wasn't letting Itachi in to help him.

"And did you say anything to Gaara after he told you this?"

Shisui shrugged. "I told him Sasuke would likely not take it well, since he has made it through the majority of his life not letting anyone in. He will exact his pound of flesh on Naruto for breaking through his walls then walking out his door."

Shisui remembered the look of amusement on Gaara's face at his words, clearly approving of the sentiment. After all, if Sasuke didn't get upset, it would mean he probably couldn't handle Naruto in the first place.

Itachi's cell phone buzzed, and he picked it up. "Uchiha... What?... When did he send the request?... Who's working on it in the evidence lab?... Ok, thank you for informing me of this development."

Shisui didn't like the suddenly concerned look on Itachi's face. "What happened?"

"Kabuto. He's had all the physical evidence and interview notes transferred over regarding Orochimaru's death. He has one of Orochimaru's friends at the police department working the case off the radar, but they are going over the evidence with a fine-tooth comb."

"Will they find anything?"

Itachi shrugged. "Naruto is good. But no one is perfect."

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Naruto had to bite his cheek to keep from laughing at the guy who was clearly the CIA contact. He had never seen anyone look so conspicuous about trying to be inconspicuous. Dark haired and wearing dark sunglasses, the guy appeared to have a serious stick up his ass. Naruto adjusted his earbuds (which were not actually attached to anything, due to his intense phobia of any electronic device that could track his movements and report his location... so the cord simply ended in Naruto's pocket), and pretended to be reaching in his pocket to adjust something on his nonexistent iPod. In reality his hand closed around the three-inch steel blade concealed there.

His trademark blond hair was covered by a hooded sweatshirt as he smiled at a girl who had been eyeing him. She blushed prettily and turned, walking slowly away. He pretended to casually follow her, as she happened to be walking in the direction of the man he had to talk to. Naruto kept his peripheral vision on high alert, walking in a slightly curved path and watching to see if any eyes tracked him for more than a couple of seconds.

Satisfied that they were as alone as he could manage, Naruto finally made his move. He walked near the man and pretended to stumble, bumping into him. He reached out as though catching himself, brushing his hand along the man's back, feeling the gun concealed there in the waistband of his pants.

Naruto pressed his knife just above the man's kidney. "Try to draw your gun on me and you will be bleeding out on this floor before it clears your waistband."

The CIA agent cursed, but stayed still. "How did you know it was me?"
Naruto snorted. "Are you kidding? You stand out like a sore thumb. You must be new to field work."

The man bristled. "I'll have you know I am an elite field agent. Highly decorated."

"Ok, Mr. Elite. What's your name?"

"You can call me Ebisu," the man said somewhat stiffly. "But you aren't getting any information from me until you withdraw your knife from my back." The man clearly didn't want to engage in an physical brawl in a populated area any more than Naruto did.

Naruto had to get rid of the gun, which is why he had 'accidentally' shoved the man against one of the large metal garbage cans. Glancing around to be sure no one was looking, he used the man's shirt to pull his gun out without leaving fingerprints and drop it into the trashcan. Now neither of them could access it before the other vanished. It was a level playing field again.

Naruto withdrew his knife. Hand-to-hand, he was pretty sure he could take the guy if he tried anything now that the gun was out of the way. "Ok, fine. Tell me what you want."

......

Three hours later, Naruto met Gaara at their 'green light' meet spot, which was a booth in the back of a corner bar that had both a rear and side exit to the building. If Naruto had failed to show, Gaara would wait three more hours before waiting at their 'yellow light' meet spot. Luckily, that was not necessary.

"Well?" Gaara asked.

Naruto rolled his eyes. "That guy was a total tool. I can't believe he is allowed in the field at all. They must not be prioritizing this contact much, to send someone like him. Which is good luck for us. At least he gave us the satellite photos."

He pulled out a large, brown envelope and dropped it on the table. Gaara opened it and removed the maps while Naruto felt around the inside of the envelope, not surprised when he found a small tracking device. Gaara smashed the tiny device with his glass without even looking up from the map.

"If these are real, this is going to be tough," Gaara said after a bit.

Naruto shrugged. They had almost a month to plan. Between the two of them, they'd figure out something.

Gaara looked up. "What did 'the tool' ask you?"

"The usual. Where we were staying, when we were leaving, and whether we had additional contacts inside who were helping us. He said that there is a general in one of the adjacent districts that the CIA is friendly with who would meet us there and provide us with supplies and intel."

Gaara looked at the name and photo, the name under it read: Mu Tsuchikage. *So this was the CIA's angle.* Mu had been trying unsuccessfully to seize Gaara's father's territory since before Gaara was born. The CIA probably had a deal with him. If they helped him take out the Kazekage leader, Mu would be their ally in the region. Until someone else offered him more money, at least. Mu had always sold himself to the highest bidder, and was known for double-crossing 'allies'. "And what did you say?"

"I told him we were staying in a youth hostel just outside of Paris until our two friends joined us in
six weeks, at which point we'd be heading directly to Suna to meet up with our contact there. He asked me to call him on this number when we were ready to go, and said he would 'help us' get to Suna. But he wanted to meet you and the rest of the crew first. I told him I'd give him a call in six weeks when we're ready."

Gaara's lips twitched. "Perfect." In six weeks, they'd either be dead or back in New York.

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Sasuke knocked on Kabuto's office door, Itachi standing behind him, and Karin following last.

"Please, come in Councilman Uchiha," Kabuto said to Sasuke, then turned and nodded slightly more curtly to Itachi, "Counselor."

Kabuto raised his eyebrows in curiosity as Karin entered, clearly not expecting Sasuke to have brought anyone other than his brother to this meeting.

"This is Karin. She is the head of my PR, and a personal advisor to me. I thought it best she is along, in case there are any... public relations ramifications from our discussion."

Kabuto eyed her thoughtfully for a moment. "At this stage, I do not think it wise on either of our parts to make this discussion public. We both value our careers too much to be... rash."

Sasuke's face betrayed none of the nerves he felt. His voice sounded almost bored as he responded, "I must say I was a bit surprised to receive your request that I come down to your office to meet with you today, and your refusal to disclose the topic in advance. If you wish to see my campaign finances, I am more than happy to open my files for you. Karin is conversant on all my campaign activities, including fundraising."

Kabuto smiled slightly. "No, Mr. Uchiha. This has nothing to do with your finances. Or your work as a politician."

Sasuke simply raised a brow, "I don't mean to be rude, but I do have a series of appointments today that would be difficult to reschedule. Could we get to the point of this meeting?"

Kabuto's smile thinned almost predatorily for a moment, his jealousy of the attention Orochimaru had fixed on this man almost bursting free. He took a breath to still the urge for violence. He was too intelligent to resort to such measures. "I notice that Mr. Uzumaki is no longer escorting you."

Sasuke's hand twitched involuntarily before he could still it. "Given that the police found evidence that Orochimaru was my stalker, and that he is now dead, I didn't feel the need to retain Mr. Uzumaki's security services further."

"It's unfortunate that he no longer seems to be in town. I have had difficulty in locating him."

Sasuke shrugged. "If you wanted to know if he left a forwarding address so you could keep in touch, you could have simply called my doorman," Sasuke's voice had taken on a distinct warning edge to it.

Kabuto hesitated briefly, his eyes flashing at the not-so-subtle insult. "In that case, I will 'get to the point', as you so politely requested. As you may or may not know, the evidence concerning Orochimaru's death has been turned over to the police department here. And they made a very interesting discovery."

Neither Itachi nor Sasuke showed any visible reaction at all to Kabuto's statement. Karin seemed
only mildly puzzled. "But... I thought that his death was ruled as self-defense, and the investigation had ended," she said tentatively.

The pencil Kabuto had been holding snapped at Karin's words. "They stopped their investigation. I did not."

Itachi adjusted the cuff of his tailored shirt slightly. "Under what authority did you re-open the case, Mr. Yakushi?"

Kabuto looked slightly nervous under Itachi's intense gaze, then he steeled himself. "I suppose it is fortunate that you decided to join your brother in this conversation, Itachi. Given that this... discrepancy would effect you as well."

"I don't tolerate threats, Kabuto. Get to the point, or we're leaving and I will be filing a complaint with our boss about your conduct, including misuse of your authority in re-opening a closed case and wasting public funds," Itachi's voice was cold and hard.

Kabuto licked his lips nervously, but pushed ahead. "I just thought you should know that they found Orochimaru's blood on the inside of the katana's sheath."

Karin cast a puzzled look to Itachi and Sasuke, but neither man's face betrayed any reaction whatsoever. "What does that have to do with anything?" she asked. "Wasn't he killed with a sword anyway?"

Kabuto turned to her and smiled. "Do you know much about the martial arts, Karin?"

She shook her head.

"Well, in martial arts styles involving swords, the way you draw, clean and re-sheath your sword are as important has how you swing or strike with it. A true master of the sword arts would never use his blade in battle, then drop it bloody on the floor. No, he would wipe it, then resheath it. It would be second-nature... done without a conscious thought."

Karin nodded hesitantly, understanding his words but still not seeing how it could be relevant at all. The frozen stillness of Sasuke beside her, however, told her that there was momentous importance in what the man was saying.

"So the fact that trace amounts of blood were found on the inside of the katana sheath... trace amounts, not visible blood... would imply that the sword was wiped then re-sheathed after killing Orochimaru. But the sword was not found in its sheath. The sword was found on the floor, unsheathed, and covered in blood. This would mean that - after Orochimaru was killed and the sword cleaned and re-sheathed - someone took the sword out of its sheath and dropped it in his blood."

The room was absolutely still.

Kabuto continued, speaking only to Karin but keeping his peripheral vision focused on the two men exuding suddenly dangerous auras in his office. "It might further interest you to know that the Uchiha clan is known for their swordsmanship. In fact, they have their own unique style of fighting that has been passed down for generations, based on centuries old samurai techniques. Both Itachi and Sasuke have trained since the age of four. They are, in short, masters of their sword martial art style."

Karin's eyes widened as she realized what the man in front of her was implying. "Are you... are you seriously accusing Sasuke or Itachi of killing Orochimaru, then tampering with evidence and framing
"I am not making any accusations at all. I am merely laying out certain facts that have come to light recently. Facts that should give me grounds to formally re-open the case."

"There are many explanations to those facts," Itachi said calmly. "Explanations that could easily fit within the existing theory of the case."

"Oh, really, Itachi? And what might those be?"

"The trace blood evidence doesn't come with a date. It could have been deposited last month, or even last year. Orochimaru spent time with Sasuke, and had visited his home on multiple occasions. Given Mr. Sanin's fascination with our family and its history, a fact which I know you are well aware of," Itachi took sadistic pleasure in the flare of jealousy he saw in the man's eyes, and was grateful that Naruto had told him of the connection early on. It was something he could use to his advantage if the situation became more serious. "It is possible that Orochimaru could have picked up the sword at some point. Not being familiar with weapons, he could have nicked his finger on the blade, leaving trace amounts of blood behind that would have been deposited in the sheath. Another possibility is that some of the spray from the kill strike landed in sheath at the time of Orochimaru's death. From what I observed at the time, the spatter went quite far into the room. The sheath was resting quite close to the body as well, making it possible that some stray droplet could have entered the opening."

Kabuto drew a breath in through his nose, clearly annoyed that Itachi had so quickly been able to come up with two plausible excuses for the evidence of the blood in the sheath. It would be enough to make a jury question things, especially when there was someone already willing to take the blame. Although that man was conveniently missing. Naruto's disappearance was fast becoming Kabuto's best argument in their being something fishy about his story. But it would be a risky move. It infuriated Kabuto that the man didn't even appear to be nervous. He wanted them to sweat. He wanted them to fear him, to finally acknowledge that he was not inferior to them, even if it would be too late to prove it to Orochimaru himself.

"Those are convenient stories. But without Naruto here to verify the original accounting of events, it does open up an entirely new line of questioning that must be considered. It's convenient that you got him to take the fall for you. But I wonder how willing he would be to... bend over for you in that way without Orochimaru here to pay him to do so?" Kabuto put a subtle stress on the words while looking directly at Sasuke, contempt clear in his eyes, as though saying he knew exactly what Orochimaru had hired Naruto to do for Sasuke. Implying that the only reason Naruto had stuck around was because Orochimaru was paying him, and now that the money was gone, so was Naruto.

Sasuke's fist clenched, but Itachi set a hand on his arm to keep him from reacting further.

"If you come after us with half-baked accusations like this, I will ruin your career," Itachi said, his tone polite. "I would tread very carefully, Yakushi."

With that, the three of them stood and exited Kabuto's office.

Karin grabbed Sasuke's arm as he went to get into his car where Shisui was waiting to escort him home. "You and I have a few things we need to talk through, Sasuke. I want to know how much of what that ass just said was true. There is no way I am going to let him derail your career, but I need to know what he might possibly find out if he digs hard enough. You have to tell me what is going on. All of it. You need to trust me."

Sasuke looked at her, evaluating how much he could really trust her. Finally he nodded. "Fine. Get
in. And call Suigetsu. Tell him to meet me at my apartment. We have work to do."

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**Three weeks later**

It had been almost a month since Naruto had left New York with Gaara. After going over the plans in detail. They were almost ready to act. They would leave for Madrid in two days and meet Kimimaro’s contact there. The man’s name was Sasori, and while Naruto had never met him, he knew that he had been the regional head of Nagato's central Asian operation before Nagato died.

It didn't mean they could trust him, but it did give Naruto a bit of confidence. Nagato was picky about his people. He only took the most capable, and only those he trusted.

Naruto and Gaara periodically went to the public library where there were computers available free for public use. They searched for any information on Gaara's father or activities in the region.

Naruto tried to avoid it, but inevitably he found himself Googling Sasuke to see what he was up to. He would drink in the images of the man, so formal and controlled in public. It made him think of how those same stoic features would twist in the throes of lust.

But he knew he had to stop torturing himself. A week ago, there started to be tabloid rumors that Sasuke had begun dating his head of PR. Naruto masochistically clicked on photos of them together. She had begun accompanying Sasuke to public events. There were, of course, no overt displays of affection. But she stood closer to him than was strictly necessary, and there were shots of the two of them looking at each other, a large grin on her face and a slight smile on his.

He stared at the photo, noticing the way her fingers rested lightly on Sasuke's arm. Again, nothing overt. Just a simple sign of closeness. But in a way, that was what made it so believable. Naruto knew Sasuke well enough to know that casual touching was not something he indulged in with most people. Evidently the local media had noticed this, too, and rumors abounded.

The woman was pretty, though not stunning, with her red hair and glasses. But she looked intelligent and comported herself well. She seemed to fit in Sasuke's life. Much more than Naruto did. At least, that's what Naruto kept telling himself. He didn't want Sasuke to be miserable and missing him. He wanted Sasuke to be safe and happy.

Naruto closed the photo and shut his eyes, as though willing the image out of his consciousness. Some things just weren't meant to be. And Naruto had to be man enough to accept that. He was the one who had left. Sasuke did the right thing by moving on and finding a more appropriate partner for his career.

Naruto logged into the temporary e-mail account he had set up for communicating with Kakashi. It wasn't completely secure, but it was safer than phones, where locations were easier to pinpoint. He read the message and froze, his heart both soaring and sinking at the same time.

_They have re-opened the case. He will be charged if you don't come back and re-issue your statement. Your favorite ADA is leading the witch hunt. It should not take more than two days of your time, so it should not interfere with your existing time table. J has it planned out. There is a round-trip-ticket waiting for you at the airport under ID4. Get to a safe location and call my cell._

Naruto tried to get his mind around the fact that he needed to go back to see Sasuke. Sasuke - who had already moved on and was dating someone else. Gaara noticed his friend's complete and utter stillness, and came over, quickly taking in the contents of the e-mail.
Gaara looked at Naruto's expression. "You're not actually the one who killed him, are you?"

Naruto looked at Gaara, then slowly shook his head. To his surprise, Gaara smiled. "I knew I liked that Uchiha. Let's go. You've got an overnight bag to pack."

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"Captain Hatake?"

Kakashi looked up from his desk, surprised to see the chief of the department there. "Yes?"

"I'd like to introduce you to a visiting police officer from Japan, Obito Uchiha. He's here on special assignment from Japan's Criminal Investigation Bureau. Evidently there is a serial killer that his division has been chasing for more than ten years that they have reason to believe might be in New York."

Kakashi smiled, carefully concealing any indication that he knew exactly who the man was likely looking for.

"Nice to meet you, Officer Uchiha," Kakashi said in a casually friendly voice. "Uchiha - we have someone in the District Attorney's office with that same last name. A relative of yours?"

"Uchiha is an old name in Japan. Perhaps we are distant relatives, but not that I am aware of," the man said, dismissively. "But I'd much rather hear more about you. I've heard amazing things about your work, Captain Hatake," the black-haired man said, his face seemingly open and eager. Almost childish, despite the fact that he looked to be roughly the same age as Kakashi, if not older.

"Obito here has requested you to be assigned as his partner on this case, given that you had already begun some of your own investigations into someone that appears to fit the same profile. Of course, the feds will also be brought in at some point if it appears there is indeed an international serial killer now operating in New York. Obito has brought a file for you to look through that contains all the Japanese authorities have on the serial killer, though most of it is information on his victims. There is no confirmed identity, no known contacts, and no photograph or drawing of the killer's likeness."

Obito smiled at Kakashi disarmingly. "I hope you don't mind my requesting you. I did my research before coming over. I wanted to be sure I worked with the best."

"Not at all," Kakashi said, trying to get a read on the man, but not quite able to.

Obito tried not to laugh. He always liked taking on a new name. Obito Uchiha would suit him perfectly until his little fox showed up again. He liked using the name of legends. Uchiha would be perfect.

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**to be continued**

So the next chapter contains the part of the story for which this fic was named. ;-) Yay! And it only took me 18 chapters to get to it. sorry... I know I promised this whole thing would only be 15 chapters long. Blame it on my wordiness. And all the sex.
Sasuke stood in front of the cameras on the steps of City Hall for yet another campaign speech. One of the District Congressmen had latched onto Sasuke to help him 'lock in the women's vote' for the party. Sasuke was now asked to appear at almost every event the party held in New York City. He knew this was just part of paying his dues to the party that would, in a couple of years, back him for his own congressional campaign but it didn't make it any less of a pain in the ass.

As with most of these events, Karin stood by his side, easily side-stepping all inquiries about the nature of their relationship, which only further fed the frenzy of speculation. Nothing was better during campaign season than politicians having sex. At first his party had been unsure how the gossip would affect the polling numbers, given that Sasuke was definitely not married to the woman the press was speculating about. But because he was young, handsome, and not married, it seemed to only feed the excitement and 'humanness' of his political persona rather than damage it. So the rumor mill was left to run unchecked, with Sasuke and Karin neither confirming nor denying the existence of anything other than a professional relationship between them, saying simply that people should vote based on the merits of the candidate and their platform, not on the details of their social life. As though that statement would ever prove to be true.

When the questions and grandstanding were finally over for the day, Sasuke placed a hand under Karin’s elbow to guide her down the steps to his car. Before they reached it, however, a hand fell on his shoulder. Sasuke turned to see Itachi standing there looking grim.

"Come to my office. We need to talk."

Sasuke knew Itachi was not one for drama, and he felt apprehension flare. Anything that would have Itachi visibly concerned had to be serious. But Sasuke knew better than to ask questions amidst a sea of reporters who had their cameras and microphones out, so he simply nodded, settling Karin into his car and instructing the driver to take her home. Karin looked as though she would object, but Sasuke had turned and started up the steps before she could say anything. Shisui tracked his movements from the crowd, continuing his low key surveillance that he had taken over from Naruto for the past month. When no one appeared to follow Sasuke inside, Shisui headed in to meet the brothers in Itachi’s office, wondering what had happened to make his usually impassive lover appear shaken.

Itachi closed the door to his office, then turned to look at Sasuke, his face grave. "I found out that Kabuto has asked the District Attorney permission to schedule an indictment hearing regarding the Orochimaru case, naming you as his killer."

To his credit, Sasuke didn't flinch. He had known that Kabuto had spent all of his time trying to build as much of a circumstantial case as he possibly could against Sasuke. Itachi’s ability to constantly generate alternative, reasonable interpretations of the evidence had only delayed the inevitable. Sasuke slowly nodded, his mind racing through options of how to handle the situation, and what likely outcomes of various scenarios would be. "Kabuto knows he doesn't need to actually win the case against me. Simply indicting me on a charge like this will end my career, regardless of the outcome of the trial," Sasuke said, a strange calm settling over him. At least the waiting was finally over.

"He hasn't won yet," Itachi said. "District Attorney Sarutobi was in a closed door session with Police
Commissioner Jiraya for three hours immediately after he talked with Kabuto. He hasn't given permission yet for the indictment charge to be filed."

That gave Sasuke pause. In reality, Kabuto hadn't needed to seek permission for filing the indictment. The old joke that the District Attorney's office could indict a ham sandwich if they wanted wasn't really that much of a stretch. Kabuto was clearly trying to cover his own ass for when the case eventually went badly, but in doing so he had now boxed himself in. He would have to wait for Sarutobi to agree now that he had asked. Sadistically, Sasuke wished he had been there to see Kabuto's face when the old man had said no. Surely Kabuto had thought he had enough evidence to convince him, or he would never have even tried.

"What could Jiraya have said that made Sarutobi hesitate?"

Itachi frowned. "That's what I wanted to ask you about. Jiraya had come by a few times, asking general questions about the work Naruto had done for you, the event with the bomb, and how Orochimaru had connected you with Naruto in the first place."

"And what did you tell him?" Sasuke asked sharply, though he knew that Itachi would never talk out of school.

Itachi raised a brow in a small reprimand for even hinting that he would make a mistake. "I told him that Naruto had found the bomb as well as persuaded Deidara to share what he knew -"

"That was more Deidara trying to get in your pants, but I'm guessing you didn't choose to share that with the Commissioner," Sasuke said, noticing the nervous glance Itachi sent to Shisui at his little brother's words. Shisui gave him a look that said this topic was not over, but didn't derail the conversation to go into it right then.

"I also told him that Orochimaru had employed Naruto to serve as additional protection for you after you received the photos, and Naruto that had warned me that Orochimaru was obsessed with us, particularly you. I said that Naruto had mentioned that Kabuto disliked me personally due to Orochimaru's... admiration. Jiraya asked me a lot of questions about exactly how Naruto knew this, and what kind of connection there was between Kabuto and Orochimaru. Unfortunately, I don't know that much about it. Do you?"

"No. And unfortunately, we can't as Naruto since he has long since disappeared off the face of the earth with Gaara," Sasuke said with more than a trace of bitterness coloring his voice. Despite his better judgment, he had had Suigetsu looking for Naruto. But the blond had simply vanished. Sasuke tried to tell himself that the twisting sensation he felt in his gut was simply annoyance.

Not worry.
Not loneliness.

Itachi looked at Sasuke for a minute. "We need to find him, Sasuke. If he can convince Sarutobi to block the indictment, it will save your career. Naruto already gave a statement to the police about his actions, but now Kabuto is trying to imply that it was coerced. If Naruto can come back and reaffirm his statement, or cast doubt on Kabuto's credibility or impartiality -"

"No. I am not going to go running to Naruto to have him come back and -" Sasuke clenched his teeth. "Just no. I killed Orochimaru. I knew what I was doing when it happened. If I go to jail or have my career ruined, then so be it. Naruto left. I'm not going to ask him to come back. Especially not to help me save my career," Sasuke sneered out the last words.
Itachi sighed. *Foolish little brother. Why do you always put your pride first?*

Sasuke fixed Itachi with a hard glare. "If you go behind my back to find Naruto or bring him here, I will go down to the police station and confess. Do not interfere, Itachi. What's done is done. Every action has consequences. I'm not afraid to face mine."

With that, Sasuke stood and walked out of Itachi's office. Shisui hesitated, seeing Itachi clearly upset. But he knew his first duty was to make sure no one was able to physically harm Sasuke. None of the Uchihas believed for a moment that the stalker had been Orochimaru. Itachi would never forgive him if something happened to his family again. They had only barely made it back together after the first time. If something happened to Sasuke, it would be irreparable.

"I'll come by tonight," Shisui said. "In the meantime, I'll try to talk to him."

Itachi nodded, but they both knew it would be a waste of breath.

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Naruto's plane touched down in JFK at three o'clock in the afternoon. It took a bit more time for him to clear customs since he was not on a diplomatic passport this time. Luckily, all he had in his carry-on was a toothbrush, pajamas, and two changes of clothes. If his luck held out, he'd only need to use one of the sets of clothes. His stomach was twisting at the thought of being back in New York. Sasuke was here. With Karin, now.

Though even if he wasn't really with her romantically, it wouldn't change things. Naruto couldn't see him. It would only put Sasuke at further risk from Tobi. And it would also increase the chance that their past relationship would be discovered, since surely there were people watching Sasuke now.

Naruto pulled out the new disposable cell he had purchased before leaving and called Kakashi.

"I've landed. Should I meet you directly at the police station?"

"*No. Jiraya has scheduled the meeting with Kabuto for tomorrow morning. Meet me at location 3 in two hours. I can debrief you more fully then.*"

Naruto sighed, wishing he could just get this over with today and go back to Paris.

He hung up and made his way to the train that would take him into the city. He wondered what the hell had gone wrong with their plan, but knew he'd have to wait to discuss it with Kakashi in person. You could be as careful as possible with disposable phones, but you still never knew who was listening.

*Fucking Kabuto,* he thought bitterly about the man who had forced his hand and made him return to New York. *I always hated that guy.*

Naruto transferred at Penn Station to the subway, trying not to think about the shit bad luck he'd been having on them lately. But the trip was without incident, and he found himself entering the confessional in a small catholic church in Little Jamaica.

The divider between the booths was pushed open, and Kakashi's familiar covered face appeared. "Let's hope neither of us get struck by lightning for sitting in here. I have a feeling the combined confession of both our sins would cause the priest to abandon his faith."

Naruto smiled half-heartedly, just wanting this trip to be over. "You're keeping your word, right? I don't want to see him. I can't... he's moved on. It's best if he never even finds out I was here."
Kakashi nodded slowly. He had been keeping an eye on the young councilman after Naruto had left. He was aware of the rumors about his relationship with the pretty campaign manager. He didn't believe a word of them. But until the situation in Suna was resolved, there was no point in making these two stubborn men admit how they felt. Kakashi would wait until things had played out with Gaara's father. Then he would simply lock Naruto and Sasuke in a large room with a small bed. He was pretty sure they'd resolve any misunderstandings quite quickly.

"The meeting will just be with you, Kabuto, Jiraya, and Sarutobi," Kakashi said, not hinting at the direction his thoughts were going. "It is being kept completely off the record at Jiraya's insistence. No one else will ever know it has happened, not even Sasuke. I'll be in the monitoring room to make sure it is not recorded and there is no video feed of the conversation."

"But Sasuke's lawyer must know that this meeting is happening, right? Don't they have to be notified?"

Kakashi shifted. "Sasuke hasn't been charged, yet. For now, I think Itachi is acting as his counselor, though Sasuke has his own law degree so wouldn't really need one. If it goes to trial, that will change. But officially, this meeting isn't happening... even the chief of the department is not aware of the details. He only knows that a protected witness is being brought in. Jiraya asked me to contact you directly. My guess is that this has something to do with the fact that he knows Tobi is turning the City upside down looking for you right now. Any word of you being in town would put you and anyone you meet with in immediate danger. All Jiraya told the department was that he had a witness in protective custody that he would be bringing in, and would need the examination room. He said it was not a case that fell in this jurisdiction, but they just needed the room. If he was anyone other than the Commissioner, his request would have been denied, but they allowed him to bend the rules without the usual paperwork."

Naruto felt unease creep over him. This didn't sound right. "Why is Jiraya playing it this way? Everything I have to say is in the initial official statement I gave the police, signed and notarized. Why can't they use that? If I say anything off the record, without Sasuke's attorney present, can the statement even be used? Plus, you know what a hardass the District Attorney Sarutobi is. The guy is like three thousand years old and can spot a lie a mile away. You guys know I'm not good at bluffing. Why are we taking this risk? What the fuck is going on, Kakashi?"

"Jiraya wouldn't tell me. I don't know if this is to protect you, to protect Kabuto, or to protect Uchiha. But he clearly feels like there are people in the department who can't be trusted to know that this meeting is happening. Which is why we're meeting at 4am."

Naruto blinked. "Why would Kabuto agree to this? Kakashi, this doesn't make any sense. Something's wrong here."

Kakashi sighed, but couldn't disagree. "I don't know. That's why you're staying with me tonight in one of the safe houses. Put your hood up and sunglasses on. I'm guessing since you had to arrange the trip without much notice you couldn't bring a weapon. I'm not letting you out of my sight until you are back on that plane."

Kakashi had access to witness protection housing units that were not currently in use, so he took them over to one. Naruto showered and tumbled into bed, telling himself that by tomorrow night he'd be back on his way to Paris and whatever this was would be over. He was jet-lagged, and fell asleep by 8 o'clock.

Kakashi had checked his work phone earlier, and saw three missed calls from his new partner, Obito. But he had pulled the battery out of the phone before he had left to meet Naruto, just in case someone was following it to monitor his location. He would call Obito in the morning, after Naruto
was safely on his flight back to Paris. Whatever his temporary partner was needing, it would have to wait.

Kakashi watched the blond sleep, wishing he could do the same, even though they'd have to be up again in a few hours. But something had felt wrong over the past few weeks. He couldn't put his finger on it, but he knew that he was missing something. Overlooking something. Kakashi showered and pulled on his boxers, still feeling unsettled. Taking out his cigarettes, he sat on the sill of the window, looking out at the city below. The glow of the city lights played over the toned muscles of his torso. Out of habit, he closed the curtains before lighting the cigarette, knowing that the glowing ember was a clear marker for where his head if there was anyone in range with a gun.

He hadn't received any specific threat, but his instincts had rarely failed him.

And they had been screaming for weeks that he was in deep shit.

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"Uchiha," Itachi said when he answered his phone. He wondered who would be calling him at 10 o'clock at night on his private cell. It was not a number that many had access to.

"Assistant District Attorney Uchiha. I hope I'm not catching you at an inconvenient time."

Itachi looked over to where Shisui was just coming out of the shower. Shisui threw Itachi his damp towel to keep him from dripping on the expensive carpet.

"Commissioner Jiraya," Itachi said, keeping the surprise from his tone when he recognized the man's voice. "I didn't realize you had my private number. I'm assuming that this has something to do with your meeting with my boss the other day?" Itachi wiped his still dripping face with the towel, then wrapped it around his waist. Shisui came up behind him, placing a kiss at the crook of his neck before taking a smaller towel to gently dry Itachi's hair, his eyes showing concern at Itachi's expression.

"Yes. I thought you might like to know that there is going to be an interview this morning that might be of interest to you and your brother. If you meet me at the station at 3:30, I will escort you in."

Itachi blinked. "Three thirty in the morning?"

"If the time doesn't work for your schedule, you can always refuse, but I think it would be in your best interests to hear this. We will be bringing in a witness in the Orochimaru case. Someone who works for the police department, and will be the deciding factor as to whether the case against your brother moves forward."

"We'll be there," Itachi said, hanging up. Shisui sent him a questioning look, but Itachi was already calling his brother. He grabbed the belt of the white, cotton bathrobe that Shisui had thrown on, and tugged the older man flush against him, giving him a hard, quick kiss as he waited for Sasuke to pick up.

After replaying the conversation he had just had with Jiraya to his younger brother and confirming that they would be going to the police station together, Itachi hung up.

Shisui had heard what Itachi had said to Sasuke, and knew his lover would not be sleeping tonight. "Come," Shisui said, tugging Itachi gently toward the bed by gripping the towel that was around his waist. "There is nothing more you can do for the moment to help Sasuke."

There were very few types of witnesses that could turn the course of a potential indictment, and have
the backing of the Commissioner, and direct audience with the District Attorney. But none that would require a meeting after hours. Off the radar.

Itachi let Shisui pull him down onto their bed. He would find out in a few hours if it was who he was beginning to think it might be.

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Sasuke paced back and forth. Given that it was already eleven o'clock, he didn't pretend he was going to get any sleep. He would just have to be up again in a couple of hours.

There was a witness who knew something about Orochimaru. Most likely either the nature of his death or information of his obsession with Sasuke and Naruto's role. Both of those were potentially quite damaging to him. Given the number of political figures and wealthy businessmen at the hotel the day he was killed, it is possible that there was some sort of police detail assigned to one or more of the guests. Particularly with some known Yakuza operatives attending as well.

It is possible that one of the men saw Naruto leave with Orochimaru, and - recognizing Naruto as belonging to Nagato's operation - followed them. But Sasuke had not seen anyone in the hallway when he had approached Naruto's room.

The other angle would be if someone had been investigating Orochimaru and new of his more underhanded dealings, or even of the nature of the relationship he had with Naruto. They had been discreet, but nothing was impossible. If it came to light that he and Naruto had been involved in a sexual relationship, it would give Kabuto plenty of ammunition to undermine Naruto's statement with a jury. Juries loved sex and scandal. And this case would be rife with both.

But none of that explained why the meeting was taking place at the police station in the middle of the night. If they wanted it to be completely secret, then they shouldn't meet at the police station at all. And if it were 'on the books', then why all the cloak and dagger with the timing?

None of it made any sense. Sasuke had thought for a wild moment that the witness could possibly be Naruto. But if it were someone in the police employ, then it couldn't be him. Naruto would never have come to his apartment with his head bleeding after suffering a gunshot wound if he had a safer place to go. Which he would, if he were an undercover cop. Nonetheless, he had had Suigetsu check, but there was no undercover operative that even remotely resembled Naruto.

So what the hell was going on?

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Kakashi's growing sense of unease was nearly drowning him. He had almost called off the meeting, but there was still nothing specific he could point to except for his own paranoia. Fortunately, he was used to relying on his neuroses, so he did the next best thing to cancelling the meeting. He set off the fire alarm at 3:00 am, watching the mandatory evacuation of the building and all personnel from a darkened doorway down the block. While the building was being searched, he and Naruto climbed in through an air vent in the rear of the building, and crawled their way through the dusty air ducts until they were above the examination room that Jiraya had reserved.

Once Kakashi had made sure it was the correct room, he told Naruto to stay hidden in the shaft until Jiraya signaled him. Kakashi would enter the building through the regular entrance after carefully noting the names of every person still standing out on the street waiting for clearance to be let back in the building. If there was a mole in the department, Kakashi would at least have a narrowed down list of suspects to choose from.
All that was left to do was to disable the video feed to the interrogation room, and there would be no record of Naruto ever entering the department.

Having completed all his tasks, Kakashi walked calmly to the viewing room where he would be invisible through the one-way glass but would be able to see and hear everything that happened in the room. Jiraya hadn't told Kakashi he could stay, but he hadn't told him he couldn't either.

Kakashi pushed open the door, and froze at the two well-dressed men standing in the room. "What the hell are you two doing here?" Kakashi asked, his anger flaring as he realized what the answer must be. Was Jiraya trying to get Naruto killed?

"Officer Hatake," Itachi said smoothly, seemingly unperturbed by the less-than-friendly greeting. "I assume Commissioner Jiraya forgot to inform you that my brother and I would also be observing this... interview."

Kakashi looked from one man to the other, gauging their guarded looks. "Did he tell you who was coming?" Kakashi asked.

"No," Sasuke said curtly. "Nor would he give any context at all except that evidently the person Jiraya will be bringing is so well-regarded by the department that they will single-handedly decide whether an indictment against me is filed."

Kakashi raised an eyebrow, wondering what Jiraya had up his sleeve. "I must ask you both to refrain from disclosing anything at all about what and who you see here tonight. I brought my witness in under the strict promise that the only people party to this discussion would be Kabuto, Jiraya, and Sarutobi. If it were up to me, I would evict you immediately."

"How unfortunate for you, then, that Jiraya outranks you," Sasuke said bitingly.

Kakashi's eyes narrowed. "I can still withhold my witness, on the grounds of protecting his safety. You have no idea what kind of danger your presence here tonight puts him in."

Itachi stilled. "I believe the damage is already done," he said, as Jiraya, Kabuto, and Sarutobi walked into the vacant interrogation room. "It looks like it is already beginning."

"Where is your witness, Kakashi?" Sasuke asked, feeling tense and unsettled at the thought that something so major in his life was about to be decided and he would have no way of controlling the outcome. He hadn't felt this way since Naruto left him a month ago.

Kakashi smirked, taking a small sadistic pleasure in having at least one other person feeling as anxious about this meeting as he was. "You'll see, Councilman Uchiha."

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"So?" Kabuto said, looking pointedly around the room. "You set up a meeting in a totally unorthodox manner, in the middle of the night, and your supposed witness isn't even here?"

Jiraya leaned back in one of the metal chairs. "Oh he's here. I just wanted to make a few things very clear first. I want you to both understand that there can be no public record of this meeting. If you decide to proceed and file an indictment, then we will have to deal with sealed hearings, and there will be information that will need to be redacted from the public record. Any mention I hear of the person you will meet tonight or the specifics of his connection with the department, and I will personally see to it that you are charged with hindering an investigation, endangering a witness, and any other charges I can convince a federal court to file against you. Disbarment will be the least of your worries. Is that clear?" Jiraya said, giving Kabuto a hard look.
Kabuto shrugged. "I believe I am aware of all the undercover programs the department runs, as well as its operatives. Clearly the District Attorney and I have sufficient clearance to know about whatever this person's activities are."

Jiraya looked at the two men for a moment. "I wouldn't go making assumptions. You're just an assistant district attorney."

Kabuto's slight frown was quickly masked behind his usual polite facade. "Very well. I believe you have sufficiently drawn out the mystery around this person. I hope that the build-up is worth it."

Jiraya smirked. "I'll let you judge that for yourself. You can come in now," Jiraya said, raising his voice on the final sentence as though speaking to someone outside the locked room.

But Kabuto and Sarutobi started when there was a grating noise from the ceiling, and they looked up to see a young man wearing jeans and a hooded sweatshirt lower himself smoothly from the air conditioning vent in the ceiling. The person had his back to them while he dusted a few cobwebs off his legs.

"What kind of a circus is this," Kabuto said, clearly annoyed. "Surely there is no reason to have this kind of melodrama for a simple meeting with a supposed witness."

Said 'witness' looked up to the corner of the room, noting the cord dangling uselessly from the closed circuit camera mounted there. He turned around, pulling his hood back to reveal a head of bright blond hair and startling blue eyes.

"There is if he's being hunted by a serial killer who we believe has access to information within this department," Jiraya said tersely. "There will be no record of this meeting leaving the walls of this room. If you are not satisfied with what Naruto has to say regarding the death of Orochimaru, then feel free to issue your indictment on the Uchiha of your choosing."

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On the other side of the one-way glass, Sasuke froze. For weeks, he had been searching for any trace of this man. He had ached for the sight of him, having not a single photograph or any tangible evidence of his ex-lover's existence. He had even gone so far as having Suigetsu scan the death notifications to see if there were any john doe's matching Naruto's description, trying to ignore the eating worry every time Suigetsu would call to give an update.

But there was never any sign, never any word. It had been as though Naruto had simply vanished off the face of the earth. And suddenly here he was, casually brushing dust off himself as though there was nothing unusual about meeting with the two most powerful men in the City, next to the Mayor, at four o'clock in the morning.

Sasuke swallowed, his fingertips brushing the glass as though his hand would pass through it an allow him to touch Naruto. Judging by the way the younger man had fluidly descended into the room from the ceiling, Sasuke assumed he hadn't received any significant injuries since he'd seen him last. He felt the familiar hunger surge in him as he watched Naruto lounge casually back in his chair, blue eyes hard and wary.

Jiraya must have had Kakashi find Naruto. And Naruto had agreed to come back, despite the risks. For him. Sasuke drew a breath as his emotions surged in a twisted mess. Relief. Anger. Jealousy. Lust. Worry.

"Pay attention, Otouto," Itachi said, snapping Sasuke out of his thoughts. "I believe we are getting to
the part where Jiraya will explain just exactly what Naruto has been doing for the department."

Sasuke's eyes narrowed as he remembered what Jiraya had said about the nature of this witness. That the witness worked for the police. And Naruto was the witness.

"I am assuming that Naruto is just going to give the same account of events that he gave the last time he was questioned on this matter. Why should his statement carry any more weight now than it did five weeks ago?" Kabuto asked, his eyes narrowing as Naruto pulled out a chair and seated himself at the table next to Jiraya, lounging back as though completely at ease.

"Because," Jiraya said, pressing his knee against Naruto's under the table where Kabuto and Sarutobi couldn't see it. "Naruto works for the police department as part of a special under-cover program."

"What?!" Kabuto's calm finally cracked and his voice rose in volume. Even Sarutobi frowned at this revelation. "Naruto was confirmed to be a part of the Akatsuki crime syndicate. He was suspected in at least a dozen disappearances of known enemies of Nagato. There was no evidence to bring the case to trial, but there is no way that this person is an undercover cop. I have access to every one on that roster, and I know for a fact this man is not on it," Kabuto said.

"I didn't say he was an undercover police officer. Naruto is part of a program that spans across both FBI, CIA and NYPD operations. He is one of nine special operatives, but I can't reveal any more information other than that. Quite frankly, you don't have the clearance. The only reason you are even learning about this now is because we are trying to prevent a miscarriage of justice against an innocent party. It would put not only Naruto's personal safety in great jeopardy to testify in open court, but would also potentially expose the existence of a program that has been responsible for bringing down three of the five major crime organizations in New York over the past six years, as well as closing down many smaller operations."

Naruto worked hard to hide his shock. He was glad that Jiraya had given him a small warning that he was going to do something, or he would probably not have been able to stop the startled "What?" That had nearly tumbled from his lips. What the hell was Jiraya playing at?

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Shock didn't even begin to cover the emotion that surged through Sasuke at the white-haired commissioner's words. What?

After a frozen moment, Sasuke's brain started working again.

Anger bubbled up inside him. If Naruto weren't really a criminal all this time, then all of the angst that Sasuke had gone through to try to find a way to make their relationship possible was for nothing. Sasuke had thought Naruto had been at least partially honest with him about his life. But evidently Naruto hadn't trusted him enough, or hadn't taken their relationship seriously enough to really tell him anything.

Sasuke's hand clenched into a fist.

It had all been part of one big set-up. Had anything that happened between them been real? Sasuke felt his stomach churn, and thought for a moment he might actually get sick.

No wonder Suigetsu hadn't been able to find anything about his background. Undercover agents often have their pasts completely re-invented. But then why hadn't he been listed with the other undercover police agents, or any of the federal programs Suigetsu had hacked into?
Sasuke moved abruptly toward the door, wanting to confront Naruto directly about his deception, not caring anymore about the outcome of whether or not he was going to be indicted. Nothing mattered right now except making Naruto tell him the truth about what was real with what the blond had told him. And what was real about how Naruto felt.

A hand blocked his path, and Sasuke glared into the mismatched eyes of the hand's owner.

"Get your hands off me," Sasuke said coldly.

"You can't go in there," Kakashi said firmly.

"You have no authority over me," Sasuke said, danger edging his voice.

"You can't go in there," Kakashi repeated with more force. "First of all, Jiraya has locked the door to that interview room. Secondly, Kabuto has no idea that either of you are here. If he finds out that Jiraya let you in, he might think you are manipulating Naruto or bribing him to give this statement. As far as anyone knows, the two of you have had no contact since Orochimaru was identified as your stalker and the bomber, ending Naruto's need to work for you. If you walk in there right now, all of that will be called into suspect, and so will anything Naruto says."

Kakashi held Sasuke's glare unflinchingly. "Furthermore, Jiraya took a huge gamble having you both come. You know who is hunting Naruto. My guess is that he has no idea where Naruto is currently staying, so he will be following the last known person that Naruto had had contact with that he can locate. That would be the two of you. I am not going to let you get Naruto killed by drawing further attention to what is going on in that room."

Sasuke glared at Kakashi for a tense moment, then slowly returned to his position by the one-way glass, anger coursing through him.

"Sasuke," Itachi's voice cut across his thoughts. Sasuke felt his brother's hand touch his shoulder. "Look at Naruto's face. He didn't expect this. Something's not right. It isn't what it seems."

None of the men in the observation room had missed the sight of Jiraya's leg nudging Naruto's under the table, as though warning him to play along. While the two men in the interrogation room had their view blocked by the table, Kakashi, Itachi and Sasuke could see perfectly.

Sasuke glanced at Kakashi, and saw the man's face was rigid in wary shock. Itachi was right, there was more going on here than a simple undercover agent being revealed.

"What the hell are you doing, Jiraya?" Kakashi breathed out, clearly talking to himself.

Sasuke didn't care about the police officer's personal angst. He didn't know exactly what was going on. But he was sure of one thing.

There was no way he was going to let Naruto disappear again. Not without finding out the truth first.

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*to be continued...*
Deceptions

Author's note - ok, so I am giving up on giving estimates of how many chapters I will need to get to a certain point in the story. If I say anything about it again just tell me to shut the hell up because clearly I am incapable of any sort of estimation of how many words it will take me to explain something. BUT hopefully this chapter makes it totally clear what Naruto is and isn't. And it only took us 20 chapters to find it out. LOL. And the manga is ending... and I am spending a lot of time wallowing in how I feel about that. So... it is later than expected but IT IS HERE. Thanks as always to BriEva for reading this over and pointing out where I was being confusing/inarticulate... as well as for pinging me to remind me to put the freaking manga down and actually write this. ;-)

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Jiraya watched as Naruto struggled to keep his expression neutral while he tried to pick through what the older man was saying, searching for clues as to what Jiraya wanted him to do. Jiraya had intentionally not briefed Naruto in advance, needing Naruto's reactions to be completely genuine. Sarutobi could spot a scripted comment from a mile away after years of experience with practiced liars saying whatever they could to try to sway a jury. Everything would hinge on Sarutobi's read of Naruto, and how he judged his character. Jiraya just hoped his gamble would pay off. Naruto was never predictable, but Jiraya trusted him completely. He understood Naruto and knew what made him tick.

Naruto's mind raced as he tried to understand why Jiraya was talking about this in front of the District Attorney who - of anyone in the city - was the one with the power to bring Jiraya down over this.

He forced himself not to look at the Commissioner for fear that too much would show in his face, and instead focused on watching Kabuto's and Sarutobi's reactions, hoping they would give a clue as to what Jiraya was hoping to accomplish by this seemingly reckless maneuver. Surely there could have been a simpler way to get them to believe Naruto's testimony? Why go to such lengths?

"I would have expected to have been made aware of a program like this," Sarutobi was saying, clearly not happy at learning he had been out of the loop on a program that - even if housed elsewhere - involved the NYPD. "The evidentiary issues alone with this could end up being a nightmare for my office."

Jiraya smiled slightly. "Don't worry, Sarutobi. We took into account the entrapment laws. The members of this program never gave testimony in any case they were involved with. All evidence was handled through the usual channels. There is not a single conviction that could be overturned if this program came to light. However, you know how tight-lipped the Feds are with anything having to do with their programs. And given the stakes here, the safety of the men and women within the program would be severely compromised if even its existence were known. If you wish, I can give you a more thorough debriefing at another time, with a smaller audience," Jiraya said, looking pointedly at Kabuto.

"Even if this is some sort of joint program, if NYPD is involved this group must have a supervising officer," Sarutobi said, running an evaluating eye over Naruto as though trying to judge his character.

"Yes," Jiraya said, "But I am not going to disclose any further specifics about the nature of the program without clearance. You wanted a witness to the events of Orochimaru's death. I have delivered him to you. And I will personally vouch for anything that Naruto has to say on the matter. He has my office's full backing. Given that this meeting is officially not even happening, that should
be sufficient for you to decide whether you want to proceed with this indictment."

Sarutobi arched a brow at that, but nodded in acceptance. There were not many people that Jiraya would issue such a blanket statement for.

Kabuto's eyes narrowed. "It's awfully convenient, with Naruto suddenly reappearing just as we were about to file an indictment. Where has he been all this time?"

Naruto shot a sidelong glance at Jiraya then, not sure how to play this.

"Naruto has been in Europe. He recently received instructions for a mission working with a CIA agent. Beyond that I am not at liberty to discuss anything."

"And does this CIA agent have a name?" Kabuto pressed.

"Is it that you find my word as Police Commissioner insufficient to confirm the nature of Naruto's work in the department?" Jiraya asked, placing all the intimidation of his office as well as his own personal stature into the comment.

Kabuto was seething, but retreated. He knew that there was something going on. He had found Naruto's medical reports in Orochimaru's desk when he had gone to plant the evidence in the man's home shifting the blame for the bombing and photographs to Orochimaru. Naruto's allergy to anesthetics had been highlighted, and Kabuto suspected that Orochimaru had drugged Naruto the night of the killing. Orochimaru would never have acted without heavily stacking the odds in his favor, especially not against someone like Naruto. Combined with that and the blood evidence on the inside of the katana sheath, there was no way that the killer was Naruto. It was one of the Uchihas, even though he doubted he'd ever be able to prove it in court, especially not with Naruto apparently willing to take the blame. But Kabuto would be satisfied with ruining Sasuke's political career. And all he needed to do to accomplish that was to file the indictment.

"I just wonder if you are somehow personally invested in the outcome of the Uchiha indictment." Kabuto asked pointedly. He knew exactly what Orochimaru had hired Naruto for. Sasuke might have moved on to his pretty assistant now, but Kabuto was sure that there had been a sexual relationship between Naruto and Sasuke.

Jiraya's knee bumped Naruto's again, and suddenly Naruto understood what he was supposed to do. His shoulders relaxed and he forced himself not to grin. Oh, he was going to enjoy this. "If anyone is 'emotionally invested' in the outcome of this indictment, I would say it would be you, Kabuto. Not myself or Commissioner Jiraya."

Kabuto froze slightly, beginning to sense the danger, but it was already too late.

Sarutobi frowned. "What do you mean, Mr. Uzumaki? Did Kabuto have some sort of relationship with Orochimaru?"

"This is completely irrelevant, sir. We are here to discuss the credibility of this witness, not to -"

"Be quite, Kabuto," Sarutobi said calmly, gesturing for Naruto to continue.

Naruto allowed a thin smile to form on his lips. "Oh, they had a relationship alright. You may be aware that Orochimaru hired me for security after Nagato's organization was brought down."

Sarutobi nodded, and Naruto continued.

"My... supervising officer recommended I accept the offer, as there was significant suspicion that
Orochimaru was involved in illegal activities, but not enough evidence was ever found to make a case. Orochimaru had significant influence within the department, so any effort at a formal investigation was blocked.

"That's hearsay," Kabuto interjected. "You can't expect us to just take your word against -"

"Counselor, that's enough," Sarutobi said calmly. "All of this is off the record. This meeting is not even being recorded," he looked pointedly at the security camera, drawing the attention to the dangling wire that rendered it useless. "So we might as well hear what this young man has to say in its entirety. We can decide how to proceed at that point."

Kabuto clearly disagreed with this, but could not come up with any reasonable grounds to go against what his boss was saying.

"Please continue, Mr. Uzumaki."

"Um, well, as I was saying, an investigation through regular channels was not possible. So I was put in to see if I could find anything on him."

"This was shortly after you were shot in the Akatsuki raid, yes?" Sarutobi cut in, clearly interested in Naruto's history. Naruto was relieved that so far he was able to basically stick to the truth. He knew of Sarutobi's long-standing reputation for being able to spot a lie.

"Yes," Naruto said, shifting his shoulder slightly, remembering the bullet he took in that event.

"And yet you were immediately returned to the field. That's not standard procedure for most operatives, regardless of the agency they work for."

"Well, I was given the choice. But the previous person from our group who had tried to insert themselves had been killed. It seemed the best path since Orochimaru had actually reached out to me, though we weren't sure why. We didn't want to put anyone else at risk."

Sarutobi nodded, clearly pleased with Naruto's answer and the truth he was able to read in the young man's face.

"While I was there, I saw Kabuto quite frequently at Orochimaru's place."

"Orochimaru and I were acquaintances, having a number of friends in common -" Kabuto began.

"I heard you and Orochimaru discussing getting access to the case file on the Akatsuki syndicate," Naruto said over him. "He was reprimanding you for failing to insert yourself onto the team, and you were promising to do better. He said you were not as skilled as ADA Uchiha, but that until he found a way to get Uchiha to work with him, he would continue to use your... services."

Naruto purposely filled the word with innuendo. Kabuto flushed, whether in embarrassment or anger Naruto wasn't sure. He could feel that Jiraya had gone completely still.

"So that is why you repeatedly tried to appeal Itachi's request to keep you off the team. I was wondering why you were so desperate, given that you already had a full case load on your own desk," Sarutobi said slowly. He turned to face Kabuto more fully. "It's unusual for someone to be able to conceal their true motivations from me, Kabuto. You are quite skilled at deception, I would say."

Fortunately, Sarutobi's face was turned away from Naruto and he missed the slightly panicked look that Naruto shot at Jiraya before the older man's knee slammed into his once again.
Sarutobi finally turned back to Jiraya with a heavy sigh. "Of course, you and I had discussed the issue of the mole in my office, Commissioner. Now I understand the reason for all this secrecy. The mole was Kabuto, and you must believe that his obsession with attempting to bring the younger Uchiha to trial is tied to his other agenda somehow."

Naruto's eyes widened slightly, and he turned to look at Jiraya to find validation of what Sarutobi was saying. The old DA turned to Naruto, explaining. "We had found out that Orochimaru had been able to get his hands on information regarding a very high profile case about a year ago and used it to influence the jury pool. After we became aware of this, we found a pattern of other confidential information being leaked. We couldn't trace it back to a single person's case load. We had monitored the phones and e-mails of everyone involved, but we couldn't find the source," Sarutobi turned again to Kabuto. "But it was you, wasn't it, Kabuto? Orochimaru must have paid you very well."

Kabuto snapped himself out of his glare at Naruto. "Of course it wasn't me. You have absolutely no evidence to support any of this. You can check my bank records... I have never received any money from Orochimaru. All you have is the word of this... questionable person," Kabuto waved his hand dismissively towards Naruto. "Who, by the way, would most likely not be able to testify against me for fear of revealing the details of this supposed task force that Jiraya mentioned. Not to mention the nature of his relationship with Councilman Uchiha. He was providing services beyond just security, I can tell you. No one would believe a witness like this. And as for any other evidence, you will not find anything at Orochimaru's house."

Realization flooded through Naruto. Kabuto could only be completely sure that there was nothing at Orochimaru's if he had searched the place himself after the man's death. And the only person that Naruto was absolutely positive had been in Orochimaru's house was the same person who had planted the evidence about the bombing and the stalking. Which meant that Kabuto was the stalker. Of course, Naruto thought. He wanted Sasuke out of the way so that Orochimaru would continue to need Kabuto and would lose whatever leverage he thought he was going to get over Itachi with this. "It was you, wasn't it?" Naruto asked, his eyes narrowing suddenly quite dangerously. All he would have to do was reach out his hand, and he could end the life of the person who had tried to blow up Sasuke. It would take less than ten seconds. Kabuto clearly read his intent and paled.

Jiraya looked over, somewhat puzzled. Evidently he didn't know everything. Naruto fought to control his temper as he thought quickly. Physical violence would only discredit Naruto in front of the District Attorney's eyes. He was starting to get a sense of where Jiraya was going with this insane gamble of his, and he needed the DA to be on his side. To ensure that, he needed to discredit Kabuto in the fastest possible way. Luckily for him, he knew the man's Achilles heel. "You were the one who planted the evidence of the bomb and the stalking in Orochimaru's apartment, so it would never come back to you, didn't you?"

"W-what? That is ridiculous. I work in the District Attorney's office. I've taken an oath -" Kabuto stammered out.

"Yes, you are in the DA's office, which means you would have had access to Hanzo's case file and the evidence locker to duplicate the bomb. Someone planted that evidence in Orochimaru's brownstone. You knew that Orochimaru was trying to get to Itachi through Sasuke, so you wanted Sasuke out of the way. It must have just killed you, hearing Orochimaru go on and on about the Uchihas. He was obsessed with them. No matter how much information you brought him. No matter how many times you risked your career for him. He never really saw you. All he saw was how amazing they were. How intelligent. How much better pedigreed. How much better in general than you," Naruto continued, his voice almost bored. Jiraya and Sarutobi watched in fascination at the
transformation of Kabuto's face at Naruto's words. Shock gave way to fury in Kabuto's features, and his hands fisted on the table.

"You know, I was there at night after I first started working with Orochimaru. I would hear the two of you in Orochimaru's office," Naruto leaned forward, resting his hands flat on the smooth metal table to prevent himself from reaching out and crushing the man's trachea. "I heard you moaning. But it wasn't your name that Orochimaru called out when he came, was it, Kabuto? Do you know the name I heard him shout? The person who he was wishing was sucking him off?"

"Shut up!" Kabuto screamed, his face white with fury, his body rigid with rage. All it would take was one more small push.

"It was Itachi's name he screamed."

With that, Kabuto launched himself over the table, grabbing Naruto around the throat. Naruto made no move to defend himself or hit back. After a frozen second, Jiraya reached over and roughly grabbed Kabuto's forearms, wrenching them off Naruto.

Naruto grinned, bringing a hand up to touch the abused flesh around his throat. "Police Commissioner Jiraya and District Attorney Sarutobi. I would like to file a formal assault charge against ADA Kabuto Yakushi here. I trust you will both serve as witnesses. I want photographs taken of the injury. And... I would request that ADA Uchiha personally take this case."

Jiraya snorted. "I am pretty sure that that would constitute a conflict of interest for Uchiha. But... I will see the charges are filed. Kakashi can see to the paperwork. We'll have to get a physician to document the injuries."

Kabuto was in shock. How had things turned so quickly? "You have no evidence of any of the things this boy said," Kabuto said. "Orochimaru told me exactly what he hired you for, Naruto. Don't think you can play innocent here. You were just Orochimaru's paid whore to bind Uchiha to Orochimaru. If anyone is guilty here of indecent behavior, it is you, you little -"

"I thought you were trying to claim that you weren't involved in any of Orochimaru's illegal activities, Kabuto. If you were witness to Orochimaru's attempt to procure sexual services for someone to gain illegal favors and didn't report it, you would be complicit in that act," Jiraya cut in, smiling narrowly. This had gone better than he could ever have expected. "However, given that Orochimaru is already dead and we will not be filing charges against him, I doubt we will pursue that particular charge against you. But we will have plenty of time to find out about all your other activities, thanks to your assault on Mr. Uzumaki here tonight. I am fairly certain that Sarutobi has grounds to suspend you from working in the District Attorney's office long enough for us to find it."

"Sonofabitch," Kakashi murmured, not sure if he was referring to Kabuto or Jiraya at this point. He was annoyed that Jiraya hadn't told him of his plan in advance, but he supposed he was still glad of the outcome. It was a bold move. Sarutobi had been searching for the mole in his office for close to a year. Naruto's eyes had never shown even the slightest flicker of panic, a fact that Sasuke would have found incredibly arousing in other circumstances, but right now he was just pissed off and frustrated that he was being kept separated from Naruto.

"Sasuke was frozen, his hands fisted against the glass where he had nearly punched through it when he had seen Kabuto launch himself at Naruto and try to strangle him. Luckily, Jiraya had been quick to intervene. Naruto's eyes had never shown even the slightest flicker of panic, a fact that Sasuke would have found incredibly arousing in other circumstances, but right now he was just pissed off and frustrated that he was being kept separated from Naruto.

"Sonofabitch," Kakashi murmured, not sure if he was referring to Kabuto or Jiraya at this point. He was annoyed that Jiraya hadn't told him of his plan in advance, but he supposed he was still glad of the outcome. It was a bold move. Sarutobi had been searching for the mole in his office for close to a year. Naruto had just handed him to him on a silver platter, which would gain him credibility in Sarutobi's eyes. The big risk now was whether Sarutobi would probe on the official details of the
program. Which - since it didn't exist - would be problematic. The one piece of Jiraya's plan that Kakashi wasn't sure about was why the Uchiha brothers were here.

"Sasuke," Itachi said, drawing his brother's attention from where it had been riveted on Naruto for the past twenty minutes.

Sasuke didn't turn his head, not wanting to miss the ending of the meeting when he would be able to enter the room Naruto was in. All that mattered now was that Naruto was back, and he was still in one piece. "What," he said tensely, noticing the slight bruising already visible around Naruto's throat and feeling his fists clench tighter, the knuckles going white.

"Who were you planning to have alter Naruto's records to clean his background before he disappeared?" Itachi said calmly.

Sasuke's head snapped around. "What?" he hissed, slanting a meaningful glance and Captain Hatake who had abruptly turned to face Itachi. Was Itachi trying to get him arrested?

Kakashi slowly nodded, "Of course. Jiraya must have known about your relationship with Naruto. Your hacker must be good if Jiraya is willing to take such a gamble on him. We noticed that some of Naruto's files had been altered, but I hadn't realized it was you."

Sasuke pressed his fingers to his temples. His head was pounding. He hadn't been sleeping well since Naruto had left a month ago, and last night he hadn't slept at all. All he was able to focus on was that Naruto was just on the other side of the fucking glass from him, and he wasn't allowed to go to him. Now his brother was discussing Sasuke's illegal activities (which he wasn't supposed to know about in the first place) and plans to hack into the NYPD computer systems in front of a fucking Captain in the police department.

"Stop thinking about the different positions you are planning on having sex with your boyfriend when you get him alone, Sasuke. You need to focus," Itachi said, amusement showing slightly through his eyes. "Well, Captain Hatake. I can only assume that you are the 'supervising officer' that Jiraya didn't want to name for this fictitious program that the two of you have evidently cooked up."

"Fictitious?" Sasuke asked, immediately wishing he hadn't opened his mouth. His brain had basically shut down as soon as he had seen Naruto, simply being overwhelmed with a flood of emotions from relief to anger to worry to hurt and finally settling on an all-consuming need to simply be with Naruto.

Itachi smirked. "Of course, fictitious. You've worked in government long enough to know that such a cross-organizational task force would never make it off the ground between all the red tape and bureaucratic territorialism. I'll bet that when the Feds come knocking asking for inconvenient information about the group, they are told it's a 'secret' NYPD program. And when NYPD comes inquiring, he can't discuss the details because it's run by the FBI. It's a shell game for hiding a program that doesn't actually exist, but allows Hatake and Jiraya to do what they want. Am I warm, Captain?" Itachi asked, slanting a glance to the officer who was now lounging in the corner of the room giving a false air of complacency.

Kakashi shrugged. "There doesn't seem much point in my answering, since you appear to be figuring enough out without my help."

Sasuke's brain had finally caught up. "So... " Naruto hadn't lied. "... Jiraya is trying to use the fact that I want to..." He wasn't playing me. "... legitimize Naruto by having me use my contact to create some sort of retroactive proof of the task force he was supposed to be working for that doesn't exist?" He came back to help me even though he was at risk. Sasuke was struggling to keep his mind
focused on the conversation he was having with Kakashi and Itachi, but his gaze kept drifting hungrily to the sight of Naruto in the other room. Just out of his reach.

Kakashi glanced at where Naruto, Sarutobi and Jiraya were apparently filling out the paperwork of Naruto's charge of assault against Kabuto while the ADA looked on in shock. He wondered if Sasuke realized that the reason they were doing all this now was because Naruto would be out of the country again by evening.

"The Jinchuuriki program. Yes, I think that is exactly what Jiraya had in mind," Kakashi said finally.

Sasuke thought quickly. It could be possible. Suigetsu was good. But it would be a hell of a risk. He wouldn't commit Suigetsu without talking to the man first. Naruto hadn't lied. He forced himself to focus. This could be possible. It would actually be significantly safer than trying to delete individual records. There would always be stray newspaper articles, photos, or police files. But if it could all be put in the context of undercover work, he could make Naruto's criminal history become part of an overall legitimate history. He pulled out his phone, checking the time and realizing he would have to wait another two hours before Suigetsu was likely to be awake enough to answer his call.

There was a knock on the door to the observation room, and Kakashi frowned. He had locked it as a precaution, but the room was reserved and there was no reason anyone should be knocking at this hour. "Don't leave this room. Don't talk to anyone," Kakashi said as he opened the door just enough to see who was there but to keep the other occupants in the room hidden.

"Obito," Kakashi said, a sense of unease washing over him at the man's unexpected presence. "What are you doing here?"

"Can I come in? I heard you were in the office early and thought we could catch up. I was trying to reach you yesterday, but I couldn't get ahold of you. I might have a lead on Tobi."

Sasuke's eyes snapped towards the door, but Kakashi had not opened the door enough for him to see who it was. He remembered what Kakashi had said about the fact that the killer was likely following Itachi and Sasuke to see if they would lead him to Naruto. He glanced at Itachi to find a similar look of concern on his brother's face.

"No," Kakashi said. "I was asked to stay in this room and make sure that no one recorded or observed the interrogation room. There is someone from witness protection in there."

"Who is it?" Obito asked seemingly casually.

Kakashi's face showed no reaction, "Obviously, I can't disclose that. The meeting should be over in an hour. Just come by my office then, and we can catch up."

Obito seemed to hesitate. He looked as though he were going to force the issue, and when his eyes locked onto Kakashi's, Kakashi felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. He almost reached for his gun out of reflex that the lethal intent in those eyes, but before he could, Obito was stepping back, his face back to the genial mask he always wore. "Fine. I'll just wait, then."

He turned and walked down the hall towards Kakashi's office. Kakashi watched him go with narrowed eyes. He tried to do the mental conversion of time zones between here and Japan. He had some phone calls to make. Something wasn't right.

Kakashi closed the door and locked it again.
"Who was that?" Sasuke asked, his voice dangerous.

"That was a man named Obito Uchiha, supposedly an officer from Japan sent to track a lead on the serial killer known as Tobi," Kakashi said slowly. "Not a direct relation of yours... I asked."

"Supposedly an officer?" Itachi asked. He had never heard of an Obito in their family, but Uchiha was an old name, and there could be distant relatives that still used the name that he had never met.

"Supposedly. I had assumed his paperwork had been thoroughly vetted. I think I need to re-check that. He should not have known I was here. And no cop would try to enter an observation room like that, no matter what country they are from."

Sasuke looked back into the interrogation room, where Naruto was getting up. The meeting appeared to be ending. "Was Naruto planning on going out the way he came in, or is he going to go into the hallway?" Sasuke asked, the tension heavy in the room.

"Yes. I was supposed to meet him at the air intake grate behind the building. I had put the screws back in so no one would notice anything. Someone needs to go and open it so he can get out without smashing it down and drawing attention," Kakashi pulled a small philips-head screwdriver out of his pocket and handed it to Sasuke. "I need to go distract Obito. I don't think we can trust he is who he says he is at this point."

"Do you think he's connected to Tobi?" Itachi asked.

"I don't know. But I've learned a long time ago to trust my instincts."

Itachi nodded. Kakashi banged three times on the glass, and Sasuke saw Naruto stiffen. "That was the signal we worked out if something went wrong. He'll know now that he has to be careful. I don't know if he'll take the same route out as he came in, but at least now he will be watching his back. Once Naruto is in the air vents, you two go and let him out the back while I distract Obito. If you get him, meet me at this address," Kakashi quickly wrote down the address of a safe house along with a key. "Actually, meet me there whether you get him or not."

Sasuke nodded, and the three turned back to watch the men in the interrogation room wrap up.

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Jiraya frowned, also aware of what that signal meant. He had been uneasy about bringing Naruto back given the circumstances, but this had been their only chance to trap Kabuto before he ruined Sasuke's career.

"Well, Kabuto. I will personally take you down to booking to get the assault charges processed," Jiraya said to Kabuto, who flushed with anger and glared murderously at Naruto. "Sarutobi, what is your decision regarding the Uchiha indictment?"

Sarutobi turned and looked directly at Naruto. "Did you kill Orochimaru Sanin?"

Guilt washed over Naruto as he thought of who had actually done the killing on his behalf, but there was no doubt in Naruto's mind that he was responsible for Orochimaru's death. "Yes," Naruto said. "I wish to hell it had never happened. But I came out of the shower in my hotel room to see Orochimaru with a gun," Naruto said, drawing a breath. His gaze never faltered.

Sarutobi stared at him for a few seconds, then nodded. "We will not be filing charges. I will allow the findings of the Hampton police to stand."
"No! You can't let them get away with it! They killed him! It was Uchiha, I know it was Uchiha, I-"

Jiraya stood in front of the enraged Kabuto. "Enough. There is absolutely no evidence supporting your belief, and a lot of evidence refuting it. It's over, Kabuto."

Naruto caught Jiraya's eye and gave a small nod. "You need to get back to work," Jiraya told him. "Watch yourself."

Sarutobi nodded to Naruto. "It was very interesting meeting you, young man. When your current assignment is over, I would very much enjoy having lunch with you."

Naruto tried to cover his nerves, but still stammered slightly. "Y-yes, sir."

He stood on the chair as the three men in the room watched, then pulled himself back up into the air duct with seeming ease. Jiraya pushed the panel back into place as though this was something he did every day before leading Kabuto out of the room, Sarutobi following.

The remaining men exited, and Kakashi went off to find Obito while Sasuke and Itachi headed immediately for the main exit to get to the back of the building to open the vent there.

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Naruto army crawled through the air ducts with practiced ease in complete silence over the metal casings. He had a decent idea of the layout of the building, and decided his safest bet would be to exit into a room near a side entrance that had only one security camera between him and an exit. Though if Tobi were already here, then there was no point on trying to avoid the cameras. He just needed to get the hell out.

Naruto paused over the air grate, listening to be sure no one was in the office before he quickly kicked it open, catching it before it fell and drew attention. He lowered himself into the small office and pulled the hood of his sleeveless sweatshirt to cover as much of his head and face as possible. Walking quickly but without drawing attention, he left the office, turning a sharp right to the exit of the station and out into a narrow alley.

He picked up his pace trying to move as quickly as possible without actually running and drawing attention. He needed to get to a pay phone and call Sakura. He still needed a medical report to file with the assault charge, and Sakura was the only person he would trust right now. Four blocks from the police station, Naruto slid into a payphone at a run-down gas station, and prayed that this was one of the nights that Sakura was working late and would have her cell on.

"Hello?" Sakura asked, her voice sounding unusually stressed.

"Sakura, it's -"

"Naruto! Where are you? You have to be careful, I -"

"I'm at the Citgo four blocks from the police station. Can you meet me there?"

"We're two blocks away," Sakura said, hanging up before the call could be traced.

It was less than a minute later when Naruto saw Sakura leaning out of a large, black luxury SUV waving to him frantically. "Naruto, get in!"

"Sakura? What are you doing here? It's like... not even six in the morning yet," Naruto said, glancing over his shoulder to make sure no one had followed him.
"I was looking for Kakashi since he's not answering his cell and...Ugh, I'll explain in the car, hurry up and get in! It's not safe," Sakura ordered, pushing open the rear door of the car.

Naruto hesitated, but he knew that Kakashi wouldn't have sent the signal if something weren't really wrong. "Can you take me to JFK? I need to catch a flight." He asked, getting into the car and noticing that the driver was not someone he recognized.

"Yes," Sakura said, turning towards the man with shaggy brown hair and red tattoos on his face who was behind the wheel. "Kiba, this is Naruto. Naruto, this is my best friend Kiba. We'll talk while we drive."

Kiba's eyes locked on Naruto's for a suspended second, but the man simply nodded and merged out into the early morning New York traffic.

"So tell me again how you found out that Tobi knows I am in town?" Naruto said, trying to get his head around how that could have happened without Sakura being dead.

"I don't know if it was Tobi. I... I know you said not to, but I've been checking around the hospital trying to find the person who tampered with the files. Tonight I went back to the morgue to see if there were any more things being tampered with that might give us a clue as to who is after you and Gaara. I was almost to the office when I heard someone talking. It was the middle of the night, and no one else should have been there. They said that they couldn't find Gaara, but that they knew you were in town and would try to take you out before morning."

"And you just fucking stood there and listened to it? Sakura, when you are breaking into a morgue in the middle of the night and you see someone there who is not supposed to be there, you should run like hell and call the police. What were you thinking?"

Sakura glared at him. "I did run like hell, and I tried to call Kakashi. When I couldn't get ahold of him, I called Kiba. After I convinced him to help me look for you I called the station and dispatch said they saw Kakashi come in early this morning. I figured he might know something so we came here to try and tell him what I saw." Sakura's eyes dropped to Naruto's throat, and she gasped when she saw the ring of purple bruises around his throat.

"Naruto! You idiot!" She unfastened her seatbelt and climbed into the back with him. "Why didn't you tell me you'd been attacked? Do you have other injuries?"

She began grabbing at his sweatshirt, but Naruto took hold of her wrists, stopping her. "No. We don't have time for sex now, baby," he said teasingly, raising his eyebrows at Kiba's glare before returning his attention to Sakura. "The only injury is around my neck. I need you to take some pictures of them with your phone, and write up a medical report to confirm the injuries. The person who attacked me is already being booked."

"Pshh," Sakura said, smacking Naruto on the back of his head while Kiba snickered. Then she sobered. "Is it... was it... the person who attacked you in the subway?"

"No," Naruto chuckled, the irony of the situation finally dawning on him. "It was Assistant District Attorney Kabuto."

"I hate that guy," Kiba said, with feeling.

"Yeah, me too. Turns out he's dirty. I hope Jiraya and Itachi hang him out to dry," Naruto said. "You know him or something?"

Kiba shrugged uncomfortably. Sakura answered. "Let's just say that you're not the only friend I have
who doesn't always want an official record of his injuries. Kiba's had some run-ins with the DA's office in the past."

Naruto looked at Kiba assessingly. He seemed to be a decent enough guy, and his affection towards Sakura seemed genuine. Naruto recognized the gang tattoos on the man's face. He was a member of an up-and-coming organization that had been making waves in some areas, but it hadn't infringed on Nagato's organization or dealt in child trafficking, so Naruto hadn't had any run-ins with them before.

Sakura shoved Naruto's head towards the window when she noticed his measuring look at Kiba. "Stop going all big brother on me. I've known Kiba longer than I've known you."

Kiba snickered again as Naruto's head banged against the glass.

"Something funny?" Naruto asked warningly.

"Yeah... it's funny to see someone else getting Sakura's fucked up version of affection for once," Kiba said, still grinning.

"Ouch!" Kiba cursed after Sakura socked him in the arm. "Watch it! You'll break it again!"

"That was one time Kiba! One freaking time!" She yelled causing Naruto to grin as he relaxed slightly. He might not know their back story, but he was glad that Sakura had someone like Kiba in her corner. And now that she had gotten in between Naruto and Tobi, she was going to need it.

Naruto noticed the lack of keys in the ignition and Kiba's gloved hands. He hoped to hell that Kiba dumped the stolen car as soon as possible. And that it hadn't been reported yet.

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To be continued...

Next chapter will have Jiraya explaining a bit more to Itachi and Sasuke, Naruto meeting back up with Gaara, and Sasuke getting serious about finding Naruto.
Tracking and planning

Author's note - hmmm... not much of a note this time. Got all my ranting out last time. I'm tired and have a sore throat. And I want it to snow? Special thanks as always to BriEva for advice on the spooky parts, and also to WordWriter who helped me smooth the wording and settled me down about the chapter when I was freaking out that it was somehow coming out so much more complicated than when I had just been thinking about it in my head LOL.

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Sasuke and Itachi easily found the air vent that Kakashi had mentioned. Sasuke was just about to loosen the screws when footsteps behind them drew their attention.

It was a Japanese-looking man wearing a cheap suit and a badge. "What are you two doing out here?" he asked, his accent slight, eyeing the screwdriver Sasuke held in his hand with suspicion.

"We're just... waiting for a friend," Sasuke said, elevating the volume of his voice just a bit in case Naruto was close, so he would be warned off. He didn't recognize the man, but he would lay odds this was Obito.

"I'm pretty sure that the NYPD wouldn't appreciate someone messing with their air supply," the man said, continuing to walk closer. Sasuke altered his grip on the screwdriver, holding it now in the same way he held his katana. There was something menacing about this person. Sasuke sensed Itachi subtly shifting as well, clearly having the same read on the man.

"It's not safe," the man continued, his voice smooth and almost hypnotic. "Being in an alley like this when it's not even light out. No one around. Bad things can happen in places like this."

Sasuke felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. If he knew nothing else, he was sure that this person was no police officer. The menacing aura increased as Obito drew nearer.

"I recognize you," he said to Sasuke. "Sasuke Uchiha. I believe we have a mutual acquaintance." Sasuke visibly flinched as the man suddenly drew his bare fingertips across Sasuke's stomach in a circular motion.

"Obito," Kakashi's voice sliced through the tense air, causing the man to withdraw his hand. Kakashi had entered the alley and was walking toward them, his face carefully blank. "I thought we were going to meet inside and discuss your potential lead."

Obito slid his hand into his jacket pocket, and Sasuke heard the faint clink of metal. No longer hesitating, he stepped back into a full defensive stance, raising the screwdriver in readiness, prepared to attack or defend, depending on what Obito did in the next few seconds.

"Is there a problem," Shisui materialized almost directly behind Obito, having come up silently from the corner where he had been waiting for Sasuke and Itachi to emerge from the alley.

Obito turned, giving an assessing look to Shisui. He slowly began walking towards Kakashi, his hand still in his pocket. "I was just telling these men not to mess with the air intake," he said, looking at Kakashi. "I have an appointment with a potential witness now, Hatake. I'll swing by your desk in an hour."

"I think it would be better if we talked now, Obito," Kakashi said stepping forward, his hand going to his gun.
Before anyone could react, Obito pulled his hand out of his pocket, now wearing a leather glove with metal blades on each fingertip. Kakashi had his gun out in an instant but Obito was already on him and had grabbed Kakashi’s arm with his gloved hand before he could get a shot off, the gun pointing back towards Sasuke and Itachi. Obito drove the blades of his fingers into Kakashi’s arm, slicing through skin and muscle as he rotated his hand. "You should have let me in the room, Kakashi," he whispered.

Kakashi used his free hand to strike Tobi in the throat, but the man had seen the move coming and leaned back enough to keep the blow from being lethal. Tobi knocked Kakashi’s gun to the ground with his free hand, then pulled his blades from Kakashi’s arm and made to strike him in the stomach. But by then Itachi, Sasuke, and Shisui had closed distance and Tobi - realizing he was outnumbered and out of time - turned and raced down the alley. "I'll see you all soon," he called out over his shoulder.

Shisui gave chase while Itachi checked on Kakashi and Sasuke ran into the station to get help.

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Sasuke paced back and forth in the hospital waiting room while Kakashi was being treated and they waited to hear from Shisui. He had gone back into the station to see if Naruto had gone out some other way, but no one had seen him. It was as though the blond had simply vanished into thin air. And the person who had the best chance of knowing Naruto’s likely whereabouts was currently being treated in the emergency room. Jiraya walked in, his face grave. "There has been no sighting of Obito. Or Tobi, as I suppose he is actually called. We confirmed with our contacts in Japan that there had been an officer, Obito Uchiha, who was one of their lead detectives and had been coming to the US to look for Tobi. It is safe to assume that Tobi found him first. They faxed over fingerprints and a photo, and it is definitely not the same man who was here claiming to be him."

Itachi surreptitiously checked his phone, and Sasuke knew he was hoping for word from Shisui. The fact that Shisui had run off unarmed to chase after a serial killer was something Itachi would be taking up with his lover the next time he saw him.

Sasuke had been playing back the scene from the alley and had realized that - until Shisui had shown up - Tobi had assumed he could take on three at once as long as he took out the one with the gun first. Kakashi would evidently not be the first cop he'd killed. But four-to-one odds had been deemed too risky by the serial killer. Sasuke knew the man would simply wait until the odds were in his favor again. Sasuke didn't misunderstand the way the man had brushed his fingertips against Sasuke's stomach, mimicking the motion that he had likely used when he gave Naruto his first set of scars.

It was not a comforting thought. He wondered how Naruto had lived with this fear hanging over him since childhood.

"I would imagine that the two of you have a few questions for me," Jiraya said. "Kakashi will meet us at the safe house when he releases him. He'll call if there is word about Naruto or Shisui in the meantime. We should all go there and talk. Naruto is likely to disappear for a bit, but he'll make contact within twenty-four hours to let us know he's safe. Have Shisui meet us there when he's decided he's looked hard enough. I doubt he will find Tobi at this point. He knows that he's been made. The advantage now is that we have his fingerprints and his face. He will be easier to spot now. He must really value Naruto to have made such a risky move."

Sasuke's eyes were hard. "And what do you think would have happened to Naruto if he'd left through the planned route and run into Tobi alone? If you are familiar with his case history, then you know that he is particularly vulnerable when it comes to Tobi. You put him at a hell of a lot of risk for this plan of yours."
Jiraya shrugged, pulling out his keys and heading toward the exit, clearly expecting Itachi and Sasuke to follow him. "That's true. But he wouldn't have come at all if he hadn't been trying to protect you, Councilman."

"I never wanted him to protect me. Kabuto's case was dead in the water, and we all knew it."

Jiraya shrugged again. "Maybe. But you and I both also know all it would have taken was a formal indictment against you and your career would have been over. Kabuto didn't have to win the trial."

"Naruto didn't need to put his life at risk for my career," Sasuke said, gritting his teeth. He was trying very hard to not think about what could be happening with both Naruto and Tobi unaccounted for somewhere in the city.

"I believe the things we need to talk about require a more private venue," Itachi said. "Shall we?" He checked his phone again, worry beginning to edge his voice.

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Shisui slowly entered the warehouse, forcing his breathing to slow so he could hear the sound of potential footfalls. He turned slowly in a circle, knowing that the man he had been chasing through the streets was somewhere nearby, hidden amongst the crates.

The lighting in the warehouse was dim and motes of dust hung in the air, swirling in the weak morning sun that filtered through the dirty windows. There was a mustiness that indicated that the warehouse was likely abandoned. Shisui wondered if this place had a special significance to the killer. He had clearly been led here on purpose.

The stacks of boxes in haphazard rows gave plenty of places to duck out of sight, and made it difficult to determine the direction of sounds in the room.

He knew that he was at a disadvantage, not having a weapon with him. But he was skilled at hand-to-hand, and as long as Tobi didn't have a gun, it would likely be an even fight. Though he didn't fool himself that it would be easy.

He heard the sound of sirens in the distance, and wondered if they had been able to track him as he gave chase to the man he was quite sure was the serial killer through the streets of New York.

The faint noise of a foot softly treading on the gritty floorboards made him turn. Tobi stood, his clawed glove already in place. "I suppose there is no point in wearing the mask. Although I am a creature of habit."

The man walked calmly toward Shisui, clearly not afraid of whatever skills the Uchiha might possess. Shisui shifted slightly, glad of the man's over-confidence, but knowing that it was probably earned. There was an unnatural light in the man's eyes that Shisui felt unnerved by. Even seasoned killers were wary in battle, but Tobi seemed... excited by it. The madness of the killer was palpable. Shisui's mind flickered to Naruto as a child, wondering how many years of nightmares his encounter with this monster he had suffered through.

"I have to say, it was a unique experience to be chased, rather the doing the chasing," Tobi stretched out his hand, articulating each finger separately, the sharp blades glinting in the dim light of the warehouse. "I hope you provide even more entertainment now that we've finally arrived." Tobi smiled, then gestured his bare hand to encompass the warehouse, as though showing someone his home. "This location suits me. It's the perfect setting, don't you think?"

Shisui let the man talk and kept his eyes trained on him, waiting for an opening or a momentary
distraction that would give him an advantage.

"It appears that Naruto has tried to find himself another family. He really should have warned you what I did to his first family. Perhaps then this could have been avoided," Tobi said, his voice low and lethal now.

The sirens were getting louder, likely less than two blocks away. Shisui didn't want to take the chance that the man would run, so without waiting further, he lunged forward and grabbed the wrist of the gloved hand to render the unusual weapon useless. His other hand went directly to Tobi's throat, but before he could land a killing blow, he felt a burning sensation between his ribs, and looked down, surprised to see a smaller blade sticking into his side.

"Now what fun would it be if I only had one trick," Tobi whispered, his lips brushing Shisui's ear as he twisted the knife sharply while trying to free his gloved hand. Shisui gasped at the pain but kept his grip tight on the killer's wrist. He knew he was dead if he let go.

The door to the warehouse was kicked in as two police officers ran in, guns drawn. "Say hello to Naruto for me," Tobi whispered, then Shisui was shoved forward and a pile of boxes crashed down. More officers poured in, and the warehouse was searched, but Tobi was gone.

"Someone call an ambulance!" was the last thing Shisui heard before everything went black.

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Itachi didn't wait for them to get settled when they arrived in the low profile apartment. "Let's cut to the chase, Commissioner. Kakashi basically admitted that the entire program is a sham. But that has evidently been true for a long time. Why are you suddenly pushing to get it all out in the open now?"

Jiraya looked at the two brothers who were pinning them with dual, slightly hostile gazes. "I don't know if you were aware that there have been some bodies showing up in the morgue bearing a certain tattoo?"

Sasuke and Itachi exchanged a glance, neither quite sure of where the man was going with this.

Grabbing a pad of paper that was laying on the table by the phone, Jiraya quickly sketched out a swirl, marking a few kanji on the outside of it. "I would assume that this mark is familiar, at least to you, Councilman, if what Kabuto said about your relationship with Naruto is true."

Both Uchiha brothers recognized it as the tattoo that Naruto had on his stomach. Jiraya smirked. "Ah, I see you both have seen it. How fascinating. You must be... quite close."

Sasuke nearly rolled his eyes at the lecherous expression on the man's face. But the implication of what Jiraya was saying was not lost on him. "I am assuming that this is the mark of the Jinchuuriki program."

Jiraya blinked at the fact that Sasuke apparently knew the name of the program, but didn't remark on it. "Yes. They all have the same tattoo. It was a way to identify the bodies, if it came to that. Some of the criminal organizations that they go up against don't always leave their enemies intact enough for the regular means to work. When the first member of the program disappeared, we assumed that it was just an unfortunate fact of the lives that they all lead. Part of the... risk of doing business, if you will," Jiraya offered.

"That was the one who had tried to infiltrate Orochimaru's affiliates," Sasuke guessed.

Jiraya nodded. "And we thought Orochimaru had been the one responsible until two more members
disappeared that had nothing to do with him at all. They turned up in the morgue just before Naruto left town, showing signs of torture. No one has connected the dots back to Kakashi and me yet, but someone is definitely digging around and tampering with the files. Someone other than you, Councilman."

Sasuke's fist clenched at the information that yet *another* person seemed to be targeting Naruto. Though he supposed it could have been Tobi trying to mess with Naruto's associates, but somehow he didn't think so.

"So you decided that - rather than waiting for the program to be exposed - you would try to bring it into the light yourself and... what? Retroactively legitimize it?" Itachi said, sounding skeptical.

Jiraya smirked. "You say that like it could never happen. I might have agreed with you before, but recent circumstances afforded me a chance to have the outcome play out differently than the one I had expected."

"What circumstances?" Sasuke asked sharply.

"Because of the size of organizations it has brought down, the operations of the Jinchuuriki have become more high profile than was originally intended. Both the FBI and CIA have recently asked to tap into my... resources. The Jinchuuriki program is now being mentioned in legitimate operations as having played a role, vouched for by respected, legitimate agents in the FBI, CIA and our own department. This makes it more likely that - given a minimal amount of historical documentation about the program - people would not dig too deeply. But creating records in a government agency's systems is a tricky business. Getting in is of course a challenge, but you'd need someone with the skills to know how to alter the time stamps on the entries to make them appear to go back to the program's inception, you'd need to link the files to the right systems internally... it's a very high-end task. And I didn't happen to have access to a hacker with that level of skill."

Jiraya looked at Sasuke. "But I noticed some interesting changes in the files associated with Naruto shortly after he began working with you. I only caught it because I was involved in his case personally, and I remembered the details. But not a single tech could tell me how it had been changed, or even when. I had heard that Naruto had been bought by Orochimaru, and was now working for you. And then you had your office run that little survey about how the public would respond to a senate candidate who was in a relationship with someone with a criminal record, and it occurred to me that someone in your position might have resources to 'fix' little problems like a person's criminal background. But I had no way of approaching you about it. You'd never admit to having such a person in your organization."

"But then Kabuto began investigating Sasuke for the murder of Orochimaru, and you found your leverage," Itachi said, his voice hard.

Sasuke was silent. Jiraya probably couldn't prove that Sasuke had tampered with police files, but he was aware of it. And potentially could make others aware of it if Sasuke didn't deliver what was being asked of him. Given that he was already under the microscope thanks to Kabuto, Jiraya had him in a corner.

"But if these government agencies have been asking for your help, surely they've needed some sort of documentation on the program," Sasuke said, not quite ready to give ground on Jiraya's demands until he understood them better. Tampering with files that were already being watched was a different game than creating some that were completely off the radar.

Jiraya smirked. "While most people loathe bureaucracy, I find it incredibly convenient. Governmental agencies are so mired in it you could hide Atlantis in the sheer amount of red tape that
surrounds them. Hiding nine people has been easy by just being vague about where they actually were housed. And as long as we play ball when our mutual goals are aligned and no one had to sign off on budget for it, it has worked."

Sasuke and Itachi looked at him for a moment. And finally Sasuke asked what was clearly the most important question remaining.

"So what exactly is this program that Naruto is a part of?"

"Hmm," Jiraya said, considering the question as though somehow he hadn't expected it, though Sasuke thought it was more likely that the man was simply trying to decide how truthful to be.

"If you expect my help in any of this, then I want the complete truth. Trust me when I tell you that if I find even the smallest discrepancy between what you tell me and what my... associate... finds, I will first clean Naruto's files, then offer my services to the DA's office to help get you removed from office and arrested," Sasuke said flatly.

It was a bluff, because now that Naruto was embroiled in this with the DA it would be hard to extract him without bringing the whole program along with him. Sasuke was quite sure that Jiraya had done that intentionally to tie his hands. He didn't like being manipulated, but he had to admit that the older man seemed to be remarkably skilled at it.

"I suppose if I were to call it anything, I would say that the Jinchuuriki program is an... off-the-books affiliation of criminals who are willing to play nice with Kakashi and myself under certain conditions," Jiraya said carefully, watching the reaction of the brothers' faces as he did so.

"So... they are informants?" Itachi tried to clarify.

Jiraya smiled slightly predatorily. "Oh, they do much more than just inform. That's the beauty of the program. There are times when witnesses are killed or too afraid to testify, or when police and judges are bribed and an investigation gets cut off. When the official channels are closed, the Jinchuuriki can still operate."

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"So they do what? Kill for you?" Sasuke asked, wanting to be clear exactly what this man was admitting to.

Jiraya's smile widened. "Are you trying to tell me that you don't know what it feels like to make the call over whether killing someone is justified when you know they'd beat the system, Councilman Uchiha?"

He knows, Sasuke realized, a bit stunned. *He knows I killed Orochimaru, and he doesn't care. Or he even agrees with me.*

"Not everything is black and white, as much as we might wish it were," Jiraya continued. "I realized early on that if there are cops who can be bought by criminals - and you and I both know that there are - then there are most likely criminals who could be bought by cops. Not with money, of course, but with other things. Just because someone sells drugs doesn't mean they'd sell kids. Or stand idly by and watch someone else sell kids. And more importantly, they are not bound by the same rules as actual officers of the law, and can shut down these kinds of operations by means that the courts would not condone."

"So... you pay them with what?" Itachi asked.

Jiraya again shrugged. "Information. Turning a blind eye to certain activities as long as they aren't too blatant about it. Kakashi and I were quite selective in who we recruited. We all share the same..."
perspective... on right and wrong, I guess you'd say. The courts routinely award longer jail time for white collar crimes... defrauding a bank, for example, than they do for things like rape or even murder at times. I don't happen to agree with that."

"That's vigilantism," Itachi said, no emotion or judgment showing in his voice.

Jiraya raised an eyebrow. "It's informed vigilantism, but yes. I suppose you could call it that. If it were legitimate, we wouldn't be having this conversation, now would we?"

"So what are we actually having a conversation about?" Sasuke asked, deciding it was time to cut to the chase.

Jiraya looked him dead in the eye. "I know that you want to clean Naruto's record so he could be 'presentable' to the press. I also know that you have a hacker with some considerable skill that I have not been able to locate on my own. If I give you all the information of the Jinchuuriki and the work that they've done, I want you to create a retroactive record that makes it look like a legitimate operation that was housed in Homeland Security. In return, I will ensure that any inquiries that surface regarding Naruto, your relationship with him, and the death of Orochimaru are handled discreetly and to your benefit."

Itachi and Sasuke exchanged a long look.

"I think if you see the work that they have delivered, you will feel less morally conflicted about it. Gaara and Naruto alone have taken down seven child trafficking operations," Jiraya said.

"If I do this, then you need to retire the program. There can't be any more activity once it is on the books. Naruto will be done working for you, as will everyone else unless they choose to serve as legitimate informants," Sasuke said. "I am not going to give you carte blanche to run this operation going forward."

Jiraya nodded. "It only worked when it was under the radar anyway. The... methods that the group employs would make it immediately clear that the group was not sanctioned. We knew we'd have to shut it down when the bodies started appearing."

Jiraya's phone went off, and he checked the number then answered. "Yes?... when?... What's his condition?... We'll be there in twenty minutes."

"Naruto?" Sasuke asked, his stomach clenching at the grim look on Jiraya's face.

"No. Shisui. He caught up with Tobi. He's been stabbed. He's down at the hospital in surgery."

Itachi's face went white. He was out the door before Jiraya had finished standing up.

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While Itachi waited impatiently in the waiting room for news on Shisui's condition, Jiraya and Sasuke were informed that Kakashi was ready to see visitors. They walked in to find the white-haired man just finishing a phone call, his gun arm heavily bandaged and in a sling.

"That was Sakura. Naruto got out ok, and had called her to fill out the medical report documenting his injuries. She dropped him off at JFK two hours ago and said she would bring the report by later today so we can proceed against Kabuto. She also may have a lead on who is hunting the Jinchuurikis. We might need to place her into protective custody until this is over."

"Where is Naruto going?" Sasuke asked sharply. He bit back a surge of jealousy that Naruto had
called Sakura but not him.

"My guess is he caught the first flight to anywhere in Europe. I don't know what passport he is traveling under, given that this was last minute and I was afraid my e-mail was being monitored. He will go to ground until he finishes what he needs to there given that he knows Sakura has already let us know he made it out ok," Kakashi said, not seeming particularly worried.

Sasuke's face hardened, and he looked hard from Jiraya to Kakashi. He would find out what Sakura knew later, but for now he would deal with the two men in front of him. "You said you would give me access to all information on the Jinchuurikis. Right now I want to know exactly where Naruto is going and what he is doing. And the two of you are going to tell me."

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Naruto lay on his back on the rooftop of the youth hostel in Madrid where he and Gaara would be staying at for the next two nights. There was a reddish haze around the full moon. Naruto remembered as a child his mother would tell him that people used to believe that was a portent of death. Naruto smiled slightly. They wouldn't be wrong. The only question was: whose death?

He and Gaara had decided to move up the timeline for going to Suna. They had decided on a plan, and the longer they waited, the greater chance Tobi would leave New York and Naruto wouldn't be able to find him again. He didn't like the thought of what the sociopath would do to try to force Naruto's return if he delayed too long. In the morning they would meet with Sasori, who would hopefully agree to smuggle them in close enough to the Kazekage's compound that they could make the final approach on foot.

They had had to alter their plan a bit, now that Naruto had realized that Jiraya must be trying to bring the group out into the open. They had to make it at least appear that they were playing nice with their idiotic CIA contact. Naruto had called him saying they were moving up the timeline, and would be in Suna in four days. The man had been pleased and told them he would arrange his contact there to be ready. Naruto had been nervous about it, but Gaara had said he had a way to solve the issue without actually letting Mu take over his father's lands. No point in taking out one asshole to replace him with a worse one.

Naruto glanced at his watch. Gaara had been gone for more than an hour. He wondered what his friend was doing, but Gaara had seemed to need time alone. Naruto had also needed to clear his head. Tomorrow was the first step in their plan. If Sasori agreed to help them, things would move quickly after that. They had to be focused. But tonight they could let themselves drift just a little. Naruto remembered reading about soldiers on the eve of a major battle, sitting by the fire, waiting for the dawn with the knowledge that many would not live to see another. He had confidence in both himself and Gaara, but he wasn't foolish enough to know that there was a real chance that they wouldn't both make it back.

Naruto accepted that. He would regret not being able to catch the man who had murdered his parents, but he had left no other loose ends.

The night was warm, and a gentle breeze ruffled his hair. Naruto closed his eyes, the sensual feel of the wind's caress making him think of Sasuke. That was something he tried not to do. It had been hard to be back in New York. Knowing that Sasuke was there, already moving on with his life. Hopefully what Naruto had done would finally free Sasuke of any taint that Naruto had brought. Then Naruto could at least keep his memories free of guilt.

He had considered trying to see Sasuke before he left. Not to talk to him. Just to see him, even from a distance. But in the end, it hadn't been possible. Tobi had appeared, and Naruto had left on the first
flight going anywhere in Europe, knowing he could just take a train to where he had arranged to meet Gaara.

A shadow fell over Naruto's face, blocking the moonlight. Naruto wasn't surprised to see his red-haired friend sit down next to him.

"You ok?" Gaara asked.

Naruto shrugged. "I'm alive. And I have a date with your daddy. I guess I'm pretty good."

Gaara just looked at him, not buying the façade for a minute. "Do you want to give Kakashi an update on our new timeline?"

"Given that Tobi found out about the supposedly secret meeting we had at the precinct, I think we should lay low. It's not like we'll be off the radar for months. We'll tell Kakashi when it's done."

Gaara nodded slowly. Every contact put them at risk. Unless Kakashi signaled it was urgent, they would stay dark. It was standard operating procedure any time it became possible that your contact was being monitored, whether you were a cop or a criminal. "And once it's done, what will you do? Orochimaru is dead. Nagato's operation is completely dismantled."

"I have business with Tobi back in New York."

Gaara looked at Naruto. "What if he's not there anymore?"

Naruto shrugged. "Then I think I'm ready to start tracking him. He can't go without killing for long. I'll have Jiraya connect me with whatever group is looking for him. Now that he's trying to legitimize us, I might have a shot."

"It could take years to find him. Don't you want to actually build some kind of life? If Jiraya is really trying to whitewash the program somehow, you could have a chance."

Naruto knew that Gaara was talking about Sasuke. He closed his eyes, trying to block out the emotions that poured into him at the thought of what a life with Sasuke would have been like. "He needs something else. He might even have found someone. And in any case, you know that I can't have a life until Tobi is dead. Any life I have, he'll just rip apart."

Gaara shot Naruto a look, but the blond simply turned his head away. "Leave it," he warned. "What about you? Are you staying in Suna once this is over with your father?"

Thoroughly annoyed at the question, Gaara reached over and grabbed Naruto just under his elbow digging his fingers into the cluster of nerves there and temporarily paralyzing Naruto's right arm. He looked down at Naruto, his face calm. "I believe we have discussed in the past what would happen if you ever tried to hunt down Tobi without me. I don't think I have been at all unclear on that matter."

Despite the pain in his arm, Naruto snickered. "Psycho. Let go of my fucking arm. What kind of idiot wants to go chasing after a serial killer that isn't even after him, anyway?"

Gaara released Naruto's arm, laying back down next to him and looking at the moon. "The same as the kind of idiot who goes charging into the lair of a sociopathic dictator who doesn't even know he exists."

Naruto turned to his side, looking at Gaara for a few minutes. "I guess that's what brothers are."

Gaara turned to face Naruto, then slowly lifted his hand and let it settle in Naruto's hair, running his
fingers through the blond locks the way he had the night Naruto had been shot in the head. Naruto closed his eyes, enjoying the rare physical contact from his best friend.

They stayed like that for several minutes, neither wanting to voice the doubts or worries that had begun to swirl though them now that the time for action was getting so close.

"Did you get what you needed?" Naruto asked, his voice sounding almost sleepy.

"Yes," Gaara said simply.

He sat up and pulled out a small wooden box out of one of the bags he carried. Naruto could smell the scent of sandalwood coming from it. A small smile lit Gaara's face as he lifted the lid, revealing an intricately designed black lacquered fan with a blood-red, silken ribbon tied at its base.

"What is that?" Naruto asked, not sure what to make of Gaara's strange mood.

"It's a message to an ally that we have in my father's house," Gaara said softly.

Naruto raised an eyebrow, but didn't ask further. He knew he would meet this ally and find out more about them when Gaara was ready.

Their room was stuffy and the air conditioning wasn't working well. Gaara went and brought their pillows and blankets up, and they decided to sleep out under the moon. They lay down next to each other, and Naruto turned, his face serious. "If you try to leave without me tomorrow, I swear I will hunt you down and kill you myself if you make it out of your father's place alive."

Gaara looked at him steadily. "Like you could find me."

Naruto glared, and Gaara let his fingers run through the blond's hair again, the movement becoming more natural. "I won't go without you. If for no other reason than you'd probably chase after me and get yourself killed," Gaara said, a tiny smile telling Naruto that he was joking.

"Asshole," Naruto said affectionately. "Try to sleep tonight."

Gaara shrugged noncommittally. He couldn't sleep well under the best of circumstances, and the night before he finally set his plans in motion to take out his father was not a likely candidate for sleep. He stroked Naruto's hair, waiting until the blond had fallen asleep.

He turned, pulling out the contents of the second bag. He looked at the tiny device he held in his hand. It was amazing how small they could make these things these days.

-xXx-

Suna

A blond woman was seated at a desk in the inner sanctum of the Kazekage fortress, reviewing the deployment of the security forces and analyzing recent infiltration attempts by rival factions. There was a knock on the door to her office.

"Come," she said tersely, not looking up from a report she was scanning that indicated that a US satellite had been positioned recently over their territory, potentially a surveillance device that might have tracked the location of the guards and the timing of the rotations. She sighed, knowing that she would now have to re-draw the security plans.

"This came for you, Commander. It shows it was sent express from Spain," the man said. He hadn't
opened the package to inspect it, since it was addressed to her personally.

The woman looked at the package, and the neat handwriting that spelled her full name and address. It was not one she recognized. She ran her hands along the seams, checking for wires or other signs of a bomb. Though it was unlikely her father's enemies would target her specifically. Finding none, she opened package and pulled out an intricately carved sandalwood box.

Slowly, she lifted the lid. Her breath caught in her throat when she saw the delicate fan nestled inside the box. She pulled it out almost reverently.

"Get out," she said, her voice soft.

"I'm sorry, Commander. Is there anything that I can -"

"I said GET OUT!" she did not lift her eyes from the fan that she now held within trembling fingers.

When the sound of the door closed, she closed her eyes and the first bitter tears rolled down her cheek. She thought of the beautiful baby brother that she had loved with all her heart. The baby brother who had been so clearly a born leader, so fiercely intelligent that at the age of seven her bastard of a father had had him killed. Too many dictators had fallen to impatient sons, and her father had not wanted to wait for Gaara to become old enough to attempt anything when others in his army were already admiring the boy.

But to her, Gaara had simply been a small child with frightened eyes and a teddy bear that he needed to fall asleep at night since their mother had died when he was two. When he had vanished from his bedroom, Temari had cried on his small bed, holding his teddy bear to her chest. It was the first and last time that anyone had ever seen her cry, even when their mother had died.

But she wept now, aching at that the thought that her little brother might be somehow alive and coming back to her. Terrified that it might not be true. Terrified that their father would find out and kill him. Every year on her birthday, since the time he was three, Gaara had bought her a fan. She never knew why he had started the tradition, but she had cherished them. She had bought herself a fan every year on his birthday since his disappearance. It had been her one connection to the memory of her baby brother.

Finally she wiped her eyes dry. She had hated her father with every ounce of her being from then on, biding her time until she found an opportunity. Inside the delicately carved box was a small piece of paper with a time and date inscribed. Temari smiled. It looked like opportunity had come knocking at last.

And if this was a trick by one of her father's foes to try to distract her from her duties, then they would learn just how much like her father she could be.

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to be continued...

See! Women in Naruto can do something other than raise babies. SEE!

Next up will be Karma paying a little visit to Gaara's dad...

which brings me to a question I have for you. Who do you think should be the one to kill Gaara's dad? Choices are: Gaara, Temari, or Naruto. I thought I knew which one I wanted to do the deed. But now... I am not as sure. They each have benefits. Thoughts?
Of Warlords and Fathers - Part 1

Author's note - OK so... this chapter... is about 15k words long. I know, right? But to be fair, I am overthrowing an entire government in it, so... I just... ok, it's long. Since people complain when my chapters get over 10k that it crashes their devices, I am splitting it into 2. First part comes today, second part I will post in 3 or 4 days to give most people a chance to read this part first and not accidentally read them in the wrong order (because very few people read my author's notes... if you are reading this you are one of the 'good ones'. LOL)

ALSO - I am making up an entire country in this fic. It is AU, so I am allowed. I am doing this so that I am not 'picking' on anyone's country. So the city is called Suna and it is in the country called Kazenokuni (land of wind = Kaze no Kuni). But much of what I describe will be based on things I've observed/experienced/heard about in my time spent working in the Dominican Republic, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Morocco. So it's a hybrid and not totally pulled out of my ass. I have ridden that bus, worked in that shanty-town, taken a 1-gallon shower (and I have waist-length hair, so that was fun) and my toothbrush makes a special guest appearance in this chapter. (Are you excited yet? LOL. Seriously, though, I promise smut soon.)  Special thanks to BriEva for helping me with this beast, figuring out what scenes go where and helping me channel Gaara's father.

-xXx-

Itachi walked into the hospital room, forcing his face into its typical impassive mask as he looked at the man resting on the bed.

Shisui looked up at him and smirked. "Careful, Itachi. Your Uchiha is slipping. If I didn't know better, I'd say you looked almost worried."

"You idiot. What kind of person chases after a deranged serial killer unarmed in a city that he has only passing familiarity with. Were you trying to get yourself killed, Shi?"

Shisui's smirk softened into a smile. "Come here, Itachi," he said, flexing his fingers slightly to motion his lover closer.

Itachi glared, then walked over to stand stiffly next to Shisui's bed.

Shisui reached out and slid his fingers through Itachi's cold ones. Itachi gripped the offered hand almost convulsively.

"I'm fine, Itachi'. He surprised me, but I'm fine," Shisui's voice and gaze were steady.

Itachi slowly sat on the edge of the bed, then took his free hand and slid it softly down the side of Shisui's cheek. "You're not allowed to die, Shisui. As head of the family, it is my right to mandate this. Do not disobey me."

Shisui slid their joined hands up to his mouth, brushing his lips across Itachi's knuckles. "I always obey you, Itachi. Though sometimes you disagree with the way I do it."

It was as close as a direct conversation that they'd had about the events that had torn them apart years ago. Itachi realized, as he looked at his lover lying in the hospital bed, that it was time to move past that.

"I know," he said softly. "I understand the choice you made, even if I don't agree with it."
It wasn't a direct statement of forgiveness, but Shisui knew that Itachi was telling him it was ok. Shisui felt his throat close, but kept his eyes dry and focused on the man he loved. He may be injured, but he would not appear weak before this man.

Shisui slid his lips again across Itachi's hand, then tilted their wrists so he could capture the tip of Itachi’s strong, elegant index finger and pull it slowly into his mouth. He swirled his tongue around the tip, letting it dip slightly under the fingernail to the sensitive flesh there.

Itachi closed his eyes, the let out a low chuckle. "Tease. You won't be up for anything like that for at least a week given your little adventure," Itachi's voice roughened slightly.

"Never underestimate an Uchiha," Shisui said, running the tip of his tongue along the sensitive flesh in the V of Itachi's hand between his thumb and forefinger.

Itachi jerked his hand back as a spike of lust rushed through his veins. Shisui smirked at the movement, knowing that Itachi had been afraid of losing control by his touch. Itachi narrowed his eyes, though they gleamed with humor. "You are going to be a difficult patient, aren't you?"

Shisui reached back out and grabbed Itachi's wrist, lowering it to where his erection was forming beneath the hospital sheet. "I think you mean… hard."

Itachi snorted out a laugh. "I can see the pain killers are working quite well," he leaned in, brushing a soft kiss against Shisui's ear when he whispered. "But I will take care of you."

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Sasuke breathed out a sigh of relief when Itachi called to let him know that Shisui was alright. It was after visiting hours, and it was only through sheer intimidation that Itachi had convinced them to allow him to stay with Shisui.

Sasuke knew that his brother would look after his cousin. He had called Kakashi to make sure that there was a police officer outside of Shisui's room, and would continue to monitor them.

He had gotten Sakura's number from Kakashi. He wanted to know exactly what Naruto had said before he had left, if he had given any clue as to where he was going to be meeting Gaara or what their plans were. Suigetsu had already hacked into the CIA database and was downloading every scrap of information and communication regarding mission Naruto and Gaara had been assigned to.

Sasuke's phone buzzed, and he scrolled through the first batch of information that Suigetsu had sent over. His finger abruptly ceased scrolling when he reached a section of information that had an overall mission assessment. It was categorized as a likely success rate of 17% and technically classified as a suicide mission. Sasuke viced his hand around the device to keep himself from hurling it across the room. He didn't know how the CIA had landed on such a specific number, but he hoped like hell that Gaara and Naruto knew something that the government didn't that would increase their odds.

Forcing himself to take a deep breath, he kept reading. His gaze fixed on the last set of communications that had been exchanged on the mission. The operative had confirmed that Naruto and Gaara would make contact with Mu's agent in Suna. The response had been that they would need to send someone over to ensure that Naruto and Gaara did not return from the mission on the off chance that they were not killed on site. The CIA didn't want any possible leaks of their involvement in yet another government overthrown by someone they were supporting. Sasuke called Jiraya and let him know about the situation. Given that the whole thing was set in motion by the Commissioner, Sasuke figured the man had damn well better play a part in fixing it. The extensive
and highly creative stream of cursing that came from the older man's mouth made Sasuke feel only slightly better.

Jiraya agreed he would try to work things behind the scenes officially, but neither of them expected it to get resolved on the timescale that it needed to. Someone needed to get in touch with Naruto and Gaara and let them know they were being set up.

Sasuke dialed Sakura. That was where he needed to start.

"Dr. Haruno," a tired woman's voice picked up.

"Dr. Haruno, this is Sasuke Uchiha," Sasuke said. "I understand that you spoke with a mutual friend of ours earlier this morning. I was hoping we could speak privately about this morning's events."

There was a slight pause. "Not on the phone. My shift ends in four hours. If you want to talk, I'll meet you at the rear entrance to the hospital then."

Sasuke agreed, then hung up.

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Kakashi had told Sasuke to use a rental car that wouldn't draw too much attention, so Sasuke found himself pulling the tan Ford Taurus into the staff parking lot of the hospital later that evening. He opened the door and stood when he saw the pink-haired doctor emerging from the building. There was an officer escorting her.

The officer looked at Sasuke, "Captain Hatake said you would be coming. I understand you will be taking Dr. Haruno to one of the safe houses?"

Sasuke nodded. Sakura sighed resignedly, clearly not excited to have the police protection, but sensible enough not to argue about it. Sasuke understood, feeling largely the same.

Sakura got into the rental car and Sasuke began driving back to the safe house where Kakashi would be meeting them when he was discharged from the hospital, hopefully later that evening.

"Kakashi told me that you dropped Naruto off at the airport this morning," Sasuke began as his driver eased into the street.

He felt Sakura's assessing look, and wondered what Naruto had said about him to make her cool so much towards him since the last time he had seen her. "Since Kakashi already told you about it, I suppose there is no point in denying it." Sakura calmly stated. "Naruto called me to document his injuries."

"How..." Sasuke drew a breath. "How was he?"

Sasuke again felt the weight of her gaze. Finally she spoke. "He was fine, physically. All of his bruises were superficial and his previous wounds healed well." Sasuke wanted to ask about more than his physical condition, but something in the rigid body posture of the doctor sitting next to him warned him not to. He supposed she had seen the tabloid rumors about him and Karin. Possibly Naruto had as well. Sasuke suddenly very much wanted to know if Naruto had, and whether he had taken them seriously. Would Naruto assume their relationship was over and move on with someone else? With Gaara?

As much as it would kill him if that happened, it wasn't the most important thing right now. "Do you know what flight he took?"
She shrugged. It was only a matter of time before they would figure out which flight Naruto took based on the security footage from the airport. There was no point in withholding the information. "He used my phone to check which flights were leaving. The first one he could catch was to London."

Sasuke nodded. He had checked all the flights that would have been departing around the time Naruto had entered the airport, and he knew which flight Naruto had taken if it were the London one. "Did he tell you where he was going after London?"

Sakura bit her lip, unsure of if she should reveal all that Naruto had told her during the car ride. Naruto almost never disclosed specifics to her and this was one of the few times he had, but she wasn't sure if that trust extended to Sasuke anymore.

"Sakura, if you know something I need you to tell me," Sasuke said, trying not to lose patience. He couldn't afford to alienate her, but he also didn't have time to waste. "There is more going on than you might know."

"I know enough," she growled. "Why do you want to know so badly? I've seen the news. You've gone to great lengths to make everyone think you're dating your head of PR. Naruto trusted you… and that is something that he almost never does. But I don't know if he trusts you anymore, Councilman." She narrowed her eyes, "I asked him if he wanted to see you before he left yesterday."

Sasuke paused waiting for her to finish her statement. "And? What did he say?" he finally bit out.

"We went directly to the airport. So what do you think?" Sakura noticed Sasuke's body tense at the words. She wondered why the man had tried to fake a relationship with someone else when he was so clearly in love with Naruto. She supposed it had to do with maintaining his image as a politician. She understood it, to a certain extent, but knew that Naruto would never want to be in a relationship where it had to be kept secret. He had told her as much.

Sasuke pulled over, parking in front of a modest townhouse. "He's being set up by the CIA and is likely to end up dead if we don't let him know. Evidently, the CIA has decided to wait until Naruto and Gaara do what they were assigned to do. If they don't get killed in the actual mission, then there will be a team sent to take them out before they leave Suna. But I have no idea how much time we have until that happens, and I have no idea how to contact Naruto before then."

Sakura's eyes widened and her heart dropped at the information. Whatever the issues might be between Naruto and Sasuke, right now the important thing was making sure that Naruto and Gaara made it back alive. She took a breath.

"Less than two weeks." Sakura stated calmly as she unbuckled her seat belt.

Sasuke glared at her. "Two weeks what?"

"Naruto told me he would be in Spain for 2 days with Gaara finalizing plans, and that they would be back in New York within two weeks if everything went well." She hadn't wanted to ask Naruto what would happen if it didn't go well. It had been clear from Naruto's expression that this was not a sure thing. Given what Sasuke had just told her, it seemed the odds were even worse than her friend knew. Her fist clenched.

He nodded curtly. "Fine. I will see if I can find him before then."

Sakura looked at him steadily. "If this is as dangerous as you and Naruto seem to think it is, then you have a better chance of helping them if a doctor goes with you."
Sasuke smirked. "And I suppose you just happen to know one that has enough vacation saved up to fit the bill?"

Sakura grinned back. "Maybe you're not as dumb as the tabloids make you out to be after all, Uchiha."

"Hn. Don't push your luck, Haruno. It's annoying."

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Sasuke waited with Itachi for the guards to lead the prisoner in. Shisui had been annoyed that he was not accompanying him. He hadn't forgotten what Sasuke had said about Deidara apparently having an interest in Itachi. But the hospital had decided to keep him an extra day, and Itachi had insisted that Shisui not push it.

Out of all the operatives from Akatsuki, Deidara had done the most international work. If Naruto were meeting someone in Spain to get him into Suna, Deidara would be the one to know who it would be, and what route they were likely to take.

The blond felon entered the room in shackles, his eyes going immediately to Itachi.

"It's been a while, counselor. I was beginning to think you'd forgotten me, yeah?" Deidara said before sprawling as much as the shackles would allow into the metal chair. He looked at Itachi a bit more closely. "You seem different from the last time. You're getting laid now, yeah? Pity. I would have been more than happy to unwind you. But you seem to be missing someone from your group. Where's our blond lover-boy for the little Uchiha here?"

Sasuke shifted slightly, and Deidara's eyes immediately narrowed. "Where is Naruto?" he repeated, this time much more softly, and much more threateningly.

Sasuke glanced at Itachi, who gave him a slight nod. Itachi walked over and engaged the guards in a conversation about Deidara's behavior and how he had been integrating with the other prisoners since being released from solitary. He wasn't surprised to hear that basically everyone steered clear of the blond, valuing their continued ability to not have to piss through a tube.

Sasuke pulled out a pad of paper, knowing that their conversation was being recorded, and sat across from Deidara. "Naruto's visiting friends out of town," Sasuke said casually, while he wrote on the paper:

\[N\] is with \[G\] headed to Suna.

Deidara's eyes widened as he read the pad. "Hn. Some of Naruto's friends are some crazy motherfuckers. I hope he's got his head on straight about it, yeah? I'd heard there were some old friends in town trying to look him up as well." Deidara grabbed the pen from Sasuke and wrote:

\[Tobi\] is in town. He has been tracking down people who know \[N\] and \[Zetsu\].

Sasuke grabbed the pad back, glancing up, a bit surprised to see that Deidara had already figured out that Naruto would have told Sasuke about Tobi. Deidara just gave a grin. "Yeah. We bumped into one of them," Sasuke said slowly. \[T\] attacked \[N\] in the subway. \[N\] is ok. \[T\] is trying to recruit him.

Deidara read the note, then started to laugh. "Man, crazy turns to stupid. Our boy will never play that game with that fucker."

Sasuke glanced at the guards, but they continued to talk with Itachi about the prisoner's behavior and were not trying to read the writing on the pad. "Yeah. That was Naruto's reaction as well. But with his out-of-town friends... I worry that he might not have enough money for his trip home. Any ideas?" \[The CIA is setting \[N\] and \[G\] up. \[N\] was going to use one of Nagato's contacts to get into Suna.\]
I need to find them. They will leave from Madrid.

"Well, I'd offer to give him a lift, but I'm a bit stuck here, yeah?" Deidara looked at the note a minute or two, clearly frustrated that he was out of the action on something like this. Sasuke started to get nervous that the man was not going to respond. Finally he grabbed the pen. Sasori Akasuna. They should not trust him now that Nagato is gone. Sasori and I go way back. At the slightest sign of trouble, he will leave them behind. He won't wait for anyone. "Naruto better have a fucking back-up plan, yeah? That piece of shit he's driving now isn't likely to make the return trip."

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Naruto had long since lost feeling in all his limbs in the small metal box that was on the underside of the old truck where they were riding, jammed in with their packs so that there was barely any space to move. It was a good thing that neither he nor Gaara were claustrophobic, or they would probably have lost their minds hours ago. It was bad enough to fight down the headache and nausea of the strong smell of exhaust and unrelieved heat. The roar of the engine was so loud that Naruto wondered if he were going to suffer permanent hearing loss by the end of it, but there was no point in worrying about it now. They were stuck in the box until someone came and let them out.

Naruto decided to use the time to review what Gaara had told him about the details of his father's security that they would be facing once they reached Suna.

"When I was little, I used to design securing protocols for the guards. It started off as just a game, at first. But then I actually came up with some good suggestions, and the head of security started talking to me more about the actual plans and protocols. Given the geography of the stronghold, I doubt the basic ideas have changed that much, through the details will be altered periodically to prevent security breaches," Gaara said, taking out a sheet of paper and flattening it.

He sketched a rough oval of mountains, then a complicated-looking building in the middle.

"My father's compound is built in the remains of a dried lakebed about a mile and a half in diameter. It is surrounded by mountains. Given the unique geography, there are three layers of the security. One is the Mountain Guard. Before I left, my father had two men stationed at each of the eight compass points in the mountains surrounding our home. North, Northeast, East, etc. They work in pairs, one looking out, and one looking in. They are in radio contact with each other and each pair has sharp-shooter abilities. This means that all eight groups have to be taken out before anyone can advance on the compound or they'll be picked off by sniper-fire. The Mountain Guard can easily pull off a clean headshot from two miles away, and they will be equipped with night-vision goggles and scopes."

Naruto nodded. That would make four pairs for him, and four for Gaara. He wasn't worried.

Gaara saw that Naruto understood, and proceeded. "The second ring of defense is at the perimeter of the compound. There are watchtowers and look-out windows, as well as exterior guards at all of the entrances. The guards at the windows are behind bullet-proof glass and are in radio contact with the Mountain Guard. The Mountain Guard has to check in every hour. Failure to report in triggers an automatic lock-down. We will have to time our initial strike on the Mountain Guard just after a check-in, we will have sixty minutes to take out both the Mountain Guard and the Perimeter Guard or we will be caught."

Naruto looked at Gaara flatly. "If half the Perimeter Guard is behind bullet-proof glass, then how are we supposed to do that? How hard is it to enter without being seen with the Perimeter Guard still active?"
Gaara smirked. "They have heat-sensing devices. Anything that approaches the compound that isn't the same temperature as the surrounding landscape sets off an alarm. Even if the guard isn't there, that system will remain active unless someone deactivates it from the central command room."

"Fuck," Naruto muttered. "Your dad is a paranoid asshole, did you know that?"

Gaara raised a hairless brow. "He'd have to be if he considered a seven-year-old a significant enough threat to his reign that he decided to have me killed."

Naruto blew out a breath. No wonder Gaara had never tried this on his own earlier.

"The final group is the Interior Guard. They will be by far the most difficult. They have all been hand-picked by my father and are specially trained in various styles of attack and defense. Watch their blades in particular, because they will almost all be poisoned. So will their bullets."

"Will it be possible to turn one of the guards? There must be at least some who would be glad to see him go. Maybe someone who would remember you from your childhood," Naruto said hopefully.

But Gaara was shaking his head. "No. My father goes through great pains to ensure absolute loyalty of his Interior Guards. They are all either completely brainwashed by him, or beholden in some way. He has threatened their family, or their lands, or has some other leverage over them. We will have no allies there. Besides, if my brother is going to take over without civil war, then it needs to seem as though Mu was behind this and he merely intervened to prevent a takeover from an outsider. It will bring all of my father's forces together under him without further strife. If they know that I was behind it, they will suspect Kankuro of simply staging another coup, and it will open the door for one of my father's other generals to step forward and try to take power."

Naruto's head hurt. This kind of strategy wasn't really something he was good at. But what Gaara said made sense, and if it avoided further killing then he was all for it. "So will we be making contact with Kankuro? Maybe he can help us from the inside?"

Again Gaara shook his head. "My father is a paranoid man. He has positioned Kankuro as his second in command in charge of the military. Every communication to him will be tightly monitored to ensure that he isn't plotting against him. The only reason he didn't kill my brother along with me was that he wanted to be sure his legacy continued after he died. To him, children are just a form of immortality, carrying his blood and ideals forward. Of all his children, he viewed me as the greatest threat. So he had me killed."

"What do you mean?"

"He over-looked my sister," Gaara said, a small smile gracing his lips. "Of course, he was wrong."

Naruto looked at him, raising a brow. "What do you mean?"

"He chose the wrong child to fear."

"What do you mean?"

"He over-looked my sister," Gaara said, a small smile gracing his lips.

A jolt as the truck hit a pothole rattled Naruto out of his thoughts. He wondered where they were.

Sasori had said he would meet them after they had crossed the border into Suna and arrived at a safe location. He wouldn't disclose in advance what that location was, and Gaara and Naruto had to simply take it on faith that he wasn't going to just drive them into the desert and leave them locked in the metal coffin under the baking sun. It didn't sit comfortably with them, but it was the chance they'd have to take. The first of many on this journey.

They had been travelling so long that when the vehicle finally stopped Naruto felt like his body was
still moving. The sudden silence when the engine had cut off felt almost like a religious moment to Naruto. But the voices from outside the truck warned him that they were not in the clear yet. Naruto could feel Gaara tense next to him as the men outside spoke in a harsh language that Naruto didn't understand. It was clear that Gaara did, however, judging by the increasing tension that was creeping along his frame. He heard Gaara release the safety on the gun he was carrying. Naruto did the same, though with some difficulty since his entire arm had fallen asleep. He focused on tensing and releasing every muscle in his body, trying to get the blood flowing again so that - if they were discovered - he would at least be able to force his body into motion to fight.

Though if these were border guards, they likely would have machine guns, making the idea of fighting a bit optimistic even with the guns they had with them. There were sounds of heavy boots tramping through the main body of the truck as the vehicle was searched, a few more exchanged phrases, then the engine roared to life and they were in motion again. Naruto felt a combination of intense relief that they'd gotten past the guards combined with agony as the sound pounded against his ears and the truck bounced along the bumpy road.

At some point, he must have dozed off because he found himself waking as the truck rumbled at last to a stop. Naruto realized Gaara was also awake as he felt the man shift slightly beside him. The sound of the latch of the box was heard and then the door was opened. They stiffly climbed out into the humid evening air, dragging their packs out of the bin as well and stretching their limbs and looking around at the garage they found themselves parked in.

Sasori walked into the room and spoke quickly to the two men who had driven them across the border before dismissing them.

"Welcome to Suna," Sasori said, switching to English. "The city is about four miles from the Kazekage's compound. This is as close as I can bring you. The border security was tighter than expected," Sasori commented, looking at the two men in front of him with slightly more interest than he had shown in their first meeting. "It seems that Mu has been mobilizing troops along the border. There are rumors that he is going to try to take over the Kazekage's territory. You two wouldn't happen to know anything about that?"

Gaara looked at Sasori steadily. "We have no interest in helping that butcher. Our business lies with others."

Sasori shrugged. "I don't really care either way. I just try to stay out of political activities. However, if war breaks out, your escape route will be closed. Just keep that in mind with whatever 'business' you conduct over the next five days."

Gaara nodded.

Sasori pulled out a small laptop and logged on. "Now it's time for your part of the bargain."

Naruto took the laptop and quickly entered the codes transferring the entire balance of one of the Swiss accounts that he had opened on his way to meet Gaara to the routing number Sasori had given him. Regardless of whether Naruto and Sasori had both worked for Nagato, with his organization dismantled they were both free agents. Naruto would fully expect Sasori to just take their money and dump their bodies in the desert if they had carried the cash with them. So he and Gaara had set up a series of bank accounts that they could pay on demand.

He handed the laptop back so Sasori could see the transfer go through and verify the funds' arrival into his own account.

"And payment for the return trip?" Sasori asked, noticing the balance of the original account was
"Will be made from a different account, upon safe arrival of our return journey," Gaara said.

Sasori narrowed his eyes but nodded. "Then my men will return here in five days. They will wait twelve hours, then leave with you or without you," he looked at Gaara again, measuringly. "Assuming that the border is still open, that is."

Naruto and Gaara nodded, slinging their packs over their shoulders before heading towards the exit. Before they could open the door, Gaara placed a hand on Naruto's shoulder, stopping him. "Wait."

Naruto blinked, surprised that they were delaying their departure at all. Sasori might have been convinced that they had no money on them, but he was clearly trying to figure out what their agenda might be. Gaara resembled his father to a certain extent, and if Sasori was able to piece together who he was, it would lead to trouble. The longer they stayed in his presence, the higher that risk became. He exchanged a glance with Gaara, realizing he had come to the same conclusion. They would need to find their own way out of Suna. Sasori was too likely to sell them out.

Gaara reached in his pack and pulled out a large garment of black cloth. "You will draw too much attention in the city. You don't speak the language and you are obviously not from here. We don't get many tourists. This will cover you entirely, and will cover-up the fact that you don't speak."

Gaara unfolded the black cloth, handing it to Naruto. "How the hell am I supposed to even put this thing on?" Naruto asked, turning it first one way then another trying to figure out what it even was.

"It's called a burka. It's worn by women that belong to one of the more traditional sects of the community here. It will completely cover your entire body, including your hair and face. Your identity and even your gender will be impossible to discern."

Naruto eyed the garment and smirked. "This is just your way of finally getting me to be your bitch."

Gaara snorted. "You're always my bitch."

Naruto gave a short jab to Gaara's stomach, briefly knocking the wind out of him, then busied himself pulling the fabric over his head and positioning it so he could see out. After a minute or two, Gaara nodded in approval.

"Let's go."

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The stepped out into the street, and Naruto's eyes widened as he got his first real look at Suna, a large city in western Kazenokuni. He had been in Japan, the US, and Europe, but he'd never seen a place like this. The city was both vibrant and dirty at the same time. Brightly colored clothes hung from balconies of the apartments that lined the streets, strung out on strings across the narrow alleyways. One entire street seemed to be blocked with what looked like a pile of trash. Vendors walked the streets with baskets of fruits, vegetables and other wares in baskets balanced on top their heads.

The streets were teeming with cars of all different makes, from a brand-new Cadillac to something that looked like a forty-year-old Chevy, to some that Naruto couldn't even recognize. The only thing that they all had in common was the large, steel pipe bumpers that were welded onto the front and rear of each vehicle.

The reason for the strange appendages was immediately obvious, as Naruto observed one of the few operating traffic lights turn from green to yellow to red with no discernable effect on the traffic flow.
The cross-traffic began moving when a few brave drivers just began advancing into the intersection, playing a game of chicken with oncoming cars, horns blaring in all directions, until the cross-street traffic was now flowing through the intersection.

Naruto watched in fascination, coughing slightly as a brightly painted bus that looked like it was probably retired from some US school district in the sixties drove by spewing black smoke.

Gaara had paused, assuming that Naruto would need to take a minute to get his bearings. "Let's go. You can gawk from the bus."

Not seeming to notice the risk of imminent death, Gaara stepped into the busy street as a bus bore down on him. A man hanging off the back of the bus banged the side loudly three times, and the bus stopped. Gaara said something briefly to the man hanging from the side, and before Naruto knew what was happening, they were climbing onto the roof of the overly full bus with their heavy packs and holding on. With three more bangs from the man that Naruto assumed was effectively the conductor of the bus, the unstable looking vehicle lurched forward through the busy streets.

On Naruto's left was some sort of bamboo cage that was full of chickens. The two men carrying it sat cross-legged on the hot bus roof, seemingly unconcerned at what seemed to be a very real possibility that the bus would crash into something and send them all flying into the road to be crushed.

He looked over to see Gaara's eyes shining with amusement as he took in Naruto's obvious unease. Naruto bit back the 'fuck you' that came to the tip of his tongue, knowing that it was critical that no one heard them speaking English.

They rode the bus for about forty minutes to a shanty-town on the outskirts of town. Gaara signaled the conductor, who banged the side of the bus causing it to come to a stop. Naruto and Gaara jumped down, and the bus was careening off down the road again before their feet had barely touched the ground.

The street was quiet compared to downtown. The houses that seemed to stretch off in an endless sea were made of corrugated aluminum. But there were many families camped out on the sidewalk, with small cook fires going and plastic tarps set up to protect them from the sun and rain and not much else. Naruto looked over to see a woman stirring a pot of what looked like rice and beans while a baby suckled at her breast and another small child slept in her lap. The small tent where apparently the whole family lived tied between a tree trunk and a fence-post on the sidewalk.

The woman looked up at Naruto and smiled, saying something he couldn't understand. Naruto simply nodded, while Gaara murmured something to the woman that made her look at Naruto with a blend of sympathy and curiosity before going back to her cooking.

They walked quietly down a row of aluminum houses, one leaning against the other. Gaara paused in front of one that - to Naruto - looked like all the others. Gaara pushed the blanket aside that covered the entryway, and they found themselves in a small ten foot by ten foot room with a dirt floor, some blankets folded in a corner, and not much else.

"This is…?" Naruto began.

"Where we're staying tonight. We'll leave for the compound in the morning. No one will find us here."

Naruto thought about the hundreds of identical houses in the area, not sure he would be able to find his way back without Gaara guiding him. "How did we find our way here?"
Gaara's lips twitched. "I used to come here sometimes when I was young. I made a few friends back in the day. One of them worked his way out of the slums and works in the capital now. He told me which house we could use while we're here."

Naruto nodded slowly. "So... this city is under your father's rule, right?"

Gaara nodded. "His word is law here. National laws and courts can't touch him. He has his own military and his own revenue sources from the gold and oil."

"So... he's like the king of this place? Would that make you like... a psycho prince or something?" Naruto snickered.

Gaara smirked. "Don't go thinking fairytales. He's more like warlord. He isn't recognized as autonomous by the international community. Technically, his territory belongs to the Kazenokuni government. But the government doesn't have the power to really enforce that, so my father acts on his own."

Naruto looked around at the tiny home, knowing that there were likely thousands of people living like this or worse on the outskirts of the city. "So... when your brother takes over..."

Gaara's face grew serious. "Then he will start putting money back into building up the infrastructure of the country rather than just siphoning it off into his own personal bank accounts the way my father has."

Naruto nodded. He'd never really felt the pull of a 'greater cause' before, but the image of the mother with her small children cooking out on the streets haunted him. He knew the feeling of living on the streets. He couldn't imagine the stress of trying to raise a family on them.

"Will you be coming back to help him, once things are settled?" Naruto asked his friend.

Gaara looked at Naruto a bit, then nodded. "After Tobi is dead."

Naruto stared at the corrugated walls thoughtfully. There was nothing tying him to New York anymore. "Maybe I'll join you."

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Gaara told Naruto to stay inside while he went and got some food and supplies. Naruto pulled off the burka, relieved to be out of its smothering folds. He checked and cleaned their guns to be sure none of the sand and dust from their journey interfered with the firing mechanisms, then he lay back on one of the blankets to rest. He wished he could take a shower. He decided he'd ask Gaara where they could manage that when the man got back.

It was about an hour later when Gaara arrived carrying four gallons of water in a pack strapped to his back along with a couple of bags of food and a large pack of what appeared to be climbing gear. He opened the water bottles and dropped a small tablet in.

"Chlorine pills," he said when Naruto raised an eyebrow. "Works the same way it does in city water back in New York, but it's portable. You can't drink the water here from the taps, and we don't have time to boil it and let it cool. There's a pipe about half a block away that you can get water from, but don't even brush your teeth with it or you'll be useless the rest of the journey."

Naruto eyed the small pill warily as it dissolved in the jug. "And then... this is safe to drink?"

Gaara's lips twitched at his friend's obvious nervousness. Naruto was evidently more afraid of
diarrhea than bullet wounds. Gaara thought about it briefly and decided he didn't blame him.

"Yes. Give it 15 minutes. This one is for drinking. We'll fill several water bottles to take with us tomorrow." He nods towards another gallon. "That one is for your shower."

"My what?"

"No indoor plumbing. Given that you need to remain covered at all times when we're outside, you'll have to just stand in the corner and dig a little trench for the water to go in. Just make sure you don't use up your water before you've rinsed off the soap."

Naruto realized that Gaara wasn't joking and shrugged. He dug a small depression into the sand, figuring the water would quickly soak into the dry soil as long as it was trapped there for a few seconds. Gaara left to go take his shower presumably wherever the other men in the shanty-town did.

Naruto pulled out his soap and stripped off his clothes. He slowly poured just enough water to wet his hair and body, then scrubbed himself with the soap. He slowly rinsed himself off, starting with the top of his head and working down, and was surprised to find he had a quarter of a gallon left at the end of it all. The luke-warm water felt good against his skin after the heat of the day and the dust of his journey, and he found he really didn't miss the hot shower he had been craving earlier.

He pulled on a pair of boxers and lay down on one of the two blankets that were in the small hut. Taking Gaara at his word, he brushed his teeth with a small amount of the chlorinated water, setting his toothbrush to rest on his pack while it dried.

Gaara returned a few minutes later, stripped down to his boxers and lay down on the other blanket. The night was warm, so they didn't bother with a sheet to cover themselves.

"In the morning, we will go back into town. If all goes well, we'll leave for my father's compound before nightfall."

Naruto nodded in the darkness. He assumed that whoever Gaara's contact was would be meeting them in town tomorrow.

Naruto wondered briefly what Sasuke was doing at that moment. Looking at his watch, he estimated that it would be mid-morning back in New York. He imagined Sasuke at some press conference, or maybe at some political meeting trying to negotiate some minor city issue while he waited his turn to rise through the political ranks. Karin was probably by his side, helping him succeed. Naruto tried not to let his mind drift to images of him and Sasuke in bed together. Or Sasuke fucking Karin in his giant bed. There was no point in dwelling on the past.

He closed his eyes and forced himself to sleep, his mind swirling with the images of Suna that had bombarded him throughout the day. He felt somehow that the rawness and simplicity of life in this place suited him.

Until he woke up to find a cockroach sitting on the bristles of his toothbrush, evidently sucking the remnants of the toothpaste he hadn't quite rinsed away from the night before. He would need to ask Gaara if there was a place to buy another toothbrush when they went to town, because there was no way in hell that thing was ever going back into his mouth again.

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They sat in chairs in the small coffee shop in the bazaar, just across from a tiny curio shop. Despite Gaara appearing to look at Naruto, the blond could tell that all of Gaara's attention was fixed on the entrance of the shop, monitoring it from the corner of his eye. The store appeared to sell a number of
decorative items, but the thing that caught Naruto's attention was the row of delicate, decorative fans displayed off to one side in the window. Gaara had a head scarf tied loosely about him, to both keep out the heat and dust, but also to disguise his face. Naruto was once again back in his burka, all that showed of his body was his eyes.

Gaara suddenly tensed as a blonde woman approached the shop. He threw down some money on the table and made his way over to the shop. Naruto waited for several minutes, watching the street and surrounding rooftops to see if the blonde woman was being followed or had brought anyone with her. When it was clear that she had come alone, Naruto stood and followed Gaara into the shop.

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Gaara stepped into the shop. The chimes on the door were exactly the same as when he was little, their whimsical, musical tone making one feel like they were entering almost a magical place. He thought about how little had changed since he used to drag Kankuro here to help him buy a fan for their sister.

The shop was almost empty, except for the shopkeeper and the blonde woman. The woman turned at the sound of the chimes, her beautiful teal eyes almost desperate.

Gaara softly closed the door, standing still as he looked upon his sister for the first time in well over a decade. He could see the tremor that visibly shook her as he slowly pulled the scarf off from around his face.

A single tear slid down her cheek before she brought herself under control. They were in public. Anyone could be watching. Gaara casually pulled the scarf back in place, acting as though the gesture had merely been to readjust the fabric.

Temari turned and walked deeper into the store through the narrow shelves filled to overflowing with small pewter cups, wooden carvings, and sand paintings. Gaara waited several minutes, then headed down an adjacent aisle.

When they reached the back of the store, Gaara walked casually around the corner. Temari looked at him, then pretended to examine a tiny coffee set.

"It's good... to see you," she murmured in their native tongue, her voice raw with emotion.

Gaara's lips turned into a small smile. "I knew you wouldn't forget."

"Never," she said, her voice breaking. "Never."

They stood in silence for a moment, each wrestling with their emotions and knowing this was neither the time nor the place. Too much was at risk. "I have implemented protocol T. Starting at sunset. It will be in effect for forty-eight hours before we need to rotate to another protocol."

Gaara's lips twitched. It had been one of the first security protocol's he had designed with his father's top advisor after several successful raids had breached the compound when he was a child. After spending a few days exploring in the mountains with his sister and brother, he had been able to figure out the flaw in the current deployment that was allowing the breaches. It was a brilliant plan, one more suited to have been born from an adult mind. But only Temari and Gaara knew what the T stood for. Gaara had called it protocol teddy bear, since it would keep his best friend from being stolen by the bad men outside.

Unknowingly, his childish attempt to keep his family and prized belonging safe had signed his own death warrant as his father had begun to view him as a threat.
"And Kankuro?" Gaara asked.

"In the capital, surrounded by scores of witnesses who will assure anyone that he was not involved."

"Then I will see you tomorrow evening," Gaara said, his voice low.

"Please be careful. I can't lose you a second time," Temari said softly as she placed a small bag on the shelf. She bent down, pretending to look at something, then turned and walked away from where Gaara stood.

Gaara casually picked up the small package, then turned and walked out of the shop.

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to be continued in part 2 of this never ending chapter... will post in 4 days.
Author's note - So this chapter... might be this long because... I dated a Navy Seal... or because my
dad was a Marine... or because... I seem to feel the need to explain how every little thing happens?
BUT THERE IS SEX IN THE NEXT CHAPTER (I swear to god). Thanks to Bri for helping me
figure out Gaara's dad, and basically beta-ing the whole monstrous chapter.

Part 2

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Sasuke looked at the information that Suigetsu had procured for him. He thanked god that the
government insisted on documenting everything. The detailed notes and communication reports
would make it much easier to disrupt what the CIA was planning to do to Naruto, and know exactly
how close to finding Naruto they were.

Shisui had a map out, studying the area around Suna where the Kazekage's compound was located.
He had been released from the hospital the day before, but already was able to walk without issue.

Itachi had been annoyed that Shisui was insisting on going with Sasuke, but given Shisui's abilities
with a gun as well as his experience reading situations like this, there really was no way to tell him
not to go unless Sasuke himself didn't go. Which was not going to happen in this lifetime. Itachi
would stay behind with Jiraya to try to get the CIA to back down, while also handling any publicity
that Sasuke's sudden absence stirred up.

They weren't going to get involved in taking down the Suna government. They were only trying to
find Naruto and get him out before the CIA caught up with him. All evidence suggested that the CIA
didn't know that Gaara was Kazekage Sabaku's son, which meant that their assessment of the risks of
the operation were likely off. At least, that was what they were all hoping.

"They are planning to take Naruto and Gaara down at a warehouse in downtown Suna in four days.
Evidently they have a source who told them that this is the location Sasori uses to pick up and drop
off shipments, and is likely the rendezvous place where they will meet him when the operation is
complete," Suigetsu said.

Assuming they make it out alive. Sasuke suppressed the unhelpful thought. Given that Gaara likely
had extensive inside information on the compound, Sasuke would only be in the way if he tried to
intervene in whatever they had planned. He had to stay focused on just keeping Naruto out of the
hands of the CIA until Jiraya and Itachi could work their influence.

"Then we either need to head them off before they get to the warehouse, or we need to take out
whoever the CIA is sending to greet them," Shisui said matter-of-factly.

Suigetsu's fingers were flying over the keyboard. "I can find out who they're sending and how many.
The report here says it is unlikely that both Naruto and Gaara will make it out of the compound alive,
given the General's security forces and general fucking up neuroses about his personal safety."

"Then they probably aren't sending more than one or two snipers. They'll want to keep the operation
small if the whole point is to hide any CIA involvement in this," Shisui said, looking up from his
maps.

Suigetsu paused. "Sasuke... you said there was a doctor who was willing to come in case they need
medical attention?"

Sasuke nodded curtly.

"Tell her to do some research on poisons before she packs her kit. Evidently General Kazekage's security forces are known for coating their bullets and knives with it, to increase the probability of taking out a target even if they don't manage to get in a clean shot. It's slow acting to give them time to interrogate any prisoners, but still lethal."

"Fuck," Sasuke breathed. If they waited to meet Naruto and Gaara at the warehouse, they might be too late to help. But if they tried to intercept them between the compound and the meeting point, they might miss them altogether. He really wished that Naruto wasn't so fucking paranoid about electronic surveillance. Then he could call him or send him an e-mail and everything would be so much simpler. He was going to have a word with his blond when he finally got his hands on him.

Actually, there were a lot of things he was going to do to Naruto when he finally got his hands on him.

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Naruto and Gaara were both feeling the altitude as they made their way up the forested side of the mountain. Gaara had explained that the mountains acted like a rain barrier in the area. The western side had all the moisture from the sea, but the altitude of the mountains forced the air to rise high enough that it dropped all its moisture, leaving a barren wasteland to the east where General Kazekage's compound was located. Along with the deposits of oil and gold that had made him wealthy

By approaching from the forested side, they would be much more difficult to detect by the Mountain Guard. They were dressed in forest camouflage, but would change to desert cammies before they began their descent. They reached an area that Gaara had remembered exploring as a child, with a small cave where they could store a larger pack with food, water, changes of civilian clothes, and two sets of travel documents for the journey home. If all went well, they would be coming back the way they entered. Of course, in case things didn't go well, they also had a different set of travel documents tucked in the much smaller packs they would be carrying with them, along with extra rounds of ammo and three vials of what Gaara had explained was antidote to the poison that many of the guards treated their weapons with, courtesy of Temari's visit to the fan shop.

They each had four weapons on them, all well-suited for silent kills. A gun with silencer, a tranquilizer dart air gun, a garrote, and a double-edged knife that could be wielded in close combat or thrown. Gaara had strapped a sniper rifle case to his back.

While Naruto certainly had more experience in cities, both men were sufficiently versed in stealth to move in absolute silence as they made their way through the forest. Gaara pulled out his compass pointing to the four positions he would be taking out. Naruto nodded sharply, his own compass still holstered, and they headed off in opposite directions. They would meet on the other side of the lake-bed when they had taken out the Mountain Guard. They would begin their attacks as soon as they heard the guards radio in their status. That would give them maximum time before the breach was noticed.

Naruto headed off to the right as Gaara went left. Speed and stealth were both of the essence, and there would be no room for error. Naruto drew a steadying breath, reminding himself that this was the easy part.

He slowed his pace as he heard the sounds someone walking through the leaves. Pressing himself
against a tree, he waited until he had marked the position of both members of the first pair that he was to take out. One was eating rice from a small steel container while the other was checking his watch. "Time to check in," the one with the watch said. He walked closer to the side of the ridge that faced the compound to likely get a better signal. The one eating gave a slight grunt and didn't respond, his eyes scanning the slope behind them. Neither noticed Naruto approach.

Naruto pulled out his dart gun. For this part of the mission, they would use heavy tranquilizers rather than bullets wherever possible. The amount of drug in the darts made the effect almost instantaneous if delivered to the carotid artery, and would last about six hours. By that time, it would be over, one way or another. It also helped that the tranquilizer used was a favorite of Mu's forces and would help to establish his involvement in the assassination of General Kazekage.

While the dart gun was not as silent as Naruto's other weapons, the pairs here were far enough apart that he could get two clean shots off with no risk of one of them sending out an alarm or being overheard by the next group. He had twenty minutes to make it to the other side of the ridge a mile away, with six more enemies between him and his destination. He silently released the safety, and took aim.

Eighteen minutes later, he was crouched behind a boulder on the far side of the ridge waiting for Gaara when he felt the nose of a gun dig into his flesh just behind his ear.

He blew out a breath, as he flipped the man over his shoulder and grabbed the gun, not surprised to see it was Gaara. They grinned at each other for a moment, their sense of accomplishment rising up before they both focused on phase two: The Perimeter Guard.

Naruto reached down, offering his hand to Gaara. The man didn't hesitate before clasping Naruto's forearm and pulling himself up. "Ready for the fun part?" Naruto asked, feeling the adrenaline starting to surge through his body, combining with nerves in a heady combination. Surprisingly, Gaara didn't release Naruto's arm but instead pulled him close so their shoulders bumped against each other. Naruto's eyebrows rose up in surprise at the contact.

"Let's do this," was all the redhead said. Their eyes locked for a moment, both fully knowing the risks they were facing. The complete faith that each had in the other, the willingness to face these odds together flowed between them. Then Naruto grinned.

"Hell, yeah," Naruto said cockily.

He pulled out a small infra-red device, pointing it down into the valley. The air in the mountains was cool, but in the valley it was at least twenty degrees hotter. Naruto nodded at the reading. "It's about 101 degrees on the floor. I'll need to descend in less than thirty minutes to make it to the base before the temperature starts dropping as the sun sets.

Naruto quickly set up his rappel rope. The fastest way down a mountain was straight off a cliff. This was the steepest part of the valley's edge. It wasn't that much different from scaling down the outside of a tall building, which Naruto had done many times. They quickly changed out of the heavy, forest cammies into the tan, lightweight desert cammies with a Kevlar vest beneath it. Naruto tied a tan bandana across his face. If they made it out of this alive, it would be essential that no one knew who had been behind this.

Gaara scouted out a flat rock to set up his sniper rifle while Naruto pulled on his climbing gloves and hooked the GriGri rappel hook to his belt. The tan rope was anchored with a simple sling that they placed around a large boulder to avoid the sound of an anchor being driven into the rocks, which could carry into the lake-bed and alert the guards. Once he reached the end of the rope, Naruto would have to descend the rest of the way strictly by climbing. It would be low light with no safety,
but the slope flattened a bit towards the base of the mountain, making it possible.

Without hesitation, Naruto let himself over the edge of the cliff in a slow controlled slide. His camouflaged clothing and even pace of descent would make him basically invisible unless someone was looking directly at him with binoculars from the compound. The temperature of the lake-bed floor would be close enough to body temperature at this time of day that the infra-red sensors would not pick him up either.

Luckily, there were too many animals that lived in the area for the base to have set up motion sensors. That would have complicated things significantly.

Gaara would take out the members of the perimeter guard that he could from a distance, starting with anyone outside the building who might hear Naruto’s approach or see him in the low light outside the flood-lit area at the base of the compound. Gaara would then make the call as to whether to try for any of the interior-stationed guards. Bullet-proof glass was only impervious to certain types of bullets. Not military grade sniper rifle rounds. But the sound of it cracking the heavy glass would likely be heard, setting off the alarm. He would only fire inside if necessary, otherwise he would simply follow Naruto's path down the rope and across the lake-bed while Naruto disabled the infra-red detector.

The sun had set, giving an advantage to Gaara who was able to see into the lighted windows easier that their occupants were able to see out. Additionally, Temari's information let him know exactly where each of the perimeter guards would be stationed. He looked through the scope on his rifle, briefly focusing on the flag that hung from the pole on top of the building, gauging the wind. There was almost none that night. It was a perfect night for a sniper.

Naruto didn't hesitate when his feet touched the sloping rock at the end of the rope. He released the clip from his belt and immediately began his descent the rest of the way down the incline, ignoring the fatigue of his muscles as he mentally counted down the minutes passing.

When he finally reached the sandy floor of the ravine, he turned and headed in a smooth, steady run towards the compound, careful to not run too fast and cause his body temperature to spike. The darkness was complete, not even the moon was out, and the only thing that would give him away was his heat signature. Gaara had remembered as a child the window of time each evening and morning where the temperature surrounding the compound was roughly body temperature. In the darkness, Naruto was effectively invisible for the next fifteen minutes.

In nine minutes, Naruto had reached the perimeter of the compound. Two guards were slumped in a corner by the side entrance Gaara had told him about. He quickly stripped them both, pulling on one of the uniforms and leaving the other ready for Gaara when he came down. Blending in by wearing the guard's uniform could buy them critical seconds if they were discovered.

Removing the lanyard from around one of the dead men's throat's that held an entrance keycard, Naruto grabbed their weapons and walked quickly to the entryway, swiping the card and entering the building. So far, no alarms had been triggered.

Naruto pulled out his knife. Inside, even the sound of a silencer would be enough to give him away. Gaara had told him of the positions of the Perimeter Guard who were not in line of sight from Gaara's position that Naruto would have to deal with first. There would be six, assuming that Gaara could take the three stationed at the western windows when he entered.

Naruto had only found the first two when an alarm sounded. *Fuck.* He wondered what had set it off. There was the sound of feet running.
Naruto saw a door with a swipe bar by it that looked the same as the one at the side entrance. Praying for a bit of luck, he swiped the guard's key card, and breathed a sigh of relief as a green light flashed and the door opened.

He ducked inside and closed the door, noting that the room appeared to be some sort of supply room. He held completely still as the sound of feet passed by his hiding spot, with no signs of slowing. It was too soon for Gaara to have made it down the mountain to the compound, so he didn't worry about his friend just yet. It was his own ass he had to look out for right now.

He quickly checked the amount of ammunition and condition of the fully automatic weapons he had taken from the two outside guards, knowing that the purpose of the mission had now shifted from stealth to speed. According to Gaara, there would be at least fifty-six armed guards inside the compound, more than half of them belonging to the elite Interior Guard. If all had gone according to their original plan, they would only have had to take out sixteen. The alarm going off meant Plan A had blown up. Now... assuming they were able to get to Gaara's father before reinforcements arrived from the barracks on the other side of the compound, they might have to take on all of them. Plans B through F were all pretty risky. The odds of success had just dropped dramatically.

Naruto drew a breath. Assuming it was one of Gaara's shots that had set off the alarm, the forces would all be rushing toward the western side of the compound where the attack was coming from. If Naruto's entrance had not yet been noticed, he could sweep in from behind and do some serious damage. But he'd have to have a fallback place where he and Gaara could meet up that fell along Gaara's original entry path.

It was probably NOT safe to assume that the key Naruto had would give him access to all the rooms in the compound, but there weren't a lot of options. Naruto scanned the contents of the shelves. A box caught his eye, and he smiled. Stun grenades. Perfect. He stuffed as many as he could into his pack, released the safety on one of the two stolen guns he was carrying, and stepped back out into the hallway.

By his count, assuming that Gaara had noticed the alarm go off as soon as it happened, Naruto had at least twenty minutes left before Gaara could reach him. That meant he needed to disable the heat sensor and take out as many Perimeter Guards as he could in that time on the off chance that the alarm wouldn't automatically signal for reinforcements from the Interior Guard or the military barracks. And not get himself killed in the process.

If they had already called for reinforcements… Naruto shrugged. Then he and Gaara were just screwed.

Naruto walked rapidly down the hallway. His guard uniform wouldn't be of much use since he didn't speak the language or look like a native Sunan. But it would buy him a second or two, which he used to his full advantage with the first three guards he encountered on his way to the monitoring room.

He swiped his badge in the door slot and - not even bothering to look in the room - rolled in two compression grenades and closed the door. Gaara had already told him there were usually at least six guards inside. When he next opened the door, they were all on the ground unconscious. He took out the tranquilizer gun and made sure they would stay that way until he and Gaara were cleared, and quickly found the switch that Gaara had described that shut off the heat monitoring of the surrounding area. The floor of the lakebed would have cooled to below body temperature by now, meaning Gaara would be visible if he had already made the descent down the cliff.
Knowing it probably wouldn't matter at this point but trying his luck anyway, he also turned off the alarm that was sounding. By now the bodies of the perimeter guard that were stationed outside the rear entrances would already have been discovered, so there was no trying to cover this up as a 'false alarm', but possibly some of the troops would get confused or at least slowed down.

Naruto glanced at the monitors that were showing each of the areas of the compound. It looked like Gaara's father had already been evacuated to his 'safe room', which Gaara had said was basically impenetrable without a special access card and code, neither of which they had. They had known it was likely to happen unless everything had gone perfectly, which - of course - had been only slightly less probably than Santa arriving with his sleigh to help them escape. The General had only four guards with him in that room, which was good news. If they ever made it that far.

In the meantime, Naruto was able to pinpoint where the two largest groupings of the Perimeter guard had moved. They would have to find one of the senior-ranking Interior Guards later to get an access key to the safe room, but that was later. The guards seemed to be focused on the side entrance opposite of the one he had entered. One of the guards that Gaara had taken out must have been able to get out a warning or somehow trigger the alarm.

Naruto used the security monitors to scan the corridors between him and that location, trying to remember which rooms and ducts would be his best route of escape based on the blueprint Gaara had sketched for him earlier.

Naruto considered the odds that he or Gaara would make it back to the security room to make use of the monitors, vs the odds that the Kazekage's forces would use them against them instead. It wasn't hard math, and he opened fire into the monitors, shattering them and eliminating the possibility of their motions being tracked.

He glanced at his watch. Eight minutes before Gaara would arrive as back-up. He re-packed his dart gun, pulled out the automatic and took off down the hall.

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Thanks to the stun grenades, Naruto had cleared the two main areas with minimal casualties. If the size of the Perimeter Guard hadn't been increased since Gaara's time, Naruto estimated that they had incapacitated more than eighty percent of it. He had killed as few as possible, but it had been impossible to avoid all casualties. Considering it was basically a coup in progress, though, he estimated that they were still coming out ahead. He decided that - with the bulk of the Perimeter Guard taken care of - he would switch back to his semi-automatic with the silencer, and try to make his way toward where the first station of the Interior Guard would be located and try his luck without drawing them all down on himself. Assuming they hadn't already been sent as back-up.

He jumped when an air conditioning vent from the ceiling crashed down less than a foot away from him, but grinned in relief when he saw the familiar green eyes looking out from above a tan headscarf.

Naruto looked quickly up and down the hallway to see if the sound had alerted anyone else to their presence. "So… Plan A pretty much went to hell as soon as I got in, but so far I've been able to take out most of the Perimeter Guard. By my count there should only be three left, unless you got them on your way in. But then we have the Interior Guard to deal with. And the General has already been moved to the safe room. He's there with four guards."

Gaara nodded, not surprised that Naruto had been so efficient. "I got the rest of the perimeter Guard on my way in. The Interior Guard also sent a little welcome party for me. I took out five of them," Gaara brushed over his sleeve where a deep cut through the fabric of his desert cammies was already...
soaked with blood. He hadn't taken the time to change when he had raced into the compound, not sure how long Naruto would be able to hold out on his own. Naruto was good, but… the odds were heavily stacked against them at this point. Gaara opened one of the vials of antidote, hoping it would return the feeling to his arm before they had to engage any more of the guards.

Naruto opened his mouth to ask Gaara where he thought they should go next, given that they now needed to find someone with access to the safe room to take as hostage or they would be unable to reach Gaara's father. But before he could, three guards came around the corner.

Naruto fired three precision shots in rapid succession, and the guards hit the ground before Gaara had finished swallowing the liquid.

"So far, so good," Naruto said, cockily. No sooner had the words left his mouth than the sound of running boots thundered down the hall.

Naruto looked up to see the number of soldiers entering the hall and began to curse as he and Gaara both started firing, running backwards to find shelter in a doorway. Naruto lobbed a couple of stun grenades and he and Gaara turned and ran like hell.

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Naruto and Gaara sat back-to back, panting and bleeding behind one of the few remaining pillars in the central room that they had finally found themselves trapped in. Gaara had been shot in his left arm, and they both had been cut from flying debris as a hail of machine-gun bullets had torn through the walls and glass that they had tried to hide behind. A bullet had grazed Naruto's thigh, but the bleeding didn't seem too bad. He had been shot in the chest as well, but luckily the Kevlar vest he had worn had stopped the bullet. His chest still felt like it had been kicked by a fucking horse. Naruto didn't know what other injuries Gaara had sustained beside the arm wound, but he knew they were both at their limit. Exhausted, their heads rested against each other, the motion of their breathing causing their backs to slide against each other subtly. It wouldn't be long now. They were out of bullets. They were out of grenades. They were out of time.

They had made a good run of it. They had used up all of the compression grenades and emptied all their clips, but in the end there had just been too many of them. Reinforcements from both the Interior Guard and the military barracks had been called. Naruto felt Gaara press something into the palm of his hand, and his fingers closed around it, realizing it was a vial of the antidote. Considering how many wounds they both had on their bodies, and the fact that they were about to be either summarily shot or tortured and then shot, Naruto thought it was a bit like putting a Band-Aid on an amputated limb. But he accepted it anyway, feeling Gaara's head tilt back as presumably the redhead drank his own drought. Naruto shrugged, and did the same.

Part of him briefly wondered if a quick death by poison would be preferable to what was likely going to happen to them as a prisoner of a completely sadistic warlord that he had been caught trying to overthrow. But if Gaara was going to stick it out, then he would, too. It wouldn't be the worst thing they'd ever faced together. It made him a bit sad, though, to think it would be the last.

And Sasuke...Naruto felt his gut tighten as unbidden images of Sasuke that flashed across his mind. Naruto had never thought he would experience a relationship as intense as the one he'd had with Sasuke. He felt a flash of regret that he would never get to see him again, even from afar. He wondered briefly how far the man would go politically, wishing he would have been able to at least read about it. But at the end of it all, he was still glad. He had gotten the chance to be with someone like Sasuke, even if it was only for a short while. And he was grateful that Sasuke would never know what had happened to him... wouldn't be waiting for news and upset when none ever came. Sasuke had moved on, and for the first time since Naruto had found out about it he was honestly glad.
for it.

A woman's voice carried across to them, saying words that Naruto couldn't understand. Her tone was hard and cold and unyielding. Gaara tensed behind him, and Naruto felt his friend's fingers grip Naruto's wrist in a quick squeeze, their signal to wait and stand down.

Gaara responded to the woman, his voice gruff and guttural. Then slowly, he stood, tugging on Naruto to do the same. Together they stepped out from behind the pillar, their hands over their heads, weapons on the ground. Naruto's eyes widened as he took in what had to be over a hundred soldiers with fully automatic weapons trained on them. But what really gave him pause was the woman who stood out front, her own gun leveled directly at Gaara's head, her teal eyes cold and deadly. It was the woman from the shop.

She slowly walked forward, until all that the soldiers accompanying her could see was her back. Then slowly, her lips curved into a small smile at Gaara, and her eyes softened and took on a look of anticipation and excitement. Instantly, the cold mask of command was back in place and she was shouting orders to the troops behind her, pointing to outside where Naruto could hear additional gunfire.

Evidently they were not the only ones attacking the compound tonight. Mu must have decided to make his move. It would be the perfect cover. Gaara's presence would be assumed to be part of the broader attack. The CIA had unknowingly played Mu straight into their hands. All they had to do was make it out of here alive.

The woman issued a sharp order, and soldiers stepped forward and quickly stripped Naruto and Gaara of all weapons and bound their hands behind them. Temari held out her hand to one of the guards, and their packs were given to her. She looked through the contents briefly before slinging both packs over one shoulder.

She gestured with her gun for Naruto and Gaara to precede her, and they were marched at gunpoint down the corridor that Naruto recognized as leading to the General's safe room. The impenetrable room that Gaara had said they would be unable to access without inside help.

As soon as they had entered the room, guards that had escorted them dispersed, likely going to join their comrades in repelling Mu's forces. Naruto was glad that he had disabled the security cameras in the guard room before coming here. It would make it much less likely that reinforcements would be sent. There were only six guards plus Gaara's father that they would need to take out. Naruto noticed that Temari had set their packs down, but kept her weapon out.

Naruto turned with some curiosity to see the man that had tried to kill his friend. He was in his early fifties, with no grey showing in his auburn hair. His dark eyes were cold and hard, the eyes of a man used to issuing death. He looked at Temari, his eyes showing the smallest hint of pride at her appearance with the two prisoners. He began to speak, but Naruto had no idea what was being said. Gaara watched with close attention, his eyes never leaving his father's face.
"Daughter," the warlord said, looking at her with satisfaction. "I take it these two are the ones who were causing such a disturbance. I am pleased that you were able to capture them before they distracted us from the rest of Mu's forces. Now we can focus our efforts at rebuffing his pathetic attempt at invading our territory. But I don't understand why you brought them here rather than simply taking them to interrogation."

"Father," Temari said, her voice cool but respectful. "I believe that the identity of these particular men will be of interest to you. They have something to say that I determined would be best that you heard directly, and in relative privacy."

The Kazekage frowned at her words, clearly sensing that something was different from the simple sabotage force from Mu that he had expected. He narrowed his eyes at his daughter, trying to identify what it was about her that was off. Surely she was not making him nervous. He owned her, controlled her. She was formidable, but only to his enemies, she belonged to him. He did not fear her. His eyes strayed to where her weapon was still raised.

Naruto focused on standing absolutely still while his fingers slowly worked over the bindings on his wrists, looking for a way to free himself. He didn't know if the woman was going to release them or simply not fight back when they released themselves. In any case, he'd feel better with his hands free and able to defend himself. Though hands vs fully automatic weapons were still pretty shitty odds. But they were better than no hands vs. fully automatic weapons.

Gaara looked impassively at the man who had ruthlessly destroyed his life and put him through three years of a nightmarish hell that he still had not completely crawled his way out of. It struck him how much older his father looked. The hair show little greying yet, but the lines around his father's face were deeply etched with suspicion, paranoia, and corruption. He was much weaker than the monster he had remembered cowering from as a child.

But there was no mistaking the cold, dead look in those eyes he remembered so well that night he had been taking from his bedroom. He had cried for his teddy bear, knowing he couldn't sleep without it. He had learned that there were things so much worse to cry about than the loss of a toy.

Strangely enough, he felt oddly calm facing this man. He wondered what his father would make of it when he learned his true identity. He shifted his gaze briefly to where Temari was standing, her face expressionless as she held her gun steady. Gaara felt a surge of pride at his sister. She was strong. Their father had not been able to break her.

Her eyes met his and held for a moment. Without breaking her gaze with Gaara, she opened fire, killing the six guards in the room before they even had a chance to lift their weapons.

Naruto had worked his hands free and reached and grabbed a weapon from one of the fallen guards. He turned to release Gaara from his bindings, but the redhead had already freed himself. Unlike Naruto, though he stood weaponless in front of his father.

"Temari. What is the meaning of this? You know what the penalty of defying me is."

To his credit, the General didn't even flinch. He looked Temari squarely in the eye. He didn't even seem to notice the fact that he now had two guns trained on him.

Temari smiled. The hair on Naruto's arms stood on end.

"Father. I thought it would be appropriate if you greeted your youngest son home without your guards to interfere," her voice was deceptively soft.
The Kazekage paused, his gaze flickering to where Naruto and Gaara stood. Naruto wondered if the General had finally begun to sense the deadly aura that was flowing from Gaara.

"Who are you?" the General said, his face showing uncertainty for the first time since they had entered the room.

Gaara slowly walked towards his father. The man's eyes followed his path warily. Gaara walked until he stood directly before his father, then slowly pulled down the cloth that covered his face.

"Don't you recognize your own son, Father?"

The Kazekage's eyes widened, and he shook his head slightly. "No. You're dead. I received confirmation."

The Kazekage's hand shot out to where a gun was resting on a table next to him, but he never reached it.

He screamed, clutching his knee where blood was now pooling through his pants. Temari stood calmly, her pistol leveled at the Kazekage's other knee.

"You will not harm him a second time, Father."

"How?" Gaara's father's hands clenched around his wound, sweat broken out on his brow but his eyes remained fixed on Gaara's face. "How did you survive? They sent me confirmation that you were dead."

Gaara turned back to look at Naruto, knowing that his friend could not understand the words that were spoken. "My father seems to be asking how we met. Shall I tell him?"

Temari's eyes flickered back towards Naruto, her curiosity showing, but she returned her focus on her father and making sure he made no further movements. She knew that Gaara needed closure on this, and she would ensure that he had the time to do it. Realizing that Naruto didn't speak their language, she said in perfect English. "We might not have much time. By now, the guards in the control room will know that my father is being held at gunpoint. The doors are strong, but they will only hold for so long."

Naruto grinned beneath his mask. "Well… I think I might have, um… broken your control room. All the monitors are dead. And so is the control box for recording the video feed. Unless there is a secondary system somewhere."

Temari smiled. "The secondary system is in here. We have quite a bit of time, then."

General Kazekage paled at this, but did not otherwise show fear. He snarled at Naruto, his voice thickly accented. "Who are you? What is your business here?"

Naruto just shrugged, "I'm with Gaara." He would leave it up to Gaara how much to disclose to this man.

Gaara looked at his father silently for a moment. "I don't know what to say to a man who so feared a seven-year-old child that he sold him into slavery, ordering him to be raped for three years before finally being allowed to die at the age of ten." Gaara spoke in English so Naruto would be able to understand.

Temari's hand tightened on the gun, and for a second Naruto thought she was going to shoot the General where he sat. It was with visible effort that she held back and loosened her grip slightly.
"And now, I have returned. And Father...," Gaara leaned down, until his face was level with the Kazekage's, their eyes locked. "... you should have killed me when you had the chance."

A shudder ran through the man's frame at the soft, emotionless words.

Kazekage Sabaku stared at Gaara for a moment. "I paid to have you executed. Cleanly, as befitting for one of my lineage. Never would I sell a child of mine into slavery."

Gaara's eyes flashed. "That's a lie," he said softly, his voice almost calm. But then, "You LIE!"

Gaara's hand moved faster than Naruto could see. A knife that he had concealed in his head wrap was instantly pressed against the Kazekage's throat. Gaara tugged the scarf fully free from his head, allowing it to drift slowly to the ground. "Look at my face," he hissed.

The warlord's eyes drifted up to the tattoo on the side of Gaara's forehead, and his eyes widened. "No," he whispered the denial, recognizing the brand as one used by one of the major slave syndicates in the region. And the specific symbol that was tattooed on Gaara marked him as a sex slave.

"They shipped me to an owner in New York who... specialized in children. He planned to kill me when I turned ten, since I would be... too old for the tastes of his clients. And more dangerous to manage." Gaara's face flashed in disgust before returning to his icy demeanor. "They had taken me out back behind the alley. They were about to kill me when one of their clients called and said he wanted one more... turn." Gaara's face was cold, devoid of all emotion. His voice soft but glacial. "They took me back inside to wait for him. He...," Gaara tilted his head to Naruto though never took his eyes off his fathers. He was careful to not use Naruto's name. "... was sleeping in that alley that night. He'd heard what they said and realized what they were going to do to me. A year younger than me, but he climbed up the fire escape and removed the grate that held the bars to my window in place. They had me shackled to the bed, but he knew how to pick locks."

Gaara went still for a moment, remembering the utter disbelief when the small, bright blond boy had smashed the window in the room he had been held prisoner in for three years, and proceeded to release the bindings that had held him. They had fled through the streets of New York together, living out of dumpsters, afraid to visit even the homeless shelters lest they be found by the monsters that searched for them.

But they had become strong. The streets had been a harsh classroom, but knowing each other's goals, they had slowly worked their way up through various gangs and crime syndicates. Building their skills. Surviving on their own terms.

Gaara drew a breath, looking at his father. Who was only a man, after all. Not the monster he had imagined him to be in his youth.

"Gaara..."

"Do not speak my name," Gaara hissed, the blade digging to the man's throat, drawing a thin trickle of blood.

To his credit, the General's eyes did not falter. "Very well. You hold all the cards now." He stared into Gaara's eyes unflinchingly. "But the man that I hired to kill you was ordered to do it cleanly. I would never have sold a child of mine into slavery. It is not befitting of our lineage."

Gaara's voice was icy. "You never considered me a child of yours. Ever since mother died."

The older man gaze was locked on Gaara, and for just a moment, Naruto thought he saw regret flash
through the man's eyes. "I never viewed you as anything except my son." The softness was gone from his eyes then, replaced by the fanaticism of a man driven to rule by suppressing all others. A man who eliminated anyone, friend, ally or even family that he viewed as a potential threat to his power. "But that meant it was my duty to take responsibility for your existence. You were too dangerous to the stability of the government. Already some of my security advisors were talking about what a strong leader you would make. Suna has always had enemies at her throat. I have kept this land from being taken over and our people killed. But in order to do that, one must rule with an iron fist. I could not show weakness, even for my own son."

"I. Was. A. Child!" Gaara's voice cut like a whip. "What kind of threat did you see me being?"

The general said nothing for a moment, his eyes shifting slightly, as though looking for enemies that were not there. Gaara recognized the light of madness in his father's eyes that he had not been able to see as a child. "You were even able to turn your sister against me." His gaze sharpened once more focusing on Gaara. "You are just as dangerous as I always knew you would be. Tonight only proves I was right about what you are."

"Don't attempt to justify your actions now. You made me what I am."

"It was not my intention to have you suffer like that. The men I paid were told to kill you and leave your body in the desert where it wouldn't be found. One of my top lieutenants said he personally witnessed your death."

"Who." Temari's voice was cold.

Their father paused. "Shukaku."

Gaara remembered the man well. His first...customer. Gaara's blade returned more forcefully against his father's throat. "Where is he?"

"Dead," Temari said. "Father decided that he was gaining too much influence amongst the guards, and had him killed for treason."

Gaara looked at his father, unsure what to make of the fact that - while his father had ordered him killed - he hadn't intended for him to suffer to the extent that he had. And the man who had been responsible… was already dead.

"I guess that just goes to show that you can't trust anyone, can you Father?" Gaara said, his voice slightly mocking.

"So now what will you do? Kill me and take power for yourself?"

"No. I will kill you. And Kankuro will take power," Gaara said calmly.

"And where is my elder son? We could have made this one final family reunion. Of traitors," The Kazekage's eyes shifted back to Temari.

"Kankuro doesn't know about any of this. As far as he knows, Gaara died fifteen years ago. He is on his way back to help fend off Mu's minor incursion into our territory."

The General thought for a moment, taking it all in. "Then there will be no chance for anyone to stand against him. My death will be blamed on Mu, and everyone will rally behind Kankuro. Our borders will stand. It will remain Sabaku territory."
A look of acceptance and almost… peace crossed the older man's face. He looked Gaara directly in the eyes, pride showing. He smiled slightly. Then, faster than any of them expected, the man drew a small gun from his chair and aimed it at Temari. The sound of a shot echoed through the small room.

Gaara watched as his father's body slumped back in his chair, his hand resting limply on a map of Kazenokuni spread out on his desk. A small bleeding hole directly between the warlord's unseeing eyes. Slowly, Gaara lowered the gun he had used to finally kill his father.

Naruto looked at the weapon held in Gaara's hand blankly. "When did you pick that up?"

Gaara didn't take his eyes from the body of his father.

"When you were busy unbinding your wrists."

Temari and Naruto walked forward to stand next to Gaara. They gazed at the body of the man who had caused so much suffering.

"Soo…." Naruto began. "I guess you decided to go with the gunshot wound to the head after all." Gaara didn't move. "Are you... ok?"

Gaara was silent for a moment, honestly not sure what he was feeling anymore. The man he had thought to have been a monster his entire life, who he was so sure had sent him into that hell all those years ago...

Temari let out a soft sound, pulling Gaara in and holding him tightly. Naruto tensed when he noticed how Gaara stiffened at the initial contact, wondering if he would pull away. Slowly, awkwardly, Gaara's arms lifted and closed around his sister.

Naruto could hear the soft sounds of Temari sobbing, and was shocked to find his own eyes filling then overflowing at the sight of his friend embracing his sister. He turned away and stepped back to give the siblings a bit of privacy, and was startled by the gentle brush of fingers against his arm.

"Thank you for saving my little brother," Temari embraced Naruto briefly before releasing him.

"Now," she said, clearly gathering herself. "I need to get you both bandaged up enough to make it out of the country without bleeding to death despite the borders being closed, get my other brother back to officially take over the government, and make sure Mu's forces get sent back home with their tail between their legs.

Gaara smiled. He loved his sister.

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Sasuke sat at the desk in his hotel room in Athens, surfing his laptop for any news at all coming out of Kazenokuni while he waited for Shisui or Suigetsu to call him. Greece turned out to be the closest that he and Sakura could get to Kazenokuni without a visa. Shisui had gone on ahead with false documents to get to the rendezvous point that Naruto had with Sasori in Suna. If Naruto took that route, Shisui would eliminate the CIA hit man and get Naruto and Gaara out of the country and meet up with Sakura and Sasuke.

Sasuke had wanted to go with, but Shisui and Itachi had convinced him that it was too risky. Sasuke wasn't trained for the kind of action that was likely to go down. And if he got caught traveling with false documents, it would cause major problems for him politically. But what finally convinced Sasuke was the simple fact that they simply had no idea what route Naruto and Gaara were going to take out of the country. Once the coup started, the borders would be locked down, and if Gaara and
Naruto made it out a different way, there would be no chance for Sasuke to get to them in time and warn them not to make contact with the CIA if they were all still trapped in Kazenokuni.

Suigetsu had stayed back in New York where he had all his equipment, and he was constantly monitoring the CIA communications for any news, but so far they seemed as in the dark as to what was happening as Sasuke was. He also had Suigetsu monitor the airline, passenger ship and train manifests to see if any of the aliases that Naruto and Gaara had passports under showed up.

Someone knocked on his door. Sasuke went and looked out, not surprised to see Sakura standing there. "Did you hear the news?" She asked, her face tight with worry.

"What news?"

"My friend, Kiba, just told me he heard all the borders were shut down six hours ago. There has been a media crack-down, so no reports made it into the news until now." At Sasuke's pointed look she explained. A little. "He does… business… in Suna." Kiba had contacts in the opium trade and Suna was a major stop along the drug route. He would have gotten word before the 'official' sources came out. She walked over and refreshed one of the pages Sasuke had been surfing looking for any reports on Suna.

"Reports are still unconfirmed at this point, but it appears that the leader of one of the most influential military factions in Kazenokuni, General Kazekage Sabaku, has been killed in an attack on his military compound north of the city of Suna. The forces are believed to belong to Mu Tsuchikage, the leader of a neighboring territory. The borders to the country have been sealed. There has been no official statement from the Sabaku family, but it is believed that the daughter, Temari Sabaku, has taken control of the military in her father's place and is supporting her brother as the new leader of Suna."

Satellite images of muzzle flashes of gunfire in the mountains surrounding Suna were shown in the background

"Dobe," Sasuke breathed out. "You'd better know what the fuck you're doing."

Sasuke's phone rang, and he answered before it finished its first ring. "Tell me you found him."

Suigetsu's sigh reached him. "It's no fun when you expect me to work a miracle. But yes. Someone using one of their fake passports just booked two train tickets from Istanbul to Paris. They paid in cash. The CIA haven't picked it up because they've been monitoring the major commercial travel routes."

Sasuke rubbed the bridge of his nose, exhaustion making his mind slow. He felt like he hadn't had a good night's sleep since Naruto had left. "What does that mean, Sui?"

"They are tracking passenger lists on commercial airlines, Eurorail, that kind of thing. Since he hasn't shown up on any of those, they still think Naruto is stuck in Kazenokuni or dead."

"So what did Naruto book if it's off their radar? Did he buy two tickets or one?"

"Two... one under Gaara's alias and one under his own. It's some sort of tour. One of those fancy trains that tries to recreate the experience of the Orient Express. They follow roughly the same route from Istanbul to Paris. He purchased the ticket in cash in person from Istanbul an hour ago."

"When does it leave Istanbul?" His eyes met Sakura's gaze and nodded sharply, signaling that Naruto and Gaara appeared to have both made it out. She nearly sagged with relief.
"Tomorrow, 4pm local time."

"What's its first stop?"

"Bucharest. And before you asked, I already bought you and Sakura tickets. If you leave for the airport now, you should be able to make it. You can obtain an expedited visa to Turkey at the port of entry. There should be no problems getting the visa given your existing reservation with the tour, as well as your personal connections. Jiraya will put in some calls. You'll arrive in Paris six days after you board in Istanbul. That should give Jiraya time to get the CIA to call off their dogs. Especially with the files I just sent him." Suigetsu snickered. That never boded well.

Sasuke paused. "Do I even want to know?"

Suigetsu laughed. "No. You really don't."

Sasuke hung up and looked over at Sakura. "Pack your bag. We're leaving for Turkey. Evidently Naruto and Gaara have decided to escape by slow-moving luxury train from Istanbul to Paris."

"What?" Sakura asked, her brow furrowing in confusion.

Sasuke smirked. Evidently he wasn't the only one who was suffering from brain fatigue.

"We're going to take a little ride the goddam Orient Express with two men who just singlehandedly overthrew a warlord."

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_to be continued!

and... the train ride from Istanbul to Bucharest is about 19 hours. I wonder what on EARTH Naruto and Sasuke could possibly do to pass the time? hmmmmmmm. I think Sasuke has ideas ;-)
Reunions

Author's note and warning: Hard yaoi (18+) in this chapter (and the next chapter). FINALLY! OMG I've been dying here. Special thanks to BriEva, who continues to be my muse and give me advice, opinions, and stern talkings to as needed LOL. Thanks bae.

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Naruto held his stomach. He had never ridden in a helicopter before, and - as it raced over the ground at high speed and low altitude - he decided he would be very content if he never did again. The adrenaline that had shielded him from feeling his injuries had long ago faded, and all he wanted right now was to lie down in a very soft bed for about three weeks and not move. He really hoped that he didn't need to go to a hospital. But he was more worried about Gaara.

Temari had radioed to Kankuro, who had already been in flight when news of the attack by Mu's forces at the border had reached him. It had been too risky to allow anyone else into the safe room, for fear that the identity of the General's killer would be leaked. Temari had grabbed some of the medical supplies that had been stored in the room to bind and bandage their wounds as much as possible, but Gaara would definitely need stitches on the gunshot wound. Naruto hoped the surgical tapes would suffice for the rest of their wounds.

Luckily, there was an escape door from the safe room that led directly to the roof and a helicopter pad. Knowing that their communications were likely being monitored by the former Kazekage's forces as well as the CIA and Mu, Temari simply radioed that there had been a security breach at the compound, some of whom had been captured. She requested that Kankuro land there immediately and take some additional guards with him before joining their forces on the battlefield.

She handed Naruto and Gaara a pouch of money and the contact of a personal friend in Turkey would help them make travel arrangements under whatever identity they chose. She wrote a set of instructions for Kankuro explaining the route he would need to take and what was happening. They couldn't risk discussing it over the radio, or take the time to explain once he arrived. It wouldn't be long before she needed to let at least the top guard members know that the General had been killed by assailants who had escaped after killing his personal guard.

Naruto and Gaara changed into Interior Guard uniforms that Temari gave them, and wrapped their heads, concealing their faces in the black headscarves that were used by the General's top assassins. They boarded Kankuro's military helicopter with their packs. Gaara paused as he saw his brother for the first time in over a decade. Not aware of their identity, Kankuro simply nodded sharply, accepting the envelope that contained the information Temari had provided which would inform Kankuro of his father's death as well as the surprising resurrection of this little brother.

As soon as they were seated, the Blackhawk took off, flying low to the ground, below the radar as it slipped over the border and into Azerbaijan. The noise on board made talking difficult, but Naruto kept a wary eye on Gaara's condition as his friend leaned against the wall, holding his wounded arm.

Kankuro sat and read the letter that Temari had sent, his eyes widening as he looked first at Naruto, then Gaara, their faces concealed beneath their headscarves.

He stood slowly, earning a sharp word from the copilot which he ignored as he approached Gaara, kneeling before him. They exchanged words briefly, and Kankuro brought some pain medication from the battlefield medical kit that was on board, concern etching his features.
"Have you both taken the antidote?" Kankuro asked.

Gaara nodded and took the pain medicine, his eyes locked on his brother. Naruto could not read the expression in Gaara's eyes, but he noted that they did not hold the warmth that he had shown Temari. Still, Gaara allowed his brother to see his injury and adjust the bandage, signaling at least a base level of trust.

They landed in a private airfield and boarded a small plane belonging to the late General Kazekage. The pilot had instructions to fly members of the General's elite guard to track the fleeing assailants who had attacked the compound and were believed to have co-conspirators in Turkey. Their hair and face were completely covered, except for their eyes, and the pilot simply assumed Naruto and Gaara to be assassins. He was correct, just not in his assumption on which side they had been on.

Once they were on board and the plane was in flight, Kankuro dismissed the attendants from the rear cabin so they could speak privately.

Gaara removed the cloth that had covered his face, allowing his brother to look upon him for the first time since they were children. Kankuro noted the tattoo, and his face crumpled in anguish before he buried it in his hands. Naruto looked out the window, to give the man some privacy while he gained control over his emotions.

After a few minutes, Kankuro drew a shuddering breath and scrubbed the heel of his hand over his eyes. "Gaara," he placed a hand tentatively on his brother's shoulder. "He told us you were dead."

Gaara nodded, knowing his brother felt guilty that he had never looked for him over the years, believing him dead. "When this is over, I want you to come home. Temari will make sure no one ever learns of your involvement. As far as anyone will know, our father was killed by Mu's forces and I simply stepped in to fill his seat. We will say that my sister and I took up the search for you, then brought you home."

Gaara nodded, hearing the slight pleading in his elder brother's voice. "I have something I have to finish first. But I will come back."

Kankuro looked at him. "And if you want father's seat, it is yours."

Gaara shook his head. "No. But I will be your advisor."

The brothers talked a bit, conversing in their native tongue and Naruto let his mind rest, knowing that - for the moment at least - he was safe. His body was aching, but at least now they were out of immediate danger. And the job was done.

"Avoid the airports," Naruto heard Kankuro tell Gaara, in English this time so Naruto would be able to understand as well. "Mu is in the pocket of the CIA, and they will have access to all the video surveillance that is there, as well as the passenger lists. Mu will want to be sure that there is no one who can tie his possible takeover back to the CIA, since that would not go over well politically for him in Suna or back home. Travel by boat or by train to stay under the radar. No one needs to ever know you made it to the compound. There will be no evidence that they can use against you."

Naruto wondered what the CIA would make of their success of taking out General Kazekage… and their failure to help Mu overthrow the government. He and Gaara were supposed to contact their agent when they reached Europe and were far enough away from Mu and the Kazekage's loyalists to be safe. They just needed to spin it that they did their part and Mu dropped the ball. It was a pain that Jiraya had wanted this to be a 'legitimate' operation. But Naruto knew that Jiraya was trying to keep the program from landing them all in jail, so they had to do their part and play nice.
But that was all secondary to them. Gaara had killed the man he needed to. Now it was Naruto's turn.

The thought of returning to New York ate at Naruto. He would be back in Sasuke's city, but unable to be with him. Naruto steeled himself. It was the right thing to do. He wasn't going to do any more damage to Sasuke than he already had.

It was over. He just needed to stay focused.

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They landed in Istanbul late that same night and walked down the narrow stairway off the private plane. Kankuro spoke with some of the military officials that had come out to greet the plane that was registered under one of the most powerful leaders in Kazenokuni. Naruto and Gaara had papers ready, but surprisingly they were not asked to show any, and instead were offered to be driven by military vehicle to wherever they needed to go. Naruto sighed as he realized the politics played the same in whatever country you were.

Gaara gave them the address to the Kazenokuni consulate in the Beyoglu district of the city. They would carry the news of the change in leadership in Suna to the ambassador there, then disappear. Naruto kept his mouth shut and was careful to follow Gaara and mimic his greeting, passing as nothing more than another member of the General's elite guard.

Naruto couldn't follow the conversation, but by the widening of eyes and sudden flurry of activity in the consulate, he assumed that Gaara had delivered the news of the General's death. Their official business concluded, they stepped out into the warm, busy streets of Istanbul, despite the late hour. Naruto drew a breath, the smell of the sea carried on the evening breeze. But there would be no time to take in the sights. They had to stay hidden. Naruto could tell that the gunshot wound on Gaara's arm was hurting again, but his friend kept moving. They rapidly walked through the streets and alleyways, knowing their first task was to lose anyone who might be following them from the embassy before they took a cab to the address that Temari had given them for the house in the Fatih district, where they were to find refuge.

When they finally arrived outside the large home, it was well past midnight. Naruto worried that no one would answer, but an old woman opened the door before they had even knocked.

"I heard from a friend at the embassy that the General was dead. I wondered if anyone would come to tell me in person." Her voice sounded irritated to Naruto, but since he couldn't make out her words he simply relied on Gaara to handle the situation.

Gaara handed her a note, "Granny Chiyo," he said, using the name he had called her long ago. "It's been a long time."

The woman froze, not recognizing the voice. But there were not many who had ever called her by that name. She stepped back from the doorway, allowing them entry into her home.

Once the door had closed securely behind them, Gaara removed his head wrap. The old woman's eyes widened in recognition. And to Naruto's surprise, she began to cackle with laughter. "Ah, it's good to see that the General's actions came back to bite him in the ass after all." She gave them a sly grin. "Or, from what I heard this evening, shoot him in the head."

Gaara didn't laugh at her joke, but nodded in acknowledgement at her assumption of what had occurred. "My sister said we would be safe spending the night here," Gaara said, switching to English so Naruto would be able to follow. "We need a way out of Istanbul that won't draw attention
from the US or Kazenokuni authorities."

The old woman thought for a minute. "Well, I assume you have passports that will take you where
you need to go?"

Gaara nodded shortly.

"Then I might be able to help you. They will be focusing their search on the smuggling routes and
the normal commercial passages… planes, major trains, ships, ferries….”

Naruto really hoped she wasn't about to suggest crossing a desert by camel. He had seen Lawrence
of Arabia and had no wish to live that for real.

"Hmmm... I think there is a train that might suit," she said after a moment.

"Didn't you just say that they were being watched as well?" Naruto asked, frowning. Gaara seemed
to trust this woman enough to let her know their plans, but Naruto wasn’t so sure.

"The major trains, yes. But not the tour-group trains. They will assume you are trying to get out of
the region with all possible speed."

Naruto tried to assess whether the woman was potential senile. "Yeah… because we are."

The woman cackled again. "Actually, you might not be. I can get you on a train that will go to
Paris…eventually. First stop will be in Bucharest. You will have six days to rest and let them run in
circles trying to find you. We can pay for the tickets in cash, making it untraceable. It is unlikely
they will be searching the manifests of this particular train, since it only runs a few months out of the
year."

Naruto looked at Gaara, and they both shrugged. If Temari thought this woman was trustworthy,
then they would go with what she suggested. It wasn't like they had a lot of options.

"We need a place to wash up and sleep before then," Gaara said, not revealing that they were also
injured.

But the old woman seemed to already know the situation. "I used to be a medic in your grandfather's
army a long time ago," she said, looking at Gaara. "I still sometimes patch up some of the Sunan
operatives that show up at my door after midnight. Go and wash up, and I'll take care of the worst of
your injuries. At least enough to keep you from keeling over until you get to Bucharest. But you
won't be able to board the train looking like assassins. You'll need different clothing."

Gaara smirked. "Actually, we already have that part of the plan covered."

"Hmpf," she said skeptically, leading them upstairs to the guest wing where she showed them where
their bedrooms were as well as the shower. Naruto took one look at the soft, clean bed and wanted
nothing more to crawl between the sheets and sleep for the next week, but he was filthy and bloody
and needed a shower first.

"Granny Chiyo is actually the one who first started the practice of coating the weapons of the guards
with a variation on the traditional poison that had been used by the local tribes for centuries," Gaara
said.

"And more importantly, I came up with the antidote," the old woman said.

Naruto looked at her curiously. "So… I assume the poison is slow-acting if it was used on prisoners
that would be interrogated. How does it work?"

Granny Chiyo looked at him a moment. "I don't suppose that you have any medical training?"

Naruto shook his head, and the old woman sighed. "Well, then I won't get technical. The poison has two components. There is one which is basically a central nervous system depressant. Originally it was found in the venom of poisonous snakes in the area. It is the part of the poison that actually kills you, slowing the motor functions and eventually stopping the lungs and the heart. I added a second component. It is a type of hallucinogen, making the vision and hearing distorted. It aids in the interrogation process, as it confuses the subject. And it is very long-lived… staying in the system for up to four days."

"But the antidote handles both effects?"

"Well, the antidote is focused more on the part that kills you, though you will be a bit slower for a few days. But yes, we added another ingredient to the antidote as well to counteract both chemicals."

Naruto nodded, relieved to hear that. He had been feeling queasy, and had been worried that it was a side effect of the poison. But evidently, it was just run-of-the-mill air sickness. He left to go take a shower, carefully washing around the myriad of cuts, nicks, and grazes that covered his body. The cut in his leg was only one of them looked serious enough to require stitches. The old woman was annoyed when Naruto said he didn't want any anesthetic, probably assuming he didn't trust her not to poison him, but in the end she stitched his leg without it, letting him limp off to bed to sleep.

Gaara allowed the woman to stitch his bullet wound as well, then stood to go rest.

"You should keep an extra vial or two on you in case the antidote wears off before the hallucinogen does. You both have a lot of injuries. If they were all made with treated weapons, one draught might not be enough. If you start feeling nauseous or having trouble with your vision, take another dose. If left untreated, the symptoms can escalate to extreme disorientation and paranoia. Some people are more sensitive than others, depending on their tolerance levels to the drug."

Gaara accepted the extra vials of the antidote from the woman and went up to bed. They slept until almost two in the afternoon, when the old woman woke them to tell them that she had purchased their tickets while they slept, and the train left Halkali station the next day at four.

Naruto's mouth watered at the smell of food cooking, and realized he couldn't quite remember when he last ate. He followed her downstairs after waking Gaara. She served them a meal of rice, a lightly spiced lentil dish and a yogurt cucumber salad. Naruto had never eaten anything like it before, but it was delicious. His motion sickness from the day before didn't seem to have faded, though, and he wasn't able to eat as much as he would have liked. But he didn't complain. In the scheme of things, he knew that he and Gaara were lucky to be alive at all. Gaara also ate, but looked paler than usual.

Naruto frowned, worried for his friend. He wished they could risk going to a hospital to get him proper care, but it was too risky. They had gone without medical treatment before. Gaara knew his limits. And of the two was the best judge at how much they should trust Chiyo.

Immediately after eating, Gaara, returned to bed to sleep. Naruto asked to borrow Granny Chiyo's computer to quickly check the news that was coming out of Suna and scan for any mention of him or Gaara. He blinked at the screen, his eyes having trouble focusing on it. Deciding he must just be exhausted, he followed Gaara's example and went back up to sleep.

The next day, they again slept until after noon, then quickly showered and dressed to leave. Naruto grinned to see that this time, Gaara was joining him in wearing the burka. It was the perfect way to
pass through the city and board the train with no one being able to identify them. Even so, they waited to board the train until the last possible minute to be sure that they were not followed.

Several times, Naruto was sure he heard someone behind them, but as they made their painstakingly slow progress to the train station, no one appeared.

Naruto drew a breath. He felt oddly disoriented. He would be glad when they could board the train and he could sleep.

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Sasuke had already double-checked the information Suigetsu had sent him. He was definitely in the right cabin - the one that Naruto had reserved. As with all of the private, sleeper car rooms on this train, it was luxuriously appointed with deep blue carpeting and mahogany paneled walls.

Sasuke had kept the lights off, and had drawn the curtains to prevent anyone from seeing him in a cabin that wasn't his. He looked at his watch in the dim light for the tenth time in as many minutes. He and Sakura had agreed that she would wait where the passengers were boarding and Sasuke would wait in Naruto's room in case they boarded the train some other way. Shisui hadn't been able to get out of Suna in time when the borders were sealed, but he would be meeting up with them in Bucharest.

The train was going to leave in one minute and there was still no sign of Naruto. Sasuke saw two bukra-clad women walk past Naruto's cabin carrying duffel bags. He felt his stomach sink as the conductor announced through the speakers that the doors to the train were closed for boarding and welcomed riders to the 'new' Orient Express. The train slowly began pulling out of the station as the conductor described the history of the route, the stops they would make along the way to Paris, and what they could expect to see on their first leg to Bucharest. Sasuke didn't register the words. His mind was focused on the fact that Naruto hadn't boarded the train. He wondered if the train was going slowly enough that he could jump off.

Naruto was in Istanbul. Or at least he had been yesterday. If he hadn't boarded the train as planned, did that mean he'd found another way out of the city that even Suigetsu hadn't been able to pick up, or did that mean that the CIA had found him first? Or maybe he had been too injured… Sasuke's mind raced, and walked over to the window, pulling back the curtain slightly to judge how rapidly the train was picking up speed and tried to assess whether the window would open enough for him to jump out.

He had just finished unlatching the window lock when the door to Naruto's cabin opened and one of the covered women who had passed by earlier walked in. The figure had barely entered the room when they immediately dropped the bag they had been carrying and lunged towards him. Sasuke caught the glint of the knife and narrowly avoiding having it embedded in his chest. He turned, readying himself for the next attack and nearly stumbled when he found himself looking into shockingly familiar blue eyes.

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Naruto stood outside his room door, his breath slightly labored. His feeling that someone was following them had only been growing. Gaara had been exhausted by the time they had boarded the train, so Naruto had told him to rest with his gun ready, but didn't worry his friend further with his anxiety. Gaara was in no condition to help him search, which he would insist on doing if he knew that Naruto was worried. Naruto would search the train himself while Gaara rested. He was afraid his friend's arm was becoming infected, or perhaps there was internal bleeding somewhere. After he had cleared the train of anyone who had decided to follow them, he would find out if there was a
medical facility on the train and have Gaara checked out whether he liked it or not.

But he was having trouble getting his bearings. Everything seemed to be somewhat distorted. He remembered Chiyo describing the effects of the poison, but he had taken the antidote… had it not been enough? Naruto was having trouble thinking clearly. Maybe he just needed more sleep. He would search the train, get Gaara some help, then get some sleep. He just needed to be able to concentrate.

His hand froze on the handle of the door to his cabin. He had an overwhelming sense of danger surge through him… a certainty that there was someone in his room. He drew his knife from the sheath he had worn on his calf, and pushed open the door, soundlessly setting his bag inside. The room was dark, but he saw the silhouette of a man against the curtains. His eyes hadn't adjusted to the low light of the room enough to make out anything about him, but Naruto immediately attacked as he heard the door click shut behind him.

Naruto cursed as the man moved with surprising speed and was able to avoid him when the lunged forward with his knife. His body felt slow and his vision was blurry again, making it harder to read the signs signaling what his opponent was planning to do, especially in the darkened room.

"Naruto! What the fuck?!"

Something about the voice was familiar, but Naruto didn't take time to think about it. The only people who would be waiting to ambush him on this train in a darkened room were not his allies. The heavy black cloth was restricting Naruto's movements, so he quickly ripped it off and threw it on the floor, freeing his limbs. He wore an olive green tank top and jeans beneath, which were much more conducive to fighting. He wondered why his opponent seemed to be merely avoiding him, rather than attacking. Surely the man must have a weapon if he were here to kill him.

"Naruto, stop! What the hell are you doing!"

Naruto felt like he was in a fog. He ignored the voice and simply lunged at his opponent, cursing his slowed movements when the man was able to dodge his knife yet again. He was only slightly gratified that he had felt the blade graze the man's arm, though not enough to do serious damage. Close quarter fights never lasted long, though, because there was no space to dodge. The thought had just crossed his mind when he felt strong fingers wrap around his wrist of the hand that held the knife at the same time that Naruto swept his opponent's legs out from under him. They crashed sideways, knocking into a table by the window sending some bottles rolling to the floor. Naruto landed on top but his knife was ripped away, spiraling onto the carpet just out of reach.

Naruto didn't focus on the loss of the weapon. He was more than capable of killing with his bare hands, slow reflexes or not. But first he wanted some answers. He quickly straddled his opponent and braced his legs on either side of the man's thighs to prevent him from being able to roll them and reverse their positions. The man wasn't giving up easily, though as Naruto felt a fist connect with his jaw and his head snapped back before he grabbed the man's wrists and used his weight as leverage to pin him down.

"Who sent you?" Naruto growled, looking down into the blurred face below him.

"Get a fucking grip, Naruto. No one sent me! I'm here to try to warn your stupid ass that the CIA is setting you up!"

Naruto paused. That voice… but it couldn't be. Naruto blinked his eyes hard, trying to clear his vision. His confusion over the voice caused his muscles to relax fractionally, which was all his opponent needed before his hips bucked up, sweeping one of Naruto's legs under his to break the
brace that was keeping them in position and flipping them over.

Naruto found himself pinned to the floor, in the exact reversal of the position he had just had the other man in, his wrists gripped with bruising strength.

His vision cleared slightly as he looked into angry black eyes that were glaring down at him. The same black eyes that haunted his dreams every night.

It couldn't be real. Sasuke safe back in New York. Not magically appearing in Naruto's cabin, pinning him to the floor. Naruto squeezed his eyes shut then opened them again, but the man was still there.

"Sasuke?"

Sasuke narrowed his eyes. Naruto could feel the anger and adrenaline pumping off his lover. The feel of being held down under that intense gaze brought back visions of all the nights they'd spent together back in New York. Naruto wondered if this was real, or if he were in fact hallucinating. It would explain the haziness he felt.

"Are you done trying to kill me now?" Sasuke panted out, his grip tightening further on Naruto's wrists.

Sasuke's eyes traveled hungrily over Naruto's form, pausing slightly at the sight of the bandaged wounds on his arms. Naruto licked his dry lips, not sure what the hell was going on. He saw the way Sasuke's eyes were drawn to his mouth, and despite the thick blanket of disorientation that was still wrapped about his mind, he felt lust spike through him. He forced himself to get some sort of explanation out.

"I... didn't expect there to be a... friend hiding in my room with the lights out," Naruto managed, trying to get his brain to make sense of how this scenario could be happening. But his senses were being overwhelmed by the familiar feel and scent of his lover. His ex-lover? Looking at the dark, angry eyes staring down at him, he wasn't really sure. "But maybe you had something specific in mind while you were waiting for me?" Naruto's breath was coming fast. The fogginess of his mind seemed to somehow amplify his lust. He wasn't able to think clearly, but he could feel things just fine.

Naruto's hips flexed up slightly, instinctively seeking friction against his lover's body. God, he wanted this to be real. He wanted to believe that Sasuke had really come to him. That this wasn't just another tortuous dream that he would find himself waking from, alone and longing in an empty bed.

"Don't flatter yourself," Sasuke said, his voice low but with a dangerous edge. "You left, remember? I just came here to warn you."

Naruto could read the anger clearly in Sasuke's dark eyes. But that was not the only emotion he sensed in them, and Naruto felt heat pool in his groin at the naked desire that he saw swirling with the anger in Sasuke's heavy-lidded gaze, belying the man's words.

Naruto's cock was fully hard now. He didn't even know what Sasuke had come here for yet, but at that exact moment he didn't fucking care. He vaguely recalled Sasuke's earlier words about the CIA.

"So you came all this way just to... deliver a message?" Naruto could hear the taunting lust in his voice, and his pulse pounded in his own ears. Naruto twisted his hands, reversing the grip so that his hands now gripped Sasuke's wrists. With fluid strength, Naruto sat up and forced Sasuke's hands behind his back, with Sasuke still straddling his lap.
Sasuke glared at Naruto. His adrenaline was still surging from their fight, and the way that Naruto gripped his wrists, forcing him to arch back, went straight to his groin. He honestly didn't know if he wanted to punch Naruto right now or fuck him into the floor. The desires seemed closely linked.

"Fuck, I missed you, Sasuke," Naruto breathed out, his eyes closing briefly as he brushed his cheek against Sasuke's shirt.

Those words tipped the scales in Sasuke's mind, and he surged forward, fusing his mouth against Naruto's. As soon as Naruto loosed his grip on Sasuke's wrists, he drove them into the blond locks, crushing their mouths together with more force, demanding that Naruto open his mouth.

Naruto was more than happy to comply, his hands up from Sasuke's hips to the small of his back, pulling him closer as he tilted his head to deepen the kiss. Sasuke shoved Naruto back against the floor, forcefully pinning Naruto's body beneath him once more, but this time with a different intent.

Naruto could feel the hard length of Sasuke's erection pressed against his, and his only coherent thought was that if they didn't fuck soon he would lose his mind. All other questions could be asked and answered later. It had been too long. All the doors in his mind that he'd tried to lock away his feelings for Sasuke splintered open, and the flood of them was almost unbearable.

Sasuke groaned as he felt Naruto's hands digging into his hair, pulling him even closer. He felt Naruto's tongue thrusting against his own, his mouth open and sucking with furious intensity.

Sasuke jerked Naruto's head back hard, breaking the kiss and baring the tan throat as he slid his mouth down along the hard edge of Naruto's jaw then laved downward along the neck, scraping his teeth over the delicate skin where he could feel the strong pulse in his throat.

"Yessss, Sasuke," Naruto's hoarse voice made Sasuke almost cum. He shuddered, reveling in the sound and feel and scent of Naruto, letting the senses flood over him. He had craved this... hungered to possess Naruto again. This man he had killed for, without remorse. He would not let him go again. Could not.

Sasuke ground his mouth back over Naruto's harshly, thumbing Naruto's jaw open wider before slipping his hands down Naruto's chest to the hem of his shirt. He slid his hand underneath, needing to feel the smooth, hard heat of Naruto's bare skin.

"God, Naruto... I need to... I just..." Sasuke fumbled trying to undo the buckle of his pants.

Naruto seemed to share his urgency as tan hands covered his and simply ripped Sasuke's pants open, sending the button flying and breaking the zipper. "Right now," Naruto panted. "Oh, fuck, Sasuke!"

Sasuke felt his erection already throbbing and ready to burst. Naruto had undone the fastenings of his own jeans was kicking them off with record speed. Sasuke reached to grab the complimentary lotion that had been knocked from the table in their earlier struggle, too far gone to bother with trying to find a condom at this point.

"Jesus Christ, just hurry," Naruto wrapped his hand around Sasuke's shaft as Sasuke struggled with the cap of the makeshift lube, squirting some hurriedly in his hand before dropping the bottle carelessly to the floor. He grabbed Naruto's hand away from his cock before the blond made him cum. He was too close for any kind of foreplay. He needed to be inside Naruto.

Wordlessly, he shoved Naruto onto his stomach, hissing as he quickly coated his cock with the cold lotion before lifting Naruto's hips and shoving two shaking fingers in. Naruto was tight, and it would be painful for both of them if he tried to enter without any prep at all.
Evidently, Naruto didn't share that idea.

"Sasuke, you pussy, I swear if you make me wait I am flipping you over and fucking you into the floor."

Sasuke paused, the idea of that happening sending a surprising spike of lust through him. He used his thumb to press hard on the ring of muscle, massaging it and forcing it wider as he leaned over Naruto's back to whisper in his ear. "Maybe we'll have to try that at some point."

Naruto made an animalistic whimper of need and Sasuke withdrew his hand, driving himself in with one hard thrust. They both groaned at the nearly painful intensity of the penetration with so little prepping.

"Nnggghhh," Sasuke felt Naruto's heat surround him and he leaned his chest against Naruto's back, his arms encircling Naruto's torso as they knelt there together for a moment, feeling each other's hearts beating frantically.

Sasuke closed his eyes and brushed his nose against the side of Naruto's neck, breathing in the scent of him. The dark possessiveness that surged through Sasuke had his hips thrusting forward ruthlessly. Naruto's elbows gave way under the force and he braced himself on his forearms, his fingers digging into the carpet as he arched his body, pushing back to meet Sasuke's violent, almost frantic thrusts.

It didn't take them long before Naruto was cumming hard onto the plush blue carpet, and Sasuke shuddered his release seconds later.

They lay together, panting, their bodies lightly sheened with sweat. Sasuke made no move to withdraw or loosen his hold around Naruto's body.

"Mmmm," Naruto said, his voice lazy. "That was a much better greeting than what I was expecting from a man hiding in my room today."

"Pfft," Sasuke blew out a short laugh, still not able to move, simply listening to the rise and fall of Naruto's breathing. Proof that Naruto had beat all the odds and made it out alive. Sasuke had not been able to face the possibility that Naruto could be lying in a shallow grave in the Sunan desert. He relaxed against the heat pumping off the blond, his mind still hazed by the flood of adrenaline and arousal. Slowly, Sasuke frowned. Naruto was too warm. Something was wrong.

"Naruto?" Sasuke asked, his voice concerned.

"Mm?" Naruto said, feeling incredibly sated and sleepy. If it were up to him, they would not move from this position for the rest of their natural lives. But Sasuke was carefully pulling out, and gently turning Naruto to face him.

"Naruto, you feel like you have a fever. Are you sick?"

Naruto thought back to what he'd been feeling throughout the day. "I don't think so… I think… I might still be a little bit poisoned." His voice sounded completely calm, almost complacent about the fact.

"What? You idiot! Why did you let me fuck you if you were...!" Sasuke was on his feet, turning on the lights and jerking his pants on. "We have to find Sakura. She looked into the poisons that they use in Suna and -"

"Hand me my pack," Naruto interrupted, his voice sounding calm, though slightly annoyed. He
blinked as he finally processed Sasuke's words. "Wait, Sakura's here, too? Why did she -"  

"Shut up and pull your pants on. She's probably gone to check Gaara's room since I didn't meet her back at the dining car," Sasuke was clearly trying not to panic.

"Sasuke. Stop. I have more of the antidote in my bag, and I've already taken some. If it's the poison, I'll be fine in twenty minutes if I take another dose. If I'm not better by then, then we'll get Sakura. But if she's with Gaara, I'd rather have her treat him first. He was shot in the arm and I think it's getting infected."

Sasuke snatched Naruto's bag from the floor where he had dropped it. He quickly dug through it, ignoring the number of weapons, bundles of cash in various currencies, and fake passports. He noticed what appeared to be a Kevlar vest, but rummaged past that as well. At the bottom of the pack he found a small box and pulled it out. There were three vials of a clear liquid inside. "This?" he asked tersely.

Naruto nodded wearily and Sasuke opened one and handed it to him. Naruto drank it quickly, still sitting on the floor. Sasuke walked over to the couch, looking beneath it to find the lever that released it to lay flat into a double bed. He grabbed the heavy damask sheets from the shelf and quickly threw one over the bed, along with the pillows and blanket.

"Lie down," he ordered.

Naruto sat up, slightly amused at Sasuke's dictatorial tone. "I need a shower."

Sasuke eyed him for a moment, realizing that he had cum inside Naruto without a condom and conceded. "Fine."

"Aren't you going to offer to wash my back? Some of this mess is yours."

Sasuke rolled his eyes, and went to the narrow door that opened to the small, private washroom. "Honestly, I'm not sure we'll both fit," he said skeptically.

He felt Naruto's arms slide around his waist from behind, and was pulled back flush against the blond's hard body as he felt Naruto's breath in his ear. "I'm pretty sure we can figure something out, Sasuke."

Sasuke gently circled his fingers around Naruto's wrist as he turned to face his lover, pulling him into an open-mouthed kiss. "Let's make sure you're not dying first. Necrophilia is not one of my fetishes."

Naruto snickered. "Shit, I hope not."

Sasuke turned back to the tiny bathroom and started the shower, then stepped back so Naruto could get in. "Wow. You weren't kidding. I think we might actually have to take turns."

Sasuke didn't speak, but let his fingers drift to the hem of Naruto's tank top and slowly pulled it off, his eyes darkening at the sight of so many bruises and cuts along Naruto's back.

For the first time, he noticed the large bandage on Naruto's thigh, and he traced his fingers along the edge, noticing that they weren't quite steady. Naruto must have sensed the suddenly heavy atmosphere, because he turned and looked up at Sasuke.

Sasuke's gaze traveled over Naruto's naked chest, where there were three large, purple bruises, one dead center over his breast bone. Sasuke ran his fingers over them, sending a questioning look at Naruto. "You were captured?"
Naruto knew that the bruises were from where the bullets had struck the Kevlar vest, not the beating marks Sasuke assumed they were, but he figured that would not make Sasuke feel better. "Yeah, but not tortured. These are all just… minor wounds we got along the way."

Sasuke had seen the CIA description of the security and firepower of the military compound that Naruto and Gaara had evidently successfully overthrown. He knew that there was a hell of a story behind the myriad of cuts and bruises, but he honestly needed to have a drink or two before he was ready to hear it.

So he only nodded, guiding Naruto into the now hot shower and washing him gently. Naruto seemed completely relaxed, letting Sasuke have his way and take his time with it while Naruto rested his head against the narrow wall of the stall. Sasuke noticed Naruto flinch slightly as the soap stung some of the cuts, but otherwise they were both silent, just focusing on where Sasuke's hands connected with Naruto's body. They knew they had a lot of things to discuss, but right now they just wanted to be together without reality getting in the way.

When Sasuke slid a finger in to clean out what he had deposited in the blond on the floor of the cabin, he heard a low chuckle from his lover. "You're being very thorough today, aren't you?"

Sasuke felt his lips tug into a smirk, and he angled his finger downward, no longer focusing on cleaning. Naruto sucked in a breath through his teeth as Sasuke brushed against his prostate.

"I thought you were all worried and wanting me to sleep," Naruto said, his voice distinctly husky now.

"I said I wanted you to lie down on the bed. I never said anything about sleeping."

Naruto laughed softly, before sucking in a breath as Sasuke's fingers closed around his shaft. "Well, given the rug burn I have on my knees and elbows, I guess a bed sounds pretty good."

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Sakura huffed out an annoyed breath and adjusted the shawl that she used to cover up her tell-tale pink hair. The train had departed almost thirty minutes ago, and Sasuke hadn't shown up to tell her if he had found Naruto and Gaara yet or not. Sakura thought about it for a minute, then blinked. She supposed that meant he had found Naruto. Rolling her eyes, she decided that - if what she was suspecting was actually the case - Gaara would likely be alone in his sleeper car. They must have boarded some other way, since she hadn't seen anyone that even slightly resembled from her vantage point in the dining car. She had chosen that position as it gave a perfect view of the passengers lining up to board. It also provided her with a convenient excuse to sit there watching as she leisurely sipped her coffee. None of the passengers boarding had even glanced up to look at her.

She slung her medical bag over her shoulder and pulled out the piece of paper where she had written down Gaara's and Naruto's room numbers. Being able to take a good guess at what was likely going on in Naruto's room, she walked past that closed door (noting the muffled noises coming from within with a smirk) and proceeded on to Gaara's.

She took a deep breath before she knocked on the door, and waited several minutes before the curtain was pulled back and she found herself looking past the barrel of a gun into familiar clear green eyes. And a face flushed with fever.

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*train ride will be continued next chapter*
On the train

Warning: Hard yaoi (18+) in this chapter. Anal, oral. Rimming on AO3 and y!gal versions (edited for the trolls on ff who keep reporting this story).

Author's note: Thanks as always to BriEva for being my beta and sounding board as we start to wind this story up!

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Gaara's eyes widened when he realized it was Sakura at his door. He saw her relax as he lowered the gun and stepped aside to let her in. He scanned the hallway to make sure she wasn't followed, then closed and locked the door behind them. His arm was burning and the room was spinning. He had taken another draught of the antidote, but it hadn't helped. Which meant it wasn't some sort of residual effect from the poison, but potentially something more serious. He needed a doctor...and the only doctor he trusted had just shown up at his doorstep. Gaara blinked, trying to see the trick. Life didn't work this way, delivering what you needed when you needed it. He had learned that lesson the hard way many years ago.

"How are you here?" he asked her suspiciously. If Sakura could find them, then presumably so could Mu. He realized that somehow Sakura had two of her fingers against his throat, taking his pulse. When had she gotten so close? Gaara tried to get his mind to focus. He would be useless if he was attacked in this condition.

"Gaara," Sakura said in a calm but concerned voice. "You have a fever and your pulse is elevated. I need you to lay down so I can examine you and find out what's wrong. You might be poisoned -"

"I took the antidote. My gunshot wound is infected," he grabbed her wrist, jerking it away from his throat. "Tell me how you knew where I was. I know Naruto didn't make contact."

Sakura didn't flinch. It wasn't the first time one of her boys had been afraid to trust help when it arrived. She kept her voice calm, her eyes locked on Gaara's so he could read them. "Sasuke has a friend who found one of your aliases on the passenger list for the train. He also hacked into the CIA systems and is monitoring them to see where they are searching. The CIA doesn't know you made it out of Suna. You're safe for now."

Gaara frowned at her statement. CIA? He hazily thought that if she was worried about the CIA, then they must have decided to double-cross him and Naruto now that the mission was over to cover their trails. His last thought before he blacked out was Fucking CIA. I knew they would be a pain in our ass.

Sakura grabbed Gaara as he fell forward, glad she was strong enough to drag the unconscious man back to the bed. Her training in the ER kept her from panicking. Gaara had said he was shot. There wasn't a lot of blood around, so that meant at least the bleeding was under control. That was good.

But he had a raging fever and his pulse was skyrocketing. Which meant that the wound was most likely infected. That was bad. She adjusted his body on the bed as best she could, then quickly set to work getting the needed supplies from her bag. She carefully unbuttoned his shirt, seeing the myriad of wounds covering his toned torso. As she gently pulled his arms free from the sleeves, the large bandage drew her attention. She removed it to find a properly stitched but angry-red bullet hole in his arm. Definitely infected.
She worked methodically and efficiently, treating all his wounds with antiseptic and injecting him with antibiotics that would clear the infection from his system. When she had done all she could, she arranged her supplies neatly on the table near the bed. Gaara would have to be monitored for fever and inflammation for the next twenty-four hours before he would be in the clear.

Sakura looked down at the handsome face that even in sleep never seemed to fully relax. She knew what had happened to Gaara as a child. Over the years he had told her parts and she had pieced together the rest. Gently, she brushed a lock of hair from his forehead.

When they first met, Sakura had felt particularly drawn to Gaara though she hadn't understood why. Now, knowing what she did, she wondered if he trusted her because somehow he sensed that she understood him. That she, too, knew what it felt like, to be used in ways a child should never be used by an adult...

A shiver passed through her. She would not focus on those memories. Not anymore.

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Naruto lay on the bed, letting his hand run up and down Sasuke's side. They had barely made it to the bed from the shower. But now that the haze was cooling and the antidote was working, Naruto's brain was starting to kick in. He glanced at the nick on Sasuke's upper arm where his knife had grazed him. If he hadn't been slowed by the residual effects of the poison, it would have gone right into Sasuke's heart. The thought sent chills down Naruto's spine. This was the reason he had left Sasuke... the reason he should tell Sasuke to get off the train, fly back to New York, and forget Naruto existed.

Naruto swallowed. It was hard - knowing what the right thing to do was, and not sure he would be able to make himself do it. His hand shook as he brushed a finger against the small cut.

"Naruto, stop," Sasuke said, clearly reading the guilt and rising panic in Naruto's ever transparent eyes.

"Sasuke...."

"No," Sasuke said, his voice hard. "You are not going to use this tiny fucking scratch as an excuse to walk away from me again."

Naruto looked up, finding himself pinned by Sasuke's unrelenting stare. "It could have been a lot worse than a scratch, Sasuke. If I hadn't been slowed by the poison -"

Sasuke cut him off. "- then you would have recognized me sooner and not attacked in the first place."

Naruto huffed out a small breath, but couldn't dispute it. "Even without that, there's still the fact that your career would be over if anyone found out about us. Not to mention the serial killer waiting for me back in New York who has a habit of killing people I'm close to. Plus all my other enemies and even some of my friends in various criminal organizations that would view my relationship with you and your brother as a threat. How many reasons do we need, Sasuke? We don't make sense together."

It sounded to both of them like Naruto was trying to convince himself as well as Sasuke. Churning with emotions he couldn't handle, Naruto threw off the sheet and stood, walking over to his pack for a change of clothes.

"I see. So you're going to run away again without talking to me about any of this? That's bullshit,
Naruto. All your reasons for walking away are about me and my life. That isn't your decision to make." Sasuke's voice was angry as he watched Naruto pull on a pair of jeans.

"I don't know if I can 'run away' again," Naruto said, tiredly, digging out a shirt and avoiding looking at Sasuke. "Even though I know it's the right thing to do," Naruto laughed bitterly at his own weakness. "You make me feel..." He drew a breath, stopping himself from saying more, not sure that it was an admission he should be making. It would be dangerous to let Sasuke know how much power he truly wielded over him. "But that doesn't mean I'm going to just blindly drag you down with me, Sasuke."

Sasuke stood and walked over to Naruto, ignoring his own nudity, "No one is telling you to act blindly. But you don't have all the information, either."

Naruto looked at Sasuke, and felt an ache in his chest that had nothing to do with the wounds he had received. "Alright," Naruto said. He wasn't ready to have this conversation. He had convinced himself that their relationship was over. Now Sasuke seemed to be overturning all the decisions Naruto had made, and he didn't know how to deal with it. He needed time to try to get his head clear. Which certainly wasn't going to happen with Sasuke standing naked in front of him. "So we can talk about it, then. But I need to check on Gaara first and make sure he's doing alright."

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Sasuke watched the door close behind Naruto. He would have gone with him if it hadn't be obvious that half the reason Naruto was going to check on Gaara was to get some distance from Sasuke. He shrugged. He would give Naruto time. Sasuke knew that he had taken the blond by surprise with his appearance. And he took the man at his word that he would at least hear Sasuke out before disappearing again. And if he didn't... Sasuke's gaze darkened as he briefly fantasized about chaining Naruto to the wall in his bedroom.

He didn't expect Naruto to be gone too long. The antidote had clearly worked to clear Naruto's fever. And Sakura would have come looking for him if she had been unable to find Gaara or if his condition were beyond her skills.

Right now, Sasuke needed to check in with Suigetsu, Shisui, and Itachi to find out how everything was progressing and let them know that he had successfully made contact with Naruto. He smirked a bit on just exactly how much contact he had made with him. He quickly dialed Suigetsu to find out the latest intel on how close the CIA was to finding Naruto and Gaara, and whether the order regarding them was still to kill on sight.

"There seems to be some discussion now as to whether or not Naruto and Gaara even made it to the compound. Evidently one of their contacts in the Sabaku forces said that it was Mu's men who killed the General, and that some others were taken prisoner before they reached the headquarters."

Sasuke wondered who Naruto and Gaara had found within the General's forces to lie for them, but he was glad in any case. Though it wouldn't solve the issue of the CIA wanting to cover their tracks about trying to overthrow the government. Even if they viewed Naruto and Gaara as unsuccessful, the conversation had still happened. He called Jiraiya next, and the older man told him that things were moving, but it would be at least another day before he could be sure that he had the right 'leverage' to get the order rescinded. Shisui had checked in and had found a way across the border, and would meet with them in Bucharest. Itachi was flying over to meet him there.

Sasuke looked down at where Naruto's pack had fallen over on the floor, some of the contents spilling out. He put the cash and passports back in the bag, but not before checking the names on the false IDs and committing them to memory in case he ever needed to hunt Naruto down again.
The Kevlar vest had fallen out as well, and Sasuke picked it up so he could fold it and fit it back in Naruto's tightly packed bag. He laid it out on the bed to fold, and froze as he saw three small tears in the outer fabric of the vest. Bullet holes. One of which was dead center in the vest. If Naruto hadn't been wearing it, he would be a corpse. Sasuke brushed his fingers over the hole, remembering the bruises on Naruto's chest. And how the blond had brushed them off like it was no big deal.

Sasuke had known that the mission had been dangerous. The CIA's assessment of the risks had been quite clear. But he hadn't realized just how close Naruto had come to getting killed. He felt the numbness slowly melt into anger, drowning the paralysis panic that had been rising. How many times something like this had happened to Naruto that he could brush it off so casually? And when would his lover's luck finally run out? He understood to a certain extent that Naruto hadn't had much choice in the direction his life had taken when Tobi had killed his parents and began hunting him.

But Naruto had choices now. And Sasuke needed to impress those upon him. Naruto's life didn't need to continue on the way it had been. He didn't need to constantly be in danger like this.

Sasuke looked down at the vest again, his mind able to conjure up exactly what those holes would have looked like in Naruto's corpse. He walked over to the mini-bar, and got himself a drink. Suddenly, he really needed it.

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Sakura heard three short taps on the door, followed by a louder one. The usual code that Naruto and Gaara used. Standing from the chair she had been reading in, she picked up Gaara's gun, glancing over to his unconscious form before going to the door. She was pretty sure it was Naruto, but she wasn't going to take any chances. Not when Gaara was weakened like this.

She pulled back the curtains on the door to see Naruto there, looking concerned but otherwise healthy. She quickly unlocked the door and let him in.

"How is he?" Naruto asked he stepped into the room, his eyes going immediately to the form of his friend lying on the bed.

"Unconscious. One of the bullet wounds was infected, but I cleaned it and gave him antibiotics. He should be much better by the time we reach Bucharest," Sakura said, running an assessing, medical eye over Naruto, gauging the alertness of his eyes and the way he moved. "Are you injured too?"

Naruto shrugged, noticing the gun she held in her hand with some amusement. "I had to take another dose of the antidote. I think I was sort of hallucinating. Gaara seemed to be fine even though he had more injuries than I did. Except for the infection, I mean. But the poison didn't seem to bother him as much as it did me."

Sakura nodded, setting the gun down. "I researched the poison they used before I came. I'm not surprised that you needed a double-dose of the antidote. You might end up needing a third. One of the chemicals in it is similar to the set of anesthetics that you have reactions to. Your body is not able to process them as well as others, and it would have had a much stronger effect. I'm actually surprised that it wasn't worse."

"Well," Naruto said slightly sheepishly scratching the back of his head. "I attacked Sasuke when I found him in my room. I didn't even recognize him."

Sakura's eyes widened in horror as she realized that the sounds she had heard when passing Naruto's cabin could have been the sounds of Naruto fighting with Sasuke. "Oh, my god! I walked right past your cabin and I heard something, but I thought…" she trailed off, blushing.
Naruto blushed as well, clearly following her train of thought. He coughed. "Well, um, we...uh...we figured things out eventually, so..."

Sakura blinked, then let out an uncharacteristic giggle. "Oh, ok. Well, I'm... glad things... worked out?"

Naruto sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face. "I don't know. Sakura... why did you guys come here? If you had enough information to find us, you must know the trouble we're in. Why did you and Sasuke get involved? Even if you were trying to warn us, which I totally appreciate-" Sakura cut him off.

"You went to Suna for Gaara, even knowing the risks," she stated, looking him dead in the eyes. "Because he's your friend and you love him," Sakura held up her hand, preventing him from interrupting her. "But you two won't let anyone else do the same for you? Why can't you just accept that we want to help you? That we... care for you, too?"

Naruto shifted uncomfortably. Was Sakura... confessing? It had been years since they'd briefly been lovers, and though he still cared for her deeply...he just didn't see her that way anymore. She had become more like a sister to him. "Sakura..." Naruto began cautiously, reaching out and clasping her hand. "I... you know how much I care about you right? And we've known each other for years now, but..."

She smacked him over the head. "Not you, you idiot," Sakura said, her eyes dancing with laughter as she saw the relief flood over him. Then he slowly blinked, glancing at the man lying unconscious on the bed, and comprehension lit his face. He looked back at a blushing Sakura.

He didn't know if Gaara would ever be ready for a relationship, much less a sexual one given his past.

Sakura could read the conflicting emotions in him eyes. "I know he doesn't see me that way. The he doesn't see anyone like that. I just..." she trailed off as she turned to the sleeping red head. "Anyway, I'm being realistic about it. It's not like I'll never date anyone else," she said.

"Like that Kiba guy?" he asked.

"What?! No, Kiba's practically my brother!"

Naruto held his hands up in mock surrender. "Ok, ok... I just... I know how hard it is."

Sakura blew out a breath, but then smiled. Naruto grinned, then flicked the tip of her nose. "Well, I guess that explains all the free medical care we've gotten over the years."

Sakura snickered and rolled her eyes. "No. I would have done that anyway."

"He's going to need friends now. You... you know what we did, right?"

Sakura nodded slowly. "I know that you killed General Kazekage."

Naruto looked at her. "Gaara did. Gaara killed Kazekage Sabaku."

Sakura's eyes widened as the pieces fell into place. In the reports she'd read, the man's last name had not been mentioned. So then Gaara...

Naruto saw her connecting the dots. "Yeah. Gaara's... doing okay with it, all things considered." He looked to his friend, sleeping on the bed. "He didn't have a choice when it all went down, but I
would guess it's not an easy thing...to kill a parent. Even a horrible one."

Sakura's face had darkened, her eyes staring off blankly. "No," she said distantly. "No, it's not."

Naruto looked at her, but decided not to press. They all had secrets in their pasts that they kept closed. Sakura finished checking Naruto over and said he needed to rest and watch for infection, but otherwise seemed to be ok.

They agreed that she would stay and monitor Gaara's condition, and come get Naruto as soon as he woke up.

Naruto pulled her close into a quick hug. "Thank you, Sakura," he murmured against her hair. "You are a good friend. To the both of us."

She nodded. She would be happy with that. It would be enough.

It would have to be.

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Naruto returned to his cabin, and was surprised to see a slightly disheveled Sasuke sitting on the window seat, looking out into the darkness as the train passed through a relatively uninhabited stretch of land.

"Sasuke?" Naruto asked hesitantly.

Sasuke looked over at him, a drink in his hand. "You were shot in the chest three times."

Naruto closed the door behind him, locking it. "Well, I was wearing a vest, so -"

He could feel the anger radiating off the dark-eyed man but didn't understand the source of it. He slowly walked towards Sasuke, noticing his slightly flushed cheeks and the nearly empty glass in front of him. "Are you... drunk?" Naruto asked.

"Not yet, but I'm working on it," Sasuke said bitterly, swallowing what was left of his drink.

"Um... why?"

"I saw the vest. And the three fucking holes in it, one dead center."

"Well, yeah... but that's why I wore the vest. All it left was a bruise," Naruto explained slowly, struggling to understand why Sasuke was so angry.

"And what if they'd aimed for the head instead of the chest, moron? What if they'd used hollow points? Was this really worth dying for? Whatever this...," Sasuke gestured angrily. ".. is? Jesus, Naruto, if you need money, you can just ask. You don't need to get yourself killed for whatever shit Jiraiya or the CIA offered to pay you."

Naruto stopped short, feeling his own anger spark slightly, but trying to fight it down. "I'm not a mercenary. No one paid me to do this. This was personal."

Sasuke grabbed the bottle and poured himself another drink. "Personal?" he sneered. "Well that's just fucking great. And what was it between us then. Business?"

"Sasuke -"
"No, Naruto. Tell me. What was so personal about killing some warlord in a country that you've never even been to? And yes, I had Suigetsu check."

"Sasuke... If you had Suigetsu looking into it as much as it seems, then you know who Gaara is. I've known Gaara since I was nine years old. I found him when he was about to be executed by the pimp his father had sold him to."

Sasuke's eyes widened slightly at that, several things about Gaara's aversion of physical contact and the nature of his relationship with Naruto clicked into place.

"We were both on the run. My family was dead, and his might as well have been. We had no money, no family, no papers... we didn't even speak much English," Naruto continued, thinking back to that vulnerable, terrifying time in his life. "We lived off the streets. We protected each other. We lived off the streets. We protected each other. I've killed for him, and he's killed for me. He's my family, Sasuke," Naruto said, trying to explain what the redheaded man meant to him. The lengths they would go for each other.

Naruto met Sasuke's gaze, and he swallowed at the intensity of the emotion he read there. "I know. And I never wanted that. Sasuke, Gaara and I are the way we are because it was the only way to survive. We were thrown into that life. You have a choice. You have options. I don't want you to be like us. Even if that means I can't... have you."

"That's right, Naruto," Sasuke lashed out "I am supposed to have options. But you keep trying to make the fucking decisions for me. I can make my own choices. I knew exactly what I was doing when I cut Orochimaru's throat," Sasuke cupped his hand around Naruto's throat. "I was fully aware of the likely consequences of my actions, and ready to face them. Even though I appreciate what you did, you have to stop pretending like you know what matters most to me. Not everything is your decision to make. If you don't want me, then walk away. But I will be the one to make decisions about my career and my safety and what I'm willing to risk. Not you."

Their gazes locked, Sasuke's dark and angry, Naruto's slightly shocked. Sasuke stepped back, putting some space between them before he escalated things further. He grabbed his glass then drained it in one swallow. It was the most he'd ever heard Sasuke say outside of the mandatory campaign speeches, and Naruto found himself at a loss for words at how to respond...

"Sasuke, I didn't... I was only -" Naruto began but Sasuke wasn't finished.

"Especially when you don't even have all the information to make the decisions."

"Okay," Naruto began in a placating tone. "So if there are things I need to know, then tell me."

"Don't patronize me, Naruto. How would you like it if I decided that Tobi was too dangerous for you to take on due to your untreated PTSD, and I had you institutionalized while I went after him with Shisui? Because I wanted to 'keep you safe'. You'd be pissed as hell."

Naruto felt his temper flare. He was trying to be patient, but Sasuke evidently wanted a fight. At this point, Naruto wasn't averse to giving him one. "It's not the same thing, Sasuke, and you fucking know it. Tobi is after me. It has nothing to do with you. It's my fight. Not yours."

"It's personal, right?" Sasuke sneered.

"Of course it's personal! The guy killed my parents right in front of me and has been hunting me for years. Yeah it's fucking personal!" Naruto was shouting, and at this point he didn't care. The walls on the train were thick, and any sounds would be muffled by the constant rumble of the train over the
tracks.

"Well maybe it's personal for me, too. Tobi put Shisui in the hospital after telling him he plans to kill Itachi and me as well."

Naruto jerked back, fear pumping through him. "What?"

"That's right," Sasuke said, seeing Naruto's eye widen with panic and guilt. "Jiraiya invited Itachi and me to your little 'secret meeting' with Kabuto and Sarutobi. He wanted to pressure me into giving him access to Suigetsu to hack into the government systems and legitimize the Jinchuuriki program. But he didn't know that Tobi had taken over the identity of a Japanese cop he'd killed, and was working with Kakashi at the department. Tobi showed up just as Itachi and I were loosening the air vent to let you out that night."

"He promised me he wouldn't involve you. That fucking asshole," Naruto's anger at Jiraiya didn't quite drown out the fear that Tobi would make good on his threat to kill Sasuke and Itachi.

"Tobi had a special greeting for me," Sasuke said, brushing his fingers over Naruto's stomach the same way that Tobi had in the alley. Naruto shuddered, and squeezed his eyes shut to force back the memories that threatened to overtake him.

"Sasuke, don't."

Sasuke didn't let up. "He told me he'd see me again. And he attacked Kakashi and then ran off when Shisui appeared as well. Shisui chased him, but Tobi managed to stab him before disappearing again."

"Kakashi and Shisui... are they ok?" Naruto asked.

"Yes, for now," Sasuke said brutally. "But running away isn't going to protect anyone anymore, Naruto. Not to mention the fact that - despite all your skills - you are singularly ill equipped to confront this guy. If you try to track him down and face him alone you will lose. And Itachi and I are not going to just sit around and wait for him to come to us. I'd rather work together with you, but we will do it separately if you disappear."

"Fuck," Naruto said, leaning against the wall and raking his fingers through his hair.

Sasuke was silent, watching Naruto's reaction.

"Look, what do you want from me, Sasuke? You want me to say I'll come back and help you find Tobi? Fine. It looks like I don't have much of a choice, though by the sound of it I'll be more dead weight than actual help," Naruto said bitterly. "You want me to say we can still fuck while we hunt for him? I don't know if I can do that, Sasuke. It was hard enough to walk away from you the first time. There's no place for us together, not with my history and your future. What do you fucking want from me?"

Sasuke stepped closer to Naruto, until their bodies were almost touching, his eyes dark and flashing with anger. "What do I want from you? I think my being here should make that pretty obvious."

"Well then I guess I'm just stupid, Sasuke. Because I honestly don't know. I started off just doing security for you. You wanted to have sex, so we had sex. But there's nowhere for us to go from here. If anyone found out about us, your career would be over. I don't want to be the one who brings you down. And I also don't want to be your dirty little secret on the side while you have some sort of public relationship with someone more acceptable," Naruto spat out. "Stop pretending this is something that it isn't!"
"Who says a relationship with you would ruin my career?" Sasuke's voice rose to match Naruto's. "I told you I can fix your history. It will make all your past actions 'sanctioned'. I agreed to do it for all the Jinchuurikis under the condition that the program was deactivated. You'll all start with a clean slate. But doing all these suicide missions ends."

Naruto let out a short, hollow laugh. "No matter how good your hacker is, there's no way to scrub it all clean. And even if you did, how would that make me an acceptable counterpart to someone like you? I barely finished high school, and not even under my own name. I'm... I have other issues as well," Naruto said swallowing, thinking back to his breakdown when Tobi had attacked him in the subway. It was only one part of the damage that resided in his head, and he knew it. "I don't think I will ever be 'normal', Sasuke. I have no employment history, no credit history, no apartment... I can fit everything I own into two duffle bags. Even if I'm not a criminal, the press would have a field day with you hooking up with someone like me. You need to find someone who can fit in your life. Someone like the person they think you're already seeing," Naruto said, unable to keep the accusation out of his voice.

"You are a fucking idiot. Karin decided that hinting at a relationship between us would help Kabuto have a harder time finding a motive for his allegations that I killed Orochimaru. It was just for PR."

"And that's exactly my point! You had to pretend to be with someone else in order to hide a relationship with me," Naruto's eyes narrowed. "But if we were actually together, there is no way in hell I would let you belong to someone else in public. I don't do things halfway, Sasuke," Naruto had shifted forward aggressively, and Sasuke had to fist his hands to keep from grabbing Naruto and throwing him on the bed. How could the blond not see that they already belonged only to each other? But Naruto was continuing, "Don't make this harder than it has to be. We can deal with Tobi together. But that's it."

"No," Sasuke growled. He'd had enough of this bullshit. Naruto was in denial, and Sasuke was going to end it.

"No?" Naruto asked, his voice slightly mocking.

"I'm not letting you go again, Naruto. I will handle Kabuto. And I will handle the press. But you are not fucking leaving me again 'for my own good'. No one gets to make that call for me," Sasuke slammed Naruto back against the wall, his eyes boring into Naruto's as though daring him to disagree with him.

"So what are you saying, Sasuke? Are you seriously considering being in a public relationship with someone like me?" Naruto was still burning with anger and pain at having to go through severing his ties with Sasuke all over again. He had said the words mockingly, assuming Sasuke would laugh and say something about how that would never happen. But instead, Naruto felt his eyes trapped by Sasuke's gaze, and the dead certainty he saw there of what Sasuke wanted. Sasuke wasn't talking about Naruto being his piece on the side. Sasuke seemed to be saying... something completely impossible.

"Not someone like you," Sasuke said, lowering his mouth to hover just above Naruto's. "You."

Naruto tried to keep his thoughts together, knowing that this was a conversation he needed to be paying attention to. But he could feel Sasuke's fingers gripping the front of his shirt, feel the heat from Sasuke's breath across his cheek, feel the possessiveness radiating off the hard body that was brushing against his. It made it really hard to do anything other than breathe.

"Why?" Naruto gasped out as Sasuke's tongue traced along the edge of his jaw. "We don't know each other all that well when it comes down to it. There's a lot about my past that -"
Sasuke closed his mouth over Naruto's, thrusting his tongue in. Naruto could taste the alcohol on Sasuke's lips. He sucked on them hungrily.

Sasuke reached out and circled his fingers around Naruto's wrists, closing his fingers around them in a harsh grip. "We'll have plenty of time to catch up on the details. I'll need to make cover stories for them eventually. But none of it will matter. I already know that I'm not letting you go," Sasuke said, his voice seeming to soak through Naruto's skin.

Naruto stopped trying to fight it. He wanted Sasuke. He knew there were things in Sasuke's past that he didn't know about, but honestly he didn't care what they were any more than Sasuke seemed to care about his past. If Sasuke were willing to risk it all to try to have a future together, then who was Naruto to walk away? He had way less to lose than the councilman. Sasuke had been right. In the end, it was up to Sasuke to decide what he was willing to risk. Naruto had no right to make the call of whether Sasuke's career ambitions or their relationship mattered more.

But he did know that if he was going to be in the Uchiha's life, he would not simply be a passive observer. "Alright," Naruto breathed out, his hands wrapping around the back of Sasuke's neck as his lips trailed down the pale column of flesh. "Ok, you win," he smiled darkly at the satisfied groan from Sasuke's lips. "But I am taking over your security from Shisui. If anyone from my past or yours tries to take you down, I will be the one who kills them. Not you. Not Shisui. You are mine to protect, now, Sasuke."

Sasuke lifted his head and met Naruto's gaze, reading the lethal intent in his lover's gaze. The knowledge that this man would kill for him, and could do so with unparalleled skill. And fuck did that turn Sasuke on.

Unable to articulate any sort of response to Naruto's statement, Sasuke simply crushed their mouths and bodies together, desperate for more of everything. Frustrated with the insufficient contact, he slid his hands up to grab the hem of Naruto's shirt and ripped it off. His gaze caught on the three bruises, one directly above Naruto's heart and he froze.

The bullet would have gone dead center through the blonde's heart. Sasuke traced his finger over the bruise, then laid his hand flat to feel the strong pulse beneath it. He closed his eyes briefly, trying to shut out the image of what so easily could have happened.

"Sasuke…" Naruto began, but Sasuke's mouth stopped his again. Then Sasuke's lips were trailing down, following the path his fingers had taken, gently caressing the bruised flesh with his tongue. He trailed his lips over to close around one of Naruto's nipples, relishing the way it pebbled to hardness beneath his lips. Sasuke's fingers trailed down over Naruto's taut abs, and he felt the muscles tense beneath his fingers.

"Fuck, Sasuke," Naruto gasped, stepping back under the gentle assault. Sasuke took a step forward, smirking as blue eyes widened when Naruto felt the edge of the bed his the back of his knees. Sasuke kept moving forward, pressing Naruto slowly down onto the bed.

"I thought we were going to… ahn… talk," Naruto choked out as Sasuke's mouth settled again on Naruto's other nipple. He lowered his body over Naruto's, and smiled darkly when he felt the hard shaft in Naruto's jeans straining against his own.

"No more talking," Sasuke slid his hands down Naruto's body, feeling how tight and perfect the muscles felt beneath the smooth, tan skin. He thumbed the button of Naruto's jeans open, and unzipped them just enough the he could push the fabric down to rest his thumbs on the sharp cut of Naruto's hip bones. He held the tan hips still as Naruto writhed beneath him trying to get more friction.
For once, Sasuke wanted to take his time. He wanted to taste and savor every sensitive spot on Naruto's body. He had come so close to losing him. Naruto was here, and he was alive. And Sasuke was going to make sure he stayed that way. He had missed Naruto more than he had been able to admit to himself. And all he wanted now was to indulge himself - to re-memorize every angle, every dip, every cut of his lover's body. He wanted to find every spot that made Naruto suck in a breath, every place that made him groan, every motion that would make him cum.

He slid the tip of his tongue down over the ridges of Naruto's abs to swirl in his navel. Naruto let out a breathless laugh, finding the feeling incredibly erotic but also slightly ticklish. Goosebumps raced across his skin as Sasuke blew across the wet flesh. Naruto threaded his fingers into Sasuke's hair, hoping that the talented mouth would head down where Naruto was beginning to get desperate for some friction, but instead Sasuke was tracing his tongue over Naruto's side, lips brushing against the small cuts and scratches that covered his skin there.

Naruto let out a whimper in frustration. Neither he nor Sasuke usually bothered with a lot of foreplay, not having the patience for it. What was between them was too explosive for that. Naruto's fingers tightened painfully in Sasuke's hair, yanking the dark head up.

"Stop playing around," Naruto growled.

Sasuke's hooded eyes gleamed with dark amusement and arousal. He loved the power he held over Naruto in this way. The fact that someone so dangerous allowed him to do the things they did. "No. After having to wait this long, I am going to take my time."

Naruto narrowed his eyes dangerously. "Don't fuck with me, Uchiha. I let you take the lead only because I want to," Naruto flipped them over, pinning Sasuke beneath him. "But I won't always let you have it."

Sasuke felt his lust spike at Naruto's words. He smirked, arching up against Naruto. "But then I wouldn't get to show you what I think about the fact that my lover just overthrew the government of a third world country," Sasuke said, taking Naruto's hand and placing it over his straining erection.

Naruto's eyes crinkled in amusement at Sasuke's candor. He'd really need to get his boyfriend drunk more often. The word caught in his head. Boyfriend. He'd never allowed himself to have a serious relationship. The thought of doing so now was both exhilarating and terrifying. He leaned down, tracing the shell of Sasuke's ear with his tongue and taking satisfaction at the shiver it evoked. "Does it make you hard, Sasuke, to think about it?"

"Ugh, god, you have no fucking idea," Sasuke said, panting as Naruto pulled Sasuke's wrists over his head while slowly sliding his hips over Sasuke's.

Naruto traced his lips along Sasuke's throat, running the tip of his tongue along the pulse point at the base of the throat before slowly mouthing his way back up to just behind Sasuke's ear. "Do you want it gentle like this, Sasuke? Is this how you like it?" Naruto brushed his lips back and forth gently across Sasuke's before slowly pressing their mouths open and sliding his tongue in.

Sasuke was breathing like he'd been running a marathon. They both still had their pants on, but he felt like he was about to cum just from Naruto kissing him. "Naruto," Sasuke said, not wanting it to end too quickly but not able to control the tremors that were starting to wrack his body. "Please, let me," Sasuke said. "This time, I just need to… god I just…"

Naruto did a poor job concealing his grin as he slowly pulled down Sasuke's jeans while Sasuke took off his shirt. Naruto sat up, looking down with a hooded gaze at the sight of Sasuke's body laid out on the bed, the flesh uniformly pale except for the red cock standing rampantly between his
thighs, already dripping with arousal.

Sasuke looked back at him, his eyes straying to the unfastened jeans that hung low on Naruto's hips. "Off," he ordered.

Naruto's grin didn't fade as he slowly pulled down his jeans and tossed them to the floor. Sasuke propped himself up on his elbows, shifting his legs slightly wider apart as he watched Naruto strip.

"Come here," Sasuke said, his voice low.

Naruto raised a brow, but complied, walking over to where Sasuke now sat at the edge of the bed. He hissed as Sasuke's hand closed around his shaft, and he had to brace a hand on the pale shoulder to keep himself steady. Sasuke smoothly slid to the floor, pivoting Naruto so Naruto's back was to the bed with Sasuke kneeling before him. He pulled on Naruto's slim hips, guiding him to sit on the bed while he ran his tongue along Naruto's inner thigh.

The blond sat down, immediately arching his back as Sasuke's mouth began a slow assault on Naruto's sensitive skin, laving with his tongue then scraping with his teeth. When Naruto's knee slammed into Sasuke's side, Sasuke merely grunted before shifting his attention to the other thigh, his hands holding Naruto's hipbones tightly, preventing him from altering their positions or thrusting upward.

"Goddammit, Sasuke!" Naruto said. "Enough fucking foreplay!"

Sasuke snickered, despite the fact that his own cock was dripping steadily at the sight of Naruto's state of arousal. Naruto was just about to shove Sasuke to the floor with his foot when Sasuke's mouth finally closed around him.

"Oh, god, fuck yes!" Naruto's head fell back as Sasuke began to suck, sliding his mouth all the way down Naruto's shaft with surprising skill. Naruto fought to keep his eyes open so he could watch the erotic sight of the councilman on his knees sucking him off. Naruto shivered at the dark lust and heat in the glazed eyes looking up at him.

Naruto arched up into wet heat of Sasuke's mouth, spreading his knees wider and feeling the tension coiling in his stomach, knowing he was going to cum soon if Sasuke kept going.

"Sasuke, I'm -" Sasuke sucked harder, shifting them both back on the bed as he slid his hand around to Naruto's entrance. It had been less than two hours since they'd had sex, so Naruto was already partially prepped. Sasuke slid two fingers in, remembering exactly how much to curve his fingers to hit Naruto's prostate. Naruto arched up in a silent scream as he came. Sasuke swallowed some, then pulled off allowing the rest to spray on his chest and stomach. Naruto looked at his cum beading on the ivory flesh and felt a surge of primal possession at the sight.

Sasuke had managed to find the condoms and lube from his bag while Naruto had been checking on Gaara, and he grabbed them from off the nightstand as Naruto watched him with lazy eyes.

"I'm not done with you yet," Sasuke said. "So don't fall asleep on me."

Naruto gave him a crooked grin. "Why would I be tired? It's not like I've been busy or anything these last few days."

Sasuke felt a smile tug on his lips. "No, you definitely haven't been up to anything strenuous. Just the usual tourist activities." Sasuke knelt back down on the bed, running his hands slowly up and down Naruto's flanks.
Naruto subtly shifted his legs further apart. "Seems like you're the lazy one here," Naruto said, then he dropped his gaze to the nearly purple erection hanging heavily between Sasuke's thighs. "Though not all of you is looking lazy right now."

"You'll get used to mixing up the pace," Sasuke said, lifting Naruto's leg by the knee and lowering his mouth slowly suck at the sensitive skin at the back of the joint. Naruto shivered at the sensation, his body still over sensitized from his recent orgasm.

"You'll have to get used to some mixing up as well," Naruto said, watching Sasuke with growing curiosity as he saw a dark gleam in the watchful eyes.

"I'm not necessarily averse to that," Sasuke said.

Naruto hadn't thought he would be able to recover that quickly, but at Sasuke's words, his dick stirred to life again. Sasuke smirked at the reaction. "I see that idea appeals to you."

Naruto hooked his legs around Sasuke's body, pulling him closer. "You appeal to me."

"Hn," Sasuke said, looking pleased. Naruto arched up, rubbing their cocks together. Sasuke's eyes closed and his body tensed, earning a chuckle from Naruto.

"That close already?"

Sasuke's eyes narrowed. "Don't get so smug," he said, lowering his head and running his tongue along Naruto's collar bone. "You'll be cumming again before I do."

Naruto arched a brow, but Sasuke was already turning him over. Naruto felt Sasuke pulling his hips back, guiding him to a kneeling position. He felt Sasuke's tongue moving along his spine while the pale hand made lazy strokes along Naruto's shaft. He heard the sound of a condom wrapper being opened, and assumed that Sasuke was finally getting serious. But instead of driving into him, Sasuke shifted further back, keeping his tongue and hands working over Naruto's body.

"Jesus, Sasuke! What the hell? Are we doing this or not?" Naruto joked, but he honestly was a little puzzled by the gentler touches that seemed almost… affectionate. Somehow it made him feel more vulnerable than the hard fucking they usually indulged in, and he wasn't sure he completely liked the feeling.

But before he had time to think more about it, Sasuke's tongue was swirling at the base of his spine, and the hand left Naruto's cock to grip his ass. Sasuke nudged Naruto's knees further apart as Naruto realized what Sasuke had in mind. He felt the wet heat of Sasuke's tongue around the tight ring of muscles before Sasuke plunged his tongue in.

Naruto's arms buckled under the sensation and fell to his forearms, his forehead resting on the bed. Sasuke drove his tongue in and out, swirling it around and flexing it until Naruto was fully hard and dripping, but growing frustrated with the relative gentleness of the sensation.

"Sasuke…" Naruto said, frustration lacing his voice. "Enough already. Please just… fuck!"

Sasuke had lifted his head and drove his cock in with one thrust, hard enough to make them both groan.

Sasuke held himself still, relishing the feel of Naruto closed around them with the taste of him still on his tongue.

"Sasuke, don't wait. Just do it. I want you to -"
Sasuke pulled his hips back and slammed into Naruto full force. "Is that what you want, Naruto?"

Naruto pushed back against him, throwing a glare over his shoulder. "I just don't want you treating me like I'm made of fucking glass just because I got a little hurt."

Sasuke's eyes widened slightly in surprise, and he slowly pulled back before equally slowly pushing back in, making sure he angled himself right to brush against Naruto's prostate.

"I know you're not made of glass," Sasuke said, his teeth clenching as he tried to go as slow as possible.

"Then… ahnn… what the hell is this?" Naruto said as Sasuke continued his slow, deep thrusts.

"This is me… showing you… that you are mine," on the last word, Sasuke slammed into Naruto, lifting his hips to go as deep as possible.

"Oh, fuck, S'ke," Naruto choked out as Sasuke's control broke and they fell into a brutal pace. Sasuke grabbed one of Naruto's legs roughly, lifting it up over his shoulder as Naruto angled his hips slightly to allow Sasuke even deeper penetration.

"Oh, god, Naruto, I…" Sasuke ran out of breath, and whatever he had been about to say was lost in the escalation of the force of their bodies coming together again and again. Naruto dug his nails into the sheets as Sasuke arched back and they both came in shuddering waves before Sasuke collapsed on the bed next to Naruto, panting and sheened with sweat.

Naruto hadn't gotten his breath back, but it didn't stop him from pulling Sasuke down into a deep kiss, growling as he tasted the faint traces of himself on Sasuke's tongue. They lay there, simply looking at each other, knowing that their relationship had changed now. They were answerable to each other in a way they hadn't been before. And it was a new experience to both men, who had been used to living on their own terms up to this point.

"So…" Naruto began. "What's the plan when we get back to New York?"

Sasuke slid his arm under Naruto's shoulders and pulled him close. He knew that for Naruto to agree to dealing with Tobi together was a huge show of trust. One that he would make sure he lived up to.

"Kakashi has been busy getting information on Tobi's contacts there. But once Tobi knows you're back in town…" Sasuke trailed off. They both knew that Tobi would come to him.

Naruto looked thoughtfully off to the side, considering what his best options were in this situation.

"You should take Nara up on his offer," Sasuke said, his voice unusually subdued.

Naruto took a moment to remember who that was, then tensed. This was not something he was comfortable about discussing. He pulled back slightly from Sasuke, but Sasuke's grip tightened, keeping him in place. "What, to make me more presentable?" Naruto said, his voice angry and brittle.

Sasuke kept his gaze locked on Naruto's, easily reading the insecurity he saw in the blue eyes. He had known that this conversation would not be easy. "No, moron. Half the congress has shrinks on retainer. I mean have Nara help you so that when you do confront Tobi, you have a chance of doing so without getting trapped in a flashback."

Sasuke could feel the tension emanating from Naruto's frame. He knew it would be hard for him to face this. But he also knew that it was the weakness most likely to get Naruto killed if he didn't at...
least try.

After a few minutes, Naruto spoke, his voice strained. "There's no magic wand for this, Sasuke. I could go to a shrink for years and have nothing change. And we don't have years."

Sasuke didn't dispute it. "I know. But we should at least try."

Somehow, the 'we' that Sasuke had casually used was almost Naruto's undoing. He swallowed convulsively. This was a part of himself that he didn't like to face. He didn't know how Sasuke would feel if he knew the full darkness that resided inside him.

"Sasuke…" Naruto began. "I've… lost control and… done things."

Sasuke nuzzled against Naruto's neck. "I know."

Naruto pushed back with more force. "No, you really don't know. I… there was a man who used to be Tobi's partner and I…" Naruto trailed off, not even sure he could put into words what he had done to Zetsu.

Sasuke looked back at him calmly. "He attacked you and you beat him to death then eviscerated him. Suigetsu got the medical reports. I saw the photos."

Naruto froze. "I didn't… I beat him, but I didn't eviscerate him. I… I didn't even have a knife. He had one. When I left, he was… bloody… and… dead. But I didn't cut him."

"Well, he was cut when the police got there," Sasuke said, eyeing Naruto closely as the blond's breathing started to escalate. Naruto sat up and Sasuke slowly rubbed his hand up and down along Naruto's back.

"Do you remember what the cuts looked like? The pattern?" Naruto asked, already knowing the answer.

Sasuke thought back, and cursed that he hadn't realized it sooner. "They were focused around the abdomen. Five shallow cuts, but then one longer one."

Their eyes met, and they were both thinking the same thing. Tobi had been there. He had watched Naruto kill Zetsu.

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to be continued…

(and yes, there will be NaruSasu before the end. you are warned)
Author's note: I know many of you were curious about it, but there will not be an explicit romance involving Gaara with anyone in this fic. His character is complex and deserves a story of its own, and I am not going to try to jam it in here right at the end. The scenes with Sakura were set up to explain why she was willing to come so far to help them, and also to show that Gaara will not (unless he chooses to) be alone. Not that Naruto would ever abandon him to be with Sasuke no matter what, ofc. Just to show that there are people in addition to Naruto who see the value in Gaara.

Thank you again to BriEva for being my beta on this chapter, and also WordWriter for reading through it as well. Chapters take me a bit longer at the end of a fic because I need to keep re-reading the whole thing to make sure I end on the right tone and don't leave something out, and this fic is a beast in terms of length (I am never writing anything this long again OMFG), so it is even harder. But there should be 4 chapters left, including the epilogue. Unless I get too wordy and have to split a chapter again, but I am trying really hard not to do that.

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Sasuke shifted slightly in the bed, wondering for a moment what had roused him from his sleep. The room was dark and he could hear the soft sound of Naruto's breathing as he slept. His body felt tired and heavy, the physical result of his reconciliation with Naruto. Just the thought of the endless hours they had spent together had Sasuke's blood heating. He relaxed against the warm body of his lover, grateful that he hadn't woken to find it all a dream. God knows he had had enough of those, always waking feeling alone and hollow. He tilted his head down, letting his lips skim lightly across the back of Naruto's neck as he breathed in the scent of him, and felt the solid presence of him in the bed.

A soft series of taps sounded against the door of their cabin, and Sasuke realized that this was the sound that had woken him in the first place. He carefully unwrapped his arms from Naruto's waist, trying not to wake him. Sasuke had kept him up well past what he had intended to the night before, and he felt slightly guilty as he saw the lines of exhaustion in his lover's face. A glance at the clock told him that they still had almost two hours before they were scheduled to arrive in Bucharest.

Sasuke grabbed his boxers from the floor and pulled them on. He approached the door cautiously, lifting the curtain to see who was there, not surprised to see Gaara. The redhead standing with his hand concealed in his pocket, scanning the empty hallway. Whatever injuries Naruto's friend had suffered, he was looking much better now.

Sasuke opened the door, allowing the man to enter. Gaara's hairless brows rose in amusement as he took in Sasuke's disheveled appearance, noting Naruto still dead asleep on the obviously well-used bed. But he made no remark as he entered the room.

The two men eyed each other briefly, but there was no hostility in their gaze.

Gaara spoke first. "I was wondering whether your pride would keep you from going after Naruto. He seemed pretty sure it was over when we left New York."

Sasuke narrowed his eyes. He understood the bond between Naruto and Gaara a bit better now, and he knew that Gaara had never been Naruto's lover. But the bluntness of the words from a relative stranger put him on edge, especially when it hit a bit too close to home. He recalled with perfect clarity the bitter anger he had felt when Naruto had left, and he knew that - had Jiraiya not had him attend that late-night meeting with Kabuto - he very well might have allowed Naruto to walk away.
And probably regretted it for the rest of his life.

Gaara's eyes drifted back to the sleeping man in the bed. "You know what's waiting for him in New York. This isn't a kiddie ride we're on, here."

"I'm aware of that. I've already had the pleasure of meeting Tobi in person. And I've seen Naruto when he gets trapped in the past. I'm not just along for the ride on this."

Gaara was slightly surprised at the news that Sasuke had met Tobi and was still around to talk about it. As far as he knew, Naruto was the only person in over a decade to knowingly see the killer's face and live. But as he thought about how Sasuke had dispatched Orochimaru, some of the surprise faded. This was not a man who was afraid to get his hands dirty if the need arose. Which was a good thing if Sasuke planned on staying involved in Naruto's life for any significant amount of time. Gaara looked at Sasuke with a grudging flicker of respect. Clearly there was more to this man than his money. "Maybe you're a good match for Naruto after all," Gaara said consideredly.

Sasuke took the words for the compliment that they were. "Maybe. As long as Naruto doesn't decide to play martyr and run off to handle things alone when we get back to New York."

Gaara's lips twitched up in a tiny smile. "Oh, I've ensured he won't be able to do that again."

Sasuke raised an eyebrow in enquiry, but the redhead said nothing, simply turning and walking to the door. "I'll come back when we stop at Bucharest," Gaara said as he opened the door to go back to his own room. He had simply wanted to check in on Naruto, but could tell he was in good hands. Gaara would be glad to get another hour or so of sleep before they arrived in Bucharest.

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They disembarked the train at Nord station in Bucharest. Most of the passengers would be going on a tour of the city, but first they were all shuttled to the Athenée Palace Hotel where they would be spending the night. While the burkas had been good disguises in Istanbul, Naruto and Gaara had agreed they would only draw unwanted attention here. Sakura kept the shawl to cover her hair, but the rest of them dressed casually in jeans and regular shirts, blending in with the tourists as they boarded the shuttle to the hotel.

Shisui was sitting in the hotel lobby looking completely at home amidst the marble columns and crystal chandeliers when they walked in. The two groups made no show of knowing each other, and they simply walked past Shisui and went to the front desk with the other passengers.

Shisui scanned the entry behind them while appearing to talk on the phone as they checked in with the tour group at the front desk. Sasuke was relieved to see that Shisui seemed uninjured from his adventures in Suna. He would not have wanted to face Itachi if something more had happened to Shisui when he had just gotten out of the hospital.

Naruto noticed that Sakura looked dead on her feet as they stood in line to check in. He assumed she had refused to sleep until Gaara's condition had improved, so he wasn't surprised when she excused herself to go to her room as soon as she'd checked in. She was the only one of the group who had never met Shisui, so likely had no idea that there was some serious business about to go down. Naruto was glad he didn't have to come up with some excuse to keep her out of it. She had already crossed the line and put herself at more risk than either he or Gaara were comfortable with. She was a doctor, not a killer.

Naruto dutifully accepted the brochure of the schedule the majority of the passengers would follow for the day-and-a-half they would be spending in Bucharest, fully intending on skipping all of it.
The three men headed over to the elevators and pretending to take no note as Shisui casually walked over and joined them in line at the elevators. With the entire tour group checking in, there was a bit of a wait and they were not alone in the elevator. When Shisui stepped out on the eighth floor, they silently followed him as though just happening to have rooms on the same floor.

Luckily, they were the only ones from their group getting off on that floor, so once the doors to the elevator closed they simply followed Shisui directly to his room.

"How is Itachi?" Sasuke asked as soon as the door had closed behind them. They headed to the small sitting area in the room. Naruto and Sasuke sat on the small sofa, their knees brushing against each other. Gaara and Shisui sat in chairs facing them across a small mahogany coffee table.

"He was hoping that Jiraiya would have been able to reign the CIA yesterday, but they were still dancing around about it. He didn't want to run the risk of giving away your location by flying out here. Your group is scheduled to stay in Bucharest for thirty-six hours. Hopefully things will be sorted out by then. The rooms were booked by the tour group, so online, your individual names don't show up. It's safest to stay here until we get confirmation the CIA have called off the 'kill-on-sight' order."

Sasuke nodded. "Suigetsu will monitor their systems internally to make sure it's really called off and not just lip service to Jiraiya."

Naruto ran his eyes over Shisui, assessing the man's condition. "How are you? Sasuke said you had a run-in with Tobi and landed in the hospital."

Shisui shrugged, casually dismissing his encounter with the international serial-killer. His pride was still slightly smarting from the fact that he'd let the guy get to him. "I'm fine. Though if it were up to Itachi, I'd still be on bed-rest."

"I think that Itachi was more thinking of the bed than the rest," Sasuke said, arching a brow teasingly.

Shisui's expression didn't change, but his cheeks pinkened slightly.

Naruto's eyes widened in amusement as he took in the implication. "Well… I guess… I'm glad that the two of you worked out your differences?"

"That's one way of putting it," Sasuke said, enjoying the rare display of discomfort from his older cousin.

Gaara noted the shadows under Naruto's eyes, and knew that his friend could do with more sleep as well. Especially since who knew what they'd be walking into when they got back to New York. "So for now we just lay low and rest up?"

Shisui and Sasuke exchanged glances.

Naruto frowned. "What?"

"You've heard something more about Tobi?" Gaara asked.

"Let's order room service," Shisui offered. "I assume Sasuke has already explained that we are… involved with the Tobi situation. Before we get back to New York, it would make sense to get all our cards on the table so we all know as much as possible and can make plans on how to draw him out, and what to do once we have him."
Naruto shifted, and both Gaara and Sasuke's eyes immediately pinned him to his seat. Naruto raised his hands in supplication. "What? I didn't say anything!"

Gaara stood and slowly walked toward Naruto, a threatening aura pumping off him. "You don't have to say anything, Naruto. You have the poker-face of a four-year-old, and everyone in this room knows that you are planning on trying to ditch us and draw Tobi out on your own in some stupid notion of 'protecting' us." Gaara had reached Naruto at this point, and was leaning over him. "And I just wanted to remind you exactly what I told you would happen if you ever tried that."

Naruto looked at the flat green eyes of his best friend. And swallowed hard. He put the palm of his hand against Gaara's chest and shoved the man back gently. "I get it. I won't try to run off unless everything else falls through."

Gaara's eyes narrowed dangerously, but he smiled slightly. "It won't matter either way. I'm just reminding you of the consequences if you try it."

Naruto looked at his friend warily. "What do you mean it won't matter? What aren't you telling me?"

Gaara's smile widened, sending a small shiver of dread up Naruto's spine before turning and facing Shisui and Sasuke, who were watching the exchange with interest. "So who is going to start this 'show and tell' first?"

Neither Shisui, Sasuke nor Gaara appeared to be in any hurry to start talking. Not feeling like waiting until they did, Naruto began rattling off all the questions he had in his head in no particular order, figuring they'd just sort it all out as they went. "What were you able to find out about what Tobi is doing now? Is he still in New York? And what about Kabuto? Has the case against Sasuke been dropped? Is Kabuto in jail? Was the medical report Sakura sent over enough? He's the bomber, by the way. And the stalker," Naruto said, looking at Shisui to see if the man had already figured that out.

A snicker from Gaara drew his attention away from the amused expressions Shisui and Sasuke's faces as they tried to process all the words coming out of Naruto's mouth.

"This is Naruto's idea of strategy when he's tired. Don't mind him," Gaara said drily, ignoring Naruto's slight huff. "Naruto, I said 'show and tell', not 'ask and blurt'. Let's take it piece by piece. We have three threats to deal with: Tobi, the Jinchuriki killer, and Kabuto. Assuming that none of those pieces are related for the moment, let's start with Tobi," Gaara said, ignoring Naruto's elbow into his ribs. "Aside from him now seeming to focus on anyone that Naruto is involved with, do we know anything new?"

"We've had no luck in locating him, but Deidara said he heard rumors that Tobi was rounding up associates of some sort. It wasn't clear if it was part of an actual organization, or random thugs," Shisui said.

Naruto looked up, cocking his head to the side as though trying to make sure he was awake enough to be hearing correctly. "Tobi worked with Zetsu in the past, but only because having a partner left him more time to play with his victims. And Zetsu was insanely loyal, so Tobi didn't have to worry about him interfering. But other than that, I'd never heard of him working with anyone. He's not really a 'leader' kind of guy. I can't imagine him being able to get people to work for him. He's totally crazy and unstable. It doesn't make any sense."

Gaara considered what Naruto was saying. "Is Deidara sure that Tobi is the one leading them, or did
he finally just find a group that would take him in?"

"But why would Tobi even want to join up with some random group?" Naruto persisted. "The only thing Tobi likes is killing and making fools out of the police that try to catch him. He doesn't care about money or drugs or anything else. When Zetsu joined Akatsuki, it was because he was interested in making more money on the side. Tobi allowed it as long as it didn't interfere with his fun. Nagato considered trying to recruit Tobi as well, but decided against it after learning more about him. Tobi couldn't be controlled. Unless it's an organization full of psychopaths, I don't see anyone willing to take on the risk of hooking up with him. And even then, I can't imagine it holding together long enough to hit Dei's radar."

"Unless it has to do with whoever is hunting the Jinchuuriki," Sasuke said slowly. "If Tobi is after you, and you're a Jinchuuriki, maybe he joined up with them. They might not know his full background."

Naruto shrugged skeptically. "I guess, but it would surprise me if Tobi thought he needed help. Especially if it comes with the risk of people seeing his face and turning him in. He's always been obsessive about hiding his face."

"But the police know what he looks like now. When he posed as Obito, he couldn't exactly go around wearing a mask. And when it came out that the real Obito had been killed and Tobi had assumed his identity, the police had his prints and picture from their files of his supposed 'transfer'," Shisui said.

Naruto sat back, the implications of that statement sinking in. For most of his life, he'd assumed that the main reason Tobi was hunting him was because Naruto was the only one who could identify him. But that was no longer true. He wondered if Tobi's fixation on him would change because of it or not.

A knock at the door signaled that their food had arrived. The four men were thoughtful as they ate and considered what the possible outcome of Tobi joining up with a larger group of criminals could mean, and the advantage that the police now had of being able to identify him. But without additional information, it still wasn't enough to really plan anything around.

"Has there been any more news on whoever has been taking out members of the Jinchuuriki program?" Naruto asked, moving on to the next point on Gaara's list.

Sasuke shook his head. "All we know is that there have been no further disappearances, and that whoever had been searching the files looking for information on them has stopped. But we don't know who they are, why they were looking in the first place, or whether they've stopped for good."

Gaara frowned, but didn't have anything more to ask.

"So we move on to Kabuto. How do you know that he was the bomber?" Shisui asked Naruto, going back to Naruto's earlier series of statements.

"When I saw him in New York, we were talking about Orochimaru and he was dead certain that there was nothing that linked him to leaking any information from the District Attorney's office. No one would be that certain if they hadn't searched the place thoroughly before the cops did."

Naruto felt Sasuke tense slightly beside him at the reminder of his last trip to New York. He wondered if Sasuke were still angry that he hadn't gone to see him, or if it was more just the reminder of how close they'd all come to being killed.
But Sasuke was keeping his mind focused on the current discussion. "So since the evidence about
the bombing and the stalking was placed at the same time, it had to be him?" Sasuke asked,
following Naruto's train of thought.

Naruto nodded. "But there's no evidence, and the police believed the planted shit that Kabuto put."

"And if you insist it's fake, it could cause problems for Sasuke again because it would open up the
issue of your relationship, giving him motive to kill Orochimaru and you motive to lie for him and
take the fall," Shisui said.

Sasuke's thumb drew down along the side of Naruto's neck at Shisui's words, and Naruto turned to
see dark eyes locked on him. The depth of the emotion in Sasuke's eye made Naruto nearly forget
that there were others in the room.

"Not to mention that if Kabuto is dirty, he probably has people willing to help him destroy any
evidence they do find. Orochimaru owned cops on the force, too. He had his fingers in a lot of pies,
and Kabuto is likely leveraging those connections now," Gaara's voice snapped Naruto's attention
back to the conversation.

"Fuck, I hate that guy," Naruto breathed out, sliding his fingers over his eyes, trying to get his brain
to focus. Fatigue was setting in and strategy had never been his strong suit anyway. All he wanted to
do was drag Sasuke off to the nearest bed and sleep for about twelve hours.

"Why can't I just off Kabuto? It would be much easier than just dancing around like this, trying to
figure out what the guy is going to pull out of his ass next," Naruto said tiredly, looking over at
Gaara clearly hoping he would second this notion.

The redhead sighed, pretty sure that Naruto was joking, but wanting to clarify things just in case.
"This is why you always left the strategy to Konan and Nagato. You have a history with Kabuto. If
you suddenly appear back in town just as he's stirring up trouble for one of your ex-employers and
he winds up dead, someone is going to come knocking at your door. Even the dumbest detective
would figure out that lead. I don't have a history with him, so I'd be the best candidate of the four of
us."

Sasuke almost smirked at the calm way that this topic was being discussed, Shisui looking
consideringly at Naruto and Gaara, clearly weighing the pros and cons of what was being debated.
Sasuke was relieved that Itachi wasn't in the room. Despite his brother's willingness to help Sasuke
deal with Orochimaru, Sasuke was pretty sure that this conversation went far beyond any line that
Itachi would ever consider crossing. It was why they had left Japan and started over in the New
York.

Sasuke had dabbled in illegal activities… getting background information on opponents, trying to be
sure he always knew about any hidden agendas. But that was as far as he'd ever really gone until
Naruto had entered his life. Now, he had not only killed a man and covered up the crime, but he was
sitting down to dinner with two men that the US government temporarily wanted dead, calmly
discussing whether or not to take out an assistant district attorney of the city of New York.

Sasuke sipped his tea, surprisingly ok with it all. But that didn't mean he wasn't going to insert some
sanity back into this discussion. Naruto and Gaara were getting a bit too enthusiastic about discussing
ways to kill the annoying ADA. "No one is going to kill Kabuto. He's being a pain in the ass, but
we've already shut him down twice. It's not worth the risk. Especially not when Jiraiya is in the
process of legitimizing you both. None of that will matter if you get caught doing something stupid
now."
"As long as Kabuto doesn't appear to still be a danger to Sasuke's life anymore, then I agree. We can handle him in other ways," Shisui said after a moment, backing up Sasuke and earning a minor glare from Naruto.

Shisui smirked. It would be amusing to see if Sasuke could ever fully bring Naruto to heel. Shisui rather doubted it. He just hoped that their relationship ran more smoothly than his and Itachi's. "If it comes down to a match of wits and legal strategy between Itachi and Kabuto, Kabuto doesn't have a chance," Shisui said.

"Agreed. Let's find out what the status of things are with him," Sasuke said. He called Itachi and put him on speaker phone as he and Shisui ran through the legal situation with Kabuto, discussing various strategies and approaches, but Naruto largely tuned it out. It wasn't an area he knew anything about. He avoided courts and lawyers with all possible skill and speed. Though given his lover's brother was in the district attorney's office, he realized that that would likely be changing. It was a strange thought, but somehow a comforting one.

There was a feeling of permanence that he'd never really had before. His actions mattered now. What happened to him mattered. He and Gaara had in a way never really expected to live this long in the first place, coming from where they had as children. They had fought to survive, and not really thought about where they were going in the long term. Gaara's father was now dead, and he had a life waiting for him back in Suna with his family. And Naruto… had Sasuke.

He turned, looking at Sasuke, watching the small frown of concentration as he debated some point of law with Itachi. The intensity of Sasuke's focus had always drawn Naruto. He remembered the first seeds of real attraction that he had felt for Sasuke when he had watched him in action dealing with politicians and wiping the floor with them by the sheer power of his intellect and ruthlessly direct approach.

Sasuke felt the heat of Naruto's gaze and turned, pausing mid-sentence before continuing. He held his gaze on Naruto as the discussion continued, not missing a beat in the conversation as he shifted his leg so his knee pressed more firmly against Naruto's. Completely ignoring the conversation going on around him, Naruto spread his knees slightly wider, increasing the contact between his leg and Sasuke's while easing the slight tightness in his pants.

Sasuke arched a brow, amusement and lust showing equally in his eyes. Naruto stretched up, folding his arms behind his head and leaning back, his blue gaze hooded and fixed on Sasuke's.

Neither noticed the amused glance exchanged between Shisui and Gaara at the obvious heat building between the two.

Sasuke's cell phone buzzed, forcing him to break his glance and look down at the number. His brows rose as he checked the message. "Jiraiya was able to convince the CIA to rescind the order. Now we just need to wait for Suigetsu to verify that this is really being carried out. If he is able to confirm the new order was delivered, we can catch a flight back to New York in the morning."

"It's about time," Itachi said, having heard the comment over the phone. "I'll send a car to meet you. Just send me your flight details."

Sasuke agreed, then disconnected.

Gaara sent an amused look as Sasuke slid his hand to rest on Naruto's hip. "I thought you were enjoying the train ride, Uchiha."

"My enjoyment had nothing to do with the train," Sasuke said, tightening his hand on Naruto's hip
and smirking slightly as Naruto rolled his eyes at them. Naruto was secretly pleased that Gaara and Sasuke seemed to be getting along well enough to joke with each other.

Sasuke looked at Naruto. "Let's all go to bed. We might have a long day tomorrow."

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In unspoken agreement, Naruto and Sasuke went to Sasuke's room. Sasuke glanced around the room disinterestedly, noticing the finely appointed furnishings before his gaze settled on the king sized bed. It was decidedly larger than the double they had shared on the train.

He felt Naruto walk up behind him and closed his eyes as he felt his lover press against his back, tan fingers reaching around to slowly undo the buttons of Sasuke's shirt before slipping the fabric free. Sasuke shivered as Naruto's lips brushed a trail across the blades of his shoulders.

"I forgot how hot it was watching you work," Naruto said, his voice low and husky. Sasuke felt his cock harden further at the sound of it.

"You're tired," Sasuke said in a thoroughly unconvincing voice. "You should get some sleep."

Naruto's hands slid over the warm, smooth skin of Sasuke abdomen before dipping lower, palming the erection that was already fully formed between Sasuke's legs. "Now what kind of boyfriend would I be if I didn't at least help you take care of this before I went to sleep?"

Sasuke couldn't do anything but let his head fall back as Naruto slowly undid the fastenings of his jeans, letting his hand slip into Sasuke's boxers while his lips continued to trail teasing kisses over the contours of Sasuke's back.

"Nng," Sasuke groaned, feeling Naruto's erection pressed against him as tan fingers curled around his shaft and slowly began pumping.

"Still want to just to go sleep?" Naruto whispered wickedly against Sasuke's ear.

"You have ten seconds to strip and get on the bed, or I am shredding your clothing," Sasuke growled in response.

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It was sometime later that Sasuke and Naruto lay on the large, hotel bed, still damp from the shower. Naruto's eyes were closing in weariness, the strain of the past week - both physically and emotionally - catching up to him.

He smoothed a hand over Sasuke's stomach as he buried his face in the crook of the pale neck, yawning. Sasuke chuckled, trying to distract himself from the heat of Naruto's calloused hand on his stomach.

Naruto felt the tensing of Sasuke's muscles, and automatically slid his hand further down to where Sasuke was already hardening again. Sasuke grabbed Naruto's wrists, pulling his hand away. "No. You need sleep. I don't want Gaara blaming me when you keel over from exhaustion when we arrive in New York."

"Hmmmm," Naruto sighed, too tired to argue about it, already drifting off to sleep.

Sasuke stroked Naruto's hair as he watched the man slip into almost instant sleep. He drew Naruto's body against his, forcing himself to simply let Naruto sleep. There would be plenty of time for other
things. Hopefully a lifetime. He just wished they had more information about what exactly was waiting for them in New York. Usually, Sasuke gathered every possible fact about his opponents before engaging them. But that would not be an option here. They didn't get to control the timing. Or the outcome.

It was a while before he fell into a restless sleep, knowing that tomorrow they would likely be on their way back to New York. Where a serial killer was looking for them.

Sasuke was standing in the parking lot of his apartment building. All the lights were out, but he could hear the breathing of the person following him. Trying to find him… to find Naruto. Sasuke turned slowly, his katana in his hand. If he could find that man first, he could end this.

He walked slowly, softening his footfalls so they would not give him away.

A sharp sound came from his left, and Sasuke drew in a sharp breath, his body tensing as he turned to face the potential threat. Somehow the darkness seemed to deepen, allowing nothing to be seen in the blackness. He tightened his hand on the hilt of his katana, walking towards the sound he had heard. He could feel a presence near him, a menacing aura, and he knew instinctively that it was searching for Naruto even as Sasuke hunted it.

Sasuke felt something brush against his back, and he jerked back, not having heard anything approach him in the darkness. The touch against his skin was repeated, then slid slowly along down his hip. It was a touch he recognized, and the threat of the person he was hunting receded.

"Naruto," Sasuke said, relaxing into the touch as he felt the warm hand move along his hip, then across his flat stomach. "Nnnngggghhhhh," Sasuke breathed as the hand continued to move, sliding along his thigh, then slowly shifting to the sensitive skin on the inside of his thighs. Sasuke shifted his legs, widening his stance, allowing his lover better access.

A wet heat closed around the head of his now throbbing erection, and Sasuke let his head fall back as pleasure washed over him. All the tension that the other presence had filled him with slowly faded away and was replaced by a growing heat between his thighs.

The wet heat slid further down his shaft, taking all of Sasuke's length inside, and Sasuke felt himself arching up almost helplessly into the pleasure. A soft chuckle emanated from that warm mouth around him, sending vibrations up the length of his dick. Sasuke gasped at the sensation, his eyes slowly opening.

He lifted his head slightly, propping himself up on his elbows as amused, lust-filled blue eyes met his. Naruto's hand replaced his mouth around Sasuke's erection.

"You were having a bad dream. I thought I'd give you a hand. Especially since I basically passed out on you as soon as we reached the bed last night," Naruto pulled Sasuke's shaft back into his mouth.

Sasuke tried to make some sort of appreciative reply, but Naruto had increased the suction, releasing his hold on Sasuke's hips and allowing the councilman to thrust freely, fucking his mouth.

In his relaxed state during sleep, Sasuke had been completely at the mercy of the sensations of Naruto's skilled mouth and hands, and he found himself already at the brink of orgasm, unable to pull himself back. His fingers gripped harshly into Naruto's hair as he arched back and came hard. Naruto continued to suck until every last tremor of climax had finished.

Sasuke lay panting, nearly unable to move from the aftermath of his orgasm. Naruto watched him for
a moment, his gaze heavy with amusement and arousal. Slowly, he levered himself up to lay down next to Sasuke, pulling the slightly dazed man close to him and kissing him deeply, letting Sasuke taste himself on Naruto's tongue. A low sound of pleasure in his throat was all Sasuke could manage in response, but he returned the kiss fiercely.

Naruto adjusted the angle of the kiss, deepening it further before pulling back and brushing his lips across Sasuke's almost tenderly. Sasuke slid his hand along Naruto's jaw, his thumb teasing the underside just above the pulse. He could feel Naruto's erection pressing hard against his stomach, as was not surprised to find his own groin stirring in response.

He wondered vaguely if the compulsive attraction would always be this strong, or if it would subside into something manageable at some point. As he rolled Naruto beneath him, he didn't think he'd ever quench his thirst for this man.

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They lay together, covered with sweat, still getting their breath back. Neither spoke about the dangers awaiting them when they returned to New York, but it hung heavily in the air between them.

Sasuke's phone buzzed, and he flicked it open, reading quickly.

"Suigetsu says the order to kill has been rescinded. He's booked us all on the afternoon flight to New York out of Bucharest."

Naruto met Sasuke's gaze steadily. "It's going to be ok, Sasuke. Don't worry," Naruto said.

Sasuke lay back on the pillows, hoping Naruto's words would prove to be true.

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to be continued

Tobi kills his first victim in the next chapter!
The flight was relatively uneventful. Suigetsu had gotten them business class seats, so they were able to sleep for much of the flight. They arrived in New York to find Kakashi waiting for them after they cleared customs.

"I thought Itachi was sending a car," Sasuke said, checking his phone to see if his brother had left a message.

"He did. I came with it. Given the situation with Tobi, we decided to take you directly into protective custody. Sakura - we've already arranged for things at your work. They are aware of the situation and are fully supportive of anything that reduces the risk of a serial killer showing up at the hospital," he said drily.

Sakura stiffened, annoyed that this had been done without discussing it with her, but Kakashi's last comment brought her up short. Of course. If she were a target, anyone she spent time with now would also be in danger. Which meant not going back to the hospital.

"Fine," she said on a sigh, her eyes flicking to where Gaara and Naruto stood. "But you two better live up to your reputations and kick some ass."

Naruto grinned and Gaara's lips twitched in response.

"When have we ever not lived up to our rep?" Naruto asked cockily, clearly trying to put her at ease.

Sakura just rolled her eyes, but some of the worry had faded a bit from her expression.

"I know it's not ideal. But with any luck it won't be long before things get back to normal again," Kakashi offered. "Sakura, this is officer Yamato. He will take you to a safe house outside of the city. You will not be able to use your cell phone, but we will have ways for you to contact people if needed."

The officer with unusually large eyes stepped forward, picking up Sakura's suitcase. "Please come with me, Dr. Haruno."

Sakura smiled slightly at Naruto and Gaara as she turned and walked off with the officer.

Gaara and Naruto watched her go out the double glass doors and into an unmarked police car. When the car had pulled away safely, they turned their attention back to Kakashi.
Kakashi nodded. "She is safer than the two of you will be."

Naruto nodded. "It was the right call. I don't know what you've 'decided' for the rest of us, but I'm not going into hiding. I've been running from this guy since I was a kid, and I'm done. I'm not going to be stupid about it, but I know he's here. I'm not going to hide until he gives up and disappears somewhere else and I have to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder, waiting for him to come back."

"This isn't the place to discuss this," Sasuke said, noticing both Shisui and Gaara scanning the passersby to be sure no one was paying too much attention to them.

"Agreed," Kakashi said.

"Let's go to my place and discuss this," Sasuke said, picking up his suitcase and heading for the door.

Naruto turned to follow him when a flash of blue hair caught his attention. He turned, his gaze briefly locking on familiar grey eyes. "Konan," Naruto whispered, taking a step towards her, not noticing how Sasuke's gaze locked on his before quickly trying to follow Naruto's line of sight. Naruto hadn't seen her since he'd been shot in the Akatsuki raid and passed out in the holding cell. There had been rumors of her whereabouts, but no matter where he looked he hadn't been able to find her. And with the situation with Orochimaru then Tobi coming up so quickly, he'd had to stop looking for her.

He had seen a flower left on Nagato's grave, and known it had been from her, but other than that he hadn't seen a trace of her. Until now. A family pushing a large cart piled high with suitcases crossed in front of him, briefly obscuring his line of sight to her. Naruto dropped his bag and quickly dodged around them, but the place where Konan had stood before was empty.

"Naruto?" Gaara asked, picking up Naruto's bag and looking at him with some concern.

"Konan," Naruto said, his eyes frantically searching for her. He leapt up onto one of the heat registers near one of the windows, trying to see her through the crowd. There was something about her expression that worried him. She had seemed... upset. Hurt? Angry?

"Fuck!" Naruto said in frustration. She was gone.

"How did she know that you were here?" Sasuke asked, his eyes also scanning the crowd. "This can't be a coincidence."

Naruto shrugged. "Nagato and Konan knew all my aliases. If she were trying to find me, she'd have seen my name pop up on the flight lists. But..." he trailed off.

"If she took the trouble to find you, why didn't she come and talk to you?" Gaara said.

Naruto shook his head. "Because I'm here with a cop?" he said distractedly, still looking around. He couldn't get her expression out of his mind. What had happened?

"I need to talk to Hidan and Dei. Maybe they know something," Naruto said, turning to Sasuke. "Do you... think Itachi can arrange it?" Naruto's voice was hesitant, clearly nervous about asking for a personal favor.

Sasuke took out his phone, already dialing Itachi to set it up.

"The car's waiting," Kakashi reminded them. "We don't want to spend too much time in the open. If
Konan knows you're here, other people might, too. We have to leave."

Naruto looked around in frustration, clearly wanting to keep searching, but a sharp look from Sasuke had him turning to follow as they headed to the black car that was waiting to take them to Sasuke's apartment.

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There were two uniformed police officers behind Juugo's security desk when they arrived. The two officers nodded to Kakashi, taking close note of the four men accompanying him.

"We will have two men stationed here at all times. Given that we know Tobi is targeting you, we aren't going to take chances," Kakashi said. "Not to mention that this is the best shot anyone's had at catching this lunatic in over a decade. Interpol has been brought in. They are running surveillance on the outside and will be providing additional resources to run down leads."

Sasuke noted how Naruto's shoulders tensed at the mention of catching Tobi. He had a pretty good idea about how Naruto envisioned this ending, and none of them included Tobi being alive for capture or Interpol playing a role.

"Those morons better not scare him off," Naruto grumbled.

"Jiraiya is waiting in your apartment. Itachi should be there by now as well," Kakashi said as they entered the private elevator. Sasuke raised an eyebrow that the man had gained entrance without his permission, but Kakashi just smirked. Jiraiya was the Police Commissioner of New York. He could go pretty much where he wanted.

When they entered Sasuke's apartment, Jiraiya was pouring himself a drink at Sasuke's bar.

"I see you've made yourself at home," Sasuke said drily.

Itachi walked out of Sasuke's office at the sound of voices. He was relieved to see both Sasuke and Shisui back and unharmed, though his expression gave nothing away. His gaze lingered on Shisui before turning to the group.

"Well," Jiraiya said, taking a drink from his glass. "I figured I might as well be ready for when you get here. Knowing my two boys here," he gestured with his glass toward Naruto and Gaara, "they are going to go on a balls-to-the-wall manhunt for Tobi as soon as possible. Before that happens, there are some things that we need to discuss."

Sasuke could practically see Naruto bristling.

"No," Naruto said flatly.

Jiraiya raised an eyebrow in amusement, clearly not surprised by the response. "No? But you haven't even heard my offer yet."

"We talked about this before I signed on. I agreed to play by your rules with everyone except Nagato and Tobi. Nagato was off limits, and Tobi is mine."

Jiraiya and Kakashi exchanged glances. "Naruto, this isn't just about trying to make the police department look good," Kakashi said, warily watching the anger level in Naruto build. "You have the chance at a different life from the one you've led up until now," he said, looking towards Sasuke. "This will be an extremely high profile case. Interpol is already involved and will be tracking your every move. If you hunt Tobi down and kill him, there won't be a way to cover it up."
Naruto's fists clenched. Sasuke had walked over to the bar to pour himself a drink, but crossed back to stand by Naruto seeing the rising anger in his lover's face. Sasuke could tell that Naruto was on the edge. If Jiraiya pushed him too hard, Naruto would bolt. "I don't care. I'll only get caught if they can actually keep up with me and find the body. You and I both know how unlikely that would be to happen. Tobi will simply disappear, and everyone will think that he's gone underground because the cops finally found out what he looks like and called down every fed and his brother to hunt for him. The killings will stop. And I'll know for a fact that the fucker is done."

"And what about the families of the other victims" Jiraiya said, unflinching under Naruto's furious glare. "Are you the only one who deserves to get closure? They always wonder if he'll reappear. They'll never get justice. Or is it only about you?"

Naruto's glare wavered. He hadn't really thought about it that way. As long as he killed Tobi, in his mind, everyone got justice and security. "You really expect me to just let him go to jail? He doesn't deserve jail. He-"

"Naruto," Itachi said, interrupting him with a calm voice. "If Tobi is tried in New York, I will have influence on which facility he is incarcerated in."

Naruto looked at Itachi, not following what he was saying. Sasuke was quicker on the uptake. "I bet Hidan and Dei would have some great ways of welcoming him to Sing Sing," Sasuke said thoughtfully, carefully placing his hand on the small of Naruto's back, trying to calm Naruto. If Naruto left now, they might never find him again. "I think maybe you should go and have a little chat with them."

Jiraiya and Kakashi blinked, but didn't object. They seemed to sense that they would need to give a little ground if they expected Naruto to cooperate.

Naruto looked at his hands. "Look. I don't know what is going to happen. If he comes out of nowhere, I might not have a choice. If it comes down to him or me, I'm not going to hold back. And even if I see him coming, I don't always have control. But… I'll think about it."

Jiraiya nodded, clapping a hand on Naruto's back like it was already a done deal. "That's all I ask. Things happen in the field. Just work with Kakashi and the feds. We'll try to bring him in alive if possible. And you'll have extra back-up."

Naruto and Gaara exchanged a look that clearly said that they considered the cops as dead weight rather than an asset.

Sasuke watched Naruto intently as a series of emotions that flashed across the blond's expressive face. "Then I take it that Kakashi already has a plan?" Sasuke asked, looking over at the policeman.

Kakashi shrugged, pulling out a cigarette. Sasuke narrowed his eyes at him, and Kakashi reluctantly put it away. "Plan is pretty simple. We know that Tobi wants Naruto. If we draw attention to Naruto being back and allow him to be 'vulnerable' in very controlled settings, we can try to draw Tobi out at a time and a place where we will be expecting him, rather than just trying to hide and wait for him to find you."

Naruto nodded slowly. "Ok, so I agree with the 'not hiding and waiting' part. I just… Tobi has been watching all of us for a while. It will be hard to pull this off without him figuring out what we're doing. But… it's worth a shot."

Sasuke narrowed his eyes. "That's not really much of a plan."
Kakashi smirked and raised an eyebrow. "Nope. It's not," he said, seemingly unconcerned about that fact. "We have to use Naruto to draw him out. Tobi is experienced and unpredictable. We have no idea where he is currently. He has allies that we have not been able to identify working towards an objective that we know nothing about. So an elaborate plan wouldn't be worth much. Too many unknown variables. We just need to try to control as many of those variables as we can, and then wing it."

It annoyed Sasuke that Naruto seemed completely fine putting himself at risk with this half-assed 'plan'.

"But you're putting Naruto at risk using him as bait, but you're tying his hands and telling him that he has to try to take this guy alive in front of bunch of cops that will be watching his every move," Sasuke said, anger edging his voice.

"Naruto is at risk no matter what we do. He's Tobi's main target," Itachi said. "All we can do is try to focus our efforts on minimizing the number of chances that Tobi will have to come after Naruto. He's relatively safe here. There is no access from the roof or windows, so they only way up is from the elevator that is guarded by the building security and two officers handpicked by Kakashi. We will know their faces, so there is no chance of anyone standing in. No maintenance, food delivery, cleaning or any other types of visitors will be allowed to enter that elevator. That means that if Tobi wants Naruto, he will only be able to go after him in the narrow windows that we create."

"He'll realize that," Naruto said. "Tobi is crazy, but he isn't stupid."

"Yes, he'll realize it," Kakashi said. "But he will think he's smart enough to be able to get you anyway."

"And he might be," Gaara said flatly. He exchanged a look with Sasuke, in unspoken agreement that they were the ones who needed to advocate for Naruto's safety, since the blond clearly was not going to do it on his own.

Kakashi shrugged. "We won't know unless we try. And it's better than doing nothing and letting Tobi run the game. He's very good at winning if it is by his rules. Sitting back and waiting just plays into his hands."

"I'm in," Naruto said, cutting short the discussion.

Gaara glared at him. "Don't you want to at least think about this a little more? We just got back. We might be able to dig something up where the police couldn't."

Naruto met his gaze without hesitation. "And there is a good chance that Tobi already knows we're back. Konan was able to find us. She knew all of my aliases, so it was easier for her, but Tobi could be watching her as well. The longer we drag this out, the longer he has time to make plans as well. Our location is easier to find than his. He has the advantage right now. This is the best we can do. Tobi knows how to hide. He's spent decades doing it. We won't find him unless he wants us to. This is the only choice."

"Naruto…" Sasuke began.

"I know this seems like I'm just agreeing without thinking it through. But I've been thinking about how to get this guy for years. There isn't going to be a better, cleaner way," Naruto said, pulling away from Sasuke's hand and sitting down on the leather sofa.

"Fine," Sasuke said after a moment. "Then we need to make sure Tobi knows Naruto is back in
town. I have a meeting with the mayor in two days. Let's have Naruto accompany me there. We don't leave this apartment until then. If Tobi knows we are already in town, then he will be waiting for a chance. If he doesn't then this will ensure he is watching our next move. Besides, it is bound to get out sooner or later that Naruto is living with me. Karin can help us spin it the right way."

Sasuke noticed the slight tensing of Naruto's body at the mention of his PR rep's name. It amused him slightly that Naruto could be jealous at a time like this. He'd have to make sure Naruto understood that there was only one person Sasuke was interested in, and it certainly wasn't Karin.

Jiraiya finished off his drink. "Then I will leave you boys to it. Just make sure that Naruto's backstory is cleared before you unleash the press on him."

Sasuke smirked. "My contact has already created the shadow files in the Department of Homeland Security's archives."

Jiraiya frowned slightly. Sasuke still had not released his 'contact's' identity to the man, and Jiraiya was annoyed by it. Sasuke said that - as long as the files were created as required - the man had no need to learn the identity of the person who did it.

"All we need to do is fill out the details" Sasuke continued. "We'll start with Naruto and Gaara. He'll need to interview you both to get the information he needs."

Gaara and Naruto exchanged nervous glances. "Interview?" Naruto asked.

"We need to know what you've done so that we can create fake 'missions' to cover your past activities," Sasuke said calmly, as though he wasn't asking two paranoid criminals to reveal over a decade's worth of illegal acts.

"Umm…," Naruto hedged. "Can't we just… tell you the ones where we might get caught?"

Jiraiya laughed, then grabbed his coat. "Just make sure no one is recording the sessions. I don't even want to know."

Kakashi followed the police commissioner to the elevator. "I'll contact you tomorrow for the details of the meeting with the mayor. If you need to leave for any reason, call me and I will send a police escort. We don't want to give Tobi any free bites at the apple."

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When the two men had left, Shisui finally spoke. "How much do you trust Kakashi?" he asked Naruto directly.

Gaara raised a hairless brow in amusement, but Naruto answered equally directly. "Kakashi is a cop. He could have screwed Gaara and me over a bunch of times, but he's always had our back. He has to play by the rules more than we do, but he isn't afraid to break them if he has to. If it goes down wrong, Kakashi will be the first one to put a bullet in Tobi if it means saving one of us. But… he's still a cop, and we've seen things and done things that he hasn't. If major lines need to be crossed, we should plan on it being one of the three of us."

Sasuke looked annoyed at not being included in Naruto's count, but Shisui only nodded.

"The other issue that we need to deal with is Kabuto," Itachi said, glad that he wasn't the one that had to tell Sasuke to sit the main fight out.

"What do you mean?" Naruto asked.
"Fuck," Sasuke said, already seeing where this was going.

"Once Sasuke shows up with you in something other than a bodyguard capacity, Kabuto is going to try to use that as leverage to get all of Naruto's statements revisited," Itachi stated.

"Leverage?" Gaara asked, frowning slightly.

Itachi glanced at Sasuke, who nodded. "The only reason that Naruto's version of Orochimaru's death wasn't questioned very hard, aside from Naruto's gunshot wound, was the fact that there didn't appear to be any motive for anyone other than Naruto to have killed him. But if a relationship became known between Naruto and Sasuke so soon after his death..."

Gaara's frown didn't lessen. "That shouldn't be enough to reopen a case."

"It wouldn't be for anyone other than Kabuto," Sasuke bit out.

Gaara looked to Naruto for an explanation. "Orochimaru wanted to get in Sasuke's pants. He used Kabuto as a stand-in, and Kabuto didn't like it. Plus Itachi kicks his ass as an attorney, and Kabuto had a chip on his shoulder about that, too. He's looking for any way to drag them down," Naruto said baldly.

Shisui snickered slightly at the characterization, but no one refuted it.

"So can we reopen the discussion about killing Kabuto now?" Naruto said hopefully, looking at Shisui.

Itachi choked on the drink he had just taken before glaring at Shisui. "Care to enlighten me on the details of this 'discussion'?"

Shisui looked Itachi dead in the eye. "Actually, no."

Sasuke smirked. "As fun as this is, it's late. Suigetsu will be coming by early tomorrow to start creating the back-story for Naruto and Gaara. We should all get some sleep."

Sasuke showed Gaara to one of the guest rooms down the hall from where Shisui and Itachi were staying. Naruto dragged Gaara over to the sparring room, and told him they would blow off some steam in the morning. Gaara knew that this was Naruto's way of trying to deal with the stress of what was happening, and what was being asked of him.

Sasuke slid a hand along Naruto's shoulder. "You can play with your friend tomorrow. Let's go to bed now."

Gaara watched his best friend nod distractedly and follow Sasuke to the bedroom they shared. He had a feeling that Sasuke had a different idea of how to help Naruto deal with the stress. His lips twitched before he, too, turned and headed for bed.

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They closed the door to Sasuke's bedroom. Naruto was strangely silent as he walked into the large en-suite bathroom.

"Are you ok?" Sasuke asked. They hadn't showered since before the flight, and he scrubbed his fingers through his hair, feeling dirty from the plane and recycled air of the long flight.

He heard the shower being turned on, and wondered if Naruto was going to answer him. He walked
casually to the bathroom door, unbuttoning his shirt as he walked. He wasn't a saint. He wouldn't push Naruto if the blond wasn't in the mood, but they both needed a shower. There was no sense wasting water by taking two.

Naruto was watching the steam start to rise from the shower with a pensive expression on his face. Sasuke simply walked up behind him and wrapped his arms around Naruto's waist, leaning in to breathe in the scent at Naruto's neck that he still somehow couldn't get enough of.

Naruto leaned his head back slightly to rest against Sasuke's. "Mmmmm… this is nice," Naruto said, his voice low and slightly rough.

"Are you worried about being back?" Sasuke asked, turning face toward the crook of Naruto's neck, brushing his lips over the sensitive flesh there, but stopping himself from going further.

For several moments, Naruto didn't answer. "I guess in a way. I just… I don't know how it's all going to go down with Tobi. My whole life has been about either hiding from him or hunting him," Naruto blew out a breath, stepping away from Sasuke slightly as he began pulling off his pants. "And then after it's done…” Naruto trailed off as he haphazardly folded his pants and set them on the counter.

"After it's done?" Sasuke prompted, silently removing his own clothing and setting it in a neatly folded pile next to Naruto's.

"I never really gave it much thought. I mean… there's a chance I won't come out the winner, in which case it won't matter anyway," Naruto said, not noticing the way Sasuke's hand clenched around the handle to the shower door at the words. The blond stepped under the hot spray, flinching slightly at the heat of the water but not bothering to adjust the temperature. "But I never really thought about it. I always assumed I'd either be dead or working for Nagato. It wasn't like there were a lot of alternate career paths open for someone like me, given my history."

Sasuke stepped in behind Naruto, turning the temperature of the spray down a little before gently pulling Naruto to him, lightly holding his body against his own. "Tobi is not going to get to kill you. Shisui, Gaara and I will be with you. And when this is over, you will have options other than finding a new crime boss to work for. Your life… can be different now." You can have a life with me, Sasuke stopped himself from actually saying the words, the fear of voicing them out loud freezing his tongue.

Naruto was still, letting the combined warmth of the body of his lover and the shower relax him. "It's just… hard to imagine a normal life after everything that's happened. But I guess there's no point worrying about it now. First we have to get Tobi."

"Hn," Sasuke said noncommittally. He knew that Kakashi and Jiraiya were pushing hard for Naruto to play along with the way they wanted this to go, but Sasuke wasn't going to try to influence Naruto either way. He understood that arresting a criminal of that caliber would bring recognition to the police department of New York, and therefore assure Jiraiya's continued place as police commissioner and Naruto's position as 'hero' rather than 'criminal'. But it also tied Naruto's hands and could make him hesitate.

In the end, he'd let Naruto make the call.

Sasuke took the soap from the shelf and lathered up a washcloth, noticing the tension in Naruto's back. He smoothed the cloth over the tan flesh, and heard Naruto hum slightly at the touch.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Sasuke asked, sliding the cloth over the contours of Naruto's back,
slowly washing the smooth skin.

"No," Naruto said, finally turning to face Sasuke. He picked up the soap that Sasuke had abandoned, and began slowly washing his lover as Sasuke washed him. "It's our first night back. I can think of other things we could do instead."

"Hn," Sasuke smirked, letting his head fall back as Naruto closed his soap-slickened hand around Sasuke's rapidly hardening erection. He had definitely been looking forward to having Naruto in his bed again. And if Naruto was looking for a distraction for the evening, Sasuke was certainly not about to deny him.

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Early the next morning, Naruto found himself standing next to Gaara in Sasuke's office with a room full of people. He flicked a nervous glance to Sasuke, licking his suddenly dry lips. "I have to do this in front of all these people?"

Suigetsu had arrived, as expected, and was seated at Sasuke's desk, a high-end laptop set up in front of him. What Naruto had not expected was to see Shikamaru. Itachi and Shisui were sitting in the two leather chairs to the side of the desk, clearly expecting to be party to the conversation that was about to occur.

Naruto had no issues with Sasuke and Gaara being there, but Itachi worked in the DA's office, and Shikamaru was on the police payroll. It went against ever self-preservation instinct Naruto possessed. He was good at what he did. He didn't leave evidence behind and the only time he'd been caught was the situation with Zetsu. And he hadn't been in his right mind. Naruto wondered how much of all this was really necessary. What were the chances of anything ever coming to light? He looked over at Sasuke, about to object again, when it occurred to him that he wasn't the one that had the most to lose if anything ever came out. Sasuke was.

Naruto swallowed. If it were only his ass on the line, he'd take the gamble and assume that most of it would stay hidden. But for Sasuke...

Sasuke looked at him steadily, but kept his distance, giving Naruto space and standing over next to where Suigetsu was setting up. "We talked about this, Naruto. Suigetsu needs to know what he is trying to cover up. If you don't tell him, this whole thing doesn't work. Shikamaru is here for observation only. You already agreed to talk with him and try to see if he can help you get more control over your reactions if you confront Tobi. There's no point in making you go through everything twice.

Naruto glanced at Gaara, but the redhead's expression gave nothing away. He was pretty sure that if it all blew up in their faces, Kankuro would have them in a private plane headed for Suna in less than three hours.

"What about Itachi and Shisui? They're not hacking into anything or trying to fuck with my head."

Sasuke raised an eyebrow. "I keep forgetting you don't know Itachi all that well. He always tries to fuck with people's heads. Usually they just never realize it's happened."

Itachi answered with a raised eyebrow of his own. "And you would know that best, little brother."

Naruto frowned. "No but seriously. No offense, Itachi, but... I don't think it's a great idea for you to be here for this. I love visiting Hidan and Dei, but I don't want to actually share a cell with them."

Itachi turned a level gaze on Naruto. "You are sleeping with my little brother. Be grateful that all I'm
Naruto looked into Itachi's dark eyes and suddenly realized that it was probably a very good thing that this man had decided to abide by the law. If he ever switched sides and was no longer bound by society's rules… Naruto shivered.

He looked up to see Shisui smirking at him.

Naruto cleared his throat. "Ok, then. Where do we start?"

Suigetsu began typing at a speed that made Naruto's fingers hurt just to watch. "I need to create a profile for you, so I need you to give me the basic rundown of your past. Schools you attended, aliases you used. When you started being involved in criminal activity. What your first major crimes were. I need to make it appear that all of this was under the auspices of the program. I'll have to position you as an informant if you were young when you started working with major organizations."

Gaara and Naruto exchanged amused glances.

"What constitutes 'young' in your book?" Naruto asked.

Suigetsu shrugged. "Depends a bit. How old were you when you committed your first felony?"

Naruto sighed. "First provable felony, or just first felony?"

Suigetsu frowned. "First felony. We'll delete the full details after we turn it into a good enough cover story. Just give me the straight facts for now."

"Ok… first felony. I guess I was… um… nine? Maybe eight-and-a-half."

Suigetsu paused, looking up and meeting Sasuke's somewhat surprised look. This was going to be harder than they had thought. There was no way in hell even a secret government organization would recruit so young, at least not domestically. The fact that Naruto's only arrest had been when he was in his late teens had made them assume he had not been involved much in criminal activity before joining Nagato's organization.

"Ok, we might need to get a bit creative here if we are going to build a profile that is even partially believable. Given that your citizenship is Japanese, and your family was in politics and law enforcement in Japan before you came here, we might have some leeway. I'm going to need you to start from the time you were eight, and tell me what you did and who saw you do it. We'll try to weave something together from there. We don't have a lot of time if the press is going to find out about you in a day or two."

Naruto drew a breath. His whole life he had lived in hiding. The only person who knew what he really was, what he had really done, was Gaara. He trusted Gaara implicitly, because their pasts had been so similar. Gaara wouldn't judge.

Naruto looked over at Sasuke. How would this change things between them? Sasuke only knew a small part of what Naruto had done. Would he look at Naruto differently after this?

And what about the others? Naruto had survived by never completely trusting anyone other than Gaara. Now he had to decide if he could really put his faith in the men sitting in front of him. He could feel his palms start to sweat and his pulse pick up. He knew that if he gave the signal, he and Gaara could incapacitate everyone in the room and make their escape before anyone could stop them. They could disappear and hunt for Tobi on their own.
But if he did that, there would be no going back. If he wanted a future with Sasuke, then he had to take this risk. Naruto looked back over to Sasuke to find the dark eyes locked on him. The fear he read in the black depths told him that Sasuke was fully aware of what was running through Naruto's mind right now.

Sasuke said nothing, simply looked at Naruto. He would let Naruto make the choice. It wasn't something he could force the blond to do, as much as he wished he could. Naruto had to choose between the life he had lived up to this point, and the life Sasuke was offering him going forward. He wished there had been more time for Naruto to get used to the idea, for their relationship to mature, but Tobi and Kabuto were forcing their hand and the choice had to be made now.

No one in the room moved. Naruto didn't blink as he continued to look directly at Sasuke… reading the willingness to let Naruto make the decision, willingness to accept Naruto's choice. Suddenly, the choice seemed easy. "I'll tell you what you need to know."

Sasuke released a breath that he didn't know he'd been holding. He walked over to where Naruto was standing and drew him down into an open-mouthed kiss, not caring that they had an audience. "Thank you," Sasuke breathed after a moment.

Naruto shrugged, blushing slightly at the public display, but his stomach felt like a belly-dancing gymnast had taken residence in it. Ignoring his nerves, he grabbed Sasuke's hand and he began to speak.

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Three hours later, Naruto and Gaara emerged from Sasuke's office. The other four men in the room still too shell-shocked to follow.

"Well, that went well, don't you think?" Naruto joked, grabbing a soda from the refrigerator. He was trying not to think about what Sasuke would make of everything he had just disclosed in the other room. Sasuke hadn't pulled away from him even once during the entire discussion. But during some of the worst of it, Naruto had looked away, keeping his gaze locked on Gaara, too nervous to see what Sasuke's reaction had been.

Gaara mock scowled. "Sasuke had better be fucking amazing in bed considering what you just did. I plan on giving Suigetsu only about a tenth of that amount of information."

"Well actually, you know -" Naruto began jokingly, but Gaara raised a hand to stop him.

"I don't want to know the details. These apartment walls are thick, but they're not soundproof."

Naruto snickered, but then quickly sobered. Would Sasuke still want him to touch him knowing his hands were this bloody? Naruto took a swallow of the soda. He supposed he'd find out soon enough.

"How about that spar?" Naruto asked. He had no idea how long it would take them to hash out some sort of back-story to fit with the facts that he'd just given them, but judging by the blank expressions on his face when he'd left the room, it would be a while.

Gaara nodded. He'd rather fight than wait around any day.

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Sasuke looked over at Itachi as the door closed behind Naruto. He had known that Naruto wasn't exactly a choirboy but... damn. He had to admit he was a little turned on listening to Naruto describe what he had done. There was something about the seeming sweetness of the blond's
character combined with the fact that he had the capacity to be so lethal that fascinated Sasuke. But it also had made his blood run cold at the risks the idiot had been willing to take. Had had to take.

Itachi seemed much calmer about everything than Sasuke had expected. The two brothers looked at each other for a moment. "Well, I guess I won't have to worry about your safety as long as you're with your new boyfriend. I think even father's enemies would hesitate if they knew they had to go up against someone like him." Itachi looked over to Shisui. "You might find yourself out of a job, Shi."

Shisui raised an eyebrow at the comment, but didn't respond.

"I wonder if his body count is higher than Tobi's?" Suigetsu asked, sounding much more excited about the whole thing than he should as his fingers flew across the keyboard. "Itachi, I'm gonna seriously need your help to try to make heads or tails of this. Some of this I can spin into something that could look like a plausible assignment for a government agent, but a lot of this is just… insane. I can't believe he isn't dead. The odds on some of the jobs he pulled were just -"

"It's good that Gaara's was the only witness for most of his crimes. And given how thorough Naruto is at taking care of the evidence, we might be able to simplify his story a bit." Itachi said, glancing over at Sasuke.

Sasuke stood abruptly, stalking over to the window. Naruto had seemed so nonchalant when he was describing the things he'd done, but when you looked at it in terms of what any normal person would even consider doing…

He turned as he felt a presence walk up behind him. Shikamaru stood next to him, looking out the window with a bored expression on his face. One look in his eyes, however, dispelled any notion of boredom.

"I know that you were hoping I'd be able to work with Naruto and reduce the risk of him having an episode if Tobi comes after him," the psychologist began. Sasuke waited, already having a pretty good idea what the man was about to say. "I'm happy to work with him. In fact, he would be one of the most interesting cases I've ever dealt with. But… this will not be one of those 'have a good cry and a hug and we make it all better' scenarios. It will take years to work through what he has been through and seen. Fundamentally, Naruto is a good person. He's been forced into a violent life after witnessing the brutal murder of his parents. Then he was stalked by something that most parents wouldn't even use a made-up story to get their kids to behave. He has PTSD, as well as anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorders." Shikamaru turned to face Sasuke, looking him square in the eye. "Are you sure you are up for this? Do you understand how troublesome this is going to be?"

Sasuke didn't hesitate before nodding. "Evidently I like 'troublesome'."

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They spent the rest of the morning creating a workable draft of a story for Naruto, filling in the required government files and associated forms that would need to exist to make it believable.

Sasuke wondered where Naruto and Gaara had disappeared to. It didn't take him long to find the two, shirtless and sweating as they slowly circled around each other in his sparring room. He watched, fascinated by the speed and skill that they displayed. Many of the fighting techniques that they were using he'd never even seen before. He sensed someone walking up behind him, and turned to see Shisui behind him, observing them.

They watched in silence, aware of the amazing and deadly skill of the two men sparring.
"When this whole thing is over, we should train with them," Shisui said, his eyes never leaving the two combatants. "They are using elements of at least seven different fighting styles."

Sasuke didn't respond. He thought back to the day that Naruto had watched him with Shisui. He suddenly understood exactly how Naruto had felt, and suddenly wished the rest of the people in his apartment had other places to be right then. A voice snapped him out of his thoughts.

"Sasuke, we need you in here to finish out the profile before we start on Gaara's," Itachi called from the office.

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Naruto woke as the bedroom door opened. He glanced blearily over at the clock and saw that it was well past midnight. Evidently Suigetsu and Sasuke had finally finished creating the documentation they would need in case anyone started digging into Naruto's or Gaara's past.

Naruto lay still, not sure if Sasuke would want to talk or just go to sleep. He watched as Sasuke unbuttoned his shirt, pulling it off to reveal smooth, white skin that seemed to glow in the darkness of the room. Naruto felt the familiar lust as Sasuke's fingers dropped to the waistband of his pants, undoing the fastenings there. But his lust was tempered with a frisson of doubt as Naruto wondered how Sasuke would feel knowing what he now did about Naruto's past.

Sasuke removed the last of his clothes, tossing them into the hamper before walking fluidly to the bathroom. Naruto heard the sound of the shower turning on and assumed Sasuke was going to take a quick shower before bed. Naruto bit his lip. Normally, he would have joined Sasuke in the shower, but Sasuke hadn't said anything to him as he'd entered the room. He could have simply assumed Naruto was asleep.

Or he could be feeling uncomfortable about the things he had learned.

Naruto closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. Sasuke had seen him after Tobi had attacked him. He had known about the eight hit men Naruto had taken out, and he had known at least the basics about what had gone down in Suna. Even if Sasuke was a little uncomfortable, Naruto was hopeful they could get past it.

Naruto tensed as he heard the shower shut off. The door to the bathroom opened, and Sasuke stepped quietly into the room, not bothering to turn on the lights. Naruto considered feigning sleep for a minute, but as Sasuke pulled back the blanket and slid between the sheets, Naruto decided 'fuck it'. If Sasuke was feeling uncomfortable, he might as well find out now.

"Hey," Naruto said, turning on his pillow to face Sasuke but not reaching out to touch him. "Late night, huh?"

"Mmmm," Sasuke said, laying down and propping his head up on his hand to look at Naruto. "You were certainly… quite a bit busier in your youth than we had anticipated. It took a while to make it all look even remotely legitimate."

Naruto studied Sasuke, wishing he could read his expression in the darkness. "Yeah. I never pretended I didn't come with history," he said neutrally, hoping Sasuke would give some sign of how upset he was. But Sasuke made no move, simply looking at Naruto.

"Are you mad about this afternoon?" Sasuke asked abruptly.

Sasuke shifted slightly, and Naruto realized that Sasuke was… nervous?

"You didn't say anything when I came in. And you didn't join me in the shower," he said, his voice smooth and controlled.

Naruto breathed out a small laugh. "Well, I wasn't really sure you'd want me to, after…" he gestured vaguely with his hand in the darkness.

He didn't need to see to be able to detect Sasuke's brow arching. "After…"

Naruto rolled onto his back, needing to break the tension of feeling Sasuke's gaze but not being able to read his expression. "After finding out… everything. I mean… if you think that this isn't going to work out because of it, I wouldn't really blame -"

Before Naruto even sensed him moving, Sasuke had pinned Naruto to the bed and fused their mouths together. "Idiot," he said before dipping his head back down to devour Naruto's mouth.

Naruto felt relief surge through him at the aggressive touch of his lover. There was no hesitancy, no reluctance in the way Sasuke moved over him. As Sasuke let his mouth slide down to ruthlessly mark Naruto's neck, the blond arched back, reveling in the heated, possessive touch.

He could feel Sasuke's cock already hard and wet against his thigh, and he smiled slowly as a realization struck him. "It turns you on, doesn't it?" Naruto said, abruptly flipping them over so he was wedged between Sasuke's thighs.

Sasuke's eyes narrowed, but he could do nothing about the way his cock surged at the dark tone in Naruto's voice. Naruto gripped Sasuke's wrists, pinning them above his head, scraping his teeth along the pale, chiseled jawline until his lips reached Sasuke's ear. "Say it," he whispered, digging his fingers even harder into Sasuke's flesh. There would be fingermark bruises by morning.

"What if it does?" Sasuke panted out, his body shivering with arousal that the admission brought in the dark room.

Naruto reached over to the nightstand where the lube and the condoms were waiting. "Then I have an idea."

Sasuke watched impassively Naruto set a condom and a bottle of lube on the bed near his knee. Naruto grinned. "You look nervous, Sasuke," he teased huskily, leaning over his lover and slowly licking down the side of his throat, using first the flat then the tip of his tongue. Sasuke's neck arched in response before he could stop his reaction.

"I don't hear you saying no," Naruto continued working his tongue down to Sasuke's collar bone, running his thumb along the prominent ridge while his hand slipped between Sasuke's thighs to wrap around the erection that was still standing at attention. He silently gave thanks that neither of them bothered with pajamas anymore.

"Ngh," Sasuke said, letting his head fall back against the pillows as he tried to decide what he wanted. He had never bottomed before, but there had been a few times when had had been fucking Naruto and the blond had slid a finger inside him. The resulting orgasms had been cataclysmic, and Sasuke would be lying if he said he wasn't just a little bit curious about what it would feel like to have more than Naruto's finger pressing against that spot inside him. And it had always been clear Naruto knew what he was doing in bed. That thought was enough to bring a growl to his throat, even as Naruto's lips closed over one of his nipples. He couldn't do anything about Naruto's past lovers, but he would be the only one in the man's bed from now on.
He told Naruto as much, fisting his hand painfully into Naruto's hair and forcing his head back.

Naruto laughed, grabbing Sasuke's wrist to allow his head back down where his lips continued to trail down along Sasuke’s flat stomach along the thin line of black hair that led to his final destination. "I'm not the one who was in the news for fucking his hot PR rep," Naruto said, his tone joking, but his teeth nipped sharply at the tender skin above Sasuke's hip bone.

Sasuke hissed. "I told you that was... ahn, fuck!"

Naruto swirled his tongue over the head of Sasuke's erection while his fingers pulled then rolled his balls.

"Hm?" Naruto said, increasing the suction and squirting lube on his fingers while he slid his hand further back between Sasuke's legs, rubbing his thumb in a circular motion, externally stimulating Sasuke's prostate.

Sasuke jerked hard on Naruto's hair again, but not enough to lift the talented mouth from his cock. "Don't play dumb," Sasuke growled, his eyes narrowing further when he took in Naruto's smug expression. "And if you go any slower I will flip you over and fuck you into the mattress with no prep."

Naruto slide one lubed finger inside of Sasuke at the taunt. "Hmmm... that's right. If you were easy, this wouldn't be any fun," Naruto said with a smirk as Sasuke glared at him until Naruto's questing finger brushed against the spot inside that made him see stars.

A spurt of precum jetted from Sasuke's cock at the feeling, and Naruto slid his tongue along Sasuke's erection to catch it. He hummed contentedly as he took Sasuke deep in his throat with a hard suck and a swallow, reveling in the way Sasuke's hips flexed and his back arched into Naruto's ministrations.

"God, you are so fucking sexy," Naruto murmured, briefly lifting his head, just enough to allow him to speak, but his lips brushed against the head of Sasuke's cock with every word, the warm breath ghosting along Sasuke's length as he inserted another finger.

"You talk too much," Sasuke panted as Naruto put in a third finger, Naruto's middle finger continuing to work Sasuke's prostate as the other two fingers stretched him.

Without warning, Sasuke used one foot to push Naruto's probing hand away while the other locked around Naruto's waist, dragging him close. Sasuke hadn't released his grip on Naruto's hair, and he used it to pull the blond into place between his thighs. "Enough," he said harshly.

Naruto would have laughed at Sasuke's impatience, but decided he would rather crush his mouth to Sasuke's hard lips, forcing both their mouths wide as he shoved his tongue in. Sasuke immediately reciprocated, running his tongue along Naruto's lower teeth before thrusting his tongue in as well.

Naruto's hand felt along the bed until he located the condom, not breaking their kiss while he quickly ripped it open and rolled it on in one hard stroke.

Shifting the angle of the kiss to deepen it further, he positioned himself and slowly began pushing in. He knew that Sasuke had never allowed this with any of his past lovers. They hadn't really discussed it, but Naruto knew that - despite the fact that Sasuke was very physical with him - the man had a reputation for being cold, with only a handful of past relationships, all of them short-lived.

Naruto slowly flexed his hips forward, watching Sasuke's face intently for signs of pleasure or discomfort. The moonlight streamed in the bedroom window, bathing Sasuke's pale, sweat-sheened
skin, making it glow.

Naruto's arms were braced on either side of Sasuke's shoulders, and they could both feel his arms tremble with restraint as he continued his slow press inside his lover. Sasuke smirked despite the pressure. "Having trouble?"

Naruto narrowed his eyes, driving his hips forward the rest of the way in a harsh thrust.

"Fuck!" Sasuke said, clenching at the abrupt, unfamiliar entrance.

"Can't handle it?" Naruto taunted back, but he held still, allowing Sasuke a moment to adjust before he carefully rotated his hips and adjusted the angle. The next slow thrust had Sasuke seeing stars and arching back at the intense pleasure as Naruto drove against his prostate.

Naruto's hand returned to wrap around Sasuke's cock and he began slowly pumping in time with his deep, languid thrusts. He watched as Sasuke's eyes closed and the strong, pale fingers twisted in the silk sheets.

"God, Sasuke, you're so…" Naruto's brain couldn't produce words to even begin to describe how good Sasuke looked and felt at that moment.

Black eyes opened, glazed with lust, but the arrogant smirk on Sasuke's lips wasn't diminished in the slightest. Sasuke lifted his hips and clamped his thighs around Naruto's torso, pale hands releasing the sheets to grip the headboard. Flexing his abs and squeezing his thighs, Sasuke took control of the pace, his hips lifting up to rapidly thrust himself up and down on Naruto's cock.

"Fuuuccccckkkk!" Naruto screamed, throwing his head back as he lost control and almost came. He reached down and shoved Sasuke's knees apart, breaking Sasuke's grip. In one smooth motion he hitched Sasuke's legs up over his shoulders, but kept up the fast pace that Sasuke had begun.

"Oh, god, I'm close you asshole!" Naruto gritted out. He had wanted to make this last but Sasuke's move had almost taken him completely by surprise and nearly sent him over the edge. It was taking every fibre of his being to hold on and keep from cumming. Luckily, Sasuke was equally close, judging from his glazed expression and flushed cheeks.

Determined to make Sasuke cum first, Naruto shifted the angle of his thrusts again to put even more force against Sasuke's prostate, rotating his hips slightly each time his head brushed over that spot to provide maximum stimulation while his hand returned to fisting Sasuke's cock. This time it was Sasuke who screamed in pleasure, his body bowing as he tried to stave off his climax.

Realizing there was going to be no stopping it, Sasuke used his legs, crossing his ankles behind Naruto's neck, his calves squeezing the tan throat as he felt his orgasm rapidly approaching.

Sasuke's legs viced harder against the sides of Naruto's throat, restricting the blood circulation. Naruto's hips didn't lose their power or tempo as he continued to slam into Sasuke, despite his vision starting to go black around the edges. It was only like this with Sasuke. This intensity that seemed to burn him alive, stealing his soul piece by piece until he belonged only to this one man.

Something of what Naruto was feeling must have shown in his eyes, because Sasuke's breath seemed to catch. Sasuke arched back as he came, his legs locking as cum jetted out onto his stomach and his knuckles turning white from his death grip on the headboard.

Naruto felt Sasuke tighten around him as he came in shuddering waves, the lack of oxygen bringing an even sharper edge to his body as he came hard, nearly blacking out before Sasuke's legs finally loosened with the final wave of his climax.
Naruto managed to collapse to the side of Sasuke rather than directly on top of him, gasping for breath and dazed with pleasure.

They lay in bed, their bodies touching lightly, their breathing heavy as they waited for the world to resume its existence.

"Holy shit," Naruto said after several minutes, his voice hoarse from the abuse of his throat. "How did you even... holy shit!"

Sasuke lay on the bed still boneless from the searing force of his orgasm, barely able to even turn his head to look over at Naruto. "Hn," he smirked. "I'm a fast learner."

Naruto gave him a lopsided grin as he slipped into sleep. They would clean up later. "God, you are amazing," he mumbled. "I am never letting you go, you know."

Sasuke turned his head to reply, but Naruto was already asleep.

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It was mid-morning the following day before they finally were allowed into the prison. Naruto fidgeted as they waited for Hidan and Deidara to be brought into the interviewing room. Itachi had pulled some serious strings to get permission on short notice for the two dangerous prisoners to be allowed in the same room as each other, and for the recording device in the room to be shut off. The attorneys of both men had signed off to allow the meeting to take place without their presence, and Naruto was pretty sure that Deidara had simply terrified them into agreeing.

But that didn't mean that security wasn't going to be tight. Shisui was required to wait outside the security office, since he hadn't been cleared far enough in advance to meet with the prisoners. Sasuke, Itachi and Naruto had been thoroughly searched, and their wallets, phones, and even Itachi's briefcase had been left with security. But eventually they had been allowed into the interview room.

The door opened and Naruto grinned at the sight of the two familiar faces in orange jumpsuits that were led in, wearing shackles on their wrists and ankles. The relieved looks on both their faces that he was still in one piece and standing before them told Naruto that they were probably aware of where he'd been and why.

Deidara flopped down into the uncomfortable metal chair and assumed his usual arrogant sprawl. Hidan leaned against the wall, smirking.

"Who the fuck you tryin' to impress, bitch?" he asked Deidara. "I thought that DA you liked was already fuckin' someone else now."

"Shut the fuck up Hidan. Or did you forget what happened to the last guy who pissed me off?" Deidara said raising a brow.

Naruto snickered, drawing their attention to him. "Damn, I missed you guys," he said sincerely.

Deidara wiped an imaginary tear. Hidan was more direct, spreading his legs slightly as he lounged against the wall. "If you miss me so much then come here and suck my dick, blondie. It's been months since I've had good head."

Sasuke made a low sound in his throat that sounded almost like a growl, and Deidara cackled. "Oooh.. careful, Hidan. Baby Uchiha here as already marked his territory."

Naruto sighed, but was still chuckling. "Shut up, guys."
Itachi shifted, drawing the eyes of the other four men in the room. "Naruto is being told to let the police take Tobi alive," he began without preamble.

Two sets of eyes immediately went cold and hard. "What the fuck?" Hidan growled.

Deidara's hands had clenched into fists, and the guards outside the soundproofed room looked in nervously through the small window, wondering if their assistance was needed. Itachi waved them away.

"I know Kabuto came to see you," Itachi said, causing Naruto's head to jerk up in surprise.

"Yeah," Deidara said, shrugging. "He tried to spew some shit about Naruto working for the cops, and selling Nagato out."

Naruto paled. "I didn't... I..."

"Shut up, kid," Deidara said. "I've seen you work, remember? No cop would do what you did. And I was there when you took a bullet for Nagato. Kabuto's full of shit."

"We're trying to change that," Sasuke said, casting a sidelong glance at Naruto.

"The fuck?" Hidan asked, clearly not following.

Deidara looked thoughtful. "You want him to go legit?"

Sasuke nodded curtly. "I have a... friend... who can make that seem official."

Deidara grinned. "So you're serious about our blondie then."

"Tobi's arrest or death would be very high profile," Itachi said carefully.

"So if blondie cuts him up into tiny pieces and does a dance while throwing him bit by bit into the Hudson, it would fuck up your effort to rewrite his background," Hidan said, finally catching on.

Sasuke and Itachi exchanged a slightly blank look at the graphic imagery. "Yes," Sasuke said finally. "But Naruto is naturally not happy about the idea of letting Tobi simply sit in jail."

"And given his crimes in other countries, the death penalty would not be an available path for the prosecution to take. However..." Itachi paused, looking down at his fingernails as though there was something deeply interesting about them. "I would have some influence in the facility and cell block in which he was incarcerated."

Hidan and Deidara paused, then looked at each other. The smiles that slowly spread across their faces had the security guards frantically throwing open the door and rushing into the room.

"We'll be sure to give him a proper greeting. And send-off," Deidara said, looking Naruto directly in the eye.

The guards looked between Itachi and the two prisoners, trying to understand what had just happened.

"We're fine," Itachi said calmly. The guards refused to leave.

"You have five more minutes," one said nervously, clearly uncomfortable with the situation.

"Oi, blondie. Your mom's been lookin' for you. You should go talk to her before you end up in
trouble," Hidan said, ignoring the guard.

Naruto froze. "I saw her in the airport the other day, but she disappeared before I could catch her. Do you know what she wants?"

Hidan looked at the two guards. "No. But is has to do with family business."

"Family business?" Naruto asked, wishing someone would pull the fucking fire alarm so the guards would get out of the room and let them talk.

"Yeah," Deidara said, looking casually at the wall just over Naruto's shoulder. "I guess she misses her kids. So she's checking in on them. Helping them all find jobs, keeping busy… you know. The usual."

Naruto blinked. Konan was trying to rebuild Akatsuki?

"Well…" Naruto glanced over at Itachi, noticing he was observing the conversation very closely. "Most of the kids are… not around anymore." Most of Nagato's crew had been put in jail, thanks in large part to the man standing next to them listening intently.

Deidara looked over at Itachi and blew him a kiss. "Yeah… she's calling on some of the ones living abroad. Also being a bit of a home wrecker. I heard she's busted up a few Russian marriages. Got those old men by the balls, your mama does."

Konan was… taking over Russian Mafia syndicates? Nagato had always steered clear of them. Those guys were seriously hard core. Naruto swallowed.

"Um… ok. Any idea where she's staying?"

"Nope. But I know she's been wanting to visit you. She's been waiting for you to get back in town," Deidara said.

Naruto nodded, wishing he could ask how Konan had made contact with them, and what else they knew, but as it was they'd probably tipped their hand too much. The guards were getting restless, signaling it was time to go.

"Time's up," one of the guards said.

Itachi nodded, thanking Deidara and Hidan for their time. Hidan just stared at him flatly. Deidara slid the palm of his hand down the front of his pants and jerked his chin up at the ADA. "Any time you want another private meeting, Uchiha, you just let my lawyer know."

Itachi's lips twitched. "I'll do that, Deidara."

Sasuke's eyes narrowed at his brother. "Shisui would kick your ass if he was in here."

Itachi smirked. "Shisui knows me well enough not to get worked up," he said as they left the room.

"I'll let you know how it all goes down," Naruto said to Hidan and Deidara. He nodded to them as he followed Itachi and Sasuke out.

"Blondie!" Deidara called out. "Just remember. We've got clean-up on this. You just do what you've gotta do."

Naruto looked back at them and gave another nod, feeling a bit less tense.
It was good to have dangerous friends.

They were just headed back out through the security gates when Itachi's phone went off. He glanced at the caller ID, then answered. "Sarutobi. Did you get my message that I would be out of the office today?"

"Thank god you're alright. Have you heard the news?"

Itachi frowned. "No. What's happened?"

"They just found Kabuto Yakushi."

"Found?"

"Yes. He's been murdered. Where are you right now?"

"We're down at SingSing… we wanted to see if Hidan and Deidara had heard any news," Itachi hedged. He had… bent more than a couple regulations with this visit. He had hoped it would go under the radar. It wasn't looking like he'd be so lucky.

"Who is with you?"

"Naruto and Sasuke were in the room with me. Shisui wasn't allowed in the room, but he was waiting in the security lobby."

"Kakashi is waiting back at Sasuke's apartment for you. Go directly there and do not leave the apartment until we know what is going on. We don't know if this was random or if someone is targeting Kabuto specifically or anyone from this office."

Itachi paused, a thought occurring to him that he could hardly credit as he heard Sasuke's phone ring. "How was he killed?"

"He was eviscerated. It looks like -"  

"Sarutobi, please excuse me but I have to go," Itachi said as he watched his brother slowly hand his cell phone to Naruto.

"It's for you," Sasuke said, his voice tense.

Naruto put the phone to his ear. "Yes?"

"See how helpful I can be?" a voice purred through the earpiece.

Naruto stumbled at the sound of it, his world spinning. He felt Sasuke's hand grip his elbow.

"What the fuck have you done?" Naruto yelled into the phone, panic rising as he realized that Gaara had been left alone in Sasuke's apartment.

"Now, is that any way to talk to a friend? A friend who just helped you out?"

The line went dead, and Naruto stared at the phone, his chest heaving. His hands were shaking as he quickly dialed the number to Sasuke's apartment. He vaguely heard Itachi saying something to Sasuke, but his entire focus was on trying to make sure that Gaara was ok.
The phone rang once…. twice… Naruto began a steady stream of cursing.

"Hello?" a familiar voice picked up at the other end.

"Kakashi! What the fuck are you doing in Sasuke's place? Where's Gaara? Is he -"

"Naruto. Calm down. Gaara is sitting right in front of me, reading porn."

"What?!"

Kakashi laughed, "Ok, so he's not reading porn, but he is sitting in front of me. I take it you heard the news."

"News? What? No, I just -"

"Kabuto was killed an hour ago," Itachi said as Shisui walked up to join them. "The police just found his body. He'd been eviscerated."

Naruto looked blankly at Itachi, then Sasuke. Finally, he spoke briefly into the phone, hearing Gaara's familiar voice in the background but unable to make out what he was saying. "We're on our way back. If Gaara tries to leave for any reason, shoot him in the leg."

"Funny… he said something similar to you. Ah, young love," Kakashi said before hanging up.

"Tobi just killed Kabuto," Naruto said, looking from Sasuke to Itachi as though for confirmation.

"Yes," Itachi said. "And now we need to wait to see what he thinks his reward should be for that."

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to be continued…
Warning: Hard yaoi (18+) in this chapter, DISTURBING CONTENT (this is where we get into Tobi's head, so... yeah. DISTURBING CONTENT)

Author's note: Thanks to BriEva for beta'ing and for helping me figure out what I wanted to do with the Tobi scenes to bring out how creepy that guy is. And thanks to WordWriter for reading it over and encouraging me to stop worrying about the fact that it is so long. Another 9k+ chapter. Apologies to your phones.

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Naruto and the Uchihas were silent on the ride back to Sasuke's house, the potential implications of what just happened spinning through all of their minds. When they stepped off the elevator, Gaara was standing in the entryway waiting for them with Kakashi sitting in the living room.

Gaara tugged Naruto aside while Itachi and Shisui went to join the police officer. Sasuke paused. "Sasuke... I'll be right there. You go ahead and see what Kakashi has to say about this," Naruto said, noticing Sasuke's eyes narrow at the obvious dismissal. Sasuke nodded curtly and followed his brother and cousin.

"Naruto," Gaara said. "You are not going to go after him alone. If whatever the police come up with sounds stupid, we'll do it our way. But you will not go alone if you decide not to play with the cops on this one."

Naruto blew out a sigh, but nodded. "If I have a choice, I'll take you with me. But Gaara, Tobi set this all in motion himself. Which means he has some kind of plan. I don't know that I'll be the one calling the shots on this."

Gaara nodded, looking grim. "I know. But worrying about one crazy person's plan is better than worry about two. I can't control Tobi. But I can try to at least talk some sense into you."

The two men turned and headed back to the living room, Naruto feeling the heavy gaze of his lover. Without a word, Naruto sat down on the armrest of the chair where Sasuke was seated.

Kakashi looked at Naruto. "We traced the call to Sasuke's cell. It was made from a disposable cell phone. The device was either completely shut off or destroyed after making the call, so we can't trace its current location. The call was routed through a cell tower that puts it in the middle of the city, but could be anywhere in a ten block radius."

"So we're nowhere," Gaara summarized.

"We're nowhere," Kakashi agreed. "What exactly did he say to you?"

Naruto shrugged, repressing the shiver that the memory of that voice always evoked in him. Flinched as he felt something brush against the small of his back, then relaxed slightly as he saw Sasuke's hand come to rest on his hip. "He said that... he was being helpful. And I... asked him what the fuck he'd done and he asked me if that were anyway to talk to a... friend."

Naruto shifted nervously, wanting to lean back against Sasuke, but not quite willing to give up his own pride enough to actually do it. He felt Sasuke's hand squeeze his hip slightly and shot his lover a grateful glance.
"He's going to expect something in return," Sasuke said, stating what they were all thinking.

"How much does he know about Kabuto?" Itachi asked Kakashi.

"We don't actually know. At minimum, he knows that Kabuto was trying to file an indictment against Sasuke, and that he assaulted Naruto in the police department. That could be sufficient grounds for Tobi to decide to kill him. He probably knows the two of you are lovers. He might know the truth about Orochimaru's death."

No one seemed surprised that the fact that Sasuke killed Orochimaru appeared to be common knowledge in the room.

Naruto shook his head slowly. "I don't think he knows about that. He had complimented me on that kill in particular as being more… creative. I think that was when he decided I was ready to be approached. He knew that I could have avoided killing Orochimaru. Maybe he viewed that kill as… done for pleasure." Naruto glanced over to see Sasuke's reaction. It was not a thought he had voiced before, but there was no point in withholding things now.

"So… it's my fault that he is coming after you," Sasuke stated, his voice reflecting no emotion, but his eyes were full of turmoil.

"No," Naruto said. "Actually… there is a chance that you prevented him from killing me outright."

Sasuke frowned in confusion, and it was Gaara who continued. "Tobi evidently saw Naruto kill Zetsu. That was probably where he first got the idea of Naruto being… like him."

"I had… kind of lost it," Naruto said, glancing at the others in the room. It was a moment in his past that he didn't like to think about or discuss. "It was pretty brutal."

"But after that, Naruto showed no particular pleasure in his kills. He only killed when attacked or under orders," Gaara continued. "Naruto's way of killing is quick, clean and efficient. Nothing like Tobi's. Orochimaru's death was showy," Gaara glanced at Sasuke, seeing the man frown. "Naruto isn't a swordsman, and he can kill quickly and with much less mess with other means. For you, killing with a sword made sense because it is the weapon you are most familiar with. For Naruto, it would only have been for fun. When Tobi heard about that killing, he might have thought that Naruto had finally grown to enjoy the act of killing enough to play a bit." Gaara shrugged as though the idea didn't disturb him.

"Tobi had clearly been following me ever since I killed Zetsu. Maybe before that? I dunno. But if he at some point decided that I was not like him and would never be a good partner, he would have had the opportunity to simply kill me."

"Like on the subway," Shisui said, nodding. "The only reason he didn't kill you then was because he thought he had a chance to make you his partner."

Naruto met Sasuke's gaze and held it for a moment before grinning. "Too bad he didn't know which one of us is actually the homicidal psychopath, eh, Uchiha?"

Sasuke snorted and looked over at Itachi, who was watching him expressionlessly.

"Either way, he is going to ask something of Naruto in return for his 'gesture of goodwill," Kakashi said.

"But depending on how much he knows about Kabuto, he might vary the price," Shisui added. "Either way, we have to be prepared."
"Given what just happened, the mayor has postponed her campaign event. We need to find another excuse to get Naruto out of here in a controlled situation and hope that Tobi takes the bait," Kakashi explained, looking more at Sasuke than Naruto.

Sasuke frowned, still clearly not liking the idea of dangling Naruto out there waiting to see what Tobi will try. But there didn't appear to be other options at this point. They just had to wait.

"Get some sleep tonight," Kakashi said as he walked to the elevator. "I have a feeling Tobi isn't going to wait very long. We've increased security. I'm going to be working with Jiraiya and the feds to finalize the plans, but I will be surprised if things don't happen pretty quickly."

The man on the roof adjusted the telescope he was using, zooming in further. It allowed him to see with great precision the measly distance of twelve blocks away into the bedroom of the penthouse apartment he was focused on. The military grade sniper rifle lay unopened in its case beside him. He had brought it only as a last resort. He never killed with guns. They spoiled the fun.

His grey clothing blended in completely with the concrete roof, making him basically invisible from casual observation. And above all else, he wanted to be undisturbed. The two men he had been watching for most of the day emerged from the bathroom, their hair still dripping from the shower they had clearly taken together.

The blond man turned, grabbing the pale man by his hair and pulling their mouths together fiercely. The dark-haired man slid his hands up over the tan back as the two men stumbled to the bed, their bodies entwined before they even hit the sheets.

He frowned as the black-haired man pulled back, tracing his fingers gently over the scars he knew were on the blond's cheeks. Scars Kyuubi had put there. A possessive anger surged inside him. The politician should know better than to touch what wasn't his.

"...Mommy..." the little blond boy cried as he crawled over her to cooling body, his face awash with tears. "M-mommy..." he sobbed louder as he brushed his hand over her chest and face. She wouldn't be answering him again.

A sound beside him drew the boy's attention to his father. The man's hand covered with blood trying to crawl over to his child. He collapsed, his body unmoving, before he could get to him.

It was then that the boy started to truly scream.

The happy, excited expression the child had worn while exiting the restaurant, his mother holding one had, his father holding the other, was gone. The child's face was now contorted in pain and anguish, terror-filled blue eyes locked on Kyuubi. He felt no pity towards the child nor the boy's parents. He only felt powerful. Seeing the results of his work laid out before him. Their blood soaked the concrete, looking black in the moonlight. So many variations on the color of death. He loved them all.

Kyuubi grinned, knowing the child could see his face. It was a novelty for him. The boy's father had actually managed to dislodge the mask he usually wore in their struggle. It was the first time that had happened, and Tobi relished the thought of his victims taking the sight of his face to their grave. Their fear feeding his ego, making him feel invincible. He casually bent down, picking up the fallen mask while the boy watched him, frozen in terror.

He had selected the family at random, seeing them come out of the expensive restaurant, the
birthday cap on the blond boy's head. So happy. So confident in their place in the world. They fought more than his past victims, but the end was the same.

He snickered, and slid the mask back on before it could be seen by anyone else. Zetsu would warn him if there were witnesses and take care of them. Leaving Tobi time to truly enjoy his work. He had only stunned the child in his initial assault to keep him from running away, knowing that the boy was no threat. With the parents dealt with, he could now take his time with the child. Though not too much time. The alley was out of sight from most traffic, but he was sure the screams had been heard.

The boy surprised him by leaping up to attack him. It was somewhat amusing, as his tiny punches and kicks did nothing. But it was unexpected. Usually his victims cowered and begged, or merely stood there, frozen in fear awaiting their fate. But the end for the child would be the same. Calmly Tobi thrust his clawed hand into the boy's stomach, watching as realization of his impending death flashed across the child's face. Most children didn't consider their own death a possibility.

Foolish.

He watched the child's face as he gave a slight twist of his claws before sharply withdrawing. Relishing the familiar scream of pain. His final gift to the birthday boy.

He roughly spun the boy around, forcing him to look upon him family. He felt the child's body contort in anguish, and relished the feel of the emotion. The feel of control. He brushed the boy's cheek with the back of a bladed finger and leaned down, adjusting the mask to speak directly into the child's ear.

"Happy birthday," he whispered before shoving the dying body of the child to the ground to join his parents.

Stepping backwards, he observed the boy for a moment, shocked when the child turned over and tried to rise, as though still believing he could fight.

Amusing.

The killer leaned forward, slicing his razor-sharp claws effortlessly across the boy's face, leaving thin symmetrical whisker like marks first on one side then the other. Whisker marks befitting for one who had fought back against Kyuubi.

His little fox.

Tobi focused back on the present. The blond had grabbed the politician's wrists and twisted them behind the man's back, stopping the touch that had annoyed Tobi. He watched as the pale man was pinned to the bed. He could see from the blond's profile that he was saying something to the man, and he watched as the dark eyes narrowed and a challenging light flaring in their depths.

The tan shoulders shook with laughter, and the dark-haired man used the opening to brace his forearm against the blond's collar bone and flip their positions before driving into him ruthlessly.

The way the blond arched to the touch, fisting into the black hair and dragging the other's mouth down to his own renewed Tobi's sense of annoyance. But at least the boy was back where he could keep track of him.

Tobi felt a fist clenching at the memory of the anger he had felt when he realized Naruto was no longer in the city. That he had escaped him again. Tobi had been so close. If only that fucking officer, Hatake, hadn't figured it out before he had expected. He had known that the blond was in the
building, but he hadn't been able to get the details on why, other than it involved Kabuto. Tobi hated not knowing things that had to do with his blond.

He had even been willing to risk discovery of his charade as Obito, even though it had been so entertaining for him. He had loved the smug feeling he'd had each day he'd gone to 'work', walking around freely throughout the very department that was currently hunting him. Rubbing it in their faces.

But Hatake had ruined it. He was cleverer than the other cops. He never let Obito get close. Tobi had known he was going to have to eliminate him anyway. If only he had let him into the observation room. Tobi would have been able to kill the officer before he had a chance to tell anyone his suspicions. Not to mention getting rid of the Uchiha. A message to his protégé of what would happen if the boy tried to hide from him again. He would have had the perfect opportunity to take his time with them in the soundproof observation room where the walls were silent and no one would disturb them for hours… not to mention he would have been able to listen in to the conversation Naruto was having with the District Attorney and the Police Commissioner.

He closed his eyes briefly, imagining it. The reaction the police would have had at his proof that he had been able to take out the officer leading up the hunt for him in his own building. The awe they would have felt at his accomplishment. Combining that with the punishment for his protégé for disappearing on him again. It would have been so perfect. His eyes opened, his expression hardening. But it hadn't happened. Too many things had gone wrong. Kakashi had been suspicious. He hadn't simply accepted the image Obito had presented like he was supposed to. And then Naruto had vanished. Again. How was the boy able to elude him so many times? But none had been as bad as that first time.

His gaze stayed fix on the bedroom, but his mind drifted back to the past.

The screams and noise of the attack had attracted attention, and Tobi knew he wouldn't get to stay and watch the final moments of the family that he had chosen that night. Zetsu was already signaling that they needed to go. It was a small regret. He always liked to see his work finished, but it didn't matter. He knew what the end would be.

He had left the scene with complete confidence in the family's demise as yet another example of his control over other's deaths.

Sitting in his hotel room, he had eagerly turned on the local news. He preferred the local newscasters to the national ones. They liked to go into the details more, and were less professional about letting their horror and emotions show. He laid back on the bed with a glass of wine, excited to hear the news woman explain in horror how the serial killer Kyuubi had struck again, killing a picture-perfect family as they came out of the restaurant celebrating their son's birthday. It was going to be so perfect. The police would be in a frenzy. Everyone would be terrified by his power. It would be his best kill yet.

"Our main story tonight is the miraculous survival of a young boy when his family was attacked by the serial killer known only as Kyuubi. Namikaze Naruto, an eight-year-old boy, was taken to the city hospital hours ago. We have learned that - despite severe injuries to his abdomen - he was reported to have survived the attack. He is the first known survivor of an attack by Kyuubi. We turn to our reporter live at the scene to find out more about this amazing story."

Tobi's eyes had widened in fury. This was NOT the story they were supposed to be talking about. He could NOT be overshadowed by some ridiculous child. People needed to stay focused on him, not the boy. The wine glass shattered in his fingers, the need to close them around the anchorwoman's
throat nearly uncontrollable.

Then abruptly, his face stilled, all traces of his anger vanishing. Eyes that had been full of rage were now calm and expressionless. He calmly stood, brushing the shards of glass to the floor and walking to get a towel from the bathroom to clean up the spilled wine.

This was simple. He knew how to fix it. They boy had just been lucky. There was nothing special about the boy. Tobi quickly finished cleaning, then hung the "do not disturb" sign on the door to his room and headed down to the hospital to rectify the situation.

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No one gave him a second glance as he calmly walked into the building, giving a friendly wink to the receptionist as he passed by as though he belonged there. People were so easy to fool. No one ever questioned him. He stepped into an unguarded supply room as one of the nurses exited. It was simple to pull on a mask and scrubs, making him blend in seamlessly as he walked with complete confidence down the hallway. The guards didn't even look twice at him as he nodded to them confidently and walked into the boy's room.

The child was gone.

He slammed the door open, startling the officer stationed outside the boy's room.

"Where is the boy?" he snarled to the wide-eyed officer.

"He... he's not in the room?" the policeman had stepped in, looking frantically around the room before cursing and racing out into the corridor, looking around wildly for any sign of the child.

Tobi didn't bother to follow. If the child had been in the hall, he would have seen him instantly. How the fuck could he be gone? What kind of incompetent police officer couldn't keep watch over an eight-year-old brat! Rage filled him again, and he grabbed the metal stand where the IV bag was hanging and hurled it against the wall. Idiots.

He drew a breath, his face returning instantly to the frozen mask he had worn on the way in. He calmly walked out, ignoring the shout from the officer for him to stop.

The boy was denying his authority over death. It could not be allowed. Normally, Tobi selected his victims by chance. On a whim. Something about them that caught his eye. But this time, he would stalk a very particular prey. And there would be no 'lucky escape' the second time.

He had never expected it would be over a decade before he saw the boy again.

Naruto was his. Tobi would not let him get away again. He was done waiting. It was time to act. His eyes narrowed as he focused his attention back to the two figures in the bedroom.

The councilman grabbed Naruto's wrist, pinning them behind his back and pressing the blond head face down into the pillows as he pounded into him. Tobi could see the force of the man's thrusts, the mahogany headboard slamming repeatedly against the wall.

Tobi never had much desire for sex himself. There wasn't enough challenge to it. Dispassionately, he watched the way the muscles and skin of the object of his fixation stretched and strained against his current lover. He could admit that there was a similarity between the agony of sex and the agony of death. Perhaps he could have the same pleasure of the kill with the blond over and over again, without actually killing him.
Of course, it wouldn't replace his hunts. Nothing could compare to that thrill. That feeling of complete power and control. Tobi's hand drifted to his pocket. He brushed his fingers against the outside of the pocket lightly, sensing the glove within, hearing the metallic sound of the blades sliding together.

But soon it would be a shared hunt.

His eyes remained locked on the two men as their sweat-soaked bodies strained together, admiring for a moment the raw power and stamina of the lovers. Of course, he would have to deal with the dark-haired one eventually. He was not going to share his apprentice with anyone else. The redhead might be an acceptable companion, but not the councilman.

The black-haired man threw his head back, his mouth opening in a scream of ecstasy as he came before collapsing on the bed beside Naruto. They lay there for several minutes, their chests rising and falling rapidly from their exertions.

Tobi's eyes narrowed when Sasuke wrapped his arms loosely around the blond. The dark head lowered to Naruto's ear, and Tobi could see the pale lips murmuring things as the blond lay with his eyes closed, a soft smile playing on Naruto's face.

This was new.

And Tobi didn't like it.

These two were no longer just fucking. It was different from how it had been before the blond had disappeared. Naruto was not supposed to have emotional attachments like this. The boy had taken several lovers in the time that Tobi had been observing him. But they meant nothing. They had all been just physical. Temporary. Even his partnership with Gaara could be forgiven. They killed together, and protected each other. It was a bond of necessity. Of survival.

This bond with the councilman was not necessary. It was an emotional entanglement that threatened to pull Naruto from his grasp.

This man, this *Uchiha*, was different. Naruto allowed him to hold him. They would talk, and the blond's face would soften, reminding Tobi of the way the boy had looked when he was a child.

Trust.

Hope.

Happiness.

All things that Tobi had killed in the boy more than a decade ago. Even Naruto's friendship with the redhead hadn't softened him like this. Tobi could not allow this to continue, to destroy what he had created. Sasuke did not belong in their world.

*Tobi* was the one who had shaped the boy's life… it was *Tobi* who had set him on this path from the child he had been when he had first met him. Sasuke was nothing compared to that. He would be quickly disposed of.

Soon.

Naruto woke slowly, but didn't open his eyes. He could tell by the low level of light in the room that it was early. Sasuke's arm was resting loosely over his waist, just as it had been when they'd fallen
asleep the night before.

He brushed his fingers over the pale forearm, unable to resist touching him. He tried to get his head around how he felt about the fact that Tobi would likely make contact with him in the next day or two. So many years of waiting for an opportunity. And finally it was going to happen.

But he felt afraid in a way that he hadn't before. He had always been afraid of Tobi on certain levels. He had always known it wouldn't be a sure thing which one of them would survive. But now…

He sighed.

He wanted a life now, not just survival. He turned slightly in Sasuke's hold, letting his cheek rest in the hollow of his lover's collarbone, feeling the warmth and scent of his lover seep into him.

He would fight for this.

The next day, Naruto, Gaara, and Shisui were sitting around the kitchen table playing poker while Itachi and Sasuke were closed in Sasuke's office, working.

The three looked up as the elevator chimed and Kakashi stepped out. The three guns that were held under the table out of the police officer's sight were replaced into the waistbands of the men who wore them.

"I take it there has been no word from Tobi?" Kakashi asked, pretending he hadn't noticed the subtle motion of the arms of the three killers who had been there to greet him. The door to Sasuke's office opened, and Itachi and Sasuke joined them to find out what was happening.

"No," Naruto answered. "There's been no contact."

The last of the evening's sunlight came through the large window that looked out from Sasuke's living room over the City.

"I want you to wear this," Kakashi said, handing Naruto a small device that looked like a button with a thin wire hanging down from it. "It's a tracking device. We've got surveillance teams at every entry point to the building. Given the security, it's likely Tobi will try to lure you out rather than come in after you. If he does, we will follow. But in case we lose sight of you, I want you to have this on any time you leave the building."

Naruto had looked at the wire skeptically, but accepted it. "You know he is probably aware that you're in here giving me this. He's not an idiot. There's a reason you guys haven't been able to catch him for like twenty years."

Kakashi shrugged. "Yeah, but this way if you get killed, I can at least say I tried."

Naruto and Gaara snickered, but Sasuke was not amused.

Kakashi's phone rang. He glanced at the number, but it wasn't one he recognized.

"Kakashi," he said into the phone.

"Officer Hatake. It's been a while. How's your arm?"

Kakashi's eyes widened, and Shisui and Gaara were instantly on their feet.

Naruto simply stood there, somehow already knowing what was about to happen.
"Where are you, Tobi?"

Laughter came through the phone as Kakashi put him on speaker. "Now, what fun would it be if I just told you? People like us enjoy the hunt. I don't want to spoil it for you."

Sasuke moved to stand by Naruto.

"Oh, isn't that cute? The little Uchiha is trying to protect his boyfriend. How cliché."

Instantly, six sets of eyes snapped to the nearest window.

"Peek-a-boo, I see you!" the mocking voice came over the phone.

Itachi pulled his cell out, immediately dialing 911 while Gaara basically tackled Naruto to the floor.

"Oh, Red. It wouldn't be any fun if I simply shot him. I could have done that months ago. Of course then I wouldn't have had the chance to watch him and the councilman get reacquainted."

Everyone had stepped back from the windows, not willing to take a psychopath on his word that he wasn't going to shoot.

Itachi was barking out information to whoever he had been put in touch with in 911 dispatch. Shisui and Kakashi began closing the curtains of all the windows while Gaara pulled out his sniper rifle. Gaara flipped the coffee table on its side and set up his rifle, flipping open the scope to search through a small gap in the curtain for the man who was hunting them.

"A good idea, Red, but you have no clue where I am. There are a lot of buildings that are in line of sight. And you don't even know if I am inside or outside."

Naruto stood and walked calmly over to one of the windows and opened the curtain, just enough that he could be seen, but not the rest of the room.

"What the fuck are you doing!" Gaara hissed.

"He's right. If he had a sniper rifle and wanted to take me out that way, I'd have been dead a long time ago," Naruto turned towards Kakashi's phone to be sure his voice would carry. "But like you said, Tobi. Where's the fun in that? Tell me what you want."

Laughter came from the phone again. "Such a good apprentice. I knew you'd understand. I want you to meet me in one of your favorite places. The church closest to your old apartment. You have twenty minutes to get there. Come alone. I might not want to shoot you, but I have no such reluctance about any of your little friends. Oh, and Kakashi, the men you stationed outside the building probably require your assistance."

With that, the phone cut off.

There was complete silence in the room as the men looked at each other.

"You'd better call an ambulance," Naruto said to Kakashi who was standing there, looking numb.

"Or a hearse," Gaara said more realistically.

"Fuck!" Kakashi said, dialing the head of the surveillance team and listening as the phone continued to ring.

Itachi was relaying the information to the police, his face grim.
Sasuke grabbed Naruto's hand as he was tying the laces of his shoes. "You are not going out there."

Naruto sighed. "Sasuke. Yes, I am. He knows where I am. He could kill me right now if he wanted. Or kill you. And we'd be sitting ducks with no way to fight back. If there's a chance of actually meeting him face to face and equaling the odds a bit, I'm going to take it. Just because I've never heard of him using a gun doesn't mean he won't. Or hasn't hired someone with the skills to do it for him."

Kakashi looked up grimly from his phone. "Back-up is on the way. I haven't been able to make contact with any of the surveillance teams. Go outside and take a taxi. I've called in for all units in the area to set up two blocks from the church and cover all possible access points to the area. They'll see you coming and back you up. Once you're in, they'll cordon off the area and lock it down. If he shows, we'll get him."

Naruto's eyes locked on the mismatched eyes of the police man. They both knew that it was a shitty plan. Back-up wouldn't get there in time to do anything if Tobi decided he just wanted to kill Naruto face-to-face rather than with a sniper shot. Naruto was going to be on his own.

Gaara walked over and reached down to pick up his own shoes. Before his hand could touch them, Naruto grabbed his wrist. "No."

Gaara's eyes narrowed.

"No," Naruto repeated more firmly. "If you walk out with me now, he'll just pick you off with a gun. We don't know where he is. You can follow me in ten minutes. Take the tunnels and stay out of sight."

Naruto stood, meeting Sasuke's angry gaze. "You knew this was coming. I never lied to you about it. I can't just run from him anymore. Let me end this. Have some faith in me."

"Don't give me a stupid line like that. This isn't about fucking faith. This is about reality. You're doing exactly what he wants."

Naruto looked over to where Itachi, Shisui and Kakashi were silently observing.

"Either we play by his rules, or he ends the game right now. That's why he called Kakashi's phone. He was letting us know that he had us. There isn't a choice. But he could have killed me in the subway, and he probably could kill me right now, but he didn't. There has to be a reason. If he's going to let me get close enough to maybe be able to get him first, I'm going to try. This is as good as it's going to get."

"He's right," Kakashi said, laying a hand on Sasuke's shoulder, which was immediately glared off. "There isn't going to be some perfect, master plan for this guy. We don't have enough information on him. And we aren't likely to get it."

Sasuke's expression clearly showed how much he hated this. Despite himself, he turned toward Itachi, hoping somehow his older brother would have a better idea, some master plan that could win this with finesse and brilliance that would avoid the horrendous risk that Naruto appeared to be ready to take without so much as a discussion.

Itachi's eyes met his. Sasuke felt his heart grow sick as he saw only resignation in his brother's black eyes.

"Without more time or more information, he doesn't have a choice, Sasuke," Itachi said gently, wishing he could still solve every problem for his little brother.
"So we just let him walk out there, when we know his backup is probably laying out there waiting for their body bags to show up?" Sasuke said bitterly, ignoring the way that Kakashi flinched at his callous words. The cop probably knew the guys that had been stationed outside. Some could have been friends. But it was the truth, and he wasn't going to sugar coat it.

"No," Gaara said calmly, checking the clip in his gun to make sure he had enough bullets. "We'll follow him. There's a manhole inside the parking garage that leads to the storm sewers. All we need to do is follow the sewers for two blocks and we can come back up grab a cab and follow. Tobi is watching the entrances to this building, not every random building in New York."

"Yeah, but he's lived here a while, and likely knows the routes like we do," Naruto said.

Gaara smirked. "No one knows them like we do, Naruto."

Naruto gave a little smile back. "Give me a ten minute head start. If you get yourself sniped, I'm gonna be really pissed."

As the doors to the elevator closed behind him, he wondered how long they'd wait before following. He'd bet it would be less than five minutes.

He was four minutes off.

Tobi watched from the rooftop as Naruto came out and hailed a cab. He waited a few minutes to be sure the blond wasn't followed. Not that he expected it. They assumed that they knew where the blond was going. He had seen the tracking device that Kakashi had helpfully given the blond.

So predictable. Though it always made his life easier when people did what he expected.

Tobi smirked as he saw the cab driver look up towards his location with a slight nod. He had never had allies in the past, but observing Nagato and Konan had made him realize that they could be temporarily useful. Usually his goals were more around instant gratification. He had never felt the need to stalk a specific prey before. They were all interchangeable.

But Naruto was different. Tobi had hunted him for years before finally finding him. That alone marked him as worthy. But of course, there was more to him than just that.

He packed his telescope, feeling a euphoric excitement surge through him. It was finally happening. Naruto would be so surprised. Tobi had spent a lot of time considering the best way to test his theory about the boy. He had spent the past six weeks picking out the perfect target. Just the kind of people Tobi loved to kill. And the similarity would surely not be lost on the boy.

A decade ago, all he had wanted was the Naruto's death. The severing of an untidy loose end that had annoyingly evaded him for far too long. Until Zetsu had unknowingly shown him what truly had made that boy special. Why he had survived.

The man closed his eyes, lost briefly in the memory of the blond, bathed in blood, laughing as he looked down at the body of the man he had just killed. With such violence. Such pleasure. Such beauty. He shivered at the exquisiteness of the moment. No one could understand how he had felt in that moment. When he had known he had found a kindred spirit. One that he had created. Moulded in his own image.

He had known that day that he had found his true apprentice. Zetsu had never been a very active participant. He had been loyal out of fear and awe of Tobi, but he didn't lose himself in the kill the way Tobi did.
But the boy… the boy had been a demon when he had ripped Zetsu apart. He didn't mind the loss of his long-term companion for this discovery.

Tobi was no fool, however. He had been cautious. He had watched and waited, wanting to be sure the boy was ready, assessing his skills. When Naruto had joined the Akatsuki, Tobi had wanted to see the boy lash out and kill with impunity, sheltered by Nagato's powerful reach. He had been disappointed as the years passed and instead, Naruto had instead shown restraint, killing only when necessary, when ordered, and with minimal pain and mess. Tobi had found out recently about the Jinchuuriki program that the boy had been recruited into. It annoyed him that they had placed such constraints on the child. Naruto had subsequently begun to kill like a soldier, rather than for the pleasure.

So disappointing. Tobi had begun to revisit his decision to spare the boy. Perhaps he had been wrong.

But that latest kill… Tobi laughed as he opened the door from the roof to the stairway that led back into the building.

That last kill had convinced him that he hadn't been wrong after all. It hadn't been ordered. It hadn't even been necessary. He had seen in the police report on Orochimaru's death. The cut had been deep. Forceful, with no hesitation. Nearly enough to decapitate the victim. The strike to the wrist would have eliminated the threat, but Naruto had continued through to the throat, his intent to kill obvious. Tobi was intrigued once again.

Then of course, there was the choice of weapon. Naruto had finally branched out to something that showed desire to experience the kill more personally. Any idiot could kill with a gun.

Swords took skill. They made the kill more personal. More intimate. More pleasurable. Not as good as his own personalized weapon, of course.

The man closed his eyes briefly, visualizing how the blood would have spurted. Yes. Naruto was ready. That kill was done by someone who was ruthless. Someone who had no hesitation or remorse on taking a life even when it was not necessary to do so.

Tobi was excited. Tonight would be the final test, one to ensure Naruto was worthy of being his partner. He was done waiting. He had taken great care to select the perfect opportunity to show the boy how fun it would be.

He hoped Naruto realized how special he was. How much time he had put into setting things up just right.

Launching their new partnership together. By commemorating their past.

Naruto stepped out of the cab. The driver looked back, smirking at Naruto as he held out his hand for payment.

"Fuck off," Naruto said shortly. "The gun you took from me is worth a lot more than cab fare. If I don't get it back when this 'meeting' is over, I'll come find it myself."

The man's smirk faded not so much at the blond's words, but with the calm certainty with which they were delivered. He didn't know much about the mystery man who was calling the shots with this operation, but he knew the guy scared the hell out of him. Even his boss treaded carefully around the guy. And given who the cab driver's boss was, that was saying something.
"Did he give you any other instructions, aside from bringing me here and taking my weapons?" Naruto asked, his voice clearly showing his annoyance at the insistence that he leave them behind. He could easily have overpowered the guy, but that would have defeated the purpose of him bothering to come at all. It put him at a disadvantage, but Tobi had already proven that he could get to him even in Sasuke's apartment. He had to just trust in his own skills and hope Kakashi found him in time to catch Tobi before the guy disappeared again.

The driver shrugged. "Just that you are supposed to wait here until he comes."

With that, the driver closed the door and drove off, glad to be away from the threatening blond and the man who was waiting for him.

Naruto fought the urge to look wildly around. He knew that he was not in the part of town where the police were expecting him. The driver had quickly found and removed the tracking device, which was not surprising given that Tobi had probably seen Kakashi give it to him in the first place.

The sun had set, and Naruto seemingly casually leaned up against the dirty brick wall of the building behind him. It wasn't in a bad part of town, but it wasn't busy either. His eyes scanned the street, trying to guess what Tobi had planned.

By now he was pretty sure that Kakashi would have found out that the tracking device had been removed. Hopefully he had been watching when Naruto got in the cab and at least gotten the medallion number of the vehicle. There were enough cameras along the city streets that they would be able to find the cab, or at least tell the direction it was going.

Naruto bent down as though tying his shoe, though in reality he was removing his shoe lace. The driver had found Naruto's knife and gun. A shoelace didn't make a perfect garrote, but it was better than nothing.

It wouldn't be the first time he'd killed with one, if it came down to that.

He slowly stood, keeping the lace loosely in his hand but out of sight. He tried to keep himself focused in the moment. Tobi would come soon, if he wasn't there already. Naruto had to keep himself grounded if he were going to have any chance of defending himself if this turned out to be some sort of trap. He couldn't afford to fall into a flashback again.

He felt a surge of panic and frustration at the thought, knowing that he could tell himself not to flash all day long, but in reality he had zero control over it. It just didn't work that way.

He hated the weakness. Hated the loss of control and exposed vulnerability.

Most of the buildings on the narrow street seemed to be businesses of some sort. Given that it was evening on a Sunday, most were closed, some with the metal grates covering their openings. One establishment caught his eye.

It appeared to be a small restaurant. Not particularly busy. He had only seen one group enter in the several minutes he'd been waiting. Given that it was the only place open on the street, he wondered if he was supposed to go inside. Would Tobi really have gone through all this trouble just to have dinner and talk? Naruto doubted it. He wondered what one would chat about with the serial killer that killed one's parents anyway.

Nothing really came to mind.

He shifted the shoelace in his fingers, pressing his fingers against its softness one by one like playing a keyboard. The waiting was starting to get to him. He had never been very good at it.
He had the sudden, overwhelming feeling that someone was watching him, but just as he was about
to move to cover, the door to the restaurant opened, catching his attention.

A family came out. A young blond boy was grinning from ear-to-ear, a birthday crown on his head.
His father held one hand, and his mother the other.

"Again, again!" the boy called out happily. "Swing me again!"

The father laughed, sharing a warm look with the mother as they counted to three before lifting the
boy and swinging him forward.

Naruto felt his stomach turn to ice, comprehension slowly dawning on him. No. No. Not this.

Something from the narrow alleyway caught the father's attention. He turned as though speaking to
someone, but Naruto could not see anything deep in the shadows of the alley.

No. Don't go in. Please…

The sound of a car horn blaring jerked Naruto back to reality as he looked to see that he was already
halfway across the street and a car had almost hit him.

He looked back up frantically, but the family had disappeared into the alley.

"Stop!" Naruto screamed, running to catch up to them. The shoe he had removed the lace from fell
from his foot and he left it in the middle of the road, barely noticing.

He got to the entrance of the alley, still shouting. The father turned to look back at Naruto, surprise
and concern on his face.

"So perfect, aren't they?" a voice said just behind Naruto's shoulder. Naruto jumped, turning to see
Tobi stepping out from behind a dumpster.

"Do you remember?" the killer whispered, his finger brushing along the back of Naruto's shoulders.
"I wanted our first time together to be special."

Naruto felt his hands start to shake.

"Who do you want? Do you have a preference?" Tobi asked, his eyes going calmly between
Naruto's face and the three people in the alley with them.

The parents seemed to finally sense that something was wrong as they realized that they had
followed a cry for help into a dead end alley that now had two strange men blocking them from the
exit, and no one else in sight.

"I might prefer the woman myself, but really, it's all the same to me," Tobi said, as though they were
selecting entrees off a menu.

"You… you're crazy!" Naruto said, stepping back between Tobi and the family who were standing
there, frozen. "RUN, you idiots! Get the hell out of here!"

Tobi's eyes narrowed, and the gloved hand he had kept concealed by his side came forward as the
mother grabbed her child by the hand and began running towards them.

Tobi lifted his hand, articulating each blade in the dim glow of the streetlight, and the sight caused
her to stop in her tracks, frozen with fear. "Now, Naruto. Don't be a spoilsport. It took me over a
month to find them. Aren't they perfect? Don't reject my gift. We are the same. I want you to
experience what I did, that night."

Naruto looked from the blades on Tobi's hand, and considered the shoelace still held in his fingers. A blunted garroter like a shoelace would not kill quickly enough to go up against blades. He needed to find something else. His eyes flicked deeper in the alley, hoping for some old pipes or anything he could use as a projectile, but there was nothing.

He then considered the child's parents. They were frozen in fear, not even screaming yet, much less fighting. They would be no help. They were sheep to the slaughter. Tobi had chosen his victims well.

Tobi's face flashed with impatience.

"Fine," he said finally, disappointment lacing his voice. "If you won't choose first, then I will. I'll take her."

With practiced speed, Tobi lunged forward, driving the blades of his hand toward the woman's belly. The blades had just begun to pierce her skin when his hand was knocked to the side by Naruto's wrist coming down forcefully against his.

The woman had finally begun to scream, blood staining her blouse. The blades hadn't been driven through, however, so the wounds at this point were not life threatening.

Naruto spun, before Tobi could recover his balance to strike again and threw himself against the older man, knocking him to the ground. He looked up to see the child's eyes wide with terror and fixated on him.

"Run," Naruto whispered, knowing the parents would follow if the child fled. The sight of the blood on the blades of Tobi's glove sent a shudder through him.

"Mommy!" Naruto heard his own voice screaming from the past, mixing with the voice of the child in front of him as the boy reached to touch his mother's stomach, which was now covered with blood.

"Such a disappointment, Naruto," the familiar voice was saying. "You've made me waste my time."

Naruto heard the threat in that voice. He knew what it meant. "Run," he said again, watching as a drop of blood hit the ground in front of him. Tobi was on top of him now, he could hear screaming. A man's. A woman's. A child's.

_The concreted, black with blood._

"You're going to have to pay for that. Along with the people who ruined you."

"Run!" Naruto screamed, but he didn't know if the scream was in the present or in the past.

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Gaara waited until the elevator closed behind Naruto before he stalked to his bedroom, pulling out the small bag he kept under his bed, ignoring the presence of Shisui and Sasuke behind him.

He left the sniper rifle where it lay, knowing it wasn't exactly something he could run through the city streets with, and grabbed something more conveniently sized, throwing it to Sasuke. He checked the clip of his own piece one more time before stuffing the Glock into the waistband of his jeans.

"The tracking device has gone dead," Kakashi said, his cell phone to his ear.
"Shit!" Sasuke swore, looking at the gun in his hand, but knowing it would be useless if they didn't know where Naruto was.

"The first back-up unit has already arrived to the meet point. They were only a few blocks away when they got the call," Kakashi said, his voice tense. "If Naruto show's up there, they'll notify us." His voice didn't sound hopeful. He hadn't heard yet what had happened to the original team, but he knew the news would not be good.

"Naruto isn't going to be at the address Tobi gave," Itachi said, standing up and going to put on his shoes, accepting the gun that Shisui had wordlessly handed him.

Kakashi looked at him but didn't disagree.

"There would have been no point of disabling the tracking device if he were going to that location," Gaara said, opening up a what looked like a tablet and turning it on, looking pleased when he heard a small, pinging beep.

"What's that?" Sasuke asked as he pushed the elevator button for the third time with probably a bit more force than necessary.

"A monitor for a tracking device," Gaara said tersely.

"But I just told you that the tracking device was disabled," Kakashi said impatiently.

Gaara looked at him, then rolled his eyes. "That's because you used a fucking antique one that would have been worthless after four blocks anyway. You cops always have shit equipment. Even a blind three-year-old could have found it."

"So what are you looking at, then?" Sasuke persisted impatiently, hoping if Gaara was implying what he thought he was.

"Tobi's man found your tracking device. He didn't find mine," Gaara said tersely, matching Sasuke's impatience.

"Where did you put your tracking device? And when?" Kakashi asked, not exactly liking the fact that he hadn't been informed about it, but willing to overlook it if the fucking thing was working.

"I embedded it in his scalp while he was sleeping before we left for Suna," Gaara said patiently, as though it were a perfectly natural thing for one friend to embed a tracking device without permission into another. "It's state of the art, military grade, smaller than the head of a pin and with a range of four miles."

The four other men exchanged a glance, not quite sure what to say to that.

The elevator doors opened. Sasuke was the first to recover. "Then let's go," Sasuke said, following Gaara's example and concealing the gun in the waistband of his pants.

Kakashi was already calling the replacement surveillance squad with the new information.

-xXx-

*To be continued...*
Warning: Hard yaoi (18+) in this chapter, and some disturbing imagery.

Author's note: This chapter references one of my favorite 'badass Naruto' scenes in the manga. Can you find it? :-) Special thanks to BriEva for being my beta and helping me choose my victims, and to WordWriter for giving me advice and reading through it as well.

-xXx-

Naruto forced himself to try to stay focused on his surroundings. He could feel a dull ache in his shoulder and a sharper pain in his right hand, but the rest of his body seemed to still be operational. He had to keep fighting. He couldn’t let go.

He locked eyes with the man he was battling, his surroundings shifting back between the present and the past. But he would only focus on this man. He was in both places, and Naruto knew he could not let him go. His hand tightened, and the sharp pain increased, but Naruto only gripped harder.

The man’s eyes widened, and Naruto saw a flicker of fear and surprise in them. Naruto lunged forward, his fingers held straight and rigid to deliver a knife strike to the man’s throat and crush his windpipe. But the man anticipated, dodging the blow and delivering a sharp knee to Naruto’s stomach, tugging to free his hand but Naruto wouldn’t loosen his grip. Instead Naruto retaliated with full strength punch to the man’s ribs, knowing he would not be able to avoid it.

The man was speaking but Naruto couldn’t make out the words. There were too many sounds bombarding him at the same time, some from within his mind, some from outside it. A child crying. Sirens.

The man had shifted again, his foot raised to crush down on a woman's throat as she lay bleeding on the alley floor. Naruto released his grip, pivoting and sweeping his leg to deflect the blow before it landed, his hand striking out at the man's face as he fell. Was the woman already dead? A noise from behind him caused Naruto to turn. People running towards him.

Men shouting. Naruto looked back down at his hands. Full of blood. Someone was saying his name.

He was kneeling over the body of a woman. His mother? No… was it?

Where was Tobi?

He felt a hand on his shoulder, pulling him back. Tobi was there.

Naruto was on his feet in an instant, spinning around and grabbing the owner of the hand by the throat and slamming him into the brick wall of the alley. He looked into the widened black eyes of the man he held.

Naruto's head was pounding in rhythm with his heartbeat, like his body had too much blood and couldn't hold it. He knew those eyes. He had to stop himself. He had to stop.

"S-Sasuke?" Naruto could see the man’s lips moving. "Why are you here?" the blond said, unknowingly speaking in Japanese, his mind still trapped between the present and the past.

"It's alright," Sasuke choked out, replying in the same language, his voice steady despite the pressure on his throat; the dark eyes were steady, locked on his, pulling at him, forcing Naruto to focus.
Naruto willed his fingers to loosen their grasp, closing his eyes tightly to try to erase images from the past that were leaking into the present. He felt the pressure of his shaking fingers on the pale throat ease.

"Naruto," a voice from behind him said. Gaara. Naruto turned, one hand still loosely touching Sasuke's throat, feeling the heavy gasps as the man sucked in air. Gaara looked at Naruto, glancing only briefly to ensure that Naruto was no longer in danger of crushing the Uchiha's trachea.

Naruto's eyes followed the short glance, and he dropped his hand away as though he'd burned it as he fully emerged back into the present. "Shit! Sasuke, did I… oh, fuck! Are you alright? Wait, Tobi!" Naruto said, spinning around, his eyes frantically searching the alley for any sign of his foe.

"He's gone," Sasuke said hoarsely, rubbing his hand lightly over his abused throat. "Shisui and Kakashi went after him. He jumped down a storm grate when we found the alley. The paramedics needed to be able to get to the woman. We needed to bring you back," Sasuke said, incredibly calm for a man who was being strangled less than two minutes ago.

Naruto looked down at the blood on his hands, a flash of real fear running through him. "Oh, god! Did I… is she… ?" Unable to voice his fears, Naruto looked helplessly from Gaara to Sasuke, wanting someone to fill in the gaps in his memory and let him know what had happened. He looked around the alley, seeing no sign of the husband. The paramedics were working on the woman, and the little boy was standing off to the side, looking at Naruto with wide eyes.

Police were everywhere. Kakashi had sent two men up the fire escapes to see if they could spot the killer while he, Shisui and six officers went down an open grate that led to the sewers where Tobi had disappeared.

"Tobi attacked the woman, and you blocked him," Gaara said, his voice flat. "The two of you were fighting when the police arrived. Luckily, the kid ran out into the street screaming his head off for the cops to come, or they might have been too late."

Naruto's eyebrows raised as he looked over to where the child was still watching him intently. "How… how did you guys get here so fast though? The address Tobi had sent us was on the other side of town, and the cab driver tossed the tracking device before we changed course."

Gaara stood there, simply looking at Naruto. Sasuke sighed when it became clear that Gaara wasn't going to say anything. "Your friend decided that the best way to keep track of you was to imbed a tracking device in your scalp while you were in Suna," Sasuke said, his voice still a bit rough but starting to return to normal.

Naruto gaped at Gaara. "What…? When did you…?"

Gaara shrugged. "It was in Madrid, actually. I wasn't sure what was going to happen when we got to Suna, but if things went wrong I wanted a way to be able to find you. It seemed prudent to leave it in place until after we dealt with the situation with Tobi as well."

Naruto's hands automatically went to his hair to try to find where the device was hidden, but Gaara's hand stopped him. "It's under your skin. You won't find it. Don't try."

Naruto blinked. "At some point, we're going to have a little chat about boundaries," he said, laughing a bit.

Gaara shrugged, turning to look towards the sewer grate that was still open. "Tobi knew what he was doing when he set this up."
Naruto followed Gaara's gaze, then turned back to look at the street sign behind them that showed what intersection it was. "Fuck," Naruto said.

"What?" Sasuke asked, trying to hide his annoyance at the nonverbal communication that the two men seemed to have.

"There is a major intersection of the storm sewer lines and some of the exhaust vents right here. There are literally a dozen different escape paths Tobi has from here," Naruto said, frustration edging his voice.

Gaara nodded tersely. "Kakashi recognized that, too. He sent a few guys up to the roofs to see if they could spot Tobi coming out, but…"

"He's gone," Naruto said, completing the thought. "Goddamit!"

He would have turned and punched the wall but a small tug on his pant leg stopped him. He looked down, surprised to see the young boy standing there.

"Hey," Naruto said, controlling his frustration and squatting down to be at eye level with the child. "You ok there, buddy?"

The boy looked at him a moment, as though not sure what to say. "You… you protected my mom when… when the man with the claw hand tried to… tried to…" the boy's lip quivered, but he swallowed and continued. "You saved her. How did you learn to fight like that?"

Naruto glanced over at Gaara before looking back at the boy. "What's your name?"

"I-Inari."

"Well, Inari. My name is Naruto. That man has tried to hurt me before," Naruto said, feeling the eerie sensation of déjà vu sweep over him as the memory of the happy family coming out of the restaurant played so closely to his own memories. "So I trained with my friend," he nodded his head toward Gaara. "And I got stronger so he couldn't hurt me again."

The child cocked his head to the side, looking at Naruto curiously. "You were… sorta scary when you fought him, though. You said stuff in a funny language. And… you didn't seem to always know where you were. Didn't it hurt?" the boy asked curiously, looking down at Naruto's bloody hand.

"Didn't what hurt?" Naruto asked.

"When the man attacked you with his claw, you just… grabbed the blades and held on. The man heard the sirens and was trying to get away, but you just held tighter. Even when he said all that scary stuff to you, it was like… nothing bothered you," the boy's voice was filled with awe, and not a little bit of fear.

Sasuke looked down at Naruto's hand, noticing for the first time that it was dripping with blood, not all of it from the body of the woman. "Shit! Naruto, your hand!" Sasuke gently lifted Naruto's hand by the wrist, looking at the two deep gashes where two of the sharp blades on Tobi's glove had gone right through the flesh.

With the fear and adrenaline pumping through Naruto's system on top of the disorientation from the flashback, Naruto had only registered a sort of non-responsiveness of the appendage, but not the full extent of the damage.

Sasuke called to get the attention of one of the paramedics, pulling Naruto to his feet and bringing
him over to have his hand checked out.

Gaara crouched down, his attention caught by something the child had said. "What did the man say to Naruto that was so scary?"

Itachi had come up behind them, and was listening intently as well.

The little boy glanced over at Naruto and swallowed. "He said… he said that he had made a mistake, and he was going to punish him for it. And that he was also going to punish the people who had r-ruined him. Will he… will N-Naruto be ok?"

Gaara gave a tiny smile to the little boy. "You saw him fight, right?"

The little boy nodded, looking over at where Naruto was trying to pull back away from the paramedic who wanted to examine his hand while Sasuke was talking to him sternly, as though scolding a child.

"Do you think he can handle himself?" Gaara asked the boy.

The boy met the clear green eyes, and slowly nodded.

"Good. I do, too." Gaara stood and walked over to help Sasuke force Naruto to let the EMT treat his wounds.

Sasuke pinched the bridge of his nose as he listened to them argue. Naruto had point blank refused to go to a hospital, and the young EMT was emphatically explaining that there could be dirt and debris lodged in the wound, not to mention that there could be tendons or ligaments that had been severed and it really needed to be seen by a doctor.

When the EMT threatened to sedate him if he wouldn't be reasonable, Naruto's eyes glazed in panic while Gaara not so subtly began looking for an escape route for the two of them through the police barricade. Sasuke decided he needed to step in. "Naruto will be treated by my private physician. I will take him there immediately, but in order to prevent him from bleeding all over my brother's car, can you at least bandage the wound?"

The calm but commanding tone in Sasuke's voice settled the paramedic down. Sasuke could literally see the man breathe out a relieved sigh, and he agreed to treat Naruto as best as he could there as long as the blond would seek full treatment immediately. He quickly cleaned and wrapped a pressure bandage around Naruto's hand then tried to check Naruto for other wounds. Naruto knocked the guy's hands away with a growl, earning a glare from Sasuke.

"I'll let you play doctor when we get home," Naruto murmured. The cheesy come-on was spoiled by the growing pallor of his skin and the slight shaking of his hands. The downside of the fight being over was that now his adrenaline rush was fading and he could feel with unfortunate clarity exactly where two of the blades of Tobi's glove and pierced through his hand.

"If you're going to go into shock, don't do it in front of the fucking EMT who's already got a hard-on to get you admitted to a hospital," Gaara said, giving Naruto a little push away from the increasingly concerned paramedic. "He's fine," Gaara said over his shoulder while continuing to shove Naruto toward the car where Itachi was waiting. "His boyfriend's rich and will pay for a doctor. You won't get sued." Gaara just wanted to make it before Naruto passed out and earned himself a mandatory trip to the hospital.

Sasuke nodded to the paramedic and helped a shaky Naruto into the car, climbing in beside him.
Gaara sat in the front next to Itachi, earning a slightly surprised look from Sasuke.

"His body is probably going into a bit of shock from the injury," Gaara said. "Have him bend down with his head between his legs."

Naruto gave Gaara a weak glare for talking about him as though he weren't there, but he leaned forward, following his friend's instructions. The two of them had been through things like this enough times to know the drill. Naruto was surprised when he felt the warmth of Sasuke's hand slowly rubbing up and down his back, soothing him.

"If you are going to get sick, let me know so I can pull over. I just had this cleaned," Itachi said casually, his eyes looking amusingly into the rearview mirror where his little brother was being uncharacteristically attentive. Itachi wished he had a video camera. This was fucking priceless. He turned his eyes back to the street when he received a heated glare from Sasuke through the mirror, his lips twitching with delight.

Gaara noted the exchange between the brothers and found it entertaining, though his face remained expressionless. "He won't throw up, but he might start dripping blood all over your carpets if we don't get going," He turned and looked back at Sasuke. "Was that just talk to save Naruto from a trip to the hospital, or do you actually have a doctor who will see him with no appointment, no insurance and no medical history?"

Naruto's head snapped up. "I'm fine. No hospital. What about..." Naruto paused. He had been about to say they should call Sakura, but he knew that Tobi would be out for revenge now. Anyone who was close to him was now a target. Sasuke, Gaara, and Sakura would likely be at the top of the list. Luckily Sakura was in protective custody, safely out of Tobi's reach. But if Naruto called her out, she would be at risk.

Sasuke pulled out his phone, looking up at Itachi. "Let's go to Shizune's office. I'll call her and let her know we're coming."

Naruto closed his eyes, but didn't disagree. He trusted Sasuke. "Fine," he grumbled, missing the surprised look Gaara sent him.

Naruto's face had grown increasingly pale. He closed his eyes, drawing deep breaths to still the dizziness and slight nausea of his body going into shock. It had happened many times before. He knew the signs, and how to counter them. He focused on the thought of cool water, running in a stream. He vaguely thought this might be a memory from someplace in his childhood, but he could never quite place it. It always calmed him and cleared the nausea.

Sasuke shifted slightly so Naruto was able to lean against his chest rather than just his arm, his face expressionless but his eyes showing concern. "You can't ever do anything the easy way, can you, Dobe? We won't go to a hospital unless you are dying, but we need to at least agree that you need to a doctor when you are seriously injured."

Naruto huffed out a small breath at the annoying pet name and managed a weak glare, but he was willing to compromise as long as there was no hospital involved. Private doctors were a luxury that he had never been able to afford, not exactly having health insurance in his line of work. Not to mention that doctors were required by law to report certain types of wounds to the police. Nagato had a doctor that Naruto would use when Akatsuki was still around. And when he wasn't an option, Sakura had been his only alternative to the emergency room. It felt... strange to have other options now.
The car ride home from the doctor's office to Sasuke's apartment went much more smoothly. Naruto's hand was wrapped in a gauze bandage, three stitches on each of the cuts that Tobi's blades had put through his hand. Shizune had agreed to see them, and checked for tendon and ligament damage. Miraculously, all that had been cut was muscle. It would take time to heal, but it wouldn't require surgery. After asking him in detail what types of medications he'd had reactions to in the past, she had told him that she had a type of local anesthetic that was not in the same class of chemicals as the ones he had reactions to and should pose no problem. Given that the blades had cut all the way through his hand, she needed to use something to be able to properly clean and stitch the wounds.

Sakura had made the same argument in the past, but Naruto hadn't been willing to chance it. He also had known that she would get in trouble if medicine went missing from the hospital with no patient record associated with it. Neither Gaara nor Naruto had wanted her to lose her job for helping them. But that wasn't an issue here, with Naruto there as a legitimate (mostly) patient. He had reluctantly agreed, and was relieved to find that his hand was completely numb, but otherwise he appeared to be ok.

Shizune had prescribed an antibiotic to prevent infection given how deep the wounds were, as well as a type of painkiller that was not morphine-based that she thought he could tolerate. Naruto had eyed the script skeptically, but Sasuke had grabbed the paper, telling Naruto that they might as well have it just in case. Naruto shrugged. He had no intention of taking it. He couldn't afford to have anything dull his senses right now. The antibiotic he'd do though. He wasn't a complete idiot.

"I thought that EMT was going to pass out when you told him to stitch your hand without anesthetics," Gaara smirked from where he was sitting next to Itachi again in the car.

Naruto leaned tiredly against Sasuke's shoulder in the back seat. "Hmmm," Naruto said, looking down at his tightly bandaged hand that he could not feel at all. "Hey, how did Itachi's car get to the alley, anyway? I thought I told you guys not to take a main exit."

Itachi looked back briefly. "We weren't sure how far you were going to go by car. Gaara, Sasuke and Kakashi went first, taking the tunnels and tracking the speed and direction you were going. After fifteen minutes, they called Shisui and me to pick them up and we followed by car the rest of the way. Tobi would have had to stop monitoring the building if he were going to keep track of you, so we figured it was safe to take the car and just go."

Naruto nodded.

"Did you deal any damage before he got away?" Gaara asked Naruto, his voice low. He knew the question would bother Naruto, but they had to know what kind of shape Tobi was in.

Naruto gritted his teeth in frustration. "I'm not… totally sure," he admitted, not certain which of his memories were real and which part of his mind's twisted defense mechanism to shield him from the past. "I think I cracked a rib or two of his when I had him by the blades. And I might have… I might hit one of his eyes pretty good," Naruto said, looking down at his bloody hands again, not sure whose blood was on it. "But the cab driver had taken my gun and my knife. All I had was my shoelace, and…" Naruto sighed, still feeling a little light-headed.

"Shoelace?" Sasuke asked, trying to figure out how that fit with 'gun' and 'knife' in terms of word association. One of these things was not like the others.

Gaara's lips twitched. "Shoelaces can work as a mediocre garrote. Too dull to cut, but high enough tensile strength to strangle. And highly portable."
They arrived back at Sasuke's apartment. Gaara went through and made sure all the curtains were closed tight in every room. They were all waiting tensely for Shisui and Kakashi to come back and let them know if they'd had any luck finding Tobi, though none of them held out much hope. Sasuke made Naruto sit down on the couch, which earned him an annoyed look from Naruto and an amused one from Gaara and Itachi.

Everyone looked up as the elevator chimed and Kakashi and Shisui walked into the apartment. Their expressions were confirmation that they had not found any sign of Tobi.

"Fuck," Naruto cursed, leaning back on the sofa. "This was all for nothing. And now Tobi knows I'm not going to be his partner. I lost the only advantage we had."

Gaara shifted. "Maybe. Maybe not. He still isn't following his normal pattern with you. He told you that he was going to come after 'the people who ruined you' first."

Naruto's eyes opened, and he tried to think back but the memories were muddled. "Did you hear him say that?"

Gaara shook his head. "The kid did. He was the only one with half a brain in that family. But he was worried about you."

Naruto gave a crooked smile. The kid had made it out ok. His mom was injured, but she'd live, as would his father. Maybe it hadn't all been for nothing after all. The thought somehow settled him. He couldn't change what had happened in his own past, but he had changed the fate of Inari. Inari wouldn't end up like him.

"You ok?" Gaara asked. Naruto knew that Gaara would have noticed the similarities. He didn't want to talk about that now.

"I'm tired," Naruto said, standing abruptly. "I'm going to go get cleaned up. We have no leads, so there's nothing urgent for us to discuss."

"Naruto -" Kakashi began.

"My hand hurts. And I need a shower." Naruto walked out of the room, closing the door to Sasuke's bedroom behind him.

Sasuke went to follow him, but Gaara's words stopped him. "Tobi was recreating it for Naruto. Making him re-live it."

Sasuke felt a sickening, sinking feeling in his stomach.

"Did you ever wonder why Naruto never talks about how old he is?" Gaara asked. The others in the room were silent, listening, but this conversation was between Sasuke and Gaara.

"…" Sasuke only looked as comprehension slowly dawned. He had assumed Naruto just enjoyed
"Would you keep track of your birthdays if this was what it represented to you?" Gaara asked.

Sasuke sighed, scrubbing his hands over his face. He looked over at Gaara, curious as to why the man was disclosing something like this to him. It was a sign of trust. One that he knew was difficult for a man like Gaara. His gaze went to the closed bedroom door. "When is it?" he asked quietly.

Gaara tilted his head to the side, then gave a small smile. "October tenth."

Only a couple of weeks away. Sasuke wasn't sure what he'd do, but he had wanted to know. "Thanks," he told the younger man.

Sasuke looked over to where others were watching him. "I'm going to go check on Naruto. I am assuming you will be making a short list of Tobi's likely targets and how to best leverage that to catch him. Naruto and I will catch up in a bit."

Sasuke walked into their bedroom to find Naruto just sitting on the edge of the bed, staring off into space. Naruto's head jerked up as the door opened.

"Sorry. I probably got the bed dirty," the blond said, looking down at his shirt and pants that were covered with dirt and blood, then over at the pristine, black, silk coverlet he was sitting on.

"Idiot," Sasuke said, ignoring the weird constriction in his chest at the pain he could read in the blue eyes. So many foreign emotions that he hadn't ever really thought himself capable of feeling coursed through him. He walked over and sat down on the edge of the bed next to Naruto. He wondered whether Naruto was feeling better, knowing that he had prevented Tobi from doing to someone else what he had done to Naruto, or if Naruto was stuck reliving the past due to the harsh reminder Tobi had created. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Naruto looked down at his hand, and chuckled hollowly. "Not particularly."

Sasuke blew out a breath. He wouldn't make Naruto talk if he didn't want to. He simply sat next to him, letting his hand lightly rest on Naruto's hip. He had experienced death as well, and dealt with its messy aftermath. He knew not to ask stupid questions like 'are you ok'. He was comfortable to sit in silence and let Naruto process what he needed to.

"I had him," Naruto said eventually. "I literally had him in my hand," he said, looking down at the bandaged appendage. "And... I let him get away. I couldn't... fuck!"

Naruto scrubbed his good hand over his face. "This sucks."

Sasuke noted the blood that was still smeared on Naruto's unbandaged hand. He stood, grabbing Naruto by his wrist and pulling him to his feet. "Come on. Let's get you cleaned up."

Sasuke led Naruto into the bathroom and walked over to the large, jetted tub that sat in one corner. Usually, he didn't have time for baths so he had honestly seldom used it. But since Naruto had to keep the bandages dry on his hand for at least three days, Sasuke realized the shower wouldn't work.

He turned on the water, sitting at the edge of the tub until the water heated to what he knew to be Naruto's preferred temperature, then closed the drain to let the tub slowly fill.

"Let me help you take those off," Sasuke said, walking over to where Naruto was standing strangely compliant.
Sasuke lifted the hem of Naruto's T-shirt and pulled it over his head, careful to avoid snagging it on the bandages. He folded it and placed it inside the plastic evidence bag Kakashi had given him. "Evidence," Sasuke said.

Naruto nodded and walked over to the sink to wash his unbandaged hand as much as possible. The doctor had cleaned the other one before treating the wound. He dried his hand on the towel and began to fumble with the buttons on his jeans, but Sasuke batted his hand away and undid them himself. He looked up at Naruto as he slowly slid the jeans down. He'd long-since given up expecting to find any underwear beneath Naruto's pants. Naruto seemed to snap out of his daze a bit as he stepped out of his jeans and watched as Sasuke efficiently folded them and put them in the evidence bag next to the T-shirt.

Naruto looked over at the tub, which was still less than half filled due to its enormous size. "We haven't used this before," he said with a smirk.

Sasuke arched a brow, stepping back slightly to let the blond know he wasn't expecting anything. He honestly had just wanted to help get the dirt and blood off his boyfriend and put him to bed. "Let's get you in the tub. It will take a while to fill, but you can still get clean."

Naruto's hand fisted into the front of Sasuke's shirt, giving a sharp upward tug to untuck it from his pants. "You're not joining me?"

Sasuke sucked in a sharp breath. He didn't want to get hard. He really didn't. He was trying to play the caring boyfriend. But it was a really new role for him, and -

Naruto's finger slid just inside the waistband of Sasuke's pants, the back of his finger brushing along the smooth, hard flesh of Sasuke's stomach. The councilman fought to keep his eyes on Naruto's face, but having his lover standing naked in front of him with his hand slowly sliding down the front of his pants made that a physical impossibility.

Sasuke swallowed, licking his suddenly dry lips. "I thought you'd want -"

Naruto's lips were closed over his before he could finish the statement about Naruto wanting to rest or be alone or something equally stupid. "Don't think right now," Naruto said, sliding his body up against Sasuke's, reveling in the feel of the solid warmth of his body. Nothing confirmed being alive like sex. And right now, that was what Naruto needed.

A knock on the bedroom door startled them, and Kakashi's voice came through the heavy wood. "I need to go back to the station. Don't you have Naruto out of his clothes yet, Sasuke? From what Gaara told me, I expected you to be quicker about it."

Naruto snickered. Sasuke threw him a glare and grabbed the bag, stalking over to the door and opening it just wide enough to thrust it into the policeman's hands before closing it firmly. He turned back to see Naruto leaning against the frame of the bathroom door, his cock half-hard as he watched Sasuke with amusement.

Sasuke stood there a moment, raising his eyebrow arrogantly as he slowly began to undo the buttons of his shirt. By the time he had reached the last one, Naruto was fully erect and looking far less casual about it. Naruto levered away from the doorframe, but made no move to come closer to Sasuke.

Sasuke pulled the shirt down away from his body, his eyes locked on Naruto's as he tossed the article of clothing negligently into an armchair by the bed. Naruto's eyes lingered on Sasuke's throat, and a
bit of the lust fell away as he walked over and slowly traced a tan finger over the shadows of finger marks that encircled Sasuke's throat. "Sorry," Naruto whispered softly, replacing his fingertips with his lips as he ghosted gentle kisses where he had gripped.

"Don't worry about it," Sasuke said, almost unable to handle the agonizing tenderness of Naruto's touch.

"You weren't afraid of me," Naruto said, a hint of wonder in his voice. "You know what I'm capable of. I literally had you by the throat but you... you weren't afraid."

Sasuke's eyes didn't shift away from Naruto's. "I trust you."

Naruto swallowed, then blew out a shaky laugh. "You know that's crazy right? Shikamaru told you... about what I have. I could have killed you. And not even... not even realized it until it was too late." Naruto's voice shook a little.

Sasuke slid his hands along Naruto's jaw, drawing their mouths together. "But you didn't. And I knew you wouldn't."

"Now who's the idiot," Naruto whispered against Sasuke's lips before fiercely crushing their lips together. He didn't want to think about what could have happened. His whole body was shaking at the thought of how he would have felt if he had come out of his episode and found Sasuke dead in the alley by his hands.

Sasuke was more than happy to be of service in wiping all thought from Naruto's mind as he thrust his tongue in the blond's mouth, deepening the desperate kiss. He felt Naruto's hands fumbling at the fastening of his pants, and he pushed the bandaged hand away and made short work of the button and zipper himself.

Sasuke never broke the kiss as he gave his pants and boxers a slight push down over his hips so they pooled on the floor at his feet. Usually fastidious about not leaving a mess, Sasuke ignored the garments and simply stepped out of the pants, kicking them aside as he walked Naruto backwards toward the tub.

Refusing to end the kiss, Sasuke stepped into the hot, swirling water pulling Naruto carefully in with him. Naruto hissed as the hot, soapy water touched some of the more minor abrasions he'd gotten from the alley fight, careful to keep his bandaged hand out of the water.

"Careful," Sasuke said, finally allowing their lips to separate. His rapid breathing was showing just how hard he was fighting to retain some control. No matter what Naruto said, the blond was injured and Sasuke didn't want to make it worse.

It could have been so much worse.

Sasuke shoved the thought down, unable to deal with it.

Naruto ran the fingers of his good hand through Sasuke's hair, tugging him back in for a short but far from chaste kiss. "You worry about the wrong things," he said, brushing his forehead briefly against Sasuke's, his eyes going again to the ring of bruises surrounding the pale throat.

"Hn," the councilman said, picking up a washcloth on the side of the tub and plunging it into the water before wiping a smear of blood off Naruto's cheek. "Let's clean you up first."

"Hmm..." Naruto sighed, realizing that Sasuke wasn't going to let them continue until they were a bit cleaner. He grabbed another washcloth from the towel rack and wet it, gently washing the marks around Sasuke's throat and the traces of blood that his hands had smeared there. "There's a joke here somewhere. The politician and the criminal in the tub. One of us is supposed to come out dirtier than
we went in, or was it… you wash my back I wash yours?"

Sasuke rolled his eyes, but his lips twitched. "Idiot."

Naruto finished washing the area around Sasuke's neck, then slowly slid the washcloth lower, making small circles with the fabric against Sasuke's chest. He ran his thumb over the nipple beneath the washcloth, feeling it harden instantly beneath his finger. Naruto grinned slowly, rubbing the nub again. Sasuke's hand had frozen, the forgotten washcloth now held in a death grip.

Naruto glanced at the pale, unmoving hand and raised a mocking eyebrow, never ceasing the circling motion of his thumb over Sasuke's now extremely sensitized nipple.

"Naruto…" Sasuke said warningly. They were not gentle lovers, and Naruto was playing a dangerous game betting on their self-control.

"Yes, Sasuke?" the blond asked tauntingly, sliding the washcloth lower over Sasuke's abs, feeling them clench beneath the fingertips that trailed behind the washcloth. The back of Naruto's wrist brushed against the erection standing at attention between Sasuke's thighs. "At least part of you seems to have figured out what a tub like this is supposed to be used for."

Sasuke's eyes narrowed, and he pushed off the wall onto his knees, grabbing Naruto's ankle and lifting it out of the water, almost dunking Naruto under by the swiftness of the movement. "Don't start games you're in no condition to finish."

Naruto's cock jumped at the look in Sasuke's eyes and the dangerous edge in his voice. Naruto answered by taking his other foot and sliding it gently between Sasuke's legs, massaging his lover's balls with the top of his foot. "Who say's I won't finish this?" Naruto responded, his voice dropping to a lower, huskier tone.

Sasuke raised a brow but didn't trust his voice enough to say anything as he decided to take back some control of the situation. He took the soapy washcloth and slowly slid it up the underside of Naruto's leg, from the ankle to just above the knee, then back again. Naruto's finger gripped the edge of the tub and his pupils dilated, but otherwise he held himself still. Sasuke repeated the motion, sliding this time from the side of Naruto's outer ankle up to the side of his thigh then back down, then the top of the ankle to the front of the thigh and back.

Naruto's breath was already coming faster in anticipation of what would come next. Every time… every time with Sasuke was this crazy intensity that he couldn't seem to break away from. Naruto licked his dry lips as Sasuke shifted his grip on Naruto's leg, swirling the soapy washcloth around Naruto's ankle bone before slowly trailing the cloth up from the inside of the tan ankle up to his inner thigh, this time going much higher than he had with the other parts of his leg to just inches below the juncture of Naruto's thighs.

"Tease," Naruto panted the accusation hoarsely his eyes meeting Sasuke's and locking. He caught his lip between his teeth as Sasuke reached down in the water to grab Naruto's other ankle before sliding forward through the water until he was kneeling between Naruto's thighs. Sasuke's hands slid up to grip Naruto just inside his knees, his thumbs caressing the sensitive flesh behind the joint.

The hot water swirled around Sasuke's shaft as he shifted forward in the water, the sensation magnified by the overly sensitive skin of his rigid erection. Teasing Naruto had backfired against himself as he imagined how hard Naruto must be, and how good it would feel to pound into him. The gentle motion of the water tease him, providing nowhere near enough pressure to provide any relief.
He stopped his body just shy of bringing the contact that they both craved, wanting to draw the anticipation out just a little more. He could see the way the muscles in Naruto's shoulders strained as he gripped the tub. The outlined muscles of the tan chest led to equally hard and defined abdominals that disappeared into the soapy water. Sasuke's cock grew painfully hard the longer he looked, and he wondered why they'd never made use of the tub before.

Naruto lost patience, locking his legs around Sasuke and pulling his lover to him. The soapy water had made Naruto's skin slippery, and Sasuke lost his grip on Naruto's legs and fell toward him, catching himself on the rim of the tub before he landed with his full weight on Naruto.

"Impatient?" Sasuke said, fighting back a groan as their erections slid against each other.

Naruto took his good arm and wrapped it around Sasuke's waist, leaning in to lick a drop of water that was making a lazy trail down the pale torso. "You have no idea," he whispered against the damp flesh, feeling Sasuke shiver at the touch of his tongue. "I think we're clean enough now," Naruto said, lifting his hips, increasing the friction between their erections.

"Fuck, yes," Sasuke groaned, arching his neck as Naruto continued to gently lave kisses around Sasuke's throat while continuing to slowly thrust their hips together.

Keeping one hand braced on the wall of the tub next to Naruto's neck, Sasuke wrapped his other arm around Naruto's waist, pressing their bodies together. The water squelched between them. Sasuke tightened his grip, needing to be closer to Naruto, to feel his heartbeat, to feel every part of him alive and strong. "$Naruto," Sasuke gritted out, suddenly desperately needing to be joined with his lover, finding even the smallest separation between them utterly unacceptable.

He paused for a moment, trying to figure out the logistics of how to manage this without getting Naruto's bandage wet. Naruto figured out the solution before he did, sitting up and pushing Sasuke back before straddling over him in the tub. "Like this," Naruto said, rocking his hips as he leaned forward over Sasuke, gripping the edge of the tub for balance.

Sasuke shuddered as his erection slid between the cleft of Naruto's ass. Naruto smirked, leaning back and bending Sasuke's cock down, then straightening up, feeling the engorged shaft following the motion of his body. "Someone's ready," Naruto said, leaning forward and kissing along Sasuke's jaw, running his thumb along his lower lip.

Sasuke reached between them, closing his fingers around Naruto's erection, feeling it pulse beneath his touch. "Looks like I'm not the only one," Sasuke said, sliding his other hand down along Naruto's spine, feeling the indentations at the base of the spine before trailing down further to the tight ring of muscle. Sasuke cursed as he realized he hadn't thought of bringing lube with them.

He was surprised to find a bottle of Astroglide thrust into his hand by a smirking blond. "I grabbed it off the sink on our way over here."

Sasuke silently gave thanks for resourceful boyfriends as he flipped open the cap and spread the silicone-based lube quickly on his finger before sliding two into Naruto. Naruto groaned, leaning back and running his tongue along Sasuke's lower lip before catching it in his teeth and tugging slightly. "Hurry," he whispered against the reddened mouth.

Sasuke wasn't sure he could still form words, so he just nodded slightly, working his fingers almost frantically to prepare Naruto. Unable to wait anymore, Naruto pulled Sasuke's hand away and gripped the base of his lover's erection with his good hand and slowly lowered himself down.

They both grasped at the depth of the penetration, and the added feel of the suction of the water
around them.

"Shit," Sasuke said his eyes rolling back and falling closed. He tightened his hands on Naruto's hips, holding him in place while he took a steadying breath. Naruto rolled his hips and Sasuke arched his neck back as he felt his balls tighten with pleasure, almost cumming.

"Don't move yet," Sasuke said, realizing that his emotions were too close to the surface and he didn't have his usual control.

Naruto clenched his muscles internally.

"Fuck, Naruto, you want this to be over before we even start?" Sasuke said, his jaw clenched.

Naruto ran his hand along the pale expanse of Sasuke's chest. "We don't need to go for a world record tonight, Sasuke. Just relax. Let me set the pace."

Sasuke realized he didn't really have a choice as Naruto slowly started to move, using his grip on the tub for leverage. Neither noticed that his hand had started to bleed again. Naruto slowly lifted his hips up, then slid back down, rotating them as he went.

"N-Naruto," Sasuke could barely get the word out as Naruto rocked forward, then repeated the motion. Unable to stay passive, Sasuke gripped Naruto's hips harder, sliding them up and down, thrusting up harshly again and again.

Naruto arched back, feeling Sasuke match his rhythm, the water sloshing wildly over the edge of the tub.

"Sasuke, I..." Naruto looked down into the black eyes of the man that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. "I..."

He read the same terrifying, overwhelming emotion in his lover's eyes that he knew was in his own. "Me, too."

Naruto's mouth closed over his as they came, their bodies wracked with agonizing pleasure. Neither had been able to say the words, but the depth of the emotion clear between them.

When Sasuke wrapped his arms around Naruto, holding him over him. Naruto relaxed against him as their exposed skin cooled and their heart rates slowly returned to normal. Sasuke slide one hand up Naruto's back and threaded his fingers through the blond, damp hair. "We should get out," he said after several minutes

"Mmmm," Naruto said, sounding dangerously close to sleep for a man in a deep bath tub.

Sasuke chuckled, wrapping an arm around Naruto and sitting up with him. "Come on. Let's go to bed."

Naruto noticed the red seeping through the bandage as he stood and tried to hide it behind his back before Sasuke could notice. Sasuke saw the gesture, and wasn't amused, grabbing Naruto's arm and pulled the bandaged hand forward.

"Shit!" Sasuke quickly undid the dressing while Naruto grumbled, but none of the stitches had ruptured. Sasuke hid relief behind a frown. "The doctor said to avoid straining this for three days or you can rupture the stitches."

Naruto shrugged as he quickly re-wrapped his hand with the clean gauze the doctor had sent home
with them. In the grand scheme of things, a few ruptured stitches were the least of their worries and
they both knew it. But it was easier to focus on something they actually had some control over, so
Naruto didn't bother with a retort.

They dried off quickly and made their way to the bed. Naruto smirked as Sasuke pulled off the
coverlet and tossed it in the hamper. They lay down, the silk of Sasuke's sheets clinging slightly to
their damp bodies.

Sasuke pulled Naruto closer to him, holding him gently as he looked over to the large bedroom
window that had been one of the main reasons he had bought the apartment. It looked out over
Central Park, with a perfect view of the city surrounding it. The view was now shut out, the curtains
pulled tight. He didn't want to think about how long Tobi had been watching them. How easily he
could have killed Naruto before.

How he might try to do it now.

Tobi stared down into the vacant eyes of his latest victim. Her body lay bloody and cooling on the
floor of the small, unremarkable apartment. He took a deep breath, trying to savor the scent of death,
when a sharp pain struck his side. The pain drew a frown to his face. His ribs were likely broken. It
was the first time he'd ever been seriously injured by one of his victims. Of course, this girl was not
the one who had done this to him. She had been pathetically easy, barely putting up a fight. The one
who had damaged him was out of his reach. For now. But there were other ways to make him pay in
the near term.

The body of the young woman appeased him only slightly. She wasn't the one he had wanted. But
she would have to do.

He looked at the unmoving body at his feet. Even though she wasn't the Uchiha she too had been
Naruto's lover, if only briefly, and the blond would feel her loss. When Naruto saw the news, he
would know it was Tobi who had done this. And that it was Naruto's fault that she was dead.

Tobi's hand went to the bandage that covered his left eye. He hadn't expected the boy to put up so
much of a fight, nor display so much skill. He had read the profile in the police's database, and he
knew that Naruto suffered flashbacks. He had expected it to be easy to get away if things hadn't gone
as planned. As it was, he had nearly been caught. He had no idea how Kakashi had been able to find
them so soon. It should not have been possible.

Nothing had gone according to plan. While waiting for the family to leave the restaurant, he had seen
the shoelace that his protégé had removed when he had been waiting. Not afraid to kill with his bare
hands and creative about finding ways to do so.

He had felt a rush of excitement.

But then it had all fallen apart. The boy had balked at his gift. Had looked at him like he was crazy.
Horrified with what was happening.

Tobi tossed the stethoscope down over the woman's body. It would be another little message to
Naruto. One he was sure the blond would understand.

The thought made him smile. He would enjoy drawing this out. It would be almost as entertaining as
his original plan of having Naruto join him. He would kill all of the boy's ex-lovers. Then all of his
friends, including the old man and that cop, and the rest of their organization. The redhead and the
Uchiha were too hard to reach right now and would require more planning, but he was more than
Naruto would be taught a lesson. Not that Tobi would hesitate to kill him in the end. The boy had had his chance. There wouldn't be another. But he wanted the child to suffer for all the trouble he had given him over the years. Though truthfully, Tobi was enjoying this game. His other prey had all fallen so easily. This one was finally... a challenge.

But until then... Tobi looked at the spatter of blood on the walls, and the slowly congealing pool beneath his victim. He suppressed a sigh of disappointment. She had been almost too easy.

But it wouldn't make the blow any less devastating. Tobi smiled as he walked over to the phone to dial 911. In a way, it would be a shame when this was all over. Hunting specific prey was much more entertaining than choosing someone opportunistically.

It would showcase his abilities to their fullest potential. It made him feel invincible. He would take his time, killing them all one by one before finally finishing off Naruto in the end.

-xXx-

to be continued...

ok, so I only got a little more than half of what I wanted to put in this chapter covered here (no snickering, Bri - I know you told me so). So the next chapter will be 'part 2' of this one, where we find out who Tobi just killed and then... who he will kill next. Then the one after that should be (?) the last one.
Warning: Intermediate yaoi (is that a term? anyway, 17+) in this chapter.

Author's note: Well. We could play a game. Take bets on how many chapters we really think it will be before I finish this fic. I guarantee whatever I say will be wrong. Thanks as always to BriEva for being my beta and advisor! And also Mykko_Ch'an for pre-reading parts of this and giving her support.

-xXx-

Naruto's forearm met with Gaara's shin just before the redhead's roundhouse would have connected with his head.

"Stop daydreaming, or I really will kick your ass, chopped up hand or not," Gaara growled.

Naruto dropped into a crouch, sweeping his leg and trying to catch Gaara's ankle, but the redhead leapt nimbly out of the way. "You wish. Even if I'm daydreaming, you won't be able to kick my ass."

The two had been sparring for over an hour. Their shirts long-since discarded, their bare chests glistened with sweat and a few newly forming bruises. Gaara made a subtle motion to his left, knowing Naruto would read it and shift to counter.

As soon as that happened, Gaara spun right, his hand catching Naruto in the solar plexus in an open-hand strike. Naruto wasn't able to block it completely due to his left hand still weak from his injury. He stumbled backward, giving Gaara an opening to sweep his leg and bring him to the floor.


Naruto scowled. He had been more than pissed when Kakashi had basically told him that - until they had better sense of what Tobi's plans were - he was basically under house arrest. There were four police officers stationed at the elevator. His only way out would be to try to sneak through a ventilation shaft, but Gaara was there to make sure that didn't happen. Sasuke had to keep up at least a minimal set of public appearances, given his position. He couldn't appear to be afraid, or avoiding being seen in public.

Naruto had been nearly apoplectic when he found out that Sasuke would be attending a speech by the Mayor on crime today, and Naruto would not be allowed to accompany him. He was not used to trusting others to guard things that mattered to him. He relied on himself and Gaara. And that was it.

"The first time they ran into each other, Tobi put Shisui in the hospital," Naruto muttered.

Gaara sighed. "He was alone when that happened, not with four cops. And he was still alive, despite being in Tobi's home turf. Stop bitching."

"Whatever. Shisui is probably a target, too," Naruto sulked, ignoring the 'bitching' comment. "Tobi hates it when people get away."

"Right now his focus is on you. Shisui isn't on the primary list," Gaara said. Kakashi had returned after taking Naruto's clothes to the department for processing. They had made a list of who Tobi's likely next targets were so they could move them into protective custody as soon as possible. They
weren't sure how long the killer would lay low licking his wounds, but they didn't expect it to be long.

Top of the list were Nagato and Gaara, since they had been the most responsible for keeping Naruto sane and protecting him. But since Nagato was already dead, and Gaara was stuck to Naruto's side like glue, they knew Tobi's first target would be someone else.

Sasuke came next on the list as an obvious target, as well as Jiraiya and Kakashi. Naruto wasn't sure how aware Tobi was that Konan had been an equal partner in running Akatsuki with Nagato, so she too was added. Most of the rest of Nagato's crew was in jail or out of the country, so hopefully they were out of Tobi's immediate reach.

The final name on the list had been Sakura. Though Naruto and Gaara had always tried to call on her as little as possible to keep her out of the world they lived in, there was no guarantee she had escaped Tobi's notice. And if he hadn't focused on her before, the medical report that Sakura filled out documenting Kabuto's attack on Naruto would have drawn his attention to her. Tobi would know that Naruto had gone to her when he had fled the station, which would definitely make her a target.

"Sasuke is third on the fucking list, and Kakashi let him out," Naruto growled, accepting the hand that Gaara had offered and pulling himself to his feet.

"Kakashi wasn't happy about it, but Sasuke has to maintain a presence in the public regardless. He had to issue a statement about what was happening, and that he had full confidence in the police and blah, blah. He's a politician. Being in the public is his job. But he's well-guarded enough that he should be fine."

"Unless Tobi uses a sniper rifle. We all agree that he's not playing by his old rules right now. It was stupid for them to assume that he won't shoot any of us now just because he didn't before."

Gaara sighed. They'd been over this before. In the end, Itachi and Sasuke agreed to go out as little as possible, but they still had to do their jobs. They couldn't stay locked away in hiding indefinitely. The police had no plan and so there was no estimation of how long this situation would drag out.

Naruto heard the sigh and looked at his friend. "I know. I just… I'm not used to having things outside of my control. For so long it's just been the two of us. We had each other's back and I knew exactly what you could handle, but now…"

Gaara looked at him sympathetically. "Now there's someone else that you care about, and you can't control what's going to happen to him."

Naruto let out a growl of frustration, slamming a side-kick into the heavy punching bag and sending it crashing into the wall with considerable force.

"Destroying my sparring equipment now?" a deep, smooth voice came from the doorway.

Naruto spun around, a look of relief washing over his features as he quickly scanned his lover for any sign of injury. Shisui stood behind Sasuke, looking impassive as usual, but his eyes held a touch of sympathy for Naruto. He understood the pain that could go along with guarding an Uchiha, and the pride the kept the job from being easy.

"Any word from Kakashi?" Sasuke asked, deciding not to remark on the new bruises that had appeared on Naruto's and Gaara's shirtless torsos. He knew that it was hard for Naruto to accept the current situation, and he hoped it didn't drag on too long.

Naruto shook his head tiredly. Now that Sasuke was back, the anxiety that had been feeding his
seemingly endless energy levels started to slump.

"I think I'm done for the day," Naruto said tiredly to Gaara, slowly walking over and picking up a towel, wiping the sweat from his face and neck.

Gaara let out a small sigh of relief. While he had taken a rest earlier in their sparring session, Naruto hadn't. The blond had simply gone and started pounding the heavy punching bag until the redhead was ready to continue. He knew that Naruto had stamina, but even he had to get tired at some point. Gaara had been worried he was going to have to try to actually knock the blond out if Sasuke hadn't gotten back soon.

Luckily, the event hadn't run long and Sasuke hadn't been delayed.

"Go take a shower. You stink," Gaara said, bumping his shoulder against Naruto's. In his tiredness Naruto almost stumbled, but he rallied enough to punch Gaara lightly on the shoulder.

"You're not much of a rose yourself," Naruto said, smiling wearily.

Sasuke raised an eyebrow. "Has he been in here the entire time I've been gone?"

Gaara shot Naruto a slightly amused, slightly annoyed look. "He doesn't deal well with worry."

"I'm not used to being told to fucking sit on my hands while everyone else is out there making themselves a target," Naruto bit out, feeling his temper snap at his inability to handle the situation head-on, as he would have preferred. "Tobi is my problem, and unless Kakashi is able to come up with at least a half-assed plan in the next two or three days, I'm done with this shit."

Sasuke walked over and slid his hands over Naruto's slick shoulders, digging his thumbs into the tense muscles he found there. Naruto sighed into the touch.

"You try to leave without telling me and I will tie you up," Sasuke growled into Naruto's ear. His biggest fear during the day was that he would come home and Naruto and Gaara would be gone. He had told Juugo to call him if either man left the building at any point, but it wouldn't have surprised him if Naruto had found a way out that didn't involve the elevator.

Naruto closed his eyes briefly, enjoying the simple touch as Sasuke's thumbs and palms continued to work his shoulders. "If I tried to leave, I wouldn't be here for you to tie up. But I won't leave without telling you."

Sasuke frowned, not sure if Naruto was trying to warn him of something he was planning, or simply stating the facts as he saw them. It bothered Sasuke that it might be the latter. And that Naruto was right.

"Gaara's right. You need a shower," Sasuke said, dropping his hands to his sides and earning a small whine from Naruto at the loss.

"You get to go out without me. Don't get mad just because I want to do the same," Naruto said, sounding slightly sulky.

Sasuke glared at him. "I have to go out because I am a public official. I got elected by taking a strong stance on crime. I am not taking stupid risks, but I still need to do my job."

"Yeah. That's what JFK said, too. See how well that worked out for him?" Naruto said bitterly as he headed for Sasuke's bathroom.
A soft click of the door knob let him know Sasuke followed him in. He turned, not entirely surprised to see Sasuke taking off his clothes as well as he turned on the shower.

"This isn't going to last forever," Sasuke said, seeing Naruto's frustration and worried about what the blond might do. Naruto had grown up on the streets, and he had connections with drug dealers and Mafiosos. If he wanted to disappear or go to war, Sasuke wouldn't be able to stop him. And that scared the shit out of him.

Naruto stood facing the shower as they waited for it to heat up. He pulled off his pants and threw them in the corner of the bathroom, ignoring the slight twitch in Sasuke's eyebrow at the action.

"If he makes even the slightest move on you, any sign at all that he is seriously gunning for you, and I am done playing nice and waiting for the cops to come up with a plan," Naruto said, his voice low and deadly.

The goosebumps that raced up Sasuke's forearms had nothing to do with his nakedness. He walked up behind Naruto and wrapped his arms around his lover's waist. "If it comes down to him or you, I don't care what the cops say. You take him out. Don't hesitate. Suigetsu can make almost anything disappear. We'll clean up whatever we have to. I won't let you go to jail."

Naruto leaned back, relaxing against his lover. He nodded slightly, relieved that Sasuke was leaving it to be his choice.

"Let's take a shower and go to bed," Sasuke said, his thumbs sliding over the bones of Naruto's hips and slowly inching down.

"I'm not that tired," Naruto said, a smirk already forming on his lips.

"Don't be an idiot," Sasuke said, biting the side of his neck as his hand closed around Naruto's already hard shaft. "Who said anything about sleep?"

Sasuke groaned as he heard his cell phone ring. His right arm was still trapped under Naruto's naked body, and his left leg was resting between the blond's thighs on the red silk sheets of his bed. Naruto had fallen asleep almost immediately after they'd cum together, despite his claims of not being tired earlier. Sasuke had been halfway to drifting off as well until his phone had gone off.

"Unh, fuck, can't they call back in the morning?" Naruto asked sleepily.

Sasuke extracted his arm just enough that he could lean over and reach the offending device. He saw the caller ID and his stomach tensed. Kakashi wouldn't be calling at this time of night with good news.

"Shit," Sasuke said, sitting up fully and answering the phone. "What happened?"

At Sasuke's tone of voice, Naruto was instantly awake, sitting up and looking at Sasuke intently.

"Get Naruto and turn on the TV. I'm on my way to your place. I'll be there in fifteen minutes," Kakashi's voice came over the phone.

Sasuke got up, grabbing a robe, not hanging up the phone. He tilted the phone away from his mouth as he spoke to Naruto, "It's Kakashi. He said to turn on the TV."

Naruto rolled out of bed and quickly pulled on a clean pair of sweatpants, following Sasuke out into the living room. "What am I supposed to be looking at?" Sasuke asked as he switched the TV on,
putting the phone on speaker so Naruto could hear as well.

"Local news channel 12," Kakashi said tersely.

The door to Gaara's bedroom opened, and the redhead walked out. "I heard voices. What's happened?" he asked tersely. He had changed into sleep pants, but didn't look as if he'd been sleeping, his eyes sharp and alert.

Sasuke turned back to the TV, where the picture of a young woman was displayed. She was pretty, with large brown eyes and long brown hair, and a gentle smile that spoke of kindness and humor. But what drew his attention most was the way that Naruto's face had gone completely white upon seeing her image.

"... body was found brutally murdered earlier this evening. At first police thought this was a gang-related killing, as the woman's brother was killed in a gang war last year. Police now believe that the woman's death was not related to that event, though they are refusing to disclose who the suspect is. The extreme violence of the death leads some to believe that...."

"Naruto?" Sasuke said, concern etching his features. "Who is she?"

Gaara's eyes had widened in recognition of the face as well, but he didn't have the shell-shocked look that Naruto was wearing.

"It's not your fault," Gaara said quietly.

"Bullshit," Naruto gritted out through clenched teeth, his eyes staring fixedly at the TV.

"Who was she?" Kakashi's voice came from Sasuke's phone.

Naruto appeared to not hear the question.

"Naruto..." Sasuke murmured, placing his hand on Naruto's arm.

Naruto stepped back, breaking the light contact. He was shaking with anger and looked like he was about to be sick. "No! She wasn't... she was just... Jesus fucking Christ!"

Sasuke looked over to Gaara, not sure what to make of Naruto's reaction.

Gaara's gaze was fixed on Naruto, but he quietly responded. "Her name was Maria. She was Naruto's lover before you two met."

Naruto's whole body tensed at Gaara's words.

"Was she... involved with the Akatsuki?" Sasuke asked.

"No," Naruto said, his voice low and hoarse. "She was just... a nice girl who lived in our apartment building. She didn't do anything wrong. She..."

Naruto turned and walked into the bedroom. Sasuke made to follow him, but Gaara put a restraining hand on his arm. "Leave him. He is going to have a hard time with this one. She was... completely innocent. They were only together for a short time but..."

Sasuke hesitated. He could see that Naruto was struggling, feeling guilt over the woman's death. They had assumed that Tobi would go after people who had helped Naruto in terms of his jobs and survival.
But instead Tobi had gone after someone that he knew Naruto would feel even guiltier about. Someone whose kindness was probably enough to 'taint' Naruto in Tobi's eyes.

"It wasn't his fault. Tobi is crazy. Naruto didn't cause that," Sasuke stated flatly, despite the fact that Naruto couldn't hear him.

"I know. And Naruto knows that, on a certain level. But he also knows that Tobi wouldn't have picked her without Naruto's involvement. Naruto never let himself have a serious relationship because he was afraid that something like this would happen if Tobi ever found him."

Sasuke considered that for a moment. Given the situation, it made sense. He would likely have done the same.

"There's more. And Naruto's not going to like it," Kakashi's voice came from over the speakerphone.

When Juugo called up that Kakashi was here, Gaara volunteered to go get Naruto. Sasuke reluctantly agreed. As much as he cared about the blond, Gaara had known him longer.

Gaara walked into the bedroom, seeing Naruto stretched out on the floor next to the enormous bed.

"Bed not big enough for you?" Gaara asked, laying down on the floor next to Naruto.

Naruto blew out a half-hearted chuckle. "It just felt… inappropriate."

Gaara rolled his eyes. "Yes, because avoiding the bed you share with your current lover is going to make things better for your former lover who just got killed."

"Fuck you, Gaara." Naruto breathed out. "You don't know what it's like."

"Bad people kill good people, Naruto. That's just the way it is. You and I both know that. You didn't kill her. If Tobi hadn't killed her, he might have killed our landlord, or the old man at the soup kitchen who used to give us free food. Or the priest that let us sleep in the church for a few weeks when we were in hiding. Which one would you pick over Maria? He was looking to take out someone who was innocent, who he could easily handle in his injured condition. He wants to mess with your head so you'll feel guilty enough to charge out after him on your own. He can't get you in here. He needs to force you out."

Naruto put an arm up over his eyes. "Yeah, well. It's fucking working."

Gaara turned and looked at him intently. "Naruto. Maria is dead because Tobi is a serial killer. You saved her when that gang targeted her after her brother died. She chose to be with you. You didn't do anything wrong. You didn't know Tobi was watching you. We both assumed that he'd kill you as soon as he found you, or at least try."

Naruto turned, surprised to hear so many words from his usually short-spoken friend. And when he took in the tension in Gaara's face he knew the red-head wasn't here to just cheer him up. "What is it?"

"Kakashi is here. He said there's more."

"Fuck," Naruto said, laying back flat on the floor and putting his arm back over his face. "I don't know if I can handle more."

They lay there for a minute, Gaara making no move to rush him.
Finally Naruto stood, Gaara following. "Alright, let's get this over with."

Naruto and Gaara walked out to find Kakashi and Sasuke sitting together at the kitchen table, surprised to see Shisui and Itachi also awake and making coffee.

Gaara and Naruto exchanged glances when they took in the grim expressions on everyone's face.

"Tell us," Naruto sighed to Kakashi. "Did Tobi kill someone else besides… Maria?" Naruto's voice tightened slightly on her name, but otherwise held steady.

"Not yet," Kakashi said, pulling out a clear plastic evidence bag from his pack. "But he left us a clue as to who is next."

He lay the bag on the table. Gaara and Naruto looked at it for a moment, before the redhead slowly reached out and picked it up. Inside was a stethoscope, with a piece of masking tape wrapped around one of the metal tubes leading to the earpiece. The name Haruno written in black ink showing clearly against the white of the tape.

"Where is she now?" Gaara's voice was flat. Naruto's eyes had turned to blue ice.

"She's still safe. I called the officer who is monitoring her. There has been no activity near her safehouse, but we are going to move her to a location that isn't in the witness protection program books. Tobi was in the police department for long enough to have figured out how to access the systems. He might not be able to find which house she's in, but he probably has the list of addresses. She's being moved as we speak."

Naruto's eyes widened then he and Gaara exchanged a dark look before turning to the police captain. "She's being moved and you're not there? How do you know that the cop moving her isn't bought by Tobi? What the fuck, Kakashi!" Naruto exploded, and only Sasuke's sudden grip on his shoulder kept him from grabbing the officer.

"The cop moving her is Yamato. He's my best friend on the force. We can trust him completely," Kakashi let out a small chuckle. "He even made sure to pass on her message to me that she was losing her mind from boredom, and that we had better get off our asses and take this guy out unless we want her to do it for us."

Naruto and Gaara smirked slightly at the message before rolling their eyes as they relaxed somewhat. That definitely sounded like Sakura.

"If I went to move her personally, I would be playing right into Tobi's plan. Why do you think he left you this message?" Kakashi said, flicking the evidence bag.

"To fuck with my head?" Naruto said bitterly.

"In part," Kakashi said. "But he clearly wants her. Evidently he has decided to go after your ex-lovers and she is next on his list. But he can't find her easily. What do you think he supposed we would do when we found out she was a target?"

Naruto looked at him, realization dawning.

"Exactly," Kakashi said. "He would assume that I wouldn't trust anyone else, and I would race down and check on her personally to move her. He's probably monitoring my movements. If I go anywhere near her, he has her."
Naruto nodded slowly. He knew that Kakashi would have been smart enough to make sure that any call he made couldn't be tracked. As of right now Sakura was still safe.

"Ok," Naruto said finally. "So… what do we do now?"

Kakashi gave a quick glance over to Sasuke, and cleared his throat. "Well, when we first made our list of likely targets that Tobi would go after, we were focusing on people who had protected you or helped you. It looks like Tobi has decided to focus on people you had… romantic attachments with." The sarcasm he applied to the word 'romantic' wasn't lost on anyone in the room.

"So…” Naruto shifted uncomfortably, his eyes darting to Sasuke's blank face then returning to Kakashi's. "You need a list of…"

Kakashi smirked, not bothering to hide his amusement at the blond's discomfort. "All the people you've had sex with, yes." He passed Naruto a notepad and a pencil. "I'll need their names and addresses, assuming you know them."

"Um… like… everyone ever? Or just in the last three years?" Naruto picked up the pencil, tapping it nervously against the paper.

"We don't know when Tobi started watching you. The complete list would be safest," Kakashi said.

Gaara snickered. "That's a pretty long list. Do you want him to… prioritize it a bit? Or rank it? Alphabetize it?"

Naruto shot him a glare, trying not to look over to where Sasuke was standing, watching him.

"How long of a list is it?" Sasuke bit out.

Itachi smirked. "Obviously a good bit longer than yours, Otouto."

Kakashi raised a silver eyebrow. "Are you talking about the list or something else?"

"Kakashi…” Naruto growled.

Kakashi burst out laughing. "Oh, come on Naruto. Lighten up."

"Lighten up? I have to go and tell a bunch of people I haven't seen in years 'Oh, hey. Remember that really brief thing we had forever ago? Yeah, well there is some psycho serial killer hunting my ass and now he might kill you because you had sex with me.' That's just really great, Kakashi."

Kakashi shrugged. "At least you don't have to tell them you have some STD or something. That conversation is much more awkward, trust me."

"TMI, asshole," Naruto said, grabbing the pad roughly and beginning to write. Gaara looked on over his shoulder, and occasionally chimed in with a name or event. Naruto's slouched down further and further in his chair as all five men in the room watched him list out every sexual partner he ever had since puberty.

Naruto stared down at the list. It wasn't crazy long, but he really wished that he and Sasuke had talked about this privately before he had to write it all down. He glanced up at Sasuke, who was looking at the list, his face expressionless. It included the date and name of the person he'd lost his virginity to at the age of fourteen. Another thing they'd not gotten around to discussing.

At least he hadn't had to sell himself. And given that he had been living on the streets, that was...
It actually quite an accomplishment, but he doubted Sasuke would see it that way.

Kakashi snatched up the list, looking over it with a critical eye. "A little young for some of these, weren't you?"

Naruto narrowed his eyes at him. "Just be glad I wasn't your typical street kid who had to turn tricks to eat." Naruto was looking at Kakashi when he said it, but the words were meant for Sasuke.

"Well, this isn't as long as I was expecting," Kakashi admitted.

"Are you sure it's a good idea to contact them all?" Itachi asked, eying the list thoughtfully. "Some of these are from more than five years ago. It seems unlikely that Tobi has been watching Naruto for that long. This could backfire and play into the same kind of trap that you mentioned about Sakura. You could end up leading Tobi to the people you are trying to protect."

"True. I was only planning on talking to the ones that happened after Naruto killed Zetsu," Kakashi said blithely.

"What the fuck? Then why did you make me write all these out!" Naruto sputtered.

Kakashi's eyes crinkled in amusement. "Well, there is a chance we will need to go back further. Besides," he winked at Naruto. "It was fun to watch you squirm."

"Asshole!" Naruto said, throwing his pencil so the point would have caught Kakashi dead between the eyes if the older man hadn't caught it.

Kakashi stood. "Well, that was fun. I should get going and catch whatever sleep I might be able to get yet tonight. We'll contact the six names on this list that are recent enough to be worried about for now."

With that, Kakashi left. Naruto looked over to where Sasuke was pouring himself a drink from the bar and sighed.

Itachi followed Naruto's gaze, then placed a hand on Naruto's shoulder and spoke quietly in his ear. "His count was three, in case you were wondering. You should probably talk to him."

Naruto grimaced but nodded as Shisui and Itachi went back to their room, likely following Kakashi's lead on trying to get whatever sleep was left for the night.

"You ok?" Gaara asked.

Naruto shrugged. "About as expected, I guess."

Gaara simply nodded and left to go back to his room as well, leaving Naruto and Sasuke finally alone.

Naruto stood and walked over to the bar where Sasuke was swirling his drink in the tumbler.

Sasuke looked up, watching Naruto approach with a carefully blank expression.

"So we... uh, never really talked much about our histories, I guess," Naruto began hesitantly. It wasn't like he'd fucked fifty people. But it also wasn't like he'd fucked five.

Or three. Naruto remembered Itachi's words with a wince. How the hell did someone who looked like Sasuke only have a count of three? He vaguely remembered Kakashi saying that everyone thought Sasuke was asexual. Naruto had laughed it off at the time, because that was so clearly not
the case. At least when Sasuke was with him.

Three?

"They were all before I met you," Naruto offered awkwardly.

Sasuke took a drink from his glass, his face still showing no emotion. "I'm not mad," he said carefully.

"But you're not happy, either," Naruto stated. He looked at the bottles of alcohol slotted into the racks under Sasuke's well-stocked bar. There were times like this when Naruto wished he wasn't too paranoid to drink alcohol.

Sasuke drained the rest of his glass, then set it on the counter. Naruto considered it a good sign that he hadn't poured himself another. "It's not like I thought you were pure as the driven snow when we first met or something," Sasuke said sarcastically. "This isn't the seventeenth century. You're allowed to have a history."

"But having it thrown in your face unexpectedly sucks, and I'm sorry," Naruto said, sliding his hand over Sasuke's where it was resting on the black granite of the bar.

"It doesn't matter," Sasuke said, his voice flat, the tightness of his tone belying his words.

Naruto grabbed Sasuke's wrist, giving a small tug to turn Sasuke to fully face him. "You're right. It doesn't matter," Naruto looked at Sasuke intently. "Because you are the only actual relationship I've ever had." Naruto circled his thumb over the bones in Sasuke's wrist, not breaking eye contact. He leaned in brushing his lips across Sasuke's, keeping their bodies a hair's breadth apart. "And more importantly, you're the only one I want."

Sasuke slid his hands into Naruto's hair, pulling their mouths together more fully. Naruto's arms closed around Sasuke's body, pulling him close as they deepened the kiss, their tongues sliding against each other in slow, firm thrusts. The kiss was somehow both deeper yet less forceful than their usual mouth-play, neither seeking to escalate it to full-on sex. They took their time, enjoying the simple intimacy of their joined mouths.

Naruto trailed the tip of his tongue along Sasuke's lower lip before returning to probe more deeply into Sasuke's mouth. Sasuke slid his hands from Naruto's hair to cup along his jaw, tilting his head slightly more to the side as he used his teeth to gently tug on Naruto's lower lip before releasing it.

They were both slightly breathless as Sasuke pulled back just enough to break the contact of their lips, resting his forehead against Naruto's. Their breathing was uneven as they stood there together, Naruto's hands loosely resting on Sasuke's hips, while Sasuke's hands had slid to the back of Naruto's neck.

They stood that way as their bodies slowly re-equilibrated, needing to simply be together.

"I'm sorry about Maria," Sasuke said at last.

Naruto's throat tightened, but he nodded slightly in acknowledgement of the statement, their foreheads still touching lightly.

"We weren't in love, but she was... kind. Gentle. She wouldn't have been able to put up any kind of a fight." The last words were spoken so softly that Sasuke could barely hear them.

He brushed his lips against Naruto's forehead. He could sense the crushing guilt in the younger man's
voice, and knew there was nothing he could say.

"I'm tired of this," Naruto said after a moment. "I'm tired of just waiting for him to strike. I can't keep doing this."

"We'll think of something," Sasuke said, his mind already starting to turn options over and toss them aside in his head. "Let's get some sleep. We'll get Gaara and Shisui in the morning and see if we can come up with a plan. It's time to shift the game onto our terms."

Naruto nodded, stepping back but wrapping his fingers loosely around Sasuke's wrist as he led them off to bed.

Tobi watched the news coverage from his small apartment. It annoyed him that the reporters were keeping his name out of it. They weren't even saying it was the work of a serial killer.

Surely they had to know. He hadn't been subtle. He had even used his signature weapon.

It had to be Hatake. That cop was fucking everything up.

First he hadn't let Obito into the examination room. Then he had somehow managed to find Naruto in the alley with the family much earlier than he had expected him to.

Tobi felt his nails dig into the palm of his hand. Now he was withholding Tobi's identity from the press. Preventing that rush of fear and hysteria that always hit a city when they knew a serial killer was on the loose.

It was one of Tobi's favorite parts, and he'd been looking forward to what the citizens of the great 'city of New York' would make of him. He had been careful to not choose his recent victims from New York for the past several years, wanting to stay below the radar here while he observed his protégé. He had been looking forward to the frenzy that would hit the city when he began his killings here.

He loved the thrill of watching the police run around uselessly. The fear in people's faces if they were caught late at work or school and had to walk home late alone. It made the risk of capture worth it, to do multiple killings in one place.

Tobi was in the center of the focus of every inhabitant in the city when he really hit hard.

But Hatake was keeping it all quiet. No word on the six cops he'd killed. Nothing on the girl.

It was beneath Tobi to have to leak something of his identity to the press himself, but he was considering it. He felt cheated by the media silence.

Tobi took a drink from the small sake cup, his one habit from 'home'.

To top it all off, Hatake hadn't led him to the female doctor like he was supposed to. Tobi's lips twisted and he slammed the small glass down, his fingers clenched around it.

He didn't want to let too much time go before his next victim. He needed to stay under the boy's skin… not let him rest. Make him come out after him.

Which meant Tobi would have to choose another victim as his second 'message'. But if he did, then Naruto would know that Tobi had failed. He had sent him the message with the stethoscope. If he didn't kill the pink-haired doctor, Naruto would know that Kakashi had outsmarted him. That was
Tobi briefly toyed with moving the bothersome officer higher on his list of targets. But he knew he was not in good enough physical condition to ensure he would succeed thanks to his broken ribs and damaged eye. Yet another thing that Naruto would have to pay for, but that could wait.

No, Hatake would have to be dealt with later, once Tobi's ribs had healed a bit more.

He drummed his fingers on the scarred, wooden table.

By now, they would have notified Naruto's past liaisons. Tobi could still hunt them all down if he wanted. But the first one was the most important. It would make Naruto worry, and feel guilty. Slowly breaking him down.

He had the list of safe houses. Presumably Sakura had been moved from whichever one she had been staying in, but there were only a limited number of places she could be relocated to. He would have to do it the hard way. It would take longer, but he couldn't give up. A promise was a promise, after all.

But he had no plans to sit idle while he looked for her. Unlike in the past, the police knew what he looked like here. He wouldn't have an unlimited amount of time to toy with his prey, unfortunately. He'd have to go for the kills that would do the most damage.

A thought occurred to him that made him slowly smile. There was one person that Naruto cared deeply about, but that the police could not contact. And neither could Naruto.

She was dangerous, but her death would cut the blond deeply. Probably even deeper than the doctor would. Tobi unclenched his fist from around the small sake glass, relaxing.

It was all under control.

He just needed to plan.

Sasuke ran his fingers Naruto's hair until the blond slowly fell asleep. Sasuke knew he wouldn't be able to sleep himself. Ever since the situation with Orochimaru, he had sat back and deferred to first Naruto then Kakashi on how to play things with Kabuto, then Tobi. But now he was done. Even if Tobi didn't end up killing Naruto physically, he would completely destroy Naruto's psyche if he continued killing people close to him. Sasuke wasn't going to let that happen.

He had different strengths than Naruto, Gaara or even Shisui. He might not have as much experience in dealing out death with his own hands, but he had extensive experience in creating strategies to manipulate opponents into doing what he wanted. Politics is a dangerous game. There was enough money and power on the line to make people go to extreme lengths. There was no such thing as an 'honest politician', a lesson Sasuke had learned hard and early in his career.

On top of that, he was Uchiha. The son of Fugaku, the man who had taken the power of the family name and linked it to ruthless Yakuza factions to make them one of the most feared and respected names in Japan. His father had over-reached, and in the end it had been his downfall.

Sasuke would not repeat the mistakes of his father, but he had learned a lot at his feet as a child. He rolled onto his back, crossing his arms behind his head and closed his eyes. He needed to think through all the variables. They couldn't predict what Tobi would do. But he had worked with unpredictable men before. It didn't mean they couldn't be manipulated. Everyone had pressure points. Things they wanted. Things they were afraid of.
They key with controlling someone was knowing what those were, and not being afraid to push them hard. Sasuke had already killed a man for Naruto. He wasn't afraid to push hard at all.

Sasuke hadn't been idle while Naruto was in Suna. He had also had Suigetsu hack into various police databases around the globe and download every case file and profile available on Tobi. At this point, he likely knew more about the killer than even Naruto did.

It was still an hour before dawn when Gaara quietly opened his bedroom door and walked soundlessly out into the living room. He knew his friend. Naruto was done waiting. If they didn't come up with a plan soon, Naruto would likely go charging off on his own to try to take Tobi down. Gaara was pretty sure at this point the only thing keeping Naruto here was the fact that he knew he had a tracking chip in his scalp, making it hard to disappear.

But eventually even that wouldn't be enough and Naruto would go hunting on his own, screw the police and the potential fallout.

After watching Naruto and Sasuke together since Istanbul, Gaara knew that Naruto would regret it in the long run.

Gaara stood, slowly circling the room, noting exactly where the range of the one camera by the entrance was, and which parts of the room were in view. He had looked over the place before, but now he had a more specific purpose in mind.

He looked at the lighted set of numbers above the elevator, noting that they indicated the elevator car was down on the ground floor. Gaara looked directly at the camera, knowing they probably could see what he was doing. If they were paying attention. Which he doubted, given their focus was on looking for someone trying to get in, not someone already inside. That would be a key thing to test.

He pulled a small Swiss army knife out of his pocket and pried the cover plate off the elevator call button, looking to see if there was any special security features there. He didn't see anything that looked unusual. He pulled a small, round key from his pocket and placed it into the small hole that was on all elevator doors. Most people didn't even notice it as they waited for the elevator to arrive. But it was actually a keyhole, in case anyone needed to open the elevator doors there when the elevator wasn't there, for maintenance.

You had to have a special key, or a tool that could be used to pick that particular mechanism. Like the one Gaara held in his hand. He quickly inserted and the doors slid open.

The redhead knelt down, looking down the forty-plus story drop to where the car of the elevator presumably was, though he couldn't see it in the dark. There was a small set of rungs that ran along the shaft for service purposes. He turned onto his back and looked up, assessing how much clearance there would be on top of the elevator car when it finally reached the top. It looked like several feet. Probably not enough for a person to stand, but laying on top of the car, or even squatting, one wouldn't have any problems.

Gaara pulled a small penlight out of his back pocket, shining it down into the shaft a few stories to see if there was another access point to the elevator shaft. He was relieved to see what appeared to be an opening one floor below. Obviously the elevator didn't service that floor, since it was exclusively reserved for the penthouse, but when the building was initially constructed the planners must have decided to leave open the possibility of two floors of 'penthouse access' from the private elevator. It was easily solved by simply programming the elevator to only stop at the top floor. Tomorrow Gaara would have to go up to the other floor to find out if the elevator opening was walled over, or left accessible.
He was glad he hadn't had to climb all the way down the shaft to look for another possible exit. He wasn't exactly afraid of heights but... a forty-odd-story vertical drop wasn't something to take lightly.

Gaara stood, stepping back from the opening. He turned to set his flashlight down on the armchair that was sitting off to the side, and was surprised to find Shisui standing a few feet away, leaning against the pillar that separated the entryway from the living room.

"Fuck!" Gaara's heart thudded as he stepped further away from the drop behind him, not taking his eyes from Shisui's steady gaze. "You could have let me know you were there."

Gaara was not used to anyone but Naruto being able to take him unawares, and he felt slightly unsettled at having been caught in such a potentially vulnerable position. Even if they were all on the same side. Ostensibly. He stepped to the side of the opening out of habit, his self-preservation instinct telling him that having his back to a danger like that was a foolish risk.

"You seemed preoccupied," Shisui said calmly. "And it seemed a bad idea to startle you when you were in that position."

Gaara narrowed his eyes, but didn't say anything. He turned and inserted the small pick into the round lock, twisting it. The doors slid closed immediately. He ignored Shisui as he continued to re-attach the faceplate around the call button, putting everything back as he had found it.

"So what is your plan?" Shisui asked when he had finished.

"Plan?" Gaara's voice was flat.

"I don't know Naruto as well as you do, but I know what I would do in his shoes. He's done waiting and playing by Tobi's and the cops' rules. Given that anything Naruto does is likely to affect Sasuke, I wanted to find out what your plan was," Shisui said.

"I almost forgot you actually work for Sasuke. You spend more time with the other one," Gaara looked over at the closed door to the bedroom that Shisui shared with Itachi.

"Itachi's asleep. I thought it would be best if we discussed things without him here. No point in adding unnecessary... constraints."

Gaara's lips twitched. He agreed completely, but he also noted the resigned look in the older man's eyes at the fact that Itachi would take him to task for this.

The redhead shrugged. "I don't have it fully thought out yet. I am just trying to get a sense of our options."

Shisui nodded. "I am guessing Sasuke will be working on it. I'm actually surprised he didn't come in and drag me out of bed earlier."

"I was being polite. But I can see the effort was wasted," Sasuke's low voice was laced with dry humor, but his face was dead serious as he finished quietly closing the door to his bedroom so they would not wake his sleeping lover. He walked towards the two men who were still standing suspiciously by the elevator. "Let's go to the kitchen. I believe we have a lot to discuss."

-xXx-

_to be continued..._

Yes... I admit it. I introduced Maria (very briefly) earlier in this story because I knew I would kill her
off here and I wanted people to think it was Sakura. Is it bad that it's fun for me? Probably.
Put your game face on

**Warning**: Intermediate yaoi (17+) in this chapter.

**Author's note**: Thanks to BriEva for beta'ing and advising on this chapter.

-xXx-

Naruto didn't open his eyes as he drifted to wakefulness, not quite ready to deal with the reality of what the day would bring. Sleep had allowed him to turn off his mind from the guilt and stress of the day before, though his dreams had been shadowy and tense. He knew he couldn't simply sit back and wait for Tobi to pick off random people in his life one-by-one. Today he'd have to decide what he was going to do about it. Kakashi would be coming by in the morning, presumably to discuss options, but right now the only one that suited Naruto was Tobi dead at his feet within the next twenty-four hours.

But depending on the situation, it could put his future with Sasuke at risk. Something he had never thought he would care about, but that now mattered more than his own safety.

He reached his hand out slowly, finding the bed cold and empty. Panic surged through him, shoving all remnants of sleep aside. Sasuke hadn't said anything about having to go out of the apartment for work today, but that didn't mean that something hadn't come up. Naruto tossed the sheet aside and grabbed the nearest pair of pants and pulled them on before throwing open the bedroom door in search of him.

Sasuke, Shisui and Gaara looked up from where they were sitting around the kitchen table, looking over some papers. Gaara was dressed in a brown T-shirt and grey sweat pants, Sasuke was wearing his black silk robe, and Shisui was shirtless in his dark pajama pants. Despite seemingly still dressed for bed, they appeared to have been up for some time judging by the empty coffee cups sitting on the table in front of them.

"I..." Naruto flushed slightly as Sasuke arched an eyebrow at him, clearly knowing what had sent Naruto into a panic. "I just wanted to be sure you weren't going out today."

Sasuke's gaze dropped down to Naruto's hips and legs. "Is that why you are wearing my pants? Surely you know I have others to wear if I need to."

Naruto blinked then looked down, realizing he had grabbed Sasuke's clothes instead of his own in his rush to catch his boyfriend before he left. "Shut up. I just didn't expect to wake up to an empty bed, ok? Why didn't you wake me up when you got up?"

"You needed sleep," Sasuke said, still looking amused as Naruto walked toward them, though his eyes did darken slightly at the sight of Naruto shirtless in his pants.

"And we wanted to discuss options without you vetoing everything that doesn't have you kicking down every door in the city by yourself," Gaara said dryly. "You usually don't have the patience to come up with an actual strategy when it's something to do with Tobi. You just charge in recklessly."

"I do not! I just... rely on my instincts more. Plans always go wrong, anyway. You know that as well as I do, Gaara," Naruto said somewhat defensively.

Gaara gave him a look, though he didn't disagree. "You have good instincts," he allowed. "But you never place enough value on your own safety."
"And look," Naruto said, holding up his hands and showing both sides. "Somehow I'm still alive and all in one piece. Something that a lot of people in our profession can't say. Literally."

"No one is saying you aren't skilled. But complicated strategies were never your strong suit, Naruto. Even you admit that. That's why you stayed with Nagato, even after you'd paid off your debt to him. You took his mark," Gaara said nodding at the Akatsuki tattoo visible on the side of Naruto's shoulder.

Sasuke's gaze narrowed slightly at the tattoo, never really quite thinking about it in that way. The idea of having another man's mark of ownership on his lover didn't particularly sit well with him, even if the man was dead.

Shisui leaned forward to pick up what Naruto was now able to see appeared to be the blueprint of a building. As he stretched, Naruto was drawn to the red and white tattoo on the back of the man's shoulder blade. It was identical to the one on the hilt of Sasuke's katana.

"It's the same in any organization, Gaara. You have tattoos as well. Even Shisui has one, as much as Sasuke insists his family wasn't yakuza."

Sasuke's brow creased in annoyance at the comparison. "Yakuza tattoos are much more overt. The Uchiha are don't require gauche, fully body ink to designate their ranks."

"Only people who directly take orders from the head of the clan bear this mark," Shisui explained.

Naruto looked at the tattoo a moment more before focusing back on what they had been debating before. "Look, Sasuke… I really appreciate your wanting to help out. You are amazingly smart and… have serious political skills. But this really isn't your area of expertise. No matter how smart you are, this isn't exactly shit you learn in school," Naruto said, feeling slightly unsettled that Gaara seemed to be comfortable bringing Sasuke in on the planning of this. Gaara never deferred to anyone. It had been the main reason he hadn't wanted to join Akatsuki when Naruto had been forcefully inducted. Nagato ruled with an iron fist, and Gaara liked to be able to call his own shots. He had aligned himself with a much weaker crime lord. It provided Gaara with protection and work, but left him enough room to do things his own way.

"Depends on the school," Shisui said. "You didn't know Sasuke's father, Naruto. He was not a politician. He was heavily involved with several major Yakuza factions. And he liked to be informed of the details. Sasuke didn't grow up in the world he lives in now."

"Hear him out," Gaara murmured. "He might surprise you. He sure surprised the hell out of me."

Naruto looked at Sasuke. This was a part of Sasuke's life that they had never discussed, but Naruto would be lying if he said he hadn't wondered about it. Sasuke had been awfully accepting of Naruto's past and all the shit that had gone down since they'd met. Any 'normal' person would have run for the hills long ago.

"I need you to trust me," Sasuke said, looking at Naruto steadily. "This won't work if you go off and try something on your own. I know we haven't had a chance to talk about a lot of things, but I understand your world a lot better than you might think I do."

Naruto hesitated, but not due to lack of trust. In his mind, it had always been him who would take care of Sasuke. Naruto was supposed to be the protector. Not the other way around. He could see Sasuke's eyes fully aware of that, and waiting for Naruto decide if he was going to write him off or hear him out. Naruto shrugged, then sat down in an empty chair next to Sasuke. He had nothing to lose from just listening. And any plan that Gaara approved of had to be pretty decent. "Ok. Let's hear
Gaara let out a small breath of relief. After what had happened yesterday with Maria, he had half expected to find Naruto missing, despite his own efforts to keep an eye on the blond. Sasuke had come up with a good plan, but he had been worried that Naruto wouldn't even hear them out. There were some points that Gaara knew Naruto would object to, but overall it was probably their best shot. The sooner they could set this in motion, the better off they'd all be.

Sasuke nodded, his face taking on the same intense expression Naruto had seen on the councilman’s face before he decimated what everyone else assumed to be a ‘superior’ opponent until Sasuke wiped the floor with him. Naruto almost felt a grin tugging at his lips at the sight. It was one of the first things that had attracted him to the man… this focused, fierce intensity of purpose. Only this time, instead of being directed towards his political battles, Sasuke had evidently turned it on Naruto and his situation with Tobi.

"Suigetsu got me the files on every case Tobi has been associated with, including those from other countries. As far as I can tell, he always chooses his victims at random. There is no correlation between them. The general consensus of the profiles they have built on him is that Tobi is a killer of opportunity... he sees someone who strikes his interest and he kills them. You are the only exception, though most people assume you died years ago," Sasuke began.

Naruto crossed his arms over his chest with a slight grimace. "Lucky me."

Sasuke shrugged. "What it means is that - while he is good at surprise attacks and up-close kills - he is inexperienced in actual strategy or tracking of a particular prey. He is stalking you because he is focused on you, but it isn't something he is particularly practiced at. Which is likely why it took so long for him to finally find you. And also why he is willing to work with whatever this 'other organization' is that we've been hearing about. He's not some super-villain who is good at everything and invincible. He's a psychopath. You are an assassin, or close enough. You are not easy prey like those sheep he tried to kill outside that restaurant he lured you to. The first thing you need to do is stop acting like his other victims. You're not the same child he met with the first time."

"Fuck you, Sasuke," Naruto was about to stand up and walk out, but Sasuke grabbed his wrist and pulled him back to his seat.

"Naruto. Hear me out. You've been seeing yourself as the victim for so long that you don't realize that you probably pose more danger to him than he does to you. Your trigger is the combination of physical injury and an association with Tobi. But if you face Tobi uninjured in a situation you control, you likely won't have flashbacks. When you heard his voice on the phone, you didn't trigger."

Naruto nodded, realizing that he hadn't really thought of it that way. "Ok. So, that is an advantage to us, sort of."

Sasuke's lips curved into a cold smile. "Not 'sort of'. It is. They key to bringing down any man is to know his blind spots. Everyone has them. Tobi is arrogant. He feels powerful because he stalks easy prey and so he always wins. He is overconfident. He is going to learn that there is a significant difference between hunting prey and hunting predators. Between the two of you, you actually have much more experience taking out dangerous opponents."

"Ok, so how do we use it? We have to be able to find him, which no one seems to be able to do."

"Most serial killers who have a similar profile have a bit of a god complex. They think they are smarter than others. Tobi is an opportunistic killer. So we present him with an opportunity that he"
thinks we aren't aware of, or aren't prepared for. We offer him a specific bait that he wants, and force him into a plan of action we determine for him," Sasuke stated calmly.

Naruto looked skeptical. "So... how do we determine his plan of action for him? We haven't had much luck predicting his moves so far."

Sasuke arched an eyebrow. "Why do you think he hasn't tried to take us out here? Everyone one in this apartment is top of his list right now. He knows where we are. What's held him back?"

Naruto shrugged. "Because he knows that Gaara, Shisui and I are professionals. Taking the three of us on at once would be suicide. I don't know how much he knows about you and Itachi, but even with just the three of us, he'd have to be careful. There are also limited ways in and out, and all of them guarded by cops. It's too dangerous."

"Exactly," Sasuke said. "So we make it easier." He detailed out exactly how to create an 'opportunity' for Tobi that even Naruto had to admit the man would not be able to resist. The subtle simplicity of it and the much more complex layers of contingency plans had Naruto wondering how long Sasuke had been thinking about this, but he realized why Gaara was willing to go along with it. It was brilliant. But there was one major flaw.

"I'm not doing it," Naruto said when Sasuke had finally finished explaining.

Sasuke's eyes narrowed in annoyance at the flat refusal. "Any particular reason you won't go along with this?"

"Several. But the one that you will most likely find acceptable is the simple fact that Tobi won't buy the idea that I would leave you unprotected. The whole plan revolves around the idea that I'd let you be alone and unguarded if a large enough emergency arose. But if Shisui or Gaara aren't with you, I don't care how many cops you surround yourself with. I am not letting you out of my sight, and I don't fucking care if the entire city burns to the ground because of it. If Tobi has studied me anywhere near as much as I've studied him, then he would know this about me. And even if he can't see through your plan completely, he will know it is a trap. He hasn't survived this long without good instincts. Cops have tried to set him up before, you know."

Sasuke's lips tightened into a thin line. Gaara shot him an amused look. "See. I told you."

"We can still make most of the plan work, but I am going to be the bait. Not you," Naruto stated firmly.

Sasuke glared at him. "You seem to forget that he said he wants to punish those around you first. You can't be the bait. It has to be Gaara, Kakashi, or me. And given that Tobi's injured, I'm the one he thinks would be the easiest kill. As far as he knows, I'm just a politician."

Naruto let out a small huff. There was no way in hell he was going to let Sasuke put himself out as bait, not matter how tight the safety net around him was. There was no such thing as a perfect plan, even when someone as smart as Sasuke or Nagato thought it through.

"We could up the ante on Naruto as a target," Shisui said thoughtfully.

"Tobi likes the media coverage. He seemed to thrive on that in the past. Given what you described about his profile, part of what seemed to really anger him about Naruto was the fact that the media made such a big deal about the fact that a little boy had survived his attack when no one else had. I remember the coverage at the time. They made Naruto out to be some sort of hero for surviving."
"Yeah, but… that was a really long time ago," Naruto said, not following.

"But I'm sure the media would love to hear about the miraculous 'resurrection' of the long-lost boy who evaded the serial killer years ago. Especially now that he has evidently been working with the government to help bring down criminal organizations and is part of the task force hunting the serial killer that took his family years ago," Gaara said, seeing where Shisui was going with this.

Sasuke said nothing, but his expression told Naruto that he had already thought of this and had not wanted anyone else to bring it up.

"It's perfect," Naruto said slowly. "It will draw Tobi's focus away from whatever random people he's decided to target. And it will also make him angry, which means he'll be more likely to make a mistake."

Sasuke drew a breath to speak, but Naruto was continuing. "And as you said, this isn't his M.O. He likes the instant gratification of a spontaneous kill. All this stalking and tracking is a lot more work, and pretty soon he's going to get tired of it. Not to mention the fact that the entire NYPD now knows his face, so it will make staying here for an extended period of time more difficult. He is going to lose patience soon. The only reason he's messing around in the first place is that I'm safe here and he wants to draw me out. As soon as that happens, he'll think he's won," Naruto piled on, seeing Sasuke's anger flare as the balance of who to use as bait seemed to be shifting heavily in Naruto's favor.

Sasuke turned cold eyes to Shisui. "I think you are forgetting what that tattoo on your shoulder actually signifies, Shisui."

Shisui met his gaze unflinchingly. "I have always known what it means, Sasuke-sama," Shisui's tone was cold and formal. "It is you and Itachi who seem to think it means that I will blindly follow your orders. What it really means is that I do what is best for the Uchiha family."

"Is that what it means?" Itachi said, standing in the doorway, his hair loose, brushing against the bare skin of his back and chest. The dark blue silk pants rode low on his narrow hips. "I had always been told it was for loyalty and fealty to the head of the clan."

Shisui looked between the two brothers. "Those things are not mutually exclusive. If you want a robot, find someone else." He stood and walked past Itachi into the room that they shared.

Itachi's eyes followed him, but he made no move to join him in their room.

"I am assuming that this little council of war you set up here was not trying to figure out what to have for breakfast," Itachi said, walking forward and glancing at the papers that were spread out over the coffee table. "Are you going to tell me what you've been planning?"

Sasuke looked at his brother for a moment. "I'll tell you the parts you need to know."

Itachi's gaze on his younger brother was unreadable for a moment. Then he sighed, resignedly. "Just don't make the same mistakes that Father did," he said softly.

"I won't. Father got lost in his empire-building. I have no such ambitions. I find more gratification on achieving things through my own skills, rather than forcing people to give ground to me through brute force like he did," Sasuke said. "But that doesn't mean I will sit back and play by the rules with those who have no regard for them. Tobi isn't someone I will lose any sleep over taking out by any means necessary."

Itachi continued to look hard at Sasuke. "It's a slippery slope, little brother. Just be sure you always
They had finished their breakfast when Kakashi arrived. Sasuke quickly brought him up to speed on their plan, reluctantly agreeing that Naruto would be the one used as the primary bait, though still not willing to finalize whether he would remain with him or not.

"Ah, it's really too bad we never caught you at anything," Kakashi said to Sasuke as he leaned back in his chair, digesting all that Sasuke had explained. "You would have made a hell of a Jinchuuriki."

Sasuke arched an eyebrow. "I think you would have found me annoyingly bad at taking orders."

"Seems to be a trait that runs in the family," Itachi murmured, looking at Shisui. Surprisingly, the statement seemed to lift some of the heavy tension that had remained between the three Uchihas since earlier that morning, as Shisui's lips twitched in acknowledgement of the statement.

"The one piece I need to verify with you is the selection of the guards to this apartment. How widely known is it that you are personally vetting each of the assigned guards?" Sasuke queried.

Kakashi shrugged. "It's not like I've been broadcasting it, but it isn't a secret. There have been several people who've asked to join the team that I've turned down because I don't know them or am not sure of them. It's caused a bit of controversy in the department. After Tobi killed six of our men, we had a lot of volunteers to take on this assignment."

Sasuke nodded, satisfied at the answer.

Kakashi turned, his eyes suddenly taking on a humorous glint. "Oh, Naruto. I forgot to mention. We have relocated most of the Jinchuuriki until we know what's going on with the killings and whether Tobi is targeting them as well or not. Fuu told me to tell you 'hey', and asked if you wanted to catch up sometime when this is all over."

Naruto felt Sasuke's eyes on him, and remembered the conversation in the prison where Hidan had described his… affair with the female Jinchuuriki in fairly graphic detail. While Sasuke had been listening in. Naruto could feel his face go up in flames. "Oh, well… uh… tell her 'hi' as well."

"Tell her that Naruto will be busy for the foreseeable future and not to hold her breath," Sasuke said tersely.

Naruto shot a sideways glance, taking in the possessive expression on Sasuke's face. He knew that Sasuke still hadn't forgotten about the 'list' Kakashi had made Naruto fill out. It boggled Naruto's mind that Sasuke could possibly be insecure, given that - of the two - Naruto thought it was pretty obvious that Sasuke was by far the better catch of the two on almost any measure. The fact that it clearly weighed on the handsome politician made Naruto suddenly wish they were alone instead of a room full of people. He would be more than happy to assure Sasuke he had absolutely no interest in anyone else. No one but Gaara had stood by Naruto the way Sasuke had. And Sasuke had a lot more to lose by doing so.

Naruto's eyes had latched onto Sasuke's, some of what he was feeling obviously showing in his face given the look Sasuke was returning, but their gaze was broken when the phone in Sasuke's office began to ring. Sasuke stalked off to answer it, ignoring the amused look his brother shot him. Naruto hesitated a moment, then decided to follow. Sasuke hadn't pushed last night, hadn't forced Naruto to talk more than he wanted. Instead, he had stayed with Naruto until he had fallen asleep, then spent the rest of the night coming up with a plan to take Tobi. Naruto wasn't going to let his own...
insecurities give Sasuke doubts about what was between them.

Sasuke was aware the Naruto had followed him into his office as he picked up the phone.

"Sasuke-san?" Juugo's voice came from over the line.

"Yes. What is it, Juugo?" Sasuke said curtly. He felt Naruto's hand slide over his flat stomach, the tan fingers splayed possessively over his pale body. His stomach muscles clenched at the spike of lust that shot through him at the simple touch. He wasn't ready to admit to himself just how much he craved it. Needed it to be only for him.

"There is a bit of a situation in the lobby," Juugo was saying. Sasuke closed his eyes as he felt the warm puff of Naruto's breath on the back of his neck just before lips brushed against the sensitive flesh there.

"Oh?" Sasuke said, annoyed when his voice came out slightly breathless.

"Yes," Juugo continued, not noticing the change in tone. Naruto's teeth were now nipping slightly down the side of Sasuke's neck, while the hand on his stomach was steadily questing lower, making small circles over Sasuke's lower abs. Sasuke shifted his feet slightly wider apart as blood started to pool in his groin.

"There is a… person here who is demanding to see Naruto," Juugo said. "He says his name is Kiba Inuzuka. But we have no record of you expecting any such visitor, and he is not someone Kakashi has authorized either." Sasuke almost missed the man's words as Naruto's fingers had finally reached their destination and had closed around Sasuke's now rapidly hardening erection.

Sasuke grabbed Naruto's wrist, needing to stop the motion so he could focus on what the man was telling him. "C-can you send up his photo? Naruto is here. I'll see if he knows him."

"Spoilsport," Naruto whispered into Sasuke's ear, causing the dark-haired man to shudder slightly. Naruto chuckled, earning a glare from his lover. "You know there's no one else I want, Sasuke. Whatever happened before, it was never like this."

Sasuke didn't want to acknowledge that he had needed to hear the words, even though he knew that was why Naruto had said them. He turned, bringing up the program that linked him to the security cameras in the main lobby.

The image of a brown-haired man appeared on Sasuke's screen, and Naruto's eyes instantly widened in recognition. "I know that guy. He drove me to the airport when Tobi found out about my meeting with Jiraiya and Kabuto."

"Yes, Naruto knows him. We'll be down shortly," Sasuke spoke briefly then hung up, turning and grabbing Naruto by the hips and pulling their bodies sharply together. "We will definitely finish this later."

Naruto pressed a hard kiss to Sasuke's mouth in complete agreement, then looked down in amusement at the still painfully obvious erection Sasuke was sporting. "I think you'd better sit this visit out. I don't want anyone else getting to see you like that, and I've got to head down to the lobby now before Kiba takes the place apart. I have a feeling he's looking for Sakura."

"You're not going alone," Sasuke growled.

"I'll take Gaara. I think he'd enjoy meeting Sakura's friend anyway."
Sasuke appeared appeased, and Naruto turned, leaving Sasuke to get himself under control.

Naruto and Gaara stepped out of the elevator to see the shaggy brown haired man being detained by the main desk by the two policemen Kakashi had stationed there. Naruto grinned when he saw Kiba practically growling at the men detaining him.

"Yo, Kiba. I'm flattered and all, but I'm already seeing someone," he walked up and nodded at the two cops blocking the man's way. "Hey, Genma, Raidou. It's ok, I know him." They looked at Kiba warily, but stepped back as Naruto offered his hand to Kiba. "Good to see you again, man. Thanks again for the ride."

"No problem," the brown-haired man grasped Naruto's hand in a firm grip, looking over Naruto's shoulder to where Gaara stood silently observing them.

"Kiba this is Gaara," Naruto tilted his head to indicate the redhead. Gaara nodded his head curtly in greeting, clearly sizing Kiba up. There was a slight recognition in Kiba's eyes at the mention of Gaara's name, but he said nothing. "I'd offer to let you come up, but we're under pretty strict security here with the... situation I mentioned before," Naruto said, glancing around the entryway.

"Yeah, no kidding," Kiba said drily, shooting the cops another look before glaring at Naruto. "Mind telling me where the fuck Sakura is? I've been trying to get ahold of her for days now and she isn't calling me back," Kiba said, his voice low but making it clear he wasn't going to be brushed off.

"Protective custody," Gaara answered tersely. "She's fine."

Naruto opened his mouth to say more, when suddenly felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, a sign he had learned early to not ignore. He swung around, looking for the source of the threat that was making his skin crawl, but the only person besides the police and Juugo in the lobby was Mr. Maruboshi, an old man who often seemed to just wander about and 'people watch'. He'd been living in the building for more than a decade, according to Juugo. He was wrapped in his familiar shawl, clutching his walker as he sat on one of the lobby benches, looking out at the street, but had turned to watch the excitement of Kiba's arrival, his cap covering the rheumy blue eyes that Naruto knew well from seeing him many times before.

Naruto glanced around once more before turning back to Kiba and Gaara. "Sorry... I'm getting paranoid."

Kiba laughed, but his voice also sounded a bit tense. "This place is crawling with cops, for people like us it's normal to feel paranoid." Naruto mentally agreed as he noted both Kiba and Gaara glancing around the lobby uncomfortably as well. "If she needed protection you could have sent her my way. Too many on the force are in somebody's pocket. It's a risk to have the cops looking out for her."

"We were careful. Kakashi hand-picked the guy who's watching her. Tobi singled her out when she filed that medical report for me. She had to go into hiding as soon as we got back into the country, so there wasn't time to come up with other options," Naruto said grimly.

Gaara gave Naruto a sharp look, surprised that the blond was saying so much.

Kiba's eyes narrowed. "And she's safe? You know for a fact?"

"Yeah. It's under control for now," Naruto snickered. "She gave the cop a message telling us to get off our asses and finish the job or she'd come and do it for us."
Kiba blinked, then shook his head and laughed. "Yeah… that pretty much sounds like her." He sighed, "And she probably meant it too." Naruto and Gaara exchanged amused looks, in complete agreement on that point.

Again, Naruto felt a prickle along his skin, but a quick glance assured him that no one else had entered the lobby, the mirrored glass preventing anyone from outside looking in. He turned back to find Kiba had grabbed one of the business cards advertising the apartment complex from the desk and had written his number on the back of it before handing it to Naruto. "If things change and you need me, you can reach me here."

Naruto took the card, quickly committing the number to memory. "You know, it might not be good that you came here. I'm pretty sure we're being watched. You have a place to lie low for a while?"

Kiba snorted in amusement. "I might have a few, but who's counting?"

"This is too open," Gaara cut in, his voice tense, giving Naruto the sense that he wasn't the only one feeling like they were being watched. He didn't know if he felt reassured or more nervous by that fact. "Let's get back upstairs. I don't like it."

"Me neither," Naruto clapped a hand on Kiba's back. "I'll keep you posted, man."

Kiba nodded, then turned and headed back out.

Gaara was already shoving Naruto back in the elevator before the man had left the lobby.

The rest of the day was spent working out the final details of the plan. Itachi and Kakashi were kept out of the loop on a few parts, much to both of the men's irritation, but Sasuke simply shrugged, saying something about needing to finalize a few things.

Everyone agreed that the sooner this could be placed in motion, the better it would be. It went unsaid that no one believed Naruto would accept any plan that required much of a wait time after what had happened with Maria and the threat to Sakura.

"So the first step will be to prime the pump," Sasuke said as the men were seated in his living room, having finished dinner. "Karin will be by in the morning to prep you for the press conference," he continued, noting the way Naruto's expression tensed at the mention of the campaign manager's name. "She has already leaked certain information to both the press and the Japanese consulate. It will be untraceable back to us, but of course Tobi will figure it out."

Sasuke smirked at the thought of the anger the killer would feel at having his 'failure' thrown back in his face so publicly. Naruto was still stuck on the fact that he was going to have to sit down and talk with the woman whom many believed had been having an affair with Sasuke while Naruto was in Suna.

Sasuke noted Naruto's distracted expression, and arched an eyebrow at him. "Problem?"

"No," Naruto said, going over to the sink in the bar and pouring himself a glass of water, wishing he dared drink something stronger. "So… how are we handling the fact that I'm about to become front-page news, and I'm living with you?"

Sasuke shrugged as though it was a completely casual question. "Are you uncomfortable about our relationship becoming public?"

Naruto shifted, feeling suddenly nervous at having this conversation in front of so many people. But
he answered it anyway. "I'm not the one with anything to lose by it. You're the one with the political career on the line. Not to mention the shit with Kabuto."

Sasuke looked completely unperturbed. "Suigetsu has already fixed all the back-files for you and the rest of the Jinchuuriki. If anyone starts digging, they won't find anything that can't be explained by your cover. And with this new angle of you being the victim of a deranged serial killer, finally 'found by your people' or whatever bullshit spin Karin will put on it, you will be nothing but an asset to me, politically."

"And Kabuto?" Naruto persisted.

"Is happily dead," Sasuke said flatly. "And the investigation along with him."

Kakashi checked his watch and stood. "So the dominoes are all in place. Tomorrow we knock the first one over, and hope they fall like you planned."

Sasuke nodded, standing as well to see the man to the elevator. "You'll see to arrangements on your side, and keep a tight handle on the security in the lobby?"

Kakashi nodded as he left.

When he returned, Gaara was unscrewing the air vent in the kitchen, with Naruto casually leaning against the wall watching him as though this was a completely normal pastime for them.

"I want to spend a bit of time mapping out the air ducts… at least a few of the main ones to be sure they match with the blueprints," Gaara explained. "If there is a chance Tobi is going to come in this way, I want to make sure we know all the access points and have them covered."

Sasuke shrugged, agreeing that it was probably a good precaution.

Naruto seemed content to watch the redhead, until Sasuke reminded him, "I believe you have some unfinished business to attend to."

He turned and walked to their bedroom, not bothering to look back to see if Naruto was following him.

Sasuke heard the door to the bedroom close softly behind him, but didn't turn around to see Naruto approach. He closed his eyes when he felt Naruto's hands close over his hip bones and slide up to splay across his stomach, fighting the sound that wanted to escape his throat at the familiar touch that he could never get enough of.

"You know," Naruto's low voice rumbled in his ear, and Sasuke leaned his head back slightly, allowing Naruto better access to his neck. "You really don't have to worry about Fuu or anyone else, bastard. Like I'd ever go to anyone else when I have you."

Sasuke pressed back, feeling Naruto's hard body against his, the rigid erection pressing against him through their pants. It always made him feel slightly better knowing that Naruto seemed to need it just as much as he did… that he wasn't the only one with this unquenchable thirst, this ever-growing obsession. He supposed it wasn't healthy, but there was nothing he could do about it.

He tugged on Naruto's wrist, bringing the man closer to the bed before pushing him down on it. "Shirt off. Now."

Naruto arched a brow in amusement, but tugged off the T-shirt he was wearing, laying back down on the bed in just his jeans, watching Sasuke. "Don't think that just because you're calling the shots
in the situation with Tobi means you get to call the shots in here as well," Naruto said, reaching up and grabbing Sasuke's shirt with his fist, tugging him down hard on the bed next to him.

Sasuke smirked, feeling his pants becoming almost unbearably tight, but not wanting to rush through the anticipation. "Hn," he slid his hand over the planes of Naruto's chest and stomach, feeling the flesh tense and quiver beneath his touch. "Somehow I can't imagine you ever being passive."

Naruto rolled over, straddling Sasuke's thighs as he deftly undid the buttons on the man's shirt. "Too bad you didn't wear your bathrobe all day. This morning was the first time I've seen you in it. I really wanted to be the one to take you out of it."

"You never let me keep anything on in here long enough for me to need it," Sasuke murmured as Naruto tugged the last button free, and pulled the shirt off his lover's body.

"Hmmmm," Naruto agreed as he lowered himself, settling further down between Sasuke's thighs. Sasuke shuddered as Naruto's fingers moved next to the fastenings of the pale man's pants, slowly pulling down the zipper. "Well, why break from tradition now?"

Sasuke fisted his hand into the blond hair as he felt Naruto's mouth close around him. His mind - exhausted from lack of sleep and focusing on lining up every variable and contingency for the upcoming week - was blissfully wiped blank as his back arched and his hips thrust up into the wet heat.

For the moment, this was all that existed.

Naruto shifted nervously as the bright-haired woman sat across from him, eyeing him with open curiosity but no hostility. Her long, vibrant red hair seemed to set off her 'sexy librarian' glasses well, and her elegantly tailored suit made the most of her figure. She was attractive, intelligent, and had a more-than-acceptable career ahead of her. But as Naruto shifted his gaze to Sasuke, it was clear that Sasuke had absolutely no interest in the woman. The cameras had made the most of their proximity to each other when the rumors of a relationship between the politician and his campaign manager were flying, but sitting in the same room, Naruto realized that there was never a chance of anything between them.

He felt himself relax slightly. It wasn't that he had doubted Sasuke when he'd told him there had been nothing between him and the woman, but Naruto's own doubts about whether he was really 'good enough' to be in a real relationship with Sasuke made him feel insecure about any comparison between himself and Karin.

She smiled at him brightly. "Don't be nervous. I already know everything."

At Naruto's horrified glance at Sasuke, she cleared her throat and clarified. "Well, not everything, but enough to know that Sui has made up a bunch of illegal documents to legitimize you that will more than pass muster with anyone who goes fishing. So you don't have to worry. By the time we finish spinning our story about the brave little boy who escaped a vicious serial killer, living on the streets in hiding until he was old enough to help make sure nothing like this happened to any other child, the City will be at your feet. The EMT and the family you saved are already telling their stories. Jiraiya and Kakashi will be hinting at your role, playing it up to be mysterious and important without giving any details away. The conspiracy theorists will go wild. All you have to do is smile and show your baby blues to the camera, and you'll be beating off admirers with a stick."

Sasuke's eyes narrowed at that last comment, and Karin grinned wickedly at him. "That's right, Mr. High-and-mighty. You'd better get ready for some serious competition for blondie here. He's about to
become probably a bigger celebrity than you are." She turned back to Naruto, her eyes running over him assessingly. "It helps that you're such nice eye candy. The press love heroes that look good on camera. It will guarantee you more air time. And you look so innocent, too! Sasuke, are you sure he's actually a killer?"

She reached forward to brush a lock of hair out of Naruto's face. Naruto flinched back, and she snickered at Sasuke's scowl. "Oh, relax. Now, here is a list of the questions you are likely to be asked, as well as a list of things that you should never say or admit to under any circumstances. We're going to role play a bit, where I will be the press and ask you things. I want you to be comfortable with your answers without sounding stiff and rehearsed. We have four hours before the press conference, and we will need every second."

Naruto looked pleadingly over at Gaara as though hoping he would somehow re-open the air vent and get him the fuck out of there. Being in the spotlight was something the two men had avoided for so long that the thought of it was making him queasy. Even though Tobi already knew where he was and the Jinchuuriki program was now in the open, Naruto felt like he was about to hyperventilate.

He jolted when he felt a hand slide along his shoulders, and looked up to see Sasuke standing next to him. "Breathe. Karin is the best. She'll have you ready. You can do this. You don't even have to lie about anything. Which is good, because you really suck at lying."

Naruto let out a shaky laugh. "Ok. Well... let's get started."

They had been going for over two hours when the elevator chimed. Juugo walked in carrying a basket of what appeared to be origami paper flowers.

"We searched this thoroughly. There are no wires, no chemicals... it's just... paper flowers. It was delivered anonymously this morning. The card is to Uzumaki Naruto," Juugo said offering it to Naruto.

Naruto ignored the card, instead looking at the flowers themselves.

"What is it?" Sasuke asked, feeling a slight unease at the intensity of Naruto's examination of the flowers.

"It's a message from Tobi. He's going after Konan," Naruto said. Konan had practiced origami as a way to relax. She had also disguised a few C4 bombs in clever origami designs. It was her signature mark back in the day when she had been an assassin, before building the Akatsuki with Nagato.

"We have no way to warn her," Sasuke eyed Naruto, surprised at the calm expression that was on the blond's face. They hadn't spoken extensively about his relationship with Konan and Nagato, but from what he had observed in the police station the first time he had seen Naruto, it had seemed to be a strong bond.

Slowly, Naruto smiled. "Oh, there's no need to warn her. If anyone needs warning, it would be Tobi. I just hope she doesn't kill him for us."

"Why?" Sasuke asked, unsure why that would be a bad thing.

"Because we'll never find the body. And I want closure," Naruto said. He grinned ferally at the thought of how that encounter was likely to go. So many people had underestimated Konan. She made sure they generally didn't live to regret it. He realized that - if Konan decided to let Tobi live - he would likely be doubly frustrated when the press conference aired. "All right. Let's finish this up. We have a press conference to get to."
Tobi stood at the rear wall of the enormous Hampton estate. He was pretty sure he had stayed out of range of all the security cameras, but he had seen a few other devices that he didn't recognize. He could always have requested a meeting with Konan directly, but the woman was careful, and always had at least five armed guards with her in any of her 'business' meetings. Which made sense given the men she typically did business with, but it was incredibly inconvenient for him. He needed to get her alone. He was sure he could kill her quickly if she was on her own.

He looked again at the line of cameras and other electronic equipment lining the wall and cursed quietly under his breath. "Bitch."

"Now, where are your manners?" A smooth female voice came from behind him, causing Tobi to jump and spin around.

Konan stood there, no guards around her. She held a small pen in her hand.

"In case you're wondering, this is a deadman's switch," she said conversationally. "The entire estate, from the buildings to the grounds to the walls, are wired with C4. If I die and release my grip on this switch, the whole thing goes up, including anyone who tries to kill me. I bring it to all my 'important meetings'.'"

Tobi eyed the switch, considering his options.

"I would kill you myself right here," the woman said with a casual confidence that Tobi suddenly realized was likely not a boast. "But I have a feeling that Naruto wants to handle this personally."

Tobi circled around behind the woman, hoping to shake her composure. "How did you know I'd be coming?"

Konan smiled coldly. "I've been watching you. While you were watching him. Ever since you came to me offering to 'help' me find the other Jinchuurikis. I remembered you from back when Nagato forced Naruto to join the Akatsuki. We looked into your background. We've known who you were all along. Which is why Nagato had no interest in recruiting you. You're too unstable."

Tobi narrowed his eyes at the characterization. "Why did you stop killing the Jinchuurikis? You believed that they were responsible for bringing down the Akatsuki. Why stop?"

Konan's face had no expression. "Because there is only one Jinchuuriki I need to talk with now. But I will wait until he's settled things with you first."

Tobi bristled at the casual assumption that Naruto would come out the victor in a battle between them. "Maybe you should have your conversation with him first, while you still have the chance."

Konan's eyes shone with amusement. "Oh, I'm not worried about having plenty of time to discuss things with Naruto." She turned her back on Tobi, a clear insult to his abilities.

"You're making a very bad mistake," he said softly.

"Oh, no," she replied, not even bothering to turn around. "You're the one making the mistake. You should have stuck with the helpless civilians who don't know how to fight back, Kyuuubi. This is a different game we play here."

He watched her walk calmly through a narrow back gate. Four guards he hadn't even noticed jumped down from the trees and followed her inside.
He clenched his fists in impotent fury. Nothing was going as planned.

He needed release.

He slowly walked to the main street, lifting his hand to a bright red convertible that was driving down the road. A young woman pulled to a stop. "Do you need anything?" she asked. Her parents had always warned her about hitchhikers, but this wasn't the city. Anyone walking out here was likely a millionaire. Plus, the older man was handsome, with an air of mystery and power about him. She smiled brightly, feeling her heart flutter a bit as the man smiled slowly back.

"Yes, actually… my cell phone seems to have run out of battery. I'm supposed to be meeting someone for lunch, and I wanted to let them know I'd be running a bit late. Unless you'd be willing to give me a lift?"

The girl felt a flicker of unease, but squashed it down. She wanted to live a little. Maybe she'd get to see which mansion this man lived in. "Sure. Hop in."

Tobi smiled. Yes, this was exactly what he needed.

_This is a different game we play here._

Tobi fought down the surge of anger he felt at the contemptuous way Konan had dismissed him as a threat, so sure that he could never touch Naruto.

She was wrong. She had no idea how close he was. It was almost time.

Naruto fidgeted with his tie as he rode down the elevator with Gaara, Sasuke and Karin. He couldn't believe he was about to go on camera (something he had always avoided) acknowledging his real name (something he avoided even more) and proclaiming his part in the task force targeting Tobi (something even in his wildest nightmares he would never have considered). He decided abruptly he must have lost his fucking mind.

Karin had suggested having it on the Japanese embassy's grounds, rather than at Sasuke's building to avoid overly publicizing their address or overtly throwing out the fact that they were living together. They wouldn't hide it, but Karin advised that they shouldn't flaunt it either. They had to keep this focused on Naruto's identity, not his love life.

"Stop fidgeting," Sasuke said, batting Naruto's hands away.

"You're sure this is a good idea? I mean… even though we're not going to be like… making out on camera, people are going to put two and two together when they find out where I'm living."

Sasuke tugged Naruto's tie, bringing their faces within a breath of kissing. "We've discussed this. And I have absolutely no problem with people finding out we're together. It will keep them from thinking they have any chance with you."

"Ok, guys. Keep it the bedroom for now. We need to let them get used to the idea slowly, not have half of them die of shock or nosebleeds right off the bat," Karin said, humor lacing her voice as the elevator chimed, signaling they'd reached the lobby. "When we get back from the embassy, you can spend the rest of the afternoon locked in Sasuke's bedroom if you want. But for now, I need Naruto to focus on the talking points I gave him."

When Sasuke made no sign of stepping back, Karin sighed and smacked him in the back with her purse. "Sasuke… let your boyfriend get a little blood back in his brain."
Sasuke stepped back, wearing a smug look at the slightly glazed expression on Naruto's face. "It's a thirty minute drive to the embassy. He has plenty of time," Sasuke smirked.

Karin rolled her eyes. Who would have guess that her boss – whom everyone had basically written off as asexual years ago – would be behaving like this. If she hadn't witnessed it with her own eyes, she'd never have believed it.

Naruto blinked, then jammed his elbow into Sasuke's ribs. "Asshole. This 'press conference' stuff is easy for you. Leave me alone and let me concentrate."

Gaara's face showed no expression, but his eyes were lit with amusement as they walked out of the elevator.

Naruto had turned to say something to his friend, but paused as he saw a face that he didn't recognize when they entered the lobby. "Hey," he said, addressing one of the police officers. "You're new, right?"

The officer smiled stiffly. "Yes. Genma is out with the flu. I offered to take his slot this week."

Naruto smiled and held out his hand. "I'm Naruto. Guess we'll be seeing you around for a bit. I'm sure Kakashi briefed you on all you need to know."

The officer nodded, taking Naruto's hand. "Mizuki. I'm sure I'll see you around."

-xXx-

to be continued...

Note: So I wasn't sure where to cut this part, and I ended up writing almost a third to a half of what will be the next chapter. Tobi and Naruto will finally come face to face for their final conflict (though depending on how long that scene goes, it might not be finished in the next chapter). After that it should just be one chapter to wrap things up!
**Warning:** Hard yaoi VERY GRAPHIC (slightly kinky) SEX THIS CHAPTER. **Don't like, don't read, don't be annoying.** (18+) in this chapter.

**Author's note:** Yeah.. another chapter that's almost 10k words long. Apologies to all your phones. But we are close now. One chapter left after this (though it will also be a monster). Thanks to BriEva and Mykko-chan for reading/telling me what was confusing/generally being awesome.

-xXx-

Naruto bowed politely to the Japanese ambassador, Tatewaki-sama, a ruggedly attractive man in his late forties.

"Namikaze Naruto, I am honored to be the one to formally state, on behalf of the citizens of Japan, how happy we are to be able to return your name to you," the man said in their native tongue. His eyes softened. "I knew your father. He was an admirable man, and had a promising career ahead of him."

Naruto tried not to flinch at the use of his childhood name. He smiled slightly and nodded, not wanting to lose himself in memories of his father just before stepping in front of the cameras. He had buried his grief long ago. If he revisited it, it would not be done in public.

"Thank you." Naruto kept his voice calm wanting to just get this over with. His eyes sought out Sasuke, who was standing next to him.

"And I see you have befriended one of the most esteemed members of the Japanese community here in New York. Uchiha Sasuke, we are grateful to you for returning our lost citizen to us," the ambassador said.

Sasuke bowed politely. "It is my pleasure. When my cousin recognized Namikaze-san, we decided immediately to help him reclaim his past," Sasuke said smoothly. Their story was well-rehearsed. Naruto - having taken refuge in the US through vague means that they did not disclose - lived on the streets and educated himself until he was old enough to begin working undercover for the government as part of a major operation to bring down major crime syndicates. He was currently part of the international task force focused on catching the international serial killer known as 'Tobi'.

As part of his undercover work, he took a job as security for Sasuke and was recognized when Sasuke's cousin from Japan came to visit. After years of living in hiding, traumatized by his tragic past, Naruto was finally ready to come forward and face his fears, with the support of the Police Commissioner, the District Attorney's office, and his supervising officer in the department.

The Japanese Ambassador and his staff were star-struck by the time the telling of the tale was finished. They agreed to expedite all paperwork to clear up any uncertainty about his identity, the fact that he had been declared dead ten years ago, and the status of his citizenship.

After an hour of talking with the staff of the Japanese consulate, it was time to face the press. When they opened the door to the press room and saw the number of people holding cameras that were in there, Naruto abruptly turned on his heel to find the nearest exit before Karin grabbed his elbow in a firm grip and propelled him back into the room.

Gaara was snickering as he followed behind.
Naruto had passed out from loss of blood or head injuries several times in his life, but he'd never been as close to passing out from sheer nerves as he was at the moment. Cameras were flashing and video tapes were rolling and everyone was looking at him. He was using his real name and proudly stating the fact that he was the missing victim of Tobi and…

_Holy fuck someone please just shoot me right now_, Naruto thought, feeling as though the whole thing must be some sort of surreal dream.

Mindful of the cameras capturing every angle of them as they faced down the room full of reporters and onlookers, Sasuke shifted just so his foot nudged up against Naruto's. The touch went unnoticed by the audience, but the small contact immediately steadied Naruto's fraying nerves. He drew a shaky breath and shot Sasuke a grateful glance before reciting the carefully woven blend of fact and fiction that Karin had drilled into him.

The story of Naruto and Gaara's youth began with them growing up on the streets of New York before slowly beginning to work with various law enforcement agencies to try to stop child trafficking and take down dangerous criminals. Gaara's full name was given, but it was clear that no one in the room made the connection at this point.

Naruto stumbled a few times in the story, but everyone seemed to write it off as simple nerves, making him even more endearing to the public. Sasuke and Gaara barely kept from rolling their eyes, knowing really it was just that the blond was a horrendous liar. But it seemed to play well enough as Karin had stuck to the truth as much as possible, knowing Naruto would have to carry the story off. Suigetsu had done his work, though, so even if people did get suspicious, all the 'facts' would check out in Naruto's favor.

When someone asked directly about the Akatsuki, Kakashi stepped forward and smoothly said that they were not able to discuss any specific details of any cases, both because they were classified as well as the fact that the Akatsuki case was still ongoing.

Naruto knew that Hidan and Dei would be watching, but they knew enough about what had been happening to know that most of this was simply a clever rewriting of history. Not to mention the fact that both men knew what Naruto's 'bull-shit face' looked like, and would be able to tell instantly which parts were true and which were fabrications.

There were many speculative looks cast at Sasuke, and Naruto knew it wouldn't be long before the dots were put together about the nature of their relationship. Sasuke stood calmly, showing no sign of anxiety at all about what this could do to his career. Naruto wasn't sure if Sasuke cared so much about him that it didn't matter, or if the politician were simply so sure of his own abilities that he knew it wouldn't matter. Naruto's gaze happened to catch Sasuke's for a moment, and the noise of the press room seemed to fade at the calm surety Naruto read in the black depths. Sasuke arched a black brow at him, and Naruto had to fight the urge to grab the man by his red tie and kiss him in front of the entire room full of people.

"No fucking on stage at your first press conference," Karin whispered in Naruto's ear with a knowing smirk, causing the young man to burst into a fit of coughing. "You have to wait until at least the third, according to my polling data."

Itachi stepped forward, saying that the Uchiha family would be helping to ensure that Naruto was reunited with any family he might have, and helping with any legal issues that his decade of 'missing person presumed dead' status might cause.

With that, the press conference was drawn to a close, followed by a few photo ops with the
Ambassador, Naruto, and the Uchiha brothers. Naruto breathed a sigh of relief that it was finally over.

As they exited the press room and stepped into the corridor, and Sasuke's entire body froze. Naruto looked over at him, and saw his eyes locked on an old man who appeared to be waiting for them.

A quick glance showed Shisui reaching into his jacket pocket, until Itachi placed a hand on his arm, stopping the motion. Gaara and Naruto's eyes locked, their instincts immediately coming on high alert. The killing intent coming off Shisui and Sasuke towards the old man was palpable.

Naruto was amazed that the entire room of people weren't screaming in terror to get out of the way, but no one else seemed to notice. He looked at Sasuke's face: it was a cold, expressionless mask. But his eyes… Naruto couldn't believe no one in the room was running.

The old man walked over to them, his eyes shrewd and hard. "Uchiha-san," he greeted Itachi first, then bowed respectfully to Sasuke, repeating the same greeting. "It's been too long since you've been back in Japan."

"Mitokado-sama," Itachi said respectfully, returning the polite gesture, but speaking in English instead of Japanese. The slight insult brought a hint of displeasure to the old man's eyes. "My brother and I have settled happily in the States."

Itachi's eyes shifted to Sasuke, the gesture the only sign that he was not fully at ease with the situation.

"Homura-san," Sasuke said, giving the smallest bow. His voice showed no emotion, but the hair on the back of Naruto's neck was standing on end. He wasn't sure if the old man was clueless, or if he didn't consider Sasuke a threat. Which would also make the man clueless, in Naruto's estimation. "Please excuse us. We have prior obligations that we can't be late to."

The old man's eyes rested briefly on Shisui, and a look of smug satisfaction appeared on the wrinkled face. "How does it feel to be a Ronin… belonging to a headless clan?"

Shisui met the man's gaze, then bowed politely even though he received no such gesture in return. "They say wisdom is the fruit of old age. You remain eternally young at heart, Mitokado-sama."

The old man's eyes flashed at the insult, but the group was already walking away to where Itachi's car was waiting.

When the door had closed and they were pulling away from the curb, Naruto looked between the three Uchihas. "So… I take it that man is not an old friend of the family's?"

Sasuke looked at him for a moment, before finally saying, "He was at one point a close friend of my father's. He was also most likely involved in his murder."

Naruto looked from Sasuke's face to Shisui's, feeling the hard anger pouring from the two men. Itachi seemed even more emotionless than ever.

"That is an old story, Sasuke. There is no point in discussing it anymore," Itachi said, a clear warning that he wanted the topic closed. Naruto caught Sasuke's eye, and knew that - while Sasuke might be willing to not speak of it in front of his elder brother - the younger Uchiha had not let it go permanently.

Naruto would get the full story out of him later.
Tobi pulled the loose clothes off that he had thrown over the bloody suit to cover it from casual observation and headed to the bathroom for a shower. The marble floor and large shower were much nicer than what he'd had in his last apartment.

He stripped off his dirty clothes and stepped into the steamy spray, watching as the water ran red, then pink, before slowly running clear as he washed his body.

He felt relaxed. He always felt this way after a kill. It hadn't been Konan. It hadn't even been anyone associated with Naruto, but it is still felt good. It had reaffirmed that he was the one in control.

He towelled off, leaving the bloody clothes laying on the floor. He'd deal with them later.

Dressing in the soft robe of the apartment's prior owner, Tobi sat down and turned on the TV. It would probably be a while before his latest victim made the news. She was killed outside the city. It would take the police a bit of time to connect the dots back to him. But he suspected that before he went to sleep tonight, they'd have figured it out.

A second victim with the same wounds would be harder to cover-up. And it was outside of Kakashi's sphere of influence. He lounged back in the comfortable chair, stretching his legs onto the ottoman placed conveniently before it.

He changed to the local news channel. Maybe they would pick something up first.

"'... earlier today on the steps of the Japanese Embassy.'

"Yes, it really is almost like a movie, isn't it Susan? A little boy escapes his parent's killer, lives in hiding until he's old enough to join a special under-cover program focused on bringing criminals to justice. His true identity only revealed by a chance encounter with someone from his own country, a man who had been just a child himself and also tragically lost his parents only a year later."

"Indeed, John. Naruto Namikaze, a man known in the community as Naruto Uzumaki, a local hero. He made news a little over a month ago by saving City Councilman Sasuke Uchiha from a car bomb, and more recently he protected a family who was attacked by possibly the same killer that left Naruto an orphan more than a decade ago. There are rumors that he is involved with the investigation to catch the killer known as 'Tobi', and has been working behind the scenes with law enforcement agencies from around the world to..."

Tobi felt fury surge through him as the reporter showed images of when Naruto had gone missing as a child, rehashing the whole story over and over, calling Naruto a hero. Stressing how the boy had managed to evade a famous serial killer. Made a fool of him.

He surged to his feet, slamming his fist into the wall, the drywall crumbling around his hand. The remembered humiliation of being evaded by a mere child flooded through him, feeding off the fresh insult from the arrogant woman crime lord.

He was tired of waiting. His patience was at its limit.

All of this chasing after random people from Naruto's life was a waste of his time. They weren't worth the effort, at least not any more. He had to find a way to draw Naruto out. It didn't have to be far. He was so close. All Tobi needed was a slight distraction.

He drew a breath and smiled. At least now he had someone inside. His brief alliance with Konan had gotten him access to resources he would never have been able to reach on his own.

It wouldn't be long now.
Naruto felt slightly frustrated that he hadn't had a chance to get Sasuke alone to talk to him more about the old man they'd seen in the embassy. But with the press conference delivered, Sasuke's plan had been publically launched, and there was no time for distractions.

Kakashi came by, discussing the new security plans for the apartment complex that required every visitor to sign in and have their ID checked. Additionally, the apartments on the three floors below Sasuke's were checked daily to insure that there had not been a break-in or any unauthorized visitors. Some of the tenants had complained, but when news of the serial killer had leaked, most had been more than happy for the extra security.

Gaara and Shisui focused on the elevator shaft and air ducts as the most likely entry routes, setting up military grade motion detectors in all of them. Kakashi was careful to not ask where Gaara had procured them from.

Kakashi was walking to the elevator to go and set up some surveillance devices on the roof when his phone rang. Frowning slightly at the number, he took the call.

"Hatake," he said tersely into the phone. No one was supposed to call him for the next forty-eight hours unless it was an emergency or something directly related to the Tobi case. He listened briefly, his eyes shooting to Naruto.

"When?" he bit out, his face looking grim.

Naruto paused where he had been trying to talk Sasuke into going into the councilman's office so they could talk about what had happened that morning. The sound of Kakashi's voice had Naruto freezing, his stomach knotting. Kakashi almost never showed worry or frustration, but Naruto could hear both in the man's voice now. And that could only mean one thing. A sickening dread crept through Naruto's stomach.

"Send me a picture of the body. I'll find out what the connection is," Kakashi's eyes met Naruto's, warning him of what was to come.

Naruto wanted to look away, to delay the moment of finding out which friend or acquaintance had he been the cause of death of this time. But he knew that would be a cop-out. He nodded tersely at the silver-haired man, indicating he was ready.

He felt Sasuke approach from behind him, the feel of the warm, steady presence at his back allowing him to swallow and accept the phone from Kakashi. All he saw at first was the blood. Everywhere. But as he looked closely, he felt some of the tension leave him.

"I have never seen her before in my life," Naruto was relieved but also confused. He knew Tobi's work when he saw it, and this was definitely one of the man's kills.

"You're sure?" Sasuke asked, his voice tense.

"I never forget a face," Naruto said with certainty. "I don't know her."

Kakashi watched him intently, taking his phone back. "She was found along a side road in one of the more expensive neighborhoods in the Hamptons. Interestingly, it is near an estate that has been rumored to have been purchased by a woman roughly matching Konan's description."

Naruto blinked, not quite able to process the implications of what Kakashi was saying, his mind still spinning with relief that the face in the photo had not been familiar.
"He tried for Konan and failed. So he is lashing out, stalking his more typical prey," Sasuke said.

Kakashi nodded. "That's my read of it as well. It shows he's losing control. The time of death puts the murder before your press conference aired. If he was already this upset because he failed with Konan, then seeing you resurrected publically will hopefully push him over the edge."

Naruto drew a breath, still having trouble believing he was actually trying to let Tobi know exactly where he was and just sit around and wait for him to come get him. He glanced over at Sasuke, reading the complete confidence in his lover's gaze. He could do this. He could handle this.

Gaara and Shisui dropped down out of the last air duct that they had trapped, immediately sensing the tension in the room.

"What happened?" Gaara asked.

"Sasuke's plan is working," Naruto replied, wiping his slightly sweaty hands on his jeans.

Shisui flipped open the laptop that would monitor the devices. It would send an alert directly to Kakashi, Sasuke, Itachi, and Shisui's cell phones if a sensor was triggered. "We're ready."

"Any word from Suna yet?" Kakashi asked, looking over at Itachi, then Gaara.

"A call was placed from the Sunan embassy to the Japanese consulate ten minutes after the press conference aired," Itachi said.

Naruto and Gaara locked eyes. It was all finally happening. Everything that had ripped their lives apart as children was now coming full circle, and it was time to step out of the shadows they'd hidden in and reclaim their lives. Naruto felt a pang as he realized how far apart their lives would lead them now. For so much of his life, Gaara had been by his side, the only person he trusted. His brother in every way that mattered. Soon, Gaara would be established in Suna beside his siblings, and Naruto would be in New York, with Sasuke. A shadow of sadness crossed his eyes.

Gaara arched a brow at the sight. "We're still brothers. Distance won't change that."

Naruto gave a lopsided smile. He supposed it was true. But it didn't mean he wouldn't miss the redhead like hell.

Sasuke didn't say anything when the two old friends decided to stay up together, sitting on the couch and talking about things from their past. At three in the morning he came out to see Naruto asleep, the top of his head brushing just against Gaara's thigh. The redhead showed no signs of sleepiness, simply resting his hand lightly on the top of the blond head, his eyes far away in thought.

Sasuke retreated from the intimate scene, returning to his bed, allowing the two friends one final night in each other's company.

"And the story continues to grow as a delegation from Suna arrived at the Japanese embassy early this morning. After Naruto Namikaze made international news for his miraculous return after supposedly disappearing at the hands of the renowned serial killer known only as 'Tobi', we discover that the childhood friend that Naruto grew up on the streets of New York with is the victim of another terrible tragedy involving child trafficking. Abducted from his home as a young boy, Gaara Sabaku was believed dead by his brother and sister until they saw him standing beside Naruto on the press conference revealing his identity earlier this week. His brother, the current ruler of the Sunan region in Kazenokure, immediately called his private jet to fly him and his sister - who is the head of the military - to New York.
It was an emotional reunion for the siblings, who will be staying at the Sunan Embassy while Gaara's citizenship is re-established, giving the family time to get re-acquainted. Kankuro Sabaku, who recently assumed leadership of the Suna province after his father was killed in an attempted coup earlier this month, has already stated he plans to install Gaara as his top advisor when they return to Suna.

Naruto sat with Sasuke, Shisui, and Itachi as they watched the news together. Images of an emotional Temari hugging a stoic Gaara filled the screen.

"She's quite good," Itachi said conversationally. "You'd never know that she'd seen her brother and helped him assassinate their father less than two weeks ago."

Naruto caught the slight softening of Gaara's eyes as he stood under his sister's embrace, and he felt a smile tug at his lips. While the publicity of the reunion was for show, the emotion behind it was real. Gaara was finally going to have a family, and a role in reforming the country that had torn him apart. He felt a tug of sadness at the thought that they were not going to be living together anymore. But he knew that they'd never lose touch. If for no other reason than Gaara had still refused to remove the tracking chip he'd implanted in Naruto's scalp.

Naruto snickered slightly, wishing he could be there with his friend. Sasuke reached over and brushed his hand lightly against the back of Naruto's neck before allowing it to settle against him.

Naruto sighed and shot him a slightly crooked smile. So much was changing so fast. His life. Gaara's life. Sasuke's life... everything was being upended. Though mostly in a good way, it was still... a lot. They just had to finish out this one last thing.

"So tomorrow the second phase of the Akatsuki trials resume," Itachi said conversationally.

"And of course, that means you and Shisui will be spending more time out of the apartment. I'll call down and let Juugo know, and tell him to inform Kakashi's men," Sasuke said.

Itachi looked straight ahead for a moment, clearly wrestling with something. "It is a good plan, Otouto. Just don't fuck it up when I can't be here to help out."

Sasuke nodded as Itachi and Shisui rose to retire for the evening. He shot Shisui a hard look. "Keep alert. I am pretty sure Tobi is focused on Gaara, Naruto, or me right now. But we can't rule anything out. Don't let anyone touch him."

Shisui's eyes had followed Itachi where he had already gone to their bedroom. The expression in his eyes reassured Sasuke as no words possibly could. "No one will hurt Itachi," was all he said before he followed his lover to their room.

Sasuke turned to find Naruto watching him. "I really wish we'd arranged for some sort of emergency to pull you away, too," Naruto said, his voice serious. "I can't... I don't know what I will do if something happens to you."

Sasuke raised an eyebrow. "Then we'll just have to make sure nothing does."

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Itachi and Shisui left early the next morning. The first day of trial of one of Itachi's largest cases was starting today, and there was no way he could be out of the office. Security had been tightened at the courthouse, and Itachi would not even be allowed to go to the men's room without Shisui, a fact that had earned the eldest Uchiha a glare, but Shisui had stood firm.

When the elevator closed behind them, Naruto looked across the empty living room. Ever since
they'd returned from Suna, Sasuke's penthouse had served as their *de facto* base of operations, and between Kakashi, Gaara, Itachi and Shisui, they had constantly had people in the apartment with them.

The place felt oddly quiet and empty. It struck Naruto in that moment that - of any place he had lived in since he had lost his parents - this was the first one that he actually felt some sort of belonging to. This place… this place would be where he lived. Not for a few weeks or a few months until he had to pick up and move due to either the cops or Tobi hunting him. He would actually… *live* here. Have a life here. It was a strange thought, but not an unwelcome one.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Sasuke's voice came from just behind his ear. Another sign of the trust he felt here. Sasuke's footfall, scent, and presence was imprinted on Naruto's subconscious. He didn't react when the man came up from behind him the way he did with others. The only other person he had ever trusted on that level was Gaara.

"I was just thinking… how weird it is to have a place that… I might actually live in. For more than a couple of months."

Sasuke's arms slid around him, his hands resting lightly over Naruto's flat stomach. "Hmmm. After all this, you'd better not take off after a month. According to Karin, my standings in the polls have already shot up by just being associated with you."

Naruto snickered. "You think they'll still be up when the find out you shove your dick in my ass on a regular basis?"

A low sound vibrated in Sasuke's chest as he slid one hand up under Naruto's shirt. "Then they're idiots, and I don't give a fuck what they think. There are some things I am not willing to give up for my career."

They were still standing in the middle of Sasuke's living room. Mizuki's shift didn't start until noon, so it was very unlikely that Tobi would make a move before then. He wouldn't have access to the video feed. Not to mention that Kakashi was monitoring video feed from all the entrances and exits, looking for anyone that even remotely resembled Tobi. That left them with several hours to just wait. Naruto never waited particularly well.

"You know…" Naruto began, his pulse picking up as one of Sasuke's hands made lazy circles on his stomach, a low heat building in his belly at the simple touch. "This is the first time in a long time that we've been alone in your place." Danger always increased his sex drive. After all, if one of them were to get injured in the next day or two, it could be a while before they had the chance again.

Sasuke's lips brushed against the back of Naruto's neck, causing the blond to arch back and shudder slightly. One of Sasuke's hands slipped down and flicked open the button of Naruto's jeans. "You're just realizing this now?"

Sasuke shifted his body closer, letting Naruto feel the very hard, very prominent ridge of his erection pressing against Naruto's ass. "Juugo will call us when Mizuki's shift starts. And I turned the volume all the way up on the motion detector alarm. We'll hear it no matter what."

Something about Sasuke's tone caught Naruto's attention, though it was hard to focus on it when the man's hand was sliding up over his chest to pluck at one of his nipples. "You have something specific in mind, don't you, Bastard?"

The sound of Sasuke's dark chuckle coming from just behind his ear caused Naruto's dick to harden painfully in an instant.
"Now what ever gave you that idea?" Sasuke murmured as his hands slowly, slowly began to lower the zipper of Naruto's pants.

Naruto felt the blood rush south from his brain at the promise in Sasuke's voice. "If it involves either of us tying the other up, it's going to have to wait until after Tobi's made his appearance and been dealt with," Naruto readily admitted to himself it was one of his own personal fantasies to tie his dark lover up.

Sasuke's hand slid into the open front of Naruto's pants, curling finger by finger around his shaft. "I can tell that is something you're fairly interested in," Sasuke murmured as he gently squeezed Naruto's cock, feeling it pulse beneath his fingers. "And I am definitely not opposed. But I agree that will have to wait until we're done with Tobi."

Naruto was pretty sure that Sasuke was still talking to him, but the long, talented fingers were pumping him as Sasuke's lips and breath continued to brush against the back of his neck and Naruto counted it lucky he remembered to even keep breathing.

Wanting to feel Sasuke's skin, Naruto started to turn around, but Sasuke's hand tightened harshly on his cock, preventing his movement. "Not yet. I haven't had you alone in my apartment in more than a month. And I want to enjoy it a bit first."

Naruto swallowed, his voice hoarse. "I can definitely promise you'll enjoy it more if I can turn around and touch you."

The soft breath of Sasuke's low laugh across his neck made Naruto's skin break out in goosebumps. "But then it will be over too quickly, and right now, I want to do something I've wanted to do since the first time you walked into my living room."

Naruto suddenly realized that they were in fact standing right in front of the wet bar where Naruto had first delivered Orochimaru's message to Sasuke, and subsequently 'serviced' the politician for the first time. Sasuke pushed him up against the counter of the bar. Naruto's hands splayed forward over the smooth, cold surface of the granite.

"And what is that?" Naruto gasped out, feeling Sasuke's hard-on pressing firmly against his ass.

"Do you remember when you first came here? I wanted you from the first time I saw you in the holding cell," Sasuke's lips brushed against Naruto's ear while his hand continued to stroke Naruto's length. "You made me wait so long…." Sasuke slid his other hand down over the curve of Naruto's ass before he hooked his thumb in the belt loop and slowly tugged the fabric down. "... making me think that you weren't interested…." He pulled Naruto's T-shirt up over his head, throwing it aside before running the flat of his hand down the contours of Naruto's back. "... telling me that rich guys didn't 'do it for you'."

Naruto's thought back to when he had first met Sasuke. It felt like forever ago. The man had been such an ass. Naruto snickered slightly when he thought about how he'd assumed Sasuke was nothing more than a spoiled, boring rich guy, who was likely lame in bed. "I wasn't interested. You were a total ass when I first met you. And I don't like you because you're rich."

"Hn," Sasuke's hand tightened slightly around Naruto's dick, hooking his thumb over the base of Naruto's cock while his fingers splayed down before cupping his balls. "Ah, yes. I seem to remember you saying something about my frigid personality being too boring for my 'regular lover' to stick around," Sasuke's voice was low in Naruto's ear, and his thumb dug into Naruto hip bone as he tightened his grip, pulling Naruto back against his still-clothed erection.
"Sh-shit! Sasuke…" The heat and hardness of Sasuke's body pressed against him making it difficult to think. "And I remember you telling me to put my mouth to better use."

Naruto could feel Sasuke's lips curve into a smile against his skin. "And you definitely did. This time I think it's my turn to make you beg."

"Bastard," he wanted to turn around and pin Sasuke against the bar, but he had to admit that Sasuke's threat to 'make him beg' was turning him on a good bit more than was healthy.

Though he could easily have reversed their positions - despite some hesitancy regarding the risk of Sasuke's firm grip on his dick - he decided it would be more fun to play the game.

"You can try," Naruto taunted, his voice rough. "But if I remember right, you were the one begging our first time. And most of the times after that, too."

Sasuke gave a sharp tug on Naruto's pants that sent them down to mid-thigh. "I seem to recall you a time or two on the train when you seemed to be finding religion yourself," Sasuke said smugly. "But since we have a bit of time on our hands, I thought I would even the score a bit."

Sasuke spun Naruto around, slamming him back up against the counter so they were facing each other. But before Naruto could fist his hands into the black locks and drag the man's mouth to his, Sasuke had stepped back. "Grip the counter," he said tersely.

There was no mistaking the tone of command in his voice. And - with his pants pulled down to his thighs - there was no mistaking Naruto's reaction to it.

Naruto locked his eyes with Sasuke's, then slowly obeyed, lowering his hands to grip the counter on either side of his waist.

Sasuke looked at him for a moment, his eyes traveling over Naruto's naked torso, the way the position drew out the definition in the tan arms, shoulders and chest. Sasuke slowly walked forward until he was only inches away from Naruto again. "Don't let go unless I say you can."

Naruto licked his lips, his gaze slipping to the front of Sasuke's pants and the evidence of just how into this his lover was. He remembered how many times Sasuke would look at him with those cold, arrogant eyes while he sucked him off. At the time, it had slightly amused him, but now it made him want to cum all over Sasuke's pretty face. "Aren't you going to take your clothes off?" Naruto asked as Sasuke reached forward and pulled Naruto's jeans the rest of the way down. Naruto stepped out of them and kicked them aside, now completely naked.

"No," Sasuke slowly ran his hands up over Naruto's taut stomach, rubbing his palms over the nipples that had already hardened. One hand slowly slid up Naruto's neck, then fisted into the blond locks and tugged Naruto's head to the side, giving complete access to his throat. Sasuke smiled darkly as he saw a spurt of precum leak from Naruto's cock at the aggressive touch. Naruto's arms grew taught as his body tensed, the contours of the muscles becoming more pronounced. The hard, controlled strength of Naruto's body combined with the darkening blue eyes to give an edge of danger to him, like the killer he was. The thought made Sasuke's cock harden almost painfully.

It reminded him of the first time he saw the blond.

Keeping one hand fisted in Naruto's hair, he slid the other down over the tan hip as he slowly traced the column of the tan throat with his lips and teeth. "I wanted you from the first time I saw you," Sasuke murmured, still unsure how he had become so fixated on the man before him so completely. There would never be anyone else for him. Before whatever was going to happen with Tobi went
down, Sasuke was going to make sure Naruto understood that. He couldn't handle Naruto disappearing again when this was all over.

"H-holy shit, Sasuke," Naruto's hands started to let go of the counter as he wanted nothing more than to bring the man's lips to his, but Sasuke sensed his intention.

"Don't. Let. Go," he ordered.

"Fuck," Naruto shuddered as Sasuke continued his slow assault of Naruto's neck. "Kiss me."

"No," Sasuke said, letting his mouth trail lower down Naruto's throat and along his collarbone.

"What?" Naruto said, his hips shifting forward to press against Sasuke's thigh, seeking friction.

"I said no," Sasuke's voice was totally devoid of emotion. If Naruto couldn't see the small patch of dampness appearing on the front of Sasuke's pants where his erection was straining, he would have been fooled.

"Don't give me that damned ice princess routine. I know you too well, now."

Sasuke's mouth reached his nipple, and Naruto shuddered as he felt the tip of the hot, wet, tongue swirling around the sensitive bud before teeth scraped over it.

"You fucking sadist," Naruto gritted out, his head falling back as his eyes fell shut. They'd never been much for 'extended foreplay', and Naruto wasn't sure how much more he could handle it.

Sasuke trailed his lips lower, sinking to his knees as he scraped his nails down the hard, smooth skin of Naruto's stomach. He traced the swirl of the tattoo with the pads of his fingers, all the while looking up at Naruto with his depthless black eyes, watching every reaction that crossed the blond's face. Naruto's skin was sheened with sweat, his cock almost purple with arousal as it steadily leaked pearly drops that slid down his length.

Sasuke didn't break his gaze, reveling in the reaction of his lover. That he could bring Naruto to this point with only his touch.

Tan knuckles whitened as he gripped the counter harder as Sasuke slowly slid his palm over the head of Naruto's dick then down his length to close around the base. He leaned in slowly, blowing a stream of hot air over Naruto's sensitive flesh. Naruto was panting by the time Sasuke finally closed his lips around the head, and Naruto almost blew his load at the first hard suck. His hips thrust forward before he could even stop it, but Sasuke's hand gripped his hip, stopping the motion.

"Sasuke, holy shit!" Naruto groaned, feeling the perfect, white teeth scraping over his flesh, with just the right amount of pressure to avoid damage but still provide the sharp edge of danger.

There was something about the fact that Sasuke was still fully clothed that seemed to tip the balance of power in the older man's favor. And it was driving Naruto crazy that he hadn't kissed him yet. A memory flickered in his head, and suddenly he knew exactly what Sasuke was doing.

"You asshole! Just because I wouldn't kiss you at first months ago, you - ahh, fuck!" Sasuke swallowed Naruto whole before the blond could even finish thinking about how long the torture was going to last.

Sasuke hummed around him, his dark eyes showing a sadistic amusement as Naruto arched back and forgot what he'd been saying. Sasuke picked up the pace and the suction, one hand massaging the base of Naruto's cock and his balls while the other braced the tan hips to keep him from thrusting
unexpectedly.

"Sasuke, stop! I'm going to…" Sasuke deep throated him, swallowing around the head and Naruto couldn't stop the orgasm that crashed through him as he came, his hands losing their death grip on the counter and fistiging in Sasuke's hair as he rode his climax out.

Sasuke continued to suck through the first waves, then pulled back, allowing the final drops of Naruto's cum to spray on his cheek.

Naruto leaned heavily against the counter, panting with his fingers still clutching Sasuke's hair.

"I thought I told you not to let go of the counter," Sasuke said smugly, sitting back on his heels and wiping a drip of cum from his cheek and the corner of his mouth. Naruto closed his eyes and let out a shuddering breath at the sight. If it were possible, he'd cum again right there.

He knelt down, sliding his fingers this time more gently through Sasuke's hair before bringing his lips to within a breath of Sasuke's before the dark-haired man turned his head. Naruto let out a growl of frustration.

"Not yet."

Naruto scowled, feeling disproportionately frustrated that Sasuke wasn't kissing him. He'd just gotten a blow-job, so he knew he shouldn't complain, but he really liked kissing Sasuke. There was a reason he had held back until he knew he was willing to actually sleep with him. In his mind, kissing was more intimate. "So are you going to make me wait a couple of weeks before we have sex now, too?"

Sasuke stood and began unfastening his pants, shooting Naruto a look that clearly said 'do you think I am stupid?' before dropping them to the floor along with his boxers. Naruto looked at the angry red erection standing proudly between Sasuke's thighs. "I'll take that as a 'no','" Naruto said, snickering.

"Unlike you, I am not an idiot." Sasuke grabbed the bucket of ice from the bar and started walking toward the bedroom. He paused and looked over his shoulder when Naruto didn't immediately follow him. "Are you coming?"

Naruto shuddered after what he thought was probably his fourth orgasm, though at this point he was past being able to count. He didn't know how Sasuke had managed to keep from cumming for so long, but he did know that payback was going to be a bitch when this was all over.

He watched as Sasuke picked up another ice cube between his fingers. The asshole still hadn't kissed him or fucked him. Naruto was beginning to consider whether adding one more name to his body count was an option. He felt Sasuke's fingers slide over his entrance, the lube ice cold. The finger was then replaced with something much harder, wetter, and colder.

Naruto clenched around the frigid intrusion, hissing as Sasuke thrust it deeper with two of his fingers.

"Fucking cold, holy nhahhhh!"

The cold sensitized him unbelievably, and the rapidly melting ice had him shuddering and clenching around Sasuke's fingers.

"Tell me what you want, Naruto," Sasuke's voice brushed across Naruto's ear.

Naruto was done waiting. His arm shot forward and grabbed Sasuke by the throat. "I want you to
kiss me and fuck me already. And if you don't, then I am flipping you over fucking you."

Sasuke's eyes widened as he looked down to see Naruto already hard again. He had underestimated the man's stamina, though he knew he shouldn't be surprised. Sasuke grabbed another smooth oval of ice - another sign that he had planned this well in advanced, since Naruto had never seen oval ice cubes before - and slowly it into Naruto's entrance. "Tell me why."

Naruto's eyes were glazed over as he gasped and writhed at the insertion of the ice. "What?"

"Tell me why you want me to kiss you," Sasuke repeated, slowly pushing the ice in and out. "Tell me, and I'll kiss you."

Naruto tried to glare at him. Tried to do anything other than arch off the bed at the sensation. He clenched his jaw, "For the same reason I didn't kiss you in the beginning."

Sasuke slid the second piece of ice up further in. "Which is?"

"Fuck you," Naruto panted.

"Answer me first."

"Because fucking is just fucking. I only kiss people I like."

"Just like?" Sasuke teased.

"And I'll like kicking your ass if you don't hurry up," Naruto growled.

"Hn," Sasuke levered his body up between Naruto's thighs so his erection brushed against Naruto's ass. His face was inches from Naruto's. "You're staying with me when this is all over."

Naruto looked up at the perfect face of his lover, his hand still wrapped around the pale throat. No fear showed in the black eyes. Only lust and a dark possessiveness. Naruto grinned, dragging Sasuke's mouth to his in a crushing kiss. "Fine. Now fuck me."

Sasuke groaned and thrust in, pushing the ice deep inside Naruto. The heat of Sasuke's shaft contrasted so sharply with the freezing ice that Naruto arched up half off the bed. Sasuke didn't give him a moment of reprieve and immediately began pounding into him with a ferocity that had them both shaking.

Naruto bit down hard on Sasuke's lower lip, drawing blood. Sasuke slid his hands beneath Naruto's back and grabbed the back of his hair, jerking it harshly to give him better access to the tan throat. He latched on brutally, a bruise instantly forming beneath his lips, a small smear of blood staining the tan flesh from his bleeding lip.

Naruto grabbed Sasuke harshly by the chin, his fingers wrapping around Sasuke's perfect jaw as he dragged him back up for a kiss, their teeth clicking as their strained breath rushed between them. Naruto felt his fifth orgasm building, and was almost light-headed with the need to bring Sasuke over with him. He slid his hands along the slick, bare skin of Sasuke's back, digging his hands into the mounds of the pale ass that was thrusting forcefully into him. Gripping the pale hips, he forced an even faster pace. He could see the strain in Sasuke's arms and shoulders from the brutal thrusting, reveling in how the sweat dripped down the pale skin.

Releasing Sasuke's hips, he reached up to press against the headboard, lifting his legs and wrapping them around Sasuke's shoulders to get the best angle.
"Oh, fucking god, Naruto!" Sasuke's eyes fell closed and his face took on a fierce expression of lust. The sounds of skin-on-skin contact seemed to fill the whole apartment.

Sasuke threw his head back with a shout as he began to cum. The sight of the expression of twisted, mindless pleasure on the pale face was more than enough to send Naruto over as well. The blond arched up taut like a bow as he came, grabbing Sasuke and kissing him harshly. He could feel Sasuke shuddering as the pale man came in wave after wave before he eventually collapsed on top of Naruto, his body boneless and trembling.

Sasuke stretched up, feeling immensely pleased with himself as he rolled over to see Naruto still looking slightly dazed on the bed next to him. Usually Naruto's stamina tended to outlast his own. Which was why he had taken extreme enjoyment in planning the events of the previous three hours.

A low growling sound drew his attention to the blond's stomach. Naruto's hand smoothed over the offending body part. "Sorry," he chuckled. "I guess I worked up an appetite."

Sasuke smirked, laying his hand on top of Naruto's, then guiding both their hands further down. Naruto groaned good-naturedly and grabbed Sasuke's wrist. "Seriously, we need to order food. Not to mention that we might be getting some uninvited guests this afternoon, and I can't be totally useless if that happens."

Sasuke sighed, knowing Naruto was right but still enjoying the moment. "Fine. I'll order some food and we can take a shower and get ready."

Naruto hummed in agreement, wishing they could just spend the rest of the evening naked together. But if things went well, they'd have a lot more time for all that. Once Tobi was taken care of.

"Order me something without vegetables," Naruto said, getting up and heading to the bathroom to get the shower going. Sasuke rolled his eyes, but had already grown used to his lover's less than healthy eating habits. It was something he planned on working on when this was over.

He called down the food order, and was told it would be at least forty-five minutes before it was delivered. He didn't mind, though... it meant they wouldn't need to rush in the shower.

The phone rang just as they were finishing getting dressed. Juugo informed them that the food had arrived, but there were so many people in the lobby that evening that they couldn't send any of the guards up with the food. Kakashi's instructions to screen every guest and watch all entrances to stairs and elevators meant that - when the lobby was crowded - they needed to stay focused on that.

Sasuke said he'd go down and pick it up. He grabbed his cell phone, on the off chance that any of the alarms triggered when he was gone.

"Take the gun Kakashi gave you," Naruto reminded, earning a glare from Sasuke as he reached to pick it up. Like he was going to forget something like that. He checked it to make sure the safety was on, then tucked it in the waistband of his pants, throwing a jacket on to cover it.

Naruto went to the kitchen and laid out the plates and silverware, wishing he could call Gaara or go and check in on how he was doing. But it was important that there be no communication for the next forty-eight hours.

He sighed, glancing over at the elevator, which indicated that it had reached the ground floor. It would likely take Sasuke a few minutes to pay for the food then come back up. He'd probably check in with Juugo to see if the man had noticed anything unusual.
Naruto was surprised when he saw the elevator almost immediately begin its return trip up. How had Sasuke even had time to pay the guy? Naruto frowned, his instincts kicking in. It was still half an hour before Mizuki was scheduled to start his shift, but something felt off.

A noise from the balcony drew his attention, and he turned to see Tobi looking at him from the other side of the glass doors to the balcony. Naruto just blinked. A slow smile spread over Tobi’s face.

They were forty stories in the air. The occupants of the apartments for the three floors below then were checked daily. Kakashi was monitoring the roof. Unless Tobi had grown wings and learned to fly, this should not be possible.

Tobi looked completely confident as he took a step towards the door. Naruto glanced over to the coffee table, where his gun was resting halfway across the room from him. He had assumed he’d have at least a one minute warning from the motion detectors. Having just showered and changed, the gun was still just sitting on the table. The sight of a hand appearing on the railing of the balcony had Naruto's eyes widening, and he saw Zaku appear over the railing. Another man he followed behind him, someone he vaguely recognized as having seen at Orochimaru's place… Dosu?

Naruto didn't bother to try to remember their names as he saw them both pull guns and release the safeties. Naruto quickly dove for his gun, leveling it at the three men on the other side of the door. He had no qualms about shooting them where they stood as he heard the elevator chime, signaling Sasuke's return. He heard the sound of glass or hard plastic breaking behind him, but he didn't take his eyes off the men standing on the balcony to turn and look. He wondered why they weren't trying to get out of his line of fire, or at least to smash the door and come after him. The feel of cold metal against the base of his neck followed by the low click of a gun being cocked answered that question.

"No guns, Naruto," a slightly familiar voice said. "Tobi said that would be no fun. I'm just here to enforce the rules of the game he wants to play. Now be a good boy and drop your weapon."

Naruto didn't hesitate. He recognized the voice as that of the new cop from the lobby, Mizuki. If he did as the crooked cop said, he'd be dead. He wasn't that dumb.

Instead, he quickly dropped into a crouch, sending an elbow back into Mizuki's gut. The man's gun went off, shattering the glass door that led to the balcony but unfortunately missing all three men standing there. Naruto placed one hand on the ground and kicked up hard, causing the gun to fly out of Mizuki's hand and skid over to the door of the elevator. He glanced at the laptop that was monitoring the motion sensors in the air vents and elevator shafts… cursing that they were too far out of reach for him to hit the alarm from across the room. There would be no way to let Kakashi or Sasuke know what was happening.

He didn't have time to wonder why the elevator door was still open, or connect it back to the smashing sound he'd heard, but he hoped like hell Gaara had heard the shot. Having disarmed the cop, Naruto rolled to his stomach, his gun already tracking Tobi as the man kicked the jagged shards of the broken glass door out of his way to step into the apartment.

They'd had to get rid of all the automatic weapons in the apartment, so there would be nothing illegal about Naruto's actions when the cops finally arrived. Which meant that Naruto didn't have any extra shots to waste.

Naruto quickly lined up his shot and squeezed the trigger, at the same time another shot came from behind him.

Sasuke paid the delivery-man, then turned back to the elevator. He nodded to Juugo, who was still
surrounded by people asking him questions about building access. He frowned when he realized he
didn't see Raidou or Genma. Mizuki was supposed to start his shift in less than twenty minutes.
Where the hell was everyone?

Something wasn't right.

Sasuke went and pushed the elevator button, his stomach tensing when the door didn't immediately
open. The elevator car should still be waiting there, since he was the only one authorized to use it.
He looked up, and saw the elevator was back up at the penthouse. Had Naruto called it back up?

"Juugo. Where are Raidou and Genma? Has someone accessed the penthouse?"

Juugo pushed back from the horde surrounding him. "Genma just went up. He said there was
something wrong with the video feed and he wanted to check it out." He grabbed the phone,
checking the security monitors. "Raidou was just here… he shouldn't have left when we had this
many people in the lobby. No one is answering in the penthouse." The large man's face looked grim
as the image came through on the screen. "The control panel on the elevator has been smashed.
There's no way to bring it back down."

"Call the Kakashi and tell him we need back-up!" Sasuke forced himself to take a breath as panic
surged through him, his mind racing over the blueprints that he had studied of the building. There
was no way he could run up forty flights of stairs in time to be of any help at all. Assuming you're not
already too late, a voice said in his head. The video to the penthouse had been disabled, and there
was no way to see what was going on. He didn't know if this was a trap to distract them or if the
main attack was happening now.

He took off at a dead run to the second set of elevators that serviced the rest of the building. He could
take the elevator up to the 39th floor, then then fire stairs to the penthouse. His finger repeatedly
pressed the button of the one that serviced floors twenty to thirty-nine. "Naruto, you better fucking be
ok..."

He clenched his fist, pulling out his phone and glaring at it. None of the motion sensor alarms had
gone off. Tobi was supposed to have waited for Mizuki to start his shift so he'd have someone on the
inside to give him easier access and disable the video feeds. Nothing was supposed to happen until
after Mizuki started his shift.

"God fucking dammit!" Sasuke cursed as the elevator doors finally opened.

-xXx-

\textit{to be continued...}

So... ONE CHAPTER LEFT. And for those of you wondering, resolution to Sasuke's family history
was set up to be the sequel story to this. Once this story is finished, you can let me know if there is
interest in that.
Warning: Graphic depictions of violence, character deaths, and intermediate yaoi in this chapter.
18+

Special thanks to Mykko_Chan and BriEva for beta’ing and sanity checking this (officially my longest ever) chapter! Yes... as promised, it is a beast. But we all knew that was coming, right?
-xXx-

"You're sure you want to do this?" Temari couldn't keep the worry from her voice. She'd just got her baby brother back. Now she could lose him all over again.

"He did the same for me," Gaara said simply, giving Temari a small smile before she closed the trunk of the Suna diplomatic car. He had plenty of time to get to his destination in the timeline that he and Sasuke had agreed to. He had given the driver had specific instructions on where to stop the car and let him out, near a subway tunnel where there were no street cameras or ATMs nearby to record his movements. No one would ever know he had left the Sunan embassy.

As the car left, the guards simply nodded at the driver, glancing in the windows to see an apparently empty vehicle, likely off to get some fancy food for the new delegates who had arrived the previous day.

When they reached the appointed destination, the driver popped the trunk when the street was clear and Gaara quickly slipped out, heading immediately down the steps to the subway, his cap covering his hair and tattoo to pass unnoticed, blending in seamlessly with the crowds in his black jeans and black T-shirt.

Gaara took the subway to the stop two blocks from Sasuke's apartment building. He walked one block in the opposite direction until he came to the narrow alley that held a relatively concealed entrance to the storm sewer that connected to the underground parking garage where he needed to go.

He checked his watch. There was still more than an hour. Plenty of time to get into the air duct that would lead him to the elevator shaft access he’d found on the twentieth floor and get into position. He just hoped Sasuke was able to make Naruto stick to the plan.

Twenty minutes later, he was sitting atop the elevator car in total darkness. Knowing he was likely to be there for several hours, he had thought ahead and brought a flashlight and a deck of cards. The top of the elevator car was dirty, but it was far from the worst place he's had to lay in wait for a target.

The sound of Sasuke entering the elevator and telling Naruto he'd be right back was enough warning for Gaara to grab his cards and grip the handle of the hatch at the top of the elevator as it begins its rapid descent to the lobby. Gaara held himself still, though he was curious as to what Sasuke was doing leaving the apartment. This wasn't part of the plan, but they did sometimes need to come down to pick up food if the lobby was too crowded to let one of the officers or Juugo bring it up. Given that it was around lunch time, Gaara assumed that was what was happening.

But when the elevator almost immediately began its ascent back up to the penthouse, Gaara went on alert. If Sasuke had gone to pick up the food, it would have taken several minutes for him to pay the guy. Gaara slid the monitoring device from his pocket, somehow not feeling relieved that none of the
motion sensors had gone off.

Something wasn't right.

The elevator came to a stop at the top floor, and Gaara heard the doors sliding open and the sound of something being smashed.

When he heard the sound of a gunshot, he knew they were fucked. Not waiting for a signal, he flung the hatch door at the top of the elevator open and drew his gun, jumping down and landing into a crouch as he took in the scene in front of him.

Tobi was just entering the living room, clearly having come in from the balcony where two men with guns drawn were following him through the smashed glass door. But the immediate threat that Gaara instantly focused on was the police man from the lobby, who was reaching for a concealed gun holstered around his calf. Naruto clearly hadn't noticed him going for a second gun, as the blond was currently facing the other direction, his eyes locked on Tobi.

Gaara was already in motion, cursing that he couldn't just shoot the guy. Mizuki was standing right in front of the video camera. If Gaara shot a cop in the back on camera, even a dirty cop, things would difficult for him and Naruto. They both had lives to look forward to now, and he wasn't going to blow it. Unfortunately, that meant he had to stop the shot without killing the policeman. Not even looking at the three killers coming in from the balcony, Gaara launched himself at Mizuki, grabbing the man's gun hand just as the shot went off, sending it off target just enough that it only grazed Naruto's arm rather than killing him, but it made Naruto drop the gun, sending it sliding across the floor.

"Fuck!" Naruto cursed as the bullet passed through the muscle of his forearm, ripping through the white, long-sleeved T-shirt he'd been wearing. Blood rapidly soaked through the fabric and dripping onto his jeans. He saw the two thugs on the balcony raise their guns and fire. He rolled to the side, reaching behind him for the knife sheathed at his back. A bullet lodged in the floor where his head had been, but Naruto didn't bother to look as he rolled into a crouch and threw the knife in one fluid motion, watching as it embedded into Dosu's throat. The man dropped to his knees, his hands gripping uselessly at the weapon embedded in his neck. Naruto didn't waste time looking at him again, knowing the man would be dead within seconds since the blade had pierced his jugular.

Unfortunately, he no longer had a weapon, and Zaku still had a gun. Naruto had seen Gaara take down Mizuki from the corner of his eye, and wondered what his friend was doing that Zaku was still standing. He knew Gaara had a gun. And Zaku wasn't a cop.

A muffled cry from behind him caught his attention, and turned to see Gaara holding Mizuki by the throat, a crimson patch spreading on the shocked police officer's chest. Zaku had evidently shot Mizuki instead of shooting at Naruto, which made no sense at all. Gaara's face looked strangely taut. Naruto wondered why he wasn't shooting, as the redhead still had his gun gripped in his hand.

He glanced over to where Tobi was walking steadily towards him, not even glancing at the other men in the room. His eyes were locked on Naruto's with an intensity that was more than a little unsettling.

Naruto felt the old, embedded fear begin to build, and his mind wavered.

"You pose more danger to him than he does to you." Sasuke's words replayed in Naruto's head. He drew a breath. He had to stay present. He could do this. He finally had Tobi where he wanted him, and he would not fuck this up. It didn't matter how the psycho had gotten into the penthouse, there
would be no escape for him. It wasn't like all the other times where Tobi had been the one deciding the location and calling the shots. Even if he had arrived a little ahead of schedule, Naruto was still the one in control.

"Fucking shoot already!" Naruto shouted over his shoulder to Gaara as he saw Zaku raising his gun again, pointing right at Gaara. To Naruto's horror, Gaara fell to his knees, allowing Mizuki's body to hit the ground in front of him. It was then that Naruto saw that the bullet had evidently passed through Mizuki's body and hit Gaara in the chest as well. Clearly there was no loyalty lost between these temporary teammates if Zaku was so willing to kill Mizuki just to get a shot at Gaara.

"No!" Naruto's scream flooded the room. Zaku was smirking as he walked further into the living room, leveling the gun to point at Gaara's head. At Naruto's scream, he glanced over, shocked to see the blond coming right at him full speed and unarmed.

Sasuke dialed Kakashi as soon as the elevator doors closed behind him.

"What the hell is happening?!!" Sasuke shouted into the phone, slamming his fist against the polished steel wall of the elevator at the seemingly snail-like pace of its ascent. Panic twisted his stomach.

"Someone barred the door to the roof from the inside," Kakashi growled. "I can't get back in. Where are you? Why the fuck was Naruto left alone!"

Sasuke swallowed around the guilt. He shouldn't have been so confident that Tobi would play by his rules. The guy had avoided capture for almost two decades… it was arrogant of Sasuke to assume this would go off without a hitch. "Mizuki hadn't started his shift yet. The lobby was packed and Juugo said it wasn't safe to send someone up with lunch, so I went down to get it. I was only going to be gone for five fucking minutes!"

Kakashi could hear the panic in the councilman's voice, and knew that Sasuke was beating himself up enough already. There was no point in piling on. He just prayed Naruto was handling it.

The wind at the top of the building was loud, muffling the sounds of the city below. Kakashi heard a sharp sound. He froze, waiting to see if the sound would be repeated.

"What should we -" Sasuke began, but Kakashi cut him off.

"Quiet. I think I heard…" his voice trailed off as he listened intently. He could hear Sasuke's harsh breathing in the phone, and it was a credit to the dark-haired man's restraint that he wasn't screaming for Kakashi to finish his sentence.

Two more sharp noises had Kakashi cursing. "Fuck. Shots. I'm pretty sure I just heard at least three gunshots."

Kakashi heard what sounded like a fist hitting metal, and more cursing from Sasuke.

"What floor are you on?" the silver-haired policeman asked, pulling his gun out and shooting the lock on the roof door. He lunged against it again, but the door didn't budge. It appeared to be barricaded rather than simply locked.

"Thirty-six," Sasuke bit out. "I'm going to take the fire stairs to the penthouse."

"It will set off the alarm. They'll know you're coming," Kakashi said, already knowing what Sasuke's response would be.
"I don't give a fuck."

The line cut off, and Kakashi assumed Sasuke had reached the thirty-ninth floor and was on his way up to the stairway. He hurled himself one more time against the door, but it was hopeless. The only damage he was doing was to his own shoulders.

Holstering his gun, he turned and walked to the edge of the roof. He looked down, seeing the forty-story drop and the tiny cars far, far below him.

Closer - and much, much smaller - was Sasuke's balcony. It didn't protrude out very far from the overhang of the roof. It seemed an impossibly small target to hit, especially compared to the four hundred foot drop waiting for him if the wind caught him and swung him out too far.

"Goddam, motherfucking... I knew I should have gone out and gotten laid last night," Kakashi muttered to himself, wishing he had time to have a smoke before he did something this completely insane. But instead, he simply lowered himself off the edge of the roof, dangled precariously by his fingertips as a strong gust of wind caught him, then let go.

"No!" Naruto's scream flooded the room. Zaku was smirking as he walked further into the living room, leveling the gun to point at Gaara's head. At Naruto's scream, he glanced over, shocked to see the blond coming right at him full speed and unarmed.

Taken by surprise by the apparently suicidal attack, Zaku froze for a moment, firing one second too late. That was all the time Naruto needed before he struck Zaku hard in the temple with the edge of his open hand strike, quickly bringing his other fist hard against the other man's throat. The shot went wild, passing by Naruto's shoulder harmlessly as Orochimaru's ex-underling crumpled, his eyes wide in shock before his body hit the ground, unmoving. Naruto was glad that Orochimaru had never been a player in hard core crime. His underlings wouldn't have lasted a day under Nagato.

Without waiting to see if the man was dead, he spun around to grab Zaku's fallen gun but another hand was there before him. Naruto slowly straightened to see Tobi leveling the gun directly at him, far enough away that he was out of Naruto's reach.

The blond shot a panicked glance over towards Gaara, seeing blood pooled there and not knowing how much of it was Gaara's and how much was Mizuki's. He knew that every second that ticked by, Gaara's chances for survival went down. He cursed his friend's insistence that he come back and help. Gaara had a future now... and a family. Naruto was not going to let him throw it all away for him.

"Oh, did you lose your little pet?" Tobi's voice was mocking, and Naruto felt his anger surge. It was strange how there was no fear this time. "You seem surprised to see me here, Naruto-kun."

"Maybe not as surprised as you might think," Naruto said, forcing his voice to sound calm. His arm was hurting like a bitch, but it wasn't life-threatening. The bullet had passed through the muscle, not hitting a bone and not staying embedded. He needed to ignore it and stay in the present. Tobi fed on fear. His victim's fear made him feel powerful. Naruto was done giving this man power over him. "I see you got my message with the little press conference Sasuke and I had."

Tobi's eyes narrowed, and Naruto could feel the anger rising in the man. It humanized him, giving Naruto further control over his own emotions. This was not a monster. He was just a man. Older than Naruto. Slower. Not used to having his prey fight back.

"How did you manage to get into the building?" Naruto asked almost casually while he looked for
even the tiniest sign that Tobi was dropping his guard.

"The front door. In fact, you have greeted me almost every day since you got back from your little trip. Quite disappointing, actually. I had thought you would be smarter than that. Yet another example of how you've failed me as an apprentice," Tobi said, circling around him.

Naruto turned slowly, keeping them face-to-face and never letting the killer get behind him. Tobi smiled, shifting the gun to his other hand as he reached into his jacket pocket to pull out the bladed glove that had filled Naruto's childhood nightmares for years and sliding it on. He slowly articulated each finger, the blades flashing in the sunlight. Naruto stood completely still, momentarily unable to tear his gaze away from the hypnotic sight. The scent of blood was heavy in the room, and his eyes were trapped by the sight of the man walking towards him.

*Sounds of screaming... his mother.... so much blood*

He heard a soft groan, a voice he knew.

*Gaara.*

It brought the present back to him. If he was going to save Gaara, he had to get Tobi to get rid of the gun. Tobi wouldn't hesitate like Zaku had... he was far too experienced a killer for that. Naruto had a flash of insight as he realized that Tobi's weakness was the same as his... an unstable mind.

"I thought you didn't want to use guns. In the note you left me, you said how blades were so much better. What... afraid I'll win if you fight me on your own?" Naruto infused every ounce of mocking scorn he could into his words. Sasuke had said that Tobi likely had a bit of a god complex. He wouldn't like to be viewed as cowardly or inferior. "I guess that's why you attack helpless civilians. They're all you can handle."

Tobi's eyes narrowed, and Naruto closed his mind to the pain in his arm and the scent of his own blood. He kept his eyes trained on Tobi's, avoiding looking at the weapon he wore on his hand. The blades that had killed his parents and countless others.

"You *need to know* what you are being punished for, Naruto. Before I kill you. I want you to *know* that it is all your fault," Tobi hissed, the calm, rational look in his eyes making Naruto's skin crawl. "Your parents' deaths, your lover, your best friend," Tobi glanced over at Gaara, sneering. "It's all your fault."

Naruto tried not to let the panic overtake him as no further sounds came from Gaara. He didn't dare look over to see if his friend was still breathing. Getting himself killed wouldn't help anything.

"Maybe. But you're still the coward hiding behind a gun. Because you know I'm better than you. The people I kill are trained killers... they are predators, like me. You only kill weak, pathetic victims that can't fight back. You're a coward. You don't impress anyone anymore. The press isn't even talking about you. All they care about is me. They cared more about me when I was eight. Even at eight I was better than you. So go ahead and shoot me. It's the only way you could ever win. But of course, everyone will *know* that you had to use a gun. They'll *know* that you were too scared to do it right."

Naruto could see the point at which Tobi's control snapped. Throwing the gun to the side, Tobi lunged at Naruto with almost preternatural speed. But Naruto was just as fast, reaching down and grabbing the knife out of Dosu's body, blocking Tobi's gloved hand. But he didn't have time to ready the knife before Tobi was on him, the pale hand viced around Naruto's throat. Tobi's elbow dug into the wound on Naruto's arm, trying to force him to drop the knife.
Naruto grit his teeth at the pain, unable to make any sound with the hand closed around his throat. He couldn't breathe, and if he didn't act fast lack of oxygen would sap his strength long before he lost consciousness. He struggled, but Tobi knew how to hold a victim down once he had them in his grasp. Naruto found himself trapped in the eyes of the killer again, the pain and fear eroding the hold he had on his mind as he felt himself slipping again into the past.

"Get up, Naruto," a low voice came from across the room, and Naruto focused on the sound with every ounce of strength he had.

"Pussy. Fight!" Gaara couldn't move enough to reach the gun to help his friend, but he could help keep him anchored in the present. He was having trouble breathing, and guessed that the bullet must have caught the edge of one of his lungs. He would have cursed if he'd had the breath to spare.

Ignoring the pain in his arm and the lack of oxygen fogging his mind, Naruto focused only on the sound of Gaara's voice. He rotated the knife in his hand and thrust down with as much strength as the awkward angle would allow, digging the blade into Tobi's shoulder.

He hadn't been able to get a lot of power in the blow, but it was enough to force Tobi to let up on his grip around his throat. Naruto immediately kicked him off, sending the older man stumbling backwards with a grunt of pain while Naruto sucked in air.

He rolled to his feet immediately, shaking the spots from his eyes that lack of oxygen had caused, readying his knife. Being older and slightly slower, Tobi was not as quick to recover his position and Naruto didn't waste the opportunity. He lunged in, going straight for the jugular. But Tobi saw it coming and blocked his initial strike with his bladed hand before slashing back, catching Naruto across the chest and opening up fresh gashes in his white shirt that rapidly bled red. Naruto ignored them and countered, this time aiming low. The blow struck, cutting into Tobi's muscled thigh with his knife. He put as much force as he could into the thrust, trying to ignore the pain in his right arm. Tobi's eyes went wide as he felt the blade slide in and he gave a sharp growl of pain, stumbling back again.

"Fuck!" Naruto cursed, realizing his weakened arm hadn't been able to put enough force to hit the femoral artery he was aiming for. He had definitely done some damage. But he had to hurry this up if Gaara was going to have any chance. How many minutes since he'd been shot? One? Two?

He fought the panic back, knowing he had to focus. If he didn't end this in the next minute, Gaara could die. If he lost the battle with Tobi, Sasuke would be at the serial killer's mercy when he returned to the apartment. He refused to acknowledge the possibility that Mizuki could have killed Sasuke on his way up.

He could not lose.

Naruto dodged the clawed glove that swept towards his face. Oddly, his panic over Gaara's condition and Sasuke's safety made him completely numb to exactly who it was that he was fighting. In the scheme of things, Gaara's and Sasuke's lives mattered more to him than Tobi's death. It would have been an earthshaking revelation to Naruto if his mind had time to process it. Instead, he was focused on trying to find the smallest opening to take Tobi down without wasting any more time.

The fire alarm suddenly sounded, the light above the emergency exit flashing as the annoyingly loud buzzing pulsed. Tobi glanced at the door for a split second, and Naruto lunged with all his strength, knocking the man to the floor and pinning him down, one hand locked around the wrist below the gloved hand, the other pressing his knife into the flesh at Tobi's throat.

"I win," Naruto said, his face only inches above Tobi's. "And I would love to savor this more, but
my friend needs a hospital."

Tobi sneered. "You wouldn't dare kill me. We're on camera," he lied, hoping Naruto wasn't aware
that he'd had the video feeds cut by Mizuki this morning. "How would it look for the heroic little boy
from Konoha to be seen slitting a man's throat in cold blood on tape?"

"Slit his throat," came Gaara's vote.

Naruto's wrist flexed, and a line of blood appeared beneath the blade. The pressure was not enough
to sever the jugular.

"You're still armed, and my friend is bleeding out. There's not a jury on earth that would convict
me," Naruto's voice lacked the confidence the words implied, and Tobi immediately pressed his
advantage.

"Then do it," Tobi taunted, straining his neck up so that the blade pressed deeper into his flesh,
causing a fresh ribbon of blood to slide down his neck. His eyes burned with an unsettling look of
pleasure that made Naruto's skin crawl. "Or better yet, use my glove and do it with that."

Naruto's didn't care if he went to jail if it meant saving Gaara. He sat up, not releasing his grip on
Tobi's wrist, and flipped his grip on the knife so it would be easier to plunge directly into the man's
heart rather than slitting his throat. "I have no interest in being like you. But I will save my friend."
He raised his arm for the killing blow. Tobi's eyes gleamed in almost triumph as Naruto's hand began
to descend.

The door to the fire stairs slammed open at the same time there was a thud and a curse from the
balcony. Naruto didn't release his grip on Tobi's shoulders as he plunged the knife down, but he
diverted the blow at the last instant, piercing the shoulder of the man's killing arm rather than his
heart. The blade went all the way through the joint and embedded into the floor, pinning him there.
Tobi's scream of pain was drowned out by Sasuke's panicked shout.

"Naruto! Behind you!" Naruto barely had time to process the fact that it was Sasuke's voice he'd
heard before two shots sounded almost simultaneously. Naruto looked up to see Kakashi on his
knees on the balcony, gun drawn. Behind him, Sasuke's gun was also out. And Mizuki was laying
on the floor, two additional bullets in his body that would ensure he didn't rise again, the gun he had
been about to shoot Naruto with falling uselessly to the floor beside him where he lay behind Gaara.

Sasuke had felt his heart freeze in his chest when he'd walked in to see Naruto covered in blood, on
the floor on top of Tobi with Mizuki – still laying on the floor – gun raised about to shoot him. There
would have been no way for Naruto to dodge the shot without letting Tobi up. Maybe he could have
rolled and had Tobi take the shot, but it would have been tight. And it was clear that neither Naruto
nor Gaara had seen the slight movement of the cop as he'd picked up the weapon lying next to him.

Sasuke paused to check the cop's body, verifying that he was in fact dead before kicking the gun
aside, just in case.

He realized that Naruto and Kakashi were speaking, and forced himself to focus on what they were
saying as he ran across the room to Naruto, keeping his gun trained on Tobi. He wasn't sure why
Naruto hadn't killed the man yet, but the tight grip that Naruto had on the gloved arm made him
wonder how in control Naruto really was.

"Call an ambulance! Gaara's been shot," Naruto shouted to Kakashi. He glanced over to where
Sasuke stood in clear line of sight of the security camera. "And you just shot a fucking cop on video!
"Don't look away from me!" Tobi tried to lunge up, but Naruto still held his gloved hand tightly. The knife that had been embedded in his shoulder slipped and angled in. Tobi screamed again as the blade cut through the muscles and ligaments of his shoulder.

Sasuke cautiously drew closer, careful to stay out of reach of the man on the floor. He noticed that Tobi's eyes never wavered from Naruto's face, despite the fact that two other people now had guns trained at his head. The eerie intensity of the sociopath's gaze was more than a little unnerving, and Sasuke was acutely aware that he stood in the presence of a prolific serial killer.

"I called down when I heard the shots from the roof. Paramedics should be arriving shortly. And Mizuki disabled the security cameras before he came up here, though it won't matter. This was clearly a justified shooting." Kakashi pulled himself to his feet and limped over to them, keeping his gun trained on Tobi.

"How hurt are you?" Sasuke's voice was strained as he fought to keep from pulling Naruto away from the killer pinned beneath him.

"I'm ok," Naruto's voice was tightly controlled as he glanced back over towards Gaara, worry clear on his face.

Sasuke saw the flash of anger in Tobi's eyes at his words, but the man had ceased to struggle. He looked down, noticing that there was a large pool of blood forming beneath them. "That's a lot of blood..." Sasuke hoped like hell it wasn't Naruto's, but the way the blond's shirt and jeans were soaked he knew at least some of it was.

"Are you going to finish it?" Sasuke asked quietly, clearly accepting whatever Naruto's choice was on the matter of Tobi's death, regardless of what Jiraiya had asked them to do.

Naruto thought briefly about literally twisting the knife in further, but in the end, Gaara mattered more.

"He's bleeding out," Naruto stated, his voice toneless as he struggled to stand, placing his foot on Tobi's wrist to keep his gloved hand still. He looked down into the eyes of the man who had killed his parents... the man who was slowly dying at his feet. Mutual awareness of the killer's impending death flashed between them. It was over. "I guess nicked his femoral artery after all. There's no need to bother."

Sasuke's arm went around his waist to stabilize him. Naruto realized he must have lost more blood than he'd realized, but there wasn't time to worry about it then. Both men ignored the anger that seared out of Tobi's eyes still lividly following Naruto's movements.

"If you try to sit up and go after him, I'll be more than happy to put a bullet in your head," Kakashi said almost conversationally. But he didn't have to worry, as Toby was clearly not able to move anymore.

"Naruto..." Sasuke could hardly get any words to come out at the sheer relief he felt that Naruto was alive. When he'd walked in and seen Mizuki about to shoot, he felt like time had stopped. Nothing else had mattered except saving Naruto. Their eyes locked for a brief moment, but there wasn't time to say more.

"I need to check on Gaara," Naruto quickly crossed to his friend, dropping to his knees and putting his fingers to his best friend's pale throat. He closed his eyes in relief when he felt the faint pulse
fluttering there. "He's alive."

Gaara's eyes opened briefly before closing again.

Kakashi nodded his eyes showing relief but they did not waver from the sight of his gun targeting directly between Tobi's eyes, which were already glazed as he seemed to be drifting in and out of consciousness.

Naruto looked briefly over at where his nemesis lay, silent and unmoving.

The sounds of sirens floated up from the street below. Naruto turned to the elevator, which was still standing open. Kakashi's phone went off, and he answered it, keeping his attention tight on Tobi.

"Paramedics are on their way up," he said after he hung up.

"We can bring Gaara down the emergency exit and meet them by the other elevators," Sasuke said, unsure how to read his lover's total emotional shutdown. He knew that - if that were Itachi laying there bleeding - he'd be in about the same condition as Naruto was. "Let's go."

Naruto's worried eyes met Sasuke's briefly, and gratitude flashed through them. He nodded, scooping his unconscious friend up in his arms and carrying him to the stairs despite his own injuries.

Gaara's eyes opened briefly, and he raised an eyebrow at the sight of Naruto carrying him. "You're bleeding on me."

Naruto snickered. "You're bleeding on me, too. Suck it up."

Sasuke was on the phone, telling the paramedics to meet them on the floor below by the fire entrance.

"You're too much of a coward to kill me," Tobi's weak voice floated over to them from where he was laying on the floor.

Naruto shot a glance over his shoulder, not breaking stride. "I already killed you. You're just not dead yet."

Sasuke opened the door for Naruto as the blond carried Gaara out, neither staying to watch the final moments of life fading from the man who had tortured Naruto through most of his life, blue eyes instead locked on the pale face of his best friend.

The door closed behind them, and Kakashi crouched down, taking his weight off his broken ankle. He was careful to stay out of reach of the man slowly bleeding to death on the floor. He could see the man's breathing becoming shallow. It wouldn't be much longer. He thought about all the people who had tried to find this man. All the lives Tobi had destroyed.

Some criminals could be rehabilitated. There was no doubt in Kakashi's mind that this was not one of them.

"It's funny. You spent so much time trying to shape Naruto into what you wanted him to be. So fixated on him. And yet..." Kakashi sent a seemingly casual glance to where the blond had exited, knowing he would do everything in his power to take care of Gaara. The redhead was in good hands. Kakashi's job was to make sure there were no loose ends when it came to Tobi. "... when it came down to it, he really didn't give a fuck about you at all. It doesn't matter to him whether you live or die. He's found a new life for himself. In a few years, he won't even think about you anymore."
A weak anger flared in the killer's eyes. Kakashi smiled. "I suppose I should call down and let them
know that you're here. Too bad with my broken ankle I can't carry you."

Kakashi dropped his phone on the floor before kneeling on it. The sound of breaking plastic seemed
unnaturally loud in the stillness of the room.

"Oh, dear. It looks like my phone is broken. I guess there's no way to call for help after all." Keeping
his gun level on the man, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette. He placed it between
his lips, then reached for his lighter. "Well, I know CSI will be here soon enough. I'm sure someone
will see to your body then."

He lit the cigarette and took a drag before putting the lighter back in his pocket. He blew out a stream
of smoke, assuming that - given the state of utter destruction that Sasuke's apartment was in - a little
smoke wouldn't matter. His eyes never left the face of the man lying on the floor.

Fifteen minutes later when the paramedics arrived, Tobi was pronounced dead on the scene. The
face of the infamous killer was frozen in an expression of pain and frustration.

Sasuke helped Naruto get Gaara down the stairs just as the paramedics arrived...

"He's been shot in the chest," Naruto said, his voice shaking slightly. The one of the EMTs reached
out to take Gaara from Naruto's death grip while the other set up the gurney to lay him in. Naruto's
hands tightened around his friend, despite the pain his weakened arm was causing him.

Sasuke gently set his hand over Naruto's wrist. "Let them take him. We'll go with him, but you need
to let them treat him now."

Gaara's eyes didn't open this time, but he breathed out, "It's ok."

Naruto swallowed, then nodded, walking with the medic over to the gurney and laying Gaara gently
in the bed. One of the medics immediately went to work, cutting Gaara's shirt open and putting a
pressure bandage on.

"You need to be treated as well," the other medic said, taking in Naruto's bleeding arm and blood-
soaked clothing. "There are two other ambulances arriving shortly. Let's all go down together."

Naruto didn't really listen to what the man was saying, focused only on following Gaara into the
elevator. He stood by the side of the narrow bed Gaara was resting in, careful to stay out of the way
of the EMTs as they worked.

All Sasuke could process was that Naruto was alive. Tobi was dead, and Naruto was alive and
finally it was over. He glanced at where the paramedics were working feverishly over Gaara. They'd
already got an IV into him, and were radioing down stats of his vitals, presumably to the hospital so
they'd be able to get the right surgeon and operating room ready for their arrival.

But there was a steady pulse, and Gaara was breathing, and the blood loss seemed to have stabilized.
He looked back over at Naruto. The blond's face was still blank, his eyes not shifting from his
friend's form as he watched them work. Sasuke brushed along Naruto's arm, wanting to reassure
him. The tan hand reached out and grasped Sasuke's like a vice.

"It's going to be ok. The hospital they're taking him to is very good. You got him out in time;"
Naruto turned to look at him. He blinked once. "I don't know what I would have done if either of
you died. Sasuke, I -"

He cut off as the elevator doors opened at the lobby and the medics immediately wheeled Gaara out to the waiting ambulance. Naruto tried to follow Gaara into the ambulance, but the paramedic stopped him, insisting he had to be treated.

Sasuke heard the discussion, and quickly intervened. "Naruto, they need to get him there quickly. If you pass out or bleed on him, it will only slow things down."

Giving one last glance at Gaara, Naruto sighed and nodded.

The medic shot Sasuke a grateful glance as he quickly closed the door to the ambulance and they sped off. Another two ambulances had arrived on the scene, and one crew immediately headed up to the penthouse along with an apparent fleet of police officers with the letters CSI printed out across their backs. Sasuke told them that Kakashi was up in the penthouse with a broken ankle and four dead bodies.

Naruto's bloodied appearance drew the attention of an EMT who hurried over.

"Can you tell me what your injuries are?" the man asked, signaling his partner while he reached to examine Naruto's arm.

Naruto took a reflexive step back. Sasuke sighed, placing his hand in the small of Naruto's back to stop his retreat, only mildly amused that medics scared his lover more than assassins.

"If you let them take you to the hospital in the ambulance, you'll get to see Gaara sooner," Sasuke rationalized.

Naruto narrowed his eyes at the blatant bribery, but he knew the man was right. Reluctantly, he allowed himself to be led into the ambulance with Sasuke. Their ambulance followed Gaara's as the EMT assessed Naruto's wounds.

"Can you call Kakashi and ask him to call Sakura? She'll want to be at the hospital, too. Not to mention she's probably been climbing the walls in protective custody," Naruto gave a weak smile, then winced at the medic cut his shirt off revealing the long gashes across his torso. They might scar but they weren't life threatening. Sasuke's eyes didn't leave his lover's body as he made the call, watching as Naruto's wounds were cleaned and treated or at least bandaged enough to slow the bleeding until they got to the hospital. The bullet wound would require stitches but most of the gashes could be held with suture tapes.

As soon as they pulled into the emergency room bay and the doors were opened, Naruto got out and walked over to the desk in the emergency room, ignoring the shout of the EMT that he still needed to get his gunshot wound treated. He closed his mind to the antiseptic smell that always pervaded hospitals. He wasn't leaving until he knew Gaara was ok.

"Gaara Sabaku was just brought here with a gunshot wound to the chest. Can I find out his status or what room he's in?" Naruto asked, ignoring the way people in the waiting room were staring at his bloodied, shirtless appearance. Sasuke stayed a discreet distance behind the blond, already having a pretty good idea of how this was going to play out.

"Who are you and why are you bleeding all over my floor instead of being treated in one of the examination rooms?" the young blond woman asked him tartly, shooting the hapless EMT a glare as though he should have had better control over his patient.

"I'm… I'm Gaara's brother," Naruto stated, leaving no room for discussion. He was sure he could
come up with some identification that would prove that if needed. One way or the other. "I just want
to know if Gaara made it ok to the hospital."

The woman's face softened slightly, but then she glared. "He's been taken to the OR. He's in good
hands. You can go to the waiting room AFTER you've let someone treat your wounds. Come with
me. I'll get you stitched up, and you can shower so you don't scare everyone away. I'll let them know
he has family here."

Naruto hesitated.

"Look, he will be in surgery for at least a couple of hours. You can't go into the OR while he's in
surgery, so you might as well get yourself seen to before you pass out."

He reluctantly agreed, and allowed himself be dragged into an examination room, ignoring the sound
of Sasuke chuckling behind him. It occurred to him that Gaara's brother and sister would also want to
be notified. As if reading his thoughts, Sasuke pulled out his phone to call the Sunan embassy.

The nurse stitched him efficiently, using the local anesthetic that Sasuke informed her was safe for
Naruto to have. In less than twenty minutes, Naruto was stitched and clean and wearing a spare pair
of scrubs that the nurse was kind enough to provide for him.

She then finally let them go to the waiting room to wait for news on Gaara.

Feeling the effects of the fight, Naruto went and sat down on one of the hard, plastic chairs that the
room was lined with, his eyes fixed on the door to the hallway that led to the operating room where
Gaara was undergoing surgery. Sasuke joined him on the adjacent chair, trying not to think about
how Naruto looked in his scrubs. Hoping they'd be able to keep them for later.

"I never thought I'd willingly sit in a hospital while fully conscious," the blond murmured.

Sasuke didn't say anything, knowing there really was nothing that would help.

"I told him not to come. I told him I could handle it…"

"I know you took out the Russians, but this was different. If he hadn't been there, do you really think
you would have been able to take on three men with guns, plus Tobi?" Sasuke asked.

Naruto thought about the moment Gaara had arrived. His expression clearly said the answer was 'no'.

"And do you think Gaara would handle it any better than you if you'd died because he wasn't there
to help?" Sasuke persisted.

Naruto closed his eyes, knowing that answer, too, visualizing New York City in burning ruins.

"So have some faith in him. His pulse was strong. The bleeding was under control. This is a good
hospital. It will be ok."

Naruto blew out a shaky breath, and shot a grateful glance at Sasuke. "Thanks." Naruto bumped his
shoulder against his lover's.

"Hn." Sasuke nudged Naruto's leg with his.

"What's the situation?" Itachi's voice drew their attention as he walked over with Shisui beside him.
Sasuke stood to greet them, and Itachi's eyes quickly scanned over his little brother looking for any
sign of injury.
"It's done," Sasuke said.

"Tobi?" Itachi asked.

"Dead."

"So your plan worked," Shisui stated, a bit of pride coloring his voice.

Sasuke snorted, and Itachi raised an eyebrow. "Barely. Tobi somehow managed to come in through the balcony of a forty story building, before Mizuki even started his shift while I was down in the lobby picking up lunch. He came in with two of Orochimaru's former henchmen while Mizuki disabled the elevator. Naruto had to face them alone. Gaara came in after the first shots were fired but…." Sasuke broke off, not wanting to think about what could have happened in those first few second when it was four on one and Naruto wasn't expecting them from that point of entry. To his utter horror, he found his hands starting to shake.

Ignoring Uchiha protocol, Itachi put his hand on Sasuke's black, spiky hair. "No plan is perfect. You did well, little brother."

Sasuke let out a shaky breath, allowing Itachi to pull him to his chest, breathing in the familiar scent of the one constant source of strength he'd had since his parents had been killed.

After a moment, they both stepped back, masks firmly in place.

"So what went wrong?" Itachi asked, seeing that Sasuke was back in control of himself.

"I can answer that," Kakashi said, coming in on crutches, his ankle in a cast. "Tobi had been getting frustrated that he couldn't get at Naruto when he was in Sasuke's building. So he found out who lived directly below, killed him, and took his place."

Sasuke frowned. He didn't do a lot of socializing with his neighbors, so he had no idea who lived below him. "But the security was checking all new tenants, and monitoring everyone who came and exited the building. They would notice if someone new came in."

"Not if they didn't ever see the man's face. The unit directly below yours belonged to a Mr. Maruboshi. We found his body stuffed in his refrigerator. Dead for probably about two weeks."

Naruto blinked. The old man. That's what Tobi had meant. No one really looked that closely at the face of someone so instantly recognizable by his walker and shawl and…. hat. Hunching over a walker would be an easy way to disguise any difference in stature. And it wasn't uncommon for the man to be in the lobby, simply watching people go by. It had been a perfect opportunity for Tobi. The old man had been killed before they'd really cracked down on security in the building. Tobi had been able to walk right in and set up base in Sasuke's back yard. Naruto shivered as he realized that the person who had been watching him when he'd spoken with Kiba in the lobby had been Tobi. Five feet away from him, and he hadn't recognized him.

"No wonder he didn't need to use the air ducts or the elevator shaft," Naruto muttered.

"What happened to Raidou and Genma?" Sasuke asked. "They were missing from the lobby when Mizuki took the elevator."

"Mr. Maruboshi had left some cookies for the nice officers keeping the building safe," Kakashi said on a sigh. "We found them unconscious in the bathroom. They either had some sort of laxative and Mizuki was waiting there to take them out, or they passed out and Mizuki dragged them into the bathroom, unnoticed in all the commotion. It turns out that someone set a listing in the paper that
there were cheap sublets available, first come, first serve today only."

Sasuke blinked. "They created a distraction from the guards so Mizuki could go up."

Kakashi nodded tersely. "Our only advantage was that we knew Mizuki was working for Tobi, hoping to get an in with Konan. Tobi thought we were unaware, so he didn't expect us to be so alarmed when Mizuki went up to the penthouse. He thought that would buy him more time, not less."

Kakashi looked over to where Naruto was sitting, still watching the doors which led to the operating room where Gaara was undergoing surgery. "Is Naruto ok?"


Kakashi nodded. All things considered, they'd come out extremely lucky in the end.

A female voice came from the waiting room entrance.

"I'm looking for Gaara Sabaku and Naruto Namikaze. Do you know where -?" The pink-haired woman cut off when she caught sight of Sasuke and Kakashi. Her eyes continued searching until they found a familiar blond head of hair. "Naruto! Oh, my god, are you alright? Where's Gaara?"

Naruto looked up to see Sakura rushing over to him. He was only slightly surprised to see Kiba beside her, given that the tattooed man was likely her first call once she was finally allowed to use her phone. He stood as she drew near and winced when she firmly grabbed his shoulders, looking him over for injury. Though he knew she had been safer than the rest of them, it was still a relief for him to see she her standing there, unharmed.

"Gaara was shot in the chest. It didn't hit his heart, but it got a lung. He's in surgery. That's all I know," Naruto's voice was low and heavy with worry. They exchanged a look of shared pain before Sakura hugged him tightly.

"What about…" she trailed off, looking over her shoulder at the large group of people in the room just as Kiba drew near.

"Tobi's dead," Naruto stated emotionlessly, his eyes locking with Kiba's over Sakura's shoulder. He saw the surprise and something like admiration on the tattooed man's face before relief set in with a feral grin.

Sakura nodded her head against his shoulder. "Ok. I'm going to go in and see if they'll let me assist on Gaara's surgery, or at least observe." Her voice was slightly shaky, but she held herself together.

She pulled back and Naruto looked at her blankly. "But... you don't work at this hospital?"

Sakura scoffed at him. "I'm his regular physician. They will at least allow me access to his charts."

With that, she walked through the doors that Naruto had been staring at for the past hour, disappearing behind them.

Naruto glanced over to where Sasuke was talking with his brother and cousin, along with several police officers that had come to talk with Kakashi.

Kiba sat down next to him on the bench. "So… you've been in the news a lot."

Naruto snickered at the man's somewhat appalled tone. Kiba clearly shared Naruto's aversion to publicity, and was a bit surprised at all the media attention Naruto had been tolerating. "Yeah. I'm…"
turning over a new leaf, I guess." Naruto's eyes drifted over to where Sasuke was talking with Kakashi, appearing cool and aloof as always. As though feeling his stare, Sasuke's eyes turned to his, their gazes locking for a moment before Sasuke continued on with his conversation.

Kiba grinned. "I can see you have some motivation there, it's just hard to believe someone like you is giving it up. You gonna miss it?"

"Miss what?" Naruto asked, his eyes still resting on Sasuke.

"The freedom… being able to decide on your own about right and wrong without suffocating under someone else's rules." Kiba paused, waiting to see if the blond was listening to him before he cracked a smile. "Not having to pay your parking tickets."

Naruto laughed, finally meeting Kiba's curious gaze, and missing the dark eyes that had shifted to him at the sound of his laughter. "Nah. I think I'm good. Plus I never learned to drive so… I don't have to worry about parking tickets." He thought a bit about the man that he'd met in the Japanese embassy, and what Sasuke had told him about him. "Besides, just because I have a better cover story now doesn't mean everything's changed."

Kiba looked at him assessingly, then stood. "Well, I have no idea how long Sakura will be playing doctor with Gaara, and the room is getting a little too law abiding for me," he glanced over to where another several policemen had joined Kakashi and Itachi. "I think I'm going to head out. The offer still stands, though."

Naruto snorted in amusement, but raised his eyebrows at Kiba's final comment.

"If you need anything. Just give me a call."

Naruto nodded at him, and Kiba turned and left just as Temari and Kankuro arrived.

The surgery lasted for three hours, but in the end they were told Gaara was going to be fine. Naruto went to see him in the recovery room along with Temari and Kankuro, but Gaara was still under heavy sedation. The hospital let them stay for a short while, then kicked them all out telling them that they could come back during visiting hours the following day.

Naruto and Sasuke were allowed to briefly return to Sasuke's apartment to get some clothes. They stood in the taped-off entryway while the officer escorting them told them where they were allowed to walk. The bodies had been removed, but the markings on the floor of where they had lay were still visible. The bullet holes in the walls were marked and flagged… the shattered glass of the balcony door scattered haphazardly throughout the room.

"I guess we sort of trashed your place, huh?"

Sasuke smirked. "Yeah. Well, you can't have your friends over again any time soon."

"Pfft," Naruto snickered, but sobered as his gaze went to the spot where Tobi's blood still stained the floor. "Yeah, we don't have to worry about that, I guess."

"You ok?"

"Yeah," Naruto shot him a grin. "Actually… I'm… strangely good. I didn't really think it would ever really be over."

Sasuke decided not to say anything about that, knowing that the implication was that Naruto didn't
think he would survive. But he had, and that was all that mattered now.

They walked carefully over to the bedroom to get their clothes. Sasuke pulled out a suitcase, since it would be at least a week before the apartment was released by the police and even longer before all the cleaning and repairs would be completed to make the place livable again.

"So, where are we going to stay?" Naruto asked, suddenly realizing that they were temporarily homeless.

"I booked us a suite at the Waldorf for the next month. We'll see how long it takes to get the place ready for us to move back in."

Us. It was a strangely solid word to Naruto. More real than it had been a day ago. With Tobi dead, the final barrier for them to actually spend a life together was gone.

Naruto looked at Sasuke, drinking in the fact that he really, honestly, could allow himself to have this man now. Fully and forever. Without damaging or destroying him.

"Dobe, if you keep looking at me like that, I'm going to make our police escort very annoyed by locking him out of this room for the next six hours," Sasuke's voice was low and husky.

Naruto swallowed, but couldn't shift his eyes away. "How far away is the hotel?"

Sasuke groaned slightly, cupping Naruto's face in his palms and pulling their mouths together. He brushed his lips over Naruto's gently, then pressed more forcefully. Naruto's hands immediately fist ed in the black hair as their mouths opened and they drew each other in.

The sound of a throat being cleared behind them made them remember where they were. "Not close enough, but we don't have much choice," Sasuke breathed out against Naruto's mouth, wishing they had gone directly to the hotel rather than coming here. He could always buy more clothes.

"Then let's get out of here," Naruto zipped the suitcase closed and slinging it over his shoulder. They reached the hotel, telling the bellhop to just leave the suitcases in the entryway as Sasuke stuffed some bills into the surprised man's hand and shoved him out the door.

He had just closed the door when Naruto's arms circled around his waist, pulling him back against him. Sasuke could feel Naruto's breath on his neck, the warm air causing the small hairs there to shift slightly, sending goosebumps over his skin. There was no mistaking the feeling of the hard body against him, and Sasuke let his head fall back against Naruto's shoulder, a dark smile on his handsome face.

He glanced down at the bandages on his lover's arm, hoping this was the last time he'd see Naruto injured, and grateful that it hadn't been worse than a simple bullet graze and a few shallow gashes. The thought of what could have happened, what he would have done if he'd burst in to find Naruto on the floor instead of standing…

"Shhh," Naruto said as he felt Sasuke's body tense in his arms. "It's over. It's ok."

Sasuke allowed the embrace as Naruto made small circles on the flat of Sasuke's stomach with the palm of his hand. The politician smirked as the circles slowly began slipping lower and lower. He could feel the blood pool into his arousal in anticipation of the final destination of that hand.

When Naruto's fingers at last slid over the zippered front of Sasuke's pants, he was already fully hard
and groaned into the touch. He could feel the hard length of Naruto's own erection pressed against his back.

He turned, pulling Naruto to him and crushing their mouths together. He let out a frustrated growl at the fact that they were still both fully clothed. He didn't want anything between them right now. Without breaking the kiss, he quickly unbuttoned his shirt, tossing it aside.

Naruto's shirt required more effort since he had to pull it over his head, taking care not to disturb the bandages. They had to slow down, but neither minded. There was no rush for once. They had the rest of their lives in front of them now.

Sasuke watched hungrily as Naruto undid the drawstring of his pants, reminding himself to save the scrubs for future use as the blond pulled them down and kicked them aside. As usual, he wore nothing beneath. Naruto quirked an eyebrow at him and stepped back unabashed by his nudity and obvious arousal. "Your turn."

Sasuke's fingers slowly closed over the button on his pants, enjoying the fact that he had Naruto's utter and complete attention. He noticed the blond swallow and lick his lips as Sasuke leisurely undid the fastening and pulled down his zipper.

"You're such a fucking tease." Naruto's eyes had darkened considerably, and were already glazed with lust.

"Do you want to come help?" Sasuke asked, a slight note of taunting entering his voice.

"No," Naruto's voice was rough, his eyes locked on where Sasuke's hands rested on the fabric of his pants. "I'm good just watching."

"Hn," Sasuke never broke eye contact as he gave his pants a slight push down over his hips so they pooled on the floor at his feet. Usually fastidious about leaving a mess, he ignored the garment and simply stepped out of it.

Sasuke walked slowly toward Naruto, aware that his own cock was in a matching state of arousal with his lover's as it hung heavily between his legs. He walked right past Naruto and headed for the bed, sending a smirk over his shoulder at the dilated eyes that followed his every movement. "You coming? Or are you just going to watch."

Sasuke lay down on his back, eyes locked on Naruto's, his pale hand closing over his own cock and slowly stroking himself. The intensity of Naruto's gaze feeding his lust, making him groan slightly.

Naruto gave Sasuke a crooked grin that made him wish the blond was in reach. "I guess it depends on the show that you're putting on. It looks pretty good so far."

Sasuke could see the beads of precum forming on the tip of Naruto's shaft, and began to lose patience. "Looking isn't mutually exclusive to touching, idiot. Get on the bed."

Naruto smirked at the command and walked unhurriedly to join his lover. "You make me so hard when you're bossy like that," Naruto murmured as he crawled over his lover.

"I make you hard anyway," Sasuke stated arrogantly.

"Hmmm," Naruto agreed, closing his hand over Sasuke's nearly purple erection. "Looks like that train runs both ways."

"Shut up and put your mouth to better use," Sasuke didn't give Naruto a chance to respond to the
familiar taunt before he'd fused their lips together.

Finally, there was nothing between them. They took pleasure in exploring it over and over throughout the long night in the large hotel bed.

Naruto stood at the wrought iron gate at the driveway of the large estate. He looked directly into the security camera, making sure his face was clearly visible. He would not hide or try to do this by stealth. He had far too much respect for the owner of the property to do so.

He didn't bother to push the intercom button on the security panel outside the gate. Knowing Konan, the cameras were constantly monitored. He was not surprised when he heard the sound of the electronic lock on the gate being released and it slowly opened.

"Come to the front entrance," an anonymous male voice spoke to him from the intercom.

He nodded, and walked up the long, curved driveway to the house. He felt a strange buzzing in his pocket, and pulled out the cell phone that Sasuke had insisted he take with him. He was pretty sure that his boyfriend had set it up with just about every monitoring device known to man, but he went along with it. There was no longer any reason to stay off the radar.

It was an odd feeling, but not an unwelcome one.

Call me as soon as you're done

Sasuke hadn't been happy that Naruto had wanted to come alone, but he'd known Konan for longer than he'd known Sasuke. Konan deserved to say her piece, without Sasuke losing his temper at her.

He reached the large, arched door and knocked. The door opened within seconds and a man Naruto didn't recognize answered, ushering him inside, then disappeared discreetly after assuring him that Konan would be down momentarily.

Naruto leaned back against the wall while he waited, an old habit of being in unfamiliar territory filled with people who knew how to dispose of inconvenient guests.

He sensed her presence a moment before she appeared in the doorway nearest him.

"Naruto," she said, her voice careful, neither hostile nor welcoming.

He smiled, glad to see her regardless of the circumstances. Even if he had been closest to Nagato, he had always cared for her. "Konan. I missed you."

Her eyes softened at the obvious truth to that statement. "I can see I was correct in my estimation of your ability to finally tie up loose ends from your past."

Naruto gave her a crooked smile. "Yeah. It was a bit bumpy, but we got it taken care of."

She nodded. "I read about his death in the papers. You're quite the hero now."

Something about her tone made it clear that was not entirely a compliment. Naruto tilted his head on his side, considering her expression. "You know most of it was lies."

She looked at him a moment, then gave a short nod. "I was told someone from the Jinchuuriki program set Nagato up. I started looking into it, and found out your roommate was one of them."

Naruto's eyes widened as he took in what she was saying. "You were the one. You were hunting
Jinchuurikis. Because you thought they were responsible for taking down the Akatsuki."

The beautiful woman didn't deny it.

"But they weren't the ones who did it," Naruto said, and Konan's eyes narrowed.

"You know who it was."

"Yes. And so did Nagato. It was Kakuzu."

Konan looked thoughtful for a moment, then slowly nodded. "Because Nagato cut off his sex trade activities."

Naruto nodded, remembering when he'd told Nagato about his friendship with Gaara, and told him that if he didn't shut Kakuzu down, then Naruto would. He'd expected Nagato to be angry if not shoot him outright, but he wouldn't betray the man who'd taken him in when he could have had him killed years ago. But Nagato had heard him out, and in the end agreed. It was a piece of his business that he had never been fully comfortable about anyway, even though the money was good. Konan hadn't objected when they'd brought it to her, and Kakuzu had been furious.

He'd tried to go it alone, but had quickly found himself in jail. Obviously, he'd cut the first deal he was offered, selling out anyone of value. Nagato had figured it out only after the raid had started, too late to do anything about it.

"Did Nagato know you were helping the police?" Konan asked, her voice calm.

Naruto nodded. "I told him about how I'd met Gaara. You've heard his story on the news by now, I'm sure."

Konan nodded, and Naruto continued. "Gaara and I took out a lot of child trafficking rings. But we didn't interfere with our own organizations. I told Nagato directly what I wanted to do. I didn't betray him. Or you."

Konan was silent for a moment, taking it in. But if he hadn't made a mistake in trusting Naruto, she didn't understand why he had done what he had at the end. "But then why did he… why would he…"

Naruto bit his lip, hating to see her so distraught. He hadn't had a chance to talk to her after the Akatsuki raid. He had been injured then taken to the hospital after his episode in the holding cell, and by the time he'd gotten out she was gone without a trace.

"He was dying," Naruto said softly. "He told me he was going to tell you, but…"

Konan's eyes snapped to his. "What?"

"He found out the week before that he had pancreatic cancer. He had less than two months left. When the raid came, he didn't want to spend the rest of his time in jail. He figured if he were dead, people could lay the blame at his feet and at least he'd be able to help that way. This way, everyone would say he was the only leader of the Akatsuki. They'd be able to leave you out of it without having to worry about Nagato suffering the consequences for it."

He could see Konan's throat working as she tried to fight back her emotions. "That… idiot. Why didn't he tell me?" Her voice was soft, but heavy with pain.
Naruto felt his own throat close at the anguish in her voice and face. "I told him to. But he knew there was no hope of treatment, and he wanted the time he had left with you to be… normal."

Konan let out a soft huff, but her face softened in understanding. If she had known Nagato was dying, all she would have done was start her grieving sooner. At least this way she'd had two more weeks of happiness. But it still wasn't enough.

"Have you visited his grave?" he asked her. She paused as she struggled to get herself under control.

"Yes. Would you like to go to see him together?"

Naruto nodded. It was the least he could do to say goodbye.

He thought of his own parents. He had never visited their graves. His birthday was coming up in a month. He wondered if Sasuke would be willing to fly back to Japan with him.

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**Two weeks later**

Naruto and Sasuke were laying on the couch in their hotel suite, enjoying a rare moment away from Sasuke's job, police investigators, and reporters. The media had decided to proclaim Naruto a hero again, and Kakashi and Sasuke were held up as shining examples of brave public officials. Sasuke's poll numbers had never been higher, which amused both him and Naruto significantly.

Naruto had just finished his fifth therapy session with Shikamaru, and was feeling mentally worn out, but encouraged. The paperwork clearing up his official dual-citizen status with Japan and the US was still in process, but both governments were making it as easy as possible. They'd been granted access to Sasuke's apartment again, but cleanup and repairs were going to take at least another two weeks.

"Your birthday is coming up in less than a month," Sasuke began, cautiously. He knew this was sensitive ground for Naruto, but he wanted to help him really move on from his past. He could feel Naruto's body tense at his words, and he tightened his arms around him slightly.

"Gaara. That asshole. Giving away all my secrets," Naruto grumbled, but there was no heat in it. Gaara had recovered well from his surgery and was already back in Suna, starting his new life. But he would be back in New York in two months as part of a diplomatic venture, and Naruto was looking forward to seeing him.

Sasuke rolled his eyes. "Well, given that we had to put your actual date of birth on the dozens of forms you've been filling out over the past week, there's no surprise that I know your birthday."

Naruto tilted his head back to shoot Sasuke a skeptical glance.

"But of course, Gaara did tell me," he conceded.

Naruto grunted at the confirmation.

"So. What do you want to do?"

Naruto was silent for so long that Sasuke wondered if maybe it was too soon to have brought it up. Finally, he responded.

"I'd like to go to Japan. I never… I never saw my parents' grave."
Sasuke drew a breath, thinking of all the complications going back to Japan would pose for him, even for a short visit. Still, there was no question that they would go. Naruto needed closure. It was well past time.

"Hn. Here I was thinking I could take you out to a club and get you drunk and have my way with you." He was only half joking, but Naruto was glad Sasuke wasn't making a big deal out of this. It was going to be hard enough as it was. "So, how long do you want to stay there?"

Naruto thought about all the time Sasuke had already taken off his work for him. He didn't need to spend much time there. "Just three days maybe. I don't have anyone I remember from that time. The guy from the embassy said there is some paperwork I need to clear up about my father's estate, but most of that can be done from here."

Sasuke nodded. He could handle three days back in Japan. He'd promised himself that the next time he returned it would be to finally get to the bottom of his parents' death, but this was more important. He could be patient on the other.

"I'll arrange things. We can stay at my family's estate."

Naruto looked at him. "Are you sure? I know that things are… not settled for you."

Sasuke kissed the side of Naruto's neck. "It's fine. I'll have Shisui set it up."

Naruto closed his eyes, relaxing into his lover's embrace. "Let me talk with Shisui about it. He's going to be staying with Itachi, I would guess. I might as well get used to handling things on his side."

Sasuke froze, remembering when Naruto had said he would be taking over Shisui's role but not really having taken him seriously at the time. There were formal rituals for becoming the guard of the head of the clan. He wondered if Naruto knew that.

"Talk to him. See what he wants to do. I'll let the two of you work it out."

Naruto nodded, letting his hand slide up along Sasuke's hip suggestively. Sasuke shifted his legs wider apart, feeling his body's immediate response to his lover's touch. Before they could take it further, there was a knock on the door before Itachi used the key card they'd given him to enter.

He looked at the two men on the sofa and his eyes softened slightly before he remembered himself and his Uchiha mask was back in place.

"So Naruto. What did you do today?" Itachi asked the seemingly innocent question, immediately making Sasuke tense. Itachi never asked pointless questions.

Sasuke had to work late at the office, and had assumed that Naruto had been home or maybe at the gym after his appointment with Shikamaru. He suddenly had the feeling that was not the case.

Naruto's silence made the worry climb slightly. "Naruto?"

Itachi held out his hand and examined his nails for a moment. "I got a call from Sing Sing today. It seems that - somehow - two maximum security prisoners escaped today. No one can figure out how it happened. None of the security cameras picked anything up. There was evidently a series of small, precisely timed detonations in the locks of their cells and the cameras along the escape route."

Sasuke breathed in, noticing for the first time a very subtle trace of smoke in his lover's hair. It could have been from a restaurant. Or a cab. Or a bomb.
"Hmmm. Sounds like a pretty high class job. Any leads?" Naruto asked, his conversational tone not fooling either of the other men in the room.

Itachi looked at him, amusement showing in his eyes. "As a matter of fact, no. Aren't you going to ask who it was that escaped?"

"Ah, yes?" Naruto blinked, the picture of innocence.

Sasuke snorted. "No leads and no evidence?"

"None. Though Hidan and Deidara will have a hard time hiding out if they're going to stay in the city," Itachi said.

Naruto cleared his throat. "Well, I mean, this is just speculation, of course, but I would say that if a criminal is smart enough to get out of some place like Sing Sing, then probably they're smart enough to leave the country as soon as possible. Especially if they have job opportunities elsewhere."

Itachi looked at him thoughtfully for a moment. "Interestingly, Konan's estate was put up for sale two days ago."

"Is that so? That's quite a coincidence," Naruto said grinning at Itachi.

Sasuke sat up, turning Naruto to face him. "But your address is staying here. Right?"

Naruto looked at him steadily. "Yes. I already have a new job. I don't plan on going back to my old one."

"Hn," Sasuke said, leaning back down. "Now is probably as good a time as any to let you know that Gaara gave me the receiver for the tracking device he put in you. Just for future reference."

Naruto's eyes widened, and Itachi shocked them both by laughing out loud.

FIN.

Note: Thank you for having patience to make it all the way through this gigantic fic... and sorry it was more than double the length than I had expected. I learned a lot as a writer about how many plots I can (reasonably) collide within one fic. This one had 5. I think 3 is probably better. Lessons learned LOL.

Special thanks to my betas and sanity checkers BriEva and Mykko_Chon. This would have gone much more slowly without their help!

I am trying to decide whether to do a sequel (at some later point, since I need a break from this genre) or an epilogue. Would love to know what you're interested in.

Epilogue would be: Naruto's recover - visit to his parents' grave, learning to drive, going to a club, settling into life (probably getting an Uchiha tattoo as he takes over from Shisui, which Sasuke will have some reaction to LOL)

Sequel would be all of the above (stretched out over more time, with more detail) but would take on Sasuke finding who killed his parents, flashbacks that show Gaara and Naruto's childhood, more info on Itachi and Shisui's past. Maybe Konan and Yahiko. Maybe Kiba and Hinata. I need to re-think the plot I had originally thought through because it was just as complicated as this one and I don't want another 34 chapter fic LOL. At some point Naruto would probably be captured and tortured by
Yakuza. Will not likely involve Naruto and Sasuke breaking up or cheating, since I don't think anything could tear them apart at this point.

Thoughts/interests?

Now I can finally get back to only working on 2 fics at a time, which is I think my ideal limit. Healing the Broken (canon angst) and Daily Ramen (AU humor) will be my focus until one of them finishes up, then I will start posting something else. - Kizu

Works inspired by this one: Disgrace by BriEva, Decieving by BriEva

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!