Summary

Sasori is a sadistic apothecary who just bought a new slave. His past experience with slaves was...not the best but this one is proving to be better than the others. She is aware of what kind of monster he is and is trying her best to remain alive.

Notes

There is a lot of toxicity in this story. Confused emotions and whatnot. I do not condone any of this toxicity but...this is just a fictional story.
There is also an ongoing soundtrack to this story you can give a listen to here:
https://soundcloud.com/alexkenway/sets/bed-of-the-scorpion
Sasori found his seat next to his grandmother. It was high up and overlooked the crowd that was still filing in. He frowned, watching as the day's selection was paraded out on to the stage. There was a quiet murmur throughout the amphitheater as everyone got into their seats for the auction. The auction started as it normally did, with the auctioneer going over the usual rules and customs for this sort of event. Without further adieu, he began with the first slave.

"Do you think you can keep this one for more than a month?" Chiyo sniffed as Sasori leaned forward to get a better look.

"Stop bidding on such weaklings and we won't have to do this monthly," he countered as he rolled his eyes. His grandmother huffed softly, shaking her head. Sasori ignored what she said next as the merchandise was announced. Most of the pieces this month were irritatingly average. The auction had barely started and he was already losing interest. He fanned himself, starting to think of the next project he wanted to work on once his grandmother let him go for the day. He doubted any of these weaklings could stand what he needed in a slave. He zoned out for the next couple of slaves that were announced, only returning back to the realm of the living when he felt his grandmother elbow him in the side to at least pay attention to the last one.

"And last, this little lady is from a far-off land," the auctioneer announced as a young woman with long black hair was brought onto the stage. "She can move like a snake and charm them too," he called out to the crowd, shoving her forward. The shackles make a soft noise as she stumbled forward. A basket was placed in front of her. "Go on," the auctioneer gave her a sharp stab in the back, "give them a dance."

She looked around at the crowd and frowned. After a couple of seconds, she heard the auctioneer threaten her quietly and then she closed her eyes with a heavy breath. She looked at the basket in front of her just as a song started to play. A king cobra started to come up, waving its body to the music. She watched it closely, mimicking its movements with her hips and waist. She created a dance on the spot, using the movements of the snake to form the choreography. She moved around the stage swiftly, keeping the dance simple and short, and finishing it off with a kiss on the snake's head.

Sasori watched intently, slowly feeling a grin pull at his lips. He could easily see she moved beautifully, despite the short display. And if she worked with snakes, it was promising to think that she knew her way around poisons.

“A belly dancer,” Chiyo hummed.

"We'll start her bidding at 3,000," the auctioneer announced.

"20,000," Sasori called out. The stadium let out a hushed gasp. He had just knocked out all of the lower-class competition.

"Sasori!" Chiyo gasped next to him.

"I want her," he hissed softly. "And I shall have her," he grinned.

"30,000," someone else called out.

"50,000," Sasori countered.
The girl sighed, picking up the snake and resting it on her shoulders as she listened to the numbers being shouted out for her. She looked at the auctioneer who smirked at her then looked back at the crowd, trying to find the faces of those who shouted their prices.

“50,000, Sasori?” Chiyo frowned.

“Hush, Grandmother,” Sasori growled. “We have the money and she will be mine.” Sasori grinned as two more people upped the price to 65,000 and then 80,000. He watched and waited for the auctioneer call the ‘once...twice.’ The crowd let out a hushed murmur. A few people glanced at him to see if he would speak up. He grinned, reveling in the tension before calling out once more.

“100,000!” The stadium was so silent that a pin drop would have been deafening.

No one else raised the price higher. No one dared to. After a couple of seconds, the auctioneer spoke. "Sold!” they grinned. "100,000."

"Well, you got her," Chiyo sighed.

The girl gasped quietly, feeling her heart begin to race. It had just hit her that she was sold as a slave. And judging by the lack of protest against his price, she could tell this was someone no one bothered to mess with. The auctioneer turned to her and smirked which only gave her a worse feeling about the situation.

She was ushered off of the stage and immediately greeted by a young man with dark-rimmed eyes and thick red hair. “Congratulations,” he said in a raspy voice. “My cousin rarely goes so all out for slaves.” The man, who looked to be about her age, nodded in the direction he started to walk in. “Follow me. You’ll be bathed and given new clothes.” His eyes landed on the snake. He frowned at it for a moment. “Do you want to keep him?” he asked softly as they continued down the hall.

"Can I?" she asked quietly. She did not want to part ways with it. She had only just met the snake, yet she could feel it was going to be the only familiar thing to her. He led her into the room she was to be bathed in, where two women were waiting for her.

“The snake stays with her,” the man instructed the women. They bowed low at his order. He nodded then turned to her with kinder eyes. “They will take care of you until my cousin comes down to retrieve you.” He paused, looking her over with a little sadness in his eyes. He opened his mouth for a moment before turning away silently and leaving.

Up in the stadium, Sasori stretched, a wide smile pulling at his lips. “I got what I wanted,” he grinned.

“Don’t kill this one so fast,” Chiyo reminded him sternly. “You just blew your entire monthly stipend.”

Sasori rolled his eyes as he turned away. “She looks to be worth it,” he said, starting towards the exit. He wanted to see his prize.

The two women worked quickly in undressing the girl and getting her into the bath. They had placed the snake on a nearby counter while they worked on her. They scrubbed her hard enough for her to wince.

"You’ve already been branded?” one of the women asked quietly, noticing the tattoo of three tomoe on the back of her shoulder.

"It...is not a brand," she said softly.
The two women shared a worried look with one another.

“It...might have to come off,” the other one said, biting her lip. Removing tattoos was a painful business.

Sasori stepped into the room. Spotting the girl and overhearing this conversation, he crossed over to them and moved the woman’s hand out of the way. He placed a delicate fingertip on the black ink. “No...she can keep it,” he said, a smirk still curling his mouth. The two women sank into low bows. Sasori’s fingers followed the curve of her neck before taking her jaw and pulling her head to look at him. “A daughter of the snake,” he whispered. “I didn’t know there were any of you left.”

She tried to hide the gasp that escaped when she felt him touch her and heard him speak. The heavy pit she felt in her stomach got heavier when she looked at the man who purchased her. She had to admit that she was a little surprised that he was a young, attractive man but there was something about him that was scarier than the idea of being bought by someone older. "There are not many of us," she said quietly. "We try not to make our scarce presence known.

The two women stepped away from the tub, signifying that they were done bathing her. One of them moved to grab the clothes that were set out for her and brought them over.

“You are a rare prize indeed,” Sasori said. He leaned in close to look at her eyes. The slit, snake-like pupils were something fascinating since they were so rare. The other of the two women walked over with the towel. Sasori stepped away, allowing the girl to get out of the tub and dry off but held his hand up before they could clothe her. “Leave,” he ordered the women. “Leave the clothes, I will dress her myself.” He waited for them to do as he ordered and leave. He stepped up to her and again lightly ran his fingertips over her skin. He dragged his fingers down her chest to her navel. “You have another tattoo,” he said, spotting a larger one of a snake on her hip that moved down to her thigh, almost touching her knee. “You are very proud of your snake heritage.”

She looked down at the floor and nodded, keeping her shaky breaths quiet and trying not to shudder too much as he dragged his fingers across her skin. "I am," she answered. She looked up for a second at the snake on the counter as it moved around, making its own coil and burying its head inside the coil. Even the serpent did not like the situation they were in. "It is a major part of my identity."

"Mmm," he hummed softly. He circled her, dragging his fingers across her lower stomach and up over her bare hip. "I suppose I could let you keep that identity for now." His voice lowered as his finger continued to move over her back and up her spine. He leaned in close to the back of her neck and stopped inches from it. "Eventually, you will have to leave the den of the snakes to lay in the bed of the scorpion."

She exhaled shakily, closing her eyes. She suppressed the shiver that threatened to run down her spine. She glanced at the snake again, hearing a soft hiss coming from inside the coil. "You wish to strip me of my identity..." she said quietly, keeping her sight on the snake. There was no way she was going to ever let that happen. It was all she knew. "It will not be easy."

"Oh, but I don't want easy," he said lowly, circling back around. He gripped her jaw and forced her to look at him. "It's no fun if you're submissive," he grinned. "I won't just take your identity..." he tightened his grip on her chin, "I'm going to destroy it and piece by piece make you all mine." He pulled away. "But not right away. As I said, you make keep it for now. Have your new little pet." He picked up the fine linen that made up her clothing and slowly started to wrap her in it. Dexterous fingers brushed her skin as they fastened the cloth and gold that made up her sparse outfit.
She groaned quietly as he fastened the tighter parts of it around her body. "You are letting me keep him," she hummed. He moved her in front of a mirror so she could look at herself. She frowned, feeling uncomfortable without her usual garments on. She watched the snake in the mirror, trying to find some sense of comfort with what she found familiar while she still had it.

"I am," he smirked, running his hand up her side, "for now." He watched her gaze. "Look at me," he growled softly, digging his nails into her side. He smirked, watching her gaze flicker from the snake to his eyes. "When I speak to you," he turned her face to his again, "you are to look at me." He stared into her eyes.

She looked into his eyes, trying not to flinch at his gaze and nodded slightly. "Yes," she said. She pulled away gently to bow. "Thank you for allowing me to keep him."

"You're welcome," he grinned, holding her gaze. They stayed there for a moment before he pulled away. "Since he is your only belonging, gather him and let's go." He turned and walked to the door. "You will tell me more about yourself once we are alone," he turned to watch her pick up the snake and wrap him around her shoulders. The head of the creature rested on her head. He gave her a sultry look as he took her in. "In another life...you could have been a queen with your beauty," he smirked wickedly. "But I won't let you go to waste."

Her brow furrowed slightly as he turned to leave. She tried not to frown too hard as she started following him. She got a feel for what kind of person he was by what he told her in their short conversation. She knew she needed to watch her facial expressions around him, knowing full well he was the kind to hurt people.

As they walked down the corridor, he unraveled a long golden chain. He looked at her over his shoulder and reached back, indicating for her to put her hand in his. As soon as she did, he clasped one end of the chain to her and slipped the other over his own wrist. They continued down to a cluster of slaves, gathered around a platform. As soon as Sasori stepped into the blazing sun, they snapped to attention and kowtowed around the platform.

"Next to me," he said, tugging the chair of the platform as he sat down on it. The other slaves silently picked him up and started walking.

She stood on the side of the platform, squinting a little as her eyes adjusted to the sunlight. Once the slaves carrying the platform started moving, she followed, keeping up with it easily. The snake on her head rested lower on her shoulders. She tried not to look at the people they passed, petting the snake's head gently.

Sasori smiled at passersby, greeting them as they called out their hellos.

"Ah, Lord Sasori, congratulations on your bid!" an older woman said on the opposite side of his new purchase. Sasori gave her a fond smile but the wickedness still flashed in his eyes.

"Thank you, Koharu," he nodded. "I take it your granddaughter is doing better?"

"Oh, yes, your tonics never fail!" Koharu smiled, bowing slightly.

The girl's brow furrowed as she listened to the conversation. 'Tonics?' she thought. 'This man actually helps people?' She glanced up at him, seeing the way he smiled at this other woman. It was completely different from the way he looked at her earlier. It almost sent a chill down her spine just how easily he could switch in front of a crowd.

Sasori gave Koharu another smile and then gave the signal to continue on. He glanced down at his
new slave, noticing her mild displeasure. He smirked, yanking her chain gently. "We're almost there," he said as the group of slaves started to ascend grand stairs.

She looked up at the mansion as they moved up the stairs. If she had not been brought as a slave, she might have actually appreciated the architecture. Once they reached the top, the slaves carrying Sasori lowered him, remaining in their bow as he stepped off of the platform. She looked around the mansion, taking in the fact that this was going to be her new home.

Sasori watched her reaction, a small smirk pulling at his lips. He tugged the chain slightly as he walked into the open and airy structure. "This is mine and Lady Chiyo's home," he told her as he turned the corner to walk down a corridor lined with flowing white linen.

Other slaves bowed low as Sasori passed, giving their greetings. They kept their eyes fixed to the limestone floors until he had passed. Only then did their eyes flicker up to give Sasori's newest plaything a sorrowful look. Unlike on the street, he paid them no mind, keeping his head lifted and straightforward.

"Everyone but you is owned by my grandmother," he smirked, turning once more and pulling her into a large room with a high domed ceiling. "You are entirely mine. Anything I say overrules Chiyo," his voice dropped low again and his smirk widened as he turned to push her against the wall. He tilted her chin up with his fingertip, their faces inches apart. He looked into her eyes again, dragging the pad of his thumb over her bottom lip.

Her breath hitched and her heart started to race again. Looking into his eyes made her uncomfortable and she could not back away from him since he had her pinned. The snake around her moved lower, sliding to the floor and coiling at her feet. She breathed heavily through her nose for a second before speaking. "You told me...once we are alone, I must tell you about myself...what do you want to know?"

"Glad you remembered," he smirked as he pulled away. He slid his end of their chain off first then took her hand. "Why don't we start with your name." He slipped the chain off of her hand and slowly coiled the chain back up. He walked to a desk near them, placing the chain down in its neat coil.

She breathed a little easier now that he was not so close to her. She swallowed a lump in her throat before speaking. "My name is Azumi," she answered, watching him linger by the desk for a moment.

"Azumi," he repeated softly. "What a kind name," he smirked, looking at her from the corner of his eye. He pulled open a small drawer then picked up two boxes. Without looking at her, he curled his finger towards her. "Continue," he ordered in an even tone as she walked to him. "Lift your leg," he instructed her before turning
on his foot. "I'll admit, I'm curious about how you came to be on that stage," he smirked. "But I am more interested in what you can do for me right now."

She stood in her spot, watching his back. "And what is it that you want me to do for you right now?" she asked, keeping her tone neutral. She tried not to show on her face or in her voice how scared and uncomfortable she was.

He looked back at her. "Come," he said, disappearing through another set of linen curtains. She followed him into the other room, looking around at it. "What did your family use the snakes for?" he asked her. "You seem to be quite comfortable around venomous snakes." He looked down at the king cobra that weaved between her legs. He sat down at a larger workbench. The whole room was lined with shelves that contained various bottles filled with dark liquids and plant matter. Across the room, a large distillery and various tools were set up on another workbench.

She did not think he would keep something like this so close to where he slept. It was a little sick, but it gave her a little more insight into what kind of person he was. "Other than as familiars," she started, "we used their venom for healing purposes." She looked down at the snake and then back at Sasori. "I am one of five people able to communicate with snakes."

"I knew I made the right choice," he hissed softly. Sasori's eyes flashed with excitement. "So, you've worked with poisons and medicines before?" he grinned. "Can I wager you've had plenty tested on you as well?" He did not bother to hide the delight in his tone. Again, he looked at the snake. "You must be very intelligent to have learned such a skill. Mmm," he hummed grinning, "but anyone with half a brain could tell you are smarter than most."

She resisted the urge to turn and leave when she saw how excited he was. "I have worked with them before, yes," she said. "And yes, I have had them tested on me. The skill to understand snakes is something that comes naturally to my father, brothers, and I."

Wickedness curled over Sasori's lips. "I knew you'd be perfect," he said as he stood up and pulled her close. "I want to test something now," he said excitedly, pulling out a vile as he held her forearm up. He opened the vile and made a small cut on her then dripped the liquid in it onto the thin line he made in her skin.

"Mm," she hummed uncomfortably as he cut her. Once she felt the liquid sink into the cut, she felt the painful burn and groaned. The burning sensation increased and she squeaked quietly. Sasori nearly moaned at her reaction. "Do you know what that was?" he asked, his voice slipping low. He capped the bottle and gently dabbed the small wound to clean it and wrapped it neatly with some silk. He watched her for any more visible signs of it taking effect.

"Snake venom?" she huffed, still feeling the burn in her arm. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes as she bit her lip in pain. However, just as quickly as the pain came, it started to go away. The cobra hissed softly, wrapping around her leg.

"The deadliest one in my collection," he grinned. "And you're hardly reacting to it." He stood up, wrapping a hand around her neck. Using his pointer finger and thumb, he pushed her head back and watched her eyes dilate then constrict. "You should be dead by now," he whispered, still smiling. "And yet your body is only showing signs of mild irritation," he crooned close to her ear. "You have an immunity to snake venom."

"Yes," she panted, the sensation in her arm easing just a little bit. "Snake venom has hardly any effect on me. And depending on what the sensation is, I can usually tell what snake the venom came from."
"Fascinating," Sasori almost giggled. "Oooh, do I have plans for you," he grinned. "But before I get carried away, I suppose I should show you where you'll sleep part-time," he said, letting go of her. "When we are working on things for the shop and clients, you'll sleep here," he said, walking back into his main room. He gestured to a daybed that was pressed to the end of his large one. "In all honesty, I hardly sleep so you'll have to get used to that. When we aren't working on a major project, you can sleep down in the slaves' quarters," he told her. "You'll know which room is yours. It's the only one with a red door and a scorpion on the front."

She looked at the daybed and nodded slightly. She herself did not sleep much but if his plans for her were along the lines of what he just did to her, she was going to treasure sleep whenever she could get it. "If I may ask," she started, looking at him, "what projects do you work on?"

Sasori smirked, sitting down on the daybed and crossed his legs. "I am the proprietor of an apothecary," he told her. "The best in this whole country," he grinned. "And I also make the deadliest poisons known to man on commission."

"I see," she hummed. The cobra slithered up her body, resting on her shoulders. Her hand immediately went to the snake's head, petting it gently. "The poisons..." she started, "do you use a lot of snake venom in them?"

"I like to keep it on hand," he hummed. "Since, I have certain clients that prefer its effects." He smirked at her, leaning his head on the back of his hand. "I do favor scorpion venom as a base if they do not give me any specific criteria though."

"Scorpion venom..." she hummed. "I am not familiar enough with scorpion venom," she said quietly. "We do not use it in our remedies and medicines since it is not as potent as snake venom."

"Not as potent?" he questioned. "Oh, no, my dear, you are mistaken." He shook his head. "When milked and refined, it can be just as severe and potent as snake venom," he corrected her.

"So, it needs to be worked on to be nearly as potent as snake venom," she said, shifting her weight to one hip and folding her arms. "Why go through the work? Would it not just be easier to use snake venom?"

Sasori huffed a little. "Yes, it needs refining but it works much better." He lifted his chin, watching attitude settle into her stance. "Snake venom can work too quickly and ruin the desired effect. And if you find the right type even unrefined it can be just as catastrophic of snake venom."

"Does scorpion venom even have different varieties like snake venom?" she asked. "Or is it the same boring old composition among all scorpions?"

"Excuse me?" Sasori's eye twitches. "None of the scorpion variants are common or boring," he hissed. "They are each unique and you will learn to respect them," he said, getting up and crossing to her. "In fact, tomorrow you will be testing out one on your very skin." He pulled her close and dug his nails into her hip. He dug them in deep enough to cause raised red lines to form on her skin.

Her breath hitched, feeling his nails dig into her. She figured immediately that she had struck a nerve. "I see..." she breathed, looking him in the eyes. "I apologize." She bowed slightly. "Clearly scorpions are special to you. I understand."

He looked into her eyes, the hand on her hip moved to grip her chin harshly. "I don't mind a challenge. Decent and intelligent conversation is hard to come by." He held her gaze.

She tried her hardest not to flinch under his gaze. "I was not a low commoner before this," she said.
"I do not mean to challenge you, but I am able to carry such conversations."

He smirked, watching her struggle for a solid minute before finally letting her free. He sat back down and waved for her to take a seat on the day bed. "Then I expect many interesting conversations from you." He leaned his chin on his hand again. "You're one of a kind so far and I intend on figuring out every skill you can offer me."

She sat down next to him just as he wanted, trying to keep a distance between them. "I may not be of much use to you beyond the venom," she said. The cobra followed her, loosely wrapping around her leg. "I do not know what skills you are looking for."

"You don't need to know," he smirked. "Just do as you're told and you might surprise yourself, noble girl." He looked down at the cobra then back up at her. "We won't be working on anything tonight so you may sleep in your own room tonight if you wish."

She nodded and stood up. The king cobra made its way up her body, wrapping itself around her waist and rested its head on her shoulder. "I hope everything I have told you about myself was sufficient," she said. She bowed, but the snake did not bow with her, it stood straight and hissed quietly.

"It was," Sasori said evenly. "For now." He glared at the snake for a moment before looking back to Azumi. "Make sure you get enough rest. You'll need your strength for tomorrow," he smirked as she rose from her bow. "You're dismissed."

She nodded and turned to leave, breathing easier once she was out of his room. She had no idea where the servants' quarters were but she was not going to dare ask him for directions. She walked down a corridor, hoping it would take her closer to where she needed to be. The cobra hissed quietly at her, making sure she knew exactly how he felt about the situation they were in.

Chiyo walked out of a room and passed Azumi. She looked over the girl and sighed a little. "He just sent you out here with no directions, didn't he," Chiyo said, stopping the girl in her tracks. Azumi jumped slightly when Chiyo spoke and she quickly turned around to bow to her. "Yes, my Lady," she said. "He only told me that it was a red door with a scorpion on it. But not where it was."

Chiyo sighed. "As I thought. Follow me," the woman said, turning around. "Tomorrow, if Sasori doesn’t keep you in his quarters, I’ll give you a tour of the house," she told Azumi as she turned down another hall and pushed open a door that led to a long hallway lined with more doors. "He’s terrible at actually keeping servants and when he does, he never remembers his basic manners."

She clicked her tongue, shaking her head. She walked down the hall all the way towards the end and stopped in front of a door on the left. Just as Sasori had described, the door was red and a scorpion was burned into the wood.

Azumi put her hand on the door to open it but then stopped herself and bowed to Chiyo again. "Thank you, Lady Chiyo," she said. The cobra lowered its head a little bit toward Chiyo.

Chiyo smiled kindly. "Don't let him kill you," she said softly as turned away.

Azumi furrowed her brow and frowned at the comment. 'That does not sound hopeful,' she thought as she pushed the door open and stepped inside. The cobra slithered off of her and moved about the room, trying to find a place he could feel most comfortable. He hissed quietly as she sat down on the bed. "I know I just met you, but you are the only one I can trust here. Do you have a name?"

The snake hissed at her again, coiling up at the foot of her bed. "Naga?" she smiled as she lay back
on the bed. "I like it."
Chapter 2

The sun was just barely peeking over the horizon, throwing long golden rays into the indigo sky when there was a knock on Azumi's door.

"Lord Sasori has summoned you," a man's voice called through the door. He knocked once more just to make sure he was heard. Naga lifted his head from his coil at the sound of the first knock. His attention shifted to Azumi when she moved in her bed. "I suggest you not make him wait. The young master is very impatient."

Azumi opened her eyes and sighed. "Of course," she mumbled to herself. "I would never assume such a man to be patient." She sat up and stretched then shared a look with Naga. "As much as I know you want to," she started, keeping her voice low, "you cannot bite him if he does anything to me." She stood up from the bed and got ready quickly, picking up the snake and heading out back to Sasori's room.

Sasori poked his head out of the back workshop attached to his room when he heard her come in. "You're here, finally," he huffed. "We have a large order for a batch of tonics that just came in and a special order for another client," he sighed, irritated. "I hate when Chiyo does favors," he growled, walking back into the workshop. "Aprons are on the wall," he said, sitting at the distillery workbench. The whole room had a thick aroma wafting through the air.

She nodded and stepped into the workshop, grabbing an apron and looking around. She noticed the batch of tonics and then focused on what he was doing. "What would you like me to do?" she asked him. She hoped that he had forgotten his threat of testing scorpion venom on her skin and if she did not challenge him, she would not have to hear another threat.

"Right now, I want you to make sure that doesn't boil over," he said, pointing to a beaker over a flame. "After we are done with this batch, I have something special for you." He looked over his shoulder, giving her a wicked smirk.

She tried not to look too concerned about whatever it was but she had to admit, she was scared about it. She stepped over to the beaker, watching it carefully to make sure it did not boil over, as he instructed. They spent the rest of the morning and the better part of the afternoon working on the batch and the client's special order.

Sasori sighed leaning back and running a hand through his hair. "Alright, we can let this sit for now before we bottle it later," he smirked at her. "You kept up well." He stood up and walked up to her. "I've never had another slave keep up so well on their first day. You really do know your stuff."

"Thank you," she said with a bow. "I have worked with compositions similar to this before. What I have done was not exactly the same as this but once you have mixed three or four compositions, you have mixed them all."

Sasori's eyes narrowed but his smirk remained. "Mmm, yes, you're right." He reached around her, pulling the strings of her apron. He pulled the apron over her head and tossed it onto a nearby chair. "Are you ready for your surprise?" he asked, gripping her hip harshly. He had not taken his eyes off of her the entire time. "It will be my gift to you."

Her breath hitched when he grabbed her and she figured this was hardly much of a real gift. She hesitated for a moment before nodding slightly.
He smirked, leading her over to a new table and picked her up to put her down on the edge of it. "If you have tattoos you must be good with pain," he smirked, tracing a finger up the snake on her thigh. "Am I right?"

She looked down at his finger as it traced her thigh then back up at him. "Yes," she said quietly, trying to hide her fear.

The grin on Sasori's face widened. "I want to test that." He looked her in the eyes. "Lay down." He pushed her down before she could do it herself. He waited until she was all the way down before turning and picking up ropes. He bound her hands first, then her feet.

"What?" she gasped as soon as she felt the rope. "What are you doing?" she asked. She felt him tie the rope tighter than necessary and let out a quiet whimper.

"It wouldn't be a surprise if I told you," he smirked, pressing his hand harshly into her chest to hold her down. "You'll love it." He walked over to one of the shelves and pulled down two jars. "We are going to make sure you and everyone around us know who you belong to now." He spooned some powder out of one jar into a dish and then poured a liquid over from the other. It let off a low hissing sound and a heavy scent curled up with a cloud of grey smoke. He picked up a paintbrush and sat back down next to her.

She smelled the mixture he made as soon as he brought it close and her eyes widened. She recognized it immediately as acid. "No," she whispered. She turned to look at him and her breath hitched when she made eye contact. The smirk on his face told her everything. She looked at the small dish he brought over and bit her lip, holding back the scream that wanted to escape.

Sasori pushed the fabric of her dress out of the way gently, exposing her thigh and hip on the opposite side of her snake tattoo. He smirked as he pressed a kiss to the spot.

"Oh, yes, this is going to be great," he grinned, swirling the brush in the mixture. "This will look amazing." He pressed his brush to her skin and started to paint.

She felt the first long stroke and flinched immediately. It took a couple of seconds for her to feel the burning sensation the mixture he painted with caused. "Ah-ha," she squeaked, trying not to scream. Her breath quickened when she felt the second long stroke.

"What a sweet sound," he smirked, continuing to paint. He blew on it softly, making the burning sensation stronger. He was slow with each stroke, drawing out how long the brush made contact with her skin. The mixture caused a little bit of smoke to rise off of her skin, filling Sasori's nose with the smell of her burning flesh.

She shut her eyes tight and bit her lip. The scream came out as more small squeaks. "Please," she gasped. She turned her face away from him, feeling tears well up in her eyes.

"Heh, oh no, my dear," he let a low laugh out, "we talked about this. You must look at me when you speak." He curved his brush up over her hip, following the bone. Again, he blew on it, watching her struggle to keep her body from buckling. "How does it feel?" he asked with an excited light in his eyes.

She exhaled heavily before turning back to face him. "Horrible," she groaned, biting her lip again. She looked down at the brush and where it was going. He made another long stroke, dragging over a line he already did and causing her to let out a small yelp.

"I could only imagine," he smirked. "But you are faring better than any of my other slaves have in the past. They've all passed out by this point." He leaned in as he started to go into more detail. He
made sure to add every little speck and line he knew would make this visually ornate and beautiful. Not to mention drag out more of her screams.

She let out another, slightly louder cry and curled her fists tight enough that her nails drew blood from her palms. She tried to look at what he was painting on her to see how much longer she would have to endure it but the tears that welled up in her eyes clouded her vision. She closed her eyes, letting them come out as she tilted her head back and exhaled heavily again.

Sasori’s lips parted slightly, letting out a pleased almost moan while watching her writhe in agony. When he finally put his brush and bowl down after a couple of hours, he sat back, marveling at his work. He looked her over as she still tensed up in pain. “You look amazing,” he said softly, predatorily. He turned away to grab a rag, another bowl, and two bottles. He sat back down and opened one bottle, pouring it out onto the rag. With zero warning, he pressed the rag onto the fresh burn and wiped.

The direct contact with the burn and dragging motion is what pushed her past her limit. She let out an actual scream in pain, letting more tears fall from her eyes.

Sasori grinned, feeling zero remorse for the pain he had put her in. “Relax,” he told her, “we’re almost done.” He chuckled, pouring the other liquid onto a new rag. He pressed the rag over the whole burn. It had an instant effect. First, it cooled the burn with an icy feeling then slowly a numbness crept in. “This is your reward for staying awake,” he said softly into her ear.

She inhaled sharply at the cooling sensation and then let it out in a slow exhale when she felt the numbness. She closed her eyes again, trying to relax. She did not even want to see what it was that he burned into her skin. Slowly, she opened her eyes and looked up at him, trying to quiet her breathing. She would have rather dealt with the scorpion venom than go through that.

"I'd say that wasn't so bad," he smirked, reaching down and bending her knee so her leg was up at a ninety-degree angle. "But as I said before, you're the only one who hasn't passed out from this." He wrapped a silk cloth around the newly numbed area. "Don't take that wrapping off until tomorrow. I don't feel like dealing with you if you get an infection."

"I will not," she said quietly. She did not want to take it off ever. She never wanted to see what he did to her, but she knew that he did it so it could be seen by everyone. She waited until he put her leg down before sitting up. Still tied up, she looked down at the silk and frowned. She closed her eyes again and took a deep breath. She would give herself time to cry about it later.

"I'll be kind and let you rest a bit," he smirked, smacking the silk wrapped hip. "My client that's coming is a regular," he explained. "So, I want you to pay attention to him," he told her just as another slave knocked on his bedroom door.

"Si-sir," they squeaked from the door.

They both looked in the direction of the door and Sasori sighed. “He must be here already,” he said. He looked at her and smirked before leaving the workshop to answer the bedroom door.

Azumi sat on the table, struggling to loosen the rope around her wrists and ankles because he tied them too tight. She wiped her face and listened to the conversation between Sasori and the client as they walked back to the workshop.

“It was a big order this time,” the client said.

“Nothing I could not handle,” Sasori told him.
The two men entered the room and Azumi swallowed a gasp.

"You got another one?" the man asked nonchalantly as he laid eyes on the tied up Azumi.

"Yes, and she's proving to be so much better than any of the other toys I've broken in the past," Sasori grinned, running his hand up her leg to her thigh. "Mhm," he smirked, before turning away. "Your order is over here," he said. "It's your usual: odorless and quick."

"Perfect," the client said. "Have you made anything new for me to try?"

“I can give you this,” Sasori said, picking up a bottle. “I only have two test versions of it.” He handed the bottle to the client. “It’s odorless, but has a very faint taste and it is meant for slow and agonizing deaths.”

Azumi furrowed her brow. It did not come at all as a surprise to her that he sold poisons to people. But the actual confirmation was very disheartening.

“Interesting...” the client hummed, looking the bottle over as he took it. “I shall give it a try,” he smirked.

"I expect a detailed report of how it goes," Sasori smiled.

"As I always do," the man said to Sasori. "Hidan!" he called.

Another man with silver hair came running into the room. "Yes, Lord Kakuzu," the silver-haired man said as he knelt down quickly.

"Carry these," he said, pointing to the boxes.

"There's...more than usual," Hidan said, glancing over to Azumi. "Whoooa, you branded her already, Lord Sasori!" he smirked. "Can I see it?" He walked over then gasped. "You're awake!"

Azumi gasped quietly, moving back slightly when Hidan got closer to her. “Yes, I am,” she said to him. “And I have already been made aware of how unusual that is.”

“You speak like a noble,” Hidan said.

“Not all of us are born into slavery,” she said, looking at his own branding on his chest, no doubt given by the man behind him.

Hidan huffed, backing away. "Yeah, whatever," he grumbled, picking up the boxes. "She's rude," he said to Sasori as he turned to leave.

Sasori smirked, looking at Azumi. "She's still adjusting," he almost cooed. He walked over and ran his fingers through her hair.

"Your payment," Kakuzu said, clearing his throat and holding up a plain wooden box. Sasori pointed to workbench behind Kakuzu, indicating for him to put it down there. "Will I see you tomorrow night at Oonoki's banquet?"

"Unfortunately," Sasori growled. The soothing strokes in Azumi’s hair suddenly turned into a nasty grip, scraping her scalp.

“Nng,” she grunted in pain.

Kakuzu nodded and then bowed. “Until tomorrow then,” he said. Sasori nodded back at him.
“Goodbye, Lord Sasori,” Hidan said as he bowed his head slightly and followed Kakuzu out of the room, leaving Azumi alone with Sasori again.

Sasori released her hair, slowly returning to stroking it. "I'm going to release you soon,” he told her. “And I'll show you how I want my bath run so you can do it for me in the future."

She did not want to like the feeling of her hair being stroked but she did. She almost leaned into his touch before she caught herself. “At what times do you like your bath to be run?” she asked.

"Typically, around seven thirty, but if I'm in the middle of a project, whenever I've finished." He sat back down, smirking as he noticed her almost lean into his hand. "I take it with oils that I make and the perfect temperature between lukewarm and scalding." He dragged his nails gently along her scalp. "After, I expect my towel to be warmed and ready for me. I will tell you which creams and oils I want you to set aside for the night before and after my bath at first," he explained. "Once you get the hang of it you can choose for me. I don't doubt you will pick it up easily."

She tried not to hum at how good his nails against her scalp felt. “That sounds easy enough,” she said. “I hope I can serve you well and better than...the previous slaves.”

Sasori smirked, lifting his other hand to trace up her leg again to her thigh. His fingertips ghosted over the silk bandages up to her stomach. "You know your way around a lab and so far can keep up with what I need from you," he smirked. "You are already so much better than anyone else I've ever had serve me." His hand in her hair traced down her jaw and turned her head to him.

Her breath hitched slightly as she made eye contact with him. “It is because a lab is a familiar environment for me,” she said. “To be honest, it is where I feel most comfortable. But I know how to adapt in other places.” She tried to keep her eye contact with him as best as she could.

"I couldn't have made a more perfect purchase," Sasori grinned. He pulled his hands away and moved them up to undo the ropes around her feet. He turned back to work on the knotting at her hands, tracing the rope indentations for a moment. "Let's go," he said, stepping away from the table.

She rubbed the spot of her ankles that the rope hurt before getting off of the table. She took a couple of seconds to adjust to the numbness in her leg as she stood. Once she figured out how to walk with the uncomfortableness of it, she followed him, rubbing her wrists where the rope hurt her.

He led her back through his room to another doorway. "I have a private bath here, but there are two bathhouses on the property itself," he told her. The room they walked into was large, circular and very open air. The river that ran near the house could easily be seen and heard from where they stood. A large, pool-like bath was sunk into the ground along with another, smaller inground tub.

She looked around the bathroom in awe. "Wow," she whispered. She caught herself staring at the view. The sound of the river made the bathroom feel a little more like an oasis. "This is beautiful," she told him.

He smirked at her reaction. "My mother put a lot of effort designing our homes." He walked over to a built-in set of shelves that contained various types of jars and bottles. "Come," he waved her over. "This is where I keep most of the scents and oils that I am favoring currently," he told her. He squatted to open a cabinet. "Towels are down here, always rolled and this should always be kept well stocked." He stood back up. "You won't be stocking it but if you notice it is running low, be sure to tell the maids of the house."
She nodded and took a moment to look at how many towels were in the cabinet. She looked at the scents and oils on the shelves, reading the labels. She had to admit she admired his taste. They all seemed to be ones she would use herself. She looked at him and nodded again. "This seems easy enough," she said.

"You would think that but for some reason, so many of your predecessors messed it up," he said with mild irritation. "Anyway, over here is the valve that fills the smaller tub." He tapped a brass faucet. "You need to turn it to these two points." He turned on the water with both sides of hot and cold. "No higher or lower. If you do, I will notice."

Again, she nodded. "Understood," she said. That was a small detail that she could understand the previous slaves messing up on. She had no doubt that at least one of them was killed over something like that. If he ended up killing her, she was not going to let it be over something as stupid as water temperature. She resisted the urge to scoff and roll her eyes at the mere thought of it.

"Good." He looked around the room. "I'll give you time to acquaint yourself with all of this later," he sighed with a stretch and started to remove his clothes. "For now, take these back to my room and find my robe." He gestured to his clothes as he threw them to the floor, circling back to the shelves. "When you do, hang it up over there then come back to the shelves and I will show you what order to put things in."

She tried her best not to look at his body. She did not want to be attracted to such a monster, finding it completely disheartening that he was the way he was while he looked the way he did. She picked up his clothes and took them back to his room, folding them neatly and then grabbing his robe. She went back into the bathroom and hung it up where he told her to. As she approached the shelves, she looked over the labels of the oils and scents he had.

Once she was back Sasori picked out four jars. "Two of these are oils," he held up the jars. "You only need four drops of each," he said, pulling out a dropper from a small vase on the shelf. "And these two are salts." He held up the other jars. "One scoop of each of these will do." He showed her what to do. "Simple," he said, turning to shut the water off. "Now go eat dinner and come back before I'm done."

She nodded and bowed to him before leaving the bathroom. Naga slithered up to her, having been coiled by the door the entire time. He hissed softly to her as they left Sasori's bedroom. She picked him up and wrapped him around her waist, resting his head on her shoulder. She had no idea where to go, once again and decided to just walk in any direction.

Similar to the day before Chiyo rounded a corner and sighed. "He still hasn't given you a tour?"

"Ah, no, Lady Chiyo," Azumi said as she bowed. "He has not. He kept me with him in his workshop all day. I was just dismissed to go eat."

"Alright, I'll give you the tour since he is neglecting to," she told her. First, she brought her to the servant's kitchens. All of the servants and slaves who were sitting down to eat stood up and bowed low. "You can cook down here. And unless Sasori orders otherwise this is where you will take all of your meals." She waved the servants off. "Go back to your meal," she told them, and they relaxed. She ordered one of the women to prepare a bowl of food for Azumi. "You can eat while we walk." The servant quickly served the bowl and handed it to Azumi. She took the bowl and thanked them quietly. "This won't take too long," Chiyo said.

Azumi nodded as she followed Chiyo out of the kitchens and into the hallway. "Thank you for this," she said.
"It's part of our job to make sure you have everything you need to do your job correctly," Chiyo waved her thanks off. "My grandson gets very wrapped up in his own little world and forgets that constantly."

“He seems to take great pride in his work,” Azumi said as she ate her food quietly while walking down the hall. “It looks to have brought on a great amount of success. You must be very proud of him.”

“Proud but always worried he is overdoing it,” she frowned. “I often find clients for him when he isn’t in the shop. The Hyuugas have been coming to us personally for their medications for decades and they haven’t praised me once the way they do Sasori. It does make a grandmother’s heart swell.” She stopped outside of a room. “Down here is the laundry room. All you have to do is ask a house servant for help should you need anything from in there. Down the rest of the way is close to the servants’ quarters where you slept last night and the kitchens.”

Azumi looked into the room and nodded. “He has mentioned quite a few times how his previous slaves...” She tried to find the words to use.

“Died?” Chiyo finished.

“Yes...because of him?”

“Yes, well,” Chiyo sighed heavily. “He can have a bad temper and sets a very high bar for anyone who works with him,” she frowned. “He also forgets basic human needs when he’s working so please do remind him to eat and bathe.”

Azumi frowned a little and then nodded. “I will,” she said. She looked down the hall, recognizing the servants’ quarters. She finished her food and bowed. “I must get back to him. He may be done with his bath soon.”

"Alright then," Chiyo nodded. "If you get lost again don't hesitate to ask for help," she said before turning down a different hall.

Azumi moved through the halls back to Sasori’s room, trying to remember the path she had taken on the tour. Her leg still felt weird which slowed her down just a little bit. She put Naga down on the floor when she entered the room and went back into the bathroom where Sasori was still in the tub.

"You're late," Sasori said, leveling her with a glare. "But I figured Granny was talking your ear off so I'll forgive you," he said, stepping out of the tub.

She bowed and moved to grab a towel from the cabinet and gave it to him. “She was giving me a tour,” she said, “so I know where the kitchens are.” She grabbed his robe to bring it over to him as he wrapped the towel around himself.

"Mm, oh, yes, I haven't done that yet, have I?" he hummed as he dried off and took the robe. "Well, all the better you know and I did not have to," he said, walking back into his room. He lounged on his bed. "Sit," he commanded, casually pointing to the daybed. "Take that bottle before you leave and put it on you when you return to your room tonight," he said, pointing to a small bottle on the desk.

Azumi sat on the daybed and looked at the bottle on the desk. “Is it for the burn?” she asked. The numbness was slowly going away as it had been a couple of hours since.

“It is,” Sasori said, bending one of his legs up. “As I said, I don’t want to deal with an infection
and so far I actually like you.”

She looked at him, risking the smallest smile. “Thank you,” she said, bowing slightly. She ran her hand along the silk wrapping around her thigh. The pain was there but it was very minuscule. She knew by the time she went to bed she would feel it a lot more.

“Mhm,” he said airily, pulling out a log and marking down something. “You have nothing to wear for tomorrow.” He put the book down and looked her over. “I will have one of Chiyo’s girls provide you a dress. Can you do your hair and makeup?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “I can.” She paused for a moment before looking up at him again. “If I may ask, what exactly is this event?”

“Nothing of particular significance, just an irritating banquet.” He rolled his eyes. “A waste of my time honestly.” He stood up and with a *swish* to his robe, disappeared into the workshop. He returned moments later with a wooden box. “I made this for some client but she wound up not using it.” He pressed the box into her lap. “It’s yours now.”

She opened up the box and looked through the makeup that was inside. She whispered to herself in awe, picking up some of the items and closely inspecting them. “Thank you, again,” she told him.

Sasori glanced at her through his lashes as he picked up his log again and settled back into bed. “You can keep that. If you continue to prove useful, I’ll give you more for whenever we are forced out.” He grumbled about not wanting to deal with social graces. “Dismissed.” He waved his hand.

She stood up from the daybed and bowed. "Goodnight," she said. She picked up the bottle he mentioned from the desk and placed it on top of the box as she carried it back to her room. Naga slithered behind her, hissing quietly about how he did not trust the makeup in the box. "He made it for a client," she said to the snake. "So, it should not be too bad." Once she was finally in her room, she set the box down on the dresser and sat down on the bed. She lightly unwrapped her leg to put a little bit of the liquid from the bottle onto the burn. It cooled it instantly and she sighed. "I still do not know what it is," she mumbled to herself, refusing to look at whatever he painted on her. She placed the bottle on the dresser and laid in bed, taking a while to fall asleep.
Chapter 3

Similar to the day before, a knock came to Azumi’s door. “Lord Sasori has requested you to his room,” a new voice said. “He said to bring all of your things for the banquet as well.”

"All of my things," she groaned to herself as she woke up. If her eyes were open, she would have rolled them. She got up and looked at Naga as she got ready. "He does not seem to mind you being around," she said. "So," she picked up him and wrapped him around her, "you are coming." She placed the bottle he gave her in the box of makeup and picked it up and went back to Sasori’s room.

Sasori was still in his robe from the night before but he now had loose pants on under them. He looked up from the four beautiful dresses laid out on his bed. “Try these on,” he told her. “I need to know which will look best with my outfit tonight.” Sasori snapped his fingers at another servant girl who looked like she was going to ascend from sheer fear at any moment. The girl jumped a little and Sasori shot her a nasty glare. “Help her get dressed and whatever else she needs,” he said before disappearing into his workshop.

Azumi set the box of makeup down on the desk along with Naga and stepped closer to the bed. She looked at the servant with her and immediately noticed the look on her face as she started to undress her. The girl noticed the silk wrapping on Azumi’s leg. "Did he hurt you already?" she whispered as she picked up the first dress.

"I am fine," Azumi whispered back.

The girl frowned and turned to the dresses. “He is going to want you to show him each one,” she told her. “I will put your hair up for now just so it’s out of the way.” Her voice was still soft.

Azumi nodded and let the servant put the dress on her and put her hair up. She looked down at it once it was on. It was beautiful but it was a little more modest than she would have preferred but she was no longer in charge of what she wore. "Are these your dresses?" she asked the servant quietly.

“Only two,” she said softly. “I was allowed to keep two of my dresses when I was sold. These other two are from one of Sasori’s previous girls.” She smoothed out any wrinkles the dress had. “How does it feel?”

“It feels fine,” she answered. She did not want to admit it was a little restricting and rubbed against her burn wrong. She went into the workshop so she could have Sasori’s verdict on the dress.

Sasori heard her come in and turned around. “No,” he said quickly. “You’re restricted.” He rolled his eyes. “Put the looser dress on.” He waved her away again, turning back to his work.

She nodded and immediately turned around to go back into the room. “He said the looser dress,” she told the servant girl, already taking the one she was wearing off.

“Really?” she frowned. “You seemed like the body conforming type.” She picked up the second dress. “Here you are,” she said as she helped her put it on.

“Body-conforming restricts my dancing,” she told her. “If it were up to me, my dress would have about twenty percent less cloth.” She looked down at the looser dress once it was on. It felt much more comfortable than the last one.

“Much better,” Sasori said, leaning in the frame of the workshop doorway. “Do your hair and
Azumi nodded and began to take the dress off. “Thank you,” she whispered to the servant girl.

“It was nothing,” she whispered back.

“You are dismissed,” Sasori said to the other girl. She bowed low and back out of the room silently, taking the two dresses that belonged to her with her. “You know where the bath is. Waste no time,” he said easily.

Azumi paused for a second, a little shocked that he wanted her to use his bath. She nodded and went into the bathroom to start it. She let it get to a nice temperature and unwrapped her leg. She still refused to look at what he did to her. She sighed as she turned the faucet off and stepped into the tub, flinching at the feeling of the water touching her burn and then relaxing just seconds later.

A few moments passed and suddenly Sasori swept into the room. He was now dressed in a red and linen outfit. He walked up to the shelves and sighed. Without asking, he poured oil into the bath and then looked at her then pulled another jar down and added two scoops of salt. He took a deep breath. “Perfect.” Then he walked back out.

Azumi shook her head and sighed as she washed up. She made sure to keep the bath short, knowing that he did not like to be kept waiting as the servant who woke her up the day before mentioned. Once she was done with her bath and got out, she grabbed a towel, assuming that since he poured oil and salt into her bath, he would tell her to use the towels in the cabinet. She dried herself off and went back into the room to get dressed.

Sasori looked at her in his mirror. He was putting on the finishing touches of his makeup. He stood up and looked her over. “Here,” he said, offering her the chair as he walked over to a jewelry cabinet and opened it. He pulled out several gold pieces and laid them out on the bed.

"Thank you," she nodded. She brought her box of makeup over and sat down, glancing at him in the mirror as she started doing her makeup. She finished it within a couple of minutes, making it match the outfit that Sasori chose for her.

He stopped her before she could put the dress on. He tilted her head on the tip of his finger and looked her over, taking in her handiwork. He hummed softly. “That will do,” he said, releasing her.

She held back the scoff that almost came out and picked up the dress. She put it on and sat back down in front of the mirror to do her hair. She pinned the front part of it back, not wanting to deal with it in her face most of the night. But she knew at some point, she would let it all down.

Behind her, Sasori finished adorning his different jewelry, waiting for her to finish her hair. Once he was certain she was he walked up behind her and placed two golden scorpion bracelets down in front of her. He carefully took her left hand first and slipped the two rings that were hidden under the scorpion's claws on to her fingers then slipped the bracelet over her wrist. He repeated the action on her right hand, keeping their bodies close. "Keep these on," he said softly in her ear. "No one will question who you belong to in these." He traced his finger up the backs of the scorpions and up her arms.

She looked down at the scorpions and resisted a sigh. It came as no surprise to her that he would do this. Her gaze moved to his and she made eye contact with him in the mirror then nodded. "If I can ask one thing," she said cautiously, "can we numb my leg again?" The pain from the burn was starting to come back. She knew asking was a risk.
His eyes drifted down to her hip along with his hand. He pulled back her dress then pulled her away from the desk to get a better a look. "It's healing beautifully," he smirked. "Fine, I do not want you making a fool of yourself. Where is your bottle?" he asked her, standing back up.

"In the makeup box," she told him. She stepped over to the other desk she had left the box on and opened it, pulling out the bottle he had given her. "It worked really well last night," she said quietly.

"Of course it did," he said knowingly. "I had to strengthen it before giving it to you." He took the bottle from her. "Anyone with a high pain tolerance will have a higher tolerance for anesthesia," he explained as he knelt down and very carefully applied some of the liquid to her hip. "Have you looked at it yet? It turned out beautifully against your skin." His voice took on a tone of reverence.

She paused for a second, sighing quietly in relief at the liquid. "I have not," she told him. "I have kept it wrapped as you told me to. I only took it off for the bath."

"After tonight you will be able to wear it openly," he told her. "Do so," he said, standing up and replacing the bottle in the box. "You will be allowed to walk around freely but when I call for you, you must appear at my side."

"I will try not to stray too far," she said with a slight nod and then a bow. "Are you intending to make a brief appearance at this event?" she asked. "Or will we be there for quite some time?"

"I never stay long," he said airily. "But I have the feeling that Chiyo is going to keep us much longer than I would like tonight," he sighed.

"I see," she hummed, looking at Naga who was coiled up in the corner of the room. "Even though it is not an important event. I have finished getting ready."

"No event hosted by the nobles are truly important," he countered. "They are all a waste of my time and by extension yours. We could be spending it doing something far more productive."

"I was never one for these events back home either," she said with a slight shrug. "Many times, I was asked to attend to be the entertainment, but I would usually leave shortly after I performed."

There was suddenly a knock on the door. "Sasori," Chiyo said from the other side. "Are you ready yet?"

"Performances?" he repeated softly. He was going to ask for elaboration but he cut himself off with a long-suffering sigh. "Unfortunately," he called back as he walked to the door. "We’ll meet you out front." He opened the door, folding his arms. Azumi followed him to the door, walking closely behind him as they made their way through the halls. She had not seen him interact with his grandmother and she was a little curious to see their dynamic. Outside, a covered palanquin was waiting outside for them. Chiyo was already sitting in the structure. Seven servants waited around the palanquin. One was clearly Chiyo’s handmaiden. Sasori rolled his eyes, pulling out the gold chain from the first day he walked Azumi home. Without turning around, he held his hand out. "Hand," he said, letting the chain drop.

Azumi frowned, stepping a little closer to Sasori as she walked to give him her hand. ‘I should have known he was going to chain me to him,’ she thought. She started to wonder if he was lying when he told her she could walk around freely. ‘Did he mean as freely as the chain allows me?’ she thought, mentally rolling her eyes.

He walked up to the edge of the palanquin and pulled the chair through the window. "Relax," he
told her softly with a smirk. "It's only for the walk to and from the banquet."

She nodded and took her spot next to him. Once he sat down, the palanquin bearers picked it up and were given the order to walk. Once they did, she kept up easily.

"Sasori, please don't start anything with Deidara tonight," Chiyo said after they had been walking for about twenty minutes. Sasori's head snapped up from a scroll he had brought with him. The rage in his eyes would have made a lesser man flinch, but Chiyo simply lifted her head.

"I never start anything with that dirt clot of a child," he said, his voice tinged with his anger.

Chiyo closed her eyes and sighed. “Your temper gets out of control around him,” she said. “You must control yourself around him, tonight is a very important night.”

"How about Oonoki keeps his damned brat in check, this way my temper's limits won't have to be so tested," Sasori countered with a hiss. "It's not my fault nor my responsibility to be nice to that man-child he calls an heir." Azumi listened to the conversation, hardly surprised he came off a little childish around his grandmother.

"Sasori..." Chiyo sighed. "You are older than Deidara, you must act like it. Be the better man and an example."

'This man should not be an example of anything other than a sadistic psychopath,' Azumi thought, rolling her eyes.

"Again," Sasori leaned back, "I won't have to react if he has some respect." He straightened his back as they arrived at another opulent home. There was a flurry of activity as the other guests arrived and the servants from every household moved to help their masters in and out of the mansion. The smell of different foods and the sound of music drifted through the air. The pallbearers stopped on Chiyo's command and slowly lowered them down, ending their conversation.

A servant assisted Chiyo out of the palanquin and the rest bowed as she and Sasori stepped off. "Do not ruin this because you cannot handle yourself around him," Chiyo grumbled, walking ahead into the mansion.

Sasori refrained from rolling his eyes again as he walked behind his grandmother. He gently pulled Azumi along behind him. "Stay close for just this part," he said to her softly.

"Ah, Chiyo! Sasori," Oonoki boomed as soon as he saw them. He was at the front of large hustle and bustle greeting guests as they entered.

“Oonoki!” Chiyo grinned, keeping the air between them friendly. “How are you doing this evening?”

Azumi peeked around Sasori and looked at the little old man in front of them. It made her wonder what ‘his brat’ looked like.

"Is that Sasori!" a woman's voice yelled over the crowd.

Sasori tensed and took a long deep breath. He let it out in a long slow breath as he turned to greet the young woman that was running up to him. "Kurotsuchi," he said respectfully, a fake smile plastered over his lips. "You've grown since I last saw you." He bowed low.

"Oh, Sasori!" Kurotsuchi giggled, blushing a little. "You don't need to put on airs around me," she
"Now, Kurotsuchi," Oonoki said, "you know he is being respectful. As you should be too."

"I am always respectful, Grandfather," Kurotsuchi grinned.

Azumi’s brow furrowed. 'What a cocky child,' she thought.

"You look as lovely as ever," Chiyo smiled at her.

"Thank you, Lady Chiyo," Kurotsuchi said with a smile and a bow.

"Shall we move inside now that we've all greeted each other?" Sasori said with a tight but polite tone. His eye flicked around for a certain someone.

"You go on ahead, Sasori," Chiyo smiled. "I want to talk to Homura," she said as she bowed again to Oonoki and Kurotsuchi.

"We can go find something to drink together," Kurotsuchi grinned, slipping her arm around Sasori's.

Sasori ground his teeth but somehow managed to flash a smile. "A drink sounds perfect," he said, pulling Azumi along. "I almost forgot," he said, undoing her chain. "Remember, you must come when I call for you," he said lowly to her.

She nodded to him and bowed as he turned and walked away. Once he was gone, she looked around. She knew absolutely no one at this event and it was not like she could mingle with anyone because she was a slave. She sighed, looking for a corner to occupy until Sasori called for her. She found one, next to another servant, close to where the drinks and appetizers were being kept. If her anxiety began to skyrocket due to the number of people in the area, she was going to risk taking a drink.

"Are you not used to these kinds of events?" a familiar voice said. It was the boy she had met right after she was sold, Sasori’s cousin. His red hair was now adorned with a simple gold band and he was holding a glass out to her.

She looked at him and bowed. "Not in the position of a slave," she told him. She noticed the glass he held out and took it. "Thank you."

"I've never been one for these events, slave or not," he chuckled, leaning against the wall. He glanced down at her hands and frowned a little. "I...you weren't born into slavery...are you adjusting alright?"

"I, uh...I am," she said quietly. "And no, I was not born into slavery. I was a noble's daughter in my home village. So this...is a very different experience for me."

The boy nodded. He was admittedly curious as to how she had been sold off but he did not press her. "My cousin can be...eccentric," he said the word like he knew it was not quite the right word.

"Gaara," a blond man said as he approached the redhead. "Is your cousin here yet, un?" The blond had electric blue eyes that looked right over Azumi.

"He is," Gaara answered. "But he wouldn't be where there are too many people."

Azumi looked between the two men. 'Is this him?' she thought.
"Hm, you're right," the blond said. "I'll have better luck finding him outside probably, un."

"Oh, boy," Gaara sighed. "The party has barely even started." He sighed again and downed his drink. "I'm going to get another one of these, want one?" he asked but then shook his head. "No, you're going to need it."

They watched the blond beeline deeper into the house. He was heading for the back where there was a large patio. It also overlooked the river and was set with foods, drinks and other things for people to enjoy.

She quickly finished the first drink she was given and nodded. "I think I will take another one," she chuckled quietly. "Thank you." He nodded and stepped away for a moment to grab their second round. Once he was back, she mumbled a second thanks as he handed her the drink. "So he is your...cousin," she started. "Which means you have seen how many slaves he has been through."

His face grew grim and he frowned, looking into his drink before he took a sip. "I have." He looked up at the crowd. "I want to say that he's gone through more than twenty. He went through four in the time that I was studying under him." He took another sip. "Twenty is a very, very kind number."

"That is...disheartening," she frowned. "I have seen the way everyone has been looking at me since he bought me. No one thinks I will live for very long." She took a sip of her drink. "He has said that so far I am better than the others. But that could be something he has said to the previous ones before he ended up killing them."

Gaara's eyes snapped to look at her. "He's never said that to any of the slaves I've encountered." He took another sip of his drink. "You...really must be special," he breathed.

"I do not know about special," she hummed. "Probably just the only one who is noble-born." She looked at him. "If you studied under him, then you know first hand how he treated them?"

Gaara let out a slow breath, it almost sounded like a growl. "He treats his slaves like they are lower than dirt." He shook his head. "You aren't his first noble-born slave. He's even had former doctors...they especially didn't last long," he said softly, finishing off his drink.

She looked down at her own drink and frowned. "I see..." she said quietly before taking another long sip. "It does not surprise me." She finished her drink off and leaned against the wall with him. "I do not understand why he is letting me walk freely at this event. Is that a normal thing?"

Everywhere she looked, the nobles were being tailed by their slaves and servants.

"I suppose for Sasori it is," Gaara chuckled. "You're the only one who has ever come to one of these functions," he smirked. "They usually don't live long enough and the time is usually wrong."

"It feels a little odd to have that sort of freedom as a slave," she mumbled. "However, I guess it fits his...eccentrics, as you say, I will not complain." She looked at him again. "What exactly did you study under him for?"

"Medicine making and how to make antidotes to various poisons," he told her. "I'm a concierge doctor," he added.

"Oh," she said with a small smile. "Interesting. It would make sense, I suppose, to study under an apothecary then. Did you complete your training with him?"

"Almost but...I couldn't stomach his treatment of his slaves. I fell two years shy of my mark," he laughed mirthlessly. He looked out over the crowd. "I'm so rude," he laughed for real this time. "You know my name but I haven't asked you for yours."
"Oh," she chuckled softly, "my name is—" She was cut off by a loud crashing noise. They looked in the direction of the noise and saw the blond man from earlier pushing himself out of a now-broken table. 'That had to be Deidara for sure,' she thought.

"AZUMI! HERE, NOW!" Sasori's voice echoed the now silence across the room. Guests rushed out of the way and a hushed murmur filled the room as Sasori stepped in from outside and stalked up to where the blond had made an impact. He picked Deidara up by the shirt, his handsome face twisted in rage.

Azumi looked at Gaara and frowned. "I must go," she said softly to him before bowing. "I enjoyed talking to you, Lord Gaara." She came up from the bow and set her empty glass on the nearest table as she made her way to Sasori.

“Good luck.” Gaara watched her with worry etched into his face.

"Lord Sasori, calm down!" one of the servants said. They were back-handed and sent flying to the ground without so much as a glance in their direction from Sasori. Azumi approached the servant and helped them up.

"Sasori!" Chiyo yelled, coming up behind him. "What did I tell you?"

Azumi stood next to her. "Would you like to go home?" she asked him softly.

Sasori snarled at his grandmother, tilting his head. "And what," his voice was a dangerous hiss, "did I tell you," he growled. He took Azumi's hand and started to pull her to the front of the house. "Yes, we're going home now."

Azumi let herself get pulled out of the house. Once there was no one around, she let out the groan she had been holding in from his really tight grip on her hand. She made eye contact with the servants around the palanquin as he walked right past them.

All of them had a sour taste in their mouth as they watched the new young woman be dragged away from Oonoki's residence. The walk back to the house was silent and tense. Without a word to any of the servants, Sasori stormed into his half of the house and threw Azumi hard into the doorway of the workshop. He cursed lowly as he yanked his jewelry off and threw them onto his desk. "That impudent child," he growled, digging his nails into the back of his desk chair. He let out a manic laugh before turning back to Azumi.

Her breath got caught in her throat when he looked at her and she took a step back. "You do not seem like the type to want to talk about it, so I will not ask," she said. She could feel her heart start to speed up. "But is there anything I can do for you?"

"Oh, I think there is," he growled with a smirk. He slipped a hand under her jaw and squeezed her throat tightly. He looked into her eyes, pushing her hard into the wall, his nails biting into her skin. His other hand caught her hands and ripped the scorpion bracelets off of her, cutting up her wrists and fingers as he did.

"Ha-ah," she gasped. She tried to let out a scream but his hand around her throat caused it to be a whispered squeak. Her hands immediately went to his wrists, trying to pry his hands off of her neck.

"Oh, no," he said in a low, soft voice. It mocked something sweet and kind. The hand on her throat
pulled away and slid into her hair. He smirked as he made a fist and yanked her by her hair into his workshop. He threw her hard again into the table. "Get on," he growled.

Her hip hit the table hard and she let out a pained grunt. She looked down at her bleeding hands before lifting herself onto the table. Her hands started to throb and she could feel tears welling up in her eyes.

"What happened to that high pain tolerance?" Sasori said with a mock pout. He let out a bitter laugh and started to yank up her dress. "Take this off and lay back," he ordered before turning on the ball of his foot. He picked up the rope from the day before then reached for the dish and the two bottles he had used to paint on her still-healing burn. Azumi watched him move, her hands shaking as she removed the dress and tossed it to the side. She tried to quiet her heavy breathing as she laid back. Sasori turned back and pushed her hands over her head. He tied them neatly together and then to the table itself. He smirked, touching the burn he painted on her hip then traced his fingers down her legs. He gripped her shin tightly and spread her legs, tying them down to either end of the table. "No thrashing around this time," he smirked, mixing the same concoction as the other day with a paint brush. He straddled her waist and grinned down at her.

Her eyes widened once she smelled the mixture. "No," she whispered, her breath quickening. She did not want to experience that burning again. The tears were already coming out.

"Oh, yes," he grinned. "Your first one turned out so beautifully." He leaned down and wiped away the tears. "So why not add another," he growled, putting the bowl down next to her head. He sat back up and tapped the end of the brush to his lower lip then grinned, starting with three dots right to her chest. She bit her lip harder each time the brush touched her skin, letting out quiet squeals of pain. More tears came out as she shut her eyes and tried to bring her hands down but was unable to. He smirked, letting his eyes flicker up to look at her. "Let it out." He swept the brush over her skin, making neat beautiful lines in her skin. He grabbed part of her dress and carefully cleaned away any blood that seeped out. "I want to feel you struggle."

He grew silent as he worked, finishing the outline of the design in about two hours.

After two hours of crying and enduring the burning from his brush, she had grown numb to the worst of it, but she still flinched each time the brush made contact with her skin. Her breathing calmed down a little and she had turned her face from his a while ago, not wanting to look at him.

He continued to work, carefully using dots to create beautiful shading. He got off of her for a moment, moving to mix more of the acidic concoction. As he walked back over, he looked down at her. He took her jaw gently in his hand and turned her head to face him. She looked into his eyes and her breath hitched a little. She struggled a little against the ropes, trying to bend her knees. He held her gaze for a few heartbeats before releasing her jaw. He swung his leg back over and sat down in her hips as he started to put the finishing touches on the burn.

Once he was sure he was done, he got off of her again and walked over to a basin filled with water. He soaked a rag and walked over to wipe it all down. He followed it up with the numbing cream and then grabbed a roll of linen. Saying nothing still, he untied her legs and gently bent her legs up to her chest. He watched the muscles bend and contract as he warmed each leg back up. She let out a relieved exhale once the numbness of the cream had settled in on her chest and groaned quietly as he bent her legs for her. She glanced at him and then immediately looked away. For a brief moment, she wondered what she did to deserve this and then she immediately realized she did nothing. None of this was her fault. He was angry at someone else and the only person he could take it out on was her. She tried not to glare too hard, not wanting to actually be the cause of his anger.
He let out a low chuckle, seeing the disdain for him in her eyes. “You handled that well,” he told her as he moved to untie her hands from the table but left them bound together. “Sit up,” he ordered as he started to unravel the linen. She sat up and rolled her shoulders and neck. She let him dress the wound but did not look at him while he did. She just wanted to go to bed. He unbound her hands then picked her up bridal style and carried her out of the workshop. He rested her on his bed gently. “You’ll sleep here tonight. I want to make sure that doesn’t get infected,” he said. “And you’ll need help tomorrow morning with it. I don’t trust Chiyo’s people to handle it.” He stripped down and changed before crawling into the bed himself, giving her a loose dress to sleep in.

She gasped, not wanting to sleep in a bed with this man. She moved closer to the edge of the bed, wanting to be as far away from him as possible. She grabbed the dress and started to put it on. As she moved, she caught a glimpse of what he burned onto her leg the day before and paused, staring at the detailed scorpion with a frown.

Sasori rolled over and threw his arms over. “I don’t bite in my sleep,” he grumbled. “Get on the bed. I really don’t need you falling off in the middle of the night.” She huffed quietly, curling in on herself and facing away from him. She gently touched a finger to the burn on her chest, feeling the pattern he made. She did not trust him or what he would do to her while she slept so she waited for him to fall asleep before falling asleep herself.
Chapter 4

The next morning, Sasori got up before Azumi and sat down at his desk, ready to start the beginning stages of his next project. Chiyo walked in moments later and with no warning slapped her grandson hard across the face.

“You are a disgrace,” she shook.

“I told you—” he started.

“No,” she cut him off. “I told you not to start anything with Deidara. And that even if he started it, you needed to be the adult.”

Azumi woke up but did not open her eyes, listening to the conversation.

“He is old enough to start attending council meetings but he can’t handle not pressing patience!”

“Yes! Because you are still older! And a respected member of this society!”

"I will still maintain my respect," he almost spat. "The same cannot be said for the brat."

Chiyo sighed. "This is probably the last party we will be invited to for quite some time..."

“Good!” he growled. "It means nothing to me!" He stood up and walked over to Azumi. "Stop pretending to still be asleep and go run a bath." His hand came down hard on her hip.

"Sasori!" Chiyo said in a stern tone. "Leave the girl alone!" She gave Azumi a pitiful look noticed the burn on her hip and thigh as well as the dressing on her chest. "You branded her!"

Azumi gasped, looking quickly between Chiyo and Sasori.

"Branding is a primitive and lesser version of what I did to her and she is fine in my care. Now, if you don't mind, Grandmother, I have work to get done."

Azumi quickly got up from the bed and went to the bathroom. Chiyo let out another sigh. "You do not know how to properly care for anyone," she said. "If she dies, she will be your last one."

"Uh huh," Sasori said, waving her off as he started to drop his clothes. In the bathroom, Azumi started the bath, turning the faucets to the exact position he told her to and then putting in his required amount of oils and salts. He walked in and glanced at her handiwork. "I don't plan on letting this one go," he mumbled with a smirk. He sat down on a window ledge near the water and watched her move. "How is your chest?" he asked her suddenly.

She paused and looked at him. "It is fine," she lied. It hurt. It hurt a lot. She turned away and continued to set up his bath, just waiting for the moment he would get into it and dismiss her for a few moments. She just wanted to get away from him. He was not going to dismiss her anytime soon though.

"Lying to me will only wind up hurting you more," he said, walking over to his shelf and pouring something into the pool that was next to the tub. "Strip and soak yourself," he told her. "We need to clean that up and redress it." It sent a small thrill through him to watch her struggle to be near him and yet maintain such elegance.

She exhaled deeply before stripping down and removing the linen he dressed the wound in. Just
like the last one, she refused to look at it and stepped into the pool, flinching a little at the temperature. She slowly lowered herself enough so the wound was in the water, trying to hold in the small grunt that wanted to come out from the pain on her chest.

"The pain should subside in a few moments," he told her. "The valerian root and Boswellia will calm the inflammation and then I'll apply more of that cooling ointment," he said with a sigh as he eased himself into his bath. He leaned against the edge of the tub and ran a hand through his hair. "Today won't be so busy. We have a few orders to work on and then we should probably go down to the shop to check on inventory," he said easily.

She sunk lower into the water and frowned, hating how right he was about the pain subsiding quickly. It took her a few moments to finally relax her body. "Very well, then," she said quietly.

He shifted in the tub and let his eyes fall on her. He said nothing at first, simply watching her with cool eyes. "Tell me," he said softly, reaching down to twirl a finger in her bath. "You mentioned being entertainment at parties," his voice was soft, "but you are a noblewoman...how did that come about?"

She did not answer at first, keeping her sight on the water. "Most women where I am from can dance," she said. "Being the daughter of the village's head, people would ask me to come to their events so they could gain some sort of attention. I hate parties, too. I find them to be a waste of time. But it would not look right if I refused. So, I would agree to go and perform. It would give the party the attention that the host wanted, and then I would leave."

He hummed in thought. "Sounds like you've been in a form of slavery your whole life," he mused. "Do you enjoy the act of dancing?"

"I do enjoy it," she said. "I have taught a few girls from my village how to dance." She looked out at the river that ran by the mansion. "I did not have a mother to teach me...I learned from the snakes."

"The snakes," he laughed softly. "I think I'd like to see how well they have taught you then," he hummed. "For you to be so requested and coveted at parties you must be a sight to behold," he smirked.

She frowned, not exactly wanting to dance for him. She knew he was there when she danced on the stage at the auction. He already saw her dance. "I usually dance...with a snake," she said softly, thinking about how she met Naga.

"I do believe I allowed you to keep that snake," he said with a raised eyebrow. "Or did he slither away?" he smirked, looking at her fully.

"No...he is still here," she said. She looked out into the bedroom and Naga slithered into the bathroom, coiling up next to the pool as she moved to that side. He leaned his head closer to tap his nose against hers as she gently pet him. He hissed at her quietly.

"Then you should have everything you need to dance," Sasori said, watching her interact with the snake.

She and Naga shared a look before she finally looked at Sasori. "I suppose I do," she said. "When do you want this to happen?"

"Mmm," he hummed. "Tonight should be fine," he said, resting his head against the edge of the tub once more. "Before dinner, of course. We don't want you throwing up." He wrinkled his nose. He
stood up, running his hands through his hair as he stepped out of the tub. "Will you require music as well?" he chuckled softly, picking up a towel and wrapping it around himself.

She looked back at Naga who hissed his answer and then back at Sasori. "Yes," she answered.

"Wonderful," he smirked, pulling a towel out for her. "Come, we have lots of work today and I need to dress that wound." She stepped out of the tub and grabbed the towel, wrapping it around her and making sure to be careful around the wound on her chest. She kneeled down to stroke Naga's head for a few seconds before he slithered out of the bathroom. "Dry off and then sit down," he said, walking into the workshop. "I've decided we'll be working mostly from the shop today since I have my younger cousin watching the front. I want you to become familiar with the tools there and there’s more space." She followed him into the workshop as she dried herself off and then sat down in the desk chair, lowering the towel just below the burn wound so he could apply the ointment. He gently applied the cream and smirked. "This is going to heal well," he said softly, his fingers lingering over the raised design. "Your clothes are in the cabinet over there," he told her, pointing behind her. He pulled away, grabbing a smaller dressing than the one he used the night before and wrapped it neatly. "This should hold you over until we return home tonight."

Once he was done wrapping her up, Azumi stood up and went to the cabinet to grab her clothes. The feeling of the wound on her chest was much more awkward than the one on her hip and leg area. She got dressed carefully, not wanting to ruin the dressing of the wound. Sasori strode out of the workshop and back into his room to get dressed.

As soon as she was dressed she went into the room, trying not to stare too hard at his body as he got dressed. She hated that such an attractive man could be such a monster. He knew she was staring at him, but he said nothing about it. He hid a smirk as he turned once he saw that she was dressed. "Carry these boxes," he told her, pointing to a stack of wooden boxes on the seat of the desk. "We're going to walk down to the shop. No point in asking the imbeciles to carry us there."

She looked at the stack of boxes and picked it up. Naga slithered up to her, sliding up her leg and wrapping around her waist. He hissed quietly at her as he rested his head on her shoulder. They walked out to the main part of the house and passed Chiyo as they left but Sasori wasted no time in saying goodbye to her. He walked out with Azumi in tow and down to the street. 

Azumi looked around as she followed him. She had not really gotten a chance to familiarize herself with the surroundings. "You said your younger cousin is manning the shop?" she asked quietly. She wondered if Gaara was the younger cousin he meant. In fact, she hoped it was.

"Yes, my uncle’s son," he clarified. "He studied under me for a few years but he has been broadening his field of study and now can only work at the shop on select days." He turned down an alleyway. "You’ve met him," he told her, walking up to a door carved into one of the building’s sides and pushed it to enter.

She followed him in and looked around. "Where do you want these boxes?" she asked him, just about ready to drop them where she was standing.

He turned on his foot and took the boxes from her. "We're going up there," he told her, pointing to a ladder. Every wall of the room was covered in drawers and shelves. Two more workbenches greeted them as they walked in. He started up to the second floor where a larger distillery was laid out. Sasori walked over to a boiling pot and frowned. "Tch," he sighed. "He's going to burn it," he said, turning the fire down and setting the boxes down. Connected by a small strip that took them over the entrance of the shop, a large library carried over to a desk covered in more papers.
Azumi looked around the room, examining everything. "What do you need me to do?" she asked, glancing down at the papers of the desk.

"I think I can trust you to bottle what is in that pot and label it," he said, pointing to a cabinet. "It's concentrated dittany."

She nodded and went to the boiling pot, making sure none of it was burnt and turning the flame off to bottle it. She grabbed the bottles and carefully poured it into each one, filling them up to the correct amounts then sitting down to write the labels.

"Sasori?" Gaara's voice came from the lower floor. "You're here early," he said, walking up the ladder. He paused when he saw Azumi. He let out the breath he realized was suddenly caught in his throat when he heard his cousin in the workshop. He had honestly thought he had seen the last of Azumi the night before.

Azumi looked at him and gave him a small smile. "Hello," she said softly. She was glad to see him. Something about him eased her nerves.

"Yes, we had a lot of work to do that I just wanted to get out of the way," Sasori said, stepping closer to them. "Take her up front when she is done and show her how the front of the shop runs," Sasori said. "I need to refile some paperwork here. I'm also leaving any new orders and the back orders to you two," he said, sitting down at his desk and starting to organize the desk.

Gaara nodded and scooted closer to Azumi. "I'm glad you're still alive," he said softly to her.

"Me too," she hummed. "Though I did not come out of it unwounded." She shifted the dress a little bit to show him the bandaging around her chest.

Gaara stared at the bandage, assuming the worst. "He's butchering you?" he hissed, his lips pressing into a hard, grim line.

"He paints on me with acid," she hummed. "This is not the first time he has done it," she said as she finished labeling the last of the bottles.

Gaara's eyes widened then immediately narrowed into a rage. "Acid!" he growled lowly. He discreetly glared at Sasori's back, grinding his teeth. "Is he at least...helping to take care of what he's done to you." He ran a hand through his hair. "I'm so sor—"

"You two are whispering a lot," Sasori said warningly without looking back at them.

Gaara bit the inside of his cheek. "I'm just making sure she is familiar with your set up, Sasori," he called back. Sasori let out a quiet hum in response and went back to his work.

Azumi put all of the bottles onto a tray to move them easily to the cabinet they belonged in. "Show me the shop," she said quietly to Gaara. He nodded and they headed down to the ladder. They walked out behind the counter for the shop. It was not very large but it had nice displays of different cosmetic products they sold. All their more intense medicinal things were kept behind the counter. She found the section for the concentrated dittany and started putting the bottles on the tray there. "He does treat the wounds immediately after he makes them," she assured him quietly.

"That's no justification to him causing you the pain in the first place," Gaara growled, doing his best to not slam the cabinet behind the counter. "He's a fully grown man who can't control his temper." He frowned, looking back at her. "I...can't watch him continue to treat people like they are toys!"
“It does not justify it, you are right,” she said. “But it seems most people are afraid of him. And those who do not know what he does respect him highly.”

Gaara sighed. "I wish I could help." He ran a hand through his hair then looked back at her. "He's got a lot of people fooled. Even his own parents."

“That is...very unfortunate,” she frowned as she finished putting away the bottles. “It does not seem like his grandmother is fooled...they got into an argument this morning.”

"No, Chiyo is very aware of her grandson's vile behavior,” he sneered quietly. “He really has no morality as far as I'm concerned.” Gaara frowned. "He's never been cruel to me and he's very loving to his mother but..." He trailed off. "I don't know...I hope he treats you differently. None of the people he's killed over the years deserved it."

"So far, it seems like I am not treated much different," she hummed. "Other than him telling me that he likes me and that I was a good purchase. If he still does this to me, then he cannot like me that much more, I suppose." She joined him behind the counter and looked around the rest of the shop.

"He's only branded two other slaves as far as I know and that didn't happen until much later into their service," Gaara said. "Let me show you some of the stuff we keep back here." He squatted, waving for her to follow. "And he definitely didn't use it as a way to take out his anger over Deidara. Usually, that resulted in some nasty bruising and cuts."

Azumi frowned as she squatted with him. "He branded me on the second day," she said. "And it seems that even if I do obey him, I will still have to endure the pain he causes...as long as there are other people alive that can anger him." She sighed quietly and looked at Gaara. "He made me sleep in his bed last night immediately after he did this to me," she said, pointing to her chest. "I have never been so confused about a person in my life. He hurts me and then is nice to me."

"He is treating you rather differently," Gaara hummed. "But if he likes you so much...I wouldn't put it past him to personally want to oversee the effect of what he's done to you." He pulled the cabinet open. "We keep a lot of ready-made stuff down here," he told her. "Anything that we commonly get requests for and the like."

"Got it," she said, looking at the labels of the stuff in the cabinet. She took out one of the bottles and inspected its contents. "Interesting composition," she hummed. She let out a quiet scoff and rolled her eyes. "I bet he puts scorpion venom in this."

"And what is wrong with scorpion venom?" Sasori asked as he walked through the backroom's door. There was a trace of a challenging smirk on his lips.

"Nothing," she said as she stood up straight and inspected the bottle once again. "I am sure it works fine. Better than spider venom, at least."

"Mmhm," he smirked. "Snake venom would have destroyed that formula," he said easily, noting her avoid her preferred animal's secretion.

"If you had chosen the correct snake venom, it would not have," she hummed. "Unlike scorpion venom being the same composition among all scorpions, snake venom differs among different snakes." She shrugged and put the bottle back. "But if you do not have access to different snakes in this area, I suppose scorpion venom does the trick at least halfway."

Sasori’s smirk did not falter but Gaara quickly noted his cousin’s eye start to twitch. “Halfway, you
say?” His eyes narrowed as he spoke to her. “I’ll have you know that it works to its fullest potential. I tried various snake venom and they either turned out too strong, were too rare to be viable or altered the effect altogether and ruined the tonic,” he countered. Gaara almost stumbled back at the tension building in the room.

"If it works then it works," she shrugged. "It is not my place to tell you how to make your tonics or how effective they are. As I said, the snakes that would probably work best for this particular tonic are probably just too rare in this area."

“Would you perhaps know a vendor or way to acquire more of this particular venom?” Sasori leaned on the counter. Gaara was not going to mention that scorpions were not all that common in the city they lived in. Sasori had people regularly go out and get him scorpions to breed and keep to get their secretions.

"A vendor?" Azumi almost laughed. "No. There was no need for vendors where I am from since we had an abundance of snakes." Naga poked his head out from the back of her dress and hissed. "But I know how to get them to come here."

Gaara blinked at the snake, a little shocked that Sasori had let her keep the serpent.

“Do share,” Sasori practically purred, eyeing Naga himself.

"I do recall mentioning that my family can communicate with snakes," she said. "It would not be hard to get a couple of them to come here. Then you can use their venom and breed them if you wish."

“So full of surprises and resources,” he hummed for a moment. “Do it then. While I still favor scorpion venom, variety is necessary to this line of work.”

"There are a few on their way here now,” she hummed. Naga hissed again. "Actually, there is one that is here now." She moved around the counter and walked toward the front door, opening it slightly. A small desert horned viper slithered into the shop. "This one is only a juvenile," she said. "It will get a little bit bigger. But its venom is just as potent as an adult's."

Gaara blinked and took a step back in shock. Sasori smirked, pressing against the counter a little himself as he looked at her with cool eyes. "Then I suppose we should set up some sort of nursery or enclosure to keep them in." He walked over to Azumi and the animal who already looked more than comfortable twisting around Azumi's arm. "Gaara will work with you to make the enclosure. You must teach him how to extract and store the venom," he ordered.

Azumi nodded and bowed slightly. She gently stroked the snake’s rough head. “We should probably do that before the others come,” she told Gaara.

"Wha—” Gaara sighed, glaring at his cousin before rolling his eyes as Sasori smirked and shooed them to the back.

"Slither to it then," Sasori lifted his chin again. "There should be some material you can use in the back."

Azumi went into the back with Gaara and set the viper down on a flat surface. “I am sorry,” she said softly to Gaara with a bow. “I did not think he would rope you into it.”

Gaara shook his head. "Don't worry about it," he said softly. "I'm only a few steps above you in his eyes when it comes to working in the store," he sighed. "I am still technically his part-time apprentice." He squatted and reached under the counter top to pull out an old tank. "We used to
"keep a particular kind of fish," he said, placing the tank down on the workbench. "Would this work for snakes too?"

She looked at the tank and then at the viper who hissed quietly at her. "It will work perfectly," she said. "Thank you. We just need to fill it with sand so it can burrow itself into it."

"I’ll be right back then," he nodded, stepping out the back door of the shop.

"Saaaasori!!" A woman’s voice flowed through the front door. "It’s so rare to see you in the front of the shop!"

"Good afternoon, Kurotsuchi," Sasori said, a smirk evident in his voice.

"So, what are you doing here?" she asked.

"Well, it is my shop," Sasori answered.

'It is that child again,' Azumi thought, rolling her eyes. She looked at the viper who hissed quietly. "I only ask that you do not attack the younger man that was in here with us," she said quietly to the snake. "But I will not stop you if you attack the other older one." She looked around the back room a little more, trying to find something to put into the enclosure for the viper.

"What are you doing out here?" Sasori asked, glancing into the workshop at Azumi.

"Our old man is having fits again," Kurotsuchi said, leaning onto the counter. "But I also never want to miss a chance to see you. You left the party so early last night."

"Well, I got into a little...altercation with Deidara," he said.

'Little,' Azumi almost laughed, overhearing their conversation as she found a decent-sized rock to put into the tank.

"Pft!" Kurotsuchi scoffed through a laugh. "A little!" She echoed Azumi's thoughts. "You threw him through the entire house!" she laughed.

Sasori sighed lifting his chin. "He deserved it," he said stiffly.

"I'm not saying he didn't," she smirked. "But is that little slave girl that you were dragging behind you still on this mortal coil or was she used as yet another payment in my brother's stead?" Her tone was light and teasing despite the grim topic.

"No," he smirked, looking back into the workshop. "Azumi is very much alive."

Azumi rolled her eyes, picking up the viper. "Can you dance?" she whispered. The viper hissed and she started to move around the small space with it.

"Wow, I'm impressed," Kurotsuchi smirked.

"You're impudent is what you are," Sasori rolled his eyes. "I'll make the tonic for Oonoki. Just give me a minute. It's on the house." He turned to walk into the workshop and stopped short in the doorway, watching Azumi and the snake move together. It was just as mesmerizing as the first time he had seen her do it on stage with the cobra.

She moved for a couple of seconds more before she realized he was watching her. Her breath hitched quietly and she stopped immediately. "I apologize," she said, wrapping the viper around her body. "We were just getting to know each other."
He looked her over for a moment as a smirk pulled at his lips. "By all means, continue." He looked around the room. "I assume you are still waiting on Gaara to build the enclosure," he said. "I'd like to see more." He walked to the other workbench and pulled out a few ingredients as well as a mortar and pestle.

"He is getting sand to fill the tank," she answered as she started moving again. "If you choose to use this viper for breeding, then it will need to burrow itself to give birth."

“Good to know,” he said, sitting on the stool and mixing the ingredients. “What else do I need to know about keeping these snakes?” he asked her, watching with a keen eye as she moved. “You really do move just like them,” he nearly whispered, the fascination evident in his voice.

“It does not require much maintenance when it comes to feeding,” she said, spinning slowly and mimicking the snake’s movements with her hips. “This particular one prefers small rodents. But it also prefers to catch them itself...so leaving the enclosure with no lid would be ideal. It will return.”

“Then we will do that,” he smirked. “I will entrust most of their care to you. We’ll keep it here for now but eventually we’ll move them to the house,” he said, watching her hips move.

“Very well then,” she hummed as she kept moving. “The cobra will offer his venom as well.” Naga hissed quietly. “So long as he is not abused for it, he says.” She stopped moving to adjust how the snake sat on her body.

Sasori gave Naga a cool look and nodded. “Unexpected but appreciated.” He stood up and poured the mixture he was making into a bottle. He stood up just as Gaara walked back in with a large tub of sand. He was sweating heavily as he placed it down on the ground. “I’ll leave you two to this,” he said, turning to walk back out to the main room.

Azumi looked at how much Gaara was sweating and frowned a little. “I would have helped you,” she said. “I should have helped you. I am sorry.” She picked up the tub of sand and set it on a table to pour it into the tank. She climbed onto the table to get better dexterity and poured the sand. The viper immediately slithered from her arm into the tank once all of the sand was in it.

“It’s fine,” Gaara chuckled, wiping his brow. “It would have looked odd if we both left anyway.” He looked at the snake as it made itself at home. “Is that all they need?” he asked her, wanting to make sure the enclosure was comfortable for the snake.

"It is," she said, leveling the sand. She got off the table and bowed. "Thank you, on behalf of the snakes and myself." Behind her, the snakes bowed as well. "We appreciate your help."

Gaara chuckled a little, seeing the snakes bow with her. “It was no problem. Hopefully, these two can give you some preferred company.”

“Hey, Sis, we’re leavin—” They heard Deidara’s voice call to Kurotsuchi from the front of the shop. Deidara paused when he entered the shop, immediately seeing Sasori. “Well,” he smirked, trying to hide the fear that coursed through his body. "Interesting seeing you here, un."

Gaara’s eyes snapped quickly to his cousin. Sasori was gripping the counter tightly. Azumi paused at the sound of Deidara's voice and slowly turned to look at Sasori. "Oh, no," she whispered.

"In my own shop?" Sasori practically growled.

“You’re practically a recluse,” Deidara scoffed, still trying to play off his fear. “I thought you sold this place off to Gaara honestly, un.”
Gaara pressed a hand to Azumi’s stomach, pushing her back gently. He pressed a finger to his lips and walked forward into the main shop. “Cousin, why don’t you—“ he started softly.

“Or maybe your eyes are as dim as you are,” Sasori countered Deidara. “I spend the better part of the week here!”

“Mm, I never see you here,” Deidara hummed. "Maybe you're always hiding from me, un."

"Sasori, don't let him get to you," Gaara said quietly. "It's what he wants."

Sasori ground his teeth. “Take your brother and leave,” he snapped at Kurotsuchi. The girl nodded and quickly turned on her foot, grabbing Deidara’s wrist.

Deidara yanked his hand away from her. “You really think you’re all that, un,” he sneered.

“Deidara, you are risking someone’s life!” Gaara growled, looking at the blond. “Please leave!”

"Oh, please," Deidara scoffed. "She's just a slave, un."

"Brother..." Kurotsuchi sighed, taking Deidara's hand again.

"Maybe if someone here could be an adult and control his temper he wouldn't have gone through so many, un."

Gaara put his hand on Sasori’s shoulder and Sasori growled lowly. “Get off of me, Gaara.”

“Sasori, don’t,” Gaara urged again.

Kurotsuchi sighed. “Dei, you have a death wish!” she exclaimed, trying to drag her brother out of the store. It was a strangled silence for a moment where no one moved. A stalemate of sorts.

“Well,” Deidara finally said, “guess you are grown, un.” He scoffed, turning away finally. He started to walk out and muttered to Kurotsuchi. “His tonics barely worked anyway, un. I don’t know why the old man insists on coming here.”

Gaara’s eyes widened. If he caught that then Sasori sure as hell did too. And before he could do anything, Sasori vaulted over the counter, kicking Deidara out into the street. Gaara let out a pained sigh as he watched his cousin mercilessly beat a man in front of his own sister.

Azumi peeked out from the back room just as Sasori jumped over the counter and frowned. "That Deidara guy enjoys getting hurt," she mumbled. "No one would willingly provoke such a thing if they did not like it."

“I’m starting to think he has a thing for having his ass kicked,” Kurotsuchi sighed, walking back into the shop.

“You grandfather is never going to forgive him,” Gaara sighed.

“Don’t worry about him,” she waved him off. “He trusts my word about Sasori over Dei’s. I’ll tell him what happened.” She glanced at Azumi. “You, on the other hand,” she frowned. “I hope he spares you.” She frowned, watching a small crowd from around the brawling men.

"I...hope so, too," Azumi sighed. She looked back at the fight and leaned on the counter, resting her head on her hand. "I am hoping that he will get it all out now and tire himself out," she hummed. "But I also am not getting my hopes up too high."
"You impertinent sack of shit," Sasori roared as he pushed off of the twitching blond. "Get off of my property!" He spat on the man, kicking him one more time for good measure. He turned around and walked gracefully back into the shop. "Go scrape that sorry excuse of a meat bag off of the fucking ground," he told Kurotsuchi as calmly as he could. Kurotsuchi nodded and quickly walked ran out of the shop to help Deidara get up. Azumi and Gaara watched from behind the counter then looked at Sasori who had grabbed a rag to wipe the sweat from his forehead. "Move it, you two. We still have work," he growled, giving them a sweeping sharp look at he stepped into the back room and climbed up the ladder. "Azumi," he called with a commanding tone. The sound of a heavy box slammed down on the desk above. "Here, now."

Azumi let out a quiet groan and made her way up the ladder. "What can I do for you?" she asked him quietly as she stepped close to him, but not too close.

"Disinfect my other hand," he said while he wrapped his other hand.

She nodded and took his hand gently in hers to look at the damage. She frowned a little, taking a rag with a little bit of disinfectant and wiping his hand. She unraveled the bandage and tied it neatly around his hand for him.

He flexed his fingers and sighed. "What a waste of time," he growled. "How much longer until the other snakes get here," he asked her, feeling mildly childish for asking the question.

"They will be here in the morning," she told him, taking a small step back. She frowned at his hands. "Is that...the only wound you have?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, drumming his fingers on his desk. "The morning," he repeated. "Fine, I'm going to go take a walk." He walked back down the ladder. "Gaara, watch the shop. I'll be back in an hour," he said, whipping out the back door.

Azumi frowned again and went down the ladder, standing behind the counter with Gaara. "Is this...normal?" she asked Gaara. "I do not know him very well, but something seems off."

Gaara watched his cousin storm out of the shop. "Uh...no, this isn't," he said with a frown. "I mean this in the best way but...usually, he would have thrown you down the ladder or at least been slamming things for an hour not...taking a walk."

"That is what I was expecting," she hummed. "I hate to say it, but I am a little worried about him. But I am also worried that this walk is a way for him to think about what he will do to me when we get back."

Gaara's eyes darkened. "I won't let him do anything to you in the shop," he frowned. "I can't protect you in his home but I can try at least to do something here." He drummed his fingers on the desk. "I'm tired of not doing anything." His words were brave but he was also terrified that he would make her life worse by trying anything. "Maybe he is actually trying to clear his head...Deidara is the only one who winds him up like that."

She gave him a small smile. "I...appreciate that," she said. "And I have noticed that whenever Deidara is even mentioned, he gets angry. I do hope this is just him clearing his head." She sighed and felt the cooling cream for the burn on her chest wearing off. "Does he keep anything for burns here?" she asked.

"Is it hurting?" he asked, looking at her chest. "Yeah, he's got some stuff we keep on hand over here." He moved back up the ladder and pulled down a bottle from one of the shelves with a familiar blue liquid. "Do you need help applying it?" he asked, looking down at her.
She gave him a slight nod. "I have not looked at it yet and I am actually quite afraid to," she hummed.

He nodded, biting the inner part of his mouth. "Okay." He looked at the shop door for a moment. "You'll need to take the top part of your dress off. I'll re-dress the whole thing once we're finished." He climbed back down and pulled a curtain, closing off the workshop from the front end. "Hopefully we can do this before Sasori returns."

"It should not take long," she said as she began to take off the top part of her dress and then the wrapping that Sasori did earlier. "As I said, I have not seen it, but I do not think it is big."

He opened the bottle while he waited for her to be fully disrobed before turning back to her. He blushed a little when he turned to her but he was quickly distracted by the burn his cousin had placed on her. He gasped, seeing it in its full glory. "He...made you sit through this?" Gaara was crossed between marveling at the beautiful design and wanting to murder his cousin. He could only imagine the pain she must have suffered through with each individual stroke and tiny, raised dot of the design. He shook his head, recentering himself as he started to very gently smear the cooling balm on her skin.

She flinched slightly at the initial contact but let out a relieved breath immediately after. "He tied me down while he did this," she said, refusing to look down at it still. "He tied me down for both of them."

Gaara pulled his hand back, looking at her with wide eyes. "That's not surprising," he growled softly, his eyes narrowing again. He continued to spread the balm agent on her skin when the bottle suddenly cracked in his other hand. He was letting his own anger get the best of him. He swore softly under his breath as the stuff started to leak out. "I'll get another bottle," he said without looking at her. He turned away to climb back up the ladder. He cleaned off his hand and wrapped it, noticing a trickle of blood.

Azumi waited for him to come back, risking a glance down at the first burn she was given. She sighed heavily, frowning at the scorpion and remembering that one of the first things Sasori told her was that he was going to trip her of her identity. The thought made her wonder why she even felt bad for him just a couple of minutes ago. Her thoughts were interrupted when Gaara returned. "You hurt yourself..." she mumbled, noticing he had wrapped his hand.

"It's nothing," Gaara said softly, opening the new bottle. He finished with the burn and then picked up a fresh roll of gauze. "Hold your arms out to the side," he instructed her. He waited for her to do as he asked and started to wind the bandage around her so it was snug and fit a little more comfortably on her chest. "He really needs to work on his wrapping skills," Gaara said, taking a step back to look at his handiwork. "Does it feel okay?" he asked her.

She nodded and gave him a small smile. "It does. Thank you," she said as she put her dress back on. "It is very much appreciated."

Gaara nodded. "I'll try to help you whenever we are in the shop," he said, turning to put the bottle away. "I know it's not much but it's all I can offer right now," he said, climbing back up the ladder. He opened his mouth to say something more when he heard the slight sound of Sasori’s nearly silent footsteps enter the shop.

Sasori pushed back the curtain and glared at them both. "I leave for less than an hour and you two think it’s break time?" he asked, looking at them both with a raised eyebrow.

"I needed to numb my chest again," she said to him with a bow. "He was just giving me the cooling
agent."

Sasori looked at her cooly, humming softly. He hooked his finger on the fabric of her dress and checked the dressing. “You’ve improved,” he said to Gaara who joined them on the ground floor.

"Thank you," Gaara said with a nod.

"Did you enjoy your walk?" Azumi asked him, hoping he was actually able to clear his head.

Sasori huffed through his nose. “I did. That child has a death wish and he’s testing my societal graces,” he said with a lofty tone.

"He does it because he knows he can get a reaction out of you," she frowned. "Every time you act on your anger, you are giving him what he wants."

Sasori gave her a dangerous smirk. “You think I don’t know that, Snake?” He looked down at her. “How could I deny an imbecile the beating he so clearly deserves when no one else seems to bother? He is babied by his family.”

She furrowed her brow. "Is spite not enough of a motivator? He may deserve it, but if he wants it, why give it to him?"

Sasori turned to her fully, folding his arms over his chest. “Because if you haven’t noticed,” he smirked, leaning down to look her in the eyes getting very close. “I have rather violent tendencies that I like to entertain.” His voice was low, it was almost a whisper. “Now unless you want to take on Deidara’s punishments I suggest you get back to work.”

She held back a sigh and bit her tongue. "Yes," she said. She bowed and went back to the front of the shop.

"Gaara! Boil some marshmallow root," he said, returning to the second level.

"On it," Gaara nodded and did as he was told.

The three of them worked for the rest of the day without incident. An hour after sundown Sasori stood up from the books and walked out to the shop front. "We're leaving," he told her. "Gaara will close up the shop."

Azumi nodded and looked at Gaara. "Thank you for today," she said with a bow. "I look forward to working with you again."

"The pleasure is mine," he said softly. "And please remember what I said," he told her, making sure Sasori was out of earshot. "I am your friend."

She smiled at him. "I will remember that," she said quietly.

Sasori was already at the door. "Today," he said, tapping his fingers on the frame.

Azumi nodded. "Goodnight," she said to Gaara before joining Sasori at the door. Sasori wasted no time in leaving with her.

“Goodnight,” Gaara said softly once he was alone.
"Today was not nearly as productive as I wanted it to be," Sasori grumbled as they walked out into the night air. "I'll have to tell Gaara to double down tomorrow."

Azumi hummed as she followed him, looking around as they walked and enjoying the cooler temperatures of the night. Naga slithered quickly behind them, feeling the still-remaining warmth of the sand. "Will we be returning the shop tomorrow as well?" she asked him.

"No," Sasori said coolly. "Today was not a planned trip in. We still need to work on what I wanted to get done at home," he grumbled as they turned down a street to the mansion. Lights glowed in between the linen and pillars. "Ugh, the old hag has people over."

Azumi groaned quietly, not exactly in the mood to deal with more people. "Are guests not a normal occasion for Lady Chiyo?"

"Not really," he mumbled. "At least not this late. I don't really know what she does during the day," he said, walking up the steps. They could hear the sounds of voices coming from the left of the house. The clicking of ceramic and the aromatic smell of tea wafted towards them.

"Sasori should be home soon," Chiyo spoke up.

Sasori groaned softly and took Azumi's wrist. "Let's go!" he whispered urgently, pulling her towards his room.

"Oh, Lord Sasori," a servant said, stopping them in their tracks. "Lady Chiyo requests your presence for the guests."

Azumi and Sasori shared a look before looking at the servant. "Tell her I'm sick and am retiring early," Sasori ordered.

The servant frowned, looking worried. They did not want to cross Sasori or their lady. "I...yes sir," they nodded, scampering off.

"Weak," a woman's voice said up the hall. Sasori's eyes snapped up to see an auburn-haired woman with green eyes swaying up the hall to them.

"I doubt anyone will contest it," Sasori smirked, relaxing a little. "Are they still trying to get us married?"

The woman scoffed quietly and smirked back at him. "They're convinced we're destined to be together."

'Marriage?' Azumi thought, mentally rolling her eyes. 'This man? Impossible.'

"But as much as we know it wouldn't happen, I still could not pass up a chance to come to see you," she said.

"Destined," Sasori rolled his eyes. "What a disgusting word." He walked towards the new woman, wrapping an arm around her waist. "It's been nearly six months since we last saw each other," he smirked. "I was starting to think you didn't like me anymore, Mei," he mock-pouted.

"Never," she said with a fake gasp. "How could anyone ever stop liking someone as handsome as
'Ugh, spare me,' Azumi thought, actually rolling her eyes this time. 'He is handsome, but that only goes so far when he is a monster.'

"You flatter me," Sasori chuckled, giving her a wicked smirk. He leaned in and kissed her cheek. "Are you still trying to see that boy?" he asked, stepping back.

"Yes, actually," Mei grinned. "I think he's going to propose." Her keen eyes landed on Azumi. "I see you've got a new toy," she said coyly, swaying over to look Azumi over. "She's much prettier than your last few."

"Yes, and she's proving to be much more competent than the last ones as well," he smirked. Azumi gave them a thankful nod.

"My, my, is that a compliment from you, my dear Sasori?" Mei giggled, lifting Azumi's chin with the tip of her finger. "How rare."

"That should mean something," he hummed.

Naga slithered up the back of Azumi's dress and Mei peeked around at the snake. "She came with a pet?" she chuckled. "And you let her keep it?"

"It was a whim," he waved it off. "She does something rather entertaining with it, too."

"Oh?" the woman smirked at Azumi, taking a step back. "What do you do?" she asked.

"I am a dancer, my lady," Azumi answered with a slight bow. "I dance with snakes."

"You must be living for that," Mei said, looking back at Sasori. "You always were the best with your body. Not like the rest of us bumbling children."

Sasori scoffed through a laugh. "I do recall us bumbling around together plenty of times. Just better than everyone else."

"I retained none of it," she chuckled. "You can never catch me on a dance floor these days. You better put her to good use." Azumi tried her best to not let her reaction to that comment show on her face. "So your grandmother was telling us about that blond brat, Deidara," she continued. "You had a little mishap with him last night. You still haven't killed him?" she chuckled.

"Oh, he shouldn't be moving any time soon," Sasori smirked. "He darkened my shop's doorstep today and I took care of him," he said, looking over his nails.

"Mmm, but he's still alive," Mei giggled. "Maybe you're nicer than you like to let on."

"Or maybe I'm just reveling in the beatings I'm giving him before I finally finish him off," he countered.

"How patient of you," she smirked.

"I'm the most patient man in the world."

Azumi had to look down to hide her face, not wanting to laugh in front of them.

"How did you say that without dying." Mei threw her head back, cackling.
"With great will and determination," he chuckled himself with a twitch to his eye.

"You're probably ready to keel over right now," she grinned. "Well, I'll leave you to escape from your grandmother before she realizes you're home."

"You're the best," he smirked, kissing her cheek again. "Meet me there," he said, turning to Azumi. Azumi sighed quietly and turned, heading toward Sasori's room. He pulled Mei close again and tucked a piece of her hair back. "I'm expecting a wedding invitation if the Uchiha boy mans up and asks you."

"You'll get the first invitation," Mei smirked.

"Good," he whispered.

"Sasoriinii!" Chiyo's shrill voice came from the other end of the house. "Is that boy really not home yet! How disrespectful!"

"See you later," he smirked, kissing Mei's cheek again before slipping down the hall. He entered his room and took Azumi's hand, pulling her into the bath. "Be quiet," he said, pressing a finger to his lips.

She nodded and stood there with him, listening for whatever he was hiding from. Naga hissed softly and she gently pressed a finger to his nose to keep him quiet as well.

"Milord?" There was a small stampede outside of his room. The sound of many voices chorusing his name echoed in the room itself.

"Oh, thank god, Chiyo didn't come herself," he sighed as the voices withdrew from his room and slipped down the hall. Once he was sure they had moved on, he relaxed.

"Shall I start your bath?" Azumi asked, already moving toward the faucets.

"Yes," he smirked. "A bath sounds amazing after today." He walked over to the lanterns in the room and started to light them as she started the bath. He circled the room, stopping in front of the shelves that were filled with products.

She took the oils and salts she figured he would want to use and added them to the bath. Once it was at the perfect temperature between 'lukewarm and scalding' she turned the faucets off. She went into his room to grab his robe and hung it up on its usual hook in the bathroom. He watched her work, smirking as she moved. "Will you be needing anything else?" she asked.

"No, I think that will be all for now," he said as he started to strip. "Change and report back before I am done," he ordered, slipping into the water.

"I will be quick," Azumi nodded. She bowed and left the bathroom, heading into the workshop to the cabinet he kept her clothes in. She found the clothes she had been wearing when she was on the stage being sold as a slave. It surprised her a little that he kept them. She shifted through the rest of the clothes in the cabinet and found the next most comfortable outfit from her own, putting it on quickly while being careful not to ruin the dressing around her chest that Gaara wrapped. Once she was dressed, she went back into his room, sitting on the daybed for a couple of minutes until she figured he would be almost done with his bath. She could hear the guests leaving, meaning Sasori was no longer in hiding. Once she was sure they were gone, she went into the bathroom to grab him a towel as he got out of the bath.

Just as she walked in he stood up and flashed her a smirk. "How punctual," he grinned, taking the
towel from her and drying off.

"That is what you want, is it not?" she asked. "Someone competent and punctual? I have learned that you hate to be kept waiting."

"It is exactly what I want." Sasori took her jaw in his hand and pulled her close. "I'm starting to think you are too good to be true," he chuckled darkly, releasing her jaw and turning on the ball of his foot. He pulled his robe on before walking out of the bathroom and walked over to a case that leaned in the corner of his room then walked with it to his bed. "Punctual, competent and she can dance," he grinned. "I'm not so sure you weren't sent to kill me," he said, pulling an instrument out of the case as he sat in the middle of his bed.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "You seem too well-respected in this society for a hit to be placed on you," she smirked. "Unless you have unknowingly crossed someone from another region." She sighed, shifting her weight to one hip and folding her arms. "I can assure you I was not sent here to kill you."

"I've got my enemies," he said with a wicked smirk. "But I will trust your word for now. Now I've heard about and seen quite a bit of your dancing today," he said. "So I think it is time that I really see what you can actually do."

Naga slithered up her leg and wrapped around her waist, hissing softly at her. She nodded to him and then looked at Sasori. "We are ready," she said. Sasori nodded and pressed the instrument to his lips. He started to play a melody. It started out flowing and was easily turning into something hypnotic. Naga started moving first, immediately getting hypnotized by the music. Azumi watched him closely for a second before imitating him with her hips and moving along. As she moved, the music started to get to her as well. She continued to move, her head started to get fuzzy. 'Oh, no,' she thought, realizing she was losing control of herself.

Sasori watched them move with extreme intent and fascination. He continued to play, swelling the music once in a while and then bringing it down low. He noticed right away that Naga moved in near perfect time with the music. Almost as if it was the music itself that was moving him. And it was. The snake had no control in his body and neither did Azumi. Her mind was fuzzy enough for the music to completely control her.

Sasori's attention shifted from the snake back to Azumi. She was matching the snake's movements in the very same way. He smirked and moved a little closer to the end of the bed. 'She's being charmed,' he realized, his eyes lighting up. He noted that it did not take too long for her and the snake to completely lose control of their bodies. They kept moving, following the music mindlessly. He smirked and got up from his bed, continuing to play as he got up to move with her and the snake in the dance. Again, he played with the swell of the music and moved his body closer to hers, curious about how she would react. Hearing the music get closer made her mind get even fuzzier. She wanted to pull away from him but she could not move away. He grinned, pressing his body against hers and moving together as he kept playing. He glanced over at Naga and noticed that anything they did he would copy, despite not having a partner.

'He has figured it out,' Azumi thought. 'This is bad.' She tried to pull herself out of it but he was too close.

He grinned as he pulled the instrument away from his lips and looked at her closely. "How precious," he chuckled. "My little snake can be charmed," he said lowly, not breaking eye contact.

Azumi frowned and sighed. The last thing she wanted to for him to realize he could actually control her. She took a step back from him. "I hope our short performance was good enough for
"you," she said, resisting an eye roll.

"It was all that and more." His grin stayed predatory. "It was very informative," he said, finally pulling away from her to sit back down on his bed. "You are dismissed for the night," he said, putting his instrument back in its case.

Azumi stared at him for a moment, not liking the look on his face. She sighed again and then bowed. "Goodnight," she said. She came up from the bow and went to her room. She passed a couple of servants on the way who gave her looks she tried to ignore. Once she was in her room she let out the groan she had been holding in since they came back from the shop. She looked out the small window of her room. Naga hissed at her quietly, coiling up on her bed. "He knows now," she said to him. "He can use it against us." She opened the window and moved her dresser underneath it to sit on. She spent the entire night staring out of the window, only realizing the night had passed when the color of the sky started to change from black to indigo. She sighed, knowing that Sasori was going to send someone to wake her up. "You should stay here today," she told Naga. "I do not want him to do anything to you."

Behind her, the door to her room was pushed open. Sasori watched her sit in her window for a moment. He smirked and crept up behind her, silently lifting his chin over her shoulder so he could speak lowly in her ear. "If you try to run," he said softly, "I'll really make you a snake and cut off your limbs."

She jumped and almost screamed but he was quick enough to cover her mouth before it could come out. As soon as she realized it was him, she hummed. There was no way to truly relax around this man. "I had no intentions of running, I assure you," she said behind his hand.

"I'm sure you didn't," he grinned, pulling back. "We're finishing all that work we missed yesterday," he told her. "Get dressed." He sat on her bed and picked up Naga, smirking at the creature and wrapping it around his shoulders. She got off of the dresser and opened it, sifting through the clothes and finding another comfortable outfit. Once again, being careful with the wrapping around her chest, she took her clothes off and changed. Once she was done, she looked at Sasori and then looked at Naga.

Sasori frowned, looking at her chest. "You should be able to remove that now," he said, getting up and walking over to the door of the room. He started down the hall. "It doesn't still burn, does it?"

"No," she answered. "It feels fine now." But she did not want to remove the dressing. She did not want to see what he did to her. Covering it could let her forget about it for a while. "We do not need to apply any more of the cooling agent."

They stepped into his room and continued straight to his workshop. "Then those are coming off," he told her as he stopped in front of a full-length mirror. "Come," he demanded coolly, turning to her with a hand on his hip.

'Then what was the point of telling me to get dressed,' Azumi thought, mentally rolling her eyes as she moved closer stepped in front of him.

"I can tell you're avoiding them," he said, pulling her to stand in front of the mirror. "I find that rather disrespectful." He slid his hand under the strap of her dress and down over her shoulder then repeated the action on her other shoulder. "I worked so hard on them to make sure they suited you." His voice was low and close to her neck. His fingertips traced down her spine and started to undo the bandages around her chest.

Her breath hitched and she looked at him in the mirror. "I do not mean to disrespect you," she said.
She looked down and sighed. "But I have been keeping them wrapped so there would be no infection. Since you have expressed how much you do not want to deal with one."

"We both know that you aren't stupid," he said, running his hand down her side and gripping her hip tightly where the scorpion brand was. "I know you've barely glanced at this one." The dressings around her chest fell away. "The threat of infection has passed. Now you must let them air out." His hands moved up her sides and to her chest. "Look how beautiful it turned out," he said with a threat in his voice that meant not looking was not really an option.

Slowly, her gaze moved to the burn on her chest. She could not have imagined what it would look like. But she was not surprised when she saw it. It was a beautiful design. If it had been a painting on a canvas or on just about any other surface, she would have been able to admire it. She would have loved it. But it was on her skin. She hated it.

Very delicately, Sasori traced his fingers over the raised skin. "No canvas could compare to you," he smirked, whispering in her ear. He pulled away after a few moments. "As I said, leave it undone so that it gets air, you shouldn't get infected at this point," he hummed, turning to light a few burners.

She sighed and pulled the top of her dress back up then picked up the old wrapping to throw it out. It did not help that most of the clothes she had left the region where the burn was bare. "What work did we miss yesterday?" she asked him, stepping away from the mirror but not bothering to look at him.

"We have everything on that list," he said, pointing to a notepad that was nearly filled with orders. "Which you will need to handle because I promised to have a special order for one of my clients done by tomorrow and it needs to set overnight." He sighed, tucking a piece of his hair back as he poured over what looked like a very complex recipe.

She looked at the notepad and picked it up, reading it carefully. She started with the first order. It was simple and something she had done before she was a slave. The next couple of orders resembled the large batch they made for Kakuzu. Since she had done it just a couple of days before, she knew what she was doing. The rest of the orders were actual complex orders. It took her a little longer to work on them but by the time Sasori was finished with his special order just after noon, she finished the last of the orders in the notepad.

Sasori finally pulled his eyes away from his notes when he noticed she had stopped moving. "Finished already?" he asked with a smirk. He got up to look over her work. "I should say I'm impressed but I'm coming to expect such quality from you," he said softly as he picked up a bottle of the special order and looked at it through the sunlight.

She glanced up at him as he looked through the bottle and then looked back down at the notepad, checking off the last order to mark it as complete. "As I said, I have worked with similar compositions, and once you have done one, you have done them all."

"Hmh." He put the bottle back down. "If that were true for everyone I wouldn't have had such an issue keeping slaves." He pulled a wooden box out from under the workbench and started to put the order away. "There should be smaller boxes down there for the single orders. Box them up and we can break for food," he ordered just as there was a knock at his bedroom door. Sasori let out a soft groan as he turned to see who it was right when his grandmother walked through the door.

"Hello, Grandmother," he said with a frown. "To what do we owe this visit?"

"We have company that I would like you to be present for," Chiyo said.
'Oh, great, more people,' Azumi thought, rolling her eyes as she boxed up the orders he told her to.

"Your uncle is here," Chiyo continued. "And you know how rare visits are from him since he is so busy."

Sasori's eye twitched. "Do I really need to—"

"You skipped out on the Terumis!" A fire burned in Chiyo's eyes. "You will not skip this one! Now make yourselves ready and meet us in the tea room!" Her tone was not to be argued against. She turned and left, leaving a snarling Sasori.

Azumi could hear the quiet growl he made while she continued to box up the orders. "Would you like me to continue this while you go?" she asked him. "I can start another order for you if you would like."

"No," he said with grit to his teeth. "I'm not dealing with him alone." He rolled his eyes. "He's going to ask you questions so just be prepared," he huffed.

"Very well then," she hummed. She boxed up a couple of more orders. "Ready whenever you are," she told him. 'Which will be never,' she thought, mentally rolling her eyes.

Sasori snorted but then spent the next twenty minutes preening himself. When he finally emerged from the bathroom he sighed heavily. "Let's go."

"Leaving so soon?" A tall, dark-haired man with sharp eyes walked into the room, carrying a tray of tea.

Azumi looked at the man as he walked in. "Oh," she meant to say in her mind but accidentally let it slip from her mouth. She could not help but be taken with his appearance. The man flashed her a charming and friendly smile and she felt her heart race.

Sasori caught the sound she made and in the same moment sent a glare her way. "Uncle, I was just coming out to meet with you."

"Nonsense," he smiled, setting the tea tray down on Sasori's desk. "I heard you made improvements to your lab and I wanted to see. But first," he smiled at Azumi again, "pleasure to meet you, young lady." He bowed slightly and took her hand to press a kiss to it. "I'm Sandaime, Sasori's uncle. Who might you be?"

"My sla—" Sandaime's sharp eyes narrowed at the word Sasori was about to say. Sasori quickly corrected himself, "my help," he finished.

Azumi tried to keep her composure and not laugh at the tinge of fear in Sasori's eyes. She looked back at the man in front of her, unable to keep a smile off of her face when he looked at her. "My name is Azumi, my lord," she said with a bow of her own.

"What a beautiful name," he hummed, straightening out. "Would you like a cup of tea? It's Darjeeling. Just came in fresh from the fields!" he grinned, already pouring a cup out for her.

Sasori hid his irritation by turning and sitting down on the bed. He caught Azumi's eye. "Traitor," he mouthed to her.

Azumi caught it and smirked then looked back at Sandaime, smiling as he handed her the tea. "Thank you," she said to him. He pulled out the desk chair for her to sit. 'I want to be his slave,' she thought as she sat down.
Sandaime poured out a cup for Sasori next then sat down on the day bed with a cup of his own. "Where is it you come from, Azumi?" he asked taking a sip of his tea. "Your manner of speech leads me to believe you are noble?" His tone was kind and warm.

She sipped her tea and nodded. "I am...or rather I was. My father is the head of the village I come from. A village very far from here."

"Mmm," he nodded. "And...you have no debts to repay on your village's behalf, do you?" he asked. His eyes flickered to Sasori.

She watched him look at Sasori. "Ah, no, my lord," she answered. "This is not a debt to be repaid by my village. My service to Lord Sasori happened by chance."

"I see," Sandaime nodded and sipped his tea, looking at Sasori again.

"Stop looking at me like that," Sasori huffed. "I paid for her. I did not take her from her home myself."

Azumi nodded. "I can assure you that he did pay for me fairly and legally. Well, as fair and legal as this sort of business can be."

"Which is not at all," he lifted his chin. "But that aside," he looked her over then to Sasori once more, "I truly did want to see the new additions to your workshop," he smiled at the increasingly irritated Sasori. Sasori ground his teeth as he sipped his tea once more. "You've been really making a name for yourself and your apothecary with Gaara."

Sasori gave Sandaime a thankful nod, the irritation still on his face. "He's been doing very well keeping the shop when I'm not there," he said as he stood up. "Come see," he told his uncle. Sandaime stood up, setting his tea on the desk next to Azumi as he followed Sasori into the workshop.

Azumi watched them disappear behind the curtain and let out the smallest squeal once she was alone. 'This is a family of very attractive men,' she thought. 'And he is nice.'

Sasori turned to his uncle once they were in the shop. "Do not try to take her from me," he hissed, rounding the table in the middle of the room. "She is the best help I have ever had and I will not lose her," he growled lowly, glaring at his uncle.

Sandaime looked around the room, his expression neutrally curious. "My, my, the little scorpion is growing bold," he said lightly, looking at a plant hanging to dry.

"I just know how you are about this situation," Sasori said, his eyes following his uncle as he moved.

"I am like that because of your...history," Sandaime said.

Sasori scoffed. "Most of the time they got themselves killed."

Sandaime's face twisted in disgust. "They were human beings just like yourself."

"Oh, don't act to lofty, Uncle," Sasori spat back. "Just because you call your people 'the help' does not put you on some mighty pedestal." Suddenly there was a loud crack. Sasori's cheek burned and his right eye teared up involuntarily.

"It does when you pay them and treat them with basic human respect," Sandaime hissed, returning
Azumi heard the slap and froze. She was pretty sure it was Sasori being slapped by his uncle, which he probably—no, definitely—deserved, but it made her worry about how it would be taken out on her once his uncle was gone.

"She is paid with a place to sleep," Sasori said evenly.

"Oh, I'm sure she is," the Sandaime scoffed. "And what else? Your barbaric marking rituals?" he growled lowly. "I saw the way you dragged her off the other night." Sasori's eyes narrowed. He bit back a growl of his own. "I guarantee you have only given her one outfit and a world of pain because you keep your head around that Deidara child."

"You sound like Gaara," Sasori growled. "Deidara earned what he got and she is clearly still alive and unharmed." The growl slipped through this time.

"Unharmed?" Sandaime almost laughed. "Don't think I didn't notice the cuts on her hands. And my eyesight hasn't yet caught up to my age because, correct me if I'm wrong, but the exposed region of her torso looks like it was marked fairly recently. You call that unharmed?"

Sasori's eyes narrowed again, "The cuts are a result of her doing her job," he retorted. "We were completing orders right before you walked in." He flashed his own hands which had a few cuts of their own. "As for the mark on her chest, if your eyes are as keen as you say they are then you would notice that it is a clean and well taken care of decorative," he huffed.

"You're missing the point, Sasori," Sandaime growled. "You taking care of it does not justify the harm you are causing her. This is why your grandmother is always apprehensive about giving you new ones."

Sasori gripped the table tightly. "She does not give me anything." He was starting to lose his temper. "I pay for each and every one of them with my own earnings! If she had a better eye for choosing help then I would not have blown through so many!"

Sandaime moved his hand again, causing Sasori just to flinch a little in anticipation of being slapped again. But instead of doing that, his uncle placed his hand on the table and leaned in close, lowering his voice. "She may not have the courage to put you in your place, but I do," he said. "If this girl dies, she will be your last one." The two men glared at each other. "And if I come back two days from now and see you've thrown another tantrum on her body, I won't hesitate to show you my wrath," he said, pulling away. Sandaime turned and walked back out to the bedroom. He flashed Azumi a big smile.

Azumi's heart jumped when he smiled at her. He made her feel the exact opposite way his nephew made her feel. She smiled back at him and he stepped closer to her, keeping his voice low. "Let me know if he does anything harmful to you again," he said.

Azumi held in the gasp. "I will," she said softly with a bow. "Thank you, my lord."

He nodded and again smiled at her. "I must get going," he said, gathering the tea stuff. He looked back toward the workshop. "Behave, Sasori," he called to his nephew. He smiled at Azumi again. "And it was lovely meeting you," he said with a bow and another kiss to the back of her hand. Sasori stepped out of the workshop moodier than ever.

"It was lovely meeting you as well, Lord Sandaime," she said with a bow of her own. He smiled at her again and turned to leave. 'What a charming man,' Azumi thought as she watched the door.
close behind him. Once they were alone, she turned back to Sasori and the feelings that his uncle left her with her washed away almost completely. "I will finish boxing those orders," she told him, stepping into the workshop.

He glared at her and threw his hand out, blocking the doorway to the workshop as she tried to walk in. He turned to her, walking her up against the wall. "If you think," he took her jaw in a rough, tight hold, "for one second that he can or will save you," he leaned in closer, making very direct eye contact, his lips brushing hers as he spoke, "he won't. I won't let him take what's mine."

Her breath hitched as she tried to back away from him but could not. Her hand gripped the frame of the door and her heart started to race. "I assure you," she started, feeling uncomfortable from the extreme eye contact and the feeling of their lips barely touching, "those were not and are not my expectations."

He hummed, looking at her for a few more moments before dropping her jaw and walking back into the workshop. "Finish up whatever you need to over there then come help me with this," he grumbled, sitting back down in front of his earlier work.

She lingered against the wall for a moment after he entered the workshop. Pressing her hand to her chest, she let out the heavy breaths she had been holding in and tilted her head back against the wall. She groaned quietly, rubbing her face. 'This man will literally be the death of me,' she thought, feeling her blood pressure rise. She stepped into the workshop and continued to box up all of the orders she worked on in the morning. Once they were done, she set them down on a work table for completed orders and then joined Sasori at another work table, trying to keep her distance from him.

Sasori noted the distance but said nothing. Instead, he took her by the wrist and yanked her closer. "I'm not going to bite," he said dully. "I need you to watch the reaction I'm about to make and record your observation." He picked up a pipette filled with one liquid and pulled a small dish closer to them. She held back a scoff and resisted an eye roll as she picked up a notepad that was nearby. She watched him make the reaction, looking at every part of it intently and writing down what she saw. The smell of it made her nauseous but she pushed through it until he was done. Once it was done, she took a step back and finished recording her observation before handing it to him. His face was set in deep concentration while he read her notes. "Mm, this will need more refining," he sighed. "It won't be done in time if I stop now." He grumbled about unwanted guests and interruptions as he turned back to the initial recipe. He changed a few things and started again.

She flipped to a new page in the notepad, watching closely as he started the reaction again. It did not look much different to her when she looked at it but she recorded what she saw and the differences from the first trial were very minute. She handed him the notepad again. 'I think I know how to fix it,' she thought. She looked at the small sheet of paper he wrote the original and the fixed recipe on, writing a small equation to figure out how to help it.

Sasori's eye caught her writing after he took the notepad. "Did you have any suggestions?" he asked offhandedly. He figured any thoughts she had could be trusted considering her talents thus far.

She hummed softly as she read over the recipe a couple of more times. "Maybe just one," she said. Naga slithered into the workshop and up her leg to wrap around her waist. She looked around for a milking jar and found one on a shelf. She put the jar against Naga's mouth and he injected a little bit into it. "I am not saying to use it instead of your scorpion venom," she told Sasori as she handed him the jar. "But if you use it with...you might find the result to be closer to where you want it." She took a step back and gently pet Naga's head. "And if it does not work then try some sort of
Hooded eyes looked at the jar as he took it from her. "I will begrudgingly try your snake venom." He smirked and adjusted the recipe again. "Do you think a plant-based poison would be better than another animal base?" he asked her, getting caught up in making the poison. He pulled down several jars and started to smile a little as he moved.

She hummed again, thinking about it for a moment. "To use an animal and a plant in the same recipe may cause it to cancel out," she said. "If you have already put an animal in there, it would probably be best to put another animal to amplify." She shrugged and put Naga on the floor so he could slither out of the workshop. "But this is only just a hunch, I am not exactly sure."

He hummed. "In my experience, a plant and an animal usually work together if they have the right compounds." He made the base again, adding a small amount to a few dishes and then added the snake venom. "I'm thinking one of these five will work. Two are plant-based, one is scorpion and the other two are snake."

She nodded and stood up straight, grabbing the notepad again and labeling the next couple of pages to correlate with each dish's ingredients. She watched as he made the reaction with the first one and then the second one. He immediately followed with the next three. There was a difference in reaction from the first attempts but she did not know exactly what he was going for so she just recorded her observation as she normally would.

He grinned at the two that reacted differently. "These two were made with a plant and the scorpion." He hummed, pulling them closer. "The one with the plan is closer to the effect I'm going for but the scorpion is a good fall back."

She nodded and hummed. "Is 'closer to the effect' good enough for you?" she asked, shifting her weight onto one hip. "Or do you want the full effect?"

"I prefer the full effect," he hummed, leaning back and chewing on his lip. "I have an idea of what to add but did you have another suggestion?"

"No," she answered with a slight sigh. "I have no other suggestions. If this is good enough for you, then I have exhausted my ideas."

Sasori frowned a little, some of the excitement leaving him. "That's disappointing." He looked up at his shelves. "I think I know what to add," he said, opening a jar that was filled with purple powder. She rolled her eyes and moved to stand next to him again, picking up the notepad again to record the reaction. She watched as he mixed the purple powder in and wrote down exactly what she saw. The mixture hissed and then turned a light blue before fading to a crystal clear. "Perfect," he grinned. It looked entirely different from what they had seen before. "This will please the client and I can tell them off because they said I couldn't do it," he smirked smugly.

"And this a respected man in society,' she thought, scoffing quietly. "When are they coming to get it?" she asked.

"Tomorrow," he said, getting up to grab a set of dark brown bottles and a box. He started to mix a larger batch of the liquid they had made together. "This particular client likes to test my limitations constantly. But a good challenge is nice once in a while."

"So you have said," she said, setting the notepad down on the table. "So what else are we going to work on?"
"Nothing for now," he said. "I suppose you're hungry right about now." He looked at her. "You can eat and then return," he said before turning and concentrating on what he was doing.

She nodded and bowed before leaving the workshop and picking Naga up on her way out of the room. She wrapped the snake around herself and headed back to her bedroom. She would not tell him that she was not hungry. She just wanted to get away from him for a little while. She laid down on her bed and Naga coiled up next to her. She sighed and closed her eyes, hoping to take a short nap to make up for the sleep she missed out on the night before.
A little while later, Azumi woke up to Naga hissing softly at her and tapping his nose against her's. He did not want her to oversleep and suffer some cruel punishment for not returning to Sasori on time. "Thank you," she groaned, kissing the top of the snake's head. She figured it was about time for Sasori to want to take his bath so she got up and went back to his room, leaving Naga behind this time.

Sasori was laying on his back with his eyes covered by a book when she walked in. "You're back," he said in a rough, soft voice. He had clearly been sleeping.

"I am," she answered as she rubbed her own tiredness from her face. "Shall I start your bath?" she asked, as she was already heading to the bathroom.

"Mhm," he growled softly as he stretched. He got up and followed her into the bathroom and started to strip his clothes off. She tried her best not to look at him as he took his clothes off. She hated herself for being attracted to him. "You said those other snakes would be arriving tomorrow right?" he asked as he chose what oil and salt he wanted for his bath that night.

"I said that yesterday," she said as she turned the faucets. "Which means they arrived today. Hopefully, Lord Gaara knew to just put them in the tank we prepared."

Sasori paused. "Right," he hummed. "We'll go down tomorrow then and check on them," he sighed. "Ugh, I hate when my uncle visits," he groaned as he walked back out to his room to grab his robe.

She took the jars of oil and salts that he chose for his bath and put them into the water then turned the faucets off when the water was at the right temperature. She looked at him as he walked back in and did not catch herself staring until she made eye contact with him. "How often does he visit?" she asked, trying not to make it completely obvious that she stared at him.

His lip twitched into a smirk when he noticed her watching him. "He comes around every few months," he said, slipping into the tub once she was finished pouring everything in. "I see him every other visit typically. When he forces his way into my room."

"I see," she hummed, setting the jar back on the shelf. She turned back to him. "Will you be needing anything else?"

"No, not tonight," he hummed. "You're dismissed," he said, sinking low into the tub. He watched her from just below the surface of the water.

She nodded and bowed. "Goodnight then," she said. She left and went back to her room. Naga looked up at her from the bed and hissed softly. She took her previous spot atop the dresser, looking out the window at the river that ran behind the mansion. She wanted to take a walk along the river. Just a short one. After a couple of minutes, she made the decision to climb out of the window. She heard the sound of the water being moved and noticed a water snake moving up the river. It took notice of her and swam toward her, slithering onto the land and wrapping around her ankle. "Hello," she smiled, sitting down in the sand to pick the snake up. The snake hissed softly at her. Further up the bank, someone was slowly making their way towards her. She noticed them, seeing the red hair and almost thinking it was Sasori. Her heart
sank, not wanting to deal with getting caught outside. As the person got closer, she realized it was Gaara. She smiled and stood up. "Good evening, Lord Gaara," she said with a bow. "I have to admit I just got nervous. I thought I was about to be caught out here."

Gaara smiled serenely at her. "I'm sorry if I startled you," he said. "I like taking walks along the river to clear my head," he told her, looking down at the snake wrapped around her arm. "I see you made a new friend," he chuckled.

"I did," she smiled fondly, looking down at the snake. "I was also about to take a walk and then this little one approached me."

He chuckled again when the snake flicked its tongue at them. "They really flock to you," he said. "Those other snakes you mentioned came and...I'm not sure if they were okay with being put in the tank but they didn't seem to give me any trouble."

"That is perfect," she said. "They will be fine there for now. Tomorrow, I will be able to properly home them. Thank you for your help." She looked at the mansion really quick and then back at him. She smiled and sat back down in the sand, patting the spot next to her for him to sit with her.

He joined her on the sand and smiled. "So my uncle was around today," he smirked. "Does that mean you also received a visit?"

She chuckled softly. "Yes," she said. "I did meet him today. He is a very sweet man."

Gaara smirked at her. "You can say he was handsome," he laughed, leaning back and tucking his arms behind his head. "He has that effect on women." His giggle was boyish.

"So far, all of the men I have met in your family are handsome," she smirked down at him. "Granted, I have only met three of you, but...you are all handsome." She chuckled and let the snake slither back into the water. "He seems to be the only person who can strike fear into your cousin."

Gaara caught the compliment to him and blushed a little in the darkness. "Our uncle does not tolerate slavery," Gaara hummed. "And he particularly hates what Sasori gets away with. It's something of a family feud." He thought for a second. "He's not afraid of Sasori because they both could destroy each other...at least it seems like they could."

"Just from the slap that I heard, I do not think it would take much effort on the part of your uncle," she said. "It is so interesting to see how two different men can be brutal in different ways." She smirked and looked down at Gaara. "What about you? How brutal can you be?"

His eyes narrowed and he smirked devilishly. "What makes you think there is a brutal bone in this body?" he asked, rolling onto his side to look up at her. "I'm not partial to it but my relationship with my father has...propelled me to learn formal fighting."

"Mm, I saw the way you almost crushed that bottle in your hand yesterday," she smirked.

He chuckled again. "Right, I almost forgot about that," he said, looking at his hand over his head. She laid down on her side, facing him and resting her head on her hand. "Is your father similar to Lord Sasori in the sense that he is also prone to lashing out in anger?"

"He is. He's not a kind man in any way. I'm starting to think someone cruel is born in this family every generation."

"It is almost like a curse," she hummed. "What an odd curse that is." She looked at him and smiled.
"Thankfully, it was not you who suffered it for your generation."

"I couldn't be that needlessly cruel," he smiled as he rolled on to his back again. "I just don't have the heart for it."

"You are an absolute breath of fresh air compared to him," she mumbled. She looked behind her and noticed a glossy snake slithering toward her. It hissed quietly and coiled up next to her. She gently stroked the top of its head.

He chuckled, watching the snake. "Do they all speak the same language?" he asked.

"They do but each type of snake has a different dialect," she said. "They can all understand each other for the most part. And I have never had a hard time understanding their dialects. You have a lot of different snakes in this part of the desert." She leaned in close to the snake and tapped her nose against its nose. "They are all approaching me to introduce themselves."

"That's precious," Gaara chuckled, watching her interact with the snake. "Yeah, sometimes they can be a problem since there are so many, but I don't mind them," he shrugged.

Azumi stroked the snake for a couple more seconds before it slithered away. "I am glad you do not mind them," she hummed, watching as the snake left. She looked Gaara again and smiled. "How often do you come out here?"

"Most nights," he said. "It's nice to have someone to share it with," he smiled at her. "Do you think you'll make this a regular thing?"

"If I can manage to sneak out, I would like to," she said. "There are nights where I sleep in my own room but then there are nights where I sleep in his room." She laid on her back next to him. "So it may not be as consistent as I would like."

"He makes you sleep with him?" Gaara gasped, sitting up to look at her. "Tell me it's for work." He frowned, already ready to get up and kick Sasori's ass.

Azumi looked at him and placed her hand over his. "He has not done anything to me," she assured him. "It was just the night he made this burn on my chest. He had me sleep in his bed with him." She frowned and looked down. "There is a bed in his room for me that he told me I would sleep in when we are working on projects overnight. So far, I have not slept in that."

Gaara relaxed a little. "Okay," he nodded. "I recommend putting an extra blanket on that bed if you can," he chuckled. "I've spent many nights on that thing. Halfway through the night, the floor starts to seem way more comfortable." He looked at her again, the frown returning. "If he does...try anything, tell me. Immediately."

She smiled softly at him. "Thank you," she said softly, taking his hand in hers. "I very much appreciate it."

He laced his fingers into hers and gently pulled her hand to his lips to press a kiss it to the back of it. "You don't deserve this life," he said softly. "We should probably head back soon," he sighed heavily.

She frowned and looked back at the mansion. "I suppose you are right," she sighed. She looked back at him and the smile crept back onto her face. "As always, I enjoyed speaking with you, Lord Gaara," she said. "You are a wonderful company."

"You can just call me Gaara," he smiled, getting up first. He offered his hand to help her up. "It's
always nice to talk to you too."

She took his hand and stood up. "I look forward to doing this again," she said. "Will you be at the shop tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," he hummed, looking up in thought. "Yes, I will be but Sasori will be opening the shop," he smiled at her. "I have a patient first thing in the morning," he rolled his eyes.

She smiled at him and ran her thumb across the back of his hand before gently pulling back. "Then I will see you tomorrow," she said with a bow. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," he said softly, returning her bow. He turned and started back the way he came with one last look at her in the moonlight.

Azumi turned and started moving back toward the mansion. She found her window easily and climbed into it. From her bed, Naga watched her, hissing quietly and telling her that no one came while she was gone. "See, that was not so bad," she smiled at the snake. She stepped off of the dresser and laid down in her bed. She knew she would have to get up soon to go to the shop with Sasori so she wanted to get some sleep before she had to deal with that. She sighed, making herself comfortable enough for a nap and drifted off.
Chapter 7

The next morning, Sasori made his way down to the slaves' quarters and wrapped his knuckles on Azumi's door. He did not wait for her to respond or even indicate she was in the room before he entered. He had watched her walk back to the mansion the night before. He was sure she had no idea he had seen her but he was also not inclined to let her know that he knew about the little adventure just yet.

When Azumi opened her eyes, she saw Sasori walking into the room. "Good morning," she said as she got up. She did not wait for him to give her the order to get ready, she just started getting ready.

"Morning," he replied coolly and laid on her bed the way he had previously. Again, he pulled Naga onto his chest, stroking the snake's head lightly. "When we get into the shop, I want you to check on those snakes and see if they need feeding," he said. "Then if you can, milk them."

She changed her clothes quickly and nodded at him. "I will probably need to rehome a couple of them," she said. "If there are more than five, we will need a second tank." She finished getting ready and looked at him. "I am ready whenever you are."

He stood up and draped Naga around her shoulders. "A second tank will be delivered then," he said, walking out the door. "I'll send Baki for one," he said almost as if he were talking to himself. Azumi followed him down the halls. Naga hissed softly at her as they walked. They went into Sasori's room and into the workshop. "We're taking these boxes," he told her, pointing to a couple of boxes on the table. "They're the orders we were working on yesterday. The clients are coming to the shop to pick them up." Azumi nodded and picked up the boxes. "Let's go," he said as he started walking again. She followed him out of his room and out of the mansion to the shop. The sun had not fully risen yet it was already extremely hot outside. Sasori glared at the sun as he turned down a different path then they had taken the day before. They headed into the city with the sun bearing down on them. "I'm not in the mood to deal with this," he grumbled, slipping down a shady street. The buildings were in the perfect position to block out the sun for a majority of their walk. They entered the same alleyway as the first time he brought her to the shop. This time though, they entered through the opposite end. Sasori stopped in front of the door and pulled out his key to let them in.

They walked into the shop and she set the boxes down on a counter as they went into the back room. Her attention immediately went to the snake tank that Gaara put the snakes in. "Oh, hello," she smiled at the snakes as she approached the tank. They all raised their heads to look at her and she tapped each of their noses.

Sasori watched each of the snakes flick their tongues as she tapped their noses. He frowned a little then ducked out of the workshop to open up the front of the shop. He walked back in to grab one of the boxes knowing that one particular customer would be there as soon as he opened the door.

Azumi realized the snakes did not need to be fed. She looked around for different jars to milk the snakes, finding six which was just enough. She took the first snake out and sat on the counter. Just as she positioned the snake to start ejecting venom, she heard someone walk into the shop. 'Already?' she thought. 'We just got here.'

"So, where is it, Sasori?" the newcomer asked. It was a man. Azumi could hear the smug look on his face. She peeked out of the workshop into the main shop to look at him. "Were you even able to pull it off?" he asked.
Azumi’s brow furrowed at his question. ‘Is this the person who was challenging him?’


The man opened the box and looked into it. "Whooa," he said, pulling the bottle out of the box and marveling at the liquid inside. It was the poison that Azumi worked with him to make. "It looks really good," the man said. Then he looked at Sasori and smirked, the smug tone coming back. "But does it work?"

The snake Azumi was holding finished filling the jar with its venom and hissed at her. She jumped off of the counter to place it back in the tank and grabbed the next one to be milked.

"That's your part of the job," Sasori smirked. "Have you picked a test subject?" he asked.

"Mm, do you still have a slave?" he smirked. "Let's test it on them."

"I do," Sasori answered. Azumi heard the conversation and gasped. "But I'd rather not test it on her," he continued. "She's busy doing something for me right now." Azumi breathed out in relief.

"Oh?" the man grinned. "But if it works then she should be up and running again in three hours."

"It works but three hours is a lot of time," Sasori huffed, "that I need. You know time is money."

"Then who are we going to test it on?" the man almost pouted. "Your first customer?"

The second snake was done being milked and Azumi placed it back in the tank. She did not grab the third one just yet. She peeked out to the front of the shop again, listening to their conversation.

Sasori hummed. "Azumi," he suddenly called. "Who is second on the list of orders?"

Azumi froze for a second when she heard her name being called and then looked for the list of the day's customers. She stepped out of the workshop with the list. "Somebody named Shiore," she answered.

"Oh-oooh yes!" Sasori's friend grinned. "It's him. He's a pain in the ass anyway."

"Fine, fine," Sasori sighed. "He should be here in about fifteen minutes to pick up his cream."

"Perfect," the man smirked.

Azumi set the list down on the counter for Sasori. "Where would you like me to put the venom?" she asked him.

"There should be an empty shelf down there," Sasori answered, pointing to a low cabinet behind the counter. "We can designate that shelf for it."

Azumi nodded and went back into the workshop to continue milking the rest of the snakes.

"She sounds cute," Sasori's friend said, walking around the counter to peek into the back room. He gasped softly. "Sasori! That's not a slave, she's way too cute!" He grinned at Azumi while she started milking another snake and sashayed over to her with a wide grin. "Name's Komushi," he said, getting very close to her. Azumi let out a quiet groan when he got close and tried not to mess up the milking process of the snake. "You don't look anything like a slave. Sasori, how could you keep such a pretty little thing to yourself?" He put a finger under her chin to turn her head away from the snake and look at him.
Sasori huffed, walking into the workshop. "If she gets bitten because you're distracting her, then you're explaining to Chiyo how she got hurt," Sasori said dully.

Azumi looked at Sasori and then back at Komushi, backing away just a little bit. The snake in her hand was agitated with the stranger that approached them and was threatening to bite.

"No, thanks," Komushi chuckled. "I don't want to explain anything to the old lady."

"Then stop hitting on my slave," Sasori said.

Komushi gave her a wink and then backed away. "So what are you planning with all of those snakes?" he asked, watching Azumi resume her milking.

"I'm playing with new ingredients," Sasori said, opening a book and marking something down. "She thinks snake venom is superior to scorpion venom and I intend to test all of its possibilities out," he smirked, looking at Azumi with a glint in his eyes.

She lifted her head from the snake and looked at Sasori with a raised eyebrow. "I have not used the word 'superior' when it came to the debate on venoms," she said calmly. "I just think that using snake venom means less refining as its properties are already where you would prefer your ingredients to be, Lord Sasori." The snake in her hand was finished being milk and slithered up her arm to wrap around her shoulders. Sasori narrowed his eyes are her, his smirk still present.

"She's a sassy one," Komushi smirked. "Are you going to take that, Lord Sasori," he mimicked the way Azumi had said his name.

Sasori put the book down and closed the small space between himself and his slave. "She knows to be careful," he said, gripping her jaw tight enough that his fingers pressed into her bone. "Unless she wants to find out what that poison does." Azumi let out a quiet groan as he gripped her. The snake around her shoulders hissed in agitation.

"So, now you want to test it on her?" Komushi grinned.

Sasori smirked, opening his mouth to answer and not looking away from Azumi. "Ye—"

"Hello?" a voice came from the front of the shop.

Sasori took a deep breath and dropped her jaw. "No, just test it on Shiore," he said lowly. "Coming," he called out to the customer.

Komushi smirked at her as he walked out. "Saved...for now," he grinned devilishly as he uncorked the bottle and walked out to the workshop.

Azumi gasped once she was alone. She placed the agitated snake back in the tank and took a couple of steps back, trying to remain calm. 'It is too early for this,' she thought. She started to feel bad for the poor soul that just unknowingly saved her.

"Good morning, Shiore," Sasori said casually as if he did not have a heinous plan for this person. He stepped behind the counter and grabbed the item the customer had come to pick up.

"Good morning, Lord Sasori," a seductive voice reached her in the workshop. "Lord Komushi," he bowed his head a little to both men.

"How is your mother doing," Sasori said, making small talk. Komushi walked around the counter and winked at Azumi as he passed by. Azumi rolled her eyes and scoffed quietly, returning to the
snakes to continue milking them.

"She is doing well," Shiore said, "thanks to you."

"I'm glad to hear that," Sasori said.

"Yes, she sends he-" his voice suddenly cut off followed by a heavy thud.

"You couldn't have caught him?" Sasori asked with a small chuckle.

"Ew no, why would I do that?" Komushi chuckled.

"You're going to have to touch him anyway since we have to carry him to the back." Sasori stepped into the back room and grabbed a chair, placing it against one of the other counters in the workshop. Komushi sighed and then lifted Shiore up, hooking his arms underneath Shiore's arms and dragging him to the back room.

Azumi watched as the customer was dragged in and sat in the chair. She furrowed her brow at the two men. 'Did they just...knock this woman out?' she thought.

"Ugh, I hate touching this guy," Komushi wiped himself down. "He always smells so weird."

"You'll get over it," Sasori chuckled, as he picked up a syringe and handed it to Komushi. The other man almost giggled as he took the needle and plunged it into the bottle, filling it up.

"Let's see if you, the great Lord Sasori, master apothecary could handle my challenge," he said dramatically before leaning down to push the needle into his arm.

"No, take his shirt off," Sasori said. "It needs to go into his chest."

'This guy?' Azumi thought. 'His shirt?' Komushi smirked and stood up straight to take Shiore's shirt off. Azumi's jaw almost dropped. 'This is a man.' She watched as Komushi pushed the needle into Shiore's chest and injected the poison into him. 'Are they killing him?!

"His pulse should slow down in just a minute," Sasori said. "Just enough to be undetectable."

"Yeah, but the real test is whether he'll remember this when he wakes up," Komushi said challengingly.

"It'll happen don't you doubt me," Sasori smirked.

"Our entire dynamic is based on me doubting you," Komushi scoffed, sitting down on one of the workbenches.

'And you are still alive?' Azumi rolled her eyes.

"And yet, I haven't killed you," Sasori chuckled, echoing Azumi's thoughts.

"Who else would push you to your limits then?" Komushi smirked.

"Oh, no one can push me the way you do," Sasori ground out through a tight smile. He laughed and set his sights on Azumi. "How is this going?" he asked her, looking into the tank.

"I have milked four already," she answered, placing the snake in her hand back into the tank and letting the fifth one slither around her arm. "However, I was right about needing a second tank. These six will not last long living on top of each other like this." She started milking the fifth one.
"Mmm." He looked at the tank. "Komushi, while you wait for this little experiment to finish up, go up the street and buy a new glass tank," he said, turning to the other man.

Komushi looked up, poking Shiori's face. "Isn't Gaara coming in? Make him do it."

"He won't be here for a while," Sasori waved him off. "Also, I have other things I need him to do for me."

Komushi sighed and stood up straight. "Fine," he said. "But only because this poison is working."

"Uh huh," Sasori smirked. "Is there anything else they need so he can pick it up while he is out?" he asked Azumi.

Azumi looked at the snakes and they told her no. She looked back at Sasori and shook her head. "No, the tank is all they need right now."

"Fine, then," Sasori said. He looked back at Komushi and smirked. "Get to it, then."

Komushi looked between them before rolling his eyes with a smirk. "As you wish milord," he said dramatically with a loose bow. He slipped out of the room and out of the shop.

Sasori watched Azumi for a moment. "How much did they yield?" he asked, stepping closer to her. He reached out a hand to glide his fingers over the back of her neck to the tattoo that resided there.

She tried not to flinch when he touched her. "Each of them almost filled up their respective jars," she said. "I will write labels so you know which venom came from which snake."

He raised an eyebrow. "Are they not all the same type of snake?" he asked, pushing her hair out of the way to look at her back. He hummed softly then pulled his hand away.

"None of them are the same," she said. "We have six different types of snakes in this tank." She stepped away to grab a couple of labels and wrote down the six snakes on them. "Each venom has different properties to it, so depending on the effect you are going for with your...poisons...one of these will serve best," she told him. She turned to look at him. "If you wish to use them."

"Mmm," he looked down into the tank. "It is safe to assume that you know all these effects venoms, correct?" he asked rhetorically. "Catalog all the effects and their best uses," he said, turning to pull a thin leather-bound book out. He placed it down on one of the workbenches.

Azumi nodded and sat down to do exactly that. "Is there anything else you need me to do?" she asked him as she started writing everything she knew about the specific venoms.

"We need to take inventory of all the herbs in the shop," Sasori hummed. "We can handle that once Gaara gets here." He frowned, tapping his fingers and staring at the man slumped in the middle of the room. "Ugh, he's directly in the way."

Azumi looked at Shiori and frowned. "Why did you put him there?" she asked. She turned back to the book and continued writing. "You could have sat him against the wall so he would not be in the way. If it works and he wakes up, he will just fall out of the chair."

"Aside from it being highly amusing for him to wake up in a confused stupor and then promptly fall out of his chair," he chuckled, picturing it already, "there isn't much wall space to put him against," he said, gesturing around the room, "There is also the risk of him flailing in this state and I don't need him breaking anything because he was within arms reach of it."
She looked around the room and hummed. "I suppose you are right," she mumbled before turning back to writing. "Does your friend...challenge you to things like this often?" she asked.

"He does," Sasori smirked. "He likes to, as he puts it, 'keep me fresh and on my toes.' He sees his challenges as a way of keeping me creative." His voice had a fondness to it. "We've known each other since we were kids."

She only found it a little shocking that he even had a best friend like that. Yet, her shock was beshadowed by the fact that his best friend was just as much of a monster as he was. "Interesting..." she said. She finished up writing the effects and uses of the six different venoms and handed him the book.

He took it from her. "Done already?" he smirked, opening the book to where she started. His eyes skimmed over the detailed notes she gave him on just the six he had. He looked at her after closing the book. "I may have some more venoms in my collection. They are poorly labeled by the last slave since they could barely comprehend basic chemical reactions," he snorted. "When we start inventory I want you to handle those and categorize them."

"Alright," she nodded. She looked at the snakes in the tank. "They will not need to be fed for a while."

"I'll leave it to you when they do need to be fed," he hummed. She nodded again and suddenly the door opened. Azumi hoped it was Gaara but was immediately disappointed when she peeked out to the front of the shop and saw a customer.

"Good morning," Sasori said, stepping out of the workshop. He flashed a charming smile and the customer returned the smile.

"It's so rare to see you in the shop, Lord Sasori," they said. "But very refreshing nonetheless."

"I have your custom order right here," Sasori said, taking out a small box that was designated for the customer.

While he dealt with the customer, Azumi looked at Shiore and frowned again. She helped Sasori make the poison that was administered to him and she felt bad about it because he was just an innocent person who happened to be around at the wrong time. Her thoughts were cut off by the back door opening and she could not control the smile on her face when she saw Gaara. "Hello," she grinned at him.

"Good morning," he chuckled, walking in. He walked over to the tank and peeked in on the snakes. "How are they today?"

"They are fine," she said, looking at the snakes as well. "I have milked them and they will not need to be fed for a couple of days. Um, Lord Sasori's friend is getting another tank because all six will not be able to live in one."

"Oh...does he need me to go get it then?" Gaara asked, looking around for his cousin. He walked around Shiore in the middle of the room as if nothing was out of place.

"No, his friend should be back with it soon," she hummed, tapping the nose of one of the snakes. "But Lord Sasori said we will be taking inventory of all the herbs."

"Oh right," he chuckled, "You just said that," he said, rubbing his face, yawning. "I just did that...last month," his words slowed down at the end of the sentence. "Damn," he laughed, sitting down next to Shiore and running a hand through his hair.
She looked at him and frowned. "Are you okay?" she asked softly. "Did you not get enough sleep last night? I am sorry if I kept you out a little later than you normally stay out."

He flashed her a sweet smile. "I'm okay. It wasn't you or our walk," he yawned. "I skipped my morning routine and my patient this morning was trying me to say the least." He yawned again, stretching just as Sasori walked into the workshop.

"If you need caffeine then get some," Sasori said, pushing Gaara's hand out of his face gently.

"I'll be fine," Gaara told him. "How long has he been out?" he asked, gesturing toward Shiore.

"About half an hour," Sasori answered. "Should be out for a total of three."

A couple of seconds later, Komushi returned with the second tank. "Gaara!" Komushi grinned. "I haven't seen you in so long," he said, leaning around the tank. "Where am I putting this down? It's kind of heavy," he said with a groan as he heaved the slipping tank.

Azumi made room on the table next to the first tank. "Right here," she told him. He moved toward the table and set the new tank down. "Thank you," she said to him with a slight bow.

"Do they need sand?" Gaara asked, walking up to her side.

Komushi huffed, taking a seat next to Shiore. "Forget the sand! Someone bring me some tea," he pouted. "Iced please!"

"You know where the tea is," Sasori said. "Get it yourself."

"But what's the point of having a slave if-" Komushi started.

"She's my slave, not yours."

"They will need sand," Azumi said quietly to Gaara. "I thought I could move some of the sand from the first to the second but...it might not work out well."

"Sasori, can I borrow her to get sand for the tank?" Gaara asked politely, cutting Komushi's complaint off.

"Whaaat!" Komushi whined. "Why can he use her and not me!"

"Because he's doing stuff for the shop. Not being a lazy bum," Sasori shot back. "Fine. Go and come back quickly," Sasori said. He knew they only really needed one person but he was being spiteful.

Azumi and Gaara both nodded and Gaara picked up the tank. Azumi held the door open for him as they walked out and went to get sand. As soon as the sun hit her, she groaned. She followed him to where she assumed was the same place he got the sand from for the first tank.

"Komushi didn't bother you, did he?" Gaara asked, squatting down to scoop some sand into the tank. "He and Sasori can get out of hand when they are together."

"Not too much. I have grown used to people grabbing my face," she hummed, kneeling next to him to help him. "He wanted to test the poison on me but they ended up testing it on Shiore instead."

"I'm sorry," he sighed, shaking his head. "If Chiyo hadn't threatened him...he probably would have used you," he said honestly. "But they use Shiore often. I'm honestly surprised he's still alive and not completely fried."
"He must not be a very smart man then," she said. "If he continues to come to a shop where the owner used him to test poisons multiple times." She leveled the sand in the tank, knowing that the snakes would prefer to move it where they like it. "I am not even surprised that he would have used me."

"They usually do something to wipe his memory or charm him into forgetting what happened." Gaara picked up the now-full tank. "It's really horrendous to watch but I can't really say anything to stop them. As awful as that sounds." He started to walk back to the shop. "I'd rather it be him than me."

"I understand that," she hummed with a nod. "Even so, I still feel bad about it. He does not deserve it from what I understand." She walked a little ahead of him to open the door for him when they approached the shop.

"Put it down there," Sasori said as soon as they walked in. "Gaara, get started on the inventory. Start on the second floor. Azumi, once the snakes are settled, join him," he ordered as he checked Shiore's pulse.

They both nodded and Gaara immediately went to start the inventory. Azumi leveled the sand in the second tank one more time and moved three of the snakes from the first tank over, helping them get settled in. They thanked her and flicked their tongues against the back of her hand.

"Wow," Komushi hummed, watching over her shoulder. "I've never seen snakes act so...friendly to a person." He rested his chin on her shoulder. Sasori squinted at Komushi and yanked him back by the collar.

"They will cooperate well," Azumi said. "As long as they are not abused for their venom." She tapped the noses of the snakes and went to help Gaara with the inventory.

"You're like a human snake charmer," Komushi said.

"Snake charmers are human," Sasori said with an idle tone, mirth lurking behind it.

Komushi rolled his eyes. "I mean she doesn't even need the music to get them to comply."

"No music is needed when you can understand and speak to them," Azumi said, putting away the jars of venom she filled up and taking out all of the old jars of venom that were improperly labeled from the last slave. Naga slithered up to her shoulder from the floor to help her determine which animal each jar of venom came from.

"I feel like I'm being tag-teamed," Komushi chuckled, moving away from Azumi when Naga wrapped around her shoulders.

"Serves you right," Gaara smirked, looking at them from the top floor.

Naga smelled each of the jars and told her which animal the venoms came from. She made the correct labels and placed replaced the old ones with them. Once she was done correcting the labels, she placed the jars back onto the shelf they belonged. "Some of these venoms are very rare," she mumbled to herself as she put them away.

"Hey, how much longer is he going to be out?" Komushi asked, poking Shiore in the head. "I want to know if he'll remember anything."

"You're so impatient," Sasori said over his shoulder as he walked over to see what Azumi had done.
Komushi stood up straight, scoffing loudly. "That's rich coming from you," he countered.

Azumi looked at Sasori and backed away from the shelf so he could see it. "You have quite an array of compositions here," she said. "Most of these venoms are aquatic animals...in a land where the ocean is so far away. It is very interesting."

"My means of trade bring me a lot of unique products the common veins wouldn't dare to touch," Sasori smirked, leaning down to look at the new labels. "What is impressive is that you and your snake knew them."

"He can smell the compositions," she said. "I can only tell the differences in snake venom."

"I suppose it's lucky that I let you keep him then," Sasori hummed. He picked up one of the jars. "Now that I know what these are, I can play with them a little more," he smirked.

She furrowed her brow at his comment. She really hoped she would not be the test subject for when he decided to 'play' with the venoms. She was going to say something, only to be cut off by Shiore groaning in the back room.

"Oh! Someone's getting up!" Komushi grinned.

Sasori put the jar back in the cabinet. "Don't touch him," he ordered Komushi.

"Yeah, yeah, I know the rules," Komushi grinned like a child.

"You two are going to get caught doing this one day and I will not be apart of that fall," Gaara said as he moved to a new set of shelving.

Komushi scoffed through a boyish giggle. "We'll be fine," he grinned.

Shiore held his head as he sat up straight in his chair and then slumped over. "What happened to me?" he groaned. "Where am I?" He lifted his head and looked around. "When did I get here?"

Sasori smirked at Komushi over Shiore's head. He put his hands on the man's shoulders, making him jump.

"Relax, Master Shiore," Sasori said in his charming tone. "You tripped out on the street and Lord Komushi brought you in for me to treat you," he told the confused man. "How are you feeling?"

"My head hurts..." Shiore said, holding his head. "I don't remember much after leaving my house..."

'Looks like it worked,' Azumi thought, rolling her eyes.

Shiore looked up at Sasori and Komushi. "Thank you," he smiled. "I don't know how to repay your kindness."

Azumi leaned against the counter and tilted her head back in fake agony. 'You have got to be kidding me,' she thought. Gaara looked up from that book that he was logging everything into to catch her eyes. He smirked, shaking his head and rolling his eyes.

"Komushi, make us some tea," Sasori ordered. Komushi nodded and got up to make the tea. "Your mother's order came in so we'll treat your headache and send you on your way."

"I feel like this keeps happening," Shiore said. "I'm always getting hurt outside and you always have to treat me. I'm so sorry, Lord Sasori. I must be a burden."
Azumi moved next to Gaara. "And he falls for this each time?" she asked quietly.

"He sure does," Gaara sighed.

"It is never a problem," Sasori reassured the oblivious man. "There is no better place for you to be taken to." Komushi returned with a hot cup of tea for Shiore.

"Honestly, it's a blessing," Shiore chuckled awkwardly. "You are so kind. I never used to be this klutzy but I think taking care of my mother might be taking a toll on me."

"You need to make sure you take care of yourself so you can take care of her," Komushi teased.

"You're right," Shiore smiled, sipping his tea. "I can never thank you two enough."

'For what?' Azumi thought. 'Administering poisons into your body?'

"Your loyal patronage is thanks enough," Sasori waved him off, keeping the charm levels high.

Azumi rolled her eyes again. 'Spare me.'

Shiore finished his tea with a sigh. "I should get going," he smiled, standing up with a little help from Komushi. "Mother will be worried."

"Of course," Sasori nodded. "Your order is right here," he said, picking up the original package and handing it over to the man.

"Thank you again," he said with a slight bow to Sasori as they walked out to the shop. The others in the workshop watched the man pay Sasori for his order then leave.

"You really should assess how badly you've damaged his system," Gaara sighed once Shiore was gone. "You're going to wind up killing him."

"He'll be fine," Komushi grinned, waving off Gaara's concerns.

"At least acting would be a good fallback if the shop were to fail," Azumi mumbled within earshot of Gaara.

"His system flushes everything out within two weeks," Sasori said.

"Yeah, see?" Komushi said. "He only comes around once a month."

Gaara rolled his eyes. "Whatever you say."

"I mean the other option would be to use this lovely little thing," Komushi grinned, dancing around Azumi and wrapping an arm around her stomach. He pulled her close and started to sway a little. "I'm sure she'd enjoy a nap once in a while, right?"


Komushi laughed, twirling them away from Gaara. "Aww, would that bother you?" he teased Gaara.

"We can't use her just yet," Sasori said as he wrote down something in a different book. "She's an efficient worker. So let her go." He looked up at Naga who was coiled on the counter, hissing aggressively. "You're agitating her snake," he smirked.
'Just yet?' Azumi thought.

"Fiiiine," Komushi pouted as he let her go. "But eventually we'll get to play," he said with a wink. Naga's hiss got louder. He was getting ready to strike.

"Get away from her," Gaara warned again, glancing at Naga.

Komushi glanced at the snake and smirked, backing away just a couple of steps from her. Azumi stepped closer to the counter and Naga moved up her arm and into her dress to coil around her waist. The look on Komushi's face told her that he did not take the snake's threat that seriously but she was not going to warn him about it.

"Sasori," Gaara said, descending the ladder, "we're going to need to stock up on a lot," he frowned. "We haven't been shopping in a while."

"Mmm," Sasori frowned, taking the log Gaara offered him. "Damn, of course, it's a lot of the rare stuff. We'll have to take a trip for most of this to the night market."

"Oooh, the night market!" Komushi grinned.

"We'll only be able to get some of the stuff there," Gaara hummed. "We should contact the vendors before we close, so we can get it before the end of the week."

"I'll leave that to you then," Sasori told Gaara, handing the log back. "Teach Azumi how to do it too so she can do it in the future."

Gaara nodded and gestured for Azumi to follow him to the workshop and then up the ladder. "We really just write letters to be delivered to our vendors," he told her softly, shifting through a shelf with pre-written notes that requested specific items. "These are the only ones we'll need from them," he said.

"I suppose it is convenient to have them ready," she said with a small chuckle as she gently stroked Naga's head. "And how do you send them out?"

"There is a black market messenger that picks up the requests and sends them out to the vendors."

"Fascinating," Azumi whispered.

Gaara chuckled. "It is at first." He finished picking out the notes and putting them in envelopes. He heated some wax and stamped each envelope, marking it with a scorpion. "We leave them outside the door."

"Oh man, we haven't been to the night market in so long! I wonder what's changed," Komushi grinned. "You're in for such a treat Azumi!"

"What is this night market like?" Azumi asked, leaning over the banister and looking down at Komushi. "We do not have any of those where I am from. At least none that I know of."

"I've always like to describe it as," he paused for dramatic effect. "A festival of the underground," he grinned. "Anything and everything is sold there."

"There are ordinary things," Gaara joined in.

"And disturbing things," Sasori smirked.

"There's even performances and food from different lands!" Komushi gushed.
"Performances?" Azumi hummed. "This sounds very interesting."

"I hate to say he is right," Gaara chuckled, "but you may actually enjoy it."

"This is going to be the best outing in a while," Komushi grinned. "When is it again?" he asked Sasori.

Sasori looked at a calendar on the counter. "It starts tomorrow night," he answered. "And it goes on for three nights."

"Oh, this is so lucky!" Komushi grinned. "Let's go all three nights!"

Sasori shook his head sighing. "We don't have time for—"

"Come on, Sasori! We haven't had a good night out in so long!" Komushi whined lightly. "She has to experience it all."

Sasori raised an eyebrow looking at his best friend. "She's a slave," Sasori reminded him. "She doesn't need to experience anything aside from picking up herbs and making sure she knows how to run errands."

Gaara clicked his teeth. "Stop pretending you aren't at least a little excited to show her," he huffed, folding his arms. Sasori scoffed but did not say anything.

"I will try to not have fun there," Azumi smirked at Sasori.

Sasori rolled his eyes. "Now that would defeat the entire argument these two idiots are trying to make."

"I beg your pardon," Komushi gasped. "Why would you say something so rude to Gaara!"

"Well, at least you know," Gaara chuckled.

Azumi followed Gaara back down the ladder and he set the requests outside the door of the shop. She stopped in the back room to pet the snakes again before joining the three men at the front of the shop.

"Everyone here?" Komushi joked.

"I can go home," Gaara smirked. "Which I am going to. See you tomorrow, Azumi."

Azumi smiled at him and bowed. "Have a good night," she told him. He smiled back and left. Then she followed Sasori back to their home.

"There isn't much to do tonight," he told her as they walked up to the mansion. "Run my bath and then go to bed. We have a lot to prepare for tomorrow. We might return home early from the shop to sleep before going to the market," he said to her once they were in the house.

Azumi nodded and as soon as they got to his room, she went straight to the bathroom to start his bath, getting it to the perfect temperature then poured in the correct amount of salts and oils. She went back to his room and grabbed his robe to put it on the hook in the bathroom. Once it was ready, she turned the faucet off. "It is ready," she told him.

He hummed softly, coming out of deep thought. "You've taken to doing that efficiently." He looked at her. "Did you have servants where you lived?" he asked. "Most nobles are hopelessly incompetent," he smirked as he stood up to strip down.
"I did grow up with servants, but that does not mean I relied on them to do everything for me," she answered. "Much like you, I like to have things done a certain way. It was easier for me to do things on my own to get them how I wanted. Each time my father tried to give me a personal servant, I refused them."

He looked her over. "I almost expected such an answer from you," he said through a laugh. He shook his head then ran a hand through his hair. "You are dismissed," he waved over his shoulder as disappeared into the bathroom.

Azumi rolled her eyes and scoffed quietly. "Goodnight," she told him just as she turned to leave. "Brat," she mumbled as she walked down the halls back to her room. She laid Naga down on her bed and kissed the top of his head when he coiled up. The lack of sleep from the night before caught up with her and she laid down, drifting off to sleep quickly.
Chapter 8

The next morning, Sasori walked down Azumi's room. In his developing fashion, he did not bother to knock before walking in. "Hmnh," he grunted softly, unsurprised to find the woman still asleep. He looked down at Naga who had started to stir. He decided to crawl into the window space and wait for her to wake up.

Naga hissed quietly in her face, telling her to wake up. Azumi groaned, opening her eyes to pet the snake. She could feel the presence of another person in the room. Slowly, she turned around and gasped, covering her mouth to hold in a small scream when she saw Sasori. "For someone as impatient as you claim to be," she said, catching her breath quietly, "you certainly demonstrate patience."

"Doesn't that just mean you should be more afraid that I'm already here and that you've kept me waiting?" He gave her a devilish grin. "I don't mind waiting for things that make me laugh," he said, getting down from his perch. "There are orders we need to get done at the shop since we're closing early. So now that you're up," he said, walking to the door, "let's go."

Azumi sighed and rolled her eyes. 'It is too early for this,' she thought as she got out of the bed and stretched. She made sure she did not need to grab anything before following him. She decided to leave Naga since she was unsure how a cobra would fare in a crowded market.

Sasori waited for her in his workshop. "We'll leave directly from the shop since you slept in today," he told her, picking up a set of boxes that clinked with glass. He handed them off to her then picked up a small ornate box that wafted a woody fragrance as he passed her with it.

She looked at the boxes in her arms, recognizing a specific composition by the smell coming from one of the bottles in the top box. It made her nauseous and she let out a soft groan as she followed Sasori out of the room and through the halls. She tried to walk so the glasses in the boxes did not clink together with every step she took. Since it was slightly later in the day than when they walked to the shop the day before, it was a little hotter out.

"I hate how hot it gets past nine," Sasori huffed, making sure they walked in the shade. He led her down a different path than the day before once more. He was sticking to anywhere that had shade but they were still glistening by the time they arrived at the shop. Gaara was already there when they walked in.

Azumi smiled as soon as she saw Gaara. "Good morning," she said to him as she set the boxes down. She sorted through the glasses inside to determine which ones were orders for customers and which ones were ingredients Sasori needed to complete orders.

"Good morning," he smiled sweetly. "You're looking well rested."

Sasori did not spare them a glance as he went up the ladder to the second level. "Gaara, go down the block with her when she's done and get some of that coffee from my favorite shop," he told him.

"Alright," Gaara answered.

Azumi set the orders for customers on a shelf behind the counter and left the rest of the ingredients in the workshop to be put away when she returned. She greeted the snakes quietly and then met Gaara on the other side of the counter to leave with him.
Once she was with him, they silently walked out into the bustling streets of the market. "It's rare for Sasori to ask for coffee," Gaara hummed once they were out in the midday traffic.

"Something is off about him," she said. "He seems like the kind of person to get lost in thought, but it looks like he has been getting too deep." She sighed and rolled her eyes. "And I hate to say that I am concerned, but it is a little odd when someone does not act like their usual self."

"Deep in thought?" Gaara frowned. "Mmm, he only does that when he has a big project or a plot coming up...or something is stressing him out." He thought for a moment, trying to recall if anything, in particular, was coming up that would cause his cousin to think deeply. "Has he been treating you any differently or had any strange visitors?"

"He has not been hurting me if that is what you mean," she hummed. "But he has been dismissing me more. Other than your uncle, there has not been anyone else that has been around to visit. Before him, it was Lady Mei."

"Mmmm," he hummed. "Lady Chiyo could be pressuring him into the marrying her again." He cupped his chin, frowning in thought. "But he and our uncle never get along. And they did fight, didn't they?" he asked her. He looked at her out of the corner of his eye.

"It was not a real fight, I would say," she said, trying to hide the smirk on her face. "Your uncle only slapped him across the face."

Gaara barked out a laugh. "Yeah, that would do it," he grinned. "He's probably plotting how to get back at him. They never see eye to eye. Our Uncle has been trying to get slavery outlawed for the past five years. But even before he got his office, he had been working towards the goal of having it eradicated. You could imagine the outrage they have for each other."

"I think I received quite a glimpse of it when Lord Sandaime visited," she chuckled. They arrived at the coffee shop that Sasori favored and walked inside. It was immediately cooler in temperature than it was outside and she let out a small sigh. "This place smells amazing," she mumbled.

"You like coffee?" Gaara asked with a smile. "This place has a specialty coffee that our city is known for. People travel very far and wide to get it," he told her as they waited. Around them, people sat at cozy sunken chairs with plush cushions and a sandy pity in the middle.

"My village outsources coffee from somewhere far away and I am coming to the conclusion that it is this city," she chuckled. "I love coffee." She looked around at the rest of the shop. "I can see why Lord Sasori favors this shop," she mumbled.

"That's interesting," Gaara hummed. He walked up to the counter and ordered a large bag of ground coffee. The woman behind the counter turned and heaved a bag over the counter. "Put it on Sasori's tab please," he told the woman.

The woman smiled and shook her head. "It's on the house," she told him. "If it weren't for him, my son would have died."

It was such an odd thing to Azumi to hear people praise Sasori when she knew what kind of person he was behind closed doors. After the things he said and did to her.

"Thank you," Gaara bowed slightly and flashed the woman a charming smile. They walked back out of the shop, starting their way back towards Sasori's. He glanced at her out of the corner of her eye and chuckled. "You're thinking 'how could anyone thank him when he's a monster,' right?"

"Is it that obvious?" she asked sheepishly. "I try not to show what I am thinking," she chuckled.
"But some things...I just do not understand."

"It's sort of my job to know when people are hiding things," he laughed. "But I understand your feelings. It's amazing how little people see and how well he can hide his true nature."

"How well he hides it is what is truly shocking," she hummed. "I have never seen such a display of alternate personalities being switched between so quickly and flawlessly. In another life, he would have been a great actor."

"He's always been good at it too." Gaara shook his head. "He hates people too much to ever want to perform for them," he chuckled. "He'd be such a diva! Only accepting jobs that interest him. Sort of like he is now." He laughed a little harder as they walked into the shop.

Sasori popped up from behind the counter. "I sent her with you so she could carry that," he commented, seeing Gaara with the bag in his hands.

Azumi sighed, trying not to roll her eyes. 'As if he could not be any more of a brat,' she thought. "I'm so used to carrying things for you," Gaara shrugged, "I forgot she was here to even do that. But now you have your coffee."

Sasori looked at Azumi. "You know how to use a filter and burner set up, right?" he asked rhetorically. "Make us some coffee in the back," he ordered. "And then put the remaining grounds in a container."

Azumi nodded and took the bag from Gaara, walking to the back room to make the coffee. The snakes hissed quietly at her as she set up the filter and waited for the water to boil over a burner. "You are hungry now?" she whispered at them. She looked around for a moment then stepped toward the door. "Go and come back," she told them, opening the door just enough for the snakes to slither out of the shop.

"Are you going to leave from here for the market or are you heading back to Lady Chiyo's?" Gaara asked Sasori.

"We'll leave directly from here," Sasori replied. "It would be pointless to go home and then have to turn around."

"Makes sense," Gaara hummed.

"Komushi will be here right before we close," Sasori said. "Or at least he better be," he grumbled.

In the workshop, the water started boiling just as Azumi found something to prop the door open for the snakes. She poured it over the filtered coffee into a beaker and then found a couple of mugs. Once the coffee was done, she poured it and brought it out for Gaara and Sasori.

"Thank you," Gaara smiled at her as he took his offered mug.

Sasori simply sipped his own coffee and continued to speak to Gaara. "I don't plan to wait around for him for very long if he is late." He hummed into his coffee. He was a little surprised she had managed to make the coffee so perfectly.

Gaara smirked knowingly at his cousin. "He's been getting better with turning up on time," he countered.

"And you just went and jinxed it."
Azumi giggled, retreating back into the workshop to clean up the coffee setup she used. "Well, as you said, if he is late, then don't wait for him," Gaara smirked.

Three of the six snakes returned to the shop and went back into their enclosures. "I knew I could trust you," she smiled at them. She knew the other three were also going to come back. They hissed softly to her before burrowing into their cool sand.

"Good morning, Lord Sasori, Lord Gaara," a man said as he walked into the shop. "Aah, that coffee smells amazing."

"Coffee always smells amazing," another voice joined them.

"Kankuro, Baki," Sasori said in greeting. "I can have some more made for you if you'd like."

"I would love some," the second new voice said.

"As would I," the other man said.

Azumi scoffed and rolled her eyes. She had just cleaned everything up. She took everything out again and started heating up more water and looking for more mugs.

"Have a seat," Sasori offered the stools behind the counter. He got up, hearing her already working to get everything set up as he walked into the back. "Where did the other three go?" he asked, noticing three missing snakes.

"They got hungry and went out to find food," she answered. She found a container big enough for the rest of the coffee grounds and started pouring the bag into it. "Did your coffee come out okay?" she asked him.

He frowned for a moment, staring at the tank. "Yes, it came out perfectly," he said, finally turning to look at her. "I won't bother to say I'm surprised you know how to make it just right, considering your track record." He walked up to her and waited for her to finish packing away the coffee before taking her wrist in his hand. He turned her around to look her over. "Do you know your measurements?" he asked softly.

She shook her head. "No," she said. "I have not been measured in quite some time so I do not know my measurements."

"I figured as much," he said lowly. "We'll have to do that tomorrow then." He released her, moving his hand from her wrist to trace up to her shoulder and touch the tattoo on her neck.

She flinched slightly when he touched her tattoo. "Very well then," she said softly. The water was boiling and she stepped closer to the counter to pour it over the filtered coffee. She grabbed two more mugs and waited for the coffee to finish before pouring it into the mugs. Just as she did that, the last of the snakes returned.

Sasori pulled back to look at the snakes. He heard them hiss softly to Azumi as they crawled into their tanks. He frowned a little, waiting for her to carry the two new mugs out to Baki and Kankuro.

"Okay, but all I'm saying, Gaara, is that—" Kankuro stopped as soon as Sasori walked back in.

Sasori raised an eyebrow. "By all means, continue," he said, leaning against the countertop.
Kankuro shook his head with a smile. "It's nothing of importance," he said. Azumi followed Sasori out with the two mugs of coffee. She placed them in front of the two new men and bowed a little as she backed away and returned to the workshop to clean up the coffee set up again.

"So that's her?" Baki asked softly.

"What?" Sasori huffed. "Do you all have so little to do that you are sitting around gossiping about my new slave?"

"You're the one who's been saying she's different from the others," Kankuro smirked. "Word gets around quickly when a notorious slave killer is suddenly praising one."

Sasori's eyes narrowed. "I am not a slave killer. I only killed three of them!" he defended. Kankuro raised an eyebrow and turned to look at his brother as he sipped his coffee.

"How many slaves must one kill to be constituted a slave killer?" Kankuro asked.

In the back, Azumi listened to the conversation, hiding her quiet gasps. 'He is really being tried right now,' she thought as she put away the beaker.

There was dead silence for a few beats. Sasori simply sipped his coffee and stared at Kankuro hard.

Kankuro scoffed. "Exactly," he ground out.

"Don't you dare take the high ground here," Sasori hissed back. "You've kept slaves and have had a few die on your watch just as I have."

"Of old age or natural causes!" Kankuro fired back.

"Did you come here just to raise my temper or did you have something you wanted?"

'Who are these men?' Azumi thought, peeking out from the back.

"I came here to ask my brother to get me something since I know he is going to the night market," Kankuro said.

'His brother?' Azumi took a long look at Kankuro. 'I am convinced there are no ugly men in this family.'

"Then ask him and stop pestering me about my life choices," Sasori rolled his eyes. The tension in the air visibly melted away in everyone.

"Oh, come on," Kankuro smirked. "We never see each other outside of family parties."

"Which he barely goes to anyway," Gaara added. Baki silently sipped his coffee, not engaging in this family drama.

"Parties are a waste of time," Sasori scoffed. He looked at Gaara and squinted. "I don't need to hear anything from you."

"You should at least visit your family once in a while," Kankuro teased. Azumi came back out to take the empty mugs from Gaara and Sasori. "Jeez, Sasori, why don't you give the girl some clothes?" Kankuro teased as she took the glasses away.

"It's sweltering out," he lifted his chin. "And we work around heat. I don't need her passing out."
"You really know how to make excuses," Kankuro smirked, giving Gaara a knowing smirk.

"What does that even mean," Sasori growled as he tapped his fingers against the counter.

"He's implying you have unsavory reasons for keeping your slave underdressed," Baki said airily.

Azumi stifled a laugh as she stepped back into the workshop.

"Unsavory reasons?" Sasori repeated with a scoff.

"You never had your previous slaves as underdressed as her," Kankuro noted.

She cleaned the cups and stood in the doorway, listening to the entertaining conversation happening before her. She made eye contact with Kankuro and they shared a smirk before she retreated back into the workshop to put the mugs away.

"Sasori, it's okay to admit you've been putting off your physical needs," Baki said with a shrug.
"Just admit that's why she's so scantily dressed and we'll move on, right boys?"

Sasori shifted back as if he had been physically hit. "Excuse me!"

"Are you still a virgin?" Kankuro asked.

"I don't see how any of this is anyone but my own's business," he glared. "She is dressed to deal with the heat and my sexual life is not up for discussion."

"He means lack thereof, sexual life." Kankuro nodded with his companion and brother.

"Sounds like you're suffering some serious burns in here, Sasori," Komushi laughed, walking into the shop.

"Speaking of virgins," Sasori mumbled, looking at Komushi. Azumi's jaw dropped slightly. "These imbeciles are questions why my slave is dressed the way she is."

"Mm, that is none of their business," Komushi hummed, earning a nod from Sasori. "But since the discussion is on the table, why is she dressed like that?" he grinned, leaning on the counter next to Baki.

Sasori's nostrils flared. "I hate all of you," he folded his arms.

"Yes, yes," Komushi waved him off. "But that doesn't answer the question."

Kankuro shook his head, smirking. "Give it up," he grinned. "He's in denial that he finds her body attractive."

Gaara frowned a little. He discreetly glanced at the back room. He was not entirely comfortable speaking about Azumi like she was an object of infatuation.

"Isn't that ninety percent of why you bought her?" Komushi smirked. "Because I'm going to have to call you out right now."

"No," Sasori snapped. "She is capable and can actually do her job without me breathing down her neck."

"Mmm, that's why you're so touchy with her then?" Komushi smirked.
Azumi could not let this total annihilation go on any further. She composed herself before stepping out of the workshop and joining Gaara and Sasori behind the counter. "I do prefer being dressed this way," she stated. "It allows me to move much more freely and do my job better than if I was constricted by a more modest dress."

All five men stared at her for a moment. "There!" Sasori smirked. "I told you it was good for her work."

Kankuro sighed. "Fine," he smirked. "Defend your master all you want. We all know the truth," he winked.

Sasori's eye twitched. "We're dropping this now," Sasori said with finality to his tone. "We have to start closing the shop and getting ready to go. So, if you two vermin are done cluttering up my shop front," he said, shooing Kankuro and Baki.

"Fine, fine," Kankuro chuckled as he stood up from his stool, followed by Baki. Azumi approached the counter and took their mugs to clean. "The coffee was great, by the way," Kankuro told her.

"Thank you," she smiled with a bow.

"Don't forget please," Kankuro said to Gaara as they left.

"I won't," Gaara called back.

Sasori grumbled, sitting down on the now-vacated stool. "He gets more irksome with every passing year," he said, rubbing his temples.

"He's just messing with you," Komushi smirked, gently patting Sasori on the shoulder as he walked passed him.

Azumi went to the back room again and cleaned the mugs then put them away. The snakes hissed at her curiously, asking her where Naga was. "He is at home," she told them softly. "I could not bring him in today."

Sasori rolled his eyes. "Your brother needs to grow up," he said to Gaara as he started to clean up the workshop.

Gaara laughed softly. "Or you can be less sensitive. Unless his words hold some weight?"

"His words are meaningless and hold no weight," Sasori said, stepping into the back room.

Azumi looked up at him from the snake in her hand as he walked in. "One of them is shedding," she told him softly, peeling some of the skin off of the snake.

Sasori's face pinched in slight disgust. "Does it need help?" he asked, not sure what to do about a shedding snake.

"If you allow me to make a mineral spray for them, that is all we need," she said. "All we can do is relieve the itch while the skin comes off." She saw the disgust in his face and smirked. "It is no different from a scorpion molting its outer shell."

Sasori looked at her with a smirk. "I also think that process is gross." He flicked his hand. "Make your spray. I don't need them in discomfort and have it affect their health or venom production."

Gaara walked over to peek at the snake. "Does peeling it help them?" he asked.
"Not exactly. I am only peeling off what is not attached to the rest of the skin," she said. She put the snake back in the tank and got out the ingredients to make a mineral spray. "A snake should shed its skin whole but this one had a tear in it. I am just helping it get to where it needs to be." She combined everything into a spray bottle and tested it on her own arm before spraying the snake a couple of times. "This process will only last a couple of days for the snake."

"Interesting," Gaara said. "And that spray will just ease the itch?"

Azumi nodded at Gaara as she shook the bottle a little bit and sprayed the snake a couple of more times. "It will ease the itch and make the process a little more smooth," she said.

"When you two are done with your little show and tell, we can get going," Komushi said with a grin.

Azumi sighed quietly and set the bottle down next to the tank and cleaned everything up. Then she and Gaara joined Sasori and Komushi at the front of the shop. She had no idea what to expect from this night market that these men hyped up so much, but she made sure she was prepared for everything that was going to be thrown at her.
Chapter 9

The shop was closed and it was time to head out to the night market. Sasori shifted a bag off his shoulder and handed it to Azumi. "Hold on to this while we walk," he told her. "I'll go over everything you—"

"Um, no, no," Komushi wagged his finger. "This is her first market!" he grinned. "Gaara and I get her!"

"Did you forget that she is a slave?" Sasori asked him. "More importantly, did you forget she is my slave?"

"No, I didn't forget she is your slave," Komushi mocked. "But this is an experience that everyone, slave or not, needs to have at least once. Let this be her once."

Sasori ground his teeth, staring Komushi down. Komushi grinned at Sasori, not wavering. Neither man backed down.

"Tch fine!" Sasori growled, "Just this once!"

"Yes!" Komushi hissed triumphantly, earning a sigh from Sasori. "Get ready for a fun night," he told Azumi as she shifted the bag Sasori handed her over her shoulder.

"I am looking forward to it," she smirked at him.

Gaara and Komushi took Azumi's arms and led her ahead of Sasori.

"This is going to be great!" Gaara grinned. They walked through the still crowded streets of the city as the sun started to set. They turned down a side street that led to a building that only seemed to have one entrance. Komushi let go and let Gaara lead her down a set of narrow winding stairs.

Azumi stayed close to Gaara as they went down the stairs, finding the windiness a little disorienting. "I am not surprised that it is underground," she said softly. "But I did not expect it to be underground."

Gaara chuckled softly. "Don't worry the actual market is massive."

"You won't even realize you're underground," Komushi grinned. Gaara pushed a set of very thick curtains and a door to reveal a massive hall bustling with colors, sounds, and smells.

"Welcome to the night market," Sasori said softly as all four of them stepped into the hall. Stalls lined every pathway, mimicking the market space above them.

"Wow," Azumi whispered, looking around and taking in as much as she could. It was much more lively than the market above ground. "This looks a lot more like a festival than a market," she chuckled.

"It basically is," Komushi shrugged, walking out in front of her and Gaara. "This is the only place to get your more...questionable and rare items."

"It's not all illegal stuff either," Gaara assured her. "This is where merchants who can't make the weekly bazaars will come."

"Anything you can't find topside," Sasori spoke up, already melting a little into the swing of the
market, "you'll find here." He migrated over to a table.

Azumi hummed, looking over at a stall that had clothes from different places. Some of it she even recognized as clothes from her home village. "I see," she said. "But we are here to get ingredients for the shop. What else do you personally come here for?"

"The food," Komushi grinned. "Some of the stalls here sell food from different places and this is the only time we can get to try it without having to actually go to those places."

"When Kankuro can't come: art supplies and fabrics," Gaara said. "I personally like to see medicines and plants for my garden," he grinned.

"But the performances here are some of the best!" Komushi smiled, migrating to a food stall that only smelled like fried foods. "Pick anything you want," he told her. "For the next three nights, you're our girl to treat."

Azumi smiled, looking at all of the foods available at the stall and picking out a fried breaded codfish. "You did mention performances before," she said to Komushi. "I am very interested in seeing them."

"You're a performer, too, aren't you?" Gaara asked.

"Yes, I was," she answered.

"Aren't there performances with snakes on the third day?" Gaara asked, ordering fried gizzards.

Komushi put an order of chicken in for Sasori. "Oh, yeah, there is! Maybe we can stop by them for you to see it!" He flashed her a smile. Sasori walked across from them, picking up their reserved orders. "I would love that," she said with a small smile.

"Then that's what we're definitely doing," Komushi grinned.

"I cannot wait," she chuckled. She looked around again, spotting a stall that sold illegal herbs and plants. It was right next to a medicinal stall. "As I have never done this before," she started, "I shall go where ever you take me."

Gaara chuckled. "I might be as boring as Lord business over there." He glanced over at Sasori.

Sasori rolled his eyes and drifted over to the stall of illegal herbs. He grinned, picking up a few jars. "I'll take a little of everything," he told the woman.

The woman immediately started gathering small portions of everything in her inventory into sachets. "If you want a more wild time," Komushi grinned, "come with me."

"How wild are we talking?" Azumi chuckled, smirking at Komushi.

"As wild as we can get," Komushi grinned. "I don't have any medicine or herbs bogging me down. Only fun and lots of caffeine."

"Alright, then," she smiled. "Then I shall go where ever you take me."

"This way then!" Komushi grinned, taking her from Gaara. "Take the bag," he said to Gaara,
handed it off. Gaara shook his head and took it. Komushi pulled her deeper into the thickening market place. "What are some things you like? Hobbies you have? The clothing you like?" he asked her as he bent over a case of beautiful gold jewelry.

"Since I danced, I prefer dancer outfits," she chuckled. "I was not kidding earlier when I mentioned I prefer to be dressed this way." She looked at the jewelry with him. "Other than dancing, I like art."

"Aaaaah," Komushi smirked. "How lucky for Sasori," he chuckled. "I think we could find you something here. Or you could pick a material and I can have something made here. Sasori probably hasn't given you any clothes."

"She doesn't need much besides what I've given her already," Sasori said from behind them. He was bent over another glass case of jewelry. He was looking at a beautiful, simple body chain that had a small snake charm in the middle.

"It's nice to see you again Lord Sasori," the shop owner said from behind the stall. Sasori looked up and flashed one of his charming smiles.

"Pick something," Komushi whispered to her. "Don't worry about him." Azumi smirked and discreetly pointed to a golden armband. "Consider it yours." Komushi smiled at the woman behind the counter and asked her for the armband Azumi picked out. Sasori watched the exchange and gave Komushi a sharp look. The other man simply smirked back as he handed over the money for the armband. "Do you want to put it on?" Komushi asked Azumi once she woman handed it over.

"Yes," she grinned. She could feel Sasori watching them and she avoided looking at him. Part of her was slightly terrified that he would do something to her later, but the other part threw all cares away as Komushi put the armband on her.

"Gold looks natural on you," he said with a grin. "Now I think you need earrings and a necklace to go with it." He nodded, offering his arm for her to take it again.

Sasori watched them. He was tempted to remind Komushi that she would not be able to wear most of it daily beyond the main reason that she was a slave. Their job did not allow much jewelry. There was too much of a risk that metal would react to their chemical mixtures. But he could not ignore the way Azumi looked being treated so nicely or the fact that the gold did look beautiful on her. He did not like that it was Komushi making her smile. 'Why do I even care,' he snapped at himself.

"Milord," the woman who sold Komushi the bracelet spoke up. "Did you want anything?"

Sasori blinked, remembering where he was. "Uh...yes," he said ineloquently. "Do you happen to have this with a scorpion instead of a snake?" he asked, pointing to the body chain.

The woman nodded and turned around to pull out the exact same body chain with a scorpion. "Will this do?" she asked.

"It's perfect," he smiled, handing her the money for it.


Sasori took the neatly boxed chair from the woman. "I'm buying it because there is something I want to do and it does not matter if I did or not. I own her and can dress her however I please."
Gaara nodded and Sasori put the box in the bag that Gaara was carrying. The two of them continued down the line of stalls, buying more things they needed for the shop. After a while, they realized they had not seen Azumi or Komushi anywhere. "I think he may have stolen her," Gaara said.

"It would seem so," Sasori hummed, not all that concerned. "They won't get very far with the way he's stopping at every stall."

Gaara chuckled softly, adding another thing to their bag. "It really doesn't bother you that he's probably spending way too much on her right now?" he asked. He kept his tone light but he was curious to know what his cousin was thinking. This was the first time he had let a slave have so much 'freedom.'

"If he wants to make the foolish mistake of wasting his money on her, then so be it," Sasori said. "It's not like she can wear most of it anyway. I'll let him have his fun."

"Or are you letting her have her fun?" Gaara smirked.

"Does it really matter?" Sasori deadpanned. "Fun is being had and it's on a time limit of three days."

"That's very generous of you," Gaara smirked. "I'm sure she'll be even more loyal to you for it."

"Maybe," Sasori hummed softly, not really having thought of that point.

"She did sort of come to your defense back at the shop," he chuckled. "So her loyalty can only increase from there."

"I suppose you're right."

Up ahead, Azumi let Komushi lead her through the market and show her exactly what was and was not legal to sell in their city. Everything from foods, drinks, and other substances. He took her to the aisle of the market that had a lot of handmade items like paintings and other types of art. "And how often is this market here?" she asked.

"It's every six months," he told her. "So, it's not too rare but it only goes on for three days. If you miss it you'll have to wait half a year for it to come back around." He slowed his pace a little, stopping in front of a shop that had handmade bags. "I've been trying to convince Sasori to book a table for years. He'd make so much money off one night."

"What is his reasoning for not taking such an opportunity?" she asked. "He strikes me as someone who would want to use this as a way to not only make money but spread his name further since a lot of these people come from far places."

"He is. And I think I'm finally wearing him down," Komushi commented as he moved on to another stall. "But he hates dealing with too many people, which is why he has Gaara run the shop. And there are a lot of people who live here that also attend the market." He stopped to look at a pair of earrings then glanced at her with a squint. "If they are here, you'd think they are also into the dark side of life but a lot of regular people are here, too. Our Lordship over there has an image he wants to maintain." Komushi rolled his eyes.

Azumi scoffed and rolled her eyes as well. "Incredible," she muttered. "He has never even thought to hire another person to sell his items for him to make the extra profit."

"Aside from Gaara," Komushi chuckled, "I don't think he trusts anyone else to be smart enough to
know what they are talking about." He held up the pair of earring against her and closed one eye. "I hardly know what he's going on about when he tells me how he made his poisons. I just think of cool effects." he grinned.

Azumi nodded in understanding. "I see," she hummed. "What a missed opportunity this is for him then," she chuckled. She looked into the jewelry case in front of them. "But he could just have Gaara do it," she mumbled.

"Which is exactly what I told him, too," Komushi rolled his eyes again. "As I said, I think I'm breaking him down. Maybe you could work the stand together with him," he smirked. "Unless Sasori gets possessive and just does it himself."

"Which seems like how he operates normally," she muttered. "I am sure nothing I can tell him will convince him," she sighed. "It may stray him further from the idea."

He handed the earrings back to the stall owner and paid for them. "Oh, I don't know about that," he practically sang with a devious smirk. "You have been having a very different impact on the little scorpion."

"Stop telling her lies," Sasori snapped. He and Gaara were coming up the aisle from the opposite end, wading through the crowd. "You need to get this sick fantasy that I will ever sleep with any of my slaves out of your head." He flicked Komushi hard between the brows.

"I'm just messing with you," Komushi smirked.

"It's gone too far," Sasori rolled his eyes. "Are you done falsifying her being spoiled?"

"Tch, What? Are you tired already?" Komushi smirked. "I swear you're the oldest young person I know." Sasori rolled his eyes as he opened his mouth to counter Komushi again.

Gaara moved around the arguing pair to stand a little closer to Azumi. "Are you having fun?" he asked softly. "Komushi is a little excitable so he might be dragging you around a little."

Azumi chuckled softly. "I am," she said. "He has been explaining a lot to me and slowing down a little bit to do so. If this was my first impression of him and not him trying to kill me, we would have gotten along earlier."

Gaara laughed softly. "Mmm, but if he was this nice at first would you have believed that he's Sasori's best friend?" he asked teasingly. Ahead of them Komushi and Sasori started to walk, still bickering like an old married couple. "I know...that Sasori will take away anything Komushi buys you but if you ever want something kept safe just give it to me. I'll keep it for you," he told her softly.

She smiled at him and bowed slightly. "Thank you," she said. "I appreciate it." She looked at the bag he carried. "I can take that from you if you want. Lord Sasori did tell me to carry it."

Gaara shook his head gently. "He also said we were allowed to spoil you today," he reminded her. "It's way too heavy. Let me worry about this."

She chuckled and nodded. "Alright, then," she said. "Have you gotten everything your brother wanted? By the way, you never mentioned you had a brother. To which I stand by my statement that all of the men in your family are handsome."

"I never mentioned Kankuro?" he hummed before laughing as he scratched his head. "I have a sister, too. I'm actually the youngest of the three." He looked down at her. "I haven't gone over to
any of the art and beauty supplies. Want to help me pick stuff out for him? He wants new pigments
and compounds. He's the artist in the family."

"I would love to help you pick stuff out," she smiled. He offered her his arm and she took it,
walking with him to the section with the art and beauty supplies. "Your brother seems very
unafraid of Lord Sasori, which is very admirable."

Gaara laughed a little through his nose. "Not many of us in the family are actually afraid of him,"
he said, walking slowly with her. They stopped in front of the stall that had various colorful items.
Gaara pulled out a sheet with some color swatches and names of them next to them. "He'd never
actually hurt any of us and if he did well...you've seen that we all have our own little tempers," he
said with a hint of shame in his voice.

"Sometimes within reason, I suppose," she shrugged. "I am not one to judge other people's
behaviors too much." She looked at another sheet with different colors on them and a couple of
different brushes. He paused to look at her for a moment.

"Oh, Lord Gaara," the stall owner came up with a large stone bowl tucked into her arm and a pestle
in her other hand. "Does Lord Kankuro need restocking?" she asked with a large smile. "Is he with
you? I have a lot of new samples that I want him to take a look at!"

"Kankuro could not make it this time," Gaara said, smiling back. "But I can definitely take him the
samples and come back tomorrow with his review."

"Oh, wonderful!" she said, disappearing into the back to grab the samples. "And anything for the
lady?" she asked, looking Azumi over as she came back.

Azumi looked up at them. "Oh, no, no," she chuckled. "Thank you, but I am just here to help him
look for things for Lord Kankuro."

"Alright," the seller said. "Do you have his requests?" she turned back to Gaara with a smile. "I'll
make anything he wants."

"He wants a couple of whites, turquoises, browns, burnt sienna, and raw umber," Gaara answered.

"Those are very specific," Azumi chuckled. "It is nice that he knows exactly what he wants."

"Oh, Lord Kankuro has always been very specific with his pigments," the seller grinned. "One of
my favorite customers, if not my favorite." She looked at Gaara. "Coming right up."

Gaara thanked the seller again and then leaned over to whisper to Azumi. "Kankuro flirts with
literally everything and one in the art section of the market," he laughed softly. "He knows how to
play the game."

Azumi smiled and then chuckled quietly. "I would be so bold to say you also know how to play the
game," she smirked.

"What do you mean?"

"I saw the smiles you gave her," she laughed. "You clearly know how to play for your brother."

Gaara smirked. "I haven't a clue what you're talking about," he said with a wink and a finger
pressed to his lips.

The lady came back a few minutes later and with all of the requested pigments in little jars. "Please
tell him to stop by soon!" she grinned. "I included the samples at the bottom."

"Thank you," Gaara said, giving her another smile as he took the little jars. "I'll be back tomorrow with his reviews as promised."

The seller grinned and then looked at Azumi. "Come back if you do need anything," she told her.

"I will," she smiled, bowing slightly. "Thank you very much."

Gaara tucked the purchase into his bag then offered his arm for her to take. "We have a few more stops to make down here," he said, looking around at the other stalls. "Keep your eye out for brushes, rolls of loose canvas and clay," he told her.

"I can do that," she chuckled as they moved. She looked at each stall as they walked by, scanning each small area for those specific things. After a couple of stalls, she spotted different blocks of clay set out on a table. She gently pulled him to the table and looked over the options with him. "Does your brother own a shop as well?" she asked.

He looked over the options the stall was offering. His lips pinched up in a small concentrated pout. "Uh, it's not a real store like Sasori's," he said. "Kankuro takes on commissions from people around the city and abroad." He checked the list Kankuro had given him and then pointed out a few different clays to the stall keeper. "But he only takes on project's he's interested in. Naturally," he chuckled.

"Which makes sense," she chuckled. The stall keeper grabbed the clays that were on the list and wrapped them up, even throwing in something extra for Kankuro. "I am beginning to see just how popular he is," she smirked. "It seems everyone knows how to make a name for themselves in your family."

"We pride ourselves on being pretty charismatic," Gaara said cheekily. "Or we're big softies and like doing nice things for people," he laughed.

"There is nothing wrong with being a softie," she smirked as they continued on. They stopped by a stall that had specialty brushes. She picked one up, feeling the quality of the bristles. "This is very soft," she hummed to herself, looking at the other brushes. "What quality does he like?"

"Lately, he's been into really stiff brushes for calligraphy and ink paintings but," he looked at the brush and smirked, gently taking it from her and tilting her chin up with his finger to gently move the brush over her cheeks, "we could get you this one if you like it," he smiled. "Sasori shouldn't object to you wearing makeup once in a while."

Her breath hitched slightly and she could not help but smile. "I am finding it hard to say no," she chuckled.

He laughed boyishly as he brushed it over her nose and then very gently over her eyelids. "Good," he giggled a little.

"Sir...are you going to buy that?" the stall owner asked, watching the pair with an amused expression.

"I don't know," Gaara smirked at Azumi. "Am I?"


He gave her a mischievous grin and turned to the stall owner. "We'll take this and that pack there,"
he pointed to an extensive brush set. The stall owner nodded and packaged everything up for him as the others had. Gaara tucked them once more into the bag. "Thank you," he smiled at her.

"Anytime," she grinned back.

Azumi took Gaara's arm again as they continued walking. "Thank you," she said softly to him. "You really do not have to do this," she chuckled.

"I don't," he grinned. "But I wanted to." He gave her a fond smile as they continued to walk. The last thing they needed to pick up was the canvas.

"Are you two done yet?" Sasori asked, walking up with deep fried pieces of sugar.

"Almost," Gaara replied, reaching into Komushi's basket of sweets to steal a piece.

"Hey, that's mine," Komushi chuckled.

"It's too late for me to give it back now," Gaara smirked as he swallowed it.

Azumi looked around and spotted a stall with rolled canvases. "Ah, over there," she said, pointing in the direction of the stall.

Komushi turned to follow the direction Azumi was pointing in. His eyes fell on the rolled canvas. "Ugh, I don't want to carry that back!" he pouted. "Why doesn't your brother ever seem to do his own shopping anymore?"

"Because he's busy," Gaara smirked, walking with Azumi to the stall.

"Busy doing what?" Komushi grumbled to himself.

"What can I help you with?" the stallkeeper asked, smiling just as wide as the previous sellers.

"None of your business," Gaara countered. Komushi opened his mouth to retort but Sasori pushed right through them, walking up to the stall owner.

"We need one your biggest canvas sizes and two of your medium ones," Sasori spoke up, snatching the list from Gaara's fingers with an eye roll.

"Coming right up," the seller nodded, turning to grab the canvases.

Sasori looked at the list before handing it back to Gaara. "Now we can get out of here," he sighed.

"We're leaving already?" Komushi whined.

"We're coming back tomorrow."

"Besides," Gaara stifled a yawn, "we don't want to get caught in the heat."

"Yes the sun will be rising in an hour and I want to be in bed before then," Sasori said plainly, already making his way towards the exit. Gaara took the smaller rolls and tucked them under his arms when the seller handed them over.

Komushi sighed, looking at the big roll. "You never even asked me to carry it," he grumbled lowly, picking it up anyway.

The group headed back toward the exit quickly in an attempt to beat the crowd of that would form
once the market closed for the night. They made it just minutes before the crowd would have formed.

"Would you like me to carry those?" Azumi asked Gaara softly, looking at the canvases. "It seems a bit unfair that you are carrying almost everything."

"It's not too bad," Gaara smiled.

"Yes, it is," Sasori grumbled, taking three of the four rolls from Gaara and handed them over to Azumi. "You're being chivalrous for the sake of it now and it's starting to grate on my nerves." He shoved the rolls into Azumi's hands. "The market is over for the day. She's a slave, treat her as such," Sasori said with a command to his tone.

Azumi frowned, moving the scrolls to a more comfortable carrying position.

"Relax, Sasori," Komushi chuckled as they started moving back up the winding staircase.

Azumi rolled her eyes. She figured he would go back to being rude and grumpy as soon as they left.

"Don't you tell me to relax," Sasori hissed as the two friends walked ahead. "And, Gaara, you better keep that little brush you bought her," he ground out over his shoulder.

Gaara tensed up for a moment then started to chuckled softly. "Guess we got caught," he said to her softly.

She smiled a little. "It would seem so," she said just as softly. They made it out of the marketplace and headed back to the shop to drop off the things they bought to restock certain things. Once everything was put into the workshop, they stepped outside and Sasori locked up.

"I'll meet you guys at the entrance of the market tonight," Komushi said, waving to them as he left. "I'm going to go crash on my bed."

"I'll come by around noon to help organize everything we got today," Gaara said, smiling at Azumi. Sasori rolled his eyes. He was starting to lose count how many time he had done that on just this one outing. "I'll be more useful since all of Kankuro's errands are done."

Sasori gripped Azumi's forearm tightly. "Then we'll see you at noon," he said flatly, starting to pull Azumi in the direction of their home.

"Goodnight," Azumi said to him as they left.

Gaara watched for a few moments, sighing to himself. "Goodnight," he said, once again to himself.
Ignoring the pain from the tight grip on her wrist, Azumi allowed herself to get pulled, not saying anything to Sasori until they reached their home and then went straight to his room. "Shall I run a bath for you?" she asked once they were in his room.

"Yes," he said in a clipped tone. Without looking back at her, he walked into his workshop as he started to remove his daily jewelry. She frowned as she went into the bathroom. As usual, she set the temperature and poured the oil and salts in. She placed his robe on the hook in the bathroom and waited for him to enter the bathroom to dismiss her. He walked in moments later and looked her over. "Run the other bath. You're taking one with me," he told her. "I need to take your measurement after and I think it would be best for both of us if you were clean."

Azumi resisted the urge to roll her eyes and scoff, moving toward the other bath and setting it up for herself. She almost forgot to put the salts and oils in it if it were not for Sasori bringing it to her attention with a mere clearing of his throat and a nod toward the shelves. She nodded, grabbing an oil and a jar of salt and putting it into her bath before getting in.

Sasori sunk low into the water as he usually did, his head tilted back over the edge of the tub. They fell into silence for a little while.

"How did you like it?" he asked suddenly.

She hummed before answering, thinking about her words. "It was very interesting," she said. "I liked it a lot. It is definitely worth the hype from the three of you. I can see why one would be excited about it." She was definitely excited to go back.

"Mm, the hype," he chuckled. "I haven't seen either of them that excited about taking someone to the night market since we took Mei," he mumbled. "You won't be able to keep any of those trinkets they got you. And I want you to learn who to go to and what to shop for tomorrow. It is beneficial to know for our business."

She nodded and looked down at the water. "I was prepared to not be able to keep anything," she said. "And I made sure to pay attention to a lot of the stalls when Lord Komushi was showing me around." She knew that when she was with Gaara, she was not focused on much else but looking for art supplies with him. "But I will make sure to pay more attention tomorrow."

Sasori stared at her silently again. "Mhm." He wanted to bring up her behavior with Gaara but he was not sure how to. It was grating on him how close they were getting. It irked him just how easily Gaara seemed to brush off not only his status as a nobleman but also that she was not his. She was Sasori's slave and by extension Sasori's plaything. She could feel his eyes on her but she did not want to look back at him. She started to wash off quickly, anticipating getting away from him a little more. He watched her with half-lidded eyes. "Why are you rushing all of a sudden?" he asked, lazily turning over in the tub. He lifted his leg into the air and lazily started to wash his body down. "You can't leave until I let you," he casually reminded her.

She stopped for a moment and rolled her eyes. "I know," she said. "I just do not like being in the water for too long. And would you not prefer I get out first? To make sure your towel is warmed before you get out?"

He glanced at her again. "You're getting very clever with how you evade me," he smirked, running a hand up to his arm, rinsing off some soap.
"Evading you?" she hummed, turning toward him and leaning back against the farthest wall of the tub. "No. I just want to do my job efficiently."

Sasori scoffed, smirking again. "Fair," he replied before dipping under the water to rinse his hair. As he came back up, he ran his hands through his hair. "Tell me what your village was like," he said suddenly.

She looked up at him and blinked. "My village..." she said quietly. She had not thought about her home life since before she was put on the stage to be sold as a slave. She tried not to think about it too much. She did not want to be hindered by missing home. "It is tucked behind the mountains, settled within an oasis. Very well hidden. It is not very common to receive outsiders. One can really only find it if they are actively looking for it. And since no one knows about it, no one can know to look for it. It is a thriving village."

"Interesting," Sasori hummed. "It sounds like it has a strong natural defense. And you have many different types of snakes living within this village?" he asked, rinsing off his body. He stood up and poured water over himself to rinse his hair off and then stepped out of the tub.

"Most of them are naturally there," she said as stepped out of her tub as well. She stepped toward the cabinet to grab him a towel, handing it to him before grabbing one for herself. "The rest were brought to the village for our use."

"I see," Sasori said as he accepted the towel. He dried himself off then reached for his robe. "And how did a little noble girl from a far off land wind up on that stage for sale?" he asked her as he reached over and tilted her chin up with his forefinger. His voice lowered as he leaned in closer. "Did no one come to defend you?"

She frowned, looking him in the eyes and taking a moment to answer. "I volunteered to take the place of another girl from my village," she said finally. "She was much younger than I...and it did not sit right with me that she would be sold off as a slave."

He smirked. "How did I know it would be for some noble cause," he grinned. "And was she worth it?" His lips brushed hers as he spoke.

Her breath hitched quietly and she started to tense up just a little bit. "She deserves none of this," she said softly, keeping his gaze. "I saw great potential in her. It would have been a shame to throw it all away into slavery. So yes, she was."

"Hm," Sasori pulled back, smirking at her. He held onto her face, tightening his grip on her jaw and pressing into her bone. "I won't let you go to waste. I can assure you that," he grinned, finally releasing her jaw. His hand slipped down to her neck and shoulder. "Go get my tape measure from the workshop," he said without breaking their eye contact. His voice was soft but the dark command was still there. "Then meet me in the room." He gripped her shoulder tightly and spun her around gracefully, pushing her gently toward the door.

She wrapped the towel around herself as she went into the workshop, looking through a couple of drawers before finding the tape measure. She stood there for a moment and took a deep breath before walking out into the bedroom, handing Sasori the tape measure.

He was waiting for her on the edge of his bed when she walked back in. He took the tape from her and placed it on the bed then reached up and pulled her towel away, tossing it on the bed. He tilted his head a little to the side as he looked her over again. His fingers reached out to trace the shape of the 'art' he had burned into her chest. His fingers dragged lightly up to her collarbones and slid over her shoulder before curling under her arm to lift it up and outward. He repeated the action on the
other side. Then his hands moved to her hips. He knelt and moved his hand to her inner thigh. "Open them," she said nudging her right thigh so her legs would open.

She pressed her lips together for a moment as she moved her right foot out a little to open her legs. It had been a long time since she had been measured for any reason and it was usually a moderately uncomfortable experience. Moderate discomfort had been surpassed as soon as he took her towel off. He had barely even started and she was already much more uncomfortable than she usually was around him.

He smirked, looking up at her. He could see the discomfort on her face and it was like sweet nectar to him. It was exactly where he wanted her. He moved his hand up to the crux of her hip and pelvis, gripping her leg tightly and pushing her legs open just a little further. He turned around to grab the tape measure off his bed and stood back up. He circled her to set about measuring her arms and wingspan first. His hand casually brushed her skin every so often. He was going to make sure each measurement was detailed. He noted each number in his head as he moved back around to her and measured her front.

She looked at him for a brief moment. "If I may ask," she started, as he continued measuring, "what am I being measured for?"

He took a moment to answer her. "Not that it really matters," he said casually, "but I plan to buy you something tomorrow that I want to see you in," he told her. "Don't worry, I think you'll rather like it," he said as he knelt down to measure her hips and legs. He ran his fingertips along the length of her snake. "But even if you don't, it doesn't really matter because as I said...you'll wear it."

She nodded, starting to wonder if the comments from earlier got to him and he caved into getting clothes for her that would not cause people to question his intentions with her. "I see," she hummed, risking a glance down at his hands on her snake tattoo.

"This will be my next project," he said softly to himself. He could feel her watching him and could not help the grin that pulled his lip. He knew exactly what he wanted to do to enhance the large tattoo.

She furrowed her brows at the comment. 'Next project?' she thought. She wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt and think that maybe he was using her snake tattoo as inspiration for something that would have to do with snakes. But that was entirely too hopeful.

He finished up his measurements and walked over to his desk to record them all. "We'll leave from the shop again from tomorrow," he told her once he was done writing it all down. "I want all of our purchases from yesterday organized before we start bringing more in."

"That sounds good," she nodded, relaxing when he was no longer near her. She went into the bathroom to grab the clothes that were left in there and put her clothes back on before putting his away then waited for him to dismiss her.

He had moved to his bed in the time that she had been in the bathroom. Once more, he was poring over a ledger and making notes. He noticed her waiting and remembered why she was still there.

"Sleep here tonight," he told her. He doubted she would try to slip off to the river bank but he also did not want to have to go to her room to fetch her in the morning.

Her heart sank and she nodded, getting onto the daybed at the end of his. She laid down, trying to find some way to calm herself a little. She felt uneasy sleeping in a room with him, but she had to
admit to herself that this was a little easier than sleeping in his bed with him. She stared up at the domed ceiling, looking at the night sky through the skylight at the peak of it as she waited for him to fall asleep first.

Sasori looked up from his ledger twenty minutes later and noticed she was still awake. "Go to sleep," he commanded without raising his voice. "I did not ask that you wait up for me. I do not want you to be any more of a pain to wake up in the morning," he said, nudging a blanket that was at the edge of his bed onto her with his foot.

Azumi rolled her eyes as she took the blanket and rolled over to face away from him. 'It is not even hard to wake me up,' she thought. She continued to wait for him to fall asleep, not at all comfortable with being there with him. Another twenty minutes passed before she finally admitted to herself that she could not stay up any longer and passed out.

'About time,' Sasori thought to himself when he looked up ten minutes later and noticed her breathing had switched to a sleeping pattern. He smirked and decided to finally call it a night himself. He closed up the ledger, placed it on his bedside table and fell asleep easily.
Chapter 11

The next morning, Azumi woke up to the light beginning to pour into the room. Since it was much more open than her own room, it seemed much brighter for the time of day that it was. It had to be later in the morning than the usual time she would wake up. She groaned softly as she sat up, stretching her back a little. She risked a glance at Sasori and noticed he was also just getting up. 'And you thought you would have to wake me up,' she thought, rolling her eyes.

Sasori groaned softly as he woke up. He rubbed his face and spoke without looking at Azumi. "Go get us some breakfast from the kitchen," he told her, nudging her with his foot. "I don't care what it is. We need to eat and get to the shop."

Without saying anything to him, Azumi got up and walked out of the room, heading down the halls to the kitchen. There were only three other servants there. They all looked up at her, giving her the same looks that everyone else had given her since she arrived.

"I must say I am a little surprised that you are still alive," one of them hummed as she walked deeper into the kitchen.

"If I was paid every time someone has said that to me since Lord Sasori bought me, I might have enough money to buy myself back from him," she smirked.

One of the other servants snorted, trying to quickly stifle their laughter. "I'm sorry," they said quickly, hiding their face a little. The third servant smacked them on the head.

"We have heard a surprising lack of screams of terror coming from his portion of the house," the first servant said.

Azumi grabbed two bowls. "We have been at his shop a lot," she said, portioning out breakfast for her and Sasori.

"I'd ask if you are unharmed, but those burns tell me otherwise."

"I have a higher pain tolerance than most. And normally I do not vocalize when I am in pain." She picked the bowls up and gave the other servants a polite nod. "I will die silently," she said as she backed out of the kitchen and made her way back to Sasori’s room. The three servants watched her leave then looked at each other.

"I don't know if that was melodramatic or if she is just very brave," the second servant said.

"It's definitely both," the third nodded.

"One thing is for sure. I think Lord Sasori has met his match," the first one smirked.

Azumi moved up the halls quickly, stepping back into Sasori’s room. She did not see him in his room so she figured he was in the workshop. She quickly went in there, setting his food down on the table in front of him.

"Hurry up and eat," he told her. He had his eyes pressed to a machine as he moved something on a glass dish. "We'll leave as soon as you're done." He pulled away to start eating.

She had already started eating when she set his bowl down. She stared at the machine he was working with as she ate. Part of her wanted to ask about it, but the rest of her did not want to make
He stood, walking back out to his room with her in tow. He dressed quickly before heading for the
doors. They made their way out of the house and down towards town. Sasori squinted against the
sun until they could slip into the blissful shade the was forming in the shifting afternoon sun. They
slipped into the workshop as they had before and found Gaara surrounded various jars scattered
over every surface. A few pots boiled on one of the upper workbenches, making the room
impossibly hot and humid.

"Hey," Gaara flashed her a smile, pushing his hair back as he wiped a little sweat away from his
forehead.

"Hello," she grinned at him. "Did you sleep well?" she asked him as she moved to the tanks with
the snakes to spray the one that was shedding. She checked to see if any skin needed to be peeled
off.

"There is always room for better sleep," he grinned. He walked over to peek in on the snakes with
her. "Are they doing okay?" he asked her.

"It only takes one person to spray snakes," Sasori said from the second level. He stirred one of the
pots, not bothering to look down at Azumi or Gaara. "You'll have your time for small talk tonight."
Gaara glared up at him, the irritation on his face was blaring. Not hearing Gaara cross the room
again, Sasori's teeth ground. "Do not make me repeat myself." He turned around to give Gaara a
hard look.

Azumi and Gaara shared a look before he went back to where he was before. Once the snake was
taken care of, Azumi started to organize everything they bought the night before, making sure
everything was labeled correctly before moving on to the next thing.

"The stuff on the second level needs to be bottled and stored too," Gaara told Azumi as he
continued to put labels on any of the new stuff they had not added to the collection yet. "Two of
them are new stuff and one of them is just a replenishment."

Sasori walked over to the other side of the second level to sit down at his desk. "Gaara, did we get
any of that new poison I wanted to try out?" he called down.

"We did," Gaara answered, picking up the bottle. "Take this to him," he said softly, handing it to
Azumi. She nodded as she took it and went up to the second level. She crossed over to Sasori's
desk, setting the bottle in front of him then tending to the boiling pots that needed to be bottled.

"I can't wait to use this," Sasori grinned, swirling the little bottle. "Has anyone come in?"

"Kakuzu stopped in," Gaara responded. "I left his order on your desk and he said he will probably
see you tonight at the market."

"I look forward to that," Sasori mumbled.

Azumi turned the burners off and started bottling the compositions. Once they were all bottled, she
started labeling them and set them on a tray to take back to the first level.

"Whoa, it is hot in here!" Komushi grinned as he entered the shop. "It's cooler outside." There was
a collective hushed groan from the Azumi, Gaara, and Sasori. "Aah, the sweet sound of you all
waiting for my arrival," Komushi grinned. He spotted Azumi walking down the ladder and waited
for her to place the tray in her hands down. "And how is the little lady today?" he asked, wrapping
an arm around her waist and dipping her.

"She is working!" Sasori snapped over his shoulder. "So let her work."

Komushi glanced up at Sasori, keeping Azumi in the same position. "Did I ask him?" He looked back at her.

"You did not," she said softly with a chuckle. "I am doing well," she smirked. "But I am working."

Komushi sighed heavily, pulling her back up. "Fine, I guess I'll let you work," he pouted. He let her go and spun around, gripping the ladder and making quick work of getting up to Sasori. He picked up the vile of the new poison. "Is this new?" he grinned, holding it up to a light on the desk.

"It is. Now put it down before you drop it and manage to kill yourself."

"When are you going to use it?" Komushi gushed, putting the vile down.

"I'm not sure yet," Sasori said. He shifted through a couple of papers on his desk before handing the one he was looking for to Komushi. "This is a list of its effects since I know that's all you care about."

Komushi nearly squealed like a little girl. He snatched the paper from Sasori and started to read it over. "Oh this is deadly," he grinned. "You need someone you're willing to straight kill for me to put you to the test with this."

"I always have a list. But we could also ask Kakuzu," Sasori said nonchalantly. Not a flicker of concern or weight that they were discussing ending someone's life for fun.

"Kakuzu has a book of people," Komushi laughed. "Picking someone won't be hard. When are you seeing him next?"

"He might be at the market tonight," Sasori answered, looking through some more paperwork.

On the first level, Azumi finished putting away the newly labeled bottles and went into the workshop to take the ones that Gaara was working on. "You were right about that bed," she said softly to him. "It was not the most comfortable," she chuckled.

Gaara looked up from the bottle he was working on. "He made you sleep in his room last night?" he asked with a frown. "Why?" he chuckled a little. "I'll try to think of how I can make it more comfortable for you. But he didn't make you work on anything did he? We all got home so late."

"No, we did not work on anything," she said. "But he did take my body measurements and then told me to sleep in his room because he did not want to deal with waking me up or something like that." She scoffed and rolled her eyes.

"Your body measurements?" Gaara's brows furrowed. "For what?" he asked. "Oh, sorry I realize that's kind of invasive, isn't it," he laughed softly, scratching the back of his head. "You don't have to tell me."

"He wants to make me wear something," she shrugged, not all that concerned about the reason for it anymore. "Telling you is a lot less invasive than the way he takes measurements," she grumbled.

"That's...very unlike him." Gaara glanced up to where he and Komushi were still discussing their horrendous hobby. "I mean him wanting to buy you something. Sasori likes to keep the most ridiculously detailed measurements of people when he takes them." He rolled his eyes. "And let me
"Guess... he woke up after you, didn't he?" he smirked.

"Ugh, yes. He woke up just after I did, proving that there was no reason for me to sleep in his room."

"Yeah, that sounds like him. He likes to sleep in when he knows he doesn't have to get up for the other person."

She scoffed again, taking the labeled bottles and putting them on the tray to carry out to the main shop. "I have never experienced being around someone so ridiculous for this long," she said softly. "But this is my life now so I must deal with it."

"You... please don't believe that," Gaara said softly. "I am certain there will be a way to free you."

He kept his voice down as he said it. He slipped his hand into hers and squeezed it. "My uncle is working on freeing everyone like you."

She looked at him for a moment, a small smile appearing on her lips. She squeezed his hand back subconsciously. "Until then, I will bear it." She pulled her hand away and winked at him. "But only because I get to see you every day," she said, turning and heading into the main shop to put the bottles away.

"You two are awfully quiet down here," Komushi grinned, leaning over the railing for the second floor. He watched Azumi walk into the main shop.

"That's what people at work sound like," Gaara smirked. "But it's no surprise that you don't actually know what that is."

"You always know just how to wound me, Gaara," Komushi sighed dramatically, pressing a hand to his heart.

"Not like it's hard to," Sasori smirked. "All someone has to do is bring up your lack of work ethic or your eyebrows."

"Or your virginity," Gaara mumbled.

"What was that?" Komushi asked Gaara.

"Nothing."

Komushi squinted down at him, leaning over the railing hard.

"If you fall, I'm not cleaning your body up," Gaara said breezily.

"Yes, you are!" Sasori scoffed. "It'll start to smell if you don't."

"He's your best friend and this is your shop. You can clean him up," Gaara waved him off.

"But you work for me," Sasori smirked.

"Azumi can clean me up," Komushi grinned. "I'd rather have her touch me than either of you two."

Azumi groaned and rolled her eyes as she put the bottles away. 'No, thank you,' she thought.

"I think that's a hard pass," Gaara smirked. "I'll clean you up just to spite you and spare Azumi."

"So cruel," Komushi pouted.
Azumi chuckled as she walked back into the workshop. "That aside, please do not fall," she said, looking up at Komushi. She motioned for him to step back from the railing.

"Only because you asked." He gave her a wink and took a step back.

"Wow." Sasori rolled his eyes. "Find someone else to hit on," he grumbled. "I really don't feel like having to deal with my slave having a child."

Gaara clicked his teeth. "As if she'd give in to him." He felt an angry flare bloom in his stomach.

"So defensive," Komushi smirked. "What, did you claim her for yourself already?" he teased Gaara.

Gaara growled softly, clenching his fist. "No, I—"

"Neither of you can claim her," Sasori said, cutting him off. "Did you forget that she is my slave? I feel like I say it enough for both of you to remember."

"Yeah, yeah," Komushi smirked, walking down the ladder. "But, Sasori, if you let her youth go to waste, I'll never forgive you," he said, wrapping an arm around Azumi's shoulders.

"Oh, how will I live with myself," Sasori deadpanned, going back to his work.

Azumi chuckled softly, setting the tray in her arms down. "You might be surprised to know that I will remain looking like this for a long, long time," she smirked.

"What are you one of the undead?" Komushi smirked.

"The undead can't handle the sun, dimwit," Gaara huffed, his nerves still touched.

"Neither can Sasori and yet somehow he made it here," Komushi chuckled, releasing Azumi.

"Not the undead," she chuckled. "Just blessed with very good genes." She set the last of the bottles that Gaara did on the tray to take them out and organize them.

"That still sounds cryptic," Komushi squinted at her.

"It just means she's going to age well," Sasori huffed.

"Like our family," Gaara added. "Look at our uncle. Or consider just how old Chiyo actually is," he chuckled.

"How...old is Lady Chiyo?" Azumi mumbled. "How old is Lord Sandaime?" she whispered.

"Oh...she's ancient," Komushi smirked. "And he's about fifty-four."

'Fifty-four and he looks like he is in his thirties,' Azumi thought. She looked at Gaara and smiled, realizing that meant he would also age well. Gaara caught her eyes and winked at her.

Komushi looked between the two of them. "Gross," he said lowly.

"You're gross," Gaara said. Azumi stifled a laugh as she walked out into the main shop again.

"Anyway, what time is it?" Komushi asked. "I'm ready to go back to the market!"

"We can head out in an hour and a half," Sasori rolled his eyes. "It's like I'm babysitting children,"
he grumbled.

The last hour and a half went by quickly as the three of them worked while simultaneously ignoring Komushi. Once it was time to leave, they wrapped up everything they were working on and got ready to go to the market.
"Let's go!" Komushi grinned just as Sasori closed up the shop.

Azumi took the bag meant for their purchased goods from Sasori and shifted it onto her shoulder. He smirked and waited for everyone to file out of the shop before locking it up. Like the night before, they made their way to the underground market quickly. It was even louder and busier than the night before.

"Aah, yes!" Komushi grinned. "Now the party has started!"

"Oh, this is a lot of people," Azumi groaned quietly to herself, making sure to stay closer to the three men she arrived with. They started down a different aisle than the one they started with the night before. It was more medicinal things than anything else.

They walked up to one of the tables with an older woman seated at the table. "Lord Sasori," the woman perked up, her tone coy. "I was wondering when you'd stop by," she giggled. Some of the other women down the aisle started to stir, realizing who had arrived.

Sasori looked at them and flashed that charming smile he always gave to those unsuspecting of his true nature. Azumi scoffed quietly and rolled her eyes. "I stopped by to get a couple of these," he smirked at the woman to owned the stall as he tapped on a jar.

"Oh!" she grinned. "Coming right up," she said, unable to hold in the slight giggle that came out of her. She stood up from her chair and moved to the back to the stall to grab his items.

"Always a charmer," Komushi smirked.

"She's like Chiyo's age," Gaara whispered to Azumi. "Anyone with a cute face and maybe a pulse could charm her."

"You've got something to say, Gaara?" Sasori sent a glare at him.

"No, just letting Azumi know what it is you get here," he said.

The woman came back with a couple of jars of what Sasori requested and Azumi started putting them into the bag. "I threw in a little extra for you," she grinned at Sasori.

"Thank you," Sasori's charm turned back on. "It's always nice to see you," he told her with a small bow. The woman giggled as they moved on to the next table. This stall had an array of whole dried creatures and plants for mixing.

"My lord," the man sitting behind the table nearly jump up when Sasori approached. "To see you and Lord Kakuzu in one night," he grinned. "A very pleasant surprise."

"Oh, Kakuzu has already been through here?" Sasori asked, looking over the crowd of people.

"He was here just a couple of minutes ago," the man nodded. "He went down that way." Just down the aisle, Kakuzu could be seen bent over another table selling different mixing ingredients.

"Let's ask him for the list," Komushi said softly to Sasori, smirking evilly.

Sasori smirked. "That's the plan," he whispered back. Sasori looked down at stall owner. "Thank you very much," he grinned. "We'll come back soon," he told him. He and Komushi started to
make their way towards Kakuzu in the crowd.

"Look at them," Gaara rolled his eyes. He looked down at the stall owner. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "I know what we need," he told the man.

"No worries, Lord Gaara," the man smiled, bowing his head a little.

Gaara pointed out a couple of things to him, telling him how much of each they needed. Azumi watched Komushi and Sasori make their way towards Kakuzu like children. She hummed and then turned her attention to Gaara. Once he got everything he needed from the stall owner, she opened the bag for him to put everything in.

"Thank you," Gaara smiled at her as he started to walk with her. He offered his arm for her as they started to make their way slowly towards Sasori and Komushi.

Kakuzu stood up, looking over at the two eager Lords. "Sasori," Kakuzu raised an eyebrow. "Komushi," he nodded to each of them.

"It's been a while, Lord Kakuzu," Komushi smiled, giving the older man a polite nod.

"It has been," Kakuzu said. "I had a good feeling I would see you here, Sasori. I don't think you've ever been one to miss this night market when it comes around."

"Never," Sasori purred. "This is the only place I can get my hands on the new and unique."

Komushi was practically vibrating with excitement.

Kakuzu raised an eyebrow at the young man. "The sentiment is likewise. Are you finding anything interesting?"

Komushi's eyes were alight with excitement. He was trying his best not to fidget too much.

"You have no tact," Sasori sighed.

"Oh, who needs that!" Komushi smacked Sasori's arm.

Kakuzu held in a chuckled, retaining his stoic look among the bustling crowd. "Tact?" he repeated. "What's going on here?"

"We have something we would like to ask you," Komushi said.

Kakuzu looked between them for a moment before speaking again. "What is it?" he asked.

"I have acquired a new poison I would like to test out," Sasori said. "And we are aware that you have a list—"

"A long list," Komushi cut in.

"Yes..." Sasori said with a slight sigh of irritation at his friend. "A long list of people you want...gone."

"And we would like to wipe one of those people off of that list for you," Komushi grinned.

Kakuzu stared at them. "I'll stop by tomorrow," he said after a few moments of staring at them.

"Yes," Komushi hissed in sheer excitement.
"Did something break?" Hidan crept up behind Azumi and Gaara. "Oh, Lord Gaara," he gasped, bowing low to the man.

"Hello, Hidan," Gaara said, nodding for the man to come up from his bow as both he and Azumi turned toward him. "Are you enjoying the market?" he asked casually.

"I'm loving it!" Hidan grinned. "I got a snack." He held up a cup filled with fried scorpions. "Want one?" He offered to Azumi and Gaara politely.

"Where did you find those?" Gaara gasped softly.

"Right over there," Hidan said, pointing to another stall. It sold different fried foods.

Azumi looked at the cup, horrified at what was inside and took half a step back.

Hidan gave her a toothy grin. "Want one?" He shook it, jostling the fried insects.

"Let's go get some!" Gaara grinned, starting to pull her into the direction of the stand. "Those are so good!"

"I appreciate it," she said. "But I think I will pass on that. I am not exactly fond of such a...food." She looked at the cup in Hidan's hand again. 'If one could even call it that,' she thought.

"Suit ya self," Hidan shrugged, eating more of the insects.

Gaara stopped short. "Oh," he pouted a little. "Do you want to get something else, though?" he asked, suddenly feeling bad that he was charging to excitedly towards the stand.

Azumi gasped softly and then shook her head. "No, no," she said. "Feel free to indulge, do not let me stop you," she chuckled softly.

Gaara looked back at Sasori to see if he even noticed that they were slipping away. "We'll both get something," he grinned, pulling her towards more of the food. "And we can get away from that," he said, looking at the three murderers that they were slipping away from. Azumi looked back at them as well and chuckled, holding onto him a little tighter as they weaved through the crowd toward the stand. She looked over the different options once they approached it. There were a lot more options than just fried scorpions and she let out a small sigh in relief. "Pick whatever you want." Gaara's voice was echoed by a softer feminine one. Another couple had walked up next to them at the same moment.

"Lord Gaara," the woman said with a small gasp. "I haven't seen you in so long! You've grown even more handsome." Her voice, while excited, remained soft.

Behind her, a man a little older than Gaara and Azumi peeked out, grinning. "Nice to see ya again, Lord Gaara," he said with a bow.

"Lady Konan," Gaara smiled, bowing, "It's always lovely to see you and Yahiko."

"Likewise," Konan smiled. "Are you two here alone?" she asked, looking at Azumi who bowed slightly to her. "Or are here with your cousin?" There was a slight tone of disdain in her voice at the mention of Sasori which did not go unnoticed by Azumi.

"He's talking to our favorite, most pious, bounty hunter and Komushi," Gaara smirked. Konan's eyes flickered to the direction she assumed Gaara and Azumi had walked from.
“Komushi’s here?” Yahiko nearly whined.

“Don’t worry, darling,” Konan said reassuringly. “You don’t have to talk to him,” she soothed.

“Noted. We’ll play the avoidance game for as long as we can,” she smirked. “But, Gaara, I did not take you for the slave-owning type.” Her eyes settled on Azumi.

“Ah, no, she isn’t my slave,” Gaara started.

“I am Lord Sasori’s, my Lady,” Azumi said, bowing again.

Konan’s face dropped. She looked at Gaara. “How long as he had her?” she asked him seriously, moving closer to cup Azumi’s face. “You’re too pretty to be owned by the likes of him,” she said with a heavy tone.

Even Yahiko looked at her sadly. “Pretty didn’t stop him from mutilating that last girl,” he said, his brows furrowing.

Azumi frowned. “I have been made aware of his track record with slaves,” she told them.

“She’s only been around for a couple of days,” Gaara said.

“And he’s already done this to her?” Konan practically whispered, looking at the burn on Azumi’s chest.

Gaara nodded, then looked down at her leg, indicating there was another one down there. Yahiko clicked his teeth, his face twisting into a snarl.

“How much did he pay for you?” Konan asked, suddenly hit with a wave of maternal protection.

Gaara shook his head. “Don’t,” he told her. “I know what you’re thinking and I can’t see him taking any more for her. He...seems to be growing attached.”

“Attached?” Konan repeated. “And he has the audacity to look at me the way he does for having the relationship I do with Yahiko?” she asked softly, a small hint of a growl in her voice.

Azumi tilted her head slightly, looking at the pair in front of her. ‘Is she romantically involved with her slave?’ she thought.

Yahiko caught the look she gave them and winked, grinning mischievously.

Gaara rubbed the back of his neck. “I'm not sure it's going to be anything like you two,” Gaara hummed. “It would only turn into something as horrible and twisted as he is.” He slid his hand down Azumi's arm and laced his fingers tightly between hers. “I won't let him do that to he—you,” he stopped himself, realizing he had been talking about her as if he was not right next to her. He turned to look at Azumi with a heavy weight in his eyes.

Azumi looked at him and smiled. “Thank you,” she said softly.

Konan smiled fondly at them. “It's clear that you care for her more than Sasori ever could,” she said.

“I couldn't imagine treating anyone the way he treats others behind closed doors,” he said, looking over his shoulder. “He and Komushi are planning on testing a new poison so be ready for a request from them.”

“As if I would ever give them anything,” Konan scoffed. "I'll be making sure we don't cross paths
Azumi chuckled quietly at Konan's blatant disdain for Sasori. It was kind of refreshing to see a woman that did not swoon over him.

Gaara smiled and bowed again. "I'll try to make sure he stays away from you as well," he chuckled. "Just a fair warning, if you plan on visiting the shop, he has been frequenting it more often lately."

"He's actually making an effort to leave his house?" Yahiko blinked. "What changed?"

Gaara glanced at Azumi. "I'm going to say it has to do with how well she works with him," he smiled at Azumi. "She's brilliant and amazing help around the lab."

Konan looked at Azumi with a raised eyebrow. "Do you now?" she smirked at her. "Mm, then I might make an effort to drop by just to see you two. You are still working there regularly, right?" she asked Gaara.

"I am," Gaara said with a nod. "I'm there about four days a week."

"Maybe expect a visit from us," Konan chuckled.

"That would be really nice," Gaara smiled, bowing his head again to her.

Konan glanced in Sasori's direction and noticed that he was looking at Gaara and Azumi. "I think we may have to part ways here," she said softly, looking back at the pair in front of her. Gaara looked over his shoulder once more and frowned.

"Ugh, it's so creepy how he can pick people out of crowds like that," Yahiko shuddered. He slipped his hand into Konan's and bowed to Gaara and Azumi. "It was nice to meet you, Azumi." He flashed her a friendly smile.

"It was nice to meet you too, Yahiko," Azumi smiled. "And you too, Lady Konan." She bowed to them.

"Go quickly before he gets here. He's already on my case about trying to steal Azumi away from him," Gaara hissed to them.

Azumi and Gaara watched as the other two slipped off into the crowd, getting as far away from Sasori and Komushi as possible. "I like them," she said softly once they were gone.

Gaara smiled at her, "Konan is a kind soul among monsters," he said softly. "She and Yahiko have been going strong for a while now. He's only a slave on paper at this point," he pulled Azumi over to the stand to look at the food options.

"Aw," Komushi's voice reached them first. "I could have sworn I saw you two talking to the lovely Konan!" he said, draping an arm around Azumi's shoulders and pulling her away from Gaara. Azumi let out a soft groan, feeling Komushi on her. Sasori noted the way they had been holding hands silently.

"We were," Gaara said. "But she had to be somewhere else."

"Did she now," Sasori hummed.

"But we wanted to ask her if she wanted to test out the poison," Komushi pouted.
"We'll see her again." Sasori was still watching Gaara intently. "Hurry up and get your food. I want to go to the other side of the market," he told them.

Azumi looked over the fried food options. She found something she used to eat as a child and grinned. 'Churros!' she thought. "That," she said to Gaara, pointing at the fried pastry coated in cinnamon sugar. They were small bite-sized versions of the long ones she was used to.

Gaara put the order in for her and Komushi groaned when the smell hit him. "I'll have some too!" He pulled away from her to get his own.

"Are we all satisfied?" Sasori asked, them looking around.

"Yes, dad," Komushi chuckled, taking a bite of his fried cinnamon sweet. Sasori rolled his eyes and grabbed Azumi's arm, pulling her to walk ahead with him.

Azumi tried to eat her churros as he pulled her. "What are we getting next?" she asked Sasori. "We got what you needed from the stall that you walked away from when you went to speak with Lord Kakuzu."

He looked at her from the corner of his eyes, not turning his head. "You will know when we get there," he said, diving headlong into the rushing traffic of people. Behind them, Komushi and Gaara trailed behind.

"You're getting pretty daring," Komushi grinned at Gaara as they walked. His tone was light and conversational but Gaara could hear the threat in his voice.

Gaara squinted at him. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

Azumi stayed close to Sasori, trying not to bump into people as they walked. Once they were in more of a clearing from people, she looked at Sasori. "Would you like one?" she asked, offering her mini churros.

Sasori stared at the fried sweet for a moment then looked at her. "No," he said evenly. "I don't tend to share food with my slaves in public." He pulled her down a new aisle that was all textiles and clothing. He slowed down, looking more intently at the different fabrics. He looked down at Azumi and hummed. "Red," he said softly.

Azumi looked at him then at the fabrics. She never wore red much, even as a noble girl. She knew she no longer had a say in what she wore so she did not protest it. Silently, she ate her sweets as she watched Sasori speak to the seller.

They kept walking further into the aisle. Sasori generally ignored the swooning women they passed at the stalls, unlike the previous stands. He suddenly stopped, seeing a red and gold embellished fabric. "How much for this?" he asked, tugging on the fabric gently.

The woman looked at the fabric and then at him "It's three hundred, but I'll give it to you for a good discount because you're handsome," she smirked. Azumi scoffed and rolled her eyes. This woman was younger than the previous stall owners so of course she would be more bold with her flirting. "You can have it for one hundred."

"How kind of you." He flashed her his charming smile as he wrapped his arm around Azumi's waist. He pulled her closer, flush against his side. "What do you think, my love? I think this color will suit you well," he said, draping the fabric over her chest.

Azumi had expected him to flirt back so she was caught off guard. She looked up at him then
down at the fabric he held in front of her. "It is beautiful," she said genuinely.

"Yes, I think this shade will complement you well." The woman glared at her, lifting her chin just a little until Sasori turned back to her. Her flirtatious smile resumed, a small giggle slipping out of her lips. "We'll take it," he told her in an even tone, his smile matching hers. His hand on Azumi's waist brushed her bare skin as it moved down to her hip. This gesture did not go unnoticed by the stall owner.

"Of course sir," she bowed, the smile still in place. She took the cloth bolt down and Sasori gave her how much he needed. She handed it to him neatly folded once it was cut and without a word more, Sasori ushered Azumi further down.

Sasori released her once they were far enough from the stall. "I hate when they just throw themselves at me," he rolled his eyes. They repeated the process with an older woman at another stall. This time Sasori picked out a soft, flowing white fabric and golden beads that would act as an accent.

Azumi had finished her sweets and threw the small container out in a nearby trash can. She opened the bag for Sasori to put his purchased fabrics in. "This is beautiful as well," she said quietly, looking at the white and gold.

"I know," he said plainly, paying for it and putting it in the bag the same way he had the red fabric. He moved down the line to one of the tailors. "How much for you to make two dancer's outfits?" he asked the man with none of the pleasantries he usually had toward the stall owners.

The man perked up, looking Sasori over and assessing quickly that this was a man of money. He flashed Azumi a smile beneath his thick mustache. "I can have them both done by the end of the night," he said. "My girls have magic fingers." He winked at Azumi, gesturing back to two girls that would be making the clothing. Sasori wrapped his arm around Azumi again. "All you have to do, my Lord, is choose a pattern and pay." Sasori nodded and the man pushed the pattern book forward, allowing Sasori to look it over. "Please step over here, young lady." The old man started to get up.

"Do not move," Sasori ordered Azumi. "I have her measurements," he told the man, producing a sheet of paper with all of the numbers written down in detail.

"Oh," the man said, taking the paper and looking at the measurements. "These are very in depth," he said with a slight chuckle.

"I spare no details," Sasori hummed. Azumi sighed quietly, not exactly comfortable with a complete stranger having such detailed measurements of her body.

"Not a problem, then. We will have this done for you by the end of the night, as promised. It will be here waiting for you."

"So this is where you two went off to," Komushi said, walking up to them with Gaara in tow. "You really tried to lose us," he pouted, poking Sasori hard in the cheek.

Sasori swatted his friend's hand away quickly. "Seems I didn't try hard enough," he grumbled. "We need to stop back here before we leave tonight."

"Oh?" Komushi smirked. "Getting something custom made, are we? Are you getting us matching outfits?"

"Never in my life," Sasori glared at his friend, "will I be caught wearing anything remotely
"Aah, so we'll match when we're dead!" Komushi pushed his hands over Sasori's shoulders and pulled him away, starting to walk with him back into the bustling crowd.

"I want you to know I actually hate you," Sasori growled, pushing the other man away.

Gaara chuckled, walking over to Azumi, offering his arm once more. "Did he say what he's having made?" he asked softly.

Azumi smiled at Gaara as she took his arm again. "He asked them to make dancer's outfits," she told him. "The fabrics he chose were beautiful. And for the first time, I witnessed him not flirt back with a woman who swooned over him."

"Oh?" he chuckled. "Think our teasing got the best of him today?" He hummed. "She must have been young. He doesn't flirt with the younger women 'because they aren't as useful' as he puts it."

"It is not surprising that he decides their worth by their usefulness to him," she said, rolling her eyes. "He had to pretend that I was here not as his slave for a few moments."

"That's my cousin. If you don't serve a purpose to him then you're meaningless," Gaara grimaced. "He didn't do anything nasty, did he?" He started to look her up and down to see any marks.

"He did nothing beyond holding me close to him by the waist," she assured him, noticing his concern. "Do not worry. I am fine."

Gaara frowned, looking her hard in the eyes, "Okay," he nodded. "If he ever does try anything just tell me. I can't stand by again."

She looked up at him and smiled. "I honestly cannot thank you enough," she said. They weaved through the crowd at a good distance behind Sasori and Komushi.

He looked ahead and hummed softly. "Did you have anything like this in your village?" he asked her.

She hummed in thought for a moment. "Not exactly," she said. "This is a place where people from other places gather to sell their goods and my village is very hidden. People from the outside do not exactly get in unless we want them to. We had people go out and get the things that needed to be imported to the village to make sure no one got in."

He stayed silent for a moment, mulling over the new information she had just told him. "But...why is your village so hidden?" he asked. "And how is it you were found?"

"People like me were killed for various reasons a long time ago," she said. "Anyone remotely associated with a snake was practically hunted. I do not know the exact reason. My father never explained it to me. But he created our village to keep us hidden. So we would not be killed." She looked ahead, getting lost in thought for a short moment before continuing her explanation. "I...am here in place of someone else. To make sure it stays hidden."

His eyes were heavy when he turned to look at her. "I'm sorry that happened to your people." Absentmindedly, he slipped his hand down to hers and laced their fingers together. "Humans really are terrible to each other. I hope whoever you saved is living their life to their fullest." His voice grew soft as he spoke.

"I hope so too," she said quietly. "I cannot imagine her having to go through this." She stayed quiet
for another moment before speaking again. "However," she smiled, "despite these circumstances, I am glad I met you."

A smile pulled at Gaara's lips. "Me too," he chuckled. "I just wish it were as equals and not...this travesty of a social construct." Up ahead of them, Sasori and Komushi were bent over a table of strange bones and trinkets. "Ugh, they really don't need any more weird stuff," he groaned.

Azumi looked at them and frowned. "It is not enough that he sells poisons," she mumbled, rolling her eyes. She turned her attention to the stalls they passed, looking at all of the different things that were sold. It was a weird mix of everything with some random jewelry thrown in. "So, if you only work at the shop part-time, will you be there tomorrow?" she asked Gaara.

"Tomorrow," he hummed. "No, tomorrow I have to run to several house calls and meet with a few other doctors that work at the local clinic," he frowned. "But I could try to stop by." He looked down at her, watching the way she looked over things.

"Oh," she said. "If you cannot, then it is fine," she chuckled. "I feel like maybe you need a break from Lord Sasori."

He chuckled. "I always want a break from him," he sighed. "But...I would like to see you," he said hesitantly. "If...you don't mind."

"Of course, I do not mind," she smiled. "But you do not have to subject yourself to his presence for my sake." She looked at him and smirked. "But your presence always makes my day."

"I'm starting to think...that I might be developing an addiction to you," he chuckled. "I'll come by with some churros," he grinned. "Those are Sasori's favorites so he shouldn't give me too many gripes."

"Oh, are they?" she smirked. "That is an interesting fact to know." She gave his hand a gentle squeeze. "I would love to see you."

"They always have been as far as I know," he smirked with a questioning tone. "But I'll come by before we come back here tomorrow," he smiled at her.

Suddenly, there was a hand wrapping tightly around Azumi's forearm. "Time to go," Sasori said in a low voice, glaring at the both of them. There was a promising threat in his eyes. He dug his nails into her skin until they bit through. Azumi groaned quietly in pain, trying not to let it show on her face too much. She let go of Gaara's hand, letting Sasori pull her away. The crowds had started to dissipate. People were starting to leave the market which meant it was almost over. She looked at him for a moment as they walked and frowned, feeling his grip on her not get any looser then looked around at the stalls they walked by. He said nothing to her as they walked back through the winding aisles to pick up the two new outfits Sasori had commissioned. Sasori released Azumi's arm and jutted his chin, indicating for her to step forward.

"Ah, my Lord!" The old man said with a large, jovial smile. "Here you are," he turned around to take the neatly folded pieces from one of the girls. Sasori picked up the red bra of the first outfit and hummed, going over the quality.

"Your girls are true craftswomen," he murmured. "Thank you." His tone was lofty as he deposited the new garments into Azumi's arms.

"Anytime," the man smiled at him. "I'm sure my girls will appreciate such a compliment."

Azumi looked down at the clothes as they were placed in her arms. She marveled at the new outfits
for a moment before placing them in the bag neatly and then smiling at the man with a slight bow. "Thank you," she said to him.

"It was my pleasure, young lady."

Once again Sasori gripped her arm harshly, digging his nails into the muscle of her upper arm this time as he pulled her away from the stand.

Komushi and Gaara caught up to them just as Sasori was heading for the exit. "What did you do to make him so agitated?" Gaara asked Komushi lowly, watching Azumi be dragged along roughly. It turned his stomach to watch her be treated that way.

Komushi scoffed, drawing Gaara's attention. "Not what I did," he smirked at Gaara. "It's what you two have been doing all night," he told him cryptically.

"What...we did?" Gaara's brow furrowed then his lips pressed into a hard line. Was he going to be the reason she was punished sometime soon?

"Sasori is very observant," Komushi said. "You know that. He's your cousin." Komushi let out a laugh, equivalent to that of an older sibling watching a younger sibling get in trouble.

Gaara clicked his teeth, openly glaring at Sasori as they stepped out into the night. "I don't see why he's getting so bent out of shape," he grumbled. "He gave us permission to treat her nicely for the night market."

Komushi tucked his hands behind his head as he walked. "I'm not the sharpest tool in the lab but we both know that you two have been getting along a little too well." He glanced at Gaara again. "Well before the market."

"It isn't—" he started.

"But it is," Komushi smirked. They walked to the shop, entering through the back, as usual, to place their purchased goods in the workshop to be put away. "It's been fun," Komushi grinned. "I'll meet you here tomorrow."

Sasori released Azumi's arm and walked up to the second level to put a few things he pulled from the bag away.

Gaara bit his lip, hesitantly walking up to Azumi. "I'm sorry if he hurts you," he said softly to her.

Sasori's movements above them stilled instantly. "Azumi!" he growled. "Come, now." His voice did not raise but there was a hiss of venom in his tone.

Gaara stared up at Sasori then looked at her. His hands curled and uncurled, desperate to reach out, to pull her against his chest and tell Sasori to fuck off. But he didn't. He knew that would only make it worse for her.

Azumi looked at Gaara and nodded. She tried to smile but she was actually terrified at the moment. "I will see you tomorrow," she whispered to him before going up to the second level.

Gaara nodded silently then glanced up at Sasori one last time before leaving. His whole body felt numb and his heart was beating so fast as he hurried down the alleyway. He was afraid for her. And once again, he was being a coward. He stopped, punching a nearby wall and cursing himself loudly.
Sasori drummed his fingers on his desk, intensely glaring at a piece of writing on his desk. He waited to hear her soft footsteps stop behind him.

She stared at his back for a moment before speaking. "Would you like me to put everything away?" she asked him.

He turned around to regard her with icy eyes. He took a deep breath, his nails digging into the wood of his desk. "No, we can deal with it tomorrow," he ground out. "I want you to try those outfits on when we get home." His tone was clipped. He brushed past her, his body breezing past her. "Let's go," he ordered. He felt a little childish for only having called her up to the second level to get her away from Gaara but he would never admit that.

She let out the breath she was holding in that she did not realize she took when he looked at her. She tried to ignore her increasing heart rate as she calmed herself down before following him back down to the first level. She grabbed the bag that had only the outfits and whatever Sasori wanted to take home. He locked the shop up again and they headed back home in complete silence.
Normally, silence from Sasori is something Azumi would be okay with, but tonight, the tension from him was very high and it made her uneasy. She could feel his hostility from a few feet away and it terrified her to think of what he would do to her. The silent walk felt longer than it actually was but they eventually made it back home. He said nothing to her as they walked through the halls.

"Bath," he said flatly once they were in his room. He disappeared into his workshop and everything went dead silent again.

Azumi went straight into the bathroom after setting down the bag by his desk. She took a moment to get her terrified breaths out before starting his bath, going about the same routine of getting it to the right temperature and putting in the salt and oils. She put his robe on its spot and waited for him to get into the bath. No matter how much she tried to calm herself down, her heart kept beating really fast.

He walked in moments later, barely sparing her a glance as walked over to the tub. "Who exactly is it that owns you?" he asked her quietly. There was a long silence between them with only the soft sound of water being displaced as he slipped into the bath. He glared at her back hard enough to burn holes into her skin.

She shut her eyes tight and took a deep breath before turning to him, keeping her face as neutral as possible and trying not to let her fear get the best of her. She had a feeling she knew what this was about. "You do," she answered.

"Then I think you will do well to remember that," he growled softly, his gaze intensifying. "I do not recall Gaara being the one to purchase you nor do I remember saying you were allowed to flit with my naive, young cousin." His voice was straining to stay in control. He sat with his back against the tub, looking down his legs at her. "You are burning through patience I don't usually have. You are useful but not irreplaceable." He stared at her. Tension hung in the air.

She took another deep breath and nodded, taking another moment before speaking. "I understand," she said softly. "Lord Gaara was only being friendly to me but I realize it is not my place to accept it. I will make sure not to from now on."

"Good," Sasori said with still narrow eyes. "Now hurry up and take your bath. I want to see those outfits on you," he said, relaxing further into the tub and turning to look out over the river.

She nodded and set up the other bath for herself the same way he would make her do it and then got in, relaxing underneath the surface of the water. She basked in the silence for a moment before she started to actually wash herself up.

Sasori lazily twirled his fingers in the water, not really moving to clean himself up. He closed his eyes, leaning his head back over the edge of the tub. His eyes fell on the moonlight that spilled into the room. It nearly washed the room in silver and reflected up onto the tub, framing Sasori in silver.

She looked at him and held in a gasp. Had she not known him the way she did, she would have thought he was one of the most beautiful things she had ever seen. However, she had to admit to herself that he was a sight to behold. She caught herself staring at him and frowned, noticing that he seemed a bit...stressed. She hated herself for feeling bad for him, but she could not help it. She
brought a bit of water up to rub on her face, snapping herself out of her thoughts.

Languidly, Sasori turned his gaze back to look at her. He rested his head in his hand, his fingers threading into his hair, still against the moonlight and watched her bathe silently. He said nothing as he watched her rub her face with hooded eyes.

Azumi sighed, feeling his eyes on her. His gaze was intense enough to be felt across a room and it was so uncomfortable. It was even worse when he was in her face. She pulled her hands from her face and looked at him. "Which outfit would you like me to try on first?" she asked him, hoping to relieve the tension between them, even if just a little bit.

He took a moment to respond to her. When he finally did, his voice was a lot softer than it had been before. "The white one," he told her.

She nodded and finished bathing herself. Once she was done, she got out and grabbed a towel, wrapping it around herself. She took a towel out for him for when he was ready to get out. "I will try them on now," she said, bowing slightly and going into his bedroom to fully dry off. She went to the bag that she left by his desk and picked out the white outfit he had made for her. Seeing it unfolded, it looks much nicer than she thought it did before. "Wow," she whispered to herself. She unwrapped the towel and set it down then started putting the outfit on. Rather than the usual two-piece dancer outfit, the top part connected to the bottom by a thin gold line. As unusual as that was for her, she still felt comfortable. She did not feel constricted in any way.

Sasori joined her in the room moments later, adorned in his robe. He laid on his bed, taking her in as he did. "How does it fit?" he asked with heavily hooded eyes. His exhaustion was beginning to set in. Being as angry as he was had started to take a lot out of him.

She turned to look at him. "It fits great," she said with a small smile. She adjusted the thick straps to sit on her hips and moved the leg slit to its correct position. Nothing was too tight or too loose thanks to Sasori's invasive measuring of her body.

"Good," his voice purred softly. "Now the other one," he told her with a soft command.

She nodded and took off the outfit, folding it neatly and setting it on the chair by the desk. She grabbed the other outfit and stared at it longer than she did the first one. "I have never really worn red," she told him, putting the skirt on first. The bra of the outfit was full of gold accents like the white one was and it amazed her how well they all went together. Two armbands slipped out of the bra as she picked it up. "Oh," she hummed. She put them on after everything else was on and in place. Like the first outfit, it was very comfortable and everything fit perfectly. This was an outfit she could see herself performing in.

"Oooh," Sasori hummed lowly. "It suits you." He got up slowly and walked over to stand in front of her. "It complements your eyes." His voice was a hiss as he tilted her chin upon his fingertip to look into them. His free hand moved to rest on her hip, pulling her closer.

Her breath hitched when he pulled her close but then she found herself relaxing slightly. "Lady Mei mentioned you used to dance," she said. "And...you danced with me when you put me in a trance." She looked up at him. "Would you...like to dance?" she asked softly.

"I did," he responded softly. His eyes searched her face as he considered her question. His lips pulled into a small smirk as he pulled her flush against his body. "Why not. It's been a while." His voice was just breath as he moved his other hand from her face and laced their fingers together. He took a step back and began to lead her in a simple dance around the room.
She placed her free hand on his shoulder and followed his lead easily, letting him move her around. She was hardly surprised at how graceful he was with his movements but it made her smile a little to see it for herself.

"You said you learned to dance from the snakes," he brought up as he spun her easily. "Did you take up dancing because you learned from them or was there a demand for it?" he asked as they moved around as one.

"It is more of a cultural norm that the women in my village learn to dance," she answered. "Most of the girls in my village learn from their mothers. Since I do not have a mother, the snakes taught me." She stayed quiet for a moment as he spun her again. "This is a more normal way of dancing in my village," she noted. "I was one of the very few people who belly dance. It is why I was usually asked to perform."

He hummed softly as he moved his hips with hers in time with a song only he could hear. "You seem to have a running theme of being the supply to a very specific demand." He dipped her low so hard that her head almost touched the floor. "Do you actually enjoy it?" he asked her.

"I do," she said, looking him in the eyes. "There is something about it that is...very freeing. When one works in a lab for most of their time, being able to do something that does not require much thought is always nice."

He pulled her back up, not breaking eye contact as he moved a little fast. They were so fluid as they moved together. "I understand that entirely," he agreed. "A release of letting your body go and your mind only focusing on how your body wills itself to move."

"Yes," she smiled. "It is not surprising that someone as busy as you with the reputation that you hold understands this. I would think you of all people would know this feeling."

"Though I haven't danced with a partner in a long time," he said, pulling her a little closer and he spun them on the ball of his foot. Her feet lifted off of the ground slightly but he did not break eye contact.

She giggled a little and held onto him a little tighter until she was fully back on the ground. "I cannot even tell," she smiled. "You do not feel out of practice one bit."

The sound of her laugh gave him a ghost of a smile on his lips. "Once again," his voice was a low rasp, "you are better than most I've worked with." He looked into her eyes for a moment and the smile slipped from his lips. His feet slowed as the song in his head came to an end. "Change back." His hand pulled away from her waist. "That white one is your new daily outfit and the one you came in is your sleepwear now."

She nodded as she took a step back. "Thank you," she said with a bow. "For the outfits and for the dance."

"You're welcome," he said. "I wasn't going to deal with those brats saying that I don't keep my things nicely," he smirked as he crawled back into bed. "You're like my doll and I will do with you what I see fit." He settled back into his pillows and closed his eyes. "Sleep here again."

She went back into the bathroom to grab her clothes from before and changed into them on her way back to the desk where she neatly folded the red outfit on top of the white one on the chair. 'A doll,' she scoffed mentally. 'More like a puppet with how you controlling you are.' She looked at his sleeping form and hummed before getting comfortable on the daybed. 'If only he was that nice normally,' she thought as she stared at the sky through the window at the peak of the dome. It took
her a couple of minutes before she finally fell asleep.
As the sun poured into Sasori's room, he rolled onto his back, groaning softly. He rubbed his face before slowly opening his eyes to look at Azumi's sleeping form. It was the last night of the market. He sat up and thought about the night before.

It took a couple of moments for Azumi to wake up to the sun in her face. She groaned softly, putting her hand over her eyes as she stretched hard. The bed she was on really was not comfortable. She breathed out hard as she sat up and noticed Sasori was awake. 'Oh, he is awake before me,' she thought. It was much later in the morning than the last couple of times they woke up. At this point, she was not even sure if it was still morning. They may have slept until the afternoon, which would not be surprising since the sun was probably beginning to rise by the time they actually went to sleep.

"You wake up like a cat," he smirked, stretching a little himself. He swung his legs over the edge of his bed and ran a hand through his hair. "We don't have to rush to the shop yet. Go get us breakfast and then get changed."

She nodded as she stood up and stretched one more time. "I will be right back then," she said. She went to the kitchen, seeing the same three servants she spoke to the day before. "Good morning," she said to them as she walked in.

They all looked at her and smiled politely. "Good morning," the first one nodded. "Are you here for breakfast for the young master?"

"I am," she said as she chose two bowls to fill for her and Sasori.

"You two seem to be getting along," the second one said.

"You've also been coming home late," the third said. The first one who spoke elbowed them hard. "What!"

"Shut up before you bring the young lord's wrath down on us!"

"'Getting along' would be a stretch. There is no 'getting along' with Lord Sasori." She looked at them and smirked. "But should one not try to get on his good side at least a little if they are spending every single moment of their time with him?" she asked.

"That's fair," the second one nodded.

"That's sad and stressful," the first one frowned at her.

"Well, you're still alive so you must be doing something right."

"I would like to think so," she hummed as she grabbed a spoon for each bowl and then picked the bowls up. "Hopefully, you will see me again tomorrow," she nodded as she backed out of the kitchen and went back to Sasori's room.

Sasori was still not dressed when she came back. He looked up from the ledger that he was reading from. "I want to make a few new oils and salts," he said, looking up at her. "What scents do you prefer?" He smirked at her. "I'll decide if I like them too and go from there."

She tried not to look as shocked as she felt that he was asking her for her opinion on something.
She hummed in thought as she handed him his bowl. "That feels like a lot of pressure," she said with a soft chuckle. "Crushed macadamia and rice milk?" she suggested. "It was actually my favorite scent when I was still a noble."

"Mm," he hummed. "It's been considered," he smirked, closing the book. "I should have everything to make it. Anything else?"

She took a spoonful of her breakfast as she thought about the next scent. "There was a scent my brother made me one time," she hummed. "It was an almond scent...a very deep-toned sweet almond." She frowned and looked at him. "I apologize if I cannot describe it well."

"I think I can make something similar," he grinned. "I like the challenge. Do you like vanilla?"

"I do," she smiled. "I love vanilla. It is one of my top three favorite scents." She paused for a second. "All three of which I just mentioned," she added quietly.

"Noted," he said, walking into the workshop. He started to pull bowls and ingredients down off of the shelf to put onto the table in the center of the room.

She followed him into the workshop, leaving her bowl on the desk as she passed it. She watched as he started on the scents. "Is there something you would like me to do?" she asked him.

"Finish your breakfast first," he told her. "I'm making the salts first. I'll show you how to make the oils and scrubs after."

"Oh," she said softly, taking a step back and nodding again. She went back out to his room and picked her bowl up again to finish eating. 'He is being oddly nice,' she thought. 'I wonder how long that will last.' She took a few minutes to finish her food as she thought more about his sudden personality change and then set her bowl down again before joining him in the workshop once again.

He used a large wooden spoon to turn the salt and oil over until it mixed well. He leaned down into the bottle and took a deep breath. "This is a very refined scent," he told her. "I like it." He pulled a jar over and started to fill it with the rice milk and crushed macadamia salt. "I was thinking we would leave for the market from here," he said offhandedly as he cleaned out the bowl. He nudge the jar over to her to smell it.

"Alright," she said, picking up the jar. She held it close and smelled it briefly. Her eyes widened a little and she was pretty sure her pupils dilated and then constricted back. "This is amazing," she said. "It is just as I remember it."

Sasori watched her eyes react. "Is...that something that normally happens?" he asked her in fascination. He looked intently at her eyes.


"Fascinating," he whispered. "I'm tempted to tell you that you aren't allowed to restrict yourself anymore," he grinned. "But I want to see what will cause that against your will." He gave her an almost playful smile.

She let out a soft groan at the very idea of that as she closed the jar and set it back down. 'He would want to do that,' she thought, rolling her eyes mentally.

He moved on to making the other two scents for her. He made the vanilla one next and handed it to
her. "I'll start the prep for the almond one," he smirked. "How does this one smell?"

She picked up the jar and hesitantly brought it up to smell it. She knew it happened again. "Wow," she whispered. "That is..." She smelled it again. "Wow," she repeated.

Sasori grinned like the devil he was as he watched her through his lashes. "Glad you like it," he chuckled. "Now since we are making your almond one from scratch, I'll show you how I make my oils," he told her. He placed a few beakers over burners and started to mix the ingredients as he explained what he did to make the extracts.

She watched closely to make sure she would remember the ingredients and the process. It was only a few minutes of explanations, but she was able to understand it. The process itself is what took a while. Altogether, to make the extracts took a couple of hours. "This sounds easy enough," she hummed mostly to herself.

"You'd think so," he grumbled. "I had one guy about a year ago who managed to blow up three beakers and nearly kill us both because he couldn't just keep his eye on the temperature." He started to drum his fingers in irritation.

She looked up at him and then back at what he was doing. "I do not understand how you ended up with so many people that failed you," she frowned.

"Me either," he groaned. "I stopped letting Granny Chiyō choose my slaves." He poured a dark bourbon-like liquid into a dark bottle. "Does this smell close?" he asked her, passing her the bottle.

She picked up the bottle up and with a bit of hesitance, smelled the liquid inside. "Oh..." she said quietly, smelling it again. "It is...perfect..."

Sasori smirked, watching her breath it in. "Good to know," he said. "That will be yours then." He took it back from her and made the salt version of it for her. "The vanilla one will also be yours."

She smiled at him and bowed. "Thank you," she said. 'I should not trust how nice he is being right now,' she thought.

"Mhm," he smirked. "Go put them away and get dressed. We'll leave once I clean this up." He shooed her away.

She nodded and picked up the bottles, heading out of the workshop and to the bathroom. She approached the shelves he kept his oils and salts on and paused for a moment. "Is he nice enough to share a shelf with me?" she whispered to herself. She looked out the door and then back at the shelves. "I suppose it is worth the risk. The worst he can do is kill me." She started putting the bottles on the same shelf, but behind his own salts and oils.

Meanwhile, Sasori quickly cleaned up his mess and packed away all the instruments he had used. He breezed out to his room and quickly got dressed. But tonight he decided to wear something a little different than what he usually wore. It was a little fancier with a little more jewelry. He pulled part of his hair back and pinned it with a scorpion clip while his loose bangs hung stylishly in his face.

Azumi exited the bathroom moments later and got dressed in the white outfit that he told her would be her new daily outfit. She looked at him as he finished getting and noticed how fancy he was dressing. She wanted to say something about it but her breath got caught in her throat.

He turned to look at her and frowned. "Mhm, I should have specified," he mumbled to himself. "I want you to wear the red one and this," he said, taking out the golden body chain he had bought.
She looked at the body chain, immediately noticing the scorpion charm on it. 'If only it were a snake,' she thought. She could not deny that it was a beautiful piece of jewelry, however. She took the chain from him and then quickly changed into the red outfit then put the body chain on over it.

Sasori hummed softly. "Perfect," he purred. "Let's go. Komushi and Gaara are probably waiting for us at the shop by now," he said, walking ahead of her out of the house. They moved swiftly through the streets. Sasori's jewelry made soft tinkling sounds as he walked.

They approached the shop where Gaara and Komushi were waiting outside. "It's about time you showed up," Komushi groaned. "We thought you went without us."

"No, you thought that," Gaara said.

"Let's just get a move on," Komushi rolled his eyes. He pushed off of the wall, stretching hard.

Sasori zeroed in on the churros tucked into Gaara's arm. "It looks like you two already went." He reached for one without bothering to ask if he could even have one.

"And you look like you two are going to a party," Komushi smirked, looking at their almost matching outfits as they started to walk. "Red looks lovely on you," he winked at Azumi.

She gave him a small smile and a slight bow. "Thank you," she said to him. The walk to the market was quick just as it had been the last two nights. They made their way into the building and down to the underground. This was the last night, with more things to do so there were more people than the two previous nights combined. The number of people made Azumi very uncomfortable.

Komushi seemed to come alive, however. "It's performance night!" he roared over the din of people. "Oh, shit," Komushi whipped around to look at Sasori. "Are you—"

Sasori cut him off with a smirk and his finger pressed to his lips. "Let's just enjoy tonight shall we?" Sasori said airily, taking another churro from Gaara.

"You know," Gaara huffed. "These aren't for you."

Sasori turned his gaze to his cousin. "You brought my favorite treat and expect me to let her have it?" Sasori scoffed. "You can buy her more if you really must."

Gaara sighed and then looked at Azumi. "The stand isn't that far from here," he told her. "Would you like to go get more?"

Azumi smiled at him and then looked out at the crowd, her smile fading just a little. "I would," she said softly. "But will we even get through that?" she asked with a nervous chuckle.

Gaara glanced over at the crowd. "Milady wants churros," he grinned, taking her hand. "Komushi!" he called.

Komushi whipped around, somehow able to hear Gaara over all the people. "Yes?"

"Crowd control," was all Gaara had to say to him. Komushi's face darkened in pure mischief and he took off into the crowd.

"Crowd control? Seriously?" Sasori sighed, rubbing his face. "This is so gross."

"Crowd...control?" Azumi asked softly. She was a little afraid to even ask what it was. Within a couple of seconds, the large crowd before them started to disperse in a slight panic. "What...just
happened?"

"You don't want to know," both redheads said in unison.

Sasori held a hand out in front of Azumi. "Don't go yet," he said softly. Komushi stood in the middle of the cleared pathway, grinning proudly. They waited for a minute before Sasori allowed them to walk forward. Gaara chuckled, taking her up to the churro stand.

"Milady," Komushi bowed low to her as she passed.

Sasori snarled but forced himself to relax as he walked up to his friend. He flicked Komushi's nose hard. "Stand up, you fool," he said, passing him. "She's still a slave."

Komushi smirked as he stood up straight. "Couldn't tell," he said. "Since you two arrived like a matching married couple." He walked ahead and went to the churro stand to order some for himself.

Sasori glared at him. "It's no wonder you're single," he grumbled, kicking Komushi hard in the shin.

Komushi hissed, closing his eyes and biting his lip hard. "Worth it and uncalled for," he groaned, rubbing the sore spot.

Gaara ordered some for Azumi and the stall owner threw in the icing for free. "Wow..." she whispered.

Gaara smiled fondly at her. "What happened today?" he asked, linking his arm with hers. "Neither of you were at the shop today."

"We spent the day making salts and oils," she told him, eating her churros happily. "He made a few of them for me to have. He has been...oddly nice," she hummed. "It is a little unnerving because it was just an instant switch."

Gaara's face softened, sadly watching her. "I'm sorry he's put you on edge like this." He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "He's good at making people's heads spin."

"It was very confusing," she said. "He was hostile when we first got home..." She paused, remembering why. "Oh...he does not like us being close together," she said.

Gaara frowned. "You mean like right now?" He looks down at their linked arms. "I could feel the tension last night at the shop but..." he sighed, starting to disentangle them. "He didn't hurt you again, did he?"

"No...he did not hurt me," she said. "He just spoke to me...and then after that, he was nice. He made me try on the outfits he bought for me...then we—" She stopped herself, unsure if she wanted to admit to him that they danced together. "We...went to bed."

Gaara searched her eyes for a moment. "Okay," he said softly. "Should I keep my distance tonight then?" he asked her. Sasori did not seem to be too angry with either of them today but he had a feeling his cousin was planning something. He did not casually dress up and never with a slave. He looked ahead to find his cousin and Komushi when he noticed they had vanished. "Uh...he couldn't have been that angry. It looks like the abandoned us."

Azumi stopped and looked around as well, seeing no sign of either of them as well. "Huh..." she hummed. "He must have been dragged off by Lord Komushi to do something heinous," she said
with a slight chuckle.

"I don't know if we should trust that," he laughed with her. "Not seeing them can be more
dangerous than keeping them close by." They kept walking further into the throng of people.
Gaara remembered suddenly that she did not like the crowd and started to pull her towards the less
busy aisles. It was all books and stationery. Everyone around was much quieter as if they were
afraid they would frighten the books. "Did Sasori say why he had you dress up?"

She shook her head. "He told me nothing. Last night he said the other outfit would be my daily
outfit and when I got dressed in that, he told me to change into this. I learned to not question him."

"That's probably for the best," Gaara frowned. "Mm, but I'm still suspicious. He isn't acting like his
usual self. Nothing about him has been normal since he bought you," Gaara said, stopping to pick
up a thick tome and read the spine.

"So I am gathering," she hummed, running her finger along the spines of a couple of books. She
noted the title of one and hummed. "The other servants in the house are surprised every morning
that I am still alive."

"I...I don't know...It's putting me on edge," he admitted. "That's not to say I want you to get hurt but
it has me feeling like this is building up to something more."

"Ugh, of course, you would drag her off to this dust pool of an aisle," Komushi's voice reached
them before his arms did. He pushed his arms down Azumi's shoulders and pulled her close to his
chest. "Sasori wants you," he said in her ear, grinning like a fox.

Azumi sighed a little, feeling Komushi on her...once again. "Where is he?" she asked him.

Komushi chuckled. "I'll take you to him," he smirked, taking her hand. "Brace yourself. You're
going into the heart of the party," he warned her as he pulled her away from the calm little
sanctuary Gaara had brought her to. As he pulled her, the music suddenly started to fill the air.
Gaara followed after them as fast as he could through the mess of bodies.

Azumi stayed close to Komushi as he led her through the crowd. It was to a new area that had been
closed off the last two nights. The area was almost like a theater, with a huge stage at the front.
People were already gathering the seats. "Wow," she hummed, looking around.

"I love performance night," Komushi sighed contently. A band was setting up just in front of the
stage while people flooded in around them, finding seats.

"But where is Sasori?" Gaara frowned.

"He's backstage," Komushi practically squealed, already walking toward the stage. "I never
thought I'd see that day!" he said with a flair of drama and breathiness.

Gaara was taken aback. "He's never performed!" He shook his head. "Is he playing in the band or
something?" Gaara did not want to think about exactly what his cousin was planning. He knew,
though. It was all falling into place now.

"Oh, you'll see," Komushi smirked. "And it's going to be great!"

Azumi's brow furrowed. "I did not expect him to be in the performances," she hummed.

They went around the stage and to the back where Sasori was waiting for them. "Took you long
enough," he said as they approached.
"You saw how crowded it was," Komushi rolled his eyes. "Calm yourself. We're here. When are you on?"

"In another two acts," Sasori smirked. He looked at Azumi and reached up to fix her hair. "Hope you're ready for this."

Her eyes widened. "Wait, what?" she breathed. It all started to make sense. He had an outfit made for her to perform.

Sasori smirked devilishly. He watched the information sink in and dawn in her face. "You're smart," he grinned. "I'm sure you can figure it out."

She frowned and then looked out at the stage. "I am not prepared for a performance," she said softly.

"You're dressed for one, aren't you?" Komushi smirked.

Sasori turned her face towards him in his usual manner and looked her hard in the eyes. "Your master knows best," he said with a smirk. "You can handle this."

Gaara bit his cheek, hearing Sasori call himself her master.

She frowned again and then closed her eyes, sighing heavily. "Alright," she said reluctantly. The first set of performers stepped off the stage.

"You two go find seats," Sasori told Gaara and Komushi. "There should be two reserved for you in the front."


"Stay here," Sasori told Azumi once the other two were gone. He did not give her a chance to answer when he slipped off to speak with the conductor. There was no music needed for the second act so Sasori could take his time explaining everything he needed down to a T.

Azumi stood there, watching Sasori speak to the conductor. A very slight panic started to set in. 'A warning would have been nice,' she thought. 'I am in no way prepared for—' She cut her own thoughts off with a realization as she saw Sasori finish talking to the conductor. 'I cannot believe this.'

When Sasori finally sauntered back over to her his smirk was even wider. "Your face tells me you're putting the pieces together," he purred. "The music wasn't originally in the plan but I saw how badly you reacted to the crowd and did not want to take any risks." He rested a hand on his hip. "I like to be in control."

She frowned at him and sighed again. Of course, he liked to be in control. She looked back out onto the stage as the next performance ended. 'I suppose we should just get this over with,' she thought.

He pulled her close. So close that his lips nearly brushed hers when he spoke. "Just focus on me and the dance," he said softly, tucking a piece of her hair back. "Let it take you," he smirked.

The other performers left the stage and the band set up. The lights dipped and Sasori took her hand, guiding her onto the stage. She knew how big the crowd was and did not bother to look at them. It was not common for her to get stage fright, but because she had no idea she was going to perform,
she only had it a little bit. She kept her eyes on Sasori as they stood in the middle of the stage. Like
the night before when they danced in his room, he pulled her close. But this time the music was all
around them rather than just in his head. He started to move his body slowly, never taking his eyes
off of her as the music sunk into their bones.

She let him move her, following his lead just as easily as she did the night before. It took her a
short moment to accept the situation, but once she did, she focused on his face and the music
around them, getting lost in it just as he had said. It was much easier than she thought and the
smallest smile appeared on her lips as they moved.

He smirked, feeling her finally start to relax. He spun her around and pressed their bodies together.
This dance was almost even more intimate than the night before. He slid his hands down her arms,
lacing their fingers together. "Show us what those snakes taught you," he whispered into her ear.
The sound of the flute joined the instruments.

Immediately, her head started getting foggy and she moved with the music subconsciously. She
lost control of her body as the flute got louder and completely took over the movement of her hips.
It was much stronger than the night Sasori figured out she could be put into a trance and she could
hardly get any clear thoughts through. There was not much she could do to fight it and before she
could even try to, she had been put completely into a trance.

Sasori moved with her body, letting her lead. The crowd was completely hushed as they watched
the pair move. Gaara curled his fingers into a tight fist, never taking his eyes off Azumi.

"Whoa," Komushi whispered, watching with wide eyes and an equally wide grin.

It was nearly three or four minutes of Azumi not having control of her own body and then the
music slowed to a stop. As her head cleared, she heard the applause but did not know what it was
for. She looked around at the crowd for a moment before taking a step back to stand next to Sasori.

Sasori could see her coming back to herself as they bowed. He led her off of the stage after a few
more bows.

Gaara and Komushi were already waiting for them backstage. "That was amazing!" Komushi
gushed. "You really move like a snake!" He pulled her into a hug. "Damn, Sasori, I didn't know
you could move like that either!"

"Thank you," Azumi said softly before pulling away from Komushi. She rubbed her temple gently,
feeling a small headache forming. It had been a long time since she had been put into a trance that
strong.

"There's a lot that you don't know," Sasori smirked at his friend.

"Mm, you're right and I don't like it one bit," Komushi smirked. "Just means we need to hang out
more." He followed Sasori off backstage after Azumi.

Gaara was waiting for her when she emerged. He was more than a little shocked that she and
Sasori could be so intimate and move so fluidly together. "That...was amazing," he said with a
slight rush to his voice.

"Was it?" she asked, feeling her headache subside a little bit. "Thank you." She bowed slightly. "I
am not used to...not being prepared for a performance."

"You didn't look out of place or practice at all," he said with a smile. But it faded quickly. His
brows furrowed. "Are you alright?" he asked softly. His hand reached out to gently take her arm but
Sasori's knocked it away with a snap.

"Let's get you some tea," Sasori said, pulling her away from Gaara. "I'm sure you're dehydrated."

She let Sasori pull her along and frowned, looking around as the next performance went on stage. "You do not strike me as a performer," she told him softly. "I did not expect you to also be up there."

He did not answer her at first. He pulled her to a stall serving tea and ordered one for each of them. He handed her the beverage and took a sip of his own. "I'm not," he finally said. His voice was a little hoarse from the heat of the tea. "But we moved so well together last night. I thought it would be an interesting experience."

She nodded and took a small sip of her tea. "Well, it does go without saying that you are an excellent dancer," she told him. "It is not very often I get to dance with someone who is as skilled as you. And for you to not really perform, it was an honor to do that with you." She gave him a slight bow. "Thank you," she said softly.

He sipped his tea again. "As I said last night," he looked at her over his cup, "it's been a while since I've had a good dance partner." He finished off his cup of tea and returned the cup. "I don't like wasting someone's potential and you have a lot of it."

She hummed and the finished off her tea as well. "I understand," she nodded. She took a moment to look around as her headache went away completely. Most of the crowd was in the theater area watching the rest of the performances.

Komushi and Gaara walked up to them. "You rushed off for tea?" Komushi smirked.

Sasori rolled his eyes. "Her head hurt," he said plainly. "She needed hydration after all that work."

"I am fine now," she told them.

"Want to watch the other performances?" Komushi asked them. "They're not as great, though," he laughed.

"No," Sasori yawned. "I want to go to bed," Komushi's jaw dropped.

"You're so old," he pouted. He hooked his arms around Sasori's throat and hung onto him like he wanted a piggyback ride. "Fine, let's finish shopping then go home," he sighed. Gaara shook his head, watching Sasori elbow Komushi hard in the ribs as he started to trudge along with the man on his back.

Azumi watched them as they started walking and stood next to Gaara as they followed. "It has been a while since I have performed," she said quietly. "That was quite an experience."

"I didn't think my cousin was capable of getting on stage," Gaara said softly. His hand discreetly slipped down to catch hers and lace their fingers together. "You were incredible," he said. "Did it feel good to dance again?"

"It...did," she said. What she could remember of it felt nice. She was not sure if she wanted to admit that most of the performance was basically blocked from her mind since she had been put into a trance for it. "But I would have preferred to have been prepared for it."

"It's surprising Sasori didn't tell you about this at all," Gaara frowned. "But I'm glad you enjoyed it despite his sudden planning. It's just a testament to how amazing you are."
Gaara thought for a moment. "Maybe he wouldn't tell you something like this," he frowned. "He does just expect you to go along with his whims. I begrudgingly admit, though, he's always had a strong sense of someone's potential." Gaara rolled his eyes and smiled. "Don't tell him I said that."

"Tell him you said what?" she smirked at him. Gaara smiled at her as the caught up to Komushi and Sasori. She looked ahead at Sasori and Komushi as they walked through the aisles and bought the last of what they needed and other random things that they did not need.

"Get! OFF ME!" Sasori huffed, finally throwing Komushi off of his back.

Komushi stumbled back, nearly tumbling into Gaara and Azumi as he did. "Hey!" he pouted, twisting to avoid doing just that. "You almost made me hit the little snake and Gaara." Komushi shifted the bag in his hand.

Sasori looked at them and then at Komushi with a dead expression. "Almost. Which means everyone is fine and you should quit whining." He kept his voice monotone but they could all see the little smirk pulling at his lips. "Now, let's go because I'm tired and want a bath."

"Ugh, fine," Komushi groaned like a whiny child. They went around to a couple more stalls and then made their way out of the night market, beating the crowds that would form at the exit once it was truly over. "That was fun, though!" Komushi grinned as they made their way out into the night. "I can't wait for the next one!"

"I think I'd deem this a successful trip," Sasori agreed, breathing in the open night air.

Komushi turned back to grin at Azumi. "And how did you like your first night market experience?" he grinned, his eyes twinkling. "Did you have fun experiencing the wild and weird underbelly of shopping?"

She smiled at him and nodded. "I did. It was an amazing experience. I can definitely see why you get excited about it," she chuckled.

Komushi and Gaara beamed. Sasori said nothing as he walked ahead of them.

"And now we know you can dance!" Komushi nearly vibrated. "You have six months to get ready for next time," he grinned.

"Who said there would be a next time?" Sasori snapped over his shoulder.

"Why wouldn't there be?" Komushi whined.

"It was a one-time thing," Sasori told him.

Komushi pouted hard. "But you had an outfit made and you saw how captivated the crowd was!" he huffed. Sasori shooked his head, continuing to walk. "I swear! No one plays my heart harder than you, Sasori."

"Too bad he doesn't have one to play back," Gaara said lowly to Azumi. "Did you want to perform again?" he asked her.

"With preparation, I would not mind doing it again," she answered. "I will admit, it was quite fun."

"You hear that, Sasori!" Komushi said, walking backward next to Sasori. "She had fun!"

"Yes, but her opinion does not matter to me," Sasori said easily. "Of course she had fun. She knows
how to dance. It does not mean I want to do it again."

Azumi frowned slightly, but she was not surprised at his response. She knew he was not much of a
performer even though he would be an amazing one.

"Come on!" Komushi grinned. "Admit that you had fun! Because you sure looked like you did."

"I never said I didn't enjoy myself," Sasori said stiffly. He looks back at Azumi. "She is an
amazing dance partner,"

"Dance with me!" Komushi grinned at Azumi.

Azumi paused for a moment and looked at him. "Um—"

"Don't subject her to having to teach you how to dance," Gaara said.

"You have two left feet," Sasori chuckled.

"And I'm pretty sure they were put on backward," Gaara smirked.

Komushi gasped. "I'm under attack!" he pouted. "Azumi, you wouldn't mind dancing with me, would you?" He turned to her with the largest eyes.

Azumi looked at him and smiled softly. She put her hand out for him to take. He took it and she
spun herself into his other arm. She did not expect him to dip her but he did. "Hm," she hummed. "I
could work with it.

Komushi grinned, pulling her back up and flush to his body. "See," he grinned, "we could dance!"

Sasori shook his head. "Let her go before you step on her feet and injure what's mine," he said as he
pulled her away from Komushi.

Komushi sighed. "I have six months," he grinned. "I think I can wear you down."

"Good luck," Gaara smirked.

"You'll die of old age before you can convince me," Sasori said.

They made it to the shop and went inside to drop off everything that they bought. Azumi briefly
tended to the snakes to make sure they were alright.

"Are they still shedding?" Gaara asked curiously, walking up next to her.

Komushi peeked over his shoulder. "Yes, how are Komushi one through six?" he grinned.

"Absolutely not!" Sasori said from the second level of the shop. "If we are naming them it will not
be that!"

Azumi stifled a laugh as she sprayed the one snake that was still shedding. "Yes," she chuckled.
"This one is still shedding. But it will be over soon. In another day or two." She looked at Komushi
and smirked. "And there is no need to name them because they already have names."

All three men looked at her. "They do?" they asked.

"What are they?" Komushi grinned.
"All snakes, like humans, are named when they are born. I did not name them," she said to them. She reached into the first tank and took out the desert horned viper that arrived first. "This one is Ryuuga," she said. "He is actually quite aggressive when handled incorrectly." She placed the snake back in the tank and picked up the next snake. "This is a sidewinder and his name is Tatsuo. He does not really like to be touched." She placed the snake back down and picked up the third snake. "This is an inland taipan and his name is Kurou. He's the youngest one here." She moved over to the second tank and picked up the snake that was shedding. "This is Takumi and he is a night snake. He is only slightly older than Kurou." She placed Takumi back in the tank and picked up the next snake. "This is a regular rattlesnake and his name is Tatsuya. He actually makes sure that the way he moves in the sand leaves nice patterns."

"Oh, he's an artist," Komushi smirked.

"Something of the sort," Azumi chuckled, putting the rattlesnake back. "This last one is the oldest one here. His name is Seiji. He is the most docile one of the six."

"I'm not going to remember any of this," Komushi chuckled.

"I did not think you would," she smirked.

Sasori was writing down all of the information she just relayed above them.

"What an interesting thing to know," Gaara said softly. "You have your own culture and names," he smiled at the snakes. He was going to do his best to remember each other their names and be nicer to them.

"Do they all get along then?" Komushi asked her then looked back at the snakes.

"They do get along," Azumi hummed. "But the two youngest ones might rile up the others and there may be a fight every now and then. I can do my best to keep them in check when that happens."

"See to it that you do," Sasori nodded. "Will they respond if we use their names?" he asked.

"They do respond to their names," she nodded.

Sasori rounded the upper floor and descended the stairs. He pointed to each snake and rattled off their names quietly to himself. "I see," he hummed.

Komushi yawned loudly, leaning against one of the counters. "The sun is going to start rising soon which means it's time for bed," he said.

"You sound like a vampire," Gaara smirked.

"He is," Komushi said matter of factly, pointing at Sasori. "Have you seen the way he jumps from shady spot to shady spot when he leaves the house?" he laughed.

"You're right," Gaara smirked. "And there was a little bit of time when his room was dark all day and night."

"Do you remember the slave he forced to carry a shader everywhere?" Komushi cackled.

"When did this become about me?" Sasori asked, slightly irritated. "You're the one who said it's time for bed." Azumi put away the last of the items they brought and joined them at the door.
Komushi shrugged and yawned again. "I'll see you later," he grinned, opening his arms to hug Azumi. "Remember. You, me, dancing partners." He winked at her before turning on the ball of his foot to leave.

Sasori rolled his eyes and waited for Gaara and Azumi to step out of the shop before locking it up. "Be here before me tomorrow," he told Gaara. "I might be a little busy in the morning."

"Alright," Gaara nodded. "I'll run a new inventory with everything we just got."

Azumi smiled at him and gave him a slight bow. "Goodnight," she said.

Gaara bowed his head and smiled. "Goodnight." He turned on his foot before Sasori could say anything about his behavior towards her.

Sasori grumbled under his breath about how she was still a slave. "Let's go. I'm dead on my feet," he said, starting towards the house. Without a word, Azumi followed him.
The walk back home was thankfully not as tense as the night before but it was just as silent. They walked through the halls of the house quietly, heading straight for Sasori's room. Without a word, Azumi went into the bathroom and started his bath, going about the same salt and oil routine.

Sasori followed her into the bathroom and noticed her newly made oils and salts were on one of his shelves. Without a word, he cleared the contents of another shelf away and moved hers down to the new space. "That shelf is yours now," he said flatly. He started to shed his clothes in his usual fashion but took the time to neatly fold up his garments. He walked back out to his room and took his time taking off his jewelry. "Do you remember the performance at all?" he asked her when he walked back in.

She stood quiet for a moment, remembering her time on the stage with him. "I remember...the beginning," she said. "Everything up until you turned me around...and told me to show what the snakes have taught me. After that is it all...grey and obscure."

"Interesting," he drawled. He slipped into the tub. "You moved beautifully," he told her. "It was fascinating to see how the music moved through you. You were so malleable," he grinned.

Azumi frowned slightly, not liking the idea of being controlled so easily. Especially by someone who would clearly abuse it. However, it was something she could not help. "I cannot say whether or not I moved much differently than normal because I do not remember it," she hummed. "But thank you," she said toward the compliment.

Sasori grew silent. He leaned back in the water and moving his fingers over the surface of the water before speaking again. "I want you to remember," he said. "This trance you go into is very interesting but I think I prefer knowing you are completely conscious of what your body is doing when we move together. In dance or otherwise." He leveled her with a stare. "I need to know it's you making the choices, not the trance," he smirked devilishly. "That being said, I think I can put it to good use."

She stared at him for a moment before nodding. She was a bit scared to find out exactly what he would use it for and she did not want to risk asking him. "Do you...like dancing as well?" she asked him. "I know you are good at it, but do you enjoy it."

He thought for a moment before answering her. "Yes," he finally said. "We talked about how it's like a release the other night." He rested his chin on his thumb and forefinger, gently rubbing his lower lip as he thought about his next words. "I love my work but even I need time to disconnect and just feel my body be alive."

She hummed as she considered his answer. "That is good to hear," she said with a small smile. She backed out of the room for a brief moment to grab his robe and place it on the hook in the bathroom for when he was ready to get out.

Sasori watched her hang it up and sighed heavily. "How much longer are you going to stand around?" he asked. "You're just as sweaty as I am, so hurry up and take your bath. I want to know how those salts and oils we made turned out in practice," he said with a wave of his hand. "You'll return to your room afterward," he said.

She sighed quietly, realizing that despite the nice moments they had, he was still himself and she would have to get used to that. She did not say anything as she set up her own bath, using the
macadamia and rice milk scent that he made. Once it was ready, she carefully took off her outfit and folded it up before stepping into the bath, hiding the relaxed groan that wanted to escape when she felt the water.

He leaned over the edge of his tub, resting his chin on the backs of his hands. He took a deep breath and sighed. "That turned out even better than I originally thought," he said, smirking as he watched her try to hide her groan. He reached down and dipped his fingers into the water. "This will make your skin very soft," he said rubbing his fingers together as the liquid ran down his hand. "I might stock some of this at the shop."

She hummed and nodded as she inhaled silently. "It is nicely concentrated. It might be better than what I remember. Selling it in the shop would be a great idea."

"I'm glad you think so," he smirked. He rolled back into his tub and sighed. "We can make some tomorrow and bring it with us to the shop to give it a test run."

"Sounds good," she said softly, leaning against the wall of her tub and relaxing further into the water. She looked around the bathroom for a moment, letting her thoughts run rapidly through her mind. She did not realize how much time had passed until the actual fatigue of their night out started to hit her, bringing her back from her thoughts. She started to wash herself up, remembering he told her she would be sleeping in her own room.

He was getting out of the tub when she finally returned to herself. He dried himself off and made sure to leave a towel for her. The sun was starting to turn the horizon shades of pink and blue. "Mmm, it's been a while since I've seen the sunrise," he murmured.

She looked up at him and then out at the sunrise. She could not say the same. She spent a couple of months watching the sun rise and set when being transported from her village and sold into slavery. It lost its wonder after a week for her. She rubbed her face and finished washing up. Stepping out of the tub, she grabbed the towel he left out for her and dried off. "Will you still be going to sleep?" she asked him softly.

"Maybe," he said softly. "Seems a little pointless now." He pulled on his robe and breezed into his room. "But you should sleep regardless of me. I don't need you too drowsy when I need you most," he said flatly.

She nodded as she followed him into his room and picked up the clothes that he told her she would be sleeping in. She was not sure if she would want to actually sleep for fear that she would not wake up when he did need her, but she also was not going to pass up a chance to take a nap. "When would you like me to come back?" she asked as she got dressed.

He walked over to his desk and picked up a stack of papers. "I will either retrieve you or send someone for you," he said without looking at her. "Now go before I change my mind and make you start a new project with me," he said, walking into his workshop.

She rolled her eyes and huffed quietly as she turned to leave, heading back to her room. She passed a couple of servants on the way and gave them nods, ignoring the same looks they had been giving her since she arrived. In her room, Naga was coiled on her bed. He lifted his head when she entered the room and hissed softly at her. "Hello," she smiled at him, crossing the room to lay on the bed next to his coil. "It has been a while." He hissed quietly, leaning in to tap her nose with his. "I am still alive, yes," she chuckled. "I am sorry I left you in here." She got up and opened the window. "If you need to go eat, you can." He hissed at her to let her know he would be back soon and slithered out of the window. Azumi laid back on her bed and sighed, letting the fatigue take over and drifted off to sleep.
"She and the young lord just got in not too long ago," a servant’s voice spoke outside her door.

Sandaime paused outside the red door. "Do you know how long she’s been asleep?" he asked softly.

"She only went in there a couple of minutes ago," the servant answered. "She may still be awake."

Azumi groaned, hearing the sound of voices speaking. She could not hear what they were saying but she knew they were there. She lifted her head and looked at the window, wondering how much time had passed. Naga was not back yet, so it could not have been that long. She sat up and sighed.

Sandaime hummed, hesitating to knock now. He sighed and knocked anyway. "Miss Azumi," he said through the door. "I’m sorry to disturb you, but may I—"

"What are you doing disturbing my property?" Sasori growled from up the hall.

Sandaime turned to look at his nephew in the eye. "I need to discuss something with her that is none of your concern."

Azumi looked at the door and furrowed her brow, still unable to make out what was being said. However, she got up when she heard the knock and crossed the room to open the door. "Oh," she said, "Lord Sandaime," she bowed. "Hello." She looked at where he was facing and saw Sasori up the hall.

Rage blazed in Sasori’s eyes. He ground his teeth, closing the distance between them. "I don't understand why you think you can just do whatever you want, Uncle," he glared up at the taller man. "She needs sleep and you need to leave."

"Good morning," Sandaime said to Azumi, ignoring his yammering nephew. He ushered Azumi back into her room and pulled her door shut. Sasori’s jaw dropped.

Azumi looked at the door and then at Sandaime. "Um, may I ask what is going on?" she asked.

Sandaime leaned against the door with his full body weight as Sasori kicked it hard. He smiled serenely at her. "I simply wanted to check in on you and discuss some things."

She tilted her head a little, unable to not smile back when she saw his smile. "What things?" she asked. She found it very easy to ignore Sasori on the other side of the door with his uncle in between them.

"Well for one, how are you?" he chuckled. "If you are getting in this late I’m going to hazard a guess that you were at the night market?" he asked her with a mischievous glint in his eyes. "I liked going when I was a younger man."

"I am doing well, thank you," she smiled. "And yes, we did go to the night market. It was my first time. A great experience. I even performed last night."

"Performed?" Sandaime repeated the word with a raised eyebrow. There was a question of the implication behind his tone. "How so?" he asked ready to beat the civility back into his nephew.

"Lord Sasori gave me an opportunity to dance," she said. "Of course, it was a little unexpected but I have learned to just go with what he says and does."

"You danced," he nodded. "With clothes on, I hope?" He gave her a worried look.

Her eyes widened a little and she gasped quietly. "Absolutely," she said. "Lord Sasori actually had
an outfit made for me to perform in."

Sandaime finally relaxed upon hearing the information. "Then I am glad you got to enjoy your first experience at the night market," he smiled at her. "He's never done that before. That's almost kind of him," he chuckled. "I'm sure you look beautiful in it. My nephew may be morally unsound but he has very good taste in appearances."

She smiled and nodded. "He has been much kinder than I would have expected from someone like him," she said. "Even Lord Gaara has noticed and thinks it is odd." There was one more kick to the door from Sasori, which they promptly ignored. "Though, that can easily end once you leave," she chuckled.

Sandaime sighed and shook his head. "An unfortunate truth." He looked her over with kind eyes. "He is showing you kindness? I'm glad to hear that after what he did to your body." He frowned again. "I just wanted to tell you first that I will be working hard on behalf of you and all the others enslaved in this city to free you," he said softly.

She gasped loudly this time, her jaw dropping. "Free...us?" she whispered. "Really?" The thought of being to return home made her grin. "Wow..." Her eyes settled on his face and then she bowed. "Thank you so much, Lord Sandaime," she said softly.

He smiled kindly at her and returned her bow. "When you are free, I hope to meet you again as Lady Azumi," he smiled. "Until then, I will work hard on your behalf. And know that hope isn't lost." His smile widened. "I hope to see you dance one of these days, too," he chuckled.

She could not help the giggle that came out of her. "I hope so, too," she grinned. There was another kick at the door. "Oh," she hummed, reminded about Sasori's existence. She had a feeling he would do something to her once his uncle left. Naga came slithering back through the window, hissing softly and coiling up on the bed.

"Hello there," he smiled at Naga. Naga lifted his head to hiss softly. Sandaime chuckled then looked back at Azumi "You wait here," he smiled at her. "I'll deal with him," he stepped away from the door and opened it to quickly catch Sasori's foot in his hands. "Nearly thirty years old and you still act like a petulant child." Sasori's eyes were a brighter rage than before. His cheeks were flushed as he thrashed to no avail in Sandaime's grip. He was beyond words at this point. "I guess that means the only way to deal with you, is like a petulant child." His eyes sharpened and Sasori's widened in fear. Without another word, Sandaime pushed back on Sasori's leg, forcing him to hop backward and let the door gently close behind him.

Azumi's jaw dropped slightly as she stared at the door for a long moment. "Naga!" she whispered excitedly, looking at the snake. "He is going to try and free us!" She looked back at the door and pressed her ear to it to listen to what Sandaime was telling Sasori. She could only make out the deep hum of his voice and not his words.

"What were you discussing with her?" Sasori practically spat.

"As I said before, it doesn't concern you," Sandaime said easily.

Sasori growled. "She is mine," he snapped. "She has no business! All she needs to worry about is serving me and my needs!" Sandaime shook his head and sighed heavily. Sasori jerked his body to try and free his leg once more. His uncle stared at him and let his leg go, causing him to stumble back into the wall then hit the ground hard. "Aargh! Old man, you're really pushing it!"

"And what exactly are you going to do to me?" the older man chuckled. "Poison me?" he said the
words lowly. "That knowledge runs in this family. Know your place, Nephew." He leveled Sasori with an unwavering glare. Sasori was not given a chance to respond before Sandaime turned and left. "I will be back in a couple of days," he said as he made his way up the hall. "She better be alive."

Behind the door, Azumi backed away. She heard Sandaime walk off and she sat down on the bed, petting Naga's head.

Sasori tore into her room and pinned her up against the wall. He ground his teeth, gripping her jaw tight enough to leave bruises. "What did he say!" His voice was raspier than usual with how hard he was growling. He slammed her head back hard into the wall. "Tell me!"

Her gasp got caught in her throat and she choked on the air, letting out a grunt as he gripped her jaw and already feeling a headache forming from her head being slammed against the wall. Naga got into a defensive posture and hissed angrily at him. "He was only," she strained, "checking to see if I was still alive." She grunted again. "He said he was worried that you would have killed me by now...just as everyone else thought."

"You're lying." He glared at Naga. "Tell him to stand down or I will make him into a new belt," Sasori snarled.

Azumi's eyes widened and she gently put her hand on Naga's head, gliding her finger down to his snout to relax him. "I am not lying," she told him softly. "Lord Sandaime may care about my well-being, but I am currently loyal to you."

Sasori stared at her for a few more moments before releasing her roughly and turning away. "Fine," he hissed. "Get dressed," he snapped. "Fetch breakfast and meet me in the workshop."

She rubbed her jaw and nodded then stood up. She pet Naga one last time before heading straight to the kitchen. There was no way she was going to let him know of his uncle's plans. She went into the kitchen and thankfully, no one was there. She took a moment to inhale deeply, trying to calm herself down. Once she fought off the tears, she grabbed two bowls and served them, grabbing the spoons and heading back to Sasori's room. She saw her daily clothes on the daybed and set the bowls on the desk. Quickly, she changed into the new clothes and picked up the bowls, stepping into the workshop and placing his bowl in front of him without a word.

He picked up the bowl without saying anything to her. He was, once again, bent over a specimen. "You were paying attention when we made those oils and salts, yes?" He started to eat his breakfast.

She set her bowl down on a different counter. She did not even want it. He ruined her appetite. "Yes," she said without looking at him.

"Then get to it," he bit out. He glanced at the food she put down. "And make sure you finish that. If you pass out, waking up will be a lot more painful for you."

She rolled her eyes as she started grabbing the bowls and ingredients that he used for the first scent they made. She spent the next hour making the salt and oil in the macadamia nut and rice milk scent. They did not say a word to each other. Not that she wanted to talk to him anyway. Once the batch was done, she bottled it up. She was able to make ten bottles for its trial period in the shop.

When Sasori noticed she was done, he looked up from his work and picked up a bottle. He smelled it and then rubbed some of it between his fingers. Satisfied with the quality, he nodded to the wooden boxes they used to transport things. "Put them in there and then come here," he said. His
Still saying nothing to him, she moved to grab the box and started placing the bottles neatly inside. She set the box down once she was done and then joined him on his side of the workshop.

"Come," he instructed over his shoulder. He was grinding a fine powder with his mortar and pestle. She moved closer to see what he was doing but kept her distance so he would have room to move around. He poured a little oil into the mixture then set the bowl down. He pulled a brush from a cup in front of him then snatched her hand. Dipping the brush into the mixture, he dragged it across the back of her hand. "Mmm," he frowned. He looked up at her face and gripped her jaw just as he had earlier but much softer now. Her breath hitched as she felt his fingers on her jaw again. He gently stroked the bluish bruising that had already started to form with his thumb, pressing just hard enough into it for it to hurt as he looked into her eyes.

She furrowed her brows and winced a little as he touched the bruising. "What is that?" she asked softly, flexing her hand very slightly. He looked at her a moment longer in silence. "You bruised easier than I expected," he whispered. He tilted her jaw up and started to paint the mixture on her face lightly with the brush. "It's unfortunate." He was almost pouting as he grabbed a soft cloth and dabbed the mixture until it settled into her skin and covered the bruising.

She frowned, feeling the mixture settle. "I do not usually bruise easily," she said. "However, your grip is very strong."

"So it would seem," he said, repeating his actions on the other side of her jaw until all the bruising was covered. She let him work on her face, looking away from him the whole time. She knew he was aware of his grip. Once he let her go, she took a step back, feeling the residue of the mixture on her face set in. "Go look at yourself," he ordered. "There's a mirror in the bathroom."

She did not spare him a nod before she turned and went to the bathroom. She found the mirror he mentioned and walked up to it. It was a full body mirror facing one of the corners designated for changing, which Sasori never used. She gasped softly, looking at herself. It was the first time in a long time that she saw herself. She frowned, immediately focusing on the burn on her chest. Her eyes moved down to her thigh where he burned a scorpion onto her. She stood there for a moment before her gaze moved to her face. She did not see any bruises. "Well it works," she mumbled to herself. She scoffed and then went back into the workshop.

"Does it feel heavy on your face?" he asked her. "I know Mei doesn't like her make up to feel heavy but I had to mix in some extra colors for you to counter the discoloration." He was scraping the rest of what was in the bowl into a small container.

"No, it is very light," she answered, making her way to the opposite side of the workshop where she made the salt and oil earlier. "I do not feel it at all." She started to clean up everything she used.

"Good," he said. He stood up and walked over to her. He backed her up against the table and leaned in close to her. His hands pressed into the table, caging her in. "And if I find out you're lying to me about my uncle," his voice was a low whisper, "I'll do so much worse to you than this." He ran his finger down the burn on her chest. "Understood?" he asked her with a slight smirk. He held her gaze, using his nail to drag over the scar tissue.

She breathed heavily through her nose and then nodded. "Yes," she said quietly, wincing a little as he touched the burn.
"Yes who?" he smirked, digging into the burn a little.

She frowned, looking down and then looking back up at him. "Yes, Lord Sasori," she said, resisting the urge to roll her eyes so hard.

"Good girl," he said, finally pulling away from her. He walked out to his room to get dressed.

It was not until he was gone that she started to let her heavy breathing out. She stood there for a moment, pressing her hand to her chest and controlling her breaths. 'It looks like he is back to being himself,' she thought. Once she calmed herself down, she picked up the box with the trial salt and oils and went out to his bedroom. As soon as she joined him in the bedroom, he started for the door. They left together for the shop as it had become routine.
Chapter 16

Sasori pushed the door of the shop open and then stopped dead in his tracks. He heard Gaara talking to someone. His fists curled up tightly and he fought to keep his composure. His uncle was here.

Azumi watched him stop and then caught the voices as they spoke. She hid a smirk as she walked past Sasori to set the box down on a counter and tended to the snakes.

"Good morning, Azumi," Gaara lit up when she walked into the workshop. Sandaime nodded politely as he set an empty cup that had contained tea Gaara had made for him down on the table.

"Good morning," she grinned at them. Both of them were such mood changers for her. The snakes hissed excitedly at her and she tapped each of their noses to calm them down.

"Did you get a good night's sleep?" Gaara asked brightly. He walked over to join her beside the snakes. Sasori busied himself with setting up the new display on the floor of the shop to avoid his uncle.

She chuckled softly. "I actually did not get to sleep until the sun rose," she said. "And it was pretty good for how short it was. How about you?" She turned to look at him, still smiling. "Did you sleep well?"

"Who says I slept?" he chuckled.

"I am truly sorry that I interrupted your sleep," Sandaime said to her with a slight frown. "I don't take it he let you go back to sleep since you are here now."

"Do not worry about it," she smiled softly at him. "I have had many sleepless nights in my life, this is no different. I will be fine." She looked at Gaara. "But you are a doctor, you should have slept. You need to sleep."

"Don't you know a doctor's work never stops?" he chuckled. "I had an urgent call as soon as I got home and before I knew it I had to come here to open the shop."

Sandaime shook his head and sighed heavily. "When you get to my age, you will not be able to do that anymore," he chuckled.

"It is not something we do on purpose," she said to Sandaime with a chuckle. She gently put her hand over Gaara's and turned to him. "But promise me you will try to get more sleep," she said softly.

His face softened, looking down at their hands. He smiled, looking up at her. "I promise," he whispered.

She smiled back at him. "Thank you," she whispered. She heard Sasori walk by the workshop door and immediately retracted her hand, not wanting to get caught. Sandaime caught the quick action and shifted to stand between them and the doorway.

"Azumi," Gaara looked at her face closely. "I didn't know you wear makeup. I didn't think Sasori would let you."

She stood quiet for a moment, looking him in the eyes. If she mentioned the bruises, it could
potentially make it worse for her. "He...made it this morning..." she said softly. "I suppose he is still on a kindness streak."

Gaara frowned and took her hand again. He looked at her hard and shook his head slightly. "Did...did do something to you?" he asked. "My cousin isn't this nice for this long."

She looked down at their hands, not saying anything. It took her a long moment to nod. "It is...to cover the bruising," she whispered.

Gaara's eyes narrowed. He gripped her hand tighter and then pulled away. He walked up to his uncle, grinding his teeth. Sandaime did not move from in front of the door. He simply shook his head.

"I knew he couldn't keep up his behavior!" Gaara hissed.

"I know, but stooping to his level will accomplish nothing," Sandaime said softly.

Azumi grabbed his hand again and squeezed gently. "If you confront him about it, it will only make it worse," she whispered to him. "I understand you are angry, but please...listen to your uncle."

Gaara seethed for a moment before regaining his composure. He squeezed her hand back gently and glared up at Sandaime. "You better work fast, Uncle, before I wind up in prison," he hissed.

Sandaime nodded. "I am doing my best, Gaara," he said softly.

Azumi put both her hands over his. "I promise, I will be fine," she said, bringing his hand up to press a kiss to his knuckles.

Gaara's entire body relaxed and his face grew heavy. "This shouldn't be your life," he whispered.

"Move," Sasori's voice interrupted their moment from behind Sandaime. "I need to get in here since I seem to be the only one working in this shop today," he said, irritation evident in his tone.

Sandaime gave them a second to separate before moving out of the way. Azumi moved to the counter she set the box down on and started taking out a couple of bottles to put them out on the shop floor.

"It's nice to see you again, too, nephew," Sandaime said to Sasori.

Sasori ignored him. Instead, he walked up to Azumi and tilted his head. "You've been in here for almost twenty minutes and you're just now doing this?" He glared at her. "The snake should not take that long to care for," he snapped, sending a glance towards Gaara.

"It's my fault," Sandaime said. "I kept her in here for conversation."

Sasori turned to glare at his uncle. "You aren't their parent," he growled. "You can protect Gaara all you want, but her life is mine," Sasori kept his distance from his uncle. "So go on, test me!"

Sandaime looked at him sharply but Sasori's glare remained. Gaara took a step back at the tension between them. "What good would it do me?" Sandaime sighed.

"Exactly," Sasori huffed. "Now don't you have someone else's day to ruin?"
Sandaime rolled his eyes. "I hardly think the two visits I've paid you today remotely ruined it."
"I've been in a bad mood since your first visit," Sasori grumbled. "I would count that as ruined."
"Sasori, why don't you go home and sleep?" Gaara spoke up. "You're acting on impulses right now
and lashing out for no reason."
"I think you of all people should know I can run on less sleep than I am right now and that was a
poor attempt to get rid of me."
Sandaime sighed again. "Then I shall leave," he said. He looked at Gaara and gave him a nod. "I'll
see you again soon."
Azumi fixed the display up and watched as Sandaime came out of the workshop. "Are you
leaving?" she asked him softly.
"For now," he nodded. "It would seem I've made the little lord a little more than cranky," he said
with a smile. "But I might be back again today. I think his mother wants to come into town."
Sasori froze in the workshop. His mother was going to visit?
"Oh..." Azumi hummed. "I see. Well, as always it was nice to see you," she smiled with a bow.
Sandaime nodded to her and gave her a proper bow. As he came up he winked at her before
stepping out of the shop. She could not help but grin as she watched him leave.
"What does he mean my mother is coming into town...why?" Sasori's brows furrowed. He looked
at Gaara in confusion. "Did he say anything about this to you?"
"No, but why is this stressing you out so bad?" Gaara smirked. "What? Can't have her know her
son is a monster?"
Azumi went back into the workshop and grabbed a couple of more bottles for the display. She
noted the look on Sasori's face and hid another smirk. 'Is he afraid of his mother too?' she thought.
She went back out to finish the display.
Sasori glared at Gaara. "No," he snapped. "She's going to hound me about getting married and
starting a family."
"Hound, huh?" Gaara smirked. "Your mother should be praying nothing ever crawls between your
legs."
Sasori blinked wide at his cousin. "What's made you so bold, Cousin?"
"Maybe it's the lack of adequate sleep," Gaara shrugged.
Azumi returned back to the workshop. "The display is finished," she told Sasori.
"Then maybe you should go home for the day," Sasori grumbled, pushing past Azumi to look at
the display.
"Maybe we all should," Gaara shook his head. "We all need to sleep." He rubbed his face. He
looked at Azumi and sighed. "Did you eat yet?" he asked her.
Azumi frowned, remembering she refused to eat earlier when Sasori told her to. She shook her
head. "No..." she said softly. "But it is not because he did not let me. I just refused to."
Gaara's face softened. "I'll go get you something," he said, taking her hand and pressing a kiss to her knuckles.

"Thank you," she said quietly, smiling a little at him. She watched as he slipped out of the back door of the workshop and then moved to start organizing one of the shelves under the counter for some of the ingredients they bought at the night market.

Sasori walked back into the workshop to grab a few more things. He said nothing about Gaara not being there. Gaara returned fifteen minutes later with two covered plates.

"I hope you like rice and chicken," he said softly, walking up to the second level.

"I do," she smiled at him. She walked up to him and took one of the plates. "Thank you."

"Eat and I'll keep him distracted," he smiled. He climbed back downstairs and walked out to the shop floor to keep his cousin occupied.

She uncovered the plate and inhaled deeply, feeling her stomach rumble as soon as she smelled the food. She did not want to admit how hungry she was but there was no denying that she had been very hungry. She started eating quickly, not wanting to take too much time and cause Sasori to be suspicious. She took a couple of minutes to finish her food and then cleaned up a little bit before heading back down to the first level.

"Gaara, you're starting to irritate me!" Sasori said, storming back into the workshop at the same moment. He almost slammed into Azumi. "Go fix the display," he ordered her.

"What is wrong with it?" she asked him. "So I know what to avoid doing."

"Literally nothing," he told her. "Just put it back the way you had it," he told her.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath and let it out slowly, not wanting to let her growing irritation with him get the best of her. "Fine," she said, walking out to the shop. 'Unreal,' she thought when she saw the display completely messed up because of him.

"Sasori, maybe you really should close the shop for the day," Gaara pleaded with his cousin. "You're being a little erratic and I can handle the shop. Just go get some sleep."

"I swear, Gaara!" Sasori growled. He stopped, smelling the food. "Did...you get food?"

Gaara nodded. "I did. It's upstairs if you want some." He started moving up to the second level and Sasori followed quickly behind, wanting the food and fixing himself a plate immediately.

Azumi fixed the display again and went back into the workshop. "It is fixed," she told Sasori. 'Do not fuck it up again,' she thought.

Sasori hummed from the second floor, his mouth full of food.

"He says thank you," Gaara called down then grunted when Sasori elbowed him hard in the stomach.

Azumi sighed and sat down on a stool in front of the snake tanks. The youngest of the snakes poked his head out of the tank and hissed at her. She smiled softly at it. "You want to dance?" she whispered. It hissed again and she picked it up, wrapping it around her and getting down from the stool. She moved around the workshop with it, fulfilling small tasks as she moved around. She figured she had a moment since Sasori was busy eating. Gaara leaned against the railing of the
second floor, eating off of his own plate. He smiled dreamily, watching her dance from task to task. A couple of minutes went by before Azumi stopped at the sound of Sasori moving to the ladder to come downstairs. She placed the snake back in the tank and tapped its nose as Sasori came down the ladder. "What else would you like me to do?" she asked him.

"We're going to go to bed," he grumbled. He pressed the balls of his palms into his eyes.

"I'll send Uncle and your mother over to your house then," Gaara said, walking downstairs.

"Fine," Sasori huffed.

Azumi looked at Gaara and smiled. "Thank you for the food," she said, giving him a bow. "The moon will be full tonight," she told him softly. "I hope you get to enjoy the moonlight reflecting off of the river." She stood up straight and winked at him before turning to join Sasori by the door.

Sasori was too tired to deal with their affections. They left the shop and made their way back to their house quickly, making sure to avoid all sunlight on the way and especially avoiding contact with the servants as they entered the house. "Sleep in your room," he waved her off as he flopped down into his bed.

Azumi nodded and left his room without saying anything to him. She could not wait to sleep either. She made her way back to her room where her window was still open and Naga was coiled on her bed. He hissed at her, concerned. "No, I am fine," she smiled at him. "Gaara and Lord Sandaime are here to make sure of that." She laid down on the bed and tapped his nose. "Wake me up when the sun goes down," she said to him before drifting off to sleep.
Chapter 17

Hours later when the sun began to set Naga shifted on her, hissing softly. He bopped his nose against hers gently. His tongue flicked her nose, trying to wake her up. "Mm," she hummed, scrunching her face a little bit. She opened her eyes slowly and smiled at the snake. "Thank you," she groaned, kissing his nose. She sat up and stretched. She got up and readied herself, making sure she did not look like she had just woken up. "You can come with me this time," she said, climbing onto the dresser and out the window. Naga slithered out after her and she picked him up as she made her way to the river.

Gaara was already waiting for her at the place they had stopped the first night they walked along the river bank together. "Did you sleep well?" he asked her with a bright smile.

"I did," she grinned, walking up to him. "It was about time," she chuckled. "Did you get any rest at all?"

"I got some," he smiled, shifting a basket on his arm. "Did you eat?" he asked, offering his arm to her.

"No, not yet," she answered, taking his arm. They started to walk along the river. "I sort of try to avoid the other servants in the house so I did not bother to go to the kitchen. I know they mean well, but I am honestly tired of them expressing to me every day how surprised they are that I am still alive."

Gaara chuckled, shaking his head as they walked. "I want to say it will die off as time goes on but I think it only gets worse the longer you live," he frowned. "The longest he's ever kept someone is two months...and the shortest was three days."

"Three days?" she frowned. "That is horrible." She looked down and sighed quietly. "I think I feel sorrier for the one that had to deal with him for two whole months," she said.

"Eehh, Kabuto was okay but...I admittedly was not too upset when he died," he said with a slightly guilty expression.

"Oh," she hummed. "I see." She looked up at the sky and then back at him. "You do not need to feel guilty about that," she told him softly. They walked for a couple more minutes before stopping at a good spot along the river to sit down. They did not stray too far from Sasori's home but were out at a good distance so they would not be seen.

"My uncle has always made a point to drive the value of human life into each of us," Gaara smiled, sitting down with her and Naga. "It, unfortunately, didn't really stick in Sasori." He waited for her to get comfortable before opening his basket. The smell of food hit their noses instantly. "Sandaime stopped by in the morning, right?"

"He did," she grinned. "A pleasant surprise, I might add." She looked at the food in the basket and groaned quietly in excitement. "That smells amazing," she told him. Naga hissed in agreement. "But you cannot have this," she smirked at the snake, tapping his nose. "Plus, you already ate this morning."

Naga hissed and slipped off her shoulders into the basket. Gaara chuckled, opening the basket fully. "I brought him something, too," he said as Naga nosed a cloth away and ate his treat. He looked at her with a twinkle in his eye. "I know my uncle can do it," he grinned. "Go on. I made
"I will be forever grateful to your uncle," she said, reaching into the basket and picking up some food. "And you," she smiled, looking at him.

"I haven't done anything," Gaara chuckled. "But I will do anything to see you away from my cousin. Anything to make sure no one winds up in his clutches again."

"You may feel like you have not done anything," she chuckled as she started to eat. "But you have made it a little more bearable to be around him. I actually look forward to going to the shop when I know you will be there." She watched as Naga ate his food and smiled. "I spent most of my time with you at the night market, which made the experience more enjoyable than if I was there with Lord Sasori alone."

Gaara's cheeks were starting to burn. He looked out over the river then down at his food. "I...can't stand to see you hurt," he said softly, taking a bite of his food. "I know we barely know each other but I only ever want to see you smile." He looked her dead in the eyes. "I won't allow him to hurt you at all when I am around." He looked at the bruising on her jaw. "Why did he do that to you?"

She hummed, not saying anything at first. "When Lord Sandaime visited this morning, he came to my room to speak to me alone. He may have raised suspicions by locking Lord Sasori out of my room. But once he was gone, he immediately thought I was conspiring with him. Before even giving me a chance to explain myself, he bruised me and slammed my head against the wall." She sucked her teeth and scowled slightly. "And then he tried to cover it up and act as if it did not just happen."

Gaara's eyes lit up with rage. He put his food down and drummed his fingers hard, gritting his teeth. After a few moments, he looked at her. "Does your head feel okay now?" he asked her, doing his best to control his temper.

She looked at him and nodded. She took his hand and gently glided her thumb across the back of it. "It feels fine now," she said. She gave him a small smile. "I can handle a headache."

He lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles softly, closing his eyes as his lips lingered there for a heartbeat. "If it flairs back up or gets worse, tell me," he said, looking at her. "Please tell me."

"Of course," she said softly, still smiling at him. "You will be the first person I tell." Naga hissed excitedly, coiling up next to her. "He says he enjoyed his food," she chuckled. "And he thanks you."

Gaara smiled. "Good," he nodded at her and then looked at the cobra. "I'm glad. You deserve a treat for being so good to Lady Azumi," he slipped her title in easily.

Azumi blinked and then chuckled softly. "I believe you told me to drop the 'Lord' in your name," she smirked. "You can do the same for me. When I am free, we will be equals with no need to go back to formalities."

He pouted a little. "But your name sounds nice with your title," he laughed softly. "And I want you to remember...no matter what he puts you through, you will always be a Lady," he smiled.

She could not help but smile. "Thank you," she said. Naga hissed between them, looking at both of them. "No one is going to call you Lord Naga," she said. "You are a king cobra, not a real king."

Naga hissed, looking as if he were pouting as he coiled in Gaara's lap. Gaara chuckled and gently pet Naga's back. "I might have said this before but I'm glad you have him," Gaara said. "I'm not
sure what my uncle plans on doing first but I will make sure to keep you updated and in the loop about everything."

"Thank you so much," she grinned, taking his hand in both of hers and bowing her head. "I very much appreciate you being around."

"Under the circumstances, I have a hard time saying I'm glad I met you," he chuckled, letting go of her hands to lift her face. He very gently stroked the bruising on her jaw. "But...I am."

"I am glad I met you, too," she said softly. "And yes, the circumstances are not exactly ideal, but...I do not think we would have met otherwise."

"Who knows," Gaara grinned, pulling his hand away from her face. "Maybe we were fated to meet," he chuckled. "What are the odds of a noble lady versed in the sciences as well as you are winding up with one of the best, albeit evil, apothecaries in our country?"

"Well, when you put it that way," she chuckled, "I suppose it is fate then." She sighed and stretched a little, laying down on her side and holding her head up with her fist. "So..." she smirked, looking up at him, "you have learned a bit about me at the night market...and I do not know much about you other than you are a doctor and you come from a family of handsome men," she chuckled.

He laughed, shifting to lay down next to her. "Oh no," he grinned as he tucked his arms under his head. "You're going to find out how boring I am." He looked up at the stars then glanced at her.

"I do not think we have the same definition of boring," she smirked. "As a doctor, you must come across some insane things on a constant basis. But...maybe boring is something that is needed when you deal with someone like Lord Sasori on the regular."

"Well, when you put it that way," Gaara chuckled. "Our whole family is made up of people as talented as Sasori. But there's only one other person who comes close to being as bad as he is," he sighed with a slight yawn. "My father."

"Ah, the cursed one of Lord Sandaime's generation," she chuckled. "What makes him so bad?"

"Well, for one, he hates me," Gaara chuckled. "He has since I was born because I apparently killed my mom."

"Your mother died during childbirth?" she asked. She let out a heavy scoff and sat up. "What an asinine reason to hate your own son," she growled. "You had absolutely no control over that."

"That's my dear father for you," he chuckled. "He doesn't really get to me anymore but it was sort of hell growing up." He smiled up at her and gently pulled her back down. "But I had my older sister and brother...even Sasori protected me in his own way."

Azumi's face scrunched up a little. "Really?" she asked with a slight chuckle. "He is capable of doing that?" She resumed her position on her side, facing him.

"Surprising, isn't it," Gaara laughed, turning on his side to face her. "Sasori's the one who started to teach me about the body and herbs. He would keep me at his house for a long time just to keep me away from my father." He reached out and tucked a piece of her hair back. "It's sort of thanks to him that I realized I wanted to be a doctor."

"That is...very interesting," she hummed. "I did not think I would hear something...that pleasant about him," she chuckled. She looked at him and smiled. "I am glad you were able to realize what
you wanted to do with your life."

"It's rare and if you ever mention that I said it to him, I will deny it," Gaara chuckled. "What about you? What were you going to be before your martyrdom?"

"Mm, I do not know exactly what I wanted to be," she hummed. "But as the daughter of the village head, I honestly only had a few options. One of which I was already doing. I worked in a lab, making medicines and such using animal venom—primarily snake." She chuckled softly. "I suppose that was obvious, though. I supplied our village's healer with the remedies that had a higher concentration of venom since they were not the most experienced with working with such an ingredient."

Gaara's expression was practically dreamy. "You're too good to be here, being a slave," he nearly whined. "Are you the oldest then?" he asked, noting she mentioned her limitations. "Were you supposed to take over the village?"

She shook her head. "I am the third child out of four. My oldest brother is the next in line to take over the village. And if he chooses to relinquish the position—as is sort of suspected of him—then it will go to my other older brother. The rest of us will remain on the council." She paused for a second. "Well, the rest of them," she chuckled.

Gaara gave her a sad looked when she corrected herself. "No," he shook his head. He reached out and took her hand. "You'll be on that council. Remember that. You'll be free soon," he said with conviction in his voice, squeezing her hand gently.

She looked down at their hands and then up at him, still smiling. "I cannot thank you enough," she said.

"You don't have to," he shook his head. "This is your human right," he smiled.

"It may be but I owe it to you and your uncle...for giving it back to me." She kissed the back of his hand. "Or else, I would be stuck as a slave until my early death."

He looked at her hard and bit his lip then smiled and nodded. "Are you getting tired?" he asked her gently.

"Just a little," she hummed, rolling onto her back and stretching a little. "I am sure you are," she said. "Since you probably need to get up very early in the morning."

"Tomorrow?" he smiled. "No, tomorrow I will be taking tea with my sister and her new fiance."

"Oh," she smiled. "That sounds nice. I hope you enjoy yourself. But you should still get some rest for that."

She sat up. "I enjoyed the food you brought. It was really good."

"I'm glad you liked it," he smiled. "I like knowing you're eating something good and healthy." He sat up with her. "I'll tell you how it goes. I have a feeling Kankuro is about to take his brotherhood very seriously," he chuckled.

"As any brother should," she smirked. "I am sure all three of my brothers would do the same."

"I'm sure they would. But you seem to be a lot like Temari. Very capable of handling yourself," he chuckled as he stood up and offered her a hand.

She took his hand and stood up with him. "A quality that got stronger in me in just the couple of months of transport between sacrificing myself and becoming a slave," she smirked. Naga slithered
up her leg to wrap around her waist and rested his head on her shoulder.

"It's unfortunate, but I'm glad you didn't have to gain if from scratch." He tugged her hand gently and pulled her into a firm hug, burying his face into her neck. "You'll see your home again. You'll have your freedom, you have my word," he promised her again. Her breath hitched quietly and she smiled against his shoulder, wrapping her arms around him to hug him back. He took a step back and began to clean up their little picnic.

She helped him gather everything back into the basket and smiled at him when they were done. "Shall we do this again soon?" she asked.

"Of course," Gaara grinned. "Any time you want." He started to walk with her back towards their homes. "We should make a codeword, shouldn't we, though?"

"A code word?" she hummed. "You understood my moon and river code," she smirked. "But I do think one we are aware of ahead of time would work." She thought of it as they approached Sasori's house. She leaned against the wall next to her window. "What is something that he would not suspect? Using the moon again could raise some suspicions."

He looked up at the sky in thought for a moment then grinned. "I...grow cacti," he told her. "Anytime we want to meet, either of us can ask about the welfare of my cacti," he offered.

"Oh!" she grinned. "That is perfect! I love it," she chuckled. Naga slithered through the window, hissing his goodnight to Gaara. "He says goodnight," she translated.

"Goodnight," he smiled fondly. "To both of you."

She smiled at him, stepping closer to hug him one more time. "Goodnight," she said softly. After a few moments, she pulled away to climb back through her window and into her room. Gaara lingered for a moment to make sure she got inside safely before walking home himself.

Inside her room, Azumi sat on her bed, unable to stop smiling as she pet Naga mindlessly. He hissed at her teasingly. "Shut up," she grinned, tapping his nose. She laid back on her bed, letting the snake coil up next to her. She laid there with him for almost an hour before finally falling asleep.
Chapter 18

The next morning, she woke up with a slight gasp. The sun had been up for a while and no one had come to wake her. She wondered if Sasori was still asleep or if he just had no reason to call for her. Regardless, she got up and stretched. She changed her clothes and went to Sasori's room. He was still sleeping, which sort of shocked her. 'I suppose he was tired enough to sleep from sunset to sunrise,' she thought. She went into his bathroom to start his bath, knowing that he would feel her presence and wake up soon. She chose a different salt and oil scent this time, hoping he would not care much for it. Stepping back into his room, she saw him still asleep. 'I might as well get breakfast,' she thought. She went to the kitchen where only one of the three usual servants was.

"Good morning," they said to her.

"Good morning," she said back, grabbing a bowl and serving herself.

"How is the young lord today?"

"He is still asleep." She leaned against the counter and started eating, not bothering to sit at the table since she did not want to keep this conversation going for much longer.

"Huh..." they hummed. "That's unusual. He doesn't usually sleep in this late."

"He had not slept much in the last couple of days. His body probably just needed to catch up."

"Or his age is starting to catch up with him," the servant whispered with a smirk.

Azumi smirked back at them. "Is he not only twenty-nine?"

"That's when it starts," they chuckled. "You've been around him long enough to know he's practically an old man."

Azumi laughed softly as she finished eating and then served a bowl for Sasori. "You are not wrong," she told them.

Sasori slowly woke up to the scent of the oils Azumi had chosen for him. He buried his face deep into his pillows for a few more minutes before very slowly pulling himself from the bed. He stood up to slip his clothing off and he walked into the bathroom as he ran a hand through his messy hair. "Hmph," he grunted, being hit with the blinding light of the morning. Using his hand as a shield, he crossed the room and pulled the curtains shut. His eyes relaxed and he slipped into the tub, sinking lower into the heat of the water.

A couple of minutes later, Azumi entered Sasori's room with a bowl for him. She immediately noticed that he was not in bed. She grabbed his robe and set the bowl down on his desk for when he came out. She went into the bathroom, seeing how relaxed he was as she put his robe on its designated hook. "Good morning," she said. "You look well-rested."

"Mmm," he hummed, into further the water. His eyes opened slowly to look at her. He watched her move for a few minutes before sitting up in the tub. "How late did I sleep?" he asked. His voice was still a thick rasp of sleep.

"It is almost noon," she answered. "So...pretty late, I would say." She turned to look at him. "I brought you breakfast. It is on your desk when you are ready."
"Noon!" he gasped. Then he cleared his throat. "What a waste," he sighed, running a hand through his hair.

"You have not slept much," she frowned. "I understand you usually go without sleep but you should allow your body to catch up every now and then."

He narrowed his eyes at her then sighed. "The little snake cares about her master's well-being," he said in his husky tone. "How precious." He stretched hard and decided to get out of the tub. He walked over to pull a towel out and dry off. "Don't worry. I'm not going to snap on you this morning," he smirked at her over his shoulder. He walked up to her and gripped her chin very gently compared to the previous day. "Mm, I suppose I should treat you more delicately," he said, looking into her eyes.

She furrowed her brows, looking back at him. That sounded so untrustworthy to her. Especially with how quick he switched from being nice to slamming her head into the wall. "It does not matter how you treat me," she said. "My loyalty will remain."

His grin widened. "Now that's what I like to hear," he purred before letting her go. "I hope you got enough sleep last night yourself," he said as he dropped his towel to trade it for his robe. "There's a lot I wanted to get done today but I suppose we can work late."

She nodded as she followed him out to his room. "I slept very well last night, actually," she hummed, remembering she fell asleep in a very good mood after her outing with Gaara. "What will we be working on?" she asked, picking up his bowl from his desk and handing it to him.

Sasori took the bowl and walked into the workshop with her. "Mei sent me a request for a new body scrub and fragrance." He took a spoonful of his breakfast. "And I want to make something special for Lady Konan," he smirked.

"Lady Konan?" she asked softly. She remembered that Konan was not very fond of him and she was pretty sure he knew that too. She figured whatever it was he wanted to make her was not a true gift. "What are the scents that Lady Mei requested?"

"She wants the lotus blossom and sugar and then something manly for her plaything," Sasori said offhandedly. "And yes, Konan. I want her to do something for me so I'm going to make her a nice peace offering," he smirked, leaning against his desk as he ate.

She tilted her head a little and looked at him. "What do you want her to do?" she asked. She did not know Konan very well but her very brief interaction with her led her to believe it would take a lot more to get her to agree to anything for him.

"You needn't worry about that right now," he smirked. "If I need you to help with her I'll tell you. I'm interested to see what you come up for Mei. If I like it then we can add hers and the masculine scent to the shop, too."

She nodded and moved toward the different oils he had on a shelf. "What notes does Lady Mei dislike so I know what to avoid?" she asked as she grabbed a bowl.

"She doesn't like clove or bay leaf too much," Sasori hummed. "And she doesn't like things that are too herby."

She hummed in thought for a moment, looking at the different ingredients available. "I can work with that," she said, grabbing the ones she needed for the scent she had in mind.

Sasori hummed as he finished off his breakfast. "Good," he turned around to settle in at his desk.
"Tell me, was there anything the women in your village couldn't live without?"

She started making the fragrance as she thought about her answer. "Something the women cannot live without?" she whispered to herself. "Most, if not all, of the women in my village dance, but I do not think that is something we cannot live without."

"Hmm." He tapped his chin with the end of his pencil. "Konan's village is centered around an oasis but I don't know the culture very well." He looked up at his shelves for a moment. "Oh," he grinned. "She likes paper crafting!"

"Are you thinking about what to give her as your...peace offering?" she asked. She chuckled softly. "My village is also in an oasis. We may have similar cultures. If you are thinking of doing something simple and she likes paper crafting, then I suggest a flower. Or a bird."

Sasori chuckled. "A peace offering," he parroted. "Yeah, something like that." He pulled down one of his jars and turned to look at her.

"A peace offering is what you called it," she hummed. She poured the first fragrance into a bottle and turned toward him. She sniffed the fragrance and grinned at it, holding it out for him to smell it as well.

"Hmm," his brows furrowed. "Maybe I do need more sleep," he muttered as he leaned forward to smell it. "Oh, she'll like that," he smirked. "The lingering effect," he breathed out through his nose, "is also nice."

"It is three different layers of notes," she smiled. "I sort of modeled it after what I always imagined my husband to smell like."

"Mm, I can't imagine a certain someone wearing that," he said with a smirk. "Tell me more," he ordered.

She ignored his first comment completely. "What else do you want to know?"

"Tell me anything."

She capped the bottle and set it down to settle then leaned against the counter and crossed her arms. "Well, now you know that my village is in an oasis and that all of the women dance," she hummed. "No one can really find my village unless someone from the inside brings them in. It has been like that for a very long time." She turned around to start making another scent, wanting a more concentrated and pure version of what she had just made.

"Why is your village so reclusive?" His eyes narrowed. "It must be something special to have you then. Every day your net value only gets higher." His smirk returned with another chuckle.

"Well, you are already aware of...people who look like me already being rare," she said, remembering that was one of the first things he said to her when they met the day he bought her. "We used to be hunted. I do not know why, though. We are human. But our eyes are a dead giveaway so it only made sense to hide, I suppose."

"Every part of you is average?" he asked, a little skeptical.

She paused for a moment. "Well, I suppose most humans do not have an immunity to snake venom...and cannot communicate with snakes...I do not think my high pain tolerance is exclusive to people like me, I think that is just a quality of mine. I am sure there are other people with similar pain tolerance." She turned to look at him and squinted curiously. "Do...other humans shed?"
Sasori folded his arms and he raised his eyebrow. "No, we don't," he smirked. "Not unless we are burned. How often do you shed?" He could not keep the amusement off of his face.

"Only as a child," she clarified. "It has only happened three times." She frowned, humming in slight disappointment. 'I have spent my entire twenty-three years thinking I was completely human,' she thought.

"Mm, yeah, that's not remotely human," Sasori chuckled. He turned back around. "I can see why you were hunted now. I can hazard a guess that there are more oddities to your anatomy and physiology."

She hummed quietly. "I would not be able to tell you," she frowned. "Since I do not really know." She finished the second fragrance and bottled it, stepping closer to him for him to smell it. "This is a more concentrated version of the one I just made."

"We can always play a game and find out," he grinned at her as he leaned in to take a whiff. His eyes rolled a little. "Very good," he nodded, sitting back. "Write down the recipe and if Mei likes it then we'll keep it."

'I would like to leave my anatomy a mystery,' she thought, taking one of his notepads and writing down the recipes for the two fragrances she made. "I can make a feminine version of this scent as well," she said. "If Lady Mei would like a set to match her...plaything, as you called him."

"Do whatever you want," he smirked. "This plaything seems to be sticking around," he hummed. "I'm actually surprised how hard he's hit Mei. She doesn't come around nearly as much anymore."

She looked at him, trying to hide her smirk. "Do you miss her?" she said, trying not to coo her question.

"Tch." He hid his own expression in the fringe of his hair. "If she wants to waste her time with the impish Uchiha who am I to call her back to better company?"

"Mm," she hummed, turning to go back to where she was working. "That sounds a little bit like jealousy," she said quietly, getting different ingredients to make another scent.

"If you think that's jealousy, you still have a lot to learn about me," he smirked.

"Sasori, jealous?" Komushi's voice called from the bedroom. "Are we talking about Mei and Shisui?"

"Who let you in?" Sasori groaned. "Don't you have anyone else at all to bother?"

"Nope," Komushi grinned, poking his head into the workshop. "You're my only friend," he said as he walked in.

"I believe it," Azumi mumbled.

"Oh," he grinned, sashaying over to Azumi. He wrapped his arms around her from behind and took a deep breath. Her body tensed up immediately. "That smells good." He rested his chin on her shoulder. "Is it for you?" He buried his face in her hair.

"No," she chuckled. "It is for Lady Mei." She picked up the two bottles with the masculine scents and held each close to his face so he could smell them. "And these are for her...um, I do not know what he actually is to her."
"Oh, her boy toy," Komushi grinned, shoving his nose into the cologne. "Hey. Sasori, I think she's going to outdo you with these scents! That's amazing! Can you make me one!"

"Uh, sure," she said. She found the ingredients from the two fragrances and started on them again. "Do you want it to be layered or more concentrated?" she asked.

"Do whatever you want," he purred, shifting his arms from her shoulders down to her stomach and squeezing. Sasori sighed irritatedly. "What's got you bent out of shape?" Komushi brushed his fingers along Azumi's skin.

"I don't mind her making you a cologne, but get off of her," Sasori said. Azumi started making the more concentrated one for Komushi, not wanting to associate him with the layered scent of her imaginary husband.

"Oh, Sasori, if you wanted my affection all you had to do was ask," Komushi chuckled, releasing Azumi. He walked over to Sasori and parked it on his desk. Sasori swung his arm and knocked Komushi hard in the back.

"Get off my desk and use a damn stool," he growled.

Komushi grunted in pain and poured at his friend. "I thought you loved me, Sasori," he said, hopping off of the desk and pulling up a seat next to him. Azumi finished the cologne and placed it in Komushi's hand.

"You're still alive, aren't you?" Sasori grumbled. "And I don't want to give you a false perception. I hate you."

Komushi grinned down at the bottle. "Sure you do," he winked at Sasori, opening the bottle to take a whiff. "Ah, this is amazing, Azumi! I'll treasure it and think of your beauty when I wear it."

Azumi smirked at him before turning to go back to making more fragrances. She kept an extra bottle of the original masculine scent for herself. She was going to use the opportunity she had been given to make a few more fragrances for herself. She also decided that because she was in the mood to make different fragrances, she would make one for Sasori.

"Why are you here?" Sasori asked Komushi.

"I was bored," he hummed. "Your uncle is running me ragged so I left for the day," he said airily. Sasori raised his eyebrow. "Rasa is going to have your head if you keep doing this," he smirked, writing something down.

"Eh, he's too busy reaming Gaara out over some family affair today," he shrugged. "I think 'Lil Temi is getting married," Komushi chuckled. "The guy looks half asleep from what I saw."

Azumi frowned, hearing that Gaara was enduring his shitty father. She decided to make a fragrance for him as well.

"I wonder if this marriage would even last," Sasori hummed. "I've only met the boy once and it's an odd match."

"If it works, it works," Komushi shrugged.

"She's always been...a little hard," Sasori chuckled. "Maybe this will be good for her."
Komushi hummed, leaning back on his stool. "And what about you," he grinned. "I know Mei was over recently. Are you two officially together or..."

"Absolutely not!" Sasori scoffed. "We would never and besides, I think the boy toy might actually propose."

Komushi's jaw dropped then split into a huge grin. "Noooo," he whispered conspiratorially. "Really!"

"She mentioned he might," Sasori nodded.

"Wow," Komushi whispered. "So she's serious about him."

Azumi rolled her eyes, listening to them gossip like old women.

"She's serious," Sasori nodded.

Komushi looked at Sasori hard. "You're jealous," he grinned. He started to laugh as Sasori continued to write and ignore him. "Oh, my god, you are!" Komushi cracked up.

"I am not!" Sasori growled. "Tch, Azumi!"

Azumi jumped slightly and turned toward him as she bottled another cologne, trying not to spill it. "Yes?" she hummed.

"Give him something to do!" Sasori ordered.

"What! I'm not your little toy," Komushi smirked.

Sasori looked at him out of the corner of his eye. "You forfeited free will the moment you walked in here," he said easily.

Azumi hummed in slight disappointment. She was having fun making perfumes and colognes and now she had to babysit a man older than her. She looked at Komushi and tried to think of something for him to do. Taking his hand, she pulled him back to her workstation. "What scents do you like?" she asked him. "You can design a fragrance."

Komushi gasped in excitement. "I like these!" he said very sure and soundly as he picked out seven or eight scents. "Wow, I feel like a kid again," he chuckled.

Azumi looked at the ones he picked and smelled them. It was a weird mix of different things. "Interesting..." she mumbled, trying to figure out how to make it work. She liked the challenge. She combined all of the more similar ones together and started on making another layered fragrance for him. It took her about ten minutes and when she was done, she bottled it. "Is this okay?" she asked, holding the bottle close to him.

"That was quick," Komushi grinned. He took the bottle and took a deep breath. "Hng," he groaned. "There it is. The new scent of my life!" His grinned widened. "You're too talented for this bastard." He rolled his eyes in irritation.

Sasori growled softly. "No," he said, turning around. "She is exactly what I've been needing this entire time! Someone more than half intelligent and fucking self-sufficient." He rolled his eyes in irritation.

"Sounds like everything you'd want in a wife," Komushi smirked.
Azumi frowned and groaned quietly at the mere thought of being married to this monster. 'As if,' she thought.

"Marriage is a waste of time," Sasori scoffed. "I don't have time to deal with another person's wants and needs when I have my own goals to achieve. And that aside from that, there aren't many I deem worthy of even touching me," he said with an arrogant flair.

"That sounds like someone is just a little salty over Mei possibly getting married," Komushi whispered to Azumi. She tried not to laugh, but the fact that he thought that dealing with another person's wants and needs was a waste of time when that was quite literally her life now. She was there to do exactly that for him. Sasori growled, picking up a wooden bowl and turning to throw it at Komushi's head. "Whoa." Komushi ducked, dodging the projectile with a laugh. "Touched a nerve, didn't we?"

"Maybe we should leave him be," Azumi said quietly to Komushi, placing her hand on his shoulder. She feared that he would go too far and Sasori would take his anger out on her.

"Aw, are you feeling bad for him?" Komushi cooed. "Relax. He won't hurt you when it comes to me," he reassured her. "Not when he can just take it out on me," he grinned, walking up behind Sasori to put him in a chokehold. "Isn't that right, Sa-so-riiii," he grinned, rocking the man from side to side.

"Get off of me!" Sasori growled, swinging his fist back and colliding with Komushi's temple. Azumi sighed and rubbed her face. It was like being around actual children. Komushi held on tight and pulled Sasori with him. They hit the ground hard, making Sasori growl louder. He elbowed Komushi hard in the ribs and rolled over, straddling him. "I swear, Komushi, I'm going to murder you!" Sasori yanked him by the front of his shirt.

Komushi just laughed holding his hands up in surrender. Azumi sat down on the stool Komushi vacated and watched them. "Alright, alright," Komushi said through his laugh. Sasori slammed his head into the ground before letting him go and getting up. "God, you're such an asshole," Komushi groaned with a grin. He rubbed his head, sitting up once Sasori sat back on his stool.

"And you're a piece of shit who has no comprehension of boundaries," Sasori clicked his tongue. "Your point?"

"I wasn't trying to make one," Komushi chuckled. He got up and Azumi moved from the stool so he could have his seat back.

"I hate you so much." Sasori pinched the bridge of his nose.

Komushi rested an elbow on the table Azumi was working on and pouted. "You don't mean that," he grinned. "Who else is going to counterbalance your grumpy old man act?" he teased.

"Act?" Sasori repeated.

'Oh, it is not an act,' Azumi thought, starting another fragrance. 'That is just him.' She turned toward Komushi and held two different scents in front of him. "Choose one," she told him.

"I was trying to give you a redeeming way out," Komushi hummed, leaning his head against his arm. He twisted a little to look at the two presented bottles. "Um...this one," he said, pointing to the left-hand bottle.

Azumi nodded and used his choice in the new fragrance. She was just having fun at this point with making new smells. She finished the perfume and held it to him for him to smell. "I think I should
stop," she said quietly, more to herself.

"Did I tell you to stop?" Sasori asked, his eyes shifting from Komushi to her.

Komushi smelled the new scent and hummed happily. "You're really good at this," he smiled fondly at her.

Azumi smiled back at Komushi. "Thank you," she said with a slight nod. "It has always been a hobby of mine." She made a line of all of the different fragrances she made, separating the three that she wanted to keep for herself from the other ones.

Sasori looked over all of them before getting up. He grabbed a small container from one of the high shelves and then turned to pick up one of the bottles. He smelled each one in between placing them into the container.

"These all turned out amazing," he murmured.

Komushi gasped. "Wait...was that," he looked at Azumi. "Was that a compliment?!"

"Don't get used to it," Sasori said, rolling his eyes.

"Thank you," Azumi smiled.

"I didn't know you were capable of such a thing," Komushi smirked at him.

"It's rare for a reason," Sasori grumbled. "Now, can you repeat any of those scents?" He asked Azumi. "If you can and that first batch goes well, we'll make the scents and scrubs a permanent part of the shop."

"Oo-ho, look at you, Azumi," Komushi grinned, smelling his one scent again.

"I can remake them all if needed," she nodded. She started to clean up the station she was working on, unable to smell much anymore.

"Good," he said, turning around to place the jar back on the shelf before sitting back down.

"What are you working on so diligently over here?" Komushi asked, walking his stool over to Sasori's desk.

Sasori's eye twitched hard. "If you must know," he huffed. "It's going to be something for Konan."

"Ooh, Konan? Are you going to try to win her over since you lost Mei?" Komushi smirked. Azumi winced, wishing Komushi would stop bothering him.

"No," Sasori said through gritted teeth, clearly more than irritated with him. "I'm hoping she'll agree to test something out for me."

"Good luck with that," Komushi raised his eyebrow. "After the cold shoulder she gave us at the market, I'll be surprised if she even knows your name," he chuckled. He went to open his mouth again when Sasori suddenly stood up.

"Yes," Sasori took a deep breath. "I'm not entirely sure what's got her upset with me but hopefully this will change her mind." Komushi leaned in closer to see what Sasori was working on, nudging Sasori out of the way. Sasori ran his tongue over his teeth forcefully, took a deep breath and kicked Komushi hard off of his stool. "Leave," he growled. "Before I rat you out to my uncle and give away all of your hiding spots."
Komushi squinted at him. "You wouldn't," he said.

"Oh?" Sasori challenged.

Komushi stared at him from a moment. "I'm not going to test it," he chuckled, raising his hands in surrender.

"Good, wise choice," Sasori smirked. "Now get the hell out of my room." He turned to kick Komushi as the man scrambled to leave.

"You're the worst," Komushi laughed, dodging Sasori's kicks as he circled around to Azumi. "See you later, sweet stuff," he winked at her and grabbed the scent she made for him.

"Goodbye, Lord Komushi," Azumi said with a bow.

Komushi smirked at Sasori again before slipping out of the room. "You're an asshole," he laughed as he left.

Azumi waited a few moments before speaking. Once she was sure that Komushi was gone, she picked up the scent she made for Sasori. "I made one for you, too," she told him, crossing the workshop to hand him the bottle.

He looked at the bottle for a moment before taking it. Wordlessly, he opened it and took a deep breath. This...was going to be his new scent. "It's excellent," he uttered the second compliment softly. "Can you make it into the bath stuff too?" he asked her. This one would not be sold in the shop. This one was going to be his and his alone.

She smiled at his reaction and nodded. "Yes," she said. "I can. I am glad you like it." She grabbed all of the stuff to make the bath oil and salt in that scent, figuring she could make a bigger batch of it for him.

"When you're done, put them on the main shelf. I'll use them next time I take a bath," he said, turning back to his work. Unknown to him, his shoulder had started to hike up on one side as he worked.

Azumi worked quickly, making the salt and oil for him. It took her about twenty minutes to make both things. She set them on the counter to cool down before she would take them to the bathroom. She turned around and frowned, immediately noticing his stressed position. She stepped closer to him, waiting for a moment before hesitantly reaching her hands out and massaging his shoulders. "Is there something stressing you out?" she asked him softly.

His body tensed up under her touch, his eyes widening. He started to relax as she continued to move her hand, almost letting a moan slip as she hit a knot in his shoulder. "My uncle is planning something," he said softly. There was a roughness to his voice. "He's plotting, my mother is getting antsy for grandchildren, and I'm getting restless. I need a new project to get into." He relaxed more under her hands. "Not to mention Komushi makes things rowdy, too say the least, around here."

She moved her hands to a tense spot between his shoulder blades. "Does your mother know how you feel about marriage?" she asked him. "Or does that not make a difference?"

"Hhhng," he groaned softly, closing his eyes. "It doesn't matter what I think," he told her. "Did it matter to your father? I'm sure growing up as a noble, you should know that love does not actually matter," he said cynically. "Of course, my mother would like for me to be in love because my parents married out of love."
She frowned and sighed quietly. "As soon as I turned eighteen, my father started to pressure me into marriage," she admitted. "I know love does not matter to most people...but I would rather love the person I marry...otherwise it would be a waste of time." She moved up to his neck, feeling for any more knots and then moved back to his shoulders.

"Love, in general, is a waste of time," Sasori scoffed. His eyes rolled a little as her hands worked on his neck. His muscles were tender and her fingers hurt in the best way as she dug into him. "It rarely provides any real benefits to the two involved. Rather, it serves the family as a whole and frankly, it's not my job to carry this family."

'Those are the words of a man who has never been in love,' she thought. "So what will you do about your mother's constant pressuring?" she asked. "Will you continue to ignore it or eventually give in?"

Sasori paused for a moment. He thought hard about his answer and hated it despite it being the truth. "I've always been a stubborn child," he started. "But there is little that I won't do for my mother."

She raised an eyebrow in slight shock. His answer surprised her a little and then her face softened, realizing she completely understood it. "I...am the same way about my father," she said with a slight smile. She did not feel any more knots in his shoulders and back. "How does that feel now?" she asked, removing her hands from his shoulders.

He twisted his head and bent his neck. "Much better," he hummed. He turned to look at her hard. "Well, at least one of us won't have to worry about that kind of pressure anymore," he sighed, letting his shoulders relax entirely. If he was honest, he should have thanked her for being so skilled with her hands. He had not realized how bad his shoulders and neck had gotten but that felt amazing. It was purely on the principle that she was his slave that he did not thank her properly.

She took a step back from him, giving him some more personal space. "You said you needed a new project to get into," she hummed. "Have you not had any ideas recently?"

"I have a routine," he said, turning around to press his back to the edge of the table. "Routines are nice because I have a very steady and strong income but they are boring. And bored is on the top of my list for things I hate to be," he sighed, tilting his head back. "Komushi's been so busy with my uncle that he doesn't even have time to entertain me as often anymore."

"It seems you do not even want him around much," she noted. "You were very adamant about kicking him out today. I wish I could suggest something to you, but I do not know what you have and have not done yet. I am not like Lord Komushi where I can think of criteria for a composition to challenge you with."

"Usually he's fine," Sasori rolled his eyes. "I'm just not in the mood to be social today." He was also tired of sharing Azumi. He had had little time with her the entire night market. He was not sure why he cared about that because she was just a slave. Yet, it irked him that Gaara and Komushi had commandeered her for the better part of three days. "The night market usually saps my tolerance for humanity for at least a fortnight." This was a fact.

"That is very understandable," she nodded. "It was very crowded. And that sounds like the perfect amount of time needed to recuperate from a crowd that size." Just thinking about how many people were at the market started to make her anxious again.

"Glad we share the same sentiment," he said, playing with the bottle of the scent she had made for him.
She looked at the bottle in his hand and it reminded her that the oil was cooled down by now. "I made a bigger batch of bath oils and salts in that scent for you," she told him, closing the bottles of oils up and grabbing jars to grind the salts into. "It should last you a while."

He watched her close up each of the bottles and nodded. "Clever as always." He stood up to help her carry all of the bottles to the bathroom without saying anything.

Together, they took the bottles to the bathroom and placed them on his shelf. She saw how stressed he still seemed and figured the massage she gave him was not enough. "Will you be working on anything else?" she asked him as they went back into his workshop. She immediately started making a massage oil to give him a proper massage when he needed it. "Or are you still working on your idea for Lady Konan?"

"I want to spend the rest of today working on the gift," he said, running a hand through his hair. "I have a running list of what I want to make for her." He started to sit back down when he heard someone walk into his room. He looked straight ahead of him and took a slow, deep breath. "Who is—"

"Good afternoon, Nephew," Sandaime said easily as he strolled into the workshop. Sasori's shoulder started to hike back up towards his ear. "Uncle," he ground out as he turned to look at his grinning uncle.

"Azumi," Sandaime smiled, nodding his head in her direction.

Azumi immediately grinned and bowed. "Hello, Lord Sandaime," she said.

"What brings you here?" Sasori sighed.

"I did say I would be back, didn't I?" Sandaime responded. Sasori bit his tongue to keep from sucking his teeth hard.

"Your mother and a young lady are here to discuss some matters with you."

Sasori narrowed his eyes. "Who?" he asked, not moving.

"Get ready and meet us in the tea room," was all Sandaime said before bowing again to Azumi and turning to leave. "And don't try to slip away. I'll know," he said warningly over his shoulder.

Once Sandaime was gone and Azumi was released from his allure she looked at Sasori and frowned. He looked even more stressed. "Will I be going with you?" she asked. She was not sure if it was necessary for her to attend a meeting with his mother since the matters to be discussed most likely had nothing to do with her.

Sasori's eyes slid over to her. "And I was just praising you for how clever you are," Sasori sighed. "Of course you'll be going. I'm not dealing with him, some random girl and my mother alone." He stood up to get ready.

She rolled her eyes. 'I do not want to deal with them either,' she thought. "Very well then," she sighed, bottling up the oil she made. She went out to his bedroom and waited for him to get dressed so they could get the meeting over with.
Chapter 19

Once Sasori was ready, he and Azumi started down the hall. "I'm tired of having to turn these women down," he grumbled. "Just stay close and, if anything, this will be a fine opportunity for you to meet my mother."

She nodded but did not say anything. They moved at a leisurely pace through the halls since he did not really want to go to this meeting.

Just before they entered the tea room, Sandaime stepped out. “Glad you made it,” he said.

“I didn’t have much of a choice;” Sasori grumbled, walking past him.

“Hello again, Lord Sandaime,” Azumi said softly with a bow.

"Sasori?" a woman's voice said from behind Sandaime. A woman with dark hair and Sasori's eyes poked her head out. "My beautiful, elusive son!" she smiled, opening her arms to pull Sasori into a hug.

Sasori wrapped his arms around his mother. "Hello, Mother," Sasori's voice softened.

Azumi tilted her head a little, watching him embrace his mother. She was used to him switching between himself and charming around other people but the switch between himself and endearing was different and interesting.

“I haven’t seen you in quite some time,” his mother said as she pulled back. She caressed his face gently. “Have you been eating? I know you forget sometimes.”

He chuckled softly and nuzzled into her hand. "Of course I have, Mother," he said, looking over his shoulder to Azumi. "My new slave has done excellent in seeing to my needs. She never lets me miss a meal or a bath."

His mother looked around him at Azumi. "You got a new one?" she asked. She gave Azumi a slight smile. "Thank you for taking care of my son."

Azumi gave her a polite nod. 'It is not like I have a choice,' she thought. "It is my pleasure, my Lady."

"Come," Sandaime said suddenly. "Let's not congregate in the doorway and sit down." He started to usher everyone into the room. Sasori narrowed his eyes slightly when he felt his uncle nudge him but the glare shifted to the pretty young woman about Sasori's age. She sat primly in her chair, back straight and a kind smile on her face. She stood as soon as they made eye contact.

"Lord Sasori," she bowed lowly.

"Sasori," his mother started, walking over to the young woman. "This is Lady Shizune."

Sasori gave her a bow. "Pleasure to meet you, Lady Shizune," he said. Everyone took their seats and Azumi stood behind Sasori.

"She is here as a suitor for you," Sasori's mother continued.

"Yes," he hummed. "Uncle mentioned that," he said, eyeing the woman coolly. She did not seem to shrink entirely away from Sasori's icy gaze but she withered a little around the edges.
"Your mother mentioned you run an apothecary as your profession," Shizune said brightly. "I actually work as a midwife alongside my village's doctor."

Sasori did his damndest not to roll his eyes. "Intriguing," he said, looking her over. 'How plain.' He looked over his shoulder at Azumi for a moment then back to Shizune.

"Sasori!" his mother sighed, swatting his knee. "Where are your manners?"

Shizune swallowed quietly before continuing. "It isn't the most fascinating job, but it's quite rewarding," she said, her smile still in place. Azumi noticed her nervously tapping her finger gently against her leg. She was sure Sasori noticed it too. "Of course, it's not as interesting as what you do."

Azumi’s brow furrowed. 'I am sure being a midwife is quite interesting,’ she thought.

Sasori narrowed his eyes. "I don't like when someone downplays the significance of their job or the skill it takes to do it," he said frankly. "It leads me to believe they are either incompetent—which means they are lying about their skill in the first place—or have zero confidence in themselves, and I don't have time for building up a grown woman's self-esteem." He leveled her with an even cooler look. "You work under Tsunade," he said. "I've filled orders for her before. She is an impressive doctor. Don't disrespect her or your profession with these polite niceties."

Everyone in the room went silent except for Sasori's mother who gasped. "Sasori!" she said again. Azumi looked down at the floor, hoping her hair covered the grin that she fought so hard to keep off of her face. Sandaime just sighed. He expected this sort of thing to happen.

Shizune blinked a couple of times. "You're right," she said softly, lowering her head a little.

Sasori raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips. "I know I am," he said, earning another glare from his mother.

"I appreciate your honesty," Shizune said softly, wringing her hands in her lap a little. "Everything you said about confidence is stuff that I am working on with Tsunade."

"Mm, then continue to work on it and when you think you've reached a point that you don't need to lean on me for that then come back." There was no remorse in his tone.

"Right," Shizune said softly, keeping her eyes lowered. That only seemed to irritate Sasori more.

"I can't believe you," his mother scoffed at him. "How can you be so cold to a woman?"

'Are you not his mother?' Azumi thought. 'All he did was look at me and I knew he was like this.' Sandaime sighed again. "We thank you for coming to meet, Lady Shizune," he said kindly.

Shizune lifted her eyes look at Sandaime and smiled weakly. "Thank you for considering me," she said softly as she stood. She walked to the door and bowed lowly before leaving the room.

Sasori did not bother to look at her. He waited for her to leave before speaking again. "If the both of you are going to play matchmaker then look for someone I will actually be compatible with," he grumbled. "I could have eaten her whole. I don't need a woman who can’t hold herself up."

"I really thought she would be the one," Sasori's mother grumbled quietly with a pout.

Sandaime took a sip of his tea and then hummed. "I am not sure there will be a one for him," he
Azumi resisted the urge to shrug and nod in agreement to his statement. 'Not with the way he is,' she thought.

"You must be more kind to these women," his mother scolded. "Even if they aren't to your liking."

He huffed but there was no malice behind it. Just tired irritation. "Mother," his expression softened as he looked at her, "I'm just not ready to settle down. I'm not that old and you and father are still in your prime." He placed a hand gently over his mother's. "And I know you'd never want me to settle for less than the best right?"

A small smile appeared on his mother's face. "You're right," she said. "I would never want you to be in an unhappy marriage."

Azumi and Sandaime shared a look and an eye roll. 'Spare me,' she thought. 'Of course, he charms his own mother.'

"But I don't remember raising such a spoiled brat." Her eyes narrowed as she pinched Sasori's cheek hard enough to turn it bright red. "You aren't the center of the universe, my love." Sasori's eye watered a little. "Stop acting like you are." She glanced at Azumi and there was a flicker of something in her eyes before she looked back at her son. "I want grandchildren at a reasonable age so I can actually enjoy them." She released his now throbbing cheek. Sandaime looked at Azumi again, doing his best to keep it together.

Once again, Azumi was also fighting a grin. She and Sandaime were having a conversation of their own with just their eyes. It was the most amusing thing to see the two people who treated Sasori like the child he was in the same room.

"Of course, you do," Sasori said with a nod. "Maybe give me time to find a woman myself," he suggested.

'Yeah, right,' Azumi thought. 'Because you actually go to other places than your room and the shop."

His mother laughed humorlessly. Her face set in a way that screamed they that were related beyond a reasonable doubt. "Yeah, sure." She folded her arms. "Because you go to places other than your shop and home," she echoed Azumi's thoughts. Sasori almost winced. "And before you make your sad little attempt at convincing me otherwise," she cut her son's future plea off before he could even try, "I want to see you at more parties. I want you to prove to me that you're making a genuine effort."

Azumi deflated a little bit. That meant she had to also attend these parties and watch him fail at courting women. Sasori almost protested but stopped himself and sighed defeatedly. "Fine," he said.

"That's my boy," his mother smirked, patting his face gently. Azumi's jaw dropped slightly at the simple move.

Sasori sighed again but it bled away easily as he smiled at his mother. "You will have to give me some time, though," he said. "I don't think anyone is throwing a party in the near future," he said confidently.

"Actually there are a few parties coming up," Sandaime chimed in.
Sasori ground his teeth. "Are there?" he asked.

"Ooh, you're right," his mother grinned. "There is one in a couple of nights."

"We are all invited of course," Sandaime smirked.

"How lovely," Sasori choked on the words. "Where and by whom?"

"It’s an engagement party," his mother smirked. "The Akimichi’s son is engaged now. And Lord Oonoki was gracious enough to host it at his home."

"You want me to find a woman at someone else’s engagement party?" Sasori asked.

'Oonoki?' Azumi thought. 'That little old man?' Then it dawned on her. 'That means that Deidara man will be there.' She deflated a little more, thinking about how someone would happen between him and Deidara and it would be taken out on her again.

“Love will be in the air,” his mother said easily. Her expression shifted to a sharp glare and a wide smile. One that sent a shiver up Sasori’s and Sandaime’s spines. “And if you get into another fight with the Deidara boy our next visit will not be so pleasant. Is that understood, my sweet baby boy?” Her voice was like sugared ice.

Sasori’s lips pursed and he nodded. “But Moth—“

His mother’s eyes narrowed. "I don't want to hear it from you," she said sharply. "I will see you at that party."

Sasori closed his mouth and nodded again. "Of course," he sighed.

"My brother picked a great one," Sandaime said to quietly Azumi with a smirk. She smiled and nodded in agreement.

"Good," Sasori’s mother said. She kissed his cheek sweetly. "Now what are you doing tomorrow?" She asked him, pulling his hand into her lap. She gently stroked the back of his hand as she waited for his answer.

"I am going to start selling new fragrances in my shop," Sasori said. "I wanted to take them in tomorrow."

"Oh!" she grinned. "You're making scents again! What have you made? I'm almost out of the one you made me a few years ago for my birthday."

Sasori's brows furrowed. "You still have that?" he laughed, shaking his head. "These are all new scents she made," he said with a glance back at Azumi.

His mother looked at her. "You make perfumes?"

"I do," Azumi nodded. "If you wish, I can make you one."

She in her seat turned to look at Azumi fully. "I would love one," she smiled.

"If Sasori is vouching for you then you must be good," Sandaime chuckled.

Azumi smiled back at both of them. "Do you have specific notes you want?" she asked.

"If my son speaks of you like that, then I think I can trust you to pick them," Sasori's mother said.
"Absolutely, my Lady," Azumi nodded. She looked at Sandaime, her smile still in place. "Would you like one as well, Lord Sandaime?"

Sandaime tried his best to keep his boyish excitement off his face. "Yes," he grinned, failing easily. "Pick whatever you want," he grinned

"Consider it done," she told them. "I will have them done for you as soon as possible."

"If you come by the shop tomorrow, we'll have them there for you," Sasori said.

"I haven't been to your shop in a while," his mother said.

"Not too much has changed," he smiled at her. "I'll take you to lunch, too," he said softly.

She grinned wide and pulled him into a hug. "I also haven't been on a lunch date with you in a while!" she said.

Sasori chuckled, smiling as he hugged his mother back. "I'll see you tomorrow then, Mother," he said, pulling back.

She pulled away from him and sat back down in her seat. "I will stop by around the afternoon."

Sandaime took that as his cue to get ready to leave.

Sasori walked with his mother to the door and leaned down to kiss her cheek. "Tell father I say hello," he said with another small smile.

"I will," she said. "And you will also see him at the party."

"Father is coming too?" he hummed. "Then I'm being watched for real," he chuckled tightly.

Azumi walked next to Sandaime as they followed Sasori and his mother. "As always, it was nice to see you, Lord Sandaime," she said softly to him.

"Likewise," he smiled at her. "I hope to see you well and healthy at the party as well," he chuckled.

She smiled at him as he joined Sasori's mother by the door. She bowed to both of them. "It was a pleasure to meet you, my Lady," she said to Sasori's mother. "I will have your perfume ready for you when you come to the shop."

Sasori's mother looked Azumi over again, hard this time. She was quiet for a moment then smiled. "It was nice to meet you, too. I am eager to know what you come up with," she nodded to Azumi.

Azumi frowned as she sat down on the daybed. She said nothing at first, knowing he wanted to sulk for a moment. After about a minute, she got up and went into the workshop and grabbed the oil she made earlier. "Your mother is a lovely woman," she said as she walked back to the daybed and sat down. She opened the bottle and smelled it, smiling at how good it was. "I did a good job on this," she thought.
"My mother," Sasori sighed, "is the reason everyone thinks I'm the devil," he chuckled, pulling his arm away from the eyes. He let both his arms relax over his head and tried to relax the rest of his body. "She was pretty tame just now but it was probably just because that Shizune girl and you were there."

Azumi hummed into a slight chuckle. "Interesting," she mumbled. She held the bottle out to him for him to smell it. "Do you like this?" she asked him.

He opened his eyes to look at what she was referring to. He curled up, reaching out for the bottle to bring it to his nose and took a deep breath. "How do you do this?" he breathed. It smelled amazing. No one should have been able to put together so many amazing scents like this. It was relaxing. The kind of scent you kept wanting to shove your face in and keep on your body.

"As I said before, this was a hobby of mine back home," she said, resting her elbows on his bed as she leaned on it. "On top of the research I did for my father, I spent time making things like this and developing the combinations of different notes to make perfect fragrances. If one does not become addicted—so to speak—to the scent, then I did not do a good job."

Sasori eyed her with his lips pressed thin before they pulled into a small smirk. He scoffed, shaking his head. "It would have been interesting if we met outside of your current circumstances," he mused aloud. "To answer your question: yes, I do like it. Very much. Not as much as the one you made me earlier, though, but I feel like that one is a little special."

"Ah," she chuckled. "I did make that one specifically to your scent. It smells good on its own, yes, but when you wear it, it will change and then that," she smirked, "that will be the perfect fragrance. All of the ones I made do that."

Sasori was more than impressed but he did not want her head getting big so he toned it down and posed his excitement as wanting to learn. "Show me how you determine and make all of that tomorrow," he demanded easily.

"I can do that," she nodded. She looked at the bottle still in his hand as he kept it close to his nose. "You will notice that that oil is a little thinner than the other ones because it is a massage oil. Would you like to use it now?" she asked, a little amused that he was still smelling it.

He went a little cross-eyed, looking down at the bottle. "Like earlier?" he asked, remembering how amazing it felt to have his shoulders rubbed out like that. He was a little hesitant to put himself in such a vulnerable state but he wanted that pain relief more. "Fine," he nodded, passing the bottle back to her.

She took the bottle from him and sat on his bed, smelling it one more time. Even she fell victim to the fragrances she made. "Where would you like me to focus?" she asked.

He laughed softly watching her smell the oil. He took a moment to think then turned over. "Here and here," he said, placing his hand on his lower and mid back. He then moved his hand up to his shoulders. "Do this again, too."

"Alright," she hummed. She poured a little bit of the oil into her hand and rubbed her hands together to warm the oil up as he removed his shirt. She moved to sit on him and pressed her hands to his back, shoulders, and neck to spread the oil. The scent of it hit them both immediately. She started with his lower back, frowning as she felt just how knotted up and twisted he was. 'How was he just living with this?' she thought.

"Hee-uh," Sasori grunted under her. He gripped his sheets tightly as she dug into his sore muscles.
They were even worse than his shoulders and suddenly he was incredibly tender the more she moved her hands. He buried his face into the bed and focused on the scent of the oil.

She pressed harder into his back as she moved up a little bit. "I understand you do not deem most people worthy of touching you," she started softly, "but part of taking care of yourself is making sure you do not get like this." She pressed into a particularly large knot in his mid-back.

He groaned loudly, biting into the sheets beneath him. "Sh-shut up and do that again," he said, resisting the urge to squirm under her. It hurt but in the best way possible. He knew she was right but there was literally no one he trusted to do this. He barely trusted her but here he was, receiving a massage from his slave. She sighed, pressing into his back again and working the knot some more until it released. Then she moved up his back a little bit more. He honestly had not realized how bad his back had gotten. He used to keep his body finely tuned but a lot had gotten in the way and it slipped to the wayside. It irritated him to hear his slave lecture him on something he knew very intimately. "Let me guess," he said as he propped his head up by his chin on his hand. "You were also a masseuse in your village for fun, too?" he chuckled. "In between your responsibilities, dancing, and science?"

“No, not at all,” she chuckled softly. “As a dancer, I would have to get a massage every now and then to make sure I could still dance. I learned this from having it done for me multiple times.”

“Less and less you seem like a real person,” Sasori hummed. “Every time you showcase some new skill, I’m convinced more and more that I’m actually in a coma and you are my dream slave,” he snorted a little. This was not a lie. He was being totally honest but he was not sure how seriously she would take that.

‘Your dream slave is just a caretaker who does not ask questions,’ she thought, rolling her eyes. "I can assure you that you are awake," she told him. She moved further up his back, finding a tense spot between his shoulder blades again. That tensed up entirely too quickly,’ she thought, remembering how he immediately recoiled when his uncle entered the room earlier.

He swallowed another grunt and grew quiet as she worked for a little while. His eyes rolled and he bit through his lip when she pressed into the knot. He felt it shoot up his neck, making him gasp. "Gah,” he breathed. “I hate my uncle,” he growled. He turned his head a little to look back at Azumi. “What...did you think of that girl?"

"Lady Shizune?" she hummed. She took a moment to think about her answer. "She was...a very nervous woman. For someone with a job like the one she has, one would think she would have more confidence in herself." She moved her hands up to his shoulders, reworking what she did earlier. "She was nice but she would not have lasted very long. And the nervous tapping started to irritate me, I will admit." Under the assumption that he would keep her around after marriage, she was hoping he would find a wife that she could handle being around. As his slave, she was technically also marrying whoever he married.

"Uuh," he groaned. "I'm so glad you saw what I did," he sighed. "If neither of us could deal with her then there was no way she could be considered to be my wife." He smiled, feeling validated. "She didn't even counter me when I was being 'too cold.'" He rolled his eyes. "I don't want my wife to be subservient with no bite at all. That's boring," he chuckled a little. "You're way more challenging than she was and you're not even supposed to be."

She moved her hands down his back again, checking for any more knots. "You clearly need someone who is much more confident," she said. "Someone who is not afraid of you to the point of just agreeing with everything you say...but someone who also respects your work..." She hummed in thought for a moment. "I think you need someone who is almost like your own mother. But
maybe only half as scary."

"I was afraid you'd say that." Sasori laughed a genuine laugh. "You're too smart," he hummed, moaning softly as she moved her hands back down. It was not nearly as painful, now it was sore in the best sort of way.

"There is no such thing as too smart," she frowned. She did one last check for tense spots and found none. "I think we are done here," she said. She moved to the side of him, kneeling on the bed and picking up the bottle to put the cap back on. "How do you feel?"

He sat up, flashing a smirk at her as he sat back on his heels. He stretched his back, shifting back and forth. "The best I have in months," he told her honestly. "Put that on my nightstand," he said, gesturing to the small table that held the ledger he read from every night. "A slave can be too smart." His lips curved up again. "It's rare but so far I'm enjoying it," he hummed. "You're very entertaining."

She placed the bottle on the nightstand and crawled off of the bed. "I am glad you find my intelligence entertaining," she said flatly. She resisted the urge to scoff and roll her eyes. He knew full well she was a scientist before being a slave. Of course, she was smart. It just irked her that he was hinting at her being too smart for a slave. She shook her head, composing herself. "Will you be needing anything else?" she asked him.

His smirked lingered on his lips as he settled into the pillows at the top of his bed. He knew he struck a chord with that comment. "Not now. Have dinner," he waved her off, stretching a little. He felt amazing. Everything was relaxed and he was entertaining the idea of a nap.

She nodded and bowed slightly. She went into the workshop to grab the last remaining bottles of fragrances she made that she wanted to keep for herself and headed to her room to leave them there. Naga hissed softly and followed her out of her room, coiling around her body as she walked to the kitchen. The same three servants were in there, giving her the same looks as always. She was quickly growing tired of them.

"We heard the young Master had a meeting today," one of them spoke up with a grin.

"His mother was there, wasn't she?" the second joined in. "Did he cry? Or did he make the girl cry?" All three of them snickered.

"I love when his mother visits," the third joined in.

"Even better when his uncle is here, too," the first smirked.

"There was a meeting," Azumi said as she served herself. "And unfortunately, there were no tears shed. Still, she was...not the one for him. But...is there even anyone for him?" Naga leaned in close to smell what she had in her bowl and she gently pushed his nose away as she ate. All three snorted. 'Am I in a room full of pigs or servants?' she thought.

"We can think of one or two but it will never happen," one of them grinned. The other two chuckled softly, taking a sip from their respective cups.

"Right," Azumi hummed. "I had a feeling that was the situation." She finished her food and cleaned up. She pet Naga on the head as she made two cups of tea. "Well, his mother is giving him no choice in finding a wife," she told them. "So we will see what happens." She gave them a nod as she backed out of the kitchen and headed back to Sasori's room.
Sasori was still reveling in the loose feeling of his muscles. He picked up his ledger to write a few notes down but his thoughts slowly drifted back to the meeting. He did not need a wife right now. He did not want anything to distract him from his work. Especially not now since he now had such a competent slave at his disposal. Again, the thought that if he and Azumi had met as equals drifted through. Would they have become close? Would they have gotten along or would she still have gravitated towards his cousin? His mouth twisted into a small pout as he thought, closing his eyes.

Azumi walked into the room and around his bed to place the second cup of tea she brought on his nightstand. "I brought you tea," she said softly as she moved to the daybed and sat down on it. Naga coiled up in her lap, hissing softly at her. She smirked at him, knowing he just wanted attention and to be pet. So she did what he wanted.

Sasori opened his eyes, glancing at the tea on the nightstand. He picked it up before turning his attention towards her and Naga. "How is he?" he asked, looking at the snake.

"He is fine," she said. "He is just being needy because I leave him alone in my room."

"Mmm," Sasori hummed, sipping from his cup of tea. "So even snakes get needy, like cats," he smiled, amused by the general idea of it.

"It is not very common, but it happens. I am sure it happens with every living creature." She looked at him and smirked. "Even the ones that are known for being loners."

He tensed up, his eyes widening when what she was implying settled in. He narrowed his eyes and smirked. "You’re getting too cheeky," he said. There as no real threat in his tone.

She hummed as she sipped her tea. "Too smart...too cheeky. My apologies for not being born into slavery." She looked back down at Naga and started petting him again.

Sasori cocked an eyebrow, hiding a smile in his cup of tea. "Inborn slaves are the worst to train in what I do," he sighed. "I guess I can tolerate your cheek for now, I guess I can tolerate your cheek for now, he said with another dramatic sigh. "And if you weren’t intelligent, I would have killed you off so I suppose it’s for the best that you aren’t a half-wit."

She finished her tea and laid back on the daybed, continuing to pet Naga as she looked up at the sky through the window in the dome ceiling. She thought about the previously mentioned slaves he had and how now all of them are dead because they did something wrong that he did not like. She had not been doing this for very long, but it was quite simple. "Your first slave to die..." she started, "did they die of natural causes or did you kill them?"

Sasori sipped his tea again. "A mix of both. If you want to call stupidity a natural cause," he said. "They poisoned themselves by accident. I saw them make the mistake but I was tired of correcting them so I just let them. It was a slow death."

"I see..." She closed her eyes and sighed. She would not admit that she did consider stupidity to be a natural cause of death. She did not need him thinking she was anything like him. However, it was also his fault, for even trusting someone with poisons when he knew they were stupid. "And how many have you actually killed yourself again?" She was genuinely curious as to how he did it.

He took a deep breath and a moment to think. He started to count on his hand then recount. "Did
you want to start from fourteen or more recently?” he asked her after he figured out a number. “Because fourteen to seventeen where mostly mistakes,” he chuckled like he was remembering fond memories and not the deaths of human lives. “Eighteen to now were mostly by my hand directly or indirectly.”

To think someone who was not even thirty years old yet had upwards of eighteen slaves in his lifetime baffled her. Why did he have so many incompetent people? She understood his standards so super high but they were achievable even by someone who did not have a background in science. Then it occurred to her that maybe they were very scared of him and they let their fear get the best of them, causing them to mess up a lot. It would be stupid to ask if he regretted actually murdering people. "You seem to be a very lucky man except when it comes to slaves," she hummed. She moved Naga to her chest and held her finger out in front of him for him to strike with his nose. Then she moved it somewhere else to repeat the action. It was like a little game.

Sasori watched her little game curiously. "It would seem so," he hummed. "Are you implying you plan to join that unlucky count?" He closed his ledger and placed it back on the nightstand. "Aside from you playing games with my cousin, I haven't had any issues with you. But if you want to have 'an accident,' I..." He paused and considered his words. "I'll have to stop you."

"I do not plan on being part of that count, but I figure it would not matter how competent I am and that eventually you will grow tired of my attitude and want to kill—wait," she cut herself off. "You would stop me?" He literally just admitted to not stopping the last ones that accidentally killed themselves, now he was admitting that he would stop her? 'Not that I would be so stupid to make such a mistake,' she thought.

"Of course," he said easily. He hid another smirk in his cup of tea. "You yourself just pointed out that I have quite the unlucky streak with slaves." He looked at her. "But it seems to have all been a build up to gaining you. And now that I have you, there is no way I'm letting anything or anyone take you from me," he emphasized that last part of his sentence. "If you start pulling stunts like that, I'll simply have to start training you," he shrugged.

"Hm," she hummed quietly through a frown. She was not sure what he meant by 'training' her but she did not want to ask or even find out. "Then I can assure you, I will not be doing anything like that." She noticed that Naga fell asleep on top of her. Despite not having eyelids, he was clearly asleep and it was cute.

"I'll hold you to that," he smirked. He looked back at Naga and chuckled. "Did he get tired of your game?"

"I suppose he did," she said softly, petting the snake's head again. It was like having a child. "The venomous ones are the neediest," she noted.

He snorted, shaking his head. "I suppose the most dangerous of us tend to be, don't they." He set his cup down and stretched. He watched her and Naga for a few more minutes before slipping off of the bed. "I'm restless."

She looked at him. "Is there something you have that you want to work on?" she asked. "We could make more fragrances if you want. I do still have to make the perfume for your mother and cologne for your uncle."

"We could start with that." He gave her a devilish smirk. "Show me how you make your scents addicting."

She nodded and gently moved Naga onto the daybed as she got up. She walked with Sasori into the
workshop. "What scents does your mother not like?" she asked as she picked out the different ingredients. "Does she prefer sweet scents or more...subtle?"

"Um..." He leaned against the workbench. "Subtle," he said after some thought.

"Perfect," she hummed. "Those are my favorite to make. Also, making these fragrances is very simple." She separated the ones she wanted to use from all of the ones that could be considered sweet. She picked up one oil and held it out to him. "This has almost no scent on its own. But when applied to other scents, it amplifies them. You can make a good combination of notes and it will smell good. Once you add this, it will smell great."

He flared his nostrils a little, smelling the oil. "Interesting," he said softly, as he watched her intently. "So that isn't what you start with, it's just an add on?"

"If you start with it, it will not mix well," she said as she started to mix a couple of notes together. She chose the ones that she thought complemented each other the best without putting in too much. "The other scents would not be as potent if it was applied first." She did a second one, adding the amplifying oil before the other notes so he could smell the difference.

He smelled each of them and nodded, making mental notes of what she did to create the scent in general. "That is a marked difference," he noted.

"I noticed it looked very unused," she said, gesturing to the amplifier. She left the perfume to set and started working on the cologne for Sandaime. "Is that because it does not have much of a scent?" she smirked.

He looked at the bottle then squinted at her. "No..." he said softly. "Yes...I got it in a set but I didn't know what it was for," he shrugged. "But you know what it is so now it can be used."

"Very well, then," she nodded. "Now you know how to make the ones you already make more addicting," she told him.

"Maybe I'll buy more of this." He looked at the little bottle again. "What of scent are you making for my heathen of an uncle?"

"Something a little similar to the masculine scent I made to be sold in your shop, but I'm taking out most of the spice notes so it smells cleaner," she answered. She spent a few minutes making Sandaime's cologne.

He scoffed as he watched her work. "He doesn't deserve something so nice," he clicked his teeth. He pushed himself up onto the table and picked up some of the notes she had picked out. "So your father...was he trying to set you up like my mother is or were you free to date?"

She did not answer at first, not exactly sure she wanted to tell him so much about herself in that way. After a couple of moments of silence, she finally answered. "I was not exactly free to date," she said. "But that did not stop me. I was in a relationship. At first, it was hidden from my father. He tried to set me up with different men. And when he finally met the man I was dating, he did not like him and continued to try and set me up with different men."

"Oooh, rough," he said teasingly. "Considering the boy you're trying to reel in here your father must be very picky," he smirked. "Good thing he doesn't have to worry about that anymore. But I do wonder what the boy was like. You don't strike me as the good boy kind."

She ignored his comment about Gaara. "If you are implying that I like rebellious men," she could not hide the smirk on her face, "you may be right."
He rolled his head to rest on his shoulder, looking at her with a lopsided smirk. "I wasn't implying anything. It's pretty easy to read what kind of men you like," he chuckled. "Everyone in my family is rebellious in their own way." He looked up at the ceiling. "We don't like to remain still or complacent. I can tell you're the same way."

"I may have been what my father would consider his trouble child," she hummed. "He would describe me as reckless but I do not do anything without thinking about it first. But if I do not consult him about it beforehand, then he thinks I did not think it through." She sighed and rolled her eyes, much like she remembered doing whenever her father lectured her about anything. "But all three of my brothers do everything he says so it makes it look like I am the rebellious one. Yet...there is still not much that I would not do for my father."

"He sounds very controlling," Sasori hummed. "My parents were strict when I was young but once I moved in with my grandmother to be her apprentice they haven't been very prying." He looked down at her again. He smirked, chuckling softly. "Sounds like you've almost been bred to become my slave," he said with a spark of joy in his eyes.

Azumi's brows furrowed. She did not like that he thought of it that way. She finished the cologne for Sandaime and closed the bottle and stepped away from the counter. "They are finished," she told him.

"We'll put them in some nice box tomorrow," he said, stretching again. "I'm still bored," he sighed.

"Then what is it you want to do?" she asked him. She felt like he was a child she needed to keep entertained. "I have already shown you how I make addicting fragrances. Everything else I know how to do, you most likely already know. There is not much else I can show you."

His face split into a grin. "Well, we could go for a walk or," he pulled her close, "we could paint some more." His voice was a low whisper. There was a crazed glint in his eye for a moment. He blinked and it was gone. She knew exactly what he meant by 'paint some more.' He released her, leaning back on his hands again. "If we go out for the walk then I can show you where to see the stars the best," he hummed. "If you want a tame night."

She blinked in shock for a moment, processing what just happened. "I do not understand why you are giving me the option to go for a walk or to have my body destroyed some more. Of course, I am going to opt for the walk." She took a step away from him. "It may actually be beneficial to you...in a de-stressing type of way."

"Your justification is cute." His grin curved with the promise that the other option was still on the table regardless of what she chose. He jumped off of the table and turned easily on his foot as he grabbed her hand and turned her, pinning her to the table’s edge. "The night is still young. Let’s see how I’m feeling by the time we get back," he whispered in her ear.

She frowned, trying not to shudder with how close he was to her. She hoped he would be tired from the walk enough to not want to do anything. "Right..." she said softly. She knew full well that the choice was merely an illusion. He pulled away, flashing her the dangerous smirk again as he started to clean up their little mess. She helped him clean everything up and they moved out to his bedroom. Naga woke up and hissed quietly at her. She kneeled next to the daybed to pet him and he leaned in close to tap his nose against hers. "So where is the best place to see the stars?" she asked Sasori.

"Up on the rocks," he said, picking a shawl from a hook on the wall. "It's a little outside of the city but not too far." He looked at the snake. "You can bring him if you want."
Before he even finished his sentence, Naga was already coiling around her body as she stood up straight, resting his head on her shoulder. “He does not want to be left alone again,” she said.

He chuckled softly, walking to the door. "I didn't think he would," he said, walking out of the door silently. He started down the hall, towards the back of the mansion. She followed him just as silently. They passed almost no servants on their way out. Once they were outside, Azumi looked around. She had walked with Gaara this way the night before since the river curved behind the mansion. The sun had completely set and the nightlife in the city could be heard in the distance as it began. Sasori hummed softly the moment his feet touched the sand. "Komushi and I used to go for 'adventures' out here when we were kids," he said, wrapping the shawl around his shoulders.

Azumi smirked as they continued to walk. “Adventures?” she asked. “Dare I say that sounds quite precious.” Though, she did not know what these adventures entailed. For all she knew, they could have spent those adventures talking about murder like the psychopaths they were.

"If you find two teenaged boys hunting for scorpions in the night and plotting murder precious,” he chuckled. He dragged his toes through the sand, making a long line in it. The moon reflected off of it, making it look almost white.

‘There it is,’ she thought, rolling her eyes. “It does not surprise me one bit that that is what you two did,” she hummed.

He chuckled, tipping his head back to look up at the expansive sky. "It was fun," he grinned. "We were still free and young," he sighed. "So naive."

"So who was the first one to bring up the topic of murder?" she smirked. "You or Lord Komushi?"

"Komushi," Sasori answered easily. "Well, it was more like he voiced the thoughts we were both having," he added. "It was his idea to start using the venom in the first place but it was my idea to milk the scorpions and concentrate the venom into poisons."

"Ah, I see..." she said. ‘So neither one of them is more psychotic than the other,’ she thought. "It sounds like you two are meant for each other," she deadpanned. She stopped for a second and dug her feet into the sand, enjoying the feeling of it for a few moments before moving to catch up with Sasori who had continued on.

"I guess you could say we're best friends." He rolled his eyes with a smile on his face. "Did you not have any friends in your village? Was it just work and family?"

"I had a few friends," she said. "None I was as close with as you are with Lord Komushi, however." She looked up at the sky in thought. She tried not to think about what her life was like before too much. She did miss her old life. She missed it a lot. But she did not want to express to Sasori in any way how much she missed it. Since she left, she tried to keep her thoughts away from her village and family. She tried to focus more on surviving.

"I can hear the longing in your voice," Sasori said over his shoulder. "It's cute," he smirked. "I don't think many get to have a pain in the ass who doesn't understand the concept of 'leave me alone' to themselves."

'I would consider myself to be lucky to not have one,' she thought. She looked behind them and noticed they were already out of the city. "How often do you come out here now as an adult?” she asked him softly.

"I don't," he said laughed. "I don't have time to and usually don't care to when I do have the time."

"Once again, I am not surprised," she hummed. She continued to follow him, noticing that the further out they went, the more she could see the stars in the sky. She did not pay much attention to it when she was being transported from her village. She did not have much of a chance to pay attention to it. "Wow..." she whispered.

"I'd say I might pick up the habit again but that would be a lie," he chuckled. He looked up as he walked and felt at ease, taking in the vast expanse of the sky. He was walking towards a large set of rocks set away from the river.

Azumi leaned against one of the rocks when they approached them, looking up at the sky still. She did not realize that she would be able to see so many stars and see the constellations as they were taught to her. "I would make it a habit," she mumbled to herself, forgetting for a moment that she was a slave and would not be able to do such a thing.

"I know you would," Sasori said casually. "But you're not really allowed to form habits I don't want," he chuckled.

"Is that not part of the challenge you like?" she asked, turning around to start climbing on the rock. Naga went ahead and slithered to the top of the rock.

"I'm allowing you to walk along the river bank at night, aren't I?" he said, walking up to the same large rock.

She froze halfway up the rock. 'He saw me coming back?' she thought. 'Did he see Gaara?' She looked down at him, keeping her composure. "I only sit by the river to clear my head," she said. He made it to her level and she looked him in the eyes. "I told you before, my loyalty to you remains. I would never stray too far."

"I know," he chuckled. "I can see you talking to your cobra from my tub." He sat down on the flat top of the rock.

She and Naga shared a look and a relieved sigh. She made it to the top of the rock and laid back to look up at the sky, resting her head on her arms as Naga coiled up next to her. She enjoyed the next few moments of silence as she looked for constellations she recognized. After a couple of minutes, she looked over at Sasori, who was also laying down and looking up. "Do you have a favorite constellation?" she asked.

"Scorpius," he said like it was the most obvious detail about him. "I thought that would be self-explanatory."

Azumi tried to stifle a laugh but ended up letting it out. "You are right," she said. "I should have expected that. My apologies for thinking you would like anything else."

"I'm glad you're finally catching on," Sasori chuckled, taking his shawl off to use as a pillow under his head. "I have a running theme about me. It would suit you well to catch onto that," he said teasingly.

"Oh, believe me, I have caught on," she said. "I was just wondering if I would ever receive a surprising answer from you. I was wrong." She hummed in thought. "I suppose it is safe to assume that I have a running theme," she muttered. She knew the scorpion was just as much his identity as the snake was her's.

"I'm original when I need to be," Sasori smirked. "I know your theme but humor me and tell anyway."
"My favorite constellation?" she asked. "Hydra," she said easily. "Which I am sure is of no surprise to you. It is just one of the multiple serpent constellations."

Sasori snorted. "Yeah, there's no surprise at all there."

"Mm," she hummed. "I guess we are both quite predictable then," she said softly. They stared up at the sky for a little while longer. Azumi had not realized how tired she actually was until she felt herself drifting off to sleep.

"You're anything but," he said softly, looking up at the sky. He folded his hands neatly on his stomach and let the silence between them stretch on. He noted the shift in the sound of her breathing. "Hfft," he chuckled softly through his nose. "Falling asleep before your master," he hummed, rolling on his side. Naga was coiled up neatly on her stomach. He suddenly wanted to burn this image into his mind. She looked so different asleep. He moved a little closer and ghosted his fingers down her nose, lips, and jaw. His eyes flickered to the burn he made on her chest that was peeking through her dress. This girl was almost too perfect. Too perfect to be a slave. Too perfect to have just been let go and conveniently stumble into his possession. There was something about her that made him want to push her to her limits. He needed to know more about her, break her but he also did not want to lose her.

She stirred a little, humming quietly as she shifted onto her side. Naga somehow stayed perfectly coiled on top of her, resting his head on her hip. Having become her familiar in just a matter of days, he already knew when and how she moved in her sleep and was able to adjust himself accordingly.

Sasori watched them move together. If she had been anyone else...he would have pushed her off. If he was honest with himself, had she been anyone else, they would not have been doing this at all. He watched her for a little longer before sighing and deciding they should go home. He shifted to scoop her up in her arms and pulled her close to his chest. He stood up slowly, letting Naga adjust to Azumi’s new position in his arms before turning to descend the rock formation the way they came.
The next morning, Azumi woke up to Naga tapping her nose with his. She groaned softly. "Good morning to you, too," she said quietly without opening her eyes. She reached a hand out to pet him gently and then opened her eyes, realizing she was in Sasori's room, and instead of being on the daybed, she was in his bed. She did not even remember falling asleep on the rock. Sasori's sleeping form was very close to her body. He moaned softly in his sleep, his eyes squeezing a little. She turned around to look at him. 'Did he carry me here?' she thought. 'Why did he not wake me up?' She watched him for a few moments, wondering why he had been so nice to her. Naga shifted on her to look at Sasori. Sasori grunted in his sleep, throwing an arm over Azumi's stomach. Her breath hitched and she froze for a second. Naga hissed softly, trying to nudge Sasori's hand with his head. For fear that something would happen to the snake if Sasori woke up and saw what he was doing, she pushed him away. "Do not worry," she told Naga quietly. She gently lifted Sasori's arm in an attempt to move away.

A smirk started to curl Sasori's lips. "I can practically hear your heart racing," he rasped, pulling a little closer to her.

She tensed up a little when he pulled her closer. "Well, you are...very close. Good morning," she said softly. He was spatially invasive normally, but this felt different and she did not know if she liked it.

"I am," he hummed. "Good morning." He stretched gracefully, digging his nails into her side. "Run a bath, then get breakfast." He pressed his face into her thigh.

She was a little less gentle when she lifted his arm to unwrap it from her when she got out of the bed. She went into the bathroom and started his bath, using the salt and oil that she made for him the day before. She inhaled deeply, smirking at how well it turned out. Once it was ready, she stepped back into his room. "I will be right back with your breakfast," she told him.

"Make sure you eat this time," he said from his pillow. "Or I'll force feed you."

Azumi sighed as she walked out of his room and made her way through the halls to the kitchen. She smelled coffee and hummed. She looked around the kitchen for a tray and served two bowls then made two cups of coffee. One of the usual three servants entered the kitchen just as she finished making Sasori's coffee. "Good morning," she said to them. She did it to be polite but in reality, she did not want to have a conversation with them.

"Pool?" she asked. "As in a betting pool?" She tried her best not to growl the question, but she was already growing annoyed with these servants, this was only making it worse.

"Duh," the third one said as they walked in. "You really think there wouldn't be one with how
strangely the young master has been behaving with you?"

"We're honestly surprised every day how long you're living," the second one said, getting breakfast.

"And how \textit{nicely} he's treating you," the first one chimed in. They squinted at her, with a grin.

"I can assure you that I have not slept with him," she said. "And I do not intend to."

"That doesn't mean he doesn't intend to," the second one smirked.

Azumi frowned, thinking about how he acted when they woke up. "It will not happen," she told them. She gave them a polite nod as she picked up the tray and went back to Sasori's room. She shook her head, trying not to let her anger get the best of her. "Disgusting," she muttered as she entered the room and set the tray down on his desk.

"Bring it in here," Sasori called from the bath. "Both of them." She took a second to regain her composure before picking up the tray and taking his breakfast to him in the bathroom. She handed him his bowl first, then set the coffee down next to him. "Eat," he said, taking the bowl from her. "But strip first. I want to see something," he grinned, taking a sip of his coffee.

She looked at him for a moment, before taking a step back. She started to take off her dress, letting it fall to the ground easily. It was not the first time she stripped in front of him. They had seen each other naked many times since she became his slave. But this was the first time since she had become his slave that she started to feel a little uncomfortable with it. She chalked it up to what the other servants said minutes ago starting to get into her head.

He noticed her body language instantly. His eyes narrowed as he put his cup down. "What is it?"

"Mm," she hummed. "Nothing important. Just the other servants of the house getting on my nerves. I usually try not to let such things bother me."

"Which ones?" He did not mind having Chiyo’s servant reprimanded. It was fun to watch them cower when he walked by when he bothered to pay them any mind.

She thought for a second. "I...do not even know their names," she said. "But they always seem to be in the kitchen. They gossip like old women. All three of them seem to have a hard time minding their own business."

Sasori’s nose wrinkled in disgust. "Oh, those three," he grumbled. "Don’t pay attention to them. They are Chiyo’s personal servants and have a bad habit of running their mouths."

"So I am gathering," she sighed. "I will try to limit my interactions with them."

"Good." He continued to eat his food. "They seem to think they have an immunity to me but they don’t. Especially if they start messing with you." He waved her closer to him.

She could not resist the smirk that appeared on her lips at the thought of them cowering. "I am sure they will learn," she mumbled to herself as she stepped closer to him.

He reached out and traced his fingertips down along her snake tattoo. His eyes fixated on the shape and detail that went into it. He smirked, envisioning what he could do to it. He tapped her hip so she would turn around. She turned around for him, letting the anger over the other servants subside and then looked down at him. She had no idea what he was planning but the look on his face told
her he was planning something. He ran a hand up her back and played with the end of her hair. “So much canvas,” he hummed with a grin.

‘Great, he is going to destroy my body some more,’ she thought, rolling her eyes.

“Take a bath once you’re done eating,” he said, giving her a small push.

She nodded and picked up her bowl to start eating. As she ate, she set up her bath so it would be ready by the time she was done. She used the newer salts and oil that Sasori made for her, unable to hide the smile when she smelled how good it was. She sat on the edge of the tub, dipping her feet into the pool as she ate. She looked out at the river, trying to figure out where she was when Sasori saw her and how to avoid being seen again.

"I'll leave you to add and set up all of the new scents in the shop,” he said, finishing his breakfast. He sighed, leaning back in the tub. "I really don't want to deal with this stupid party," he nearly whined, as he stretched his legs out of the tub.

She looked at him and hummed. "All you have to do is look like you are making an effort," she told him. "She did not say you had to leave the party with a wife." She finished her food and slipped into the tub then took a sip of her coffee.

He turned his head to look at her hard. "She won't accept that at all," he sighed. "But it might keep me from murdering Deidara." He rested his head on the backs of his hands on the edge of the tub. He narrowed his eyes at her. "Mmm, yes," he grinned. "I'll use you to deflect ladies while 'making an effort,' and you can keep me from murdering Deidara."

"I do not think you need me to deflect them for you," she smirked. "You seem to be perfectly capable of doing that on your own. However, keeping you from murdering him, I can try to do."

"Either way, you're sticking close to me," he sighed. "I'm not dealing with that alone."

She leaned her head against the edge of her bath and sighed. "Alright," she said. She had been hoping to have the freedom to move around as he gave her during the first party. She had to admit to herself that she just wanted to hang around with Gaara. Then she realized she would be seeing Gaara later in the day when they went to the shop and she sipped her coffee excitedly.

Sasori sunk low into the bath to wash his hair. When he came back up, he pushed his hair all the way back and sighed. "I'll meet you in the room," he said, pushing himself out of the tub. He dried off before pulling on his robe.

Azumi watched him walk out of the bathroom and finished her coffee. She set the cup next to the bath and started to clean herself off, taking a couple of minutes to enjoy the scent of the water. When she was done, she stepped out carefully, grabbing a towel to wrap around herself. She picked up both of their empty bowls and cups and set them back on the tray. Stepping out into the room, she set the tray back on his desk.

Sasori was fully dressed when she walked out. "We should get there in time to do some work in the shop before my mother comes around."

She nodded as she found her clothes and dropped her towel to get dressed. Once she was dressed, she stepped into the workshop to put the cologne for Sandaime and the perfume for Sasori's mother into their respective boxes. She found the cologne she made for Gaara and put it into one of the folds of her dress. Seeing that she was ready, Sasori started for the door. They made their way to the shop easily without any interruption. Gaara was already in the workshop when Sasori pushed
"Good morning," Azumi grinned at Gaara as she walked into the shop. She set the two boxes down on the counter and immediately started tending to the snakes.

"Good morning," Gaara gave her a megawatt smile. "How are you this morning?"

"Could you turn that down, Sunshine?" Sasori grumbled as he walked up to the second floor.

Azumi and Gaara watched him go up to the second level and then shared a look. "What is his problem today?" Gaara smirked.

"He has lunch with his mother today," Azumi told him softly. "She wants him to find a wife at this upcoming party."


"About marriage?" she hummed. "It seems it is about that time for parents to bother their children about the subject. My father did the same to me before I left."

"Yeah," he hummed. "I think Kankuro has someone." He looked up in thought. "Or he's telling my father that to keep him off his case."

"That is one way to push the issue aside," she chuckled. "Have you considered doing the same or are you actually looking for someone?"

"I...can't play like that," he said, blushing a little. He rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. "I am interested in someone but they are a little tied up right now," he admitted.

"Oh," she frowned. "That is unfortunate. But I suppose that is not enough for your father." She started to take out the new colognes and perfumes meant to be sold in the shop from their boxes.

"It's not," he sighed. "He wants me out of his hair as soon as possible. As if I'm such a burden on him." He rolled his eyes then grinned, leaning in closer to see what she was pulling out. "What are these?" he asked brightly.

"Perfumes and colognes that Lord Sasori had me make," she smiled. "Would you like to smell them?" Without him answering, she pushed one of each fragrance toward him for him to smell. She could not keep the smirk off of her face.

He smirked, reaching for the bottle without looking away from her. He opened the bottle and waved it under his nose. "Whoa." His eyes widened. He took a deeper breath of it. "That's amazing," he breathed.

"I know," she smirked. She opened the second one and made the same motion for him to smell it.

He took a deep breath. His eyes practically rolled back. "How do you make this?" he groaned with a grin.

"Pretty easily," she hummed. "I like to think I have a good sense of what notes go well together. And then I add an amplifier." She picked up the rest of the bottles and nodded for him to follow her out to the shop so she could set up the display.

"You're amazing," he laughed, following her out. "Your talents are boundless," he grinned.

"You would be surprised at the number of things I cannot do," she chuckled softly. They worked
on the display for a couple of minutes. Just as they finished, Sandaime and Sasori's mother entered the shop.

"Good morning, Uncle, Auntie," Gaara smiled, pausing to bow to his family.

"Good morning, Gaara, Azumi," Sandaime nodded.

Sasori's mother smiled, opening her arms and walking over to pull Gaara into a hug. "Good morning, my cute nephew." She kissed his cheeks.

Azumi bowed to both of them. "I have your fragrances," she told them. She stepped back into the workshop to grab the cologne and perfume, returning to hand each of them their respective boxes.

Neither of them waited long to open the boxes. They opened the bottles and took a deep breath. Sasori's mother gasped first. "This is astounding," she sighed. "I've never smelled anything like this before. Did you really just make this?"

"I did, my Lady," Azumi smiled. "I am glad you like it." She looked at Sandaime who was still nose deep in his cologne bottle. "Do you like yours?" she asked him.

He took another deep breath. "Aah, yes," he breathed with a grin. "I'm going to wear this every day from now on." Sasori walked out moments later. "I can't thank you enough." He took another whiff.

Sasori's mother pulled away from Gaara to hug her son. "Good morning, son of mine," she smiled, kissing his cheeks.

"I am glad you like it," Azumi grinned with a slight bow.

"Good morning," Sasori said softly to his mother as he hugged her.

"So where are you taking me for lunch?" she smirked at him.

Sasori chuckled, wrapping his arms around his mother's shoulders.

"I have the perfect place in mind," he grinned. "It's a new place and the food is right up your alley."

"Ooh! I can't wait!" she grinned, placing her hands over his.

"We'll leave in just a few minutes," Sasori told her. "I'm just finishing up a composition upstairs."

"I can finish it for you," Gaara told him.

"Well, then," Sasori chuckled. "Shall we go to an early lunch then, Mother?" He offered her his arm.

She grinned as she took his arm and giggled. "Let's do dessert first," she said, walking with him towards the door.

"Whatever you want," Sasori smiled as they left.

Azumi, Gaara, and Sandaime stood there for a couple of seconds in silence. Sandaime looked at Azumi. "Are you doing well?" he asked her.

She smiled and nodded at him. "I am doing very well," she told him. "Since your visit last night with his mother, he has been much more calm than normal."
"That's good to hear," he smiled kindly. "Let's hope it lasts."

"Hopefully, it's not the calm before the storm, though," Gaara said a little worried. "You know how he likes to plot and snap."

"I know," she hummed. "I am just enjoying it for now. But he is letting me indulge myself in making these fragrances. I even made a few for myself." She chuckled softly and looked back at Sandaime. "If you wear that every day, as you said, then just let me know when you are running low and I will make more for you."

"Will do," he smiled. "He handles pressure well, so he shouldn't snap any time soon. Not over something he's dealt with before."

"Let us just hope the upcoming party actually goes well for him," she sighed. They went into the workshop to sit down. Azumi started making coffee for her and Gaara and tea for Sandaime. "But it is interesting to see how he acts around his mother. But also how...very similar they are."

"Sasori’s always been a mama’s boy," Sandaime chuckled, taking a seat. "He was very shy when he was little and would hide behind her whenever he’d come over or go out."

"They used to go on weekly dates when he still lived at home," Gaara smirked. He moved to close up a few boxes and put them on nearby shelves. "They’ve always been really close."

"The party should not be an issue."

"But Deidara might be."

"Don’t worry about Deidara, he’ll be preoccupied," Sandaime smirked deviously.

"That sounds a lot like you are going to ‘take care’ of him," Azumi chuckled.

"Oh, no, once he realizes Sasori’s mother is there, then he’ll relax," Sandaime clarified.

"Oh..." she hummed. "That is...interesting to know." She was hoping that meant she would not have to worry too much about trying to stop Sasori from murdering Deidara.

"Sasori gave you free rein to roam the party last time, so we can watch both train wrecks together," Gaara smiled.

"Mm, I would love to...I would prefer to," she hummed disappointedly. "But he told me to stay close to him for this one."

Both men frowned. "Did he say why?" Sandaime asked.

Gaara was trying his best not to pout. "He can handle ladies on his own," he huffed.

"That is what I told him but he does not want to deal with them alone," she scoffed. "It feels like I am babysitting him." Once the water was boiling, she poured it over the beaker with the coffee and the rest into a cup of tea. She handed Sandaime his cup of tea as she waited for the coffee to finish filtering.

"Mm, it is always nicer to have a partner to field with the dating pool," Sandaime sighed. "The women in this town can be scary." Gaara pressed his lips, annoyed he could not deny this fact.

"But he could not get his best friend to work as a wingman for him?" she grumbled quietly, pouring the coffee for her and Gaara. She handed Gaara his cup and leaned against the counter.
"Well, at least I know I would not have to deal with that and Deidara," she sighed.

Both men thanked her for their drinks. “That’s a relief,” Sandaime nodded.

“I don’t think Komushi is going to be at the party,” Gaara frowned, sipping his coffee.

She chuckled softly. "I think that is normally something I would find a bit relieving," she said.

"Yes, Komushi can be a little much sometimes," Sandaime smirked. Gaara went up to the second level to finish up the composition Sasori was working on. "I am going to treat you two for lunch. What would you like?"

Azumi looked up at Gaara who leaned over the railing to look at her. "Arayes?" Azumi suggested.

"And shawarma?" Gaara smirked.

They both looked at Sandaime who chuckled. "Alright," he said, finishing his tea. "Then I will get that for you."

"Thank you," Azumi grinned, bowing as he stood up. Sandaime nodded to her then slipped out of the back door of the shop.

“I’ll see if I can tear you away from my cousin at the party,” Gaara called down to her. “There is no way he’s going to hold onto you the whole night.”

"Hopefully, he will meet someone that he actually hits it off with and I then I will not be needed anymore," she chuckled as she made her way to the second level. She watched as he finished up whatever Sasori started. "However, I am also not getting my hopes up for that. He seems to be very adamant about not getting married."

Gaara looked up and pulled a stool over for her to sit with him. "Sasori’s never seemed like the marrying type," he said easily. "Not even when he and Mei were heavily involved. Frankly, I don't think any woman should be stuck with him."

"Mm, I agree," she hummed. "He would not make a good husband." She leaned on the table and rested her head against her fist as she watched him bottle up whatever he was working on. "Oh!" she said, remembering the bottle she hid in her dress. "I made this for you." She pulled it out and handed it to him. "I was having a lot of fun making these. It is made to go well with your natural scent."

Gaara stopped what he was doing to take the bottle with a look of surprise. "You...made me this?" he grinned, taking the bottle. He opened it and took a deep, excited breath. "Ooooh," he breathed out. He felt his heart speed up and a giddy feeling bloom in his stomach. He looked at her and leaned in close. His lips pressed gently against hers before he gained a little confidence and pushed a little harder.

She hummed in surprise before relaxing and pushed gently back into the kiss and cupped his face. When they finally pulled apart, she chuckled softly, feeling her face get warm. "Uh...you are welcome," she said.

Gaara's face was almost as red as his hair. "I..sorry," he laughed, looking away. "Thank you so much." He smelled the cologne again. "This is amazing."

"I am glad you like it," she smiled. She took the bottle from him, dabbing a little onto her finger and moving a little closer to him. "I want to smell it on you." She gently dragged her finger across
his neck. He tilted his jaw up a little so she had better access to his skin. He smiled, looking up at a shelf as it dried on his skin, holding his position so she could smell her work on him. She closed the bottle and leaned in close to smell him, grinning wide at how good it was. "I love it," she whispered, taking his hand and placing the bottle in it and closing his fingers around it.

He curled his fingers around the bottle and turned his face back to look at her with a wide grin. "Then I'll have to wear it every day." He took her hand and kissed the back of it. "Thank you again."

"You are very much welcome," she smirked, leaning in to press a quick and gentle kiss to his lips as she stood up. She heard the back door to the shop open. "Your uncle is back," she whispered. Gaara smiled dreamily as he stood up. He pulled her into a tight hug then released her to walk over to the top of the ladder.

"I got a few extra things," Sandaime called up to them.

"Oh?" Gaara chuckled. "Do I smell...churros?"

"Churros?" Azumi asked excitedly, leaning over the railing. She followed Gaara down the ladder as Sandaime set the food down on a counter. She smelled the food as she approached it and groaned happily.

"They are in fact churros," Sandaime laughed. He pulled the food out and set each dish out.

Gaara walked over to a cabinet and pulled out dishes for them to eat off of. "The one true weakness of our entire family," Gaara chuckled. "We can't resist them."

"They are a weakness of mine as well," Azumi admitted. She took the plate that Gaara handed her and served herself. She took a little bit of each dish and a couple of churros.

"No wonder you fit right in with us," Sandaime chuckled, dishing out a plate for himself. Gaara smirked, stepping between them to dish out some food. Sandaime noticed the scent on Gaara immediately. "Did you make something for Gaara, too?" he leaned over to look at Azumi with a grin.

"I did," she smiled as she sat down to eat. "I may have gotten a little too excited when I was asked to make these fragrances."

Sandaime chuckled as Gaara took a seat. "No such thing," he smiled at her. "I’m glad you’re smiling and have something you can enjoy."

Gaara nodded. "And we all got something one of a kind out of it." He looked at her with another dreamy smile for a moment then turned back to his food. He hoped his uncle did not notice him slip just now. But Sandaime was a very sharp man. He definitely noticed.

“I am glad you enjoy them,” she chuckled. “I also made bath salts and oils for Lord Sasori, so if you are interested in those, I can do that for you as well.”


“I’ll put in a request,” Sandaime grinned. “I'm weak for things that smell good,” he smiled.

“Then you can expect them soon,” she smirked. “I already know which scents they will be.”

"I'm excited to try them out.” Azumi finished the arayes and shawarma she served herself and
immediately started eating the churros. “You’re missing the best part,” Sandaime chuckled, handing her a small tub of icing.

She let out a small gasp as she took it and dipped the churros into it. “This was a very rare thing to have in my village.”

"Really? What kinds of foods are common where you lived?” He finished off his food. "Do you miss any of them?"

"We have an international shop here, we could maybe find some stuff if you miss something specific," Gaara smiled.

She hummed in thought for a moment. “There are a lot of foods here that are very similar or even the same. But churros were something that had to be specially imported so they were rare.”

"I almost can’t imagine this city without churros," Gaara smiled. "They are a scent of my childhood." He finished his food and picked up his own share of churros.

"Your mother made some of the best homemade churros," Sandaime hummed, chewing on his own.

“Ooh, making them,” Azumi hummed. “I never thought to make them myself.” She sat back in her seat as she finished her churros. She looked at Gaara. “Would you like to try making them?”

"I...would like that," he said softly. He looked hard at the churro in his hand, getting lost in thought. "I think Temari has her recipe," he said, snapping out of it and flashing her a big smile.

"If she doesn't, then Kankuro definitely will," Sandaime hummed. "He cooked with her more often than Temari." He dipped his own churro into some icing.

Azumi smiled back at Gaara. “Get it from one of them and we will try to make it,” she said.

"You are welcome to use my house," Sandaime smiled. "I'm not sure your cousin will allow you to have his slave over."

Gaara nodded to his uncle. "Thank you," he smiled. "He's not fond of how human I treat you," he frowned, looking back at Azumi. "The question is how will we convince him to let you out of his sight."

“That would be impossible,” she frowned. “I cannot think of a reason for me to be able to leave his side. I was thinking of making them here,” she chuckled.

Gaara looked up at the second level, drumming his fingers on his chin. "It might be a challenge but I think we could manage it," he said with a smile. "I'll bring a few extra things from home. I should be able to get the recipe this week but you can tell me when you want to make it."

“Sounds like a date,” she smirked, completely forgetting that Sandaime was right there.

Gaara blushed a little, finishing his churro. "A date," he confirmed. Sandaime smiled discreetly, standing up to clean away the mess before Sasori returned.
Chapter 22

An hour later, Sasori returned with his mother. Her arm was still linked with his. Sandaime came out of the workshop to greet them. "How was your lunch date?" he smiled.

"It was wonderful," Sasori's mother patted her son's shoulder with her free hand. "It was very refreshing to catch up with my prodigal son."

Sasori rolled his eyes but smiled. "We went to the new place that opened up a month ago," Sasori said, kissing the back of his mother's hand before untangling them.

“Oh, a new place?” Sandaime hummed. “I may have to go there.”

“Definitely,” Sasori’s mother grinned.

Back in the workshop, Azumi was cleaning the enclosures for the snakes. She heard Sasori and his mother come back and hoped that his lunch date with his mother put him in a good mood.

"Okay, my love," his mother walked into the back. "Show me..." She stopped short, seeing the snakes. She turned around slowly to look at Sasori as he walked in behind her. "Since when did you start keeping snakes?"

“Since I found a use of their venom,” Sasori told her easily. “According to her, the different snakes produce different venom. And they are all useful.”

Her nose wrinkled a little, looking at the snakes before she moved closer. "How do you know?" she asked Azumi, bending over to look at them.

"Mother, be careful please," Sasori warned.

"She can handle herself," Sandaime chuckled, joining them back in the room. Sasori sighed, shaking his head. He climbed up the ladder to the second floor and to look over the work Gaara was finishing for him.

“I have worked with snakes my entire life,” Azumi answered her. “Each breed has a different composition in their venom that serves a different purpose.” She placed the snakes back into their original tanks.

"I see," she hummed. She eyed Azumi for a moment longer before turning on her foot. She walked up the ladder to lean over Sasori's shoulder to see what he was working on.

Sandaime looked at Azumi with a little concern. He had seen that look on his sister-in-law's face. There was the air of plotting in her eyes. He walked over to her and leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Has she said anything strange to you?" he asked.

“Not at all,” she whispered back. “Only those looks that seem a bit judgemental. But that is nothing a girl my age should not be used to.”

He nodded, glancing over his shoulder to the mother and son. Gaara shook his head, burying his nose in a book. "We should get going soon, Sister," Sandaime called up to her.

"Why?" There was a pout to the woman's tone. "I'm not bothering them." She ruffled Sasori's hair. "Am I, darling?"
Sasori chuckled. “Not at all, Mother,” he said with a tight smile.

“You’re kicking me out,” his mother gasped.

"He could never," Gaara called up to her with mirth in his voice.

"No, a mother knows when her son is done with her," she sighed dramatically. "I miss the days my little boy would come find me to take walks and read to him." There was a pinch of real sadness to her voice.

Sasori sighed with a lopsided smile. "You'll need to make up your mind, Mother." He turned to pull her into a hug. "Are you marrying me off or am I your little boy?"

"Oh, you will get married," she said sternly, causing Sasori to tense up just a little bit. His mother's face softened and she wrapped her arms around him to hug him back. "But you will always be my little boy," she grinned.

He sighed again, relaxing against his mother. "Yes, Mother," he smiled, standing up to kiss her cheek.

She stepped back first to descend the ladder. Gaara and Sandaime just barely hid their grins. "Take me home," she sighed with a smile, reaching for Sandaime's offered arm. "And let's get churros on the way home," she giggled.

"Absolutely," Sandaime chuckled. He nodded his goodbye to Azumi and Gaara. Azumi bowed as they turned to leave.

Once they were gone, Gaara let the laugh out that he was trying to hold in. "Aaah, you're still such a mama's boy, Cousin."

"Shut up," Sasori snapped. "Don't make me come down there."

"I think it is adorable," Azumi chuckled.

"I don't want to hear it from you," he told her. "You admitted to being a daddy's girl."

"That I did," she hummed.

Gaara giggled harder. "You're both pretty bad off then," he grinned cheekily at Azumi. He pulled a few more books and set them down on the workbench.

"Please, if you had the chance you'd be the worst of us all," Sasori grumbled.

“Which there is absolutely nothing wrong with,” Azumi said. She smirked at Gaara and lowered her voice. “It would also be very cute.”

Gaara flashed her a smiled with a hint of sadness. He started to pull out ingredients and other containers. “Sasori...” he called up to his cousin without looking away from Azumi. He let her hand drift over to take hers. "Did you need me to write up any more schematics?"

"Hm?" Sasori hummed, shifting through a couple of papers. "Oh. Yeah. We need a few."

"Okay, leave them out for me and I will take them home with me tonight," Gaara said back as he lifted Azumi's hand and kissed her knuckles. She bit her lip in a smile, feeling her face get a little warm again.
"Have Kankuro doublecheck a few of these," Sasori said, getting up from his stool.

Gaara dropped her hand gracefully and made himself look busy. "Uh, I think he's away until the day of the party, but I'll pay him a visit to see if he's home."

"Just have them back by the end of the week," Sasori said as he descended the ladder. "I'm not exactly in a rush for them, but I also would like to have them done." He placed them on an empty counter for Gaara.

"They'll be on your desk the moment I'm done." Gaara refrained from rolling his eyes. Sasori paused to look at Azumi and Gaara. "Something wrong?" Gaara asked. He kept his face and body schooled.

Sasori's face pinched slightly. "No...did you eat?" he asked them both.

"We did," Gaara answered. "Uncle bought us food when you were out with your mother."

"Mmm," he hummed, looking at Azumi. "Good. Then when we get back, you can jump right into the new project I want to make for the party," he grinned evilly.

She hummed through a frown as she looked back at him. 'I do not like that look,' she thought. She said nothing to him but nodded.

"I'll leave you to close up the shop," Sasori waved over his shoulder as he started to clean up the other workbench. He grabbed a basket and filled it with various bottles. As he did that, Azumi and Gaara cleaned everything else to close the shop. When they were done, Azumi gave each of the six snakes a goodbye tap on the nose and then met Sasori by the door. Gaara said a soft goodnight to each of the snakes. He said goodbye to his cousin and Azumi before turning to lock up the front of the shop. Sasori rolled his eyes at the little display. He started to walk down their usual path towards the mansion. "I want you to wear your dancing outfit for the party," he told her.

"The red one?" she asked. "Alright..." She thought about it for a moment. "Will there be another 'surprise' performance?" She wanted to know ahead of time if he was going to make her perform so she could mentally prepare this time.

"It wouldn't be a surprise if I told you, now would it?" Sasori smirked. "I haven't decided. It's been a while since I've been asked to perform and I'm not particularly close to the Akimichis."

"I see," she hummed. They made it back to the mansion quickly, ignoring the other servants they passed through the halls on their way back to Sasori's room. Naga was coiled up on the daybed. He lifted his head when they walked in, bowing his head a little bit.

Sasori chuckled, seeing the small bow the snake gave them. He walked into the workshop. "Bring him with you if you want," he said, taking a seat. He flipped open a journal and started to write down a long ingredient list.

Azumi looked at Naga who immediately started to move toward her, slithering up her body to take his normal position of being wrapped around her waist and resting his head on her shoulder. She followed Sasori into the workshop. "So, what is this project you want to work on?" she asked.

"Just a little something to keep the boredom at bay," he smirked. "And a little test for you."

"A test?" she asked. She stepped closer to him, peeking at the list he was writing. None of it was a recognizable composition to her. 'What is that?' she thought.
"Yes," he grinned. "You're going to make this and then we'll test it," he smirked.

"I...alright," she said, leaning against the desk next to him to look over the ingredients. She had no idea what this was supposed to be but putting it together seemed easy enough. She studied it for a minute before stepping away to gather the ingredients. 'He said this was for the party,' she thought. 'What could that possibly even mean?'

He could not keep the grin off of his face as he passed her the list. "Let's see what you can do," he chuckled. "I'll be right back." He stretched then stood up and left the room.

Azumi watched him leave then turned back to the ingredients in front of her. Carefully, she combined them into a container, setting it over a small flame to incorporate it all. She looked at the list one more time to make sure she got everything. She was missing one thing. "Mm," she hummed, picking up a small empty vile. She held it up to Naga. "Please?" she asked. Naga hissed softly and injected venom into the small vile. Once there was the right amount of venom, she added it to the rest of the ingredients and left it alone for a couple of minutes.

Sasori walked back in with a very large book labeled 'Party.' "If that works then it will be added to this book," he smirked, putting it down on the workbench. The full weight of it made things on the workbench jump.

"And this book is what?" she hummed as she lowered the flame gradually until it was off. She set the vessel down on the counter to let it cool and then looked over at the book Sasori brought in.

"It's everything Komushi and I have ever made that worked the way we wanted it to." He flipped open the book. "Just for party entertainment."

She looked down at the vessel on the counter. 'What did I just make?' she thought. She stepped closer to him to look at the book, reading over the details of each item and their effects as he flipped through the pages. "Poisons," she hummed. "I should have known." She glanced at the one she just made again. "So what does that one do?"

"We'll have to find a test subject," he grinned. "But first, go get dinner for us."

She nodded and left the workshop. She was about to set Naga down on the daybed but he coiled tightly around her, not wanting to be away from her. "Alright," she sighed, petting him as she left the bedroom and went to the kitchen. The three usual servants were practically waiting for her when she walked in.

"You and the young master are looking pretty happy," the first said with a smirk.

"We heard you made him personal scents!" the second whispered.

She and Naga shared a look and she looked back at them. "And who told you this?" she asked, making her way to the cabinet to grab dishes and serve herself and Sasori.

"Oh, you needn't worry," they grinned. There was a soft tinkling of coins being exchanged in the room.

"The point is that you just confirmed it for us," the third one giggled.

Azumi resisted the urge to slam the bowls onto the counter, tensing up a little as she set them down a little loudly. She turned around and looked at them. "Okay, I did make him some scents," she said. "But I also made them for his mother, his uncle and his cousin, so exactly what do you think is being proved?" Naga shifted to her other shoulder and hissed warily as if acting as a meter
for Azumi's rising anger which she tried to keep off of her face.

"Oooh," all three said in unison. There was another round of jingling.

"No need to get worked up, dear," the first one gave her a smile. The other two hid their smiles behind a set of fans.

She squinted hard at them. How many bets had they placed pertaining to her? However many it was, she hated it. "This is absolutely ridiculous," she growled softly. She turned around and picked up the bowls. "You all know how he is. I think you would find it in your best interest to mind your business," she told them as she walked out of the kitchen. Naga hissed at her softly, trying to calm her down as she walked through the halls back to Sasori's room. Once she was in there, she placed Sasori's food in front of him. "I think I have a few test subjects for you."

"Oh?" Sasori looked up at her with a raised eyebrow. "Who?" A grin slipped over his lips. His little snake was worked up. Who had pulled out such rage in her? Who had made her willing to play the game? He picked up his bowl and looked at her expectantly.

"Those three servants that seem to never leave the kitchen," she answered. "As I said earlier, I try not to let their comments get to me, but I draw a line at placing bets on me."

Sasori practically moaned. "I've been dying for a reason to punish them," he grinned. "And now they've upset my little snake." He breathed in with an excited glint in his eyes. "Prepare the poison and brew some tea." She let out a quiet angry huff through her nose and set her food down on the desk. She stepped into the workshop and started a small flame to boil water over for the tea. The poison she made was finally cooled down so she poured it into a bottle to be kept in. She still had no idea what the effects of it were but at that moment she did not care. Sasori could not keep the grin off his face watching her move about the workshop. He leaned his back against the workbench, picking up his bowl to eat. "You only need three drops of in each cup," he chuckled. 

"But you're welcome to make it stronger if you'd like." He was living to see her this wound up.

"Tempting," she said, putting three drops of the poison in each cup. Once the tea was done, she poured it into each cup as well. She did not want to be responsible for killing them if she put too much so she left it at three drops.

Sasori pouted a little. "How boring," he sighed, his smirk returning. "Let's go see them." He stood up and put his bowl down then made his way to the door. He was too excited to watch this unfold. Azumi found a small tray and placed the three cups on it. She tucked the bottle of the poison into a fold in her dress, in case she decided on the way there that she wanted to give them a higher dosage and then met Sasori by the door.

"Let's see your handiwork in action," he nearly giggled. Leading the way back to the kitchen, he did not bother to stifle his excitement. He leaned against the wall of the kitchen so he would not be seen. He nodded for her to enter, folding his arms. He could hear the servants still chattering in the kitchen.

She took a deep breath before entering the kitchen with the tray. The servants noticed her almost immediately, stopping their conversation to watch her. "You're back," the first one said.

"I am," she said with a nod. "And I realize my temper was a bit irrational. I came here to apologize," she lied, setting the tray down in front of them.

"Ooh," the second one smiled as she set the tray down. "It's alright, dear."
"We remember what it's like to be young," the third said.

"Ah, I wish we could be that hot-blooded again," the first sighed. "Is this one of Lord Sasori's blends? You must be careful with stealing from him like this!" they cautioned her.

Azumi nodded and took a step back. "I do not think he will mind," she said.

"Well, we won't tell him if you won’t," the third one chuckled.

All three servants giggled to themselves as they took a sip of the tea. "What a...different taste," the second one hummed.

"I believe it is one of his newer blends," Azumi lied. "Imported from somewhere in the south." They finished the cups and the moment their cups touched down on the table, their stomachs let out a nasty, loud, wet gurgling sound. All three of their faces dropped. Azumi tucked the tray under her arm and bowed slightly, a smirk forming on her lips. "Have a good night," she told them before turning to leave the kitchen. They gave her horrified looks as she left the room.

Sasori grinned at her, holding up an arm to keep her from walking down the hall. He pulled her close. "Ready," he held the "y" for a moment. He pressed a finger to her lips so she could hear a gut-wrenching sloppy, wet sound hit the ground three separate times followed by screams.

"Ew," Azumi whispered, wrinkling her nose at just the sound of it. She knew exactly what happened and she could not help but chuckle at their suffering.

"That'll teach them," he chuckled softly. He nodded for her to follow him back to his room. Once they were inside, he turned to her, lifting her chin with his fingertips. "I'm so proud of you, little snake," he whispered, looking into her eyes.

She never thought she would hear those words come from him. It was not exactly what someone wants to be told about what she just did, but she knew this sort of niceness was rare from him so she was going to accept it. "I would be lying if I said that did not feel great," she hummed. She would not make this a common thing, however. Her own morality was grey so she did not have a problem doing this under specific circumstances. "How long does that last for them?"

"About an hour or two," he smirked. He pulled away to sit down on the edge of his bed. "They'll empty themselves out and then some," he grinned.

She raised an eyebrow. "And you want to use this at the party?" she smirked, pulling the bottle out of her dress and setting it on the desk next to the tray. She picked up her bowl and started eating the food that she almost forgot about.

"It's going to be unbelievably entertaining," he sighed with joy. "Too bad Komushi won't be around to witness the chaos," he hummed.

"And where will Lord Komushi be that he is missing out on all of this...exciting fun?" she asked. She finished her food quickly and placed the bowl back on the desk before moving to sit on the daybed.

"He's going to visit a girl his parents want him to marry," Sasori sighed, tucking his hands behind his head as he leaned back against the wall. "She's a higher status than him so he has to travel to meet her."

Her brow furrowed slightly. "Interesting..." she hummed. She thought about how it would have worked for her if she was in that situation. Then she remembered that she was the daughter of the
village’s leader. That was an automatic higher status. The few suitors her father suggested all came to her. A small smirk appeared on her lips at the thought of being of a higher nobility status than Sasori if she was not his slave. "Are his views on marriage the same as yours?" she asked.

"His change depending on the mood he's in," Sasori chuckled. "Some days, he wants to settle down and be a father," he hummed. "And other days, the very thought of matrimony is like being tied to a set of bricks at his feet and being made to swim in the river."

"I am hardly surprised," she said, laying back on the daybed. "He seems like a wild-swinging pendulum." She would not tell him that she thought the same of him as well in terms of his emotions.

Sasori laughed, nodding in agreement. "We both sort of are," he sighed. "I won't make a good husband." He rolled his eyes. "Not unless the woman is very impressive. And I don't know if there is a woman in the world who could handle Komushi in his full force." He smirked at her. "You can barely stomach him."

"So you have noticed," she deadpanned, looking through the skylight of the domed ceiling. "Speaking as a woman, he is hardly husband material. But that is not to say he cannot be groomed to be. It seems like it would take a while, but I think it could happen." She smirked and let out a soft chuckle. "You, on the other hand..." she started, "...your views on the subject are set in stone." There was no hope for him.

Sasori's eyes narrowed, his lips curving into a thin smirk. "You seem to think you've got us all figured out." He tilted his head. "Humans can be very unpredictable," he reminded her. "But you're mostly right. About me, that is. You're missing some information about Komushi."

"Oh?" she smirked, sitting up to look at him. "Like what information? He does not seem like the kind to have that much hidden information about him."

"What kind of scientist doesn't assume there is always more to something than meets the eye?" He folded his arms over his chest. "I won't give away all his secrets but he's actually a hopeless romantic," Sasori chuckled. "He's always the one getting hurt in relationships."

"I could deduce that he was a romantic from how much he touches me," she hummed. "It is unfortunate that he gets hurt but...I can only assume it is because he comes on a little too strong." Something she also deduced from how much he touches her.

Sasori chuckled again. "He does tend to come in a little too hot," he smirked. "But the girls that usually respond to him are only trying to get to me." His smile faltered.

"Oh, that is very unfortunate," she hummed. "For each party, if I am honest. It is unfortunate for Lord Komushi to not get the girl, for the girl to not get you, and for you to have to be bothered in the first place," she smirked.

Sasori did not even try to stifle his laughter. He shook his head, taking deep breaths to calm down. "You are so right!" he grinned. "But I'm sure there is a sucker out there for him somewhere."

"Hopefully he is about to meet her," she said, laying back down.

"I'd like to think I have the same sentiment, but," he frowned, "from what I remember of the girl he described, this won't amount to much."

“I see...” she whispered with a frown. She was beginning to feel bad for Komushi. Other than him wanting to test a poison on her when they first met, he was not that bad of a guy. “How many
relationships has he actually been in?"

He took a minute to think. “Three serious ones and a lot of flings.” He drummed his fingers on his lower lip. “Too many week-long ‘relationships’ to count.”

“Is his mother as...adamant as yours is about marriage?” She refrained from using the word ‘terrifying.’

"No, the lucky bastard,” he grumbled. "His family is very different from mine. They are still well-off but they don't pressure Komushi to do anything beyond showing his face at gatherings.” He rolled his eyes. "And I'm not entirely sure why considering we're usually causing some sort of ruckus."

"Is that so?” she hummed as she rolled onto her stomach and poked Naga's nose.

They sat in silence for a few moments before it was broken by the shrill voice of Chiyo. "Sasori!” she yelled.

Azumi looked at Sasori, immediately noticing the smirk on his face. "It's about time," he chuckled.

Chiyo came storming into the room. "What have you done?” she demanded.

"I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about," he grinned cheekily. "I've been here since I got home from the shop," he lied.

Chiyo glared at him. She took a long, slow breath. "I don't have time for this! I thought you outgrew this kind of behavior when you were fifteen but clearly, I overestimated you." She pinched her nose. "Go give my maids an antidote or I will tell your mother!"

Sasori squinted at her. "You wouldn't dare," he said.

"Oh, wouldn't I?" Chiyo challenged.

"I didn't even make an antidote."

"Then go make one!"

Azumi and Naga looked back and forth between them as they spoke to each other.

"They will be fine in twenty minutes!” Sasori snapped back. "Just get someone to bring them some damn water and salt soup!” He was sitting up now. "I'm not making them anything! They can deal with some diarrhea after what they've been spreading around!"

"What have they been spreading around that was so bad that you thought you needed to do this?” Chiyo asked, her anger toward her grandson still rising.

"That I plan on having sex with my slave," he narrowed his eyes. "If they have time to run their mouths and place bets then they can run to the bathroom and clean themselves up," he shrugged.

"You know better than to let such stupid rumors like that get to you," she said.

"They know better than to spread such stupid rumors," he countered. "They know to mind their own business."

Chiyo ground her teeth. "You never cease to amaze me." She shook her head, giving him a look of pure disappointment.
"I do my best," he smirked. "They'll be fine and hopefully they learned to not bother my property." He relaxed back into his pillows.

"If you pull another stunt like this that effects my own personal servants, then your mother will be hearing about it," Chiyo told him sternly.

Sasori rolled his eyes. "Keep your servants in line and we won't have to tell anyone anything," he grumbled.

Chiyo glared at him then sighed heavily as she left the room. "Shape up, Sasori!" she called over her shoulder.

Sasori rolled his eyes again, laying back on his bed. Azumi sat up to look at him. "Would she really tell your mother?" she asked softly.

"No," Sasori clicked his tongue. "She's been threatening that since I was twelve." He rolled onto his side. "She thinks she can lord my mother over me my whole life but one day, this mansion will be mine and I won't have to hear about it from her anymore," he shrugged.

"Would you like some tea?" she asked, hoping it would put him in a better mood.

He frowned, staring out of his window silently. "Fine," he said. "Use the container over the workbench to your left," he told her. "Make yourself a cup, too."

She nodded as she stood up and went into the workshop to start brewing the tea, using the exact one he told her too. "Hm," she hummed, noticing the pleasant scent it had. She poured two cups and went back out to his room, handing him his cup and then sitting down on the bed. "This smells nice," she hummed. "What is in it?"

"It's a blend of things," he said, accepting the cup. "Get changed first. You're staying here tonight." He took a sip of his tea, closing his eyes as the warmth traveled down his throat. She set her cup down on the side table and picked up her older dress to change into quickly then sat back down to drink her tea.

"It's good for when I need to de-stress fast but the ingredients are a little hard to come by," he told her. "So I stockpile them when I can."

She took her first sip and groaned contentedly. "This is really good," she hummed. "I like this a lot." She took another long sip. The immediate fatigue snuck up on her very hard.

"Good to know," he chuckled, finishing his own cup quickly and settled into his bed. He watched her finish her cup and smirked as she fell asleep before her head hit the pillow. He took her empty cup from her hand and placed it with his on the nightstand. He could feel the tea beginning to affect him as he moved her into a better sleeping position. He quickly got comfortable just before falling asleep.
Chapter 23

The next morning, Azumi woke up slowly, groaning softly as she clutched the sheets and rolled onto her stomach. She lifted her head a little and stretched hard, groaning again. Finally opening her eyes, she saw that she was, once again, in Sasori's bed. She looked over at him and saw just how close he was to her. 'It was that tea,' she thought, figuring out why she fell asleep so quickly. He knocked both of them out with it. She was starting to get used to sleeping in his bed. Admittedly, she preferred it over the daybed since it was much more comfortable. She watched him for a moment as he slept. 'He is much more handsome when he is unconscious and not being an asshole.' If only he could just stay asleep.

"If you plan on killing me while I sleep, you've missed your chance," he said softly. His voice was a thick rasp as he cracked open an eye.

She chuckled softly. "I assure you that the thought did not even cross my mind," she smirked, stretching again.

He stretched hard himself, arching his back high off of the bed. "I'm sure it didn't," he mumbled as he rolled over. "Coffee and breakfast," he muttered.

"Right," she hummed, getting out of the bed. She did not bother to change first and headed straight to the kitchen. She served two bowls for them and made two cups of coffee, finding a tray to put it all on.

"It still burns," she heard one of the three servants say from down the hall. The trio was making their way to the kitchen. Azumi paused for a second, unable to hide the smirk on her face.

"Lady Chiyo spoke with him," the second one said, their voices getting closer.

"You know how well that always goes," the third one groaned. "She's always too soft on him."

"I just can't believe he made that sweet girl do that to us," the first one sighed.

"Oh, I don't think he made her do—" the three stopped dead in the doorway when they saw her. The one speaking narrowed their eyes. The other two quickly made their way to the table.

"Good morning," Azumi said as sweetly as possible with a nod and a feigned smile. "How are you today?"

"Sore," the first one said flatly.

"Thanks to you and the monstrous young lord," the third sneered.
The second one elbowed the third. "Watch your tongue!" they hissed.

Azumi smirked at them as she turned to leave. "Maybe next time, you will think twice about betting on me," she said as she left.

The three of them simmered in their rage as she left. "I told you she was just as bad as him!" the third one screeched to the other two.

Sasori sat up as she walked in the room. He had pushed his hair back away from his face and, per his usual morning routine, got ready to move to the workshop. Azumi followed him into the workshop, setting his breakfast and coffee in front of him as he sat down at a desk, the smug look on her face still in place. Sasori raised an eyebrow, seeing her expression. "Something happen?" he asked, picking up his mug to sip his coffee.

"Nothing spectacular," she hummed. "I saw them in the kitchen, no surprise. They are still in pain."

"Oooh," Sasori chuckled. "They are going to be in pain for a day or two." He matched her smug expression. "Now that we know that it works perfectly, it will be the perfect source of entertainment." He put his mug down to start eating his breakfast. "And don't let them bother you. They'll die off soon anyway." He waved over his shoulder.

She picked up her bowl and started eating. "Shall I run your bath after you eat?" she asked him.

"Yes," he told her, picking up a beaker and a few powders. "We'll go into the shop after." He scratched the back of his neck.

She nodded as she continued to eat, watching him work. When she finished eating and finished her coffee, she went into the bathroom to set up his bath and one for her as well, knowing he would tell her to do it anyway. She used the new fragrances for both of them and then went back into the workshop. "It is ready when you are," she told him.

He looked up from his work. "Get changed and meet me in the front," he told her as he got up and started to strip down.

'Ugh, you asshole,' she thought. She went back into his room, grabbing her normal daily-wear dress and started to change. Naga hissed softly to her as she got dressed. She chuckled softly. "Sure, you can come," she whispered to him. "Just do not pick a fight with the other snakes." Naga hissed softly as he wound his way up her body. She headed to the front of the mansion to wait for Sasori as he told her to.

Sasori leaned against one of the pillars in front of the house. "It's about time," he grumbled.

"Did you even take your bath?" she asked him, almost like a mother would. She did not even see him walk past her to leave the room.

He breathed forcefully out through his nose as he pushed off of the pillar. "Are you questioning me and my bath habits?" he narrowed his eyes. "I am capable of bathing quickly. Not that it exactly matters if I did or didn't." He started down the stairs.

Azumi rolled her eyes as she walked down the stairs after him. They made their way to the shop quickly, avoiding the sun as much as possible as Sasori liked to do.

"Good morning," Gaara said, looking up from a specimen that was writhing on a glass dish. "I didn't expect you in today." He smiled at Azumi brightly.
"There was something I wanted to finish working on before this party," Sasori grumbled, making his way up the ladder.

Azumi stepped closer to Gaara and looked at the specimen he had in front of him. She could smell him wearing the cologne she made him and smiled. "What are you working on?" she asked softly. Naga shifted from her to the table and coiled up to look over what Gaara was doing.

He smiled, leaning in to sneak a kiss on her cheek. "One of my patients is dealing with...a bug," he said, looking down at the squirming worm he had pinned to his dish.

Naga leaned in close to look at it, hissing in slight disgust. Azumi chuckled softly. "A literal bug, I take it," she smirked, stepping away to check on the other snakes.

"Very literal," he chuckled at Naga's reaction. "I think I've got the medicine to solve his issue, though," he told her. "How was your night?" he asked softly, covering the insect down. He crossed the room to peek in on the snakes. He took the time to greet them each by name.

"Quite amusing," she hummed, remembering what they did to the other servants. "And then I was knocked out by some weird tea blend."

"Oh, Sasori's sleep teas are no joke," Gaara chuckled. "But why did he need to use that on you?" he asked, the worry was instantly thick in his voice. "Are you having trouble sleeping? I can make you something gentler," he offered.

"No, no, I am fine," she chuckled, putting her hand over his. "It was for him, but he made me drink some too. I suppose he did not want me to be awake if he was asleep." Gaara's face pinched in irritation. He was suddenly hit with a cold feeling in his stomach. Was his cousin already starting to suspect them? Had he found out about their meetings by the river? He shook his head and took a quiet, deep breath. He reminded himself that if his cousin even had an inkling they had done anything beyond their usual flirting then one of them would have been dead already. Azumi saw the intense worry in his face and brought his hand up to kiss the back of it. He watched her kiss his hand and smiled. "Do not worry," she whispered. "Everything is fine." He relaxed a little after another deep breath.

"You two are way too quiet," Sasori called down. "Stop ogling each other and get to work!"

"If we are quiet does that not usually mean we are working?" Azumi whispered to Gaara with a smirk. She pulled away from him and moved to another counter to start working on a checklist she found. Gaara rolled his eyes, doing his best to stifle his laughter. He spun on his foot to return to his previous work. Above them, Sasori's stool scratched softly on the wood floor.

Azumi looked up at the second level as she heard Sasori walk over to the railing, no doubt to check on them. "We're going to have a visitor soon," he said, holding a bottle over the railing and releasing his grip to let it fall. Azumi extended her hands to catch the bottle and inspected it closely.

Gaara looked at the list of people who were supposed to come and pick up their orders. "Oh..." he said softly, earning a chuckle from Sasori.

"Yes," Sasori said. "$Him." Before Gaara could warn Azumi about their new customer, someone entered the shop, the sound of metal hitting more metal with each step. "Looks like he's here," Sasori smirked.

Azumi looked out into the front of the shop. She did not know what to expect, but she had to admit
that she was very surprised to see such a large bald man, standing in the middle of the shop. He had an immense amount of metal on and in his body, wearing a metal chain around his head like a crown and a large metal nose ring. "Whoa," she whispered, taking in the thick metal chokers he wore that draped over his chest and under his arm. He lifted his hand and she immediately noticed the metal bracelets and rings he had. "This is for him?" she asked softly.

"His name is Kenzou," Gaara told her just as softly. "Despite how he looks, he is actually a very nice guy."

Sasori came down the ladder and stepped through the curtains to the front of the shop. "Lord Sasori!" the man boomed jovially. "It has been a long time!" he said with a grin. The metal draped across his body clinked as he threw open his arms to pull Sasori into a very damp hug. The man was covered in sweat. Gaara snorted, fighting to keep his laughter down. Sasori glared at them over his shoulder but Gaara just shook his head.

"He hates when he does that," Gaara whispered to her.

Sasori's teeth were set and he was trying hard not to breath in the thick scent of metal and pure sweat. The man let Sasori go and Sasori took a couple of steps back immediately. "Good to see you as well, Kenzou," he said.

"I just arrived this morning. Your shop is my first stop in the city," Kenzou grinned.

"You don't say." He waved for Azumi to hand him the bottle and once she did, he placed it on the counter. "Your special order," he said.

Kenzou grinned as he picked up the bottle but his eyes fell on Azumi. "You've got a new girl." He smiled at her just as friendly as he had to Sasori. "Your master is the best apothecary in all of the lands!" he boasted. "I travel over many lands but I can never find anyone as good as him."

Azumi gave him a polite smile and a nod. "So I have been told," she said.

"I'm sure you hear it from every new person you meet," he chuckled. Sasori circled the counter, keeping a safe distance from the large jingling man. "Where is your cousin?" Kenzou boomed, looking around the shop. "Does he still come around or is he a full-time doctor now?" he asked.

"He's just fetching us some tea," Sasori smirked, catching Gaara's eye through the curtains. Kenzou gasped, his grin never fading.

Gaara rolled his eyes as moved to the other side of the workshop and started to make the tea. "Typical," he mumbled.

"Wonderful!" Kenzou grinned.

Azumi realized that Kenzou's voice never went lower than the thunderous boom that it was. He did not seem to have what would be considered an 'indoor voice.' She went back into the workshop and saw Gaara making the tea. Sasori glared at Azumi as slipped away to freedom from Kenzou. "I can finish it," she told him. "It is sort of my job."

Gaara smiled, risking a small hand squeeze as he thanked her. "I'll grab the cups then," he said softly.

"Gaara, come out here," Sasori called in a sickly sweet voice with a promising tone of pain if he did not join Sasori in his mild suffering.
Azumi looked at Gaara. "Good luck," she whispered. Gaara sighed and stepped out into the main shop to greet Kenzou.

"Gaara!" the man grinned, causing all three of them to flinch very slightly.

"Kenzou," Gaara bowed his head. "It's always so nice to see you," he said with restraint. Once again, the large man opened his arms wide to pull Gaara into an embrace.

"You've grown more mature looking since the last time I saw you!" he boomed once he released the young doctor. Gaara tried hard not to gasp for air. His face was bright red.

Sasori grinned like a desert fox. "That's just a nice way of saying you're getting old, little cousin," he teased.

"I suppose that means you're ancient," Gaara smirked at Sasori.

Azumi grabbed three cups and poured the tea, placing them on a small tray to bring out for all three men. She placed the tray on the counter and bowed before going back into the workshop to complete the checklist Sasori had.

"How long will your visit be?" Sasori asked Kenzou.

"Oh, I cannot stay too long," Kenzou said. "Maybe just a week."

"Will you be visiting anyone else while you're here?" Gaara asked half-jokingly.

Kenzou nodded, sipping his tea. He sighed as the liquid relieved the dryness from his throat. "I plan to make my rounds," he said, starting to wander about the shop. He noticed the new table of oils and scrubs instantly. "This is new," he grinned, picking up one of the jars. He opened it, taking a long sniff. "Oooh," he breathed. "Sasori, you never cease amazing me with what you can create!" He looked back at Sasori.

"Thank you, Kenzou," Sasori nodded, "but the credit should actually go to my slave," he smirked. "She made everything on that table."

'Ooh, please do not ask me to make an antiperspirant for him,' Azumi thought. 'There is nothing that can help that man.'

"Your slave?" Kenzou's tone never waved from the jovial tone. "Aah, you've never had one capable of making things," he chuckled. "Clearly she is very talented if you are willing to showcase her wares." He looked into the back room.

Sasori nodded, following his line of sight out of the corner of his eyes. A small smile curved his mouth. "Azumi," he called out for her calmly. He turned to look back at Kenzou. "She is quite a rare find."

Azumi sighed, putting down what she was doing and walking back out to the front of the shop. "What can I do for you?" she asked.

Sasori grinned at her. He could see in her eyes that she knew what he was going to ask of her. But Kenzou spoke first. He walked over, taking Azumi's hand in his. He paused, that bright smile wavering for a moment. Sasori did not see the shift in his expression since Kenzou's back was to him but Gaara caught it. He blinked and the look was gone. The wide grin was back.

"Before I leave, would you make me an oil?" he requested. "As you can imagine, average colognes
don't stick to me very well while I am walking but oil would work wonders. Would you make me one?" He put his other hand over hers.

Azumi nodded, giving him a polite smile. "Absolutely," she said. 'This is going to be a big challenge,' she thought. "Are there any scents you prefer?"

"I like flowers and fragrant woods," he told her. "I'm curious to see what you come up with," he grinned.

"That is all I need to know," she said. "I can have it done for you by tomorrow."

"You're amazing!" he chuckled.

"You can wear it to the Akamichi's party!" Sasori clapped his hands.

"Ah, what a wonderful idea!" Kenzou boomed, causing Azumi to flinch just a little.

"If you will be attending the party, then I can give it to you there," she said.

"No, have it done before then so he can bathe properly and put it on," Sasori ordered with a grin. He wanted to challenge her.

Azumi's gaze snapped to Sasori and she tried so hard not to glare at him or huff too hard. "Right," she said. She looked at Kenzou. "Give me one hour," she told him before looking back at Sasori. 'Challenge accepted, asshole,' she thought. Sasori's grin widened.

"One hour?" Kenzou and Gaara blinked with shock.

"Won't that risk the quality of the oil, Sasori?" Gaara whipped around to say to his cousin.

"No," Sasori shrugged. "She can do it." He drummed his fingers on the counter with one hand, the other supporting his head.

"It will still be great quality," Azumi said, putting her hair up. Something this challenging was going to make the workshop hotter than it already was. She gave them a slight bow as she went back into the workshop, grabbed Naga and letting him wrap around her, and then went up the ladder to the second level and started to work on making a super strong oil with layered scents.

"She put her hair up," Gaara said softly. He smiled dreamily for a moment before he came back to himself quickly. He schooled his face and cleared his throat. "I should go see if she needs—"

Sasori narrowed his eyes at his cousin. "She doesn't," he growled.

Kenzou chuckled, leaning on the counter, some of his chains tapping gently against the wood. "You haven't changed at all, Sasori," he smirked.

"I'm a strong believer that if something is working there is no need to change it," he said easily. Gaara strained not to roll his eyes.

"You must think highly of her work then," Kenzou nodded, his smirk still in place.

"You smelled it yourself," Sasori said, gesturing to the display. "You know it's good."

"That I did," Kenzou chuckled.

"So don't bother her," Sasori told Gaara. "You will only distract her and that will mess with the
quality of it."

Gaara pressed his tongue hard into the roof of his mouth. "I said help her, not distract her." He lifted his nose.

Sasori rolled his eyes. "It's like I'm talking to a child right now." He started drumming his fingers again.

"Gaara, would you mind taking me for some coffee?" Kenzou asked. "We can catch up on the way!"

Gaara took a second to answer. He gave Kenzou a polite nod. "Sure," he said.

"Fantastic!" Kenzou boomed, leaning off of the counter.

Sasori smirked at him. "Have fun," he said.

The two men stepped out into the mid-day heat. Gaara used his hand to shield his eyes, squinting hard.

"Being in that darkness all day must do a number on your eyes," Kenzou smiled, undisturbed by the light. He towered over Gaara, requiring him to look up at the man to speak with him as they began to walk.

"It just makes them a little sensitive," he shrugged.

"Tell your cousin to open a window in the workshop," Kenzou chuckled. "It will make your eyes a bit less sensitive."

"He would never," Gaara smirked, shaking his head. "Sasori hates the sun."

"Odd for someone who lives in the desert."

Gaara snorted. "I don't think he was supposed to be born here," he laughed. "But this is where his parents had him," he shrugged.

"He could always leave."

"He could never," Gaara shook his head. "He loves his mother too much. And he's rich here."

Kenzou chuckled. "Fair points," he nodded. "How long has he had that new girl?" he asked, leaning his body to avoid a gaggle of small old women walking in the crowded street.

"Azumi? It's been...a little bit over a week, I think," he hummed. "Feels a bit longer."

"Only a week?" Kenzou asked, softer than his normal booming. "Interesting."

"She's really amazing," Gaara practically sighed.

Kenzou smiling knowingly. "She must be for her to receive so much praise from Lord Sasori," he chuckled. "Her people are a rare breed nowadays, too," he remarked. "I'm more than a little shocked to see her."

"She did mention that her people were slaughtered a long time ago," Gaara hummed, recalling their conversation at the night market. "Did you know any of them?"
"I knew a few in my travels," he nodded. "We became friends and often seek each other out if we knew the other would be in the area," he looked up at the sky. "They all had an insatiable thirst for knowledge," he smiled sadly. "But...that was a long time ago. They are all dead now."

"I see," Gaara hummed. He came to realize that Kenzou had no idea about the village Azumi was from and that her people are not all dead. They approached the coffee shop. It was the one that Sasori—and most people in the city—favored. It was instantly cooler inside, as usual.

"This probably should have been my first stop," Kenzou chuckled, enjoying the cooler air. They went up to the counter and ordered their coffee, finding a seat by the door once they had their drinks.

"Do you know why they were killed?" Gaara asked.

"Why else are unique people picked off?" Kenzou sipped his drink. "Their parts," he said, setting the cup down. "Well there's one who might have simply asked to many questions," he chuckled at a distant memory.

"Their parts?" Gaara frowned. "That's horrible," he mumbled. "You mean their eyes?"

"Their eyes, maybe their brains since they were all known to be versed in sciences. There was even a silly rumor for a while that they could produce venom like an actual snake," Kenzou chuckled. "But that was easily disproven. I wonder if she is a relative of the ones I knew," he hummed.

Gaara's stomach twisted at the very thought of Azumi's people being dismantled for parts. He set his cup down, curling his other fist below the table. He kept his face under control but his voice almost slipped. "I'm not sure about that," he said softly. "Maybe distant. She mentioned that her people are very hidden away from the rest of the world."

"Understandably," Kenzou said. "But her being alive today means there's at least one family still alive. Honestly, that makes me feel good." He took another sip of his drink.

Gaara hummed in agreement. "Have you met many people that are hunted like that?" Gaara asked.

"There are not too many unique breeds of people," Kenzou said. "I've met a couple in my life who may have been hunted, but they were either hunted to complete extinction or they were able to repopulate quickly and are no longer targeted today."

"Then there is still hope Azumi's people are repopulating," Gaara smiled. He knew she was not the last of her people but it still reassured him to think that they were not just surviving but thriving. "The world really is horrific, isn't it?"

Kenzou smiled over the edge of his cup. "That goes without saying," he smirked. "But it is filled with just as much wonder. You should try traveling sometimes, Doctor. It can broaden your horizons and let you experience something other than this city."

"Travel?" Gaara hummed. He had never given it much thought before since he had been doing well off in the city. "That sounds...I'm definitely going to consider it now."

"I'm glad to hear that," Kenzou grinned.

"We should probably bring back something for Sasori. Or he'll throw a fit that we came here and didn't," Gaara chuckled.

"He still has that churro obsession, right?" Kenzou chuckled. Gaara snorted a little, laughing as he
nodded. "Perfect! Then it will be my treat. Does Azumi like them, too?"

"She does," he smiled. "Just as much as the rest of our family, it seems."

"Great!" Kenzou stood up and Gaara followed suit. "I'm also excited to see what she came up with for the oil." He finished off his cup and went to fetch the sweets while Gaara finished his coffee.

"Ready?" Kenzou asked as he came back with everything. Gaara nodded and the two men went back to the shop.

Sasori had moved back to the workshop but the scent of the churros drew him out of the back room. "You're back already?" he grinned, zeroing in on the churros.

"It was just coffee," Gaara shared a smirk with Kenzou.

"But we returned with an offering of thanks," Kenzou held up the package of churros.

Sasori went up to them and took the package from Kenzou. "I appreciate this," he said.

"It's the least I could do," Kenzou smiled.

Sasori moved back to the counter and started to dig into the bag. "There's icing in here," he said softly to himself, hiding a smile. Kenzou shared another grin with Gaara. Gaara walked over and shoved his hand in the bag, pulling out two piping hot churros. "Excuse me! This is my offering!" Sasori gasped, outraged.

"And?" Gaara smirked, biting into one. "I'm practically your little brother. It's mandatory that you share with me," he hummed, walking towards the workshop.

If Kenzou was not there, Sasori would have protested harder. He huffed, pulling the bag closer to himself and turning back to Kenzou. "Your oil should be done soon," he told him.

"I'm eager to know what she has come up with," Kenzou said as he pulled up a stool to sit across from Sasori. "Have you been up to anything yourself?" he asked.

In the workshop, Gaara crept up behind Azumi. He wrapped his arms around her waist, pressing a kiss to the back of her neck.

Azumi grinned, leaning back into him. "You are back," she said softly, tilting her head back to look at him.

"I am," he smirked, kissing her neck then jaw. He shifted a little to pull her into a kiss. "How is it going?" he asked, glancing down at the oil she was making.

"This was...a challenge," she sighed. "It was hard to figure out exactly what will help him and not just make it smell like...wood and flowers on top of sweat." She picked up the bottle of the oil and closed it up. "But I think...I think I did it. I am done with it," she chuckled.

He spun her around and pulled her into a deeper kiss. "I want to say I can't believe you did it," he whispered through a grin. "But I'm pretty sure only you could pull something like this off." He handed her the second churro in his hand.

She gasped slightly and took it, eating it happily. "I thank you for having that kind of faith in me," she smiled, wrapping her arms around him. "Shall we figure out if I did a good job?"

"We already know you did," he grinned. "Let's go rub it in Sasori's face." He took a step back after
kissing her one more time.

They walked to the ladder and he let her go down first. She stepped out of the workshop and greeted Kenzou with a smile. "I hope you are satisfied with this, Lord Kenzou," she said, placing the bottle on the counter and then letting her hair down.

"I can already tell I will!" he grinned, picking up the bottle. He held it up to the light, swirling the liquid inside. He popped open the bottle and brought it to his nose to take a long, deep breath. "This is perfection." He got up and pulled her into a crushing hug.

She grunted softly, feeling her back on the verge of cracking. Once he let her go, she gasped slightly for air. "Thank you, Lord Kenzou, but I think you should try it before you praise me," she chuckled. "Tomorrow, I await your verdict."

"And you shall receive it!" he grinned. He recapped the bottle and bowed low to Sasori. "Lord Sasori, Lord Gaara, I shall see you three tomorrow at the party."

They each gave him a bow as well. "Tomorrow," Sasori said with a smile. Kenzou smiled at them as he turned and left the shop, leaving the three of them alone.

"You are out of that amplifier," Azumi told Sasori as soon as Kenzou was gone.

"I'm not remotely surprised," Sasori laughed. "We can buy some more now," he said, sliding off of the stool. "Gaara, you run the shop," he ordered. He started for the door, not giving Gaara a moment to protest his cousin. "Let's go, Azumi."

Azumi hummed softly, noticing the scent of churros coming out of the bag on the counter. She unwrapped Naga from her body and placed him on the counter then grabbed a churro out of the bag and dipped it in the icing before following Sasori out of the shop.

Sasori opened his mouth then sighed. "You're only getting that because you actually finished that oil in an hour," he told her sternly.

She smirked at him, humming happily as she ate the churro. "You knew I could make it in an hour," she said. "Now we just need to know if it works." She appreciated the praise she received, but she had doubts that it would actually work for someone who perspired as much as Kenzou did.

"It probably won't," he said easily. "But it will work for the party tomorrow since he'll have a bath. Nothing can help him with all of that sweat." He shook his head. He turned down a side street that narrowed into an alleyway. He walked a little further then stopped by a side door that led to stairs that ascended upwards. He opened the door and started walking up the stairs. Azumi followed, closing the door behind her. The staircase was narrow as well, and if it had been any hotter, she would have started to panic. The wood of the stairs creaked as they went up and they eventually stopped on a landing. It opened up to a shop, about half the size of Sasori's with shelves of different essential oils and the ingredients that she used to make her perfumes and colognes. Sasori mentioned he got the amplifier in a set but she hoped they sold it on its own because that was all she needed. Sasori walked over to the desk and picked up the little bell to ring for the shop owner. "Look around and pull whatever else you like," he told her with a flippant wave of his hand. A few moments later a dark-haired man walked out. He looked like he had not seen the sun in years.

"Good to see you, Utakata."

Azumi looked at the shop owner and hummed quietly. 'His eyes are gold, too,' she thought. However, she noticed the lack of vertical pupil. She moved around the shop, looking at what was on the shelves and finding the amplifier pretty quickly.
"It's been a while, Sasori," Utakata hummed. "I was wondering when I could supply the best apothecary in the world with more oils."

"I haven't had much time to play with such quality oils," he said, watching Utakata pick up his pipe and light it. "But my new girl over there has a knack for using them so you might be seeing us more often."

Utakata leaned over to glance at Azumi. "You're letting her touch your wares?" He raised an eyebrow, taking a drag from his pipe.

'I think I prefer to be called his slave than his girl,' Azumi thought, rolling her eyes as she moved to a new shelf.

"She knows what she's doing with them, that's why," Sasori told him.

"Praise from you," Utakata mused. There was a small tick of mirth in the man's smooth monotone voice. "She must be impressive."

"She is." Sasori looked over his shoulder at Azumi.

Azumi was reading the small labels of a few rare scents. 'I do not know what I can do with these,' she thought, 'but it would be interesting to see what goes with them.' She grabbed a few of the very rare ones and started to go up to the counter. On her way there, she noticed a label of another oil. It was the extract of a flower that grew in her village. She picked up the bottle and smelled it really quick, unable to hide the smile that appeared on her face. She gave it no second thought, taking it up to the counter with her and standing next to Sasori. "I think these few should do," she said. Sasori smirked, seeing the small armful of bottles she brought up.

Utakata spotted the rare bottle and set his pipe down. "What an intriguing selection," he said softly. He picked up the rare flower oil and held it up. "I've been trying to sell this one for months. The flower came in with a shipment of slaves." He wrapped it and the other bottles with paper.

"Oh?" Sasori looked at her from the corner of his eyes. "I'm interested to know how it smells," he said with a grin. "Put it on my tab," he told shop owner.

"And you're buying her things," Utakata mumbled as he placed all of the bottles in a small bag. "Here you go," he said, handing the bag to Azumi.

"Thank you," she said with a bow as she took the bag.

"She's making me money with what she makes," Sasori smirked. "I'll supply as long as she keeps producing and her wares keep selling."

Utakata nodded but the strange look in his eye did not leave. "Well, it was good to see you again, Lord Sasori. Please visit again sometime," he said with a slight bow.

"We will," Sasori nodded then turned to proceed back down the narrow stairs. Azumi gave Utakata one last bow before following Sasori down the stairs. Once they were out of the narrow staircase and the narrow alleyway, she sighed quietly, enjoying the feeling of not being suffocated by the narrow passageways. They made their way back to the shop quickly and she immediately started putting away the bottles they bought.

"Bring that rare one over here," he said, sitting at one of the workbenches. He was curious to know its scent. Clearly, she was excited about it and the fact that it came in with slaves meant it could be from any far off land.
She held onto the flower extract as she put the other ones away and then met him at the workbench, handing him the bottle. "I did not think I would see something like this here," she told him.

He opened it and took a deep breath. "You seem familiar with it," he hummed smelling the oil again. It was a mesmerizing scent. "Is it from your area?"

"It is," she nodded. "It is a flower that only grows within a two-month window. So it is rare even for me."

"A two-month window...my, that is rare." He handed the bottle back to her. "I'm curious to see what you make with it."

"It will be interesting to figure out what complements it," she said. She held onto the bottle, wanting to put it with the oils he had in his home workshop so she could work on it later. She moved to the other side of the workshop and up the ladder to clean up the mess she had made when she was working on Kenzou's oil.

"Hurry up with that," he called up to her as he walked out to the front of the shop. "I want to go home the minute you're done."

She rolled her eyes as she came back down the ladder. Gaara was cleaning up the workshop with Naga wrapped around him, getting ready to leave as well. "How are your cacti doing?" she asked him softly with a smile as she unwrapped the snake and rehomed him to her body.

His face lit up. "They are doing well! I actually just got a new one from one of my patients!" he told her enthusiastically. "I wish I could show them to you." His smile wavered a bit.


"Goodnight," he smiled, feeling a jump of giddiness in his chest.

Sasori was waiting for her at the shop's front door when she walked out. "When we get home, run a bath for both of us and pick the strongest scented oil you've made," he practically demanded as they moved back towards the house. "I hate when that man hugs me."

"Rightfully so," she hummed as she followed him. They made it back home just before the sun set completely so there was a nice nightly breeze flowing through the house when they arrived. They immediately went to Sasori's room and without wasting a second, Azumi set up the baths for them as Naga took his usual spot on the daybed.

Without missing a beat, Sasori stripped down and stepped into the tub the moment the bath was ready. He sunk low into the water and sighed. His skin itched with his and Kenzou's lingering sweat. "Disgusting," he grumbled, scrubbing his skin.

"Rightfully so," she hummed as she followed him. They made it back home just before the sun set completely so there was a nice nightly breeze flowing through the house when they arrived. They immediately went to Sasori's room and without wasting a second, Azumi set up the baths for them as Naga took his usual spot on the daybed.

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As soon as he was in his bath, Azumi stripped and stepped into hers. "Despite that, he was very nice," Azumi hummed. She sunk below the surface of the water to get the gross feeling out of her hair as well and started washing up immediately.

"Oh, yes," Sasori rolled his eyes. "The kindest leader of a gang you'll probably ever meet," he huffed but smirked a little.

Azumi's eyes widened a little in slight as she combed her fingers through her hair. "He is a gang leader?" she asked softly. "I would have never guessed that—" She stopped herself as she gave it
some thought. His appearance alone was enough to confirm something like that. "Oh, no...I can see it now."

He smirked, watching her reaction from the corner of his eye. "He is a vigilante of sorts," Sasori hummed. He rolled onto his side to look at her. "His gang protects...people like you," his voice darkened, dripping with mirth.

She narrowed her eyes a little. "What do you mean people like me?" she asked. She knew he could not have meant slaves because Kenzou made no indication that he was against slavery the way Sandaime made it clear.

Sasori chuckled, rolling back onto his back. "People who need help. People who are poor and abused." He raised his leg to wash it. "If he knew me better, I'd be dead." There was a small lick of delight in his tone. "He would have killed me off long ago and I doubt I could actually beat off his brute strength." He lowered his leg, pausing for a moment before speaking again. "But he will never know," he said warningly. "Because you are loyal to me."

She looked at him, resisting the chill that almost went up her spine. "Right," she said softly, sinking back into the water to finish washing her hair. 'Until your uncle abolishes slavery,' she thought.

"That's my girl." He leaned back in the tub, closing his eyes. "You'll sleep in your own room tonight," he told her as he rinsed his hair.

'Perfect,' she thought, hiding a smile. "Shall I get your dinner once you are finished?" she asked. She figured he would have forgotten to eat if she did not ask.

"No," he waved her off. "Don't bother. I'm not particularly hungry," he hummed. "Just make sure you eat. Those three shouldn't be in the kitchen tonight."

She nodded and took the next couple of minutes to enjoy her bath. Once she was finished bathing, she stepped out of the pool and grabbed a towel for herself then set one out for Sasori. It took her a couple of extra minutes to dry her hair enough so it was not dripping and then she got dressed.

"Goodnight, Lord Sasori," she said with a bow before turning to head to the kitchen with Naga. She ate quickly, enjoying the quiet from the lack of those servants on account of them still recovering. After she finished, she headed back to her room to take a quick nap.
Gaara walked along the water's edge with a basket tucked into the bend of his elbow. He smiled, thinking about having a moment alone with Azumi again. He was enjoying their stolen moments at the shop but he really wanted to freely express how he felt about her without the threat of his cousin hanging over them. They were playing a very risky game every time they got too close to each other at the shop. He stopped at the spot that they usually met in, reaching into the basket to pull out a palm mat and laying it out on the ground.

Azumi approached him just as he sat down on the mat. She crept up behind him and kneeled down, wrapping her arms around him just as he did to her earlier.

He tensed up before relaxing against her. He tilted his head back, letting his lips find hers. "You smell amazing," he said softly.

"Thank you," she smiled, still smelling the cologne she made for him. "As do you." She moved to sit next to him.

"All thanks to you," he grinned, opening the basket. "Did you have dinner?" he asked, as he pulled out a lidded dish and a small jug of wine.

"Very little," she answered. "And then I slept it off during my nap," she chuckled.

"Ah, I should have made something savory then," he said with a small pout. He pulled the top off of the dish to reveal a pile of zalabya.

Azumi's eyes widened a little as she looked at the dish. "You made this?" she asked softly. "This looks amazing."

"I brought wine too," he smiled. "But I forgot the cups so I hope you don't mind sharing the bottle." He looked at her a little worried.

She smirked at him, placing her finger under his chin and pressing a gentle kiss to his lips. He smiled dreamily, pushing back into the kiss. "I do not mind at all," she said softly. "I have not had a drink in..." She paused to think about how long it had been. "...months," she sighed.

"Then I'd say you deserve one and should get the first sip," he smirked. He picked up the bottle and broke the wax seal before passing it to her.

She chuckled softly, taking the bottle and taking her first sip of alcohol since she left her village. It left a dry burn in her throat and she grunted quietly. "Ah, that is so good," she groaned, tilting her head back a little bit and then handing him the bottle back.

"Did you drink often in your village?" he asked, popping one of the sweet pancake balls into his mouth. "I don't do it often but I like to keep a stash of my own stuff."

"Not very often," she hummed. "It was more occasional. During big social events, I would drink a little if I really did not want to be there. After I performed, I would drink a little to calm my nerves."

Gaara nodded thoughtfully. "I do the same thing for the parties here," he hummed. "I can't drink much for my nerves," he laughed. "I'll admit though...every time something happened to one of Sasori's slaves I...drank myself stupid. Like it made a difference." He paused, frowning. "Ah...I'm
"It tastes amazing," she grinned, eating one of the sweets. "And so does this." He passed the bottle to her and she took another long sip. She had not realized how much she missed alcohol—or rather how much of her nerves she was suppressing. "I feel like we did not really get to spend much time together today," she chuckled. "Lord Kenzou took you away and then Lord Sasori took me away."

"I haven't, no," he admired, smiling at her still. He looked away from her up at the moon. "Kenzou suggested I give it a try today, though. Did you before all of this?"

"Neither can I," she said softly. She pulled away from him, kissing him gently before releasing him and sitting back down. She handed him the wine and ate another pancake ball. "If I am honest...I cannot wait to see the look on your cousin's face when he is told that he can no longer own slaves," she hummed.

"Sorry. I got a little dark there." He popped another pancake. "Does it taste good?"

She chuckled softly. "I will drink to that," she said, putting her hand over his on the wine and using him to take a sip from the jug. "To have my title again in his presence would feel amazing."

"You will always have your title as long as I'm in the vicinity, my Lady," he smirked. He leaned forward to pull her into another kiss. He pushed into it a little more passionately, licking some of the lingering wine from her lips.

She smiled against his lips, gently cupping his face and pushing into the kiss as well. She let out a small breathy chuckle as they pulled apart. "You really know how to make a girl swoon," she smirked.

He blushed a little brighter. "You're giving me too much credit." He smiled, squeezing her hand gently. "I hope tomorrow isn't too eventful," he said softly.

"I cannot get my hopes up too high for that," she chuckled, remembering Sasori's plan for the party with the composition she made and tested on the servants. "However, I do not think any fights will happen this time involving Lord Sasori since your aunt and uncle will be there."

"Oh, no. With them there, he will have to get a lot craftier to entertain himself," Gaara sighed. "I'm sure he's got some sort of tasteless prank concocted."

"Oh, he certainly does," she hummed, taking another sip of the wine. "You may want to bring one of these and drink only from that."

He raised an eyebrow. "Noted and will do." He took another sip. "Any other hints or plots I should be wary of?"

"None that I am aware of," she said. "But it would probably be safe not to eat any of the food either. I saw what this thing can do and while momentarily hilarious, it is not pretty. It would probably be best to eat beforehand," she chuckled.

"That sounds like him," he sighed. "We're lucky that Komushi won't be there." He cracked a smile again. "That party would be razed to the ground."

"Ugh, I can only imagine," she said. She sighed and took one last pancake sweet for herself. "I am also not getting my hopes up for him finding a woman but I am dreading the wrath from his mother."

"I don't think his mother has high hopes either," Gaara chuckled. "Actually...she has high hopes but a very real understanding of how terrible her son is with women." He laughed harder. "Which she really doesn't understand since women flock to him because he's got such a pretty face." He rolled his eyes.

"A pretty face does not make a good husband," she scoffed, laying down on her back. "He needs a woman at least half as scary as his mother. Someone who would keep him in his place. And it seems those types of women are not exactly fooled by his pretty face."

He scoffed, letting out a short laugh as he set the bottle of wine back in the basket. "No woman with that much sense would want to deal with him." He leaned back on one of his hands then used the other to gently stroke her hair. "But I would pay every wage I earn for the rest of my life to see Sasori with a woman like that."

"I think Lord Komushi may actually get a wife before Lord Sasori decides to finally court a woman," she chuckled.
"I'll believe that when I see it," he chuckled. "They might just marry each other."

"I knew it from the moment I saw them together that they were made for each other," she laughed as she stretched hard. "Are you a cuddler?" she smirked, opening her arms for him.

He chuckled, leaning down to kiss her once more. "I can be. Why? Are you?"

She bit her lip in a smile, wrapping her arms around him to pull him close and resting his head on her. He stifled a yelp as she pulled him down. "I am," she said softly, gently running her fingers through his hair. He blinked a few times before relaxing against her chest. He hummed softly, closing his eyes as she stroked his hair. They stayed like that for a while, enjoying the company of one another. Azumi got lost in her thoughts as she watched the scarce clouds move across the sky and the moon drift to the other side of them, mindlessly raking her fingers through Gaara's hair. She did not think she would get to experience moments such as this as a slave. She loved how she did not feel like she was a slave around him. He treated her like a human. She felt him shift on her a little, bringing her back from her thoughts. "Hm," she hummed. "Thank you for the zalabya," she said softly, kissing the top of his head, "and the wine."

"Always a pleasure, my Lady," he smiled up at her. He shifted his weight a little again to press a kiss to her jaw. "We should probably head back," he said softly, his voice almost sounding mournful. "I hope we can see each other at the party for more than a passing moment." He pushed himself up onto his hands so he could lean down and kiss her lips fully. It was a slow, lingering kiss. "And maybe do this again sooner."

"I would love to do this again," she whispered through a smile. She sat up with him, sliding her hand from his hair to cup his face. She leaned in to kiss him one more time before they both stood up. She helped him fold up the mat and he placed it back into the basket. She looked back at the mansion and hummed, noticing that they were in an almost perfect view from Sasori's bathroom. Had they been just a few feet over, they would have been seen. "He has seen me out here," she told him. "But he has not seen you. So I do not think he suspects anything."

Gaara's eyes flashed in fear. "He's seen you?" He took a deep breath, doing his best to stay calm. "We should move further down or back towards my house then," he said, packing the rest of the little picnic away.

"Moving a little further down is probably the better idea," she said. "If he notices me going too far in the direction of your home, it would make it worse. Right now, he does not seem bothered by me being out here because he suspects I am alone or with my snake. I need him to continue to trust that I will not leave." She took his hand and kissed his knuckles. "Do not worry too much about it for now."

He gave her another hard, worried look but it melted the instant her lips touched his knuckles. "I...
He looked like he wanted to say more but stopped short. He paused, thinking of his next sentence. "I just want you to be safe. We'll move down a little the next time we meet like this." He pulled her close and kissed her deeply. He smiled as he broke the kiss and kissed the tip of her nose softly before stepping back to pick up the basket. "Ready?" he asked, slipping his hand into hers.

"I am," she grinned, squeezing his hand gently as they started walking. They went back around the mansion to where her room was and stopped at her window. She pressed her back against the wall next to her window and pulled him into a kiss. Naga poked his head out of the window, watching silently.

When the broke apart Gaara chuckled softly. "I think someone has been waiting for you," he whispered, looking up at Naga. "I'll leave you to your needy snake," he teased, stealing one last
kiss. "Sleep well, my Lady." He loved the way her title rolled off of his tongue.

She chuckled softly. "Goodnight," she smiled. She turned to climb through the window, letting Naga wrap around her as she moved. He hissed teasingly at her. "Shut up," she whispered, unable to hide her grin.

Below, Gaara grinned, drunker on love than the wine they had consumed could have made him. He chuckled to himself as he walked back to his own home.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The next morning, Sasori rose with the sun. It was not often that he was up that early but he was feeling particularly irritated. He did not want to deal with going to the party that night. Knowing he would not be able to fall back asleep, he pulled himself from the bed and decided to fetch his own breakfast.

One of the three servants that usually harassed Azumi was in there, drinking tea. They looked up from their cup, a little surprised to see Sasori in there and not Azumi. "Getting food for yourself this morning, Lord Sasori?" they asked. "What happened to your slave?"

Sasori gave the servant a tired and deadly look. "What does it matter what happened to her?" he asked, the early morning rasp in his voice making him growl softly.

"I suppose it never matters what happens to any of them," they hummed. "But not seeing her today makes me think that you finally ended her life. As you seem to do often." The other two servants walked in and grabbed their own tea, mumbling their greetings to Sasori.

He wrinkled his nose at them. "Even if I did, again, it would not matter to you," he grumbled, pouring him and Azumi cups of coffee and making a bowl of breakfast for each of them. "And you've made it rather uncomfortable for her to come in here, considering you three are so keen on placing bets on my business," he hissed.

"In all of the years we've known you, you have not cared about how your slaves have felt," the first one scoffed. The second one elbowed them, trying to get them to stand down. "And you're bringing her breakfast and coffee."

"In all your years of knowing me," he stalked towards the table, making the other two creep back as the first one did their best to hold their glare, "you have not learned a damn thing about me." He kicked the leg of the table, making the whole thing jump and spilling their tea. "Stay out of my business or I will make you mine! I don’t care what my grandmother has to say about it!" His voice was a low hiss. "If you don’t want to wind up another one of my experiments, I suggest you heed this one and only warning."

The second and third one put their hands on the shoulders of their friend, giving them a warning squeeze. "We will not pry anymore," the second one said. The glare from the first one did not waver.

"Glad we have an understanding." His mouth turned up in a mockery of a smile. He turned and walked down the hall to Azumi’s room. He opened the door with no warning or announcement. "Get up," he said just loud enough that he expected her to hear it as he put her coffee and bowl down on the window ledge.

She was sitting on her bed with Naga coiled in her lap. His mouth was wide open and she was checking inside of it. She turned her head as Sasori set the bowl and mug down. "Good morning," she said to him. She looked at the bowl and mug. 'He brought that for me?' she thought, setting Naga to the side and standing up. "You are up early," she noted, looking at the sun that had only just begun to rise.
He raised an eyebrow, taking in what she was doing to Naga. “Yes, well I didn’t exactly want to be up too early but I am.” He took a sip of his coffee and stared at Naga. “What were you checking for just now?” he asked.

“I was checking to see if his venom gland was swollen,” she said. She picked up her bowl and started eating. “He said he felt pain behind his eyes. He may just be overproducing venom. Nothing milking him will not fix.” Naga hissed dramatically. “You will be fine,” she said, rolling her eyes.

Sasori raised an eyebrow, smiling a little at the dramatic snake. "His venom gland..." He looked Azumi over and the curious thought occurred to him. "Do your people have those?" Her eyes were an obvious mutation so it was not entirely out of scope that she could have other snake-like mutations.

She paused for a moment, sharing a look with Naga as she sipped her coffee. That was not information she was willing to disclose with someone who would clearly abuse it. “I have heard those rumors,” she said to Sasori. “And that is what they are. Rumors.”

Sasori narrowed his eyes. That was not a straight answer. "Mhm," he hummed. A smirk pulled at his lips. He would just have to explore and find out for himself. He filed the newly burning question away for later use. "We need to start getting ready for this party," he sighed. It was early but he was going to take a long time deciding what he wanted to wear and he wanted it out of the way quickly.

“Right...” she sighed, finishing her food quickly and sipping more of her coffee. She picked up Naga and wrapped him around her to follow Sasori to his room with her coffee in hand.

Sasori sat down on his bed and sighed. "Let's make this fun. You pick." He waved his hand in the direction of his wardrobe. "Pick three outfits and model them for me," he smirked.

Azumi stifled her laugh as she finished off her coffee. “Model your clothes for you,” she smirked. She unwrapped Naga from her and set him down on the daybed. “Alright,” she chuckled. It was dumb, but it seemed like fun. She went into his wardrobe and shifted through his different outfits. “This is a lot of the same thing,” she mumbled to herself. Sasori hardly ever wore any proper shirts, leaving his chest and torso area exposed most of the time. She was only going to try on pants, knowing whatever top she chose would be rejected by him. He watched her idly as she shifted through the clothes. She found an outfit that was mostly white with gold accents, much like what he made her wear on a daily basis. She took it out and stripped her own clothes off to put on her first choice.

He chuckled, watching her strip. "It might get a little tight around the hip area," he warned, chuckling. "Try not to rip any seams."

She scoffed and looked at him. “Excuse me,” she said. “I will not rip any seams, thank you very much.” She continued to put on his clothes. “You are bigger than I am so I am drowning in this,” she mumbled.

"I took your measurements," he teased. "I'm not that much bigger than you," he countered, mildly offended.

She frowned, looking him over. She had never given thought about his measurements and what they were compared to hers because she did not think she would ever have to model his clothes for him. 'I refuse to believe,' she thought. "You are taller than me," she said. "Your hips are not at the same height as mine."
"You're right," he grinned. Her calculating look was more than a little amusing. "However, my hips are far narrower than yours." He leaned over, reaching for his ledger. "Your rear is also much more pronounced than mine which will account for the material added for my height if not a little more."

"More?" she scoffed. She looked down at her lower body, placing her hands firmly on her hips and then bringing them out to look at the gap between them. "Unbelievable," she mumbled, rolling her eyes. "Then is that a no to this outfit?"

Sasori chuckled, waving his hand dismissively. "I've worn that one too much this season," he said with pure mirth in his tone. "Try on another."

"Hmph." She went back into the wardrobe and took another outfit out. It was white and blue. She expected him to not choose it but because she liked it, she changed into it. He watched her pull the outfit out. His mouth started to twist in disapproval but he let her start to put it on. It had been a long time since that particular outfit had seen the light of day. As soon as she put it on, she knew it was not the one from the look on his face and the way it felt on her. She liked the outfit before she put it on. It was tight in the exact area he told her it would be but she would not admit it to him. She could hardly get it past her hips and she did not want to try to push further. "This is not the one," she said in agreement with his expression.

"Heh," she hummed, not exactly wanting to put it on all the way. "I..." She stopped herself and sighed then proceeded to pull the pants on all the way. There was a very small tearing noise. "My apologies," she said, feeling for where the tear happened.

Sasori let out a low, soft laugh. He knew that would happen and it was oh, so satisfying. "Still think your hips aren't bigger than mine?" he taunted. "There is a thread and needle in that drawer." He pointed to the top left-hand drawer of his desk. "That outfit is a hard no," he sighed. "I only wear it when Mei is attending a party." He started to pout a little.

She sighed and started to remove the clothes. 'Then I suppose you will never wear this again since she actually has a man now,' she thought. She set the outfit to the side to fix it later. She went back into the wardrobe and chose another outfit. It was red with gold accents, something that would match the outfit he wanted her to wear. She thought about it for a moment, glancing at him before looking back at the outfit. 'He is supposed to be finding a wife, but he will not find one if he matches his slave.' She stared at it for another moment. 'He does not even want to find a wife.' She rolled her eyes and took the outfit out anyway, putting it on quickly.

He stared at her silently for a moment. He also considered the fact that they would be matching. It bothered him a little but not enough that he actually cared. They would look like a cohesive front. "Leave that one out," he told her. "Don't take it off yet. I need to pick jewelry, too."

She nodded and kept the outfit on, moving over to the dresser where he kept his jewelry. She looked at what was already laid out on it, finding mostly gold. "All of this would match," she muttered, picking up a long necklace. He was curious to see what she would pick. He knew he had an overwhelming amount of gold to choose from. It came with the territory but he did have a few pieces that he favored over others. She put the necklace on and looked at the rings, picking what she found matched it the best. "All you need is a pair of earrings," she smirked.

Sasori touched his earlobe as he looked her over. "I should have a few pairs in there," he said
thoughtfully. "I haven't worn them in a long time. Pick something," he commanded again.

She grinned, looking through the pairs of earrings he had. Finding the pair that best matched the necklace and rings, she put them on immediately. She had taken her earrings out before she left her village. It felt so good to be wearing earrings again.

He hummed softly, getting up slowly. He walked over to her and tapped his forefinger against her jaw to turn her head. He hummed again, taking his time to look over the choices she made. He moved his hand from her face to trace down her neck and chest. He picked up the pendant of the necklace. "This is will do," he finally said with a smirk. "Go get your clothes then come back and run a bath." She nodded, taking a step back to pick up the clothes she stripped out of and move toward the daybed to change back into her own clothes. She needed to grab the red outfit that she wore on the last day of the night market and the box of makeup that he gave her as well as take Naga back to her room because he was not going to the party with them. "Don't change back until you come back from your room," Sasori smirked. He looked over her half dressed form. He did not have a particular attraction to seeing her half naked. It would just amuse him because all of the other house's occupants would see her.

She frowned and looked back at him. 'You would find that amusing, you asshole,' she thought. She sighed heavily, picking Naga up and wrapping him around her. "I will be back then," she said, leaving the room. "Unbelievable," she grumbled as she walked through the halls, draping her shoulders in a way that he would cover her chest. Sasori leaned in the doorway, watching her walk down the hall with a grin. There were several servants passing her as she walked. Generally, they all had the same reaction to her. Eyes went wide then were quickly averted to anywhere that was not her. Azumi made it to her room quickly. She unwrapped Naga and set him on her bed. "Oh..." she said, realizing she would have to walk back without him covering her. She growled quietly to herself and grabbed her outfit and put the perfume she made for herself in the makeup box. "I will see you later," she said to Naga, kissing him on the top of his head and then heading back to Sasori's room with all of the things she grabbed.

Sasori grinned, watching her round the corner to his room in a hurry. He held up a hand. "Slow down there," he grinned. "There is no need to rush," he chuckled through the words.

She huffed, looking up at him and holding her clothes and the box tighter to her. "I was not in a rush," she said.

"Really?" he smirked. "You were practically jingling down the hall. I could hear you all the way from your room." He rolled his eyes as he walked back into his room. He started to strip off his clothing, throwing them to the floor in his usual fashion. "So, back to this morning," he started. "You, as a daughter of the snake, have only heard rumors of your people having venom sacs like real snakes?"

She narrowed her eyes at his back as she followed him into the bathroom. "Yes," she answered. "They were and are only rumors." She began to run his bath, using the new salt and oils she made for him. "We are human," she said unsurely. "And humans do not have venom sacs."

"Humans also don't have slitted pupils that blow wide when they smell something good," he reminded her. "Or golden irises. We've yet to have a chance to properly explore your anatomy." He sat down on a stool as he waited for the bath to fill. "For a child brought up in science, it's rather surprising."

"I focused on other things," she said as she started to strip. "The matter of my own anatomy did not take priority over making medicines and antivenoms." She walked out to the bedroom, stripping out of his clothes and setting the outfit and jewelry out on the bed for him then went back into the
bathroom to set up her own bath.

Sasori was already sinking low into the bath when she walked back into the bathroom. "Well, now you don't have to worry about it," he bubbled into the water. "I will."

She frowned as she stepped into her own bath. 'So much for leaving things to be a mystery,' she thought. Of course, she knew she had a venom sac. She was not looking forward to his constant prying about it. It was not something that someone like him needed to know about. She sunk low into the water, sighing at how warm it was. Sasori settled deeper into the water and sighed as well, trying to mentally prepare himself to the evenings social promise. He honestly hated going to them and he knew his mother had probably pulled strings to have any eligible woman attempt to speak. He could feel himself getting irritated already. "How much of your mother's wrath would you endure if you left the party early?" Azumi asked, moving to the side of her bath that was closer to him and leaning over the edge, resting her chin on her arms.

Sasori groaned, it boarded on a whimper. "She'd skin us both alive. Me for leaving and you by association," he chuckled through gritted teeth. "And because you didn't rat me out that I was trying to leave."

"Mm," she hummed. "Terrifying." She sighed and sunk back into her water, pushing herself off of the wall to swim back a little. She leaned against the other wall of the pool. Suddenly, she heard someone walking into Sasori's room. She peeked over the edge of the pool and gasped quietly, seeing Chiyo walking into the bathroom.

"Oh, good, you're starting early," Chiyo chirped, looking at both Sasori and Azumi.

Sasori stiffened, curling close to the edge of the tub. "Grandmother," he growled. "We talked about you just barging in like this!"

Chiyo rolled her eyes, scoffing. "I've changed you, bathed you and was there the day you were born." She pulled up the stool that Sasori was sitting on earlier. "You'll survive." Azumi sunk a little lower, trying not to be seen too much by Chiyo. Chiyo's eyes snapped to Azumi, watching her sink. "Good morning," she said.

"Uh, good morning, Lady Chiyo," Azumi said, poking her head up a little. "My apologies, I would bow to you but I am—"

"Don't worry about it."

Azumi let out a quiet relieved sigh, sinking back below the water. Sasori glanced at Azumi from the corner of his eye. "Why are you here, Grandmother?"

"Because you're like your mother," she rolled her eyes. "I need to ensure you were starting to get ready so we won't be late." Sasori ground his teeth, glaring at Chiyo. "My son was never late until he married your mother."

Sasori clicked his teeth, earning a glare from Chiyo. "She is always on time. It's you who is always late," he growled. "You were the one who was always asking her to do a million last minute things and running her ragged!"

"It's not that I ask her last minute, it's that she waits until the last minute to do it."

Azumi's jaw dropped, watching them argue back and forth. She knew Sasori would do just about anything for his mother. She would not be surprised if that meant hurting someone who insulted her. Even if that someone was his own grandmother.
"You literally have handed her a list of twenty fucking things to get done right before she was about to leave and expected them to be done!" His voice was starting to rise.

"Don't you dare take that one with me, boy."

Sasori tilted his head, blinking wildly. "I will take that tone!" he rasped. "You bitch about her being late but can never do your own shit. You always dump it on my mother and bitch about it!"

Chiyo stood up from her chair and it fell over, echoing in the large bathroom and making Azumi flinch. The rage between the grandson and grandmother pair made her extremely uncomfortable and she would rather have been thrown into the river than have to be around this.

"Your mother does a fair amount of bitching herself," Chiyo spat. "If only she could do things without having to be told."

Water sloshed out of the tub, spilling all over the floor as Sasori stood up rapidly. Azumi did her best to avert her eyes but there was so much going on and it started to get overwhelming. "She had every right to bitch when an old hag is chewing her out every chance she gets!" he growled, curling his fists tightly. "Get out! I would like to finish my bath in peace!" he snapped.

"How dare you!" Chiyo's voice going shrill. "You live in my house still. You have as much power as that child!" She pointed to Azumi in the other bath.

"It won't be your house for much longer!" Sasori countered. "You practically have one foot in the grave!"

"One thing your mother never taught you was respect!" Chiyo yelled. Azumi slowly moved to the other side of the pool, away from both of them and tried her best to slowly and quietly lift herself out to remove herself from the situation. Chiyo suddenly bent over, yanking one of her slippers from her foot. She threw it hard towards Azumi, hitting her square in the temple. "No one dismissed you, girl!" Chiyo snapped. Sasori's eyes went wide. His breath started to come up short as he felt his rage shake through him. Chiyo turned back to address her impudent grandson when she felt something hard to connect with her cheek. Her head snapped to the side and she stumbled back, losing her footing. She slipped on the water that was spilled around the tub and fell, hitting her head hard on the limestone floor.

Azumi heard the sound of the old woman's body hitting the ground and gasped, covering her mouth to stop a scream. Her gaze immediately moved up to Sasori, seeing that his reaction was nothing like hers. She took a couple of deep breaths, trying to calm herself down as much as possible. She looked back at Chiyo. There was a small pool of blood forming around her. "What the fuck," she whispered. "What the fuck just happened."

"Tch," Sasori sucked his teeth. "Fuck, I hate getting blood out of this floor," he groaned, stepping out of the tub. Chiyo groaned softly, in pain as Sasori nudged her onto her back with his foot. He smirked, seeing the light starting to fade from her eyes. "Azumi, get your snake," he said without looking away from his dying grandmother.

Azumi took a second to process everything before getting up and wrapping a towel around herself. She did not bother to get dressed and ran straight to her room in her towel. "Naga..." she said softly. The snake looked up at her from his coil on the bed and immediately sensing her panic, moved quickly to slither toward her and up her body. Once he was securely wrapped around her, she ran back to Sasori's room, taking a deep breath before stepping into the room.

Sasori had moved Chiyo to his bedroom when she walked in. "Make him bite her," he demanded
softly, putting his robe on.

She stroked Naga's head gently, moving toward the body. "Go on," she whispered, encouraging the snake to move in close to Chiyo. He looked at her and then back at Azumi who gave him an encouraging nod. Naga looked back at Chiyo and bared his fangs as Sasori lifted one of Chiyo's arms. Naga sunk his fangs into the arm and injected venom into the old woman. After a couple of seconds, he released her and moved back to Azumi.

Chiyo's eyes shot up, her body bucking hard upwards. She groaned, a tired sad ghost of a scream she could no longer produce before her body flopped back down hard onto the ground. Sasori rolled his eyes, ignoring the soft death rattle of his grandmother breathing. "Perfect." Sasori pushed her body back up and closed Chiyo's eyes. "Okay, now we need to sneak her into her room."

Azumi looked up at him, trying not to panic. "And how do you suppose we should carry her past the many servants that roam the halls?" she asked softly. He was so calm about this and she was having an internal conniption.

He rolled his eyes again. "For once I actually wish you were Komushi," he grumbled. "We're going to clean her up and then just carry her. We'll make it look like she hurt her foot and we're helping her back to her room."

"Naga!" Azumi whispered with a panicked hiss. Immediately, the cobra struck the servant, biting into their neck and injecting venom. His body coiled around the servant's to constrict it. The servant's scream came out as a choked gurgle as Naga squeezed tight around their throat.

Sasori's eyes lit up, watching the display. He chuckled softly as he stepped over the servant's body with Azumi and Chiyo's. "Nice move," he complimented. "This actually works out even better for us," he grinned. "We just killed two birds with one stone and I know exactly how to stage it." Sasori gestured for Azumi to help him lay Chiyo in her bed. "We'll go to the party as usual. And when we come home, we'll discover this 'unfortunate event.' Of course, we'll have to tell my uncles," Sasori folded his arms, rolling his eyes. "And because Sandaime won't trust my word, Gaara will have to double check my diagnosis of the snake sneaking up on them and making Chiyo slam her head on her bedside table." He was now speaking more to himself than Azumi. He hummed softly as the gears turned rapidly in his head.

"What will happen to the snake?" Azumi asked, looking down as Naga as he uncoiled from around the servant and made his way back up Azumi's body. She did not want him taken away from her
because they were pinning these two murders on him.

Sasori watched Naga cooly. He huffed heavily, drumming his fingers. This was another inconvenience. "Relax," he said, looking at the servant still collapsed in the doorway. "Gaara would never tell and I can easily play it off as some random snake." He frowned, leveling Azumi with a cool, hard look. "You need to keep him hidden until all of this cools down. They will want the snakes in the shop accounted for as well. Anything I say will be compared against Gaara's word since he's the only one who has any authority on the body and poisons aside from me." He reached for her hand, pulling her close. He grinned menacingly, laughing softly. "You just committed your first murder with me." He cupped her face, leaning in close to look into her eyes. "How does it feel?"

She breathed heavily through her nose. "The servant meant nothing to me," she said. "But your grandmother...I am not sure how I feel about that." Chiyo was not only Sasori's grandmother but Gaara's as well. She was Sandaime's mother. Azumi recalled the moments before Chiyo died and how she started an argument with Sasori over his mother. Then she recalled the slipper flying at her face. "My only qualm with this is that we are not clothed," she said.

Sasori blinked at her then took a step back to look at them. They were only clothed in a towel and his robe. He laughed hard, the sound echoing off the walls. "Then I suggest we hurry back to the room and get dressed." He lowered his voice. "Before the other two show up." He started towards the door with a spring in his step. He felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He might actually enjoy this party.

Azumi followed him quickly. They made their way back to the room and cleaned themselves up. "It is still quite early," she hummed. Naga hissed at Azumi. "I am glad you no longer feel the pain." She stroked Naga's head gently. "Injecting them with venom helped reduce the swelling of your venom sac."

"Oh," Sasori grinned over his shoulder. "That means this whole situation was a three for one!" He laughed a genuine laugh again. It was a light, happy sound. Completely unfitting for the situation. "But you're right, it is still early. Let's re-rinse ourselves and maybe you can take your time making yourself look nice." He was practically floating with glee.

"I will clean up the spilled blood first," she told him. "Before it gets to a point where it is too hard to clean." She moved into the bathroom and drained his original bath to run him a new one. While she waited for it to fill, she cleaned up Chiyo's blood from the floor and dried up the areas where water was spilled. 'I cannot believe all of that just happened,' she thought. Once she was done, she drained her original bath and ran a new one for herself.

Sasori walked back into the bathroom, hanging up his robe once more. He sighed happily, looking at the freshly clean spot. "What a turn of events," he hummed. "Let's see..." He started to contemplate all the things that would have to happen once she was discovered. "This house is going to be a nightmare for a little while." He frowned but the grin quickly returned to his lips. "The other slaves are going to hate to find out that I own all of them now," he gasped with excitement. "And I will have access to all of the old hag's stores!"

"Do you think they will get suspicious?" she hummed, removing her towel to step into the bath. Just like the first of Chiyo's personal servants, she had no hesitations with getting rid of the other two.

"Without a doubt," he said easily. "They will think I did it regardless of this being the best accident of my life and I had planned it down to a T."
She looked up at him, seeing how happy he was about the whole situation. She washed herself up and then relaxed in the water. On the outside, she tried to be as calm as Sasori was but on the inside, she was battling her own morality. She was not a trained killer but this was not her first murder. In self-defense, she would have had no problem. Chiyo was an accident. The servant was on purpose. From experience, she knew what was going to happen to her mental stability. There were going to be moments of extreme guilt and panic, at least for a little while. And then after about a week or so, it will all just be a distant memory. Until then, she needed a way to suppress it.

'I can make anxiety pills,' she thought. She had done it before and it worked for a while. She sighed heavily and sunk underneath the water's surface for a moment.

Sasori cleaned himself up once more. He smirked, watching Azumi try to maintain her cool.
"You're bad at this," he purred. "You'll have to get it under control before we leave."

She came back up and scoffed, rolling her eyes. "I can do that," she said. She stepped out of the bath and grabbed a towel. As she dried herself off, she tried to recall the recipe she used last time she had to make something for her anxiety. Most of what she remembered she knew Sasori had in his workshop. She took a fresh towel out for Sasori and replaced his robe with a clean one that did not touch the body of a corpse. "I will be fine," she said.

He dried himself off and followed her out of the bathroom. He laid down on his bed, tucking his arms behind his head as she walked into the workshop. "I have concentrated valerian root on the upper left shelf if you need it," he called to her.

She found all of the ingredients she needed and started working on making medication for her anxiety. It would help her get through the next week until she no longer felt anything about the situation. It was not the most healthy way to deal with her problems, but admittedly, she had more of a hard time coming to terms with her feelings than she did figuring out ways to suppress them. It took her about half an hour to make the pills. She only made enough to last her the next couple of days and as soon as they were done, she took one. Then she walked out of the workshop and fell onto the daybed with a sigh. "Maybe this will distract everyone from you having to find a wife," she said after a few moments of silence.

Sasori put his ledger down in his lap. "It might," he hummed. "For about a week. And then my mother will be back on my case the moment Grandmother's tombstone is rolled into place." He rolled his eyes as he pushed a hand through his hair. "I'll take what little reprieve I can get. She'll probably come at me a lot stronger since I'll be the one inheriting this house."

"I see," she frowned. She could feel the pills kicking in and her body started to relax. She sighed again and rolled onto her side. She took a couple of moments to clear her mind and relax. After a couple of minutes, she got up and moved toward the vanity so she could start doing her makeup.
"Is there anything you wanted to work on before we leave?" she asked as she opened up the box of makeup he gave her.

Sasori looked up from his ledger again. He took a deep breath, tapping the cover of the book against his chin. "Did you have something in mind?"

"No," she hummed, looking at him in the mirror. "I think that your...'party trick' is enough for me," she said. She shifted through the items in the box and found kajal kohl eyeliner. She smiled at it and immediately started to tightline her eyes.

He chuckled, watching her line her eyes. "Do you like that kind of pencil?" he asked her, changing the subject.

"I do," she said. "It lasts longer than other ones. And it intensifies a gaze." She did her makeup as
she used to do when wearing makeup was a daily thing for her. "Which I always appreciated."

"Intensifies a gaze," he parroted. "Adorable. I made some a while back but I don't wear it myself too often." He started to consider making some to sell in the shop. "Gaara wears it, though."

Normal small talk. Like there was not a body rotting just across the house.

"I have noticed," she smirked. "Do you make it for him?" Once she finished her eyes, she moved on to the rest of her face, keeping the rest of it light since it was too hot to wear heavy face makeup.

"It was a small project we did together," he nodded. "It started out as a test run for some art project Kankuro was working on and it sort of just became part of Gaara's look. Many others that live here wear a similar style. It's surprisingly common."

"It is a good look on him," she said softly with a smirk as she finished her makeup and moved on to her hair. Normally, she left it all out and did not bother with it much. But her normal go-to for events, when she was still a noble, was to just put half of it up. So that is what she did.

He continued to watch her intently. "I suppose it is," he murmured. "Tell me more about your village. Did you have these sort of parties, too?"

"Yes," she answered simply. "And as I mentioned before, I did not enjoy going to them. They were usually birthdays, engagements or wedding parties."

"Right," he laughed. Maybe he was a little more stressed than he was letting himself to believe. He stood up and stretched lazily. "What about funerals?" he smirked.

"Longevity is sort of something that runs in my village," she hummed, looking up at him through the mirror. "We did not usually have many funerals," she smirked. She stood up as well and unwrapped her towel from her, picking up the skirt of the red outfit and getting dressed.

This piqued Sasori's interest. "Really?" he breathed. "I wonder if it has something to do with your physiology," he grinned. "I'm convinced Chiyo would have kept living had that accident not happened." He filed the thought away with the venom sac question. He was excited to learn more about her body.

She finished getting dressed and turned to him. "My physiology is the same as yours," she said. "As any other human's." He did not argue with her. He simply smirked at her as he began pulling on the outfit she chose for him. He sat down in front of the mirror as Azumi had earlier and pushed back part of his hair, clipping it back in his usual party style. They spent the next couple of hours getting ready and keeping themselves occupied before they had to leave.

Chapter End Notes

This took a turn. And that turn was dumb wild. But we're not sorry.
Later on that night, when it was finally time to leave for the party, Azumi walked Naga back to her room. "No one should come for you," she said softly to him, kissing the top of his head. "Just stay hidden." He hissed softly to her as she left. ‘I would die before they could take him from me,’ she thought as she walked through the halls and met Sasori at the front of the house.

Sasori waited for her on the front steps of the mansion. The moment he saw her, he started down the steps to the servants waiting to carry him on the platform.

"My Lord, is Lady Chiyo not traveling with you?" one of the servants dared to ask.

"No, she will be leaving separately," he said easily. He leaned back on the small back of the chair in the middle of the platform, the very picture of nonchalant tranquility.

Azumi took her spot next to the platform. Once she was there, the other servants were given the command to start walking. The party was in the same place as the last one they went to—Oonoki’s house. The same place Azumi and Gaara had their first real conversation, where Sasori got in a fight with Deidara, and where he dragged her home from to burn her chest with acid. Needless to say, the memories involved with the location were not the most pleasant for Azumi. However, she made her medications a little stronger than she normally would have so she was in a pretty neutral mood herself over it. They got to the party fairly quickly, just as the air started to cool down and the sun was not visible anymore but still cast a little bit of light. The servants lowered Sasori’s platform just below the steps of the house.

"Welcome back," Kurostsuchi greeted Sasori as he walked up the steps.

He suppressed the overwhelming urge to trip her down the stairs and plastered on a friendly smile. "Always a pleasure," he said smoothly, focusing on the giddy feeling he got every time he thought of what was waiting at home. The mansion was already overflowing with people and music filled the air.

Azumi groaned softly, seeing the number of people already there. Once again, she recognized almost no one. She stayed close to Sasori as they made their way through the crowd. She knew her purpose there was to act as a deflector of other women so he did not really have to find a wife and she had no idea how to do that. They passed by a table laid out with drinks and food. She watched as Sasori discreetly contaminated random cups and plates with the poison he had Azumi make. The very poison that would cause the consumer to literally shit themselves. His face never wavered from the genial neutrality he had forced it into. He scanned the room to find a nice spot they could hide away in when he noticed someone beelining for them rapidly.

"Oh, son of mine," his mother called over the din of the crowd.

"Mother," Sasori bowed slightly, reaching for her hand to press a kiss to the back of it.

She grinned and wrapped her arms around him in a hug. "You smell amazing," she said when she pulled away.

"Thank you," he said with a chuckle.

"Have you had any luck finding a wife?" Somehow, both Azumi and Sasori expected that question next.
"Mother, I only just arrived."

“I noticed you were speaking with Kurosaki though.” Her tone was a little teasing.

Sasori sighed rubbing his face. “Your eyesight never ceases to amaze me, Mother.” He cracked a real smile. “Unfortunately, she is out of the running because she is practically still a child,” he whined just a little.

“Oh, I suppose she is rather young,” his mother pouted slightly.

"I cannot marry someone with a ten-year age gap," he chuckled.

"I know, I know," she sighed. Her gaze fell on Azumi and then back to Sasori. She quickly noted the coordination in their outfits and again how striking Azumi was. Even more so now in the fine garment and her makeup done. She leaned in to whisper into her son’s ear. “If I find you are hiding behind that little pet you bought,” her tone a pure threat, “I won’t hesitate to take her away and force to the floor alone.”

Sasori’s blood ran cold. The nursing of his grandmother was easier to deal with than the idea of facing socialization alone. "I would never," he said softly to her.

His mother hummed as she pulled away again. She gently patted his cheek. "I would hope not," she said with a smile. "For your sake."

“May I cut in?” His father said, walking up to them. He and Sasori looked exactly alike but their demeanors were drastically different.

His mother giggled, taking his husband’s offered arm. “Why, of course.” She opened a fan to hide her wide smile, polite and flirtatious.

Azumi gasped slightly, seeing Sasori's father. 'A family of handsome men, indeed,' she thought.

His eyes fell on her and she tried her best to keep her composure, at least in front of his wife. "And who might this young lady be?" he asked.

Azumi bowed to him. "My name is Azumi, my Lord," she answered.

"She's my slave," Sasori added.

He gave her an easygoing smile. It looked so much like Sasori’s without any of the menace or malice Sasori’s usually held. He nodded slightly to her. “It is a pleasure to meet you. I hope he’s not making life too hard on you.” He gave a teasing smile to Sasori which made Sasori’s own expression twist into something lofty.

“She’s a slave, Father?” Sasori said, stubbornly reminding him again.

“I heard you the first time,” his father told him with a smirk. “Your mother tells me you’re looking for a wife.” His smirk turned into a genuine smile. “Good luck,” he said. He looked at his wife and nodded toward the dance floor. “Shall we?” he asked.

Sasori’s mother giggled and Azumi knew exactly what was happening. Sandaiame did the same thing to her whenever he smiled. “We shall,” she grinned, letting her husband lead her away. She gave Sasori one last warning look before disappearing.

Sasori rolled his eyes but could not keep the smile off of his face. "She's going to check in with me
later," he sighed. "And she's going to trap me by dancing." He released another heavy sigh. "If the party makes it that far," he purred, glancing back at the refreshment table. "If you get hungry, tell me," he told her. "I don't want to risk you getting caught up in the fun."

She nodded and followed him further through the room to the corner he claimed. He sat down in a chair and she stood next to him, looking around at the crowd. She was looking for Gaara but she did not want to admit that to Sasori. She noticed a couple of women looking at Sasori, smiling flirtatiously at him. There was an audible scoff coming from both her and Sasori. They lingered like decor in the corner for the better part of twenty minutes into the party.

"If you stay over here much longer, I'm going to start thinking you're some sort of statue," Kankuro said as he sashayed over to them with a drink in his hand and a woman on his arm.

Sasori huffed, irritated that his family was pestering him again to socialize and that no one had stumbled across his little prank yet. "Leave me be, Kankuro," he grumbled. Another young lady giggled behind her fan as she passed by.

Azumi looked at the woman that Kankuro was with. ‘So he does have someone,’ she thought, remembering Gaara mentioned it being a possible lie to deter their father.

“The women want you, Sasori,” Kankuro smirked, nodding to the woman that walked by.

“Unfortunate for them,” Sasori countered.

‘Is it really, though?’ Azumi thought.

“Aren’t you supposed to be wife hunting?” Kankuro asked. “Can’t efficiently do that sitting in the corner.”

The woman on Kankuro's arm giggled softly. Her eyes landed on Azumi. "Did you dress matching to your slave girl?" she dared to ask, stifling another giggle. "I'm surprised they are looking your way at all with you two looking so much like a married couple."

Kankuro blinked and finally looked at what his cousin and Azumi were wearing. "Wow," he laughed openly. "You're trying this hard and women are still throwing themselves at you. What a hard life you must live." He poked Sasori's nose.

Sasori's eye twitched hard and he swatted Kankuro's hand away. "I like things to be cohesive and uniform!" he snapped.

"You like to match the woman you take to parties," Kankuro corrected. "And right now it looks like you're very taken."

Azumi looked at Kankuro and nodded in agreement, folding her arms. She sighed softly.

"What does it matter to you?" Sasori asked Kankuro.

"It doesn't," Kankuro smirked. "But you know your mother is going to get on your ass about it."

"Then that's my problem to deal with."

Kankuro raised his hands in surrender. "Hey, it's your funeral," he chuckled, linking arms with his date once more and turning to leave. "I'll make sure they wrap you up real nice," he called over his shoulder teasingly as he dove back into the crowd.
"Unbelievable," Sasori grumbled, folding his arms and sinking into his seat.

Azumi sighed and looked down at him. "You will have to make it look like you are at least putting in some effort," she said softly to him. "If your mother sees you sitting here the entire time, she will not let you off easily." She did not want to admit to him that she would find dying by his mother's hand because of him more embarrassing than just dying by his hand.

"Tch," he clicked his teeth. He felt like a petulant child with the way he was behaving but he really did not want to do this. However, he knew Azumi was right. He could feel his mother's gaze from across the room. He glanced up, seeing her watch him as she spoke to Sandaime. With a sigh heavier than it should have been, he stood up. He looked around and walked up to the closest young lady who did not offend his senses. "Care for a dance?" he asked as smoothly as he could muster.

The young lady gasped, a grin slowly appearing on her face. "Lord Sasori asking me for a dance?" she whispered. "How could I refuse?" She took his offered arm and followed him onto the dancefloor.

Azumi watched as he disappeared into the crowd and sighed in relief, leaning back against the wall and closing her eyes. "Finally," she whispered. She just wanted him to stage an effort so she did not have to endure his mother.

"I thought he would never get up," Gaara whispered in her ear the moment the crowd swallowed Sasori's mop of red hair. He smiled at her, a bottle of wine tucked under his arm.

She could not help the grin that appeared on her face as soon as she heard his voice. She looked at him, resisting the urge to hug and kiss him. "It took talking to him like he was a child to finally get him up," she chuckled.

"That sounds about right," he chuckled, producing two small glasses. "Care for a drink?" he asked, holding up the bottle.

"Absolutely," she smiled. She took the glass he handed her and watched as he poured the wine for both of them. She took her first sip and sighed. "I needed this," she mumbled.

Gaara hummed, enjoying the burn of the wine. He smirked, raising the bottle a little. "Tell me when you want more." He risked leaning over and pressing a kiss to her neck. "You look beautiful by the way," he whispered in her ear.

She bit her lip in a smile. "Thank you," she giggled, feeling her face get warm. "You look amazing yourself." She took another sip of her wine. "As usual," she added with a smirk.

He smiled at her, subconsciously biting his lip as he looked at her. He wished they were sitting along the banks of the river again instead of whispering at a party. He pushed his thoughts down and forced out a small chuckle. "You're flattering me," he sighed, looking out over the crowd. "Do you know what he did?" he asked, referencing the prank he knew his cousin had lined up for the party. Just like he always did. He would admit that it was very mildly entertaining to see what he could come up with.

"He, uh...he spiked the drinks and some of the food with—" Before she could even finish her sentence, there was a nasty wet sound coming from someone on the other side of the room, followed by a couple more. It started. A few people already shit themselves. The entire room went dead silent, everyone standing in shock of what just happened, unable to actually process it. After a couple of seconds—which really felt like an eternity at the moment—the silence was broken by a
very loud, obnoxious booming laugh.

"Uuuuh..." Gaara winced. The smell hit them hard and the booming laughter was joined by a chorus of more horrific wet splattering sounds from across the room. The laughter echoed off of the walls, only getting worse as the sounds went on. Gaara sighed heavily, immediately regretting it while simultaneously looking like he wanted to die. There was a mix of more laughter and horrified screams throughout the room.

Sasori stumbled out of the crowd, grinning widely. He was giggling, nearly out of breath as he stumbled into his seat. He looked up at Gaara nearly in tears. "Your father's laugh always brings me such immeasurable joy."

"That laugh is your father?" Azumi chuckled.

"It is," Gaara grimaced, covering his face as he spoke.

She looked at Sasori. "Should we move to another location before your mother mauls you to death?" She just wanted to get out of the room and be somewhere where there was not a diarrhea outbreak happening around her.

"Aah, we probably should," Sasori said, still laughing. He stood up, waving for them to both follow him out of the room and towards the back of the house. There were steps leading right up to the river's edge. The air was clean and fresh and just far enough removed from the hysteria ripping through the party.

"That is not going to be fun to clean up," Azumi hummed, taking another sip of her wine as the three of them sat down on the steps with her in between them and looked out over the river. For once, she was grateful that she was Sasori's slave and not one of the ones that lived in Oonoki's house.

"It most certainly won't be," Sasori grinned, reaching over to snag the bottle of wine from Gaara. He noted the glass in her hand but opted not to say anything. His night was going too well to be angry. He distinctly heard Deidara's screams and reveled in a small joy.

Gaara rolled his eyes when the bottle was taken for him. "You're welcome," he said flatly.

"It's the only thing here I can trust not to be contaminated," Sasori smirked. He leaned back against the steps and sighed. "I wish Komushi was here to see this," he chuckled.

"He would have walked around, handing drinks to everyone if he was," Gaara said.

"When does Lord Komushi return?" Azumi asked.

"He's only going to be gone for a few days," Gaara rolled his eyes. "Not even a full week. But I guess that's a long time to be away from your husband," he teased Sasori. Sasori glared at him, taking a long swig from the bottle.

Azumi smirked, offering her now-empty glass to Sasori. "Would you like a glass?" she asked.

He took the glass from her, glaring at her as he poured the wine into it. Though, the expression broke as he handed her the glass back. "Pass that to Gaara," he chuckled. "Give her your empty cup," he instructed. Without much question, Azumi handed Gaara the glass of wine and he gave her his empty glass. Sasori repeated the action and handed the glass back to Azumi and then lifted the bottle. "To an absolutely wonderful day," he laughed, knocking back the bottle.
Azumi chuckled and she and Gaara drank their wine. The three of them sat there in silence for a couple of seconds until there was a sound of metal clinking with every step as someone came down the stairs behind them. "I thought you would be out here after that," Kenzou chuckled. "That was quite an interesting party trick, Lord Sasori."

"Aaah, Kenzou." Sasori's cheeks were starting to pinken. "Did you enjoy it as much as we did?"

"It's always amusing to see Lord Rasa belt one out," he chuckled.

"It gets me every time," Sasori hissed, laughing. "Drink?" He held up the bottle.

"Don't mind if I do," he smiled as he sat down, finishing the drink he had in his own glass and then holding it out for Sasori to pour the wine into it.

Azumi looked back at him. "How did that oil turn out for you, Lord Kenzou?" she asked.

Kenzou grinned, setting the glass down gently and opening his arms. He stood up, stepping down a few of the stairs so he was level with her and pulled her into a hug. "You tell me," he chuckled.

The hug was just as crushing as the last one but minus the waterfall of sweat. She could still smell the metal but the scent of the oil was much more prominent. "Great," she said. He finally let her go and she quietly gasped for air. "I used about twelve notes in it." She bent back a little to crack her back. "I am glad it works for you and that you are pleased with it."

"Twelve?" he chuckled. "I don't know much about fragrance making but I know that mine is one of a kind and judging by their faces," he chuckled, pointing out the varying levels of shock on Gaara and Sasori's faces, "that's more than average. Thank you again for this wonderful gift."

"Only three more than the average," she chuckled, waving it off. "Nothing too crazy. You are very much welcome." She gave him a bow and then sat back down between Gaara and Sasori.

"Will you be staying much longer?" Kenzou asked Sasori. "Or will you be disappearing into the night before they can find you."

"I'd say two more glasses of wine and then we've got to make ourselves scarce," Sasori nodded. "My mother is at the party and angry is an understatement for how she is probably feeling right now."

"Ah, haha, I did see your mother on my way out here," he chuckled. "You may have some spare time because getting through the room is...well, a shit show."

"Knowing my aunt," Gaara grinned. "That's not going to stop her remotely."

"SASORI!" Sasori’s mother roared.

"And that's our cue," Sasori laughed, handing the bottle back to Gaara. "Kenzou, Cousin," he bowed to both of them. "See you both tomorrow." He grabbed Azumi's upper arm harshly and started to pull her back toward the house.

Azumi waved at Gaara and Kenzou as she was being pulled. She ignored the pain in her arm from his tight grip the entire way back to Sasori's home. "That turned out quite well," she hummed. She enjoyed seeing him in a pleasant mood. She was a lot less on edge around him when he was like this. However, she did not know how long something like that would last and she was prepared for it to switch at any moment.
“Today turned out to be a rare treat!” He gave out a boyish giggle. He pulled her through the house quickly. He heard no whispers from the other servants. In fact, the whole house seemed startlingly normal. Sasori felt another wave of heady glee flush through him. He spun Azumi around by her arm and hard onto his bed so her body bounced on it. “All we need to do now is wait.” He crawled on the bed, a large predatory grin stretched over his lips. As if he was a massive cat who had just eaten their fill of a meal.

"Do you think they would have noticed your grandmother's absence among all of that commotion?" she asked. Someone was bound to notice. Chiyo seemed to be friends with Oonoki himself so he had to have noticed at least.

“My uncles noticed. And Oonki,” he confirmed. “I was asked by all of them on the dance floor and told them all the same thing: she sent me on ahead of her.” He rolled onto his back with a content sigh. “Gives us an alibi. She’s sent me ahead plenty of times. The real question is: have the other two hags noticed?"

"I think we would have been confronted by them when we arrived back if they did," she said, laying back on the bed. "I am sure by morning they will notice their friend not joining them for breakfast."

“She easily could have sent them away for something,” he said, the glee gleaming refreshed and anew in his eyes. “But you’re right, we won’t know until tomorrow morning. I’m almost too excited to sleep.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. "No, not right now, but maybe," he shifted to look at her. "You can give me one of those back rubs again."

She chuckled softly as she sat up. "Of course," she said. He grabbed the oil from the bedside table and handed it to her. She waited for him to roll onto his stomach before straddling him and dripping the oil onto his back. Once she set the bottle aside, she started massaging him, starting with his shoulders and between his shoulder blades. Her brow furrowed at how quickly he had become tense again. ‘Seriously?’ she thought. 'Can you not be stressed for at least a week?’ He hummed softly into his bedding as her hands worked his muscles. It had been a rather eventful day and before he even realized it he was starting to doze off. He idly he wondered as he slipped off how he had grown to trust her so quickly.

She continued to move her hands, working the muscles in his lower back and getting lost in thought. After a couple of long minutes, she looked down and noticed he had completely fallen asleep. She smiled softly, removing the clip from his hair and setting it aside and then getting off of him. As she got off of him, she contemplated taking off his jewelry for him but she quickly dismissed the thought. She was not his mother and though he acted like a child, he was not one. She closed the bottle of oil and put it back on the bedside table. ‘I suppose I am sleeping in here tonight,’ she thought, getting off of the bed and changing her clothes. She sighed as she laid on the daybed and attempted to fall asleep.
Chapter 27

Sasori slept soundly through the night, peacefully and very content. When he woke the next morning, he was refreshed and still felt the effects of Azumi’s rub down from the night before. Languidly, he rolled onto his back and stretched, arching his back. He noticed Azumi curled up on the daybed. He was tempted to nudge her with his foot when he remembered the news he was expecting that morning. He felt a jolt of excitement race through him. His grandmother was dead and someone must have found her by now.

On the daybed, Azumi groaned quietly, feeling the sunlight pouring into the room and onto her face. She had a hard time falling asleep and when she finally did, it was not a night of good sleep. She felt more exhausted than she did the night before. She grunted softly, pulling the blanket over her head.

He watched her burrow further into the blanket and the urge to kick her only grew. He might have acted on it had a choked "Lord Sasori" not reached his ears. He knew the voice well. It was one of the younger slaves that belonged to Chiyo. He would bet Azumi's life that his grandmother's personal servants were weeping in her bedchamber.

Azumi groaned softly again, sitting up on the daybed and rubbing her face. She knew Sasori was ecstatic but she was exhausted. She threw the blankets off of her and stood up. The slave was too afraid to open the door. She looked at Sasori and moved toward the door to open it for them, maybe a little too harshly. The slave cowered just a little and then relaxed, seeing her and not Sasori, then cowered again at the death stare she was giving them.

"I-is Lord Sasori in?" they asked.

"Of course he is," she said, with maybe just a little more attitude than she intended. She was tired. But this was another slave she was speaking to. She did not have to be nice to them. She nodded for them to enter the room and they only took two steps in, too afraid to enter any further.

"My..my Lo-Lord," they stammered. Sasori composed his face into a cool mask as best as he could. He rubbed his eyes for good measure to showcase how tired he was but inside, he was nearly vibrating with how fast his heart was racing. "Your grandmother has...Lady Chiyo, she..."

"Out with it," Sasori snapped when the slave started to stammer again.

They winced, stepping back towards the hall. "She has passed in the night," they finally slipped out.

Sasori fought hard against the grin that threatened to be plastered all over his face. "How?" he kept his composure.

"I-I believe it was a snake bite," they said. "She and one of her p-personal servants...were found in her room this morning..." 

Azumi rubbed her face again, hiding a yawn behind her hand. The slave looked at her and she glared back at them. 'What are you looking at?' she thought. Again, the younger slave flinched back, now fully in the hall. The word ‘monsters’ was clearly on the back of their tongue.

Sasori stood up gracefully from the bed and disappeared into his bathroom without another word. He re-emerged with his robe on. "Send word to my Uncles and call for Gaara," he told the quivering slave.
"Right," they said softly. "Y-yes, my Lord." They bowed and backed away to leave.

Azumi closed the door once they were gone and stretched hard. "Coffee?" she asked through the stretch groan.

"Make it extra strong," he nodded with a growing grin.

She nodded and went to the kitchen to make their coffee. Because of the commotion with the rest of the house finding Chiyo and her servant, no one had brewed coffee yet. "Wonderful," she groaned, setting everything up to brew it herself. Once it was done, she poured it into two mugs, giving Sasori a bigger one than usual and went back to his room.

He had dressed in the time she had gone and come back. He leaned in the doorway waiting for her with a large grin still plastered to his face. "Hurry up and change. We have to go see my poor, dead granny." She handed him his coffee and put on her normal daily outfit. Once she was dressed, she chugged her coffee, hoping it would wake her up a little for what they were about to deal with. Sasori continued to sip his coffee slowly. "Let's go," he said as soon as they finished their coffee. He turned on his foot and started down the hall. He felt the giddy feeling rush through him once more. She followed behind him, not in any way excited the way he was. They moved through the halls quickly, only slowing down as they got closer to Chiyo's room as to not look too excited. The servants were gathered around Chiyo's bed in tears. Azumi rolled her eyes, listening to everyone cry. Sasori set his face in deep concern. The stench hit his nose and he fought the need to back out of the room. 'Disgusting.' He wrinkled his nose. Someone had moved the servant to the daybed and positioned his grandmother's hands folded neatly over her chest.

"It was a snake bite, my Lord," one of the servants said. A couple of them looked at Azumi at the mention of a snake to which she glared back at them.

'Do not blame me for this,' she thought.

"So I've heard," Sasori said, trying to sound as solemn as possible.

"Lord Sandaime and Lord Gaara are on their way," the slave from earlier said, entering the room. He pushed past the circle of servants to look closer at his grandmother. "All of you," he said in a low voice, "get food and coffee prepared. This place is about to be overrun." Everyone took a moment to move. "Now!" He snapped. The whole group scattered out of the room in a hurry, leaving Azumi and Sasori alone with the two corpses. She watched him as his grin came back full force. She knew it hurt him to hold that in for as long as he did. He started to laugh, throwing his head back in pure joy. "Aaahahah, Azumi," he sighed, tilting his head to look at her. "I've finally won!" He grabbed a book from Chiyo's bedside table and turned her head with it to look at the fatal crack in her skull. "I wonder if we should stage her bathroom with blood to make it look like she cracked her skull in there," he hummed. "Gaara will know that snake bite isn't what killed her."

Azumi’s brow furrowed. They already cleaned Chiyo up. They could not just use her blood. "Where will you get the blood from?" she asked.

His smile shifted to something of an irritation. "I thought you were smarter than that," he sighed. He walked over and grabbed her wrist, pulling her into the bathroom. "Just when I think we're making progress," he sighed, stopping next to the edge of the pool like bath. "Stay," he commanded. He released her wrist and walked over to his grandmother's vanity to grab a small straight razor she used to shave. "Strip. If you get blood on your clothes, it will be more incriminating the just the snake bites."
'My blood?! Are you fucking serious right now?!' She sighed as she started to take off her dress. She was too tired for this.

Once she was fully undressed, he gripped her hip and slid the blade up her thigh. He squeezed the muscle, causing the blood to run down her leg faster. "We need to make this look like she slipped trying to escape the snake's attack," he told her. He started to move her around, making the blood fall just so. She let out a small pained squeak and covered her mouth to muffle it as he moved her. Once he stopped her, she looked around at her blood on the floor. Then she looked at the long cut on her thigh. Now she had to fight off a limp. Sasori rinsed off of the blade in the bath then returned it to where he retrieved it from. He then grabbed a box with gauze and creams. He knelt down next to Azumi, pulling her closer as he began toclean her wound and firmly wrap up her leg. "That should hold you over just fine," he muttered, tying it off with no fresh blood spillage.

She sighed, grabbing her dress and putting it back on. "Doing this yesterday would have been more beneficial," she mumbled. "We do not know if one of them came in here already. They will know it is staged if they did."

"Please," he rolled his eyes. "None of them had a reason to come in here so I know for certain they did not," he said easily. "They're idiots. However, my cousin is not. This was just for Gaara."

"Very well then," she grumbled, fixing her dress. They stepped back into the bedroom and only moments later, Gaara and Sandaime walked in.

Sandaime glanced at Sasori from the corner of his eye as he approached his mother. He frowned, cupping the top of her head. He looked her over, leaning down to press a kiss to the top of her head. "Good morning, Mother," he said softly. Gaara looked away from his grandmother to Sasori and Azumi. He glared at Sasori hard.

Sasori held up a hand. "Before you go spouting off that I did this," he defended himself, "you might want to actually look her body over and check out the bathroom."

Gaara moved to the bathroom, followed almost immediately by Sandaime. They scanned the bathroom for a few moments, taking in the blood all over the floor and how it was spilled. After about a minute or two, they returned to the bedroom and Gaara started looking over Chiyō’s body. Just as Sasori wanted, he noticed the crack in her skull and the snake bite in her arm. His attention moved to the servant on the daybed and he noticed the snake bite in their neck.

"So she fell," Sandaime said. Azumi closed her eyes and sighed. It bothered her that the two people she respected the most in this family were being tricked like this.

"She might have been escaping the snake from the bath and slipped," Gaara concluded. "Then the servant came to help and suffered the same fate."

"What a series of unfortunate events," Sandaime mumbled.

"Glad to know we've come to the same conclusion," Sasori muttered. Sandaime frowned, turning back to return to his mother's side. Gaara went back to the bathroom and frowned, kneeling down to get a better look at the blood and a line up of how it all fell across the ground. He hated how much Sasori’s story was checking out. He knew his cousin had something to do with her death. He just was not sure how.

"We will need to inform the rest of the family," Sandaime said. "I will start making arrangements for her service this evening." Azumi admired how professional he was being so immediately. Yet, she started to find it hard to look at him at the moment. She kept her eyes on the floor and stood in
one spot. "Was it your snake, Azumi?" he asked, causing her to look up at him with a slight gasp.

"No, my Lord," she answered softly. "It could not have been. Naga cannot leave my room. He is also very docile."

"I can attest to that," Sasori confirmed. "She hasn't had him out since the day before yesterday." He lied with no effort.

"This was not the right kind of bite, judging by her servant," Gaara chimed in. "The reaction isn't right for a king cobra."

"Very well," Sandaime nodded in understanding. "I'll call for your father first, Sasori."

"Right," Sasori nodded. "I had the servants make food and coffee so you're welcomed to it." He turned to walk out of the room.

Azumi followed him, trying to hide her limp as best as possible. 'Oh, this hurts,' she thought. They went to the tea room where food was already being laid out on tables. The servants had laid out a large spread of food in the main tea room. It was still a flurry of tears and activity as they were bustling around to get everything ready for the family.

Sandaime stopped in to grab something to eat. "Since she's clearly been sitting out, she'll need to be wrapped up quickly," he said as he shoved a sweet roll into his mouth.

"Get someone to come in tonight," Sasori told him. "The sooner we can get a service done and over with, the better." He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. Azumi poured another cup of coffee for Sasori and handed it to him. Sandaime nodded and pulled Sasori into a corner to further discuss the arrangements that needed to be made.

"Azumi," Gaara whispered as he walked over with his cup of coffee. "Come with me," he said softly. He led her away from the rest of the commotion, walking towards her room.

She followed him, wincing a little at the pain in her thigh. She wondered why he was leading her away, but most of her questioning was overshadowed by her concentration to not limp as she walked. She furrowed her brow as he found her room and opened the door. Following him in, she looked at Naga who was still coiled on the bed. "Are you doing okay?" she asked Gaara softly. She knew this was hard on him. Maybe he needed to let it out in private. She did not mind being the one he leaned on. Unlike Sasori, Gaara was not a heartless monster. This had to affect him like it would any normal person.

He pressed himself against the door to close it behind them, nodding as she asked the question.

"Yes," he said softly, eyes falling on Naga. "I'll be fine. My biggest concern right now is to know why you are limping." He had noticed it even though it was only slight. He had not noticed her be in great pain at the party, so it must have happened earlier that day. "What did he do to you?" he asked, closing the space between them. He dropped to one knee to examine the side of her thigh. His mind was already racing, theorizing that his cousin was about to snap and he had only just started with his grandmother and was about to slaughter the rest of the household.

She took a moment to answer, keeping her gaze on the door. "He sliced my leg open," she said softly. "You know how he is. He does not care."

His eyes snapped up from her leg to meet her eyes. "Undress." His voice was still soft but there was a command in his tone now. A rage was burning in his eyes as he took a step back to give her the space to do as he asked. He needed to see the damage and assess whether or not he should throw
his cousin down the stairs. He hesitated to ask why her leg had been sacrificed. He had a sinking feeling as to why. But it did not make sense. He was, without a doubt, certain the snake bite had only killed his grandmother’s servant. But had Sasori really snapped and hit Chiyo like that? The blood in the bathroom, though dried, still seemed fresh. She sighed quietly, lowering her gaze to the floor as she removed her dress. She let it fall to the floor easily. There was no way to hide the bandages going up her thigh. He forced on his most professional doctor mask, zeroing in on the bandages around her leg. They were expertly wrapped but already starting to soak through. "I'm going to kill him," he growled lowly. He picked up the sheet from her bed and told her to raise her arms. With gentle hands, he wrapped the sheet around her upper body before squatting to take a closer look at the wound. "Why did he do this?" he breathed, just loud enough for her to hear. His voice was low and starting to get rough as he suppressed his building anger. The hand not on her thigh was curling into a white-knuckled fist.

At this point, she was conflicted. She did not want to tell him the truth because though he was being professional about it, it was still his grandmother. However, she respected him too much to lie to him. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "He used my blood to stage your grandmother’s death being in her bathroom," she said softly. “She did not die in there.”

He clenched his jaw hard, causing the bones to jut out with the force for a minute as he composed himself. She had confirmed his suspicions but now his heart, already heavy from the loss, needed to know something else. He would address everything else later but he needed to know this now: "Did you help kill her?" he asked her, rising to his full height to look her in the eyes. "I don't mean that bite after she was dead. I mean did he make you participate?" There was slight desperation in his voice. A small rush of hope that whatever was blooming between them would not be forcibly tainted by his monstrous cousin.

“No,” she said with a slight gasp. “I would rather him have killed me than make me participate in that.” She took a step back, holding the sheet around her up with her arm. “She came into his bathroom while we were in our baths...and she started speaking badly about his mother to which his temper rose immediately.” She paused for a second to recall the altercation that led to Chiyo’s death. “He slapped her after she threw her slipper at me...and she moved to retaliate but slipped on the water around the tub.”

Gaara froze in shock. His cousin...Sasori had not actually plotted to kill Chiyo. This whole thing was an accident. He took a step back and shook his head as he ran a hand through his hair. He looked back at Azumi, his face twisting in confusing and a little pain. He closed his eyes again hard, squeezing them tight. "Dammit," he bit out quietly. He needed to think. Or maybe just clear his head. He could not even hate his cousin for this. He shook his head, looking back at her leg. "Stay here. That needs to be redressed," he told her, slipping out of the room. He hurried down the hall, almost trying to outrun his thoughts when another weeping servant passed by, causing him to stop abruptly. They bowed low, repeating their apologies before Gaara shooed them away. He paused, taking a deep breath once they were gone. "Dammit!" he cursed again, louder, slamming his fist into a door. The wood cracked a little under the force. Gaara ran a hand over his face, trying to gather his thoughts as he continued down to Sasori’s room. He gathered what he needed to fix up Azumi’s leg and rushed back to her room.

When he returned, she was still standing in the spot he left her in, speaking quietly to Naga and letting him know that everything was going to be fine for him. "I would never let anyone take you," she said softly. "You are also free to leave if you feel unsafe." The snake hissed frantically, pointing his nose at her leg. "I will be fine," she assured him.

Gaara shut the door softly behind him and watched them for a moment. His heart was still racing but for some reason, seeing the woman and snake interact, just watching them eased him. He put
the bundle of things he brought to treat her down on the bed. "No one will touch you, Naga," he assured the snake. He stroked the snake gently from the tip of his head down his back. "Neither Sasori nor I will let them," his voice was softer now. His thoughts started to drift and he got lost for a moment in thought. "Sorry..." He shook his head, coming back to himself. "Let's get you cleaned up before this gets infected." He turned to Azumi and kneeled down again as he started to undo the bandages. He frowned deeply, seeing the deep cut in the large muscle. "Tch, I guess we can be grateful the blade he used was so sharp," he huffed. It was a clean cut which meant it would not leave a nasty scar and would heal relatively quickly. Though it would still sting.

She winced a little as he started to clean the cut. "I am a bit surprised he did it on that leg," she said softly. Sasori had dragged the blade through the scorpion he had burned onto her skin when she was first bought by him. "He does not seem like the kind to want to ruin his...'artwork,'" she scoffed, rolling her eyes.

Gaara hummed softly, glancing up at the burn. "It's not too damaged. And I'm assuming he used one of granny's blades which means it's sharper than it should be. This cut won't leave a mark." He pinched the skin around the cut together with one hand as he dipped the other into a small jar with a salve. "He knew what he was doing." Gaara also would not put it past his cousin to have something planned for the snake tattoo on her other leg. Something that he would want it to be in an untouched condition for.

She looked down at him and frowned. 'That sounds about right,' she thought. She helped maneuver the sheet around as he wrapped her leg up. "Thank you," she said when he was done. Naga hissed at him. "He says 'thank you,' as well," she translated. He smiled softly at Naga then stood up to pull her close. He still had a myriad of emotions rushing through him but he could not deny he was relieved to know she had no major part in his grandmother's death. There was hardly any blood on her or his cousin's hands. Feeling daring, he pulled her close to him by the waist and swiftly pulled her into a kiss before either of them could hesitate. The next week was going to be a rough one. He was going to take solace where he could find it. She hummed softly in the kiss, cupping his face with one hand and still holding the sheet around her up with the other. When they finally pulled apart, she smiled softly at him. "We should probably get back before suspicions are raised," she told him.

He nodded, stepping back. He gathered up the things he had brought to use then made his way to the door. "I'll leave you to get dressed then," he said, bowing out of habit as he stepped out of the room.

She watched as he left and once the door was closed, she threw the sheet back onto the bed and picked up her dress. She quickly got dressed, fixing the dress in place to hide the wound again. She stroked Naga's head and left her room. She did not doubt that Sasori noticed them slip off together and she was prepared for whatever questions he was going to throw at her.

Sasori caught the moment his cousin tiptoed back into the room. He quickly made his way over to his two older siblings and started talking to them as if he had not just disappeared with his slave. He glared at him from across the room, swirling the cup of coffee that he was not drinking. He knew the younger man would probably corner his slave to double-check the story. There was a small niggling doubt that his slave could have spun this situation to thoroughly incriminate him but he was, foolishly, trusting her words that she was loyal to him.

"Come, Sasori," his father's soft-spoken voice was joined by one of his strong hands on his back. "We need to start the preparations." Sasori tore his eyes away from his cousin and followed his father out to his room. "Do you have the necessary incense and herbs here or do you need to go to your shop?" his father asked, following him into the workshop.
"I should have everything here," Sasori said. He moved around the shop, taking down the items they would need from the shelves.

His father looked at all of the items that were brought down. "This should be enough," he said with a nod. He let out a heavy sigh. "I can't believe it took this long for anyone to notice. This had to have happened before the party last night."

Sasori turned away from his father, feigning the pain in his voice. "She told me to go ahead." He shook his head, grinning widely. "She's always been so resilient. I never thought a snake bite or a fall even could have affected her like this." He stifled a chuckle, making it seem as if he sniffled.

His father's eyes snapped up the moment Sasori's shoulders shook. He crossed the small space, spinning Sasori around and pulling him into a tight hug. "I'm sorry, Son," he said softly, holding him tight as he buried his face in the bend of Sasori's neck. "You two fought but I know you were close."

Sasori tensed up slightly and then relaxed, hugging his father back and rolling his eyes. "We argued before she died," he said, still feigning his sadness. "I keep thinking about the last thing I said to her...she tried to tell me something important and I just threw it in her face." He paused for a moment, thinking of a line that would secure his innocence if he continued the act. "I didn't even get to apologize."

Sasori felt his father tighten his arms around him. "You can say everything you need to now," his father said as he stepped out of their embrace. "This process...is for saying goodbye. So say everything you need to as we prepare her for the next life." He smiled softly at his son, cupping his face and gently rubbing his thumb over his cheek. "Send her into the next life with no regrets."

"Right," Sasori said softly. "Thank you, Father."

His father nodded and kissed his forehead. "Let's go get this started," he said, picking up everything that Sasori brought down from the shelves. Together, they gathered up what they needed and crossed the house, weaving through family and servants to Chiyo's room. It was quiet, save for the two remaining servants who practically seemed to be standing guard outside of Chiyo's room. "I know this was your friend," Sasori's father told them quietly. "You are welcome to help with the preparations."

"Thank you," they both sobbed, followed by low bows.

Sasori and his father continued on into the room and began preparing Chiyo's body while the two servants prepared their friend's. A couple of minutes later, Sandaime walked in with his sobbing youngest brother. Upon seeing his mother's body, Rasa's sobs were just as loud and obnoxious as his laughs were at the party the night before.

Sandaime rounded the bed and stood closely to Sasori, making the younger man bristle. "You seem to be holding up well," his uncle said just low enough for the two of them to hear.

"Someone needs to be strong about it," Sasori countered. "Just about everyone else in this house is bawling their eyes out."
"Seeing as you lived with her, I'd say you were closest to her," Sandaime said. "You should be there next to your uncle."

"You're her firstborn," Sasori said. "Why aren't you breaking down? You've been with her the longest," he frowned. "I've never been much for tears and you know that. We all mourn differently." He kept his voice somber, training his eyes on his grandmother. "I know...why don't you three take care of preparing her. It only seems right."

Sasori's father looked up at him. "But Sas—" he started but Sasori shook his head.

"There is always time for goodbyes. This is too meaningful for you three not to be in charge of it."

Sasori's father sighed and then nodded. "Alright," he said.

"Let me know if you need more of any of those items," Sasori said before giving a bow to his father and uncles and then leaving.

Sandaime gave Sasori a hard look as he watched him leave the room. Once he was gone, he joined his brothers by their mother's side, trying to console Rasa as best as he could.

Sasori rejoined everyone in the main tea room, scoping out the room immediately for his slave. She was not there but Gaara was which confused him only a little. He figured she must have been in his room or her own room. His room was closer so he decided to make his way there first and almost ran into her. "There you are," he grinned, grabbing her upper arm. "Where have you been, my little snake?"

She jumped a little, startled by suddenly being grabbed. She turned to him, not exactly relaxing when she saw him. "I was in the kitchen," she answered, "helping to set things up to be brought out."

"Mmm," he hummed, pulling her into his room and shutting the door. "What did you say to Gaara?" He pinned her to the door, staring into her eyes. "Did you stick to the truth or..." he trailed off, his fingers dancing down her side to her hip. He felt the new, thicker bandages on her leg as he pressed his fingers into the wound lightly.

She grunted quietly. "He knows it was an accident," she said. "He knows that you did not kill her. I have told you before that I am loyal to you. I would never say anything to go against you."

He was a little shocked that she did not try to save her own skin. Although, he did not let it show on his face. He nodded and stepped back, moving to sit on the edge of his bed. "I can't wait for all of this to blow over," he sighed, running his hand through his hair. He flopped back onto his bed, smiling still but it faltered a little. He hated having this many people in his house. It was going to quickly wear him out.

She sighed quietly and moved to the workshop. She had already been on her way there when Sasori found her. She picked up the bottle of pills she made and quickly took one. Looking out into his room, she noticed that seemed a bit stressed. 'Dare I?' she thought, looking between him and the bottle in her hand. With another sigh, she walked up to him and sat next to him on the bed, holding the bottle out to him. "You should only need one," she said.

He looked at her and then at the bottle. He nodded, sitting up to take the bottle from her and spill one little pill into his hand. He knocked it back, swallowing dry. "My uncles and my father are going to deal with the rest of Chiyō's preparations but the great Lord Sandaime still suspects me," he rolled his eyes. "So be prepared for him to pull you aside, too."
She hoped Sandaime would actually believe her and not suspect her of just covering for Sasori. "Right..." she hummed with a slight nod. She took the bottle from him and closed it up, setting it onto the daybed. Both of them laid back on the bed with a sigh, waiting for the pills they just took to start kicking in.

"That was fast," Sasori said, already feeling a bit mellowed out.

"I made them strong," she answered.

"I won't overdose, right?"

"Just do not take another one within the next twelve hours."

"Understood," he chuckled, suddenly very content to just lay there. "This...is wonderful."

"What is?" she asked, feeling her pill kick in as well. "The pills or your grandmother dying?"

"Yes," he said contently, smiling dreamily.
Chapter 28

Nearly a week later, things seemed to have gone back to normal after the funeral services for Chiyo. It was a long week of Sasori purporting sorrow which by the third day of it, Azumi had wished she was thrown into the bath and drowned when Sasori cut her leg. Now that it was finally all over, the two of them did not speak a word of it to each other. They were in his shop, catching up on work that was missed from the week of mourning.

Azumi stayed in the workshop, working on replenishing whatever was low on stock in the main shop while Sasori was up on the second level, dealing with paperwork. Lost in thought as she stared at the boiling liquids in front of her, she was brought back by someone entering the shop. She lowered the flames and went out to greet them. "Oh," she said. "Welcome back, Lord Komushi." She bowed as he walked up to her.

Komushi, saying no words of greeting, walked straight over to Azumi and pulled her into a tight, firm hug. "I've missed you," he said softly.

Sasori heard the greeting and made his way down to the shop's front end. "Welcome back, prodigal best friend," he smirked, leaning in the doorway.

Komushi released Azumi and moved to pull Sasori into a hug. Sasori saw it coming and stepped out of the way just in time, causing Komushi to bump his forehead hard into the door frame. "Ouch," he pouted. "Azumiii," he whined, pulling Azumi back into a hug.

Azumi frowned, hugging him back. "Something is wrong," she said softly. He was hugging her differently than he normally would. This was the hug of someone who just needed affection. "Are you alright?" Komushi buried his face into her hair, starting to sniffle.

Sasori shook his head. He saw his best friend's shoulders start to shake. "Oh, no, you don't." Sasori grabbed the back of Komushi's neck. "If you're going to do this, do it in the back!"

Komushi sniffled harder, taking Azumi's hand and pulling her into the back and into another tight hug. His face pressed into the bend of her neck and large hot tears started to flow out of him silently.

Azumi sighed, rubbing his back gently. She helped him to a chair and he pulled her into his lap, resuming the hug. "I just need to be held," he whispered to her.

"What happened?" she asked him quietly.

"I got rejected," he whimpered, resting his forehead on her shoulder. "She was beautiful and so perfect," he sighed heavily. "I've never been so interested in someone that my family picked out. And she just...picked someone else."

"I see," she frowned, wrapping both her arms around him to comfort him. "I am sorry to hear that," she said softly. She continued to rub his back.

"I understand you're heartbroken," Sasori said, resisting the urge to roll his eyes for the sake of his best friend’s feelings, "but she has work she needs to finish."

Komushi let out a low, suffering whine, hugging Azumi tightly. "You can't kick me out. I need her. She's my support snake," he pouted.
Sasori groaned, rolling his eyes. "Fine, just be useful!" he huffed.

"Alright," Komushi sighed with another sniffle. Sasori groaned quietly as he went back up the ladder.

Azumi ran her hand through Komushi’s hair. "Would you like to help me replenish the shop to get your mind off of it?" she asked him softly. He nodded glumly, nuzzling into her hand as she moved it in his hair. He let her lead him back out to the front of the shop to help her with whatever she needed. He stayed close to her the whole time, hanging onto her whenever she sat down to work on anything at the bench and holding her hand whenever he was not acting as her cape. Around lunchtime, Kankuro came around for a visit. Azumi heard him coming through the door and stood up from the workbench. Komushi still had his arms wrapped around her and together, they walked out to the front of the shop. "Hello, Lord Kankuro," Azumi said. She went to bow but halfway down, she felt her body make more physical contact with Komushi beyond his arms being around her. Komushi hummed softly, pushing his hips a little closer to hers.

"Hello..." Kankuro raised his eyebrow, seeing the strange position the pair of them we in. He raised a hand, stopping her mid-bow. "It's nice to see you back, Komushi. You missed a hell of a week. How did that girl turn out?"

Azumi looked at Kankuro and shook her head very slightly. Kankuro saw the look on her face and then looked at Komushi who was on the verge of tears. Before he could say anything, Komushi dragged Azumi back into the workshop and pulled her into another hug. Azumi sighed, rubbing his back. Kankuro stepped into the workshop after them. "Needless to say, it did not go so well," Azumi said quietly to Kankuro.

"Mm, that's unfortunate," Kankuro frowned, taking a seat on a stool. "You...ah, seem to have a good fallback there, though," he said with a chuckle.

"No, he doesn't," Sasori called from the upper floor. "He has a tissue for a few hours."

Kankuro snorted. "I think...we can all do for blowing off some steam." He ran a hand through his hair.

"How?" Komushi sniffled.

"Well...you have a hookah in your room, right?" Kankuro smirked. "A rather large one, if I'm correct. We can come over, have a small get together...let it all out."

"We?" Sasori asked from above.

"Yes, 'we,' you damn recluse!" Kankuro rolled his eyes.

Komushi hummed softly in Azumi’s ear. "Sasori, come so I can hold my support snake for longer," he pouted.

"I don't recall my slave being your support snake," Sasori grumbled.

"Fine, come over and be my best friend and bring your slave so I can hold her!"

"Then it's settled," Kankuro smirked. "We'll be there tonight."

"I never said I would," Sasori muttered.

"We need a single guys' night," Komushi said.
"But Kankuro has a woman," Sasori smirked.

Komushi gasped as if offended and pulled Azumi further away from Kankuro as if he had a spreadable virus. "You can't come then. This is only for single guys."


"Fine," Komushi relented after a good solid minute of squinting. "Be there at sundown with the flavors and some of those zalabya that Gaara makes."

"Say no more," Kankuro smirked. "I'll see you there tonight, Sasori." He turned and left the shop, leaving Komushi to hug Azumi some more.

"I still never said I was going," Sasori said.

"But you have to," Komushi whined.

"I really don't," Sasori sighed.

"But you will," Komushi whined hopefully. "You will or I'll kidnap your slave and then you'll be forced to come over."

Azumi suddenly felt rope being tied around her thighs. She looked down and saw that Komushi was tying her up and then tying them together. She looked up at the second level. "He is tying me up, Lord Sasori," she sighed.

"Are you fucking serious, Komushi!" Sasori slammed his hands on his desk. He walked over to the railing and leaned over to look down.

"Yes, I'm fucking serious! When have I ever been more serious in my life?" he shot back, tightening a knot.

Sasori stared at his friend hard. The two of them glared at each other, the tension thick in the air. "Fine, whatever!" Sasori relented. "Absolutely ridiculous," he growled, sitting back down heavily.

"I win," Komushi whispered to Azumi with a smirk. He sat back down in his chair and pulled her into his lap again to hug her while she continued to work on stuff.

Hours later, just before the sun was about to set, Komushi finally released Azumi and untied her. "We'll be there soon," Sasori grumbled, coming down the ladder and taking the rope from him. Komushi gave him a shit-eating grin and hugged Azumi one more time before leaving to go home.

"It is too hot to be held all day long like that," Azumi muttered once Komushi was gone.

"I could only imagine," Sasori shook his head. "Whatever, you got your work done. I'm impressed you dealt with him that entire time. I would have given you permission to elbow him in the gut."

"Ah, normally, I would have," she hummed. "But...he was so heartbroken. I felt genuinely bad." She started to clean everything that she spent the day working on up. It took them about an hour to clean up the shop and then they headed to Komushi's house once the sun was fully set.

The mansion was not quite as big as Sasori's but it was still grand. Sasori walked up the steps to the house and made his way in as if he owned the place. Together, they walked down a long hall then stopped in front of a large curtained door. Sasori pulled them back and slipped inside. The room
was large and ornate but very clean and neat. In the center of the room was a sunken sitting pit with a massive hookah set in the middle as if it was a piece of sculptural art. Azumi hummed, looking around the new area. She did not know what she was expecting from Komushi's room but she was pleasantly surprised by what it looked like.

"Welcome!" Komushi grinned, looking at them from the sitting pit. He got out of it and walked toward them, immediately pulling Azumi into a hug. He pulled her to the sitting pit and sat down with her, keeping his arms around her at all times.

Kankuro was already there, eating some of the zalabya. "Glad you two could make it," he chuckled, popping one of the pancakes in his mouth. Sasori rolled his eyes as he grabbed a floor cushion. It was marked with a scorpion and clearly his designated cushion.

"Have you ever had these?" Komushi asked Azumi, reaching over for a zalabya. "Gaara really makes the best zalabya in the city."

Azumi grinned, remembering how good it was from the night she and Gaara met by the river and ate them. "I have not," she lied. Komushi smirked and fed her the one he had picked up. "It is really good," she said after she swallowed it.

Kankuro chuckled, dipping on into a dark berry sauce. "He didn't want to be here so bad that he made an array of dipping sauces so Komushi wouldn't guilt him later." Sasori perked up. He leaned forward a little to peer over at the sauces, taking a zalabya and dipping it into one of the sauces. He was going to try each and every one of them. Kankuro stood up, opening a small drawstring pouch and placing a couple of coal cubes on the top dish of the hookah. "These new flavors will go pretty well with a couple of the different sauces," he said. In the background, music could be heard playing. Azumi tried not to focus too much on it, not wanting to be put into a trance so quickly.

"Oh, nice!" Komushi grinned, leaning over with Azumi to pick up another zalabya. He handed it to her and then picked up another for himself then leaned back against a cushion, pulling Azumi with him. "So, you really went and got a girlfriend?" he asked Kankuro. Sasori eyed Azumi intensely. He had picked up on the music the moment they walked into the room. He smirked discreetly, catching her eye. He wondered how intensely it would affect her.

"She's just someone I met a few weeks ago," Kankuro said as he sat back down. "I was going to keep it a secret for a bit but then my father started talking to me about marriage and that he was lining up suitors, so I had to tell my little secret."

"You didn't even introduce her at the party," Sasori hummed. "The entire time you were harassing me."

"Because harassing you took precedence," Kankuro smirked. "Her name is Ameno. She's actually pretty amazing."

"We have to meet her properly," Komushi grinned. "Our little Kankuro is growing up." He pinched Kankuro's cheek.

"About time you stopped being a virgin," Sasori smirked. He was still watching Azumi from his peripherals.


"Hey, whoa, I'm not a virgin," Komushi defended. "And you know that! You've seen my last girlfriends."
"But...did we?" Kankuro smirked. He unwrapped three hoses from the hookah and handed one to Komushi and one to Sasori. Once it was heated up, the three of them started to smoke it.

"Whoa..." Komushi hummed after a few drags when the flavor finally hit him. "This does taste good. Where did you get this?"

"I know a guy."

Komushi rolled his eyes. "Care to share?"

"I think the cryptic nature of his response was so he didn't have to tell you," Sasori smirked.

"Exactly," Kankuro mirrored Sasori's smirk.

"Ugh, you are both assholes," Komushi grumbled. "I can easily tell how related you are."

"This is how we bond," Kankuro chuckled, taking a drag from his hose. "Teaming up on you."

Komushi put a hand to his heart. "In my time of weakness?" he asked dramatically. "When I am the most vulnerable?"

"You're fine. You'll find another woman who is more amazing and you'll forget all about this chick that just rejected you."

"You're so eloquent and encouraging," Komushi pouted. "Can you believe them, Azumi?" he sighed, nuzzling into her shoulder as he took a long drag.

Azumi had already started to slip into a trance but Komushi brought her back as soon as he started to nuzzle her. She blinked for a second. "Unreal," she muttered as if answering his question when really she was talking about how quickly she was falling.

"Leave her alone," Sasori smirked, taking a drag himself and blowing out a big cloud into Komushi's face. "Just relax and stop your complaining." He wanted to watch Azumi slip.

Azumi hummed, taking another zalabya and eating it. 'I cannot believe this is happening right now,' she thought. She glanced at Sasori. 'And he knows this is happening. Asshole.' She sat back again, trying hard to concentrate on everything that was not the music but it was getting stronger and she could feel herself immediately slipping again.

"Azumi," Sasori hummed. "Why don't you give Komushi a dance?" He leaned back, relaxing even more into the cushion. "Kankuro has never seen you dance either."

Komushi lit up with a small gasp. "That's right! He didn't go with us to the night market!" he grinned. "Dance for us, Azumi!" he echoed Sasori excitedly.

Azumi groaned softly, feeling her mind get hazy as they spoke to her. The music somehow got louder—at least in her mind—and she could only make out her name and the word 'dance' from them. Before she realized it, she had fully slipped into a trance. She got up from her seat and started moving with the music that had taken over her mind and body.

Komushi leaned back with Sasori, eating the pancakes in between taking drags as he watched her move. Kankuro watched her move intently, impressed with how fluid and smooth she moved with the music. Sasori grinned, realizing she was completely lost to the music.

"And Gaara stayed home to tend to his plants," Kankruo chuckled, shaking his head.
Sasori’s smile faltered a bit and he looked at his cousin. “He doesn’t need to be here,” he said.

“Well, whoa, relax,” Kankuro chuckled.

“Did you even tell him that Sasori would be here?” Komushi smirked at Kankuro. Kankuro shook his head. “That’s why. If he knew these two were going to be here then he probably would have come.”

Sasori clicked his teeth, settling back into his lounging position.

”Are you and him having a spat?” Kankuro chuckled.

”No,” Sasori rolled his eyes. ”We aren't ten. But he's been getting to close to Azumi and has this bad habit of forgetting who she belongs to.”

“Do you have any suspicions of her ‘consoling’ him since your grandmother just died?” Komushi asked. He was lowkey looking for some drama. Something to get his mind off of his own heartbreak. Azumi could not hear anything they were saying and he noticed she did not react to his comment.

Kankuro perked up. ”Consoling him?” he asked. ”There's no way. He has a very good handle on boundaries. He would never make moves on someone who is basically taken.”

Komushi raised an eyebrow with a huge grin. ”Are you sure about that?” he asked Kankuro. ”What makes you so positive?”

”He’s my brother,” Kankuro said. ”I should know. Plus, he usually tells me when he’s into a girl.”

“Maybe he’s grown now and doesn’t need to tell you everything,” Komushi smirked. “You didn’t see them at the night market together.”

”Stop trying to make my innocent baby brother sound bad.”

”Your baby brother isn't a baby anymore,” Sasori reminded him. ”And he is definitely showing too much interest in my slave.”

”I think he's just being nice,” Kankuro shook his head. ”Women have a tendency to do that to him and Uncle Sandaime.”

”I see your point about your uncle but seriously, he is practically making out with her with his eyes whenever they are at the shop together,” Komushi chuckled.

Kankuro squinted. ”I still don’t believe it. I have to see it for myself.”

”Come by the shop one day when they’re both there,” Komushi challenged.

”I’ll be there tomorrow then,” Kankuro chuckled.

Sasori hummed. ”They were also close through all of Granny’s services.”

”They were?” Komushi got up, deciding he wanted to dance with Azumi.

”Now that I think of it,” Kankuro hummed, ”I did hardly see either of them during the services. They were either both there or they weren’t.” He shook his head. “But that’s not really evidence.”

”It’s evidence enough for me,” Sasori grumbled. “But I do not think Gaara is bold enough to act on
“As I said. He knows boundaries.”

Komushi pulled Azumi close and started to move with her.

“Wish someone else knew boundaries,” Sasori muttered. Yet, could not hide his smirk. “Are you having fun?” he asked Komushi through a large cloud that he produced.

“I am,” Komushi chuckled. “But she seems...spaced out. She hasn’t responded to what we’ve been saying and she doesn’t seem to realize I’m dancing with her. I want her to tell me I’m good,” he pouted.

“She’s not going to lie to you,” Kankuro chuckled. “But is she okay? She hasn’t taken any drags. Did you give her something before coming here?” he asked Sasori. It was not accusatory, but he just wanted to be sure they were not overlooking anything that could be harmful.


“Like...like an actual snake?” Komushi exclaimed. “You can’t be serious!” He laughed, looking at Azumi again.

"That explains why she moves like one,” Kankuro noted, watching her move.

"How do you snap her out of it?" Komushi asked, waving his hand in front of her face.

"Just stop the music,” Sasori answered. "She comes back pretty quickly."

"How did you figure this out? How long have you known?" Komushi let out a huge gasp. "Was she in a trance for your performance at the night market?"

Sasori’s grin stretched, still lazy but thoroughly enjoying himself. “I figured it out not too long before the night market,” he chuckled. “It’s how I kept her calm on the stage. Her anxiety is really bad. But I haven’t played with the intensity of music or types yet.”

Kankuro frowned. It did not sit well in his stomach to hear his cousin speak about controlling someone who was clearly in a trance like some sort of doll or puppet. “Something like that shouldn’t affect people,” he remarked.

Sasori’s eyes twinkled as he turned to his cousin. “It shouldn’t but it affects her.”

“And it could have so much potential!” Komushi matched Sasori’s grin.

Kankuro was very harshly reminded in that moment of why he rarely hung out with his cousin anymore. These two were literal demons. Still, he said nothing. At least he was not going to say anything in front of them. He wondered if his brother knew about it since he worked closely with her.

In the background, the music stopped and so did Azumi. She groaned softly, almost falling over but Komushi caught her before she could and sat back down with her. She rubbed her temples, feeling a massive headache beginning to form. When she looked at the three men she was with, they were all watching her. “Please stop staring at me,” she said softly. Komushi tucked her close to his chest and rubbed her back gently.
Kankuro's stomach turned and bottomed out at the same time. "Do you...need some tea?" he asked, watching her rub her head.

Sasori shook his own. "Give her a moment to collect herself," he said easily. Kankuro frowned, still itching to get up.

"You danced beautifully," Komushi whispered to her softly, kneading his fingers into her back. She relaxed more against Komushi. "Thank you..." she said with a frown. 'I did not even know I was dancing,' she thought. She sighed heavily, running her hand down her face. "Um...I may actually need that tea," she said softly. Kankuro was on his feet before Sasori could protest.

"I still have that valerian root tea," Komushi called. "Have the kitchen staff make it extra strong," he told Kankuro as he ducked out of the room.

"I'm surprised," Sasori leaned forward, turning her head gently to face him but letting her still rest against Komushi. He looked into her eyes, studying her face. "You weren't this worn out after the night market," he was nearly whispering.

"This...was a bit stronger," she hummed. "I could not fight this one off." She was having a hard time understanding why. The music itself was not even that loud but no matter how much she tried to resist it, she still slipped. "I do not know how."

"Could it be the instruments or the flow of the song?" Komushi questioned.

"Could be." Sasori hummed. "It would seem we'll need to do some experiments."

"Are you sure you don't know anything else about how the trance affects you?" Komushi asked, already getting excited by the idea of running tests.

Azumi furrowed her brow. She did not like the idea of them experimenting on her trances—or on her at all. "I think it might just be because I am tired," she suggested, hoping they would dismiss the subject. Most of her understood that was futile, however.

"We'll make sure to add that to one of the tests," Sasori nodded. Immediately, she deflated a little bit.

"Oh, does this mean I get to sleep over?" Komushi wiggled his eyebrows. He started to stroke Azumi's hair, gently pressing his fingertips into her skull to massage it.

"Yeah, why not," Sasori shrugged.

She groaned softly, pulling away from Komushi. "I—" she started.

"I have your tea," Kankuro cut her off as he walked into the room. He sat next to her in the pit. Azumi looked at the cup he handed her. "Thank you," she said softly. She sat up a little straighter and started drinking it.

"That's going to you knock out," Kankuro frowned with concern. "I can carry her home if you don't want to," he told Sasori. He did not want her to get dumped somewhere or just left behind because she needed her pain eased.

"Thank you, Kankuro, but—" Sasori started but Kankuro pressed his lips firmly. It was rare for his younger cousin pressed him for anything. "Fine," he relented. "You and your brother are such
saps," he grumbled, rolling his eyes.

Komushi continued to stroke her hair, pouting. "You don't trust me?" Komushi hissed softly in her ear.

She finished her tea and looked at him. "I do, but—" The tea kicked in immediately and just as Kankuro told her, she was knocked out, leaning against Komushi's chest again. He maneuvered her so her head rested in his lap.

"But I'll be carrying her," Kankuro finished for her with a small triumphant smirk.

Komushi scrunched up his nose, sticking his tongue out at the artist. "Whatever. She's in my lap right now." He rolled his eyes, continuing with his gentle strokes.

Sasori blew out a large cloud over Komushi and Kankuro. "I don't understand why you two are even fighting over this. She's literally just a slave."

"But she's a girl," Komushi grinned.

"She's also a human," Kankuro deadpanned.

"A pretty human giiiirl," Komushi grinned, still stroking Azumi's hair.

"Who is still a slave, " Sasori rolled his eyes. Still, he could not suppress the smirk pulling at his lips. He took another drag and sighed. "You know what...whatever." He tipped his head back, looking up at the ceiling.

"So when do you want to experiment?" Komushi smirked at Sasori, causing Kankuro to scoff and roll his eyes.

"I'm thinking we could do it this week," he hummed dreamily. "The middle of the week good for you?"

"Middle of the week sounds perfect," Komushi grinned.

'Disgusting,' Kankuro thought.

The three of them continued to smoke the hookah for a couple of hours until the coals in the dish were nothing more than just hot pebbles. Sasori let out a sigh. "Right. It's been fun, but I don't like being out, as we all know." He stood up and stretched hard.

"Tired already, old man?" Komushi smirked.

"No, I just hate you," Sasori said. "Hand the brat over to Mr. Galleant over there and let's go," he muttered. "Or I will drag her home myself. And I literally mean drag."

"Yeah, we know you mean it literally," Kankuro mumbled, getting up as well. He picked Azumi up gently, carrying her in his arms. "Later, Komushi." He stepped out of the pit with Sasori.

"Stop by again," Komushi waved, standing to make his way to his own bed. "Both of you stop acting like strangers."

"You know this guy?" Kankuro smirked at Sasori.

"Who are you again?" Sasori asked Komushi.
"Haha, very funny," Komushi waved them off. "Bye," he said, laying back on his bed and holding both his arms up to flip off the pair of cousins. They both chuckled as they turned to leave.

The cool air of the night hit them the moment they were outside. Usually, it was sobering but Sasori felt too nice to let temperatures affect him. He and Kankuro moved along the vacant streets of the city back towards his house. "Tonight turned out to be pleasantly eventful," Sasori hummed.

"You're in a fairly pleasant mood," Kankuro noted.

Sasori looked at him with the smallest hint of a glare. "Of course, I am," he said. "I just had a good time."

Kankuro shook his head slightly, trying not to sigh too hard. He looked down at Azumi for a moment and then straight ahead as they continued on to Sasori's home. They got there in good time since there was no traffic. Kankuro followed Sasori to his room and gently laid Azumi down on the daybed.

Sasori flopped down on this bed, pulling a pillow towards him and Kankuro turned to leave when Sasori stopped him. "Oh, and Kankuro?"

Kankuro froze. "Yes?" he asked hesitantly.

"When you tell Gaara about this," he smirked in the moonlit darkness and Kankuro could hear it in his cousin's tone, "do your best to keep the facts as straight as possible and maybe omit the whole trance dance, can you?"


'Like hell, I'd do that.'

"Goodnight, baby cousin," Sasori slurred slightly as he drifted off to sleep.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

It's been almost a week since our last update, breaking our two to three-day posting streak. We're fired.

The next morning came too early to Sasori. The household was still adjusting to the shift in how it was managed. It was not too much of a shift since Sasori kept much of the household dealings the same, but it was just enough to make people uneasy.

Azumi groaned softly as she opened her eyes. She gasped and sat up quickly, looking around to see she was in Sasori's room. Normally, she would relax a little when she saw that she was in a familiar setting but as she slowly recalled the night before, she found it hard to relax. She looked at him just as he was also waking up. "Good morning," she said softly to him. She stood up and stretched hard, getting ready to get his breakfast and coffee.

"Good morning," Sasori smirked. "How are you feeling today?" he asked, scooting up towards the wall.

She gave him a long, hard look. "Better," she said after a couple of seconds. "I will be back." She turned and left the room, heading toward the kitchen. Since Chiyo and the servant died, the remaining two servants had been avoiding her. They would not look at her or try to make conversation whenever they passed her in the halls or saw her in the kitchen. Not that Azumi minded, anyway. If she had it her way, she would have sent them with their friend. She quickly grabbed two bowls of breakfast and two cups of coffee, bringing them back to Sasori's room on a tray.

Sasori had moved to his workshop in the time she had left and come back. He was writing down a list of things into a chart. "Azumi…" he hummed when she walked in, "give me any and all information you can about your trances. I need it to make sure we can test everything thoroughly." There was an excited tick to his husky morning voice.

She frowned as she set the tray down on a table for him. "My trances are not a thing I have too much experience in," she said. "I have never had to deal with people purposefully putting me in a trance. That instrument that you have...that is the only thing I know that causes it. It was also used in the music for our performance at the night market. And I am sure it was in the music at Lord Komushi’s house." She picked up her coffee and took a sip, trying to piece together all of the information that she did know. "Normally, I can fight it off and only get a headache from it. However, I do not know what exactly causes certain ones to be so strong that I cannot fight them."

He wrote down everything she was saying and any other observations he himself had made during the three times he had experienced her trances. While this was going to be fun to experiment with, he also genuinely wanted to learn about them. There could be a possibility that this trance could be used against her or himself should anyone find out about it and he preferred to be as informed as possible to combat that.

She looked at what he was writing and deflated a little. She picked up his bowl and coffee and set them down in front of him. "I think maybe you should eat before you think too much about this,"
she said softly.

He glanced at the breakfast items then up at her with a smirk. He picked up the mug and took a long sip, downing half the cup in one go. He set it down, squinting at her then turned back to the notebook and flipped to a different section of the book, writing something down and underlining it sharply. "So, tell me more about your venom sac," he grinned. He knew she said it was only a rumor but he was nowhere near convinced.

"The venom sac that I told you does not exist?" she asked. "It is rumored that people like me have one and that we produce a venom. Although, if it were true, we do not have fangs so there would be no way for us to get it out. The entire theory is flawed. And that is how you know it is a rumor. A very stupid rumor."

Sasori nodded, writing something else down. His grin was growing and a small chuckle slipped out. "There's always some truth to rumors," he hummed. "Isn't there?" He stood up and started walking towards her. "And you really don't seem to be very informed about your body." He started to walk her back towards the table behind her. "So why don't we get informed.

Suddenly, she started to feel extremely uncomfortable around him the same way she was when he first bought her. She gently pressed her hand to his chest to push him away. "Um...no, thank you?" she said.

Sasori raised his eyebrow. "Mmm...too bad you don't have free will," he grinned, putting his hands on her hips. He lifted her straight up and pushed her back onto the table. "Ignorance is not tolerated in the room." He straddled her waist. There was still a little huskiness to his voice as he leaned down, speaking softly in her ear. His hands slid up her arms, pinning them over her head. With one hand, he clasped her wrists together while he used the other to reach down and pull up one of the straps he tied her down with last time. Switching hands, he repeated the action and restrained her hands entirely. "Open your mouth," he told her.

She tried to recoil into the table in an attempt to keep a distance between their faces. "Mm," she groaned, turning her head to face away from him and keeping her mouth closed.

Sasori chuckled, gripping her jaw tightly and forcing her face back to look at him. "You really don't grasp the concept that none of these are suggestions or requests." He curled his nails until they bit into the skin of her cheeks. "Open. Your. Mouth," he growled. "If you make me get up, it will be much worse for you." She gasped softly with her mouth closed, looking into his eyes. She knew that was a promise. She opened her mouth for him, trying to ignore the fact that she could literally hear her own heartbeat with how fast it was. "Good girl," he purred. "If you try to bite me," he gently peeled back her upper lip to look at her teeth, "I'll rip your tongue out of your head," he said sweetly.

Her eyes widened slightly. She knew that was also a promise. She looked up at him as he continued invading her. The smallest involuntary whimper came out of her. He grinned like a small curious child as he used one hand to keep her mouth open and the other to gently prod around the soft wet cavern. His eyes fell on the longer than usual canines. He noticed an odd fold in the gum around the tops of the teeth. Tilting his head to the side, he took the tooth in between his forefinger and thumb and gently pulled. She shut her eyes and let out a soft pained groan. Her head moved a little in discomfort and she only felt his grip on her tighten.

He pulled the tooth until he felt it protest, taking that as an indication that it was fully extended. "Huh," he smirked, looking into her eyes. "Guess you have fangs," he purred. "There's our first grain of truth." He pulled the other tooth out to its full extension, earning another pained groan.
from her. He smirked, leaning back to examine them closely. He started to probe her soft palate, thinking of how she said a snake's venom sac was behind their eyes. He was making a jump, assuming it was in her mouth.

She winced, feeling him examine her mouth some more. The further back he went, the more she started to panic. “Ugh,” she groaned, flinching when he touched the very thing she was hiding from him.

He hummed softly at her reaction. Rotating his finger gently, he began to press hard on the squishy little sac. He smirked, wondering if something would drip out of her teeth or shoot out from the gland. “You really are a little snake.” He dug his finger in harder.

The more he touched it, the more uncomfortable she felt. It started to irritate her sinuses and she inhaled sharply then sneezed. With the venom sac being provoked, she sneezed out the venom it produced. "Sorry," she said softly.

Sasori could not pull back fast enough. The venom and a little spit hit him square in the face. It fell dangerously close to his mouth. He reeled back, glaring at her. “You could have turned your head,” he growled softly, getting off of her to wipe his face. He was annoyed but he was too excited by the information that he was gathering.

She rolled her eyes. ‘You were holding my head in place,’ she thought. She turned her head away from him as he wiped his face and sighed. She figured eventually, he would have found out about it but she had hoped it would have been way later on. With his hands no longer in her mouth, she retracted her fangs back into their original position. ‘I never had to use them before...that is why it hurt when he pulled them...’ She closed her eyes for a moment. There was nothing she could say that would fool him into thinking they were regular teeth and that that was not a venom sac in the back of her mouth.

He caught her retracting her teeth just as he finished wiping his face. His smirk slowly returned. He scooted onto the edge of the table and looked down at her again. “A normal human, are we?”

She pouted slightly and looked away from him. “These are merely mutations,” she said. “Mutations I was born with but did not come naturally to those before me. Clearly, I am a descendant of people who were heavily experimented on. I am a human. I am just not a normal human. You asked me why my village is so hidden and reclusive.” She looked him up and down, indicating that he was the epitome of the reason. “This is why.”

He shook his head. His smirk gave her the sour promise that this little conclusion of hers was not at all a conclusion to his exploration. "All I am hearing is that you need someone to help you figure out all of those mutations. It's good to be aware of one's body," he murmured, dragging the tip of his finger down from her collar bones to her chest and lingering over the burn. His eyes fixed back on her mouth. "Your venom...I wonder if it's as potent as a real snake's." There was a glint in his eyes and suddenly, he was off the table's edge again, reaching up to grab a jar from one of his many shelves.

Her eyes widened when she saw the jar in his hand. “No,” she whispered. As he came back to her, she tried to keep her mouth closed.

Sasori set the jar down next to her head and tapped her lips. "Open," he said sweetly, looking into her eyes. He felt a giddy shock run through his body. He knew she would say no once more. Still, he wanted to hear it.

She looked up at him, keeping her mouth shut. “Mm-mm,” she hummed, shaking her head a little.
He chuckled lowly. "Wrong answer." He pressed her lips with his fingertip and reached under the table for something. There was a soft metal sound and then his hand re-emerged holding two small metal clamps. They each had two prongs that, on one end came to a set of hooks and the other ended in a bolt that could be twisted to expand the prongs out. "I'll give you one last chance," he smirked. "Open," he growled softly with a malicious smile. She opened her mouth with a gasp when she saw the instruments in his hand. Another small whimper came out of her. "I knew you had a sensible head," he hummed. The jar was quickly pressed to her lips, the glass cooler than her skin. He slipped his finger into her mouth again. Over the glass and started to tease the sac once more. She grunted in discomfort and closed her eyes tight. Her sinuses were irritated again and she let out a small cough before sneezing out only a little bit of venom. Sasori caught the telltale signs of the sneeze and raise one hand to shield her mouth. He made sure to catch the little bit of leakage into the jar. "I know you can give more than that," he said cooingly. His voice might have been encouraging or even kind had it been under any other circumstances.

'This cannot be how he milks snakes,' she thought. She stared up at him and shook her head. "You will not get much by just making me sneeze it out," she told him. He pulled back to glare down at her then looked away, trying to recall how he had seen her do it. Milking a snake and a scorpion was similar but was milking a human the same? He got up, his eyes roaming his desk to spot a piece of cloth to put over the jar for her to bite down on. She stared up at him for a moment. She did not know what he intended to do with her venom but she could only imagine it was horrible. Yet, what he would do to her if she did not give him her venom would no doubt be way worse. She sighed heavily, maneuvering her fang through the cloth and into the jar. With a bit of struggle—because she had only ever forced her venom out twice in her life—she filled the jar halfway.

Realizing she could not give anymore, he pulled the jar away from her mouth and held it up to the light. "What an interesting color," he whispered, giving the jar a swirl. He let out a soft hum that nearly sounded like he was vibrating. He was excited to see what this substance could do. "This just might convince me snake venom is better than scorpion venom," he said teasingly, cupping her cheek. He slid off the edge of the table and capped the jar, taking his time to label it before tucking it away from the sun. He turned back to her and tilted his head.

She flinched slightly when he looked at her again. 'What more does he want?' she thought. She watched him closely, afraid of what he was going to ‘experiment’ on next.

He circled her, rounding to the side of her that had her large snake tattoo. He placed his hand on her hip, rubbing his thumb into the bone where the snake's head rested. He grew quiet as he dug his nail in, tracing the scales. "We haven't had much time to paint lately." She gasped quietly, her eyes widening a little. Suddenly, his first threat to her about taking her identity away echoed in her mind. 'He is going to ruin it.' She moved her leg away from him, not wanting to go through that pain for the third time.

He grinned, pinning her leg down by the knee with his other hand. He dug his nails in hard into her skin. "Don't you dare," he smirked. He pulled her leg back to its original positions and turned to reach under the table for the strap. She struggled against him a little before he held her down and strapped her legs to the table. Another whimper came out of her and she bit her lip, realizing she had no way out of this. Silently, he made his way back to the workbench and returned what he need to ‘paint.’ He stood over her, mixing together the horrible concoction. She could immediately smell the acid and wanted to vomit.

"Let’s see," he whispered, tapping the end of the brush he was using to his lip. “Where should I start?” He pulled up a stool without looking away from her as he studied her leg. “Mm, here,” he grinned, pressing the brush clean to her skin with no warning. Before she could even realize it, she
started to let out a pained scream. She bit her lip to hold it in. The burn was much worse than she remembered. Sasori sighed in pleasure at the sound. He gripped her leg with his other hand as the muscle started to tremor a bit. They were small, detailed strokes. “I wonder how long you can keep that sweet sound up,” he said as he paused to dip his brush again. This particular design was going to take a while. He decided that he might do it in parts but he would not tell her that.

When the brush touched her skin again, she let out a small whimper, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of a full scream. Once he lifted the brush, the cool air hit it straight on and she inhaled sharply. “Fuck,” she grunted through teeth.

"Such language," he gasped with a grin when she cursed. "I'm starting to doubt you truly are a lady," he teased, continuing to paint the small intricate shapes.

She glared at him, her fear instantly converting into rage. “I could say the same about you,” she growled. “I recall a couple of instances where you have uttered such words.”

"Never denied it," he hummed, laughing quietly at her sudden burst of rage. "But it's not my nobility that is in question. And don't men usually have a tendency towards those sort of words?" He cocked an eyebrow questioningly. "Not to mention, as far as I know, I have the free will to say whatever I want whenever I want. You one the other hand," he flipped the end of the brush and dug the blunt rounded point of the brush into the fresh burn. "Will say what I want you to say when I want you to say it."

Her breath hitched and she almost let out a scream. “Right,” she grunted, exhaling hard and looking away from him.

He frowned a little. He wanted that scream. He had every right to the scream she had stifled. He moved back to one of the earlier burns he made on her thigh, going over the skin again. He dragged the brush slowly, blistering the skin worse than the first time. Blood started to drip from the burn. Sasori wrinkled his nose a little at the smell of the flesh burning a little but his eyes trained on the droplet of blood. It slipped down the curve of her thigh and was about to disappear before he caught it with his finger. It burned a little since it had mixed with the acid. He rubbed it between his fingers as he looked up at her.

She shut her eyes tight, letting a couple of tears fall from her eyes. She refused to give him any satisfaction of making her scream again. She bit her lip harder, tearing into the skin and drawing a little blood. If she was not strapped to the table, she would have moved much more.

He watched the pain twist on her face and narrowed his eyes. He simply took her resistance as a challenge. He quite enjoyed that she did not cave so quickly. He had had plenty of other slaves who would have passed out by this point. It was more entertaining than she realized to watch her struggle. He continued to paint, going over spots over and over again. He did not bother to clean the blood as he moved halfway down her leg.

As the hours went by, Azumi had grown numb to the sensations. She kept her eyes averted from him, sniffling every now and then from the crying she had done earlier. Sasori set the brush down finally with a heavy sigh. “We’ll finish this later. There’s no entertainment in you sniveling like a child,” he said with irritation. He pulled away to grab the salve and wrappings.

"Finish it later?!" she thought. She huffed, having the urge to wipe her face but not being able to because her hands were tied up. She watched his hands as he wiped her leg down. He applied the cooling agent and she immediately felt the relief.

He undid the strap that held down the leg so he could wrap it snugly with the fresh gauze. "Once
that heals we'll see how you like it," he smirked, patting the fresh burns. "No peeking until then," he whispered, pressing a finger to his lips. She rolled her eyes and looked away from him as she bent her leg once he was done wrapping it. She arched her back a little, feeling how stiff it was from laying on the table for hours. He moved to undo her other leg when they heard someone walk into his room. Sasori paused, the buckles keeping Azumi's leg in place still strapped in. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He knew those footsteps all too well. "Too soon," he mouthed. Before the person even spoke, Azumi was also already irritated. "Where's my favorite slave and master pair?" Komushi asked, the grin on his face clear in his voice. Azumi rolled her eyes again and then Komushi walked into the workshop. "There they are! Ooh, what's going on here?" The grin stayed plastered to his face.

Sasori kept his back turned to Komushi for a moment longer. He dug his nails into Azumi's ankle as he squeezed his eyes tightly before answering. "We were just having some fun," he pushed out between clenched teeth. He took a subtle deep breath then continued to loosen Azumi's leg. "What brought you over? Wasn't our recent visit sufficient enough?" he asked, finally turning to look at his best friend.

Komushi pouted. "I was gone for the better part of a month, had my heart broken, and you think one baby visit is going to soothe my soul or mend my heart?" Komushi gushed dramatically. He placed the back of his hand on his forehead for added flair. "It's like you don't know me at all anymore!" He skirted around the table to look at Azumi's wrapped leg. "Aw," he pouted. "What design did you do? I want to see!"

"You were gone for barely even an entire week," Sasori said, placing his hand on Azumi's leg to stop Komushi from unwrapping it. "And you will see it when it's healed."

"I should've come earlier," Komushi muttered. "So I could've seen it."

"Mm, but knowing you, you were still wrapped up in bed," Sasori grumbled. He huffed heavily. "I suppose it's okay you came over since I have something to show you."

Komushi perked up instantly. A dark glint of excitement flashed across both of their eyes. "Oooh?" Komushi's demeanor switched. Sasori much preferred this version of his friend. Leaving Azumi's hands tied down, he beckoned his friend to follow him over to his workbench where the jar of her venom sat. Sasori picked the jar up and held it in front of Komushi who inspected it closely. "Venom?" he whispered, grinning wide still. He let out a small gasp. "Did this come out of her?" Sasori simply nodded. Komushi squeaked in delight, taking the jar from him to look at the liquid more closely. He let out a shuddering breath. "Who should we test it on! What should we put it in!" He moaned, clutching the jar to his chest. "So much potential." He handed the jar back to Sasori and vaulted over the edge of the table, straddling Azumi easily.

She let out a small grunt when he straddled her. Immediately, she noticed that he was just a little heavier than Sasori. That, or he had no problem just sitting all of his weight on her whereas Sasori would carry some of his own weight. 'Why do they insist on sitting on me?' she thought.

"Show me," he demanded in a husky voice. "Open your mouth," he cupped her face. The pad of his thumb dragged her along the swell of her lower lip, gently pulling it back.

She looked up at Komushi and frowned then turned her face away from him. 'Like hell,' she thought.

He pouted, leaning down. "Ooh, don't be that way, little snake," he cooed. He was gentler than Sasori was when he turned her face back towards his. "I just want to know what your body can do.
"You're a natural wonder!" She stared up at him for a moment before letting out a heavy sigh through her nose. She opened her mouth for him, hoping he would not shove his fingers into it the way Sasori had. "Thank you," he whispered. His eyes zeroed in on the small fangs in her mouth. He was like a small child seeing a wonder for the first time.

"Her fangs are retractable," Sasori said from the stool he had sat down on.

Komushi's eyes widened. "Can you extend them?" he asked her, looking directly into her eyes. She hummed, concentrating on pushing them out to their full length—a very uncomfortable length for her since she hardly ever extended them.

Komushi let out a hushed moan. "They are beautiful," he whispered, cupping her face. He pulled her lip back a little with his thumb so he could see her gums. "I can't believe you've been hiding this. Sasori, we have to test that venom!" he said without looking away from her. "How often can you produce your venom?" His voice was starting to get that rushed enthusiasm again.

She retracted her fangs and frowned. "I have never done this before," she said softly. "I have never had my venom sac milked completely. I do not know how long it takes for me to produce more after it has been depleted."

"Really," both men said.

Komushi leaned in a little closer. "So, how does it feel to be so...empty?" Komushi asked her curiously. Sasori folded his hands in his lap, thinking about Naga's headache a week before.

She took a moment to answer. "It feels like a pressure that I did not even realize was there has been relieved," she said.

"So, this would be beneficial to you if we continued to do it to you?" Komushi asked for clarification. Sasori leaned back, pulling the notebook he had been writing in earlier to write down her response.

Azumi shook her head. "There is no need to deplete a snake's venom sac unless it is in pain from overproduction and even then, you should only remove the excess, not all of it," she said. "I was not overproducing. I had just the right amount to fill the sac."

Komushi giggled a little at her description. "Would something cause you to overproduce?" he asked.

Sasori made another notation. "My guess would be something going wrong with her endocrine system," he spoke up.

"That would be my guess as well," she muttered, rolling her eyes. "Which, as we can see, there is nothing wrong. My body is functioning normally."

"But there is no harm in milking you anyway, right?" Komushi pouted a little. He was too excited to know the effects of her venom.

"I suppose not," she said softly with a frown. "However, you would have to wait and as I said, I do not know how long it takes."

"That's fine," Sasori said, closing the notebook with a soft tap. "We can track it and have a definitive answer rather than a guess. Certainty is always preferable and I trust my notations more than anyone else's."
"I trust them, too," Komushi grinned.

"As you should," Sasori deadpanned. "They're always accurate."

Azumi sighed, looking away from Komushi again. She hated this. She hated that she was being experimented on and there was nothing she could do about it that would not eventually end in her own death. This was the very thing her father founded their village to prevent and it was happening to her.

"Can I?" Komushi asked above her. He slid his hands up the length of her arms, lacing his fingers into hers. However, he was not looking at her. He had turned his head towards Sasori. Sasori flicked his wrist in permission. Komushi smiled, undoing her bindings. As soon as the leather straps fell away, he gently massaged the harsh indentations they had made. "Damn, Sasori, you're really bent on damaging her, aren't you?" He picked up one of her wrists and pressed a gentle kiss to the skin.

"She can handle it," Sasori waved off. "Her body can probably take much worse."

Azumi scoffed and rolled her eyes again. 'Of course, that is your response,' she thought.

Komushi smirked against her skin. He looked past her hand to look her in the eyes. "She must be able to if she's still functioning this well after your painting session."

"After the first hour, she stopped feeling everything I was doing," Sasori huffed in disappointment.

"Aw, poor, bored sadist." Komushi released Azumi's hand. He got off of her and sat on the edge of the table. "I'm sure you'll come up with something better and more painful soon," he teased. "Maybe you need to up the acidity."

Azumi sat up, twisting her body to crack her back. She sighed at Komushi's suggestion, hating that he was just as much of a monster as Sasori after being so gentle with her.

"Not a bad idea," Sasori hummed.

"Maybe you can mix some sort of plant-based poison!" Komushi grinned. "They could add a touch of color!"

Sasori nodded. "All of these suggestions are being considered. I'll figure something out."

Suddenly, Azumi was hit with the urge to kick Komushi off of the table. "Please, stop," she whispered.

Komushi's ear twitched, catching the whisper. His eyes rolled to the very corners of their sockets to look at her without turning his head. "Stop?" he grinned, the husky tone back in his voice. Sasori glanced at her. "But you're our prized plaything," Komushi cooed in a mocking tone.

She scoffed and glared at him. "I would cooperate better without the torture," she muttered.

"Oh, but the torture is a good motivator to keep you cooperating," Sasori smirked.

"Not to mention you get all of this lovely art to grace your body," Komushi's said, flicking his finger out to slide between her breasts and trace the very top of the burn on her chest.

"Komushi," Sasori growled warningly.

"Yes?" Komushi smirked, not moving his finger away from her. Azumi frowned and took his
"Remember the thing about boundaries?" Sasori asked. "And how you need to learn them?"

"Yes, yes," Komushi rolled his eyes. "A city isn't built in a night," he scoffed. "I'm sure I'll learn them."

"Learn them soon," Sasori said. "I wouldn't hesitate to torture you either."

"I know you wouldn't," Komushi smirked. "I like the thrill of the possibility." Sasori rolled his eyes, but the smirk was not missed by Komushi. "So, what do you have planned for the rest of the day?" he asked, eager to use the venom.

"Nothing," Sasori sighed. "Discovering her venom and painting on her took up my whole morning and a bit of the afternoon. I didn't even finish the painting."

“Ah,” Komushi nodded sagely. “Then why don’t we hit the town and look for a victim to test our new ingredient on!” he said enthusiastically. “Clearly you have nothing to do so don’t even try to come up with a lame excuse.”

Sasori flared nostrils as he took a deep breath. “I suppose we could.” He folded his arms.

"There we go," Komushi smirked. "Let me see your list of possible victims. I know you have it here somewhere."

Sasori did not move at first, narrowing his eyes at Komushi for a moment before relenting and opening a drawer with a list of names. They were people Sasori had not much care for so needless to say, the list was considerably lengthy. He handed the list to Komushi to pick their first sacrifice.

Azumi frowned at how long it was yet she was not surprised there were that many people Sasori would be willing to kill. In fact, she was a bit surprised that it was not longer. She moved to get off of the table, taking a moment to find her balance with the awkward feeling in her leg from the numbing agent Sasori used on the burn.

Komushi hummed as he looked over the options. He swung his feet in a child-like manner. He glanced over his shoulder, catching Azumi’s slight stumble. “Just sit next to me,” he chuckled, reaching a hand out for her to take.

Sasori got up in a flash, putting her on the stool that he was just sitting on. “You should have stayed laying down,” he grumbled.

"I am fine," she said, getting off of the stool. 'As if you even care,' she thought, rolling her eyes. "I have dealt with this before." She left the workshop and went into the bathroom to wash her face, wanting to hurry up and get rid of the leftover sensations of crying.

"Why am I on this list?" Komushi asked. He paused for a second. "Why am I on it twice?"

"You're actually on it three times," Sasori said.

"That doesn't answer my question," Komushi stressed the word.

Sasori rolled his eyes. "It really doesn't matter. Just pick someone," he huffed.

Komushi gave him a hurt pout but looked back at the list. "You really put Rasa on here?" he chuckled. "Fine, uh, Menō," he said.
"Mmm, no, let's kill her father. I think I can groom Menō."

"Ibushi it is then!"

"I believe he is usually in the market around this time or on his way home from it," Sasori hummed.

"Great! We can sneak up on him, catch him off guard and administer the venom," Komushi grinned. "If he dies, we just get rid of him. If he doesn't die, we act like heroes."

"As usual," Sasori smirked.

"I can ready the vial here you go get dressed," Komushi grinned. "Oh, wait, do you think regular antivenom will work in case we need it?" he asked, looking up from the list.

"I don't see why it shouldn't. It's still a snake based venom so it should behave the same way."

"But not all snake venom does the same thing, so this could also be different," Komushi said. "We need to figure out which type of snake her venom would be closest to and bring the antivenom for that."

Sasori folded his arms. He hated when Komushi was right. "I'm sure she knows what she is actually closest to," he hummed.

"Are you sure about that?"

"Very. She hides things but she isn't an idiot. Especially when it comes to her snake information."

"Well, she won't tell you easily," Komushi laughed. "After what you just did to her. I'll find out from her."

Sasori rolled his eyes. "Fine, but don't waste mine or her time." He glared at him. "I won't hesitate to chop your hands and a few other choice limbs off."

Komushi held his hands up in surrender. "Relax. I never do anything beyond harmless teasing," he chuckled.

"I find that hard to believe," Sasori scoffed.

"Believe what you want," Komushi shrugged as he started preparing the vile of venom to take with them. "Now go get ready and I'll ask her what type of snake she is."

"I don't even take that long to get ready," he grumbled as he got up to go to his room.

Komushi snorted softly, filling the vial then closing the jar up as it had been before. "And I'm your favorite person," he said sarcastically. He crossed the room, passing Sasori to walk into the bathroom. He walked up behind Azumi, pushing his hands over her shoulders and pulling her flush to his chest. "I wonder what he marked you with this time," he whispered into her hair just behind her ear.

She tensed up against him and then huffed. "No doubt some scorpions," she grunted, rolling her eyes. "The strokes felt like the larger one he put on my other leg but smaller and more intricate." She shrugged his hands off of her and picked up a towel to dry her face off.

"That man has no originality," he sighed, running a hand through his hair. He waited for her to finish drying her face. He watched her intently as she folded the towel back up and replaced it. "I
have a question for you, little snake," he smirked, once again closing the space between them. He walked her backward until her back hit the wall and lifted her chin on a curved forefinger. His lips nearly brushed hers as he spoke. "Just what kind of snake are you?" he asked, catching her hand with his and pinning it over her head by the wrist.

She breathed hard through her nose and tried to move her face as far away from his as possible. "May I ask why you need to know this?" she asked softly.

Komushi extended his finger, turning her face back towards his gently. "Your darling little lord needs to know what kind of antivenom to either make or bring with him." His voice softened while the grip on her wrist tightened. "We don't want to be caught unprepared to be the hero now, do we?" he chuckled. "It would make us look pretty bad. Especially Sasori," he chuckled softly, tilting his head a little to kiss her jaw. "What kind of apothecary can't even cure a snake bite?" He kissed the corner of her mouth.

Her eyes widened and she pushed his face away with her free hand. "My venom is similar to the venom of a viper," she said, trying to pull her other hand out of his grasp.

"That makes sense," he chuckled, tightening his grip on her wrist. "Are you in such a hurry to kill someone?" His lips did brush hers now.

"No," she said, trying her face away from his again which he continued to prevent her from doing. "I am not. Unlike you and Lord Sasori, I do not find killing people to be a hobby."

"Then why are you trying to run from me?" His grin was nothing but mischief. He dared to bite her lower lip just enough to taste a little blood from her biting it earlier.

She gasped and without thinking, slapped him with her free hand. "I can give you several reasons why," she said. "The first being this." She tried to pull her wrist from him again.

He laughed a little, touching his cheek with his free hand. "That was a good smack, little snake," he hummed softly. "Mmm, but that might also earn you a punishment," he whispered in her ear.

"It does not take twenty minutes to ask the girl what kind of venom she produces," Sasori's irritated tone called out from the bedroom. He walked into the bathroom just after Komushi pulled away smoothly.

"Viper," Komushi smirked.

Sasori took a long, hard look at her and hummed. "That makes sense," he said.

"That's what I said," Komushi chuckled.

Azumi scoffed and rolled her eyes, turning to wipe her face down again. Never in her life did she instantly want to kill people, but these two men were really pushing her toward it. She stepped away from Komushi and walked past Sasori into the bedroom to change her dress.

"She's still pretty cranky," Komushi said when she disappeared into the bedroom.

"I can see that," Sasori squinted at her. "You didn't do anything did you?" his voice was a low threat. He did not look away from his bedroom door.

Komushi gasped dramatically, putting his hand to his chest as if he had been wounded. "Never," he said. "Nothing beyond gently asking her what kind of snake she is," he smirked.
“I wouldn’t believe that if you bet my life on it,” Sasori squinted harder at him. However, he could not prove anything. He shook his head and joined Azumi in the bedroom. Komushi shrugged, following suit. She had just finished getting dressed when they walked in and sat down on the daybed, waiting for them to hurry up. Komushi sat down next to her, much closer than she would have preferred. She scoffed and moved further down the daybed to be away from him. "I should have an antivenom for a viper," Sasori said, stepping into the workshop and shifting through different jars on a shelf. "We won't need too much if we do need it." He grabbed a second small vile, filling it with the antivenom and tucking it away in the folds of his clothes.

“This is going to be so much fun!” Komushi practically squealed. Sasori did not wait for them to get up as he strode past them towards the door. Komushi bounced onto his feet and pulled Azumi with him, linking their arms as they walked. Azumi immediately glared at him, sliding her arm out of his and maintaining a distance between them. He was the last person she wanted to be touching her. She did not want to be around either of them, barely even looking at them as she followed them out of the house and toward the market where they suspected their victim to be.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Y’all should play Assassin's Creed: Origins if you haven't already. That shit is lit.

Komushi stepped up to stand with Sasori as they walked into the bustling area. "Ooh, mid-day traffic," he hummed, scanning the crowd of people.

Sasori's lips were set in a determined line. "This doesn't matter," he said easily, waving it off. "We both know he goes to the coffee and hookah shops then stops by food stands for shawarma and falafel."

Komushi looked up at the sky for a moment, determining the time and at what point in the routine Ibushi would be in. "He might be on his way to the food stands right now," he said.

"We'll walk by the coffee shop just to be sure," Sasori hummed, walking in said direction. "Sometimes he lingers there longer than normal, no doubt scoping out girls three generations younger than him."

"Gross, he has a daughter."

Sasori hummed, raising his eyebrows as if to say, 'believe me, I know.' The man was just slipping out the door when they walked up.

"Well, would you look at that," Komushi wrinkled his nose. The man had a young pretty woman on his arm that was chattering his ear off. The old man looked like a picture of serenity.

"Disgusting," they both muttered, watching the pair walk down the street.

Azumi rolled her eyes. 'As if the vices you two have are any better,’ she thought.

The three of them started following Ibushi and his young companion, keeping a safe distance. "What do you say?" Komushi grinned. "We use the girl, too? Make it a two for one?"

"Why not," Sasori smirked. "We haven't played this particular game in a while."

"Perfect." The predatory grin spread over Komushi's lips. "Split them up? You take the girl and I take the old man?"

"Sounds like a plan," Sasori smirked, discreetly taking out two syringes. Like the skilled apothecary he was, he filled each one up and handed the second one to Komushi. Ibushi and the young girl took a turn down a narrow street where there was hardly anyone else. "It's almost like they want us to do this," he chuckled.

"We shouldn't keep them waiting then," Komushi grinned. He and Sasori walked faster, rounding the couple on either side. With terrifying and graceful ease, they armed their syringes and plunged them deep into the jugular.

Both Ibushi and the young girl seized up, their bodies stiffening as they felt the venom start to take
over their nervous systems. In only a matter of seconds, they both collapsed, unaware of what just
happened to them and who did it to them. "It works a little faster than an actual viper's venom,"
Sasori said softly as he and Komushi stared down at their victims.

"Whoa!" Komushi giggled. "This is perfect! There is so much we can do with this!" He squatted
down to look over their victims up close. "You're really amazing, Azumi," he said, looking up at
her. "Should we move them somewhere fun before giving them the antidote?" he asked Sasori.

"Where did you have in mind?" Sasori asked. "My shop isn't close enough to get them there
without drawing attention to ourselves."

"There's a side stairway not far from here," Komushi grinned. "Help me get them there and I'll
switch their clothing," he chuckled. "A nice surprise on top of their surprise!"

Sasori chuckled. "Alright," he said, matching Komushi's grin. He moved to pick up the girl as
Komushi picked up Ibushi then followed Komushi to the location he mentioned.

Together they rested the two bodies down and Komushi quickly changed their clothes around.
"How fast-acting is the antivenom?" he asked Sasori, stepping back to admire his work.

"We'll be able to get away with no problem," Sasori hummed, making mental notes of how the pair
appeared to be and how the venom seemed to be initially affecting them.

"My venom will not kill them," Azumi said from the bottom of the stairs. "Do not waste you
antivenom on this. They will only be paralyzed for a little while and then they will not remember
what happened."

Komushi audibly moaned when she said that. "So much potential! Sasoriiii!" He put his hands on
his friend's shoulders, swooning with excitement. "The possibilities just became endless!"

"Get off of me," Sasori sighed, shrugging Komushi's hands off. "How can you be so sure about
that?" he asked Azumi.

"The viper my venom is most similar to does the same thing," she answered, completely
disinterested in the whole ordeal. "The only difference between the two venoms is that mine acts a
little faster."

"Interesting." Sasori filed the information away for later. "We better get out of here now. I'm not in
the mood to 'save them' if they don't need it." He started to walk back up the alleyway, towards
the market.

Komushi followed quickly behind him and Azumi followed at her own leisurely pace behind the
both of them. They exited the alleyway and headed down the street, blending into the crowds
easily. "Ooh, let's stop for coffee!" Komushi grinned.

Sasori thought for a second. "I could go for some coffee." They turned the corner, starting towards
Sasori's favored shop.

The trio stepped in and Komushi walked up to the counter. "You two find a seat, I know your
order," he winked at Sasori. Sasori nodded and looked around for a table that was away from most
of the crowd. Azumi followed him and they sat down to wait for Komushi. She looked around at
the other people in the shop and thought about how unsuspecting they were to what just happened
a couple of blocks away. Komushi walked over a few moments later, grinning as usual. "I ordered
extra churros." He rubbed his hands in excitement.
Sasori made a poor attempt at not looking excited. However, it faded quickly when he spotted an unwelcome pair stepping into the bustling shop. “I swear my family is inescapable,” he grumbled.

Komushi looked over at the door and saw them. “He probably sensed you were up to something and sniffed you out,” he laughed. Azumi looked at who they were talking about and immediately grinned when she saw Gaara and Sandaime walk into the shop.

“Sounds like him.” Sasori sucked his teeth and shot Azumi a glare. His face pinched in irritation. “I bet he has someone watching me now. Or he’s trying to,” he grumbled. He put his hand on her new burn and squeezed. She looked too happy and he hated it.

“Let’s hope you go unnoticed,” Komushi smirked. Just as he said that Sandaime turned and looked Sasori in the eyes. It was as if he did know Sasori was there.

“Komushi, you jinxed it,” Sasori sighed.

Azumi could not help but chuckle a little. She loved watching him get put in his place. Sandaime whispered something into Gaara's ear and the younger man's head snapped in their direction. His face instantly lit up, spotting Azumi.

Komushi stifled a laugh behind his hand. "Wow, can he be any more obvious?" he hummed.

Sasori clicked his teeth again. "At least he can respect boundaries better than you," he snapped.

"Or maybe he’s just not as blatant about it as I am," Komushi teased. Azumi kept her composure, not wanting to seem suspicious with how much that comment bothered her.

"Gaara wouldn’t dare," Sasori countered.

"You sure about that?" Komushi chuckled, letting the doubt hang in the air for a moment. Sasori squinted at him, suddenly wondering if his best friend knew something that he did not. That was until Komushi broke down in more laughter.

"My gods, Sasori, you're so predictable! I bet you were wondering if I knew something you didn't," he smirked. Sasori grunted, rolling his eyes. "I'll take that as a yes."

“Whatever,” he growled. “I know she wouldn’t dare,” he said threateningly. He squeezed her burn again and she sighed heavily.

"You constipated there, Cousin?" Gaara asked softly, seeing the frustrated look on Sasori's face as he walked up. Komushi sputtered, covering his mouth again.

“What? Is that how you greet people?” Sasori snapped, raising his eyebrow.

"I hardly count you as a person," Gaara smirked mischievously. He turned to Azumi. His face softened instantly. "Good afternoon."

She smiled at him, ignoring Sasori’s hand on her injury. “Hello,” she said with a slight giggle.

“What was that you said about boundaries and they wouldn’t dare?” Komushi asked Sasori quietly. Sasori bit his tongue behind his teeth. He shifted, kicking Komushi hard in the shin. Komushi jerked forward with a grunt. "Be cranky all you want," he hissed with a smirk. "I'm still right."

Sandaime walked up to the group and handed Gaara a coffee. “Hello, Nephew,” he said to Sasori. He looked at Komushi. “Nephew’s friend.”
“I’m wounded,” Komushi laughed, putting a hand to his chest.

Sandaime ignored him, pulling up a seat for himself. "Azumi," he smiled, nodding his head to her.

"Whoa, wait, she gets her name and we don't?" Komushi pouted. Gaara chuckled, sitting down with his uncle.

The waitress walked over with the order Komushi placed as the group spoke to each other. Sasori glared at his family members as they made themselves comfortable uninvited. He frowned, reaching for a hot churro.

"You're the only person I know who can look that upset while eating a churro," Gaara said over his coffee.

“Consider it a talent of mine,” Sasori grumbled.

“Not saying I’m surprised to see you here,” Sandaime said. “But I didn’t expect to see you here while the sun was still up,” he smirked at Sasori, earning a stifled laugh from Azumi.

"I can run on surprisingly minimal amounts of sleep," Sasori countered.

"A man of endless and many talents," Komushi chuckled, taking a churro of his own. "Please help yourself. I got a few extra so maybe it was a sign." Sasori blinked wide-eyed. He felt utterly betrayed.

Gaara wasted no time in taking one for himself. Sandaime chuckled softly. “No, thank you,” he said politely. “If I have one, my wife will smell it on me and ask why I ate them without her.”

“Suit yourself,” Komushi laughed.

"She always did have you wrapped around her finger," Sasori smirked.

"Mmm, she does but I don't mind," he smirked dreamily.

"Ew," Komushi laughed. "Is that the look of a man...in love?"

“It is,” Sandaime said.

“Gross,” Komushi smirked.

“You could look like that too if you didn’t get your heart broken all the time,” Gaara told him.

Komushi pouted hard. He looked down at the table, eating his churro like a sad kicked animal.

"I don't mean to...they just never like me as much as I like them!"

“Remember our recurring conversations about boundaries?” Sasori asked. “That’s probably why.”

"Mmm, you do have a problem with those," Gaara nodded in agreement.

"I'd dare say its something you've had a hard time with since you were a kid," Sandaime chuckled. "It was cute when you were little but now..." he trailed off, wincing a little. Komushi was being ganged up on.

“Now you know the root of the problem,” Sasori said, patting Komushi on the shoulder. He looked at his uncle and cousin. “Now that we’ve had this intervention...” he said, hinting that he wanted
them to leave.

"Oh," Sandaime tilted his head to his other nephew. "I think we're being kicked out," he chuckled. Gaara nodded, slipping his hand under the table to give Azumi's hand a squeeze as discreetly as he could manage.

"Glad to see your age hasn't dulled your capacity to read a hint," Sasori snarled.

"Was it a hint?" Sandaime smirked. "Or a blatant 'leave?'"

Azumi looked at Gaara and smiled. "I hope your cacti are doing well," she said softly.

He cracked a smile and squeezed her hand once more. He nodded his head slightly. "They are doing well." He released her hand. "Maybe I'll show you the new one I got soon." He received her message and made sure she knew.

"She is not going over your house," Sasori grumbled.

"Plants move, Sasori." Gaara rolled his eyes and stood up with Sandaime.

"We have a few matters to attend to anyway," Sandaime said. He nodded at them. "But expect another visit soon," he told Sasori.

"I look forward to it," Sasori said through clenched teeth.

"Goodbye, Lord Sandaime," Azumi grinned.

"See you soon," Sandaime gave her a small bow that made Sasori’s mouth press together.

She looked at Gaara, the grin staying in place. "I hope you enjoy the rest of your day," she said to him.

Gaara smiled a little wider at her. "And you the same, Azumi." He said her name with as much reverence as he was allowed in public. The pair of them left together.

The moment they were out of the shop, Komushi swooned. "I hope you enjoy the rest of your day," he fluttered his eyelashes. "Seems like I'm not the only one with weak boundaries.

Sasori’s lips pressed into a thin white line. "You’re really pushing me today, Komushi,” he grumbled.

"Fine, fine, I'll lay off," Komushi sighed. "I'm just saying, you keep attacking me for my lack of boundaries, but—"

Azumi leaned in close, keeping her voice low. "My telling him to have a nice day cannot be classified as sexual harassment," she told him. "I am very familiar with the concept of boundaries."

He smirked back at her, not missing a beat. "The difference between you and I, though, is that you are under ownership and I am not,” he countered.

“I am fully aware of my situation but even before I became a slave—mind you, it was only a few weeks ago—I understood the concept of boundaries. The fact of the matter, Lord Komushi, is that nobody wants to be touched.” Sasori snorted, pathetically stifling a laugh.

“Tch,” Komushi rolled his eyes, backing off. He leaned back in his seat and downed the rest of his coffee. "You two were really made for each other, weren’t you," he huffed.
“I’d say maybe you’ll find someone as clingy as you one day but I don’t think there is anyone as clingy as you,” Sasori smirked.

Komushi scoffed. “What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked.

“You are the only one of your kind,” Azumi smirked.

“I thought we were having a great day.”

“My day has been ruined since this morning.”

“My day was ruined when my uncle and cousin showed up,” Sasori added.

“It is your turn.”

“Man, I don’t want to be dragged down with you two,” he pouted. “I’m surprised you haven’t slipped your uncle something by now, honestly,” he said glumly.

"It would seem too suspicious," Sasori said. "The first person to suspect me would be Gaara and everyone would listen to him."

"What if you slipped him something, too?" Komushi smirked. "Get them both out of the way."

Sasori gave him a deadpanned look. “You’re smarter than this,” he drawled. “That’s just asking to be hunted down. No, I'd have to poison at least one of them over time and then kill off the other one quickly.”

“Well, then,” Komushi rolled his eyes. The two of them were like an old married couple discussing why the other had not started some domestic and innocent house project rather than plotting murder.

Azumi rolled her eyes and sat back in her seat. She crossed her arms and looked around, drowning out their ridiculous conversation.

“Alright, let’s get out of here,” Sasori said after a few minutes. “I still have some things I want to get done.” He stood up and stretched and Azumi stood up with him, ready to leave the moment Gaara and Sandaime left. Komushi lingered in his seat for a moment, eating the last of the churros.

“Before I turn thirty.”

“Alright, alright,” Komushi sighed, finally getting up. The three of them left the shop. “And your body is only turning thirty. The rest of you is just as old as your great uncle.”

“They are actual children,’ she thought, rolling her eyes.
"Maybe some form of a paralytic," Sasori hummed. "Or psychedelic."

"Why not both?" Komushi grinned. "It sounds like you could induce some horrific man-made sleep paralysis!"

The two of them stood there for a moment in silence as Sasori thought it over. "Give me three days," he said suddenly.

Komushi grinned, already anticipating the fun of whatever Sasori made. "Oh, I do so love that look in your eyes," he swooned teasingly.

"Leave. I'm going to start on it tonight." He took the syringe that Komushi had and the bottle of venom away. "As usual, come to the shop when I'm done with it and we'll test it. Think of who you want our next victim to be."

"As you command, my Lord," he grinned, giving Sasori an exaggerated and flourished bow as he backed out of the room. Sasori rolled his eyes, taking a seat at his workbench. Komushi straightened up when he passed through the threshold into the bedroom. His eyes fell on Azumi immediately. He walked up to her and slid his hand up her bandaged thigh. "I can't wait to see the new edition," he smirked, leaning in close to whisper in her ear.

She groaned, backing away a little bit and ending up on Sasori's bed. She put her hand on his chest to push him away and create some sort of distance between them. "Some of us are not as excited," she said softly.

He pulled back, frowning a little. "Stop fighting it," he said with a shrug. His body language said light and airy but his voice held something more serious. "The faster you do that, the less all of this will hurt."

"My apologies if I do not cooperate with my body being damaged by acid or situations that make me uncomfortable," she scoffed, rolling her eyes.

Komushi folded his arms over his chest. "That acid can...feel good," he said slowly. "And please, don't act like you haven't been having a good time at the shop. Also, you and Sasori get along surprisingly well." He looked back into the workshop. His expression softened a little before he looked back at her. "Just try to make this place your home." He reached out and ruffled her hair. "It could always be worse. You could have been owned by Kakuzu," he laughed, walking out of the room.

"Tolerance of each other is not the same thing as getting along," she muttered to herself as she got up. "And I am finding it hard to tolerate him now." She started Sasori's bath when she realized the sun was going down. As she waited for it to fill, she went to the kitchen and got food for Sasori then went into his workshop to give it to him. "Your bath is ready," she told him, setting the bowl in front of him on the table.

He looked at the food in slight surprise then smirked and looked up at her as he began to eat. "You really are efficient," he said thoughtfully. "How is your leg?" he asked after a few moments of quiet chewing.

"I started to feel it again when we were in the coffee shop," she told him. She moved to the other side of the workshop and leaned against the other worktable, wanting to be as far away from him as possible. She was not in the mood to make conversation with him and she awaited the moment he would tell her that she was dismissed.
“I’ll reapply the cooling agent and rewrap your leg after our bath then,” he said as he stood up. His dinner was only half-finished but he stretched languidly anyway and sighed as he started for the door. The day had been more eventful than he had anticipated.

She waited for him to be out of the workshop before following him to the bathroom and placing his robe on its hook. As he undressed and settled into his bath, she ran one for herself. She undressed quickly and stepped into it, once it was ready, sinking low into the water and doing her best to ignore his presence. Sasori did not seem the least bit disturbed by her lack of interaction. He knew that if he needed something from her he could merely take it from her. He rolled over in the bath, facing away from her and closed his eyes. After a couple of silent and peaceful minutes, Azumi finally decided to wash up. She quietly held her breath, sinking underneath the surface of the water to wash her hair. She made sure to use an extra couple of drops of oil and an extra scoop of the salt to smell extra good for her meeting with Gaara. She came up after a minute, combing her fingers through her hair.

Sasori had shifted to rest on his back. His eyes were still closed but he heard her emerge from the water. “You can leave when you’re done,” he waved his hand. He raked a hand through his hair then settled back into the water.

She turned away from him, grinning wide. That was the best thing she heard him say all day. She quickly finished washing up and stepped out of the bath, grabbing a towel and wrapping herself in it. She felt the burn in her leg as soon as the air hit it and grunted softly as she walked into the workshop to grab the cooling agent and the wrappings for it. She went back into the bathroom and stood over Sasori for a moment, waiting for him to open his eyes. She held out the balm and dressing to him so he could apply and wrap. “You told me not to look at it until it was healed,” she said.

He looked at the balm and the dressing then sighed. He hoisted himself out of the water with another long sigh. “Come,” he waved her closer, spreading his legs so she would have room. His face was set in slight irritation at having been disturbed but he really did not want her to see it yet. She got closer to him, turning a little so he could do what he needed to do, looking straight ahead as she moved the towel out of the way for him so he could see what he was doing. “You really heal beautifully,” he murmured. His fingertips were light and dexterous as he spread the balm on her leg but they took their time tracing out the ‘art’ he had graced her with.

She tried not to roll her eyes too hard or shudder as he moved his fingers. "So I have been told," she mumbled, looking out the window at the river toward the spot she and Gaara usually met.

He gave her a look through his lashes as he began to wrap her up. "Sleep that nasty attitude off, will you?" he said with a nudge from his hand indicating he was finished. "I'm not dealing with it tomorrow."

'Stop bringing it out of me then,' she thought, picking up the balm and the rest of the roll. "Goodnight." She left the bathroom and went into the workshop to put the cooling agent and wrapping away. She quickly grabbed her clothes and got dressed then went back to her room.
As usual, Naga was coiled on Azumi’s bed. He hissed a soft greeting to her when she walked in. "Hello," she smiled at him. "Would you like to get out of here for a little while?" She sat down on her bed and pet him gently. He hissed again. "I know...I am sorry you have been stuck in here...especially after the whole situation with Lady Chiyo..." She stayed quiet for a moment and sighed heavily. "But it is okay." She extended her arm out for him to slither up to her shoulder and wrap around her body. "We are going to see Gaara," she smiled, kissing the top of the snake’s head as she stood up and moved toward the window. She made it out easily and quickly headed toward the river, moving a bit further down so they could not be seen by Sasori. She sat down on the bank, slipping her feet into the water while she waited.

The moon started to rise, reflecting as brightly off of the water as it did the white the sand around her. Gaara slowed, dragging his feet a little through the sand gracefully as he walked up to her. He did not even try to control the smile that tugged his lips the moment he saw her. Like the last time they met, he had a basket tucked into his arm but this time he had snuck out a large rug for them to sit on.

A small hiss from Naga prompted Azumi to look up as Gaara approached her. She grinned and stood up, immediately cupping his face and pulling him into a kiss. Naga moved to wrap around the both of them as if constricting them together then took his usual position around just her body. "Hello," she said softly when they pulled apart.

"Hello," he said with a soft chuckle. As soon as Naga returned to Azumi's waist he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her again slowly. "How was my favorite desert rose's day?" he asked. He pulled away to roll out the carpet and set the basket down.

She smiled as she sat down on the rug with him. "The only time I was in a good mood all day was when I saw you earlier...and right now," she chuckled. "It is hard to have a good day when you spend it entirely with an insufferable twink and his equally insufferable twink best friend," she groaned, laying back on the carpet as Naga moved and coiled up next to her.

He frowned, laying down with her. He ran his hand up her stomach and settled his head on her chest gently. "I'm sorry you have to deal with them," he snorted a little at the term. "Do I even want to know what they were in town for today?" His other hand brushed over her hip. He felt the top of the bandage. He breathed out hard and lowly. There was a slight growl to the rush of air. "Did he hurt you again?"

She frowned, placing her hand over his on her hip. "He painted on me with acid again," she said softly. "And he...invasively discovered a couple of things about my body..."

"He did what!?" Gaara's eyes caught the moonlight, making them gleam in an eerie way. He pushed himself up to look her over, inspecting her body for any more damage other than the burn. He tilted her jaw up, looking for scratches or bite marks. His fingers moved down to her chest and stomach
to feel for any raised scratches or wounds. "What did he do to you?" he demanded softly through
his teeth, ready to kill his cousin.

She looked up at him, reaching up to caress his face. "I am sure you are aware that I am different
from other humans," she started. "People like me...can produce venom." She sighed heavily. "And
today your cousin found that out by tying me down and shoving his hands into my mouth."

"I figured as much but..." This time, he placed his hand over hers. He squeezed her hand gently.
His face twisted in barely controlled rage. "Can...I'm so sorry," his voice was hushed. His words
meant nothing but they were all he could come up with. He leaned in to press his forehead to hers.
He moved her hand to his chest. "I'm so sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for," she said softly, tilting his face a little to kiss him. He pushed
back into the kiss a little rougher than he meant. "It was bound to happen. I just did not think it
would happen so soon." She hummed quietly, running her other hand through his hair. "My only
fear is that he will try to figure out more things with the same force because I hid this from him.
There is not much else to figure out, but he may not believe that and will want to see for himself."

"I...won't be able to handle it if he hurts you again." He leaned into her hand. "Your body is still
yours." His other hand moved to grip the carpet harshly next to her, ripping up some of the threads.
"He has no right to do this to you!" He was a little breathless with anger.

"You are right, but we both know he does not see it that way," she said. "The last thing I want is for
you to get hurt in my defense...I know he would not normally do anything to you...but if he saw
that you were actively trying to defend me, that can change." She slid her hands down his arms and
laced her fingers with his, placing them on either side of her head.

He bit his lip, looking hard into her eyes. "I want...I need to protect you," he said softly. He let their
noses touch. "It's only been a couple of weeks but...I...I feel so close to you. I can't stand the idea of
him doing this anymore!"

"Hopefully, it will not last much longer," she said. "I am sure your uncle is getting closer to
abolishing slavery as a whole." She smirked and gave him a quick kiss. "And then we would not
have to sneak around," she chuckled.

“Yes,” he smiled, kissing her again. “I hope I can hold you on that day. I want to see the look on
Sasori’s face when he sees how happy you are.” His lips found her jaw and he kissed along it to her
earlobe then moved down to press soft kisses to her neck.

She chuckled softly, feeling a shiver run down her spine as he kissed her neck. “It will be a glorious
day,” she grinned. “To see the look on his face when all of this hits him at once.” She sighed
dreamily at just the thought.

He smiled against her skin. He licked her lightly before coming back up to kiss her lips. “I should
plan a celebration,” he grinned. “Just to rub salt in the wound,” he chuckled.

“Ugh,” she practically moaned, “that would be amazing,” she chuckled. “Especially if you make
zalabya for the celebration. By the way, the zalabya you made the other night for your brother to
bring over to Lord Komushi’s house was great.”

He chuckled, grinning with a slight blush on his cheeks. “I’m glad you liked them,” he said with a
shy pride but it was quickly replaced with shock. “Wait, you...Sasori brought you to that?” He
should have expected it yet he was still surprised. He was starting to go into worry overdrive but
held a tight grip on his emotions. “They didn’t do anything to you, did they?” Kankuro had gone
but his cousin did not listen to his brother.

"Not that...I know of..." she hummed, thinking back to that night. She remembered nothing from when she was in a trance and she was put to sleep with that tea shortly after. She had no idea if they did anything to her in between the time of her being knocked out and waking up in Sasori’s room. She had not told Gaara about the trances yet but she trusted him. "Another unique thing about me is that I can be charmed like a snake," she said softly. "Lord Sasori found out quite early on that I can basically be put into a trance...and it happened that night."

The rage was back in his eyes. He had seen snake charming before and how the snake had no control over themselves. “I’m going to kill him,” he growled, pushing off of her quickly. Sasori had taken her freedom and now he was abusing a power he should have never been given. Gaara could only imagine the terror she must have felt losing her bodily agency. He suddenly hated himself for not going to Komushi’s. For not thinking Sasori would bring her. He stood up and moved to storm off towards his cousin’s mansion.

It took Azumi a quick second to process that he was no longer on top of her and where he was headed. "Wait, Gaara!" she gasped, getting up just as quickly and going after him. Naga slithered quickly behind them, cheering Gaara on excitedly with loud hisses. She caught up to him and grabbed his hand. "Confronting him about it, especially right now, can only make matters worse and cause other problems," she told him. She knew that the argument would only work so much but the thought of Sasori’s suspicions about them being confirmed terrified her and she did not even want to think about what he would do to her.

He glared at her, taking a long, shuddering breath. He shook his head, pulling his hand out of her grasp. He knew she was right but he could not brush this off. He pulled away from her and kicked the sand hard, letting out a scream. He ground his teeth as he ran his hands through his hair in frustration. "I can't," he spoke softly. "I can't stand back and knowingly let this happen to you." His voice was low and rough.

"Believe me, it is harder to just take it and not fight back," she said softly. She stepped closer to him, gently placing her hand on his jaw and turning his face toward her. "But enduring it is what I have to do to stay alive for right now." She tried to stay as calm as possible for him.

He wrapped his arms around her waist again, pulling her close. "I..." He stopped himself and pulled her flush to his body and bent his head to kiss her passionately. His fingers gripped the cloth of her dress tightly as he kissed her. He took a step forward and started to walk them back towards the rug without breaking the kiss. Carefully, he eased her back down onto the rug and slid his hands out from behind her. They laced with hers and pinned them beside her head. "I will ensure you won't have to bear this much longer." His voice was still rough as he looked into her eyes.

She smiled up at him. "I have faith that it will be over soon," she said softly. "Because it is not just me that needs this. It is everyone else who is enslaved in this city."

He reeled back in a little, coming back to himself. "You're right," he nodded. "Though people like Hidan...might never leave their masters," he said with a touch of sadness to his tone. "People like him know no other life. He probably would not function well without Lord Kakazu as awful as that is to say."

"Mm, I understand," she hummed. She leaned up and kissed him softly. "But on a lighter note," she said with another smile, "how was your day? I assume you spent a good portion of it with Lord Sandaime," she chuckled.

He chuckled softly at the shift in subject. "It was pretty standard," he hummed softly. "Until I got to
see you and then it was a good day."

Her smile widened a bit. "I am glad I can make your day go from average to good," she laughed.

"Actually you make my day go from average to amazing," he laughed a little lighter.

She heard something shifting and tilted her head back to see Naga rummaging through the basket that Gaara brought with him. "Naga!" she hissed softly, scolding the snake.

"Oh." He looked over at Naga. "Guess he found my treat for him."

Naga dove into the basket and came out with his treat, eating it on the corner of the rug. "You are too kind to us," she chuckled. "But I suppose he needs it...he has been alone for a couple of days."

She sighed heavily through her nose and ran her fingers through his hair again. "Thank you..." she said softly.

He leaned into her touch once more. "It's the least I can do," he smiled. "I can imagine he's feeling a little neglected if he's been locked up," he said softly. "Naga...was only protecting you."

"I know," she said. "And I appreciate it but I do not want anything to happen to him either. Lord Sasori threatened his life once and I do not want to take any chances..." She looked at Naga who hissed softly at her. "I love you, too," she chuckled.

The little interaction between them made Gaara's heart swell. "As I said," he smiled at her and then Naga. "I won't let anything happen to you if I can help it. I...feel very protective of you both," he said in surprising honesty.

Naga moved closer to them, lifting his upper body high enough to nuzzle his face against Gaara's jaw, hissing his thanks and appreciation. "He is not used to people wanting to protect him," Azumi said softly. She looked up at Gaara. "I suppose neither am I," she said. "I spent the past couple of months protecting myself."

He smiled, laughing softly as he felt the cool scales on his jaw. "You're welcome," he said to Naga. He looked back at Azumi and lifted one of his hands to stroke her cheek gently. "I've never wanted to protect someone the way I want to protect you. Maybe it's from the years of watching Sasori murder or...maybe more but I feel it in my bones. I can't let him destroy you or anyone else ever again."

"You do not need to give a reason," she smiled. "You are just a good person." She kissed him softly.

He pushed back into the kiss and smiled. "If you say so," he whispered. He leaned in to kiss her again, feeling anything he had to say would become redundant. The rage was still boiling in his chest but being with Azumi, feeling her under him eased the tightness and kept him grounded. He wanted to enjoy being with her for as long as he could.

She hummed softly against his lips, pushing back into the kiss. She gently bit his bottom lip before pulling away. "I am sure you are aware that your cousin is very suspicious about us," she chuckled. "And his best friend is not easing any of that."

He breathed out hard through his nose. "No, Komushi wouldn't," he sighed away from her face. "If anything, he's going to be the main reason Sasori actually thinks we're together at all."

"Mm...I would not be upset if he disappeared," she said softly. "He seems to be causing more problems for me than I would prefer." She continued to run her hands through his hair as they fell
into silence. It was a peaceful silence with nothing but the river's water moving softly behind them.

Gaara had shifted to rest his head on her chest, enjoying the feeling of her fingers in his hair. “How much of the city have you seen?” he asked softly. He had closed his eyes while they were basking in each other.

“Not very much,” she hummed. “I have only seen the routes to and from the shop. And everywhere else we have gone was always close by. He does not go anywhere else.” She rolled her eyes. “Like an actual old man.”

"Sasori has always been a creature of habit," he laughed, shifting his head to rest his chin on her sternum. "Would you like a tour then?" he grinned. "It's actually really nice and has a bit of nightlife to it."

“Ooh, that is a very dangerous game to play,” she smirked. Her hand slid from his hair to his back and she gently scratched up and down his skin. “But I do crave adventure...and I trust you.” She chuckled softly. “So, yes. I would like a tour.”

He hummed softly when she scratched his back. He bit his lip slightly as he leaned in to kiss her again. "Then let's go." He bit her lip this time. His arms slipped under her, pulling her close to his body as he sat up then stood with her still in his arms. "We should be okay to leave this here." He looked down at the rug and basket. "I'll take care of it." His face was lighting up with excitement. "Let's see..." He looked up at the moon to guess the time. "The botanical gardens should still be open. And all of the bathhouses." He started to walk with her in his arms as he thought of different places they could go.

She let out a small squeal as she held onto him. “I am actually very excited,” she grinned, watching as they strayed further from Sasori’s house. Part of her was terrified of being caught, but the other part of her did not care. Sasori never left his house unless he was going to his shop and his shop was closed. So there was no reason for him to leave. She looked at Gaara and smiled, leaning in to kiss his cheek.

He laughed, giving her a squeeze as they walked. "It's been a long time since I had someone to go out with," he told her. "It's usually just me by myself. Did you eat yet? We can go to this really great restaurant that only opens at night! Do you like rose sweets?” he asked in an excited rush. "They make all of their pastries in house and it has the best view." He blushed a little, realizing he was starting to ramble.

She chuckled softly and kissed his cheek again. "I have not eaten yet and I love rose sweets," she smiled. "Take me wherever you want. As I said, I trust you."

He grinned and started for the building. "I have to put you down," he said almost sadly. "The stairs are a little narrow," he told her as he eased her down to the ground. He kissed her again and slipped his hand into hers, lacing their fingers.

She brought his hand up to kiss the back of it and followed him as he led her up the stairs to the restaurant. Immediately, she was hit with the most intense scents of different foods at once. "Whoa," she whispered, feeling her stomach growl shortly after.

He grinned, kissing her cheek. "I'm sort of a regular here," he said softly, leading her through the restaurant and up another short set of stairs. It was a quiet balcony that overlooked the open sky and desert. He released her hand and pulled out her chair for her. A pair of small candles flickered on the table along with a few lanterns that threw a soft glowing light.
His eyes did not drift over the sweeping landscape. Instead, they fixed on Azumi. His fingers laced into her hands again but he pulled back a little. "It's always peaceful here and since the night is a cover for most people there...is an air of confidentiality for anything that goes on here," he said with a small hum.

"Lord Gaara," a waitress said as she walked up with a tray of tea in a glass teapot. There was only one cup and saucer on the little metal disk. "Oh, you have a guest," she gasped. "I'll be right back!" She smiled widely at Azumi, giving her a small bow as she set the tray down. "My apologies!"

Azumi smiled at the waitress as she backed away and turned around to grab another cup. "Sort of a regular," she chuckled, looking back at Gaara. "But that confidentiality puts any anxiety I had about being caught to ease," she sighed.

"Okay," he chuckled. "I am very much a regular here," he smiled shyly.

The waitress poured out their tea and giggled. "Lord Gaara is one of our best customers," she announced. "Did you want two orders of your regular order?" she asked him. "Or would you like to try something new?"

Gaara blushed a little. "Um, one order is fine but could you also bring a menu for her to look at?" he gestured to Azumi.

"Absolutely," she grinned. She turned and went to grab a menu, coming back and handing it to Azumi. "Here you go."

"Thank you," Azumi smiled back as she took it and looked it over. "Oh," she hummed, taking in the number of items and their descriptions. In the meantime, the waitress went and grabbed a small basket of pita chips and a bowl of hummus, setting it down on the table. After about a minute, she chuckled. "All of this sounds great, it is a bit overwhelming."

Gaara laughed softly, licking some crumbs from his lips. "Would you like a recommendation?" he offered.

"Please," she chuckled.

"Well, you have one order of his usual coming up," the waitress grinned. "I also recommend shakshouka. It's a bit heavier but I think this place makes it the best."

"Oh, yes, bring an order of that and some kofta," Gaara grinned. "Do you like fish?" he asked Azumi.

Azumi scrunched her face a little. "Mm, not...really," she said sheepishly. "Sorry. I am not a big fan of things that come from the ocean."

The waitress giggled and shook her head. "It's fine, I'm not fond of the stuff either. I'll bring all of that and a little something extra," she winked. "But I'll leave the menu for dessert if you can handle it once you're done."

"Thank you," Azumi smiled. The waitress bowed and left them alone. "She is sweet," she hummed and then looked back at Gaara.

"She is," he smiled, resting his cheek on the back of one of his hands.

"This is the kind of place one would want to be a regular at," she chuckled.
"A lot of different people pass through here so you get to hear a lot of stories and characters," he said.

"I bet you know a lot about everyone then," she smirked, sitting back and crossing her arms. "A trusted doctor and a knower of all secrets. You are not one to be messed with."

He pressed one of his fingers to his lips and winked. "Ssssh," he laughed. "I do tend to know more than most people expect. I think collecting secrets is a family thing," he chuckled. "It's also good for networking. Do you have anywhere like this in your village?"

"Mm," she hummed in thought. "There was a cafe I frequented a lot. I guess you could say I was a regular. But it was nothing like this place. My village is not very large and this city...from what I have seen from the outside on my way in here...it is massive."

"Oh, like the one we go to for coffee?" he smiled, looking out over the desert. "It is pretty large. And a central hub for travelers. I can't imagine what it must have been like to come here for the first time." He took a sip of his tea and relaxed back.

"From the outside, it looks very intimidating and entering it and seeing the number of people moving about was...extremely overwhelming," she said. "The caravan I was brought here with stopped at a bunch of different places for slave auctions before this one and none of them were as big." She looked down and chuckled softly. "Of course, the one that made me the most nervous was the one I got sold in."

His smile softened into a look of concern. "I...know you'll probably go home once you are freed but tonight I hope I can show you the better side of this city." The waitress returned with another waiter and arms full of food. Gaara's jaw dropped. "What is...all this," he laughed.

"Okay, so Shira...went a little...overboard," she giggled.

"This one blabbed that you have a guest with you," the waiter rattled her out with a smirk.

"I did not! I just...mentioned it," she huffed as she set the dishes down.

"But just mentioning it is all it takes," the waiter smirked, setting some more down. "You know how he is." He looked at Gaara and smiled. "He also said he'll be out here soon to see you."

Gaara shook his head, looking over all of the food. "I hope you brought your appetite then," he laughed, looking over to Azumi.

"Do either of you want drin—"

"I brought drinks!" a new voice called up. A large handsome man emerged from the lower level with three jugs on his arms and a tray stacked with glasses balanced on his head. His grin was wide and kind. The two servers shook their heads but laughed as they stepped out of his way so he could set the jugs and glasses down.

"I'll grab you a chair," the waitress said.

"When I heard you brought someone, I was shocked," the newcomer grinned at Gaara. "But now that I see we are dining with a goddess herself, I am curious to know how you swooned her," he teased, bowing slightly to Azumi. "What did he woo you with, talk of his patients or his sweet cacti?"

Azumi chuckled as the man took a seat at their table, grinning wide at her. "Mm, the cacti," she
smirked.

"No way!" he gasped. "That actually worked?"

"Indeed it did."

Gaara blushed and punched Shira gently in the arm. "I told you the ladies love plants!"

"I'm seeing now that they do," the man chuckled, rubbing his arm.

"The way to any woman's heart," Azumi smirked.

"I'm skeptical," he chuckled. "I think you just fell for his cute face." He reached over and squished Gaara's cheeks between his hands just as he went to take a sip of tea.

Gaara sighed and gently swatted his friend's hands away. "Maybe that was the first thing to win me over," Azumi chuckled.

"That's what I thought," he smirked. "Ah! I'm so rude. I'm Shira." He took Azumi’s hand and pressed a soft kiss to the back of it.

Azumi chuckled and nodded politely. "My name is Azumi," she smiled.

"I made all of this food when I heard my best friend had a girl with him," he grinned. Gaara pouted, looking at his friend scandalized. "It's not often that he has anyone with him," Shira continued. "Which is probably why he's friends with me," he chuckled. "I get so worried about him during the day," he whispered. "He can be a real loner, you know."

"Shira!" Gaara gasped. He sighed heavily and opened one of the jugs. The strong scent of sangria filled the air.

"Am I embarrassing you?" Shira chuckled. "I'm sorry."

"Is that not what a best friend is supposed to do?" Azumi smirked. She looked at Gaara and took his hand. "It just means that he cares," she said to him.

Gaara sighed but his pout turned to a smile. "I know." He flicked Shira. "Doesn't mean he's any less the worst," he chuckled.

It was Shira's turn to gasp. "That better be a capital W," he chuckled. "It's a title I wear proudly." He poured himself and Azumi a glass of sangria then lifted his glass. "A toast!"

Azumi and Gaara lifted their glasses with him and the three of them took a long sip of their sangria. "Oh, this is really good," Azumi hummed. "Did you make this as well?"

"Every drop," he smiled proudly. "I'm glad you like it. It's a little different each time, depending on what the market has to offer."

"It's my favorite in the whole city," Gaara smiled.

"Not the whole world?" Shira pouted.

"I've not been to the whole world," Gaara countered, sipping from his glass.

"And here I thought I was your whole world."
"You're part of my world, but not the whole thing."

"I'll take it," Shira grinned. Azumi smiled at their interaction. This pair of best friends was a breath of fresh air compared to Komushi and Sasori. This was a much more wholesome relationship. "So where are you two off to tonight?" Shira asked with a slightly cheeky smirk.

Gaara rolled his eyes, smiling into his cup. "I'm taking her out on the town. She hasn't been able to see much of the city and she's been here for a couple of weeks already."

"A couple of weeks and no sightseeing!" Shira shook his head. "A sin!" he said dramatically. "Well, then thank the Gods you have the best tour guide around."

"What a title to live up to," Azumi smirked at Gaara.

"If there was an award for it, he'd have won it over and over," Shira chuckled, refilling their glasses with more sangria. "So, if you are only seeing the sights, then where are you from?"

"A village a couple of regions from here," Azumi answered. "Tucked behind a mountain pass and settled on an oasis. Very different from this city."

"A deep desert girl," he chuckled. "And how do you like our humble city so far? Does it suit you or are you ready to head back to your village?" Gaara tensed up a little. He forced himself to relax and schooled his face into a mild curiosity. A stark contrast to the burning version inside of him. Did she like it here despite Sasori? Would she want to stay with him?

"It was a bit overwhelming at first but there is definitely...a charm to it," she smirked, looking at Gaara. Shira followed her face with his eyes to Gaara. A genuine smile formed on his lips. Then she looked back at Shira. "I can say that I do find this place fascinating. Many different characters here. And it has definitely opened my mind up to the idea of traveling more."

"A city is a good place to ignite a dormant wanderlust," Shira nodded. "But seeing the world with someone else is always better."

"This is true," she smiled. "And someone with the title of best tour guide must also be able to hold the title of best travel companion. At least I would think so," she chuckled. Gaara blushed a little.

"He can ride horses and camels, too," Shira winked. "He'll be perfect for you."

"Mm, I don't know about all of that but I can certainly try."

"So humble." Shira threw an arm around Gaara's shoulders and poured them each another glass. The three of them drank through the first jug of sangria and opened up the second one as they started eating. "So how exactly did you two meet?" Shira asked. Azumi coughed slightly on her drink when she heard the question. She completely forgot she was a slave and she was not sure if Gaara wanted to share that information.

"She's...working for my cousin," Gaara said after some thought. He chose his words and tone carefully.

Shira looked at him a little funny and then it dawned on him. His mouth dropped open as he looked back at her wide-eyed. "I...are you sure it's safe?" he asked in a hushed tone to Gaara as if suddenly the walls had eyes and ears.

"It's risky but I know nothing can happen here," Gaara said.
"But what about outside of here?" Shira asked softly.

"The chances of us running into someone who would rat us out are very slim."

"You don't think your cousin is going to notice she's gone?"

"Once Lord Sasori goes to bed, he is not seen until the sun rises," Azumi assured him. "And I have given him no real reason to be suspicious of my absence. He will not have much of a reason to check if I am there."

Shira gave them both a long, stern look as he topped off their glasses. "Fine," he finally broke the silence. "Just...be careful."

"We will and always are," Gaara smiled at him.

"So, how are you doing dealing with a monster like Sasori?" Shira asked Azumi.

"It is...not the easiest task I have been given," she hummed. "However, I think I am faring quite well, seeing as I am still alive," she smirked.

"That is a...wait you said a few weeks?" Shira gasped. "Holy...that must be a record!"

"It is," Gaara nodded and sipped his drink again. "And what's worse...Sasori really likes her."

"Likes me," Azumi scoffed, rolling her eyes. "Is that what you call it?" she asked.

"I take it you're not fond of him," Shira chuckled.

"It is hard to be fond of someone who justifies damaging your body with 'I own you,'" she said. "I tolerate him at most. And even that is difficult."

Shira blinked for a moment and then laughed softly. "I like her," he said to Gaara. "Sasori's always been a piece of scarab shit." He downed his glass. "It's about time he found someone who could tolerate him."

"Hopefully she won't have to for much longer though," Gaara said, taking her hand.

"You're not planning on breaking her out are you?" Shira asked, going back to his hushed tone.

"My uncle is working on abolishing slavery in the city in general," Gaara answered.

"Ah, I did hear whispers of that," Shira smirked. "His wife was here a couple of nights ago and she might have mentioned something like that."

"Lord Sandaime has a wife?" Azumi asked with a shocked grin. It should not have surprised her because Sandaime was amazing so of course he was married. Yet, she had not heard any mentions of him being married.

"Oh, he has a wife," Shira sighed dreamily. "She's beautiful, talented, kind, and wonderful," he listed off.

"Shira has a crush on my aunt," Gaara chuckled.

"She sounds amazing," Azumi smiled. "I am sure she and Lord Sandaime are perfect together."

"Great power couple," Gaara nodded. "I'm sure she comes here often because she gets free food."
"Of course!" Shira said. "I can't make someone as wonderful as her pay."

"Does Sandaime get free food, too?" Gaara chuckled.

"He gets a discount," Shira shrugged. "He insists on paying anyway."

"I'm sure he knows you give his wife everything for free," Gaara said. "And he probably finds it amusing."

"That is quite precious," Azumi smirked. They finished their second jug of sangria and moved onto the third one. She was starting to feel a slight buzz, something she had not felt in a long time. She was not going to stop herself, however, because she was enjoying herself and having a great time.

After almost an hour, they ate most of the food Shira had made for them and finished their third jug of wine. A fourth one was brought up to them and they were well into it when Shira decided he should probably get back to work. "Have you decided on any desserts?" he asked them.

Azumi looked over the menu for a moment, scanning the dessert section. "Lokum?" she suggested to Gaara. "Unless you have something else you recommend."

"I'll bring up a few others for you as well," Shira said with a wink. He took Azumi's hand and pressed a kiss to it. "In this restaurant, you will always be considered free." With that, he disappeared back into the rest of the restaurant to make their desserts.

Azumi looked at Gaara and grinned. "I like him," she chuckled. "He is very nice. That is what a best friend should be and I am glad you have him." She took his hand and kissed his knuckles.

Gaara smiled and leaned across the table to cup her face with his free hand. He pulled her into a slow kiss, tasting the wine on her lips. "I'm glad I have him, too," he said softly. "And you."

"I am glad I have you, too," she whispered. She was truly grateful for him. If he had not been around, her time being Sasori's slave would without a doubt be much more miserable than it was. She kissed him again, biting his lip gently. He pressed into the kiss, lacing their fingers together as they kissed. They only pulled apart when there was a soft tap of ceramic on the metal table they were sitting at. Their waitress was giggling silently as she placed down their sweets.

"Oh! Sorry," she said as she quickly put the rest of it down. "Please enjoy these." She smiled widely and disappeared back downstairs. Gaara's face was flushed.

Azumi chuckled softly, kissing the tip of Gaara's nose before sitting back in her seat. "Four jugs of wine in," she smirked, "I may or may not be just a little bit drunk." Her slight buzz from earlier had escalated closer to the bottom of the fourth bottle of sangria. "I apologize."

He laughed softly, a little breathless and very flushed. "I...am drunk," he laughed again, leaning in to kiss her once more. "So there is no reason...to apologize." He paused between his words, grinning as he did. "But are you tired?"

She bit her lip in a smile and shook her head. "No," she answered. "I can last a little longer." She looked down at the desserts that were brought to them and picked up a lokum cube. "Unless you are tired," she smirked, feeding it to him.

He grinned, pulling her finger into his mouth a little to kiss it as she fed him the sweet. "No, I can last as long as you," he grinned. "There's somewhere we can go for more drinks and music," he told her. "It can be a little crowded but it's a lot of fun and you can dance. Freely," he added hastily.
"I would love to," she smiled, eating a cube herself. "Can you dance?" she asked. She did not care what his answer was. She was going to make him dance with her anyway.

He shook his head, feeling it spin a little and grinned as he picked up another cube. "I'm a terrible dancer when I'm sober," he hummed. "And would probably crush your feet too much when drunk."

She chuckled as she tried another dessert that Shira made for them. "It is hard to look bad when you are dancing with someone who knows how to dance," she smirked.

"Fair point," he hummed, licking his fingers of the light sugar sticking to them. "But I think you deserve a better dance partner," he chuckled.

She grinned, taking the final sip of the sangria in her glass. "You can try to get out of it all you want," she said. "But you are going to dance with me."

He laughed a little uneasily but leaned in and kissed her with sugar on his lips. "As you wish, milady," he told her softly.

The finished off the jug of sangria and ate the rest of the desserts that Shira made for them and got up. The waitress and waiter from earlier approached them with wide grins and cleared their table. "Shira says it's on the house," the waitress said.

"As usual," the waiter chuckled.

"Thank you," Azumi smiled, giving the servers a slight bow.

Gaara shook his head and tipped a large wage of money into each of their hands. "Thank you for everything," he told them softly with a kind smile. The waitress giggled and the waiter bowed in return. Gaara held Azumi's hand as he led her back down into the restaurant and then the stairs. He stopped on the last step, where they still had a shadow of cover and pushed her up against the wall gently. His hands found her waist as he pulled her into a deep, passionate kiss.

She hummed softly, pushing back into the kiss and resting her arms on his shoulders. Her fingers laced into his hair and bit his lip before pulling away ever so slightly. "Thank you for bringing me here," she whispered against his lips.

"Thank you for letting me," he whispered back. "We'll visit again for sure," he promised. He kissed her one more time before pulling away ever so slightly. "Thank you for bringing me here," she whispered against his lips.

"Lord Gaara!" one said with a slight bounce to him as he spoke.

"It's always good to see you Tobi, Obito."

"It's been a while," the second added. His face was heavily scarred but just as handsome as his brother's.

"It has been," Gaara chuckled.
"And I see you've brought a friend," Obito smirked.

"Is he treating you right?" Tobi teased.

Azumi laughed and nodded. "He is treating me perfectly," she told him.

"Please," Obito chuckled. "Lord Gaara doesn't have a bad bone in his body."

Tobi chuckled, shaking his head. "You're right, Brother," he said. Obito winked at Azumi. "I think you got the most gentlemanly man in all of the city."

"Second only to maybe Lord Sandaime," Obito smirked.

"Oh, no, he is definitely more than Lord Sandaime."

"We've been through this before." Obito rolled his eyes.

Gaara chuckled, holding up his hands to keep them from getting into it. "Guys, it doesn't really matter, does it?" he tired.

"See!" Tobi jutted a hand out toward Gaara. "The finest gentleman!"

"I may have to agree with you on that," Azumi said.

The twins stepped aside to let them into the building. "Have fun, you two," Obito smirked.

"Don't get too wild now," Tobi chuckled.

"Never any promises," Gaara chuckled over his shoulder.

"Ooooh," both twins chuckled as they returned to work. Inside, the club was two levels. They enter through the second level where people seemed to be mostly hanging out with drinks in their hands and having conversations or using the shadows as cover. Music bumped from the lower level. It was on the lower level where most of the action was taking place. People danced and intermingled with drinks sloshing a little in their hands. There was the thick scent of incense and something else on the air.

Azumi looked around as they made their way through the crowd. She looked at the one below and was pretty fine with the less dense one on the upper level. She followed him as he led her to the bar and let him order the drinks. They occupied a small section against the railing, overlooking the lower level and watching the dance crowd move. "I see what you meant when you said it can be a little crowded," she chuckled, taking a sip of her drink.

He chuckled softly, watching with her. "It ebbs and flows with the music. So it might thin out with the next song," he told her. "This is usually more my brother's scene than it is mine."

"Ah, I can definitely see this being his scene," she said. She leaned over the railing a little to scan the crowd below. "How often does he come here?"

"Most nights," Gaara hummed. "Father doesn't pester him too much to do well with much of anything since he's such a successful artist."

"Does he bother you?" she frowned. "You seem to be a successful doctor." She took his hand and pulled him closer, wrapping his arms around her and pressing her back against his chest. "You mentioned your relationship with him not being the best."
He smiled, nuzzling his face into the bend of her neck. He kissed her softly and sighed. "He does," he admitted. "He wanted all of his children in politics. And my sister, Temari, is the only one who followed his wishes. Kankuro won a challenge against my father and got to be whatever he wanted. Me, however," he paused, wrapping his arms a little tighter. "My profession is the only thing I can genuinely say Sasori did for me."

She frowned, turning her head to kiss him. "That is unfortunate," she said. "He should be content with you being successful in any way. Parents that force a dream onto their children are the worst. I am sorry you have to deal with that."

"You're too kind for the fate the Gods have given you," he said against her lips. He kissed her again, shifting one of his hands up to lace into her hair. "I don't mind him. I live in my own place and the rest of my family won't let him hurt me." He touched the tips of their noses together as he spoke. He got lost in her eyes for a few minutes. "What about your father? Did he have great plans for you?"

"He had plans for all of us," she sighed and then frowned. "I was already doing what he wanted me to do with the lab work."

"Did you want to do that kind of work?" he asked quietly.

"I think as a child I may have shown enough interest for him to think it was what I wanted to do so I cannot blame him," she hummed. "As I got older, I did not exactly hate it, but I knew it was not what I really wanted to do. So I got into dancing."

"And is dancing what pulls and calls to your heart?" he asked her, moving his hands to wrap around her waist. He kissed her neck, aching a little to bite down.

"I suppose you could say that," she smirked, pressing her hips against his. "It is something I find myself being passionate about."

He pressed back against her, chuckling softly. "You moved beautifully at the night market," he told her but then frowned a little. "Did he...force you to do that?"

She did not answer at first, resting her head back against him. "He...did," she said. "But the first part, when I danced with him was okay...then he made it so the music put me in a trance for the second half." She hummed softly. "I know he did it to calm my nerves, though."

Gaara strained so he would not grind his teeth. "And...did it?" He wanted to scoff and doubt Sasori actually did anything for anyone's nerves but he thought back to the night and her reaction to the crowds. Maybe his cousin could still be considerate.

"It did," she assured him. She pressed her body back against his and started to move very slightly, making him move with her. "I am not going to teach you how to dance," she smirked. "But I am going to make you look like you know what you are doing."

"Somehow," he laughed, letting his body move with her. "That sounds so much harder."

"Worry not," she chuckled, finishing her drink and setting the glass down on the nearest surface. "I am a professional." She started off slow, following the music that played so he would be able to get it at first. "You will find that it is much easier than you anticipated."

"I trust you," he chuckled nervously. He set his own glass down so he could give her his whole body to use.
She smirked, turning around in his arms to lead him around the small area they occupied to the music that played below. “You are much better than you think you are,” she said softly as they moved.

"Am I?" he smiled, leaning down to kiss her properly. "I'll take your word for it," he grinned. "If you let go though I won't know a since step."

“Then I will not let go,” she chuckled. They continued to move, him following her lead as she changed how they moved with the music. Much to his own surprise, he followed her well.

After a couple of songs, they finally stopped. Gaara grinned, pulling her close as they drifted back to the rails. He leaned against the railing and pulled her into a deep kiss. "That was amazing." He pressed his forehead to hers. "You're amazing."

"Mm, I would not say I am amazing," she chuckled, wrapping her arms around him. "That title should go to you for doing as well as you did for someone who does not know how."

"Let's agree we're a perfect pair then," he chuckled. "The right student for the right teacher." He ran his hands up her sides and kissed her again, biting her lip gently. He was suddenly struck with all of his desire for her and hated how restricted they both were. "Did you want to stay for another dance or drink?" he asked softly.

She chuckled quietly, kissing him again. "Let us have one more drink," she smirked against his lips, "and then we go."

"Sounds like a plan," he smiled, pecking her lips once more before shifting so he could untangle them. He made his way over to the bar and ordered them two more drinks.

Across the room, leaning over the other side of the railing that overlooked the dance floor below, Komushi watched them with a drink in his hand. A sinister grin spread across his lips and he took a sip every time he saw them kiss. He had been watching them since they started dancing and had not taken his eyes off of them. He had not expected his night of dancing and drinking with strangers to take a turn like this, but he was not complaining. This was rich. He finished off his drink and grabbed another as he watched them leave. “It seems the little snake also has a problem with boundaries,” he smirked.

Chapter End Notes

Komushi: *Gordon Ramsey voice* Finally, some good fucking blackmail.
Chapter 32

As they left the club, the night air was beyond refreshing. Azumi laced her fingers with Gaara's, letting him lead her through the streets that were much less crowded than they were earlier. She had no idea how much time had passed but it seemed like all the late-night places were closing so it had to be very, very late. She leaned against Gaara as they walked. He took her to a small hole-in-the-wall shawarma shop. The perfect late-night drunk snack. Then they headed back out to head home once they finished eating. "I never thought I would get to enjoy a night like this," she hummed.

He smiled down at her, lifting her hand to kiss her knuckles. "You deserve it," he said softly. "You deserve anything that makes you smile the way you're smiling right now," he said, leading her back to where they started their night by the river. He reached over and took her other hand, spinning her a little as he laughed. "I can't wait to take you on another date," he giggled, pulling her close when they stopped spinning.

"I am already looking forward to it," she giggled. She tilted her head back and groaned through a wide. "Ugh, I have not felt so free in such a long time," she said.

He smiled, shifting to sweep her off her feet and spin her again as he kissed her. "I'll plan it all out and make sure it's even better than this one!" He ran with her in his arms to the rug, laughing like a little kid. He smoothly lowered them down to the rug, keeping her close in a hug. "I can't wait for this feeling to be permanent again for you."

She grinned, running her hand through his hair. "Thank you," she said softly. "For everything." She kissed him again, practically rolling on top of him. A small hiss came from inside the basket that was on the corner of the rug. Naga had slithered into it when they left. He poked his head out and hissed again. "Yes, we had fun," she told him.

"Did you enjoy your snack?" Gaara smiled at Naga. He hissed again, slithering over to gently bump his nose against Gaara's. "I'll take that as a yes," he chuckled. He hummed, softly stretching a little under her. "We should get you home soon.

Azumi pouted slightly, looking up at the moon and noticing its significant change in position. "I suppose," she mumbled. "I know I am going to have the worst headache tomorrow," she chuckled. She leaned down and kissed him. "But it was worth it."

"I can stop by with a little something," he told her with a smile. "Shira and I make the perfect hangover breakfast."

"Mm, that sounds amazing," she said. Naga hissed at them again, a little anxious. "The sun is going to rise soon," she translated. "He is nervous that we will get caught out here." She sighed, sitting up and stretching a little before getting off of Gaara.

"We'll be alright," he assured Naga. "You climb on Azumi and I can clean everything up," he smiled. He waited for Naga to do as he was told before shaking the rug out and rolling it up. He tucked it under his arm and the basket into his elbow. "Milady," he said, offering his other arm to her. She giggled as she took his arm and they walked back to Sasori's mansion together, heading straight for the window to her room. She pressed her back against the wall next to the window and pulled him into a kiss. He smiled into the kiss, dropping the rug and the basket against the house and resting his hands on her hips. He pushed deeper into the kiss, biting her lip again, a little harder than earlier. Then they heard another hiss. "Alright," Gaara chuckled. "I think your warden is
saying let's get you inside."

"I think you are right," she smiled. She sighed and kissed him again before turning to climb through the window. Naga immediately got off of her and moved to the bed, taking up his usual corner.

Surprisingly, Gaara followed in after her. Naga hissed frantically. "Relax, Naga, it's okay," he chuckled softly, petting the snake's head gently. He turned and pulled Azumi to him, sitting down on the bed with her in his lap.

"This is another dangerous game," she whispered, getting a little worried. "Lord Sasori gives no warning as to when he will enter. Catching you in here would be just as bad, if not worse, than catching us going out."

"Then I guess we just have to make up some rules," he smirked. He moved her onto the bed and grabbed the lone chair in her room. He pressed it up under the doorknob to jam it. "Now he'll have to knock," he smirked.

Azumi's eyes widened a little and she gasped. "Gaara, no!" she whispered in a panicked hiss.

He cupped her face, lifting it to pull her into a kiss. He leaned forward, easing her down without breaking the kiss. "You said you trust me. And I'm not in the business of breaking my promises. I will keep you safe."

She gasped softly, wrapping her arms around him and looking into his eyes, searching them for a moment. "I..." She stopped herself, opting to pull him into another kiss. "Thank you," she whispered against his lips, lacing her fingers into his hair.

He grinned, pushing back into the kiss. They kissed for a little while longer before Gaara trailed down her neck then settled his head on her chest. "I'll make you breakfast as soon as I wake up," he promised with a yawn. The first rays of sunlight were starting to shine through her window. She bit her lip in a smile and kissed the top of his head, gently scratching his scalp as they laid there and fell asleep together.

Hours later, the sun was fully up and the light was entirely too bright. Azumi groaned softly, feeling the pounding headache she had been anticipating. Gaara groaned also, burying his face deeper into her chest to get away from the offending light. He sighed, wincing in pain at the dryness in his throat and the throbbing in his head. "What time is it?" he croaked. Naga hissed right next to his ear, flicking into it a little. Gaara's eyes snapped open at the weird feeling. "Too close!" he whispered.

The snake hissed his apology and then tapped Azumi's nose with his own, hissing softly to wake her up. "No," she groaned at him. He hissed at her again, letting her know that it was well into the day, practically noon. "Noon?!" she gasped, grunting quietly as she felt her head pound even harder.

"Noon!" Gaara wheezed. "And Sasori hasn't come around yet?" He sat up in a panic. His head was pounding harder now and the blood was rushing through his ears. Naga shook his head. "That's...strange," he bit his lip and got up. "I'm going to sneak around the front," he told her. "I don't trust him to not do anything and I can't leave you alone." He leaned down and kissed her before climbing out through the window.

In the midst of her own silent panic, she chuckled a little as she sat up. 'Sneak around the front,' she thought. 'It is as if we are teenagers.' She groaned and held her head, covering her eyes.
for a moment before deciding to get up and get dressed. The burn she was given the day before started to hurt a little bit. She wrapped Naga around her body and went to Sasori's room, anticipating the worst from him. The house felt much brighter than normal as she walked through the halls, but that was probably because she was severely hungover and beginning to feel nauseous. She approached Sasori's door and took a deep, calming breath to prepare for dealing with him and then entered the room.

He was lounging on his bed, reading his ledger when she walked in. "So you aren't dead," he smirked, writing something down in the log. "And here I thought I'd have to start budgeting for a new slave." He flashed her a smile and threw his legs over the edge of the bed. Getting up with a long stretch, he walked over to her and took her by the chin in his typical fashion. "Are you sick? What took you so long?" he asked, looking into her eyes. He noticed how she was avoiding the light. "Clearly, you didn't sleep well," he frowned.

"I slept fine," she groaned. It was the truth. She actually slept great. Especially because she slept with Gaara. "Once I did fall asleep," she added with a stretch. "It just took me a while to fall asleep."

"Was the burn bothering you?" he asked, pulling her over to the bathroom.

"Not too bad," she hummed, squinting a little as the light hit her face. "I actually only started to feel it a couple of minutes ago."

He squinted at her. Something was not adding up. He walked over and started both of their baths. "Then what made you so restless?" He added the salts and oils then rounded back to her. "Strip," he demanded, folding his arms.

She shrugged and Naga slithered off of her body, heading into the bedroom as she started taking off her dress. "Just a lot on my mind," she hummed. "Nothing important." She let her dress fall to the floor easily. He squinted harder at her. He started to check her over, leaning in to gently press into her muscles to feel for any issues. Just then Gaara passed outside. Sasori stood up and turned to grab the cooling salve. Gaara's eyes widened seeing him prodding and likening Azumi. Azumi sighed, feeling the relief of the cooling agent. She looked outside and saw Gaara. Her breath hitched and she looked back at Sasori who was busy tending to her burn. Looking back at Gaara, she gestured with her hand for him to get out of sight for fear of being caught by Sasori. "Go," she mouthed to him.

He gestured to her full form and looked pointedly at Sasori. "What!" he mouthed back. Sasori stood, turning to get the gauze and almost catching Gaara. Gaara scrambled to the next window. "Help?" he mouthed and drew out the question mark.

Her eyes widened at him almost getting caught and she shook her head. "No," she mouthed. "I am fine." She looked down at Sasori to see that he was almost done. She looked back at Gaara and gestured for him to leave again. Gaara ran to the front of the house and rushed to the kitchen. He started to make coffee and put together breakfast.

Sasori stood up and squinted at her again. "The salts and oils aren't good for the wound so we'll keep it covered for your bath then rewrap it once you're out."

She nodded and brought her hand up to cover her mouth as she yawned. "Alright," she said. He took a step back from her and she turned to get into her bath as he stripped his clothes and got into his. The water felt amazing and she let out a soft groan as she sunk deeper into it.

He watched her through the whole bath, still confused as to why she was so tired. It almost seemed
like she was hungover. Which was impossible because she had no money to go drinking even if she
snuck out. And he had not shown her where they kept the alcohol in the mansion. They got out of
the bath after a few minutes and he sighed. "Let's go eat," he told her once her leg was re-
bandaged and they were dressed.

She hummed softly, following him to the kitchen as she rubbed her temples. 'Ugh, I need
coffee,' she thought. She tilted her head back, keeping her eyes closed for a moment and trying to
curve her nausea, only to be brought back to the realm by bumping into Sasori who had stopped
abruptly in the doorway of the kitchen. "Mm, sorry," she mumbled.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, seeing Gaara in the kitchen.

"I thought I'd stop over for some lunch," Gaara smiled, leaning against the counter with a cup of
coffee in his hand. "The servants told me you hadn't been down to eat yet so I made breakfast."

Sasori squinted at him just as he squinted at Azumi earlier. Azumi peeked around Sasori and
smiled at Gaara. "Hello," she said as if she did not just get out of bed with him.

"Good morning, Azumi," he smiled at her. "Coffee?" he asked them both. It was rhetorical as he
was already pouring out a cup each for them. Laid out on the kitchen table was a breakfast far
healthier than what Sasori would have made for himself as a lunch.

"You look tired, Cousin," Sasori noted, accepting the mug. His squint remained.

Gaara laughed sheepishly. "Do I?" he sighed. "I was up all night with a pretty bad case but when I
got home, I just couldn't sleep," he lied.

Sasori grunted. "And you thought to come here," he said, sitting down at the table.

"I was in the area. The patient was a child a few streets from here," he shrugged. Azumi accepted
her mug of coffee from Gaara and sat down, immediately drinking half of the cup in a few seconds.
She let out a quiet sigh as she looked at the food he made as she started to serve herself, hoping her
nausea would go away soon.

"That kid again?" Sasori grumbled as he served himself. "He's always sick."

Gaara hummed, nodding over his mug. "I'm afraid it's going to follow him into adulthood," he
continued the charade. He sat down to start eating with them. Sasori started to eat and the second
the food touched his lips, he realized how ravenous he was.

"So, are you going into the shop today?" Gaara asked, pouring out another cup of coffee for
himself.

Sasori hummed as he swallowed his food. "I am. I'm working on something and I have a deadline
of three days. There are things I need at the shop that I don't have enough of here." Azumi resisted
the urge to roll her eyes. She knew it was the poison that Komushi challenged him to make with
her venom. She was too tired to be upset about it, however. She just continued eating and finished
her coffee quicker than she expected.

Without missing a beat, Gaara refilled her cup for her. She hummed her thanks and started drinking
it immediately. "Three days? Is it a big order? Do you need help?" Gaara asked, not knowing the
true nature of this project.

Sasori sipped more of his coffee and chuckled a little. "It's not an order," he said. "Just something
Komushi and I are working on."
"Ah," Gaara forced his tone to stay light and looked away from Sasori. He knew he could not control the look in his eye. He hated the games his cousin played.

"Another one of those challenges he's always putting me up to," he said casually.

"Will you be going to the shop?" Azumi asked Gaara. "Or do you have patients to tend to today?" On top of wanting to just keep the conversation going and avoid an awkward silence full of suspicion, she wanted to know what her own workload at the shop was going to look like. Gaara frowned, thinking for a moment.

"We don't really need your help today. Azumi should be able to handle everything," Sasori said flippantly. "Mmm, but you weren't feeling well this morning," he frowned, looking her over. "How are you feeling now?"

"I feel fine," she said.

"I can come in anyway," Gaara assured both of them. "I'm not up to anything today." He looked at Azumi. "Would you like me to take a look and make sure everything is okay?" He smiled at her.

She chuckled softly and took a sip of her coffee, pacing herself this time. "I will be fine," she smiled. "Thank you, though." Gaara nodded graciously.

Sasori sighed, shaking his head. He was going to give himself a headache if he kept trying to read into their movements. He was not going to complain about the food and extra help even if it seemed everyone around him was having boundary issues. He finished off his food first and stood up. "Right, then the three of us can head down to the shop once you're done," he said to them. He turned and left the room to head back to his own.

Once he was gone, Gaara let out a sigh and Azumi groaned quietly, rubbing her face a little. "He only thinks I just had a hard time falling asleep," she said softly. "I do not think he suspects much else."

"Well, thank the Gods for that," he groaned then smiled at her. "I'm sorry," he chuckled. "I shouldn't have let Shira drink us out like that." He ran a hand through his hair. "Did you like breakfast, though?"

"I did," she smiled. "It was amazing. And so was the coffee. Thank you." She made sure no one else was around as she grabbed his hand and kissed his knuckles gently.

His smile widened and he lifted her chin to pull her into a proper kiss. "I'm glad," he said softly. He jerked back when they heard someone shift down the hall.

"How much longer are you two going to take?" Sasori asked impatiently. Ignoring her now racing heart from almost being caught again, Azumi stood up, grabbing the dishes on the table to clean them. "Leave them," Sasori told her. "The servants can clean everything."

"Right," she hummed. As he told her to, she left everything there and the three of them left for the shop.

Gaara made a point of walking ahead with Sasori as they made their way to the shop. "What kind of poison are you working with?" Gaara asked conversationally. He knew it was Azumi's venom and he had half a mind to steal it away but that would just cause Sasori to forcibly milk Azumi again. Nothing would stop him from doing it and that would break Gaara's heart even more.
"A new one we've discovered," Sasori answered, a small smirk ghosting his lips. "It paralyzes on its own so we will see what we can do to make it do more."

Gaara bit the inside of his lip to keep it from twisting into a scowl. "It must be pretty strong then."

"It's interesting, to say the least," Sasori nodded, unlocking the shop as they walked up.

Once they were inside, Azumi went straight to the tanks to take care of the snakes. All six of them immediately started hissing excitedly. "You are all hungry?" she whispered to them. She sighed quietly, allowing them to slither out of their tanks and to the ground. She opened the door for them so they could leave and propped it open so they could come back. "Be quick," she told them.

Sasori took his usual place up on the second level and watched the snakes slither out. "Azumi, Gaara, can you reorganize the front and make sure we have enough inventory out?"

They both nodded and headed to the front of the shop to do as he asked. Gaara brought the log to check the inventory as Azumi moved everything around. The shop was thankfully darker than Sasori's house so Azumi's headache was beginning to subside. "We are taking a lot of risks at one time," she whispered to Gaara with a slight chuckle.

"We are," Gaara agreed. "But I think it's a little pent up and about time." He flashed her a smirk. "But we can tone it down if you are getting nervous. I don't think Sasori has noticed anything different so we should be alright."

She hummed softly and smiled at him. "I think I like the thrill," she said. She looked at the display of fragrances she made and took note of how many more she needed to make to replenish it.

He flashed her a devilish smirk. "It is pretty exciting." He was inventoried the shelves behind the counter. He put down his paperwork and peeked into the back room to make sure Sasori had not moved. When he saw his cousin was still safely upstairs, Gaara stepped around the counter to wrap his arms around Azumi from behind. He wasted no time in pulling her into a deep kiss.

She smiled against his lips, lacing her fingers into his hair and pushing into the kiss. "I see we love living on the edge," she chuckled softly.

"I think we all need it once in a while," he grinned, whispering against her lips. "Otherwise, this life could get very stale." He kissed her neck softly, wishing badly to bite down.

"Mm, you are very right," she hummed, suppressing a shudder as he kissed her neck. There was a collective hiss from all the snakes behind them. All six were in the doorway to the back room, watching them and hissing teasingly. "Shut up," she whispered to them.

Gaara turned to look at them and chuckled. "Are we being teased?" he asked her, pulling away. He liked risk but he did not want to push it too bad. At least not yet.

"No," she answered as she gathered all of the ingredients for the fragrances she needed to replenish and set a small pot over a fire. "They just spoke out of turn."
"I see," he hummed. In the shop's front, Gaara stifled a chuckle behind his hands. "Never thought I'd hear you be so stern," Sasori smirked.

"I rarely ever am. I never have much of a reason to be. But if they act out of turn, I will treat them like a mother treats her child."

"Precious," Sasori drawled. He moved his stool so he could lean against the railing and continue to work as he watched her. "Are you making something new?"

"I am only replenishing the scents that are low," she answered. She looked up at him. "Do you want me to make something new?"

Sasori shook his head. "You can do whatever you want with those," he hummed. "Since they are doing well, I'll trust you with them. They are your project now."

"Very well then," she said, turning back to her work. She looked at the oils she had. "I am running low on that amplifier," she hummed. "They will not be as strong as normal."

"You know where the shop is," Sasori said, standing up. He turned back to the desk and returned with a small pouch. He tossed it down to her. "Get whatever you need," he told her.

She caught the pouch with both hands. "I will be back then," she said, lowering the fire so it did not boil over while she was gone.

"Would you like me to come with you?" Gaara asked.

"She can go alone," Sasori said. "I need you to finish the inventory."

Azumi looked at Gaara and smiled. "Thank you, though," she said.

Gaara sneered at Sasori then looked to Azumi. He walked her to the door and kissed her cheek. "Be careful," he said softly. She was just going up the street but he still worried.

"I should only be gone for ten minutes," she whispered with a smile. With that said, she stepped out of the shop, tucking the small pouch Sasori gave her into a fold of her dress and headed to the shop Sasori usually bought his oils from. The light did not bother her as much as it did earlier so she actually enjoyed the walk.

The walk was short but not short enough for her to gain a companion. An arm slipped through hers and pulled her close. "Good morning, Little Snake," Komushi grinned down at her.

She sighed heavily as soon as she heard his voice. "Hello, Lord Komushi," she said, gently sliding her arm out of his and looking at him. "Lord Sasori is still at the shop if you are looking for him."

"Mm, I'm not interested in him right now," he hummed. "Unless...there was something you wanted me to share with him."

She furrowed her brow, stopping in front of Utakata's shop. "I cannot think of anything I would want you to share with him that I cannot do myself," she said. She began to head up the stairs into the shop, already smelling the incense being burned upstairs.

"Mmm," he hummed again. "And did you sleep well last night? You and Lord Gaara?" he hissed in her ear as they walked up the narrow steps. He reached over her head, pushing the door to the shop open for her.
She paused in the doorway, turning to look at him. "I did," she said a little confused. Her heart started to race but she fought to keep her composure. "But if you are concerned about how he slept, maybe you should ask him."

"Oh?" he smirked. "I thought it was safe to assume you two went home together after last night." Across the room, Utakata had slipped out from the back of his shop to greet his customers. Pipe in hand, he narrowed his eyes at Komushi.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, lowering her voice to a near whisper. She was starting to feel nauseous again and it was not from the hangover. Taking a quiet deep breath, she continued on into the shop toward the shelf that had what she was there for.

Komushi hovered over her. "Don't play dumb," he sighed. "It doesn't suit you." He slid his arms around her from behind to whisper in her ear. "Did that false freedom taste good on his lips?"

Utakata stepped out from behind his counter, taking a long drag from his pipe.

Her eyes widened and she unwrapped his arms from her. 'He was there?' she thought. "I do not—" she started.

Utakata cut her off by placing his hand on Komushi's shoulder and turning him around. "I've cleansed this shop this morning and your vibes are undoing my work," he said.

Komushi clicked his teeth, irritated that he was being touched and interrupted. "The vibes?" he snorted.

Utakata's face remained passive. "Yes, the vibes," he repeated, taking a long drag from his pipe.

"Fine then, Azumi, come along." He slid his hand into hers. Utakata's eyes flickered to her.

Azumi looked at Utakata and frowned as she pulled her hand away from Komushi's and took a few steps away from him. She could not get very far because the shop was small. "Lord Sasori sent me here to get something," she said.

Utakata nodded. "She is a paying customer." He tilted his head towards her. "You are not and as this is my shop, I have the right the throw you out."

Komushi narrowed his eyes. He was not going to be thrown out by the likes of some cave-dwelling shop owner. He took Azumi's hand once more and pressed a kiss to the back of her hand. "I'll—" he started but Utakata blew a large plume of smoke into his face.

"Out."

Komushi smirked at her before turning and leaving the shop. Azumi and Utakata stood there for a moment, listening to make sure he went all the way down the stairs. Once she was sure she was safe, she bowed. "Thank you so much, Lord Utakata," she said softly. She covered her mouth, still feeling nauseous as she came up from the bow and grabbed a larger bottle of the amplifier she was there for. She was afraid to leave the shop. Komushi could easily wait for her outside.

Utakata waved it off. "I'm not a Lord," he rolled his eyes. He walked over to one of the shelves and opened a bottle. "Here, this should help your stomach. You're looking a little green," he said, sticking the bottle under her nose.

"Thank you," she said, taking the bottle from him. She set the oil she picked up on the counter. "I hope you do not mind if I linger a few moments longer," she told him. "I fear he might be waiting for me."
"Linger as long as you like. I'll make tea," he told her as he slipped into the back. "Actually, just follow me." He poked his head back out. She nodded and followed him into the back room. He gestured to a seat for her to sit in at a table and she did so, looking around the room. There was a nice breeze back there and she could not figure out where it was coming from. The back room turned out to be a small two-floor loft he lived in. He walked over to the small kitchen and put a kettle on to boil. There was a soft hiss from above them. Above them was a trellis with climbing vines and hanging down from it was a snake, trying to nuzzle Utakata. "I was gone for ten minutes, Kaida," he chuckled, picking her up.

Azumi smiled at the snake. "She is beautiful," she said softly. As she looked around, she noticed a couple of different things that were very familiar to her. Things that could be seen everywhere around her village. 'Who is this guy?' she thought.

"Thank you," he smiled, kissing the snake's nose gently. "She's been with me since I was born." She slithered over his shoulders, coiling loosely around him. He set cups down on the table and poured out the water over a tea that bloomed in their cups. "Is Orochimaru still head of the village?" he asked nonchalantly.

She looked up at him confused. "Y-yes, he is," she said. She squinted a little. "You know my father?" She took a sip of her tea, instantly calming down from dealing with Komushi just a few minutes ago.

"I'm surprised," he frowned. "I did know him but he must have changed since I left. The Orochimaru I knew would never have let his only daughter become enslaved."

She frowned and looked down at the table for a moment before looking back up at him. "He did not know about it," she said. She was sure her father knew by now since it had been a few months since she left. "I am in this situation in place of someone else and I made the decision quickly to prevent any more issues."

Utakata's frown deepened. "Oh..." He looked at her hard. "He's going to raze this city to the ground."

"I know," she sighed, closing her eyes for a second. "I am hoping to be back before he can get here."

"Be back?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Lord Sandaime is working to abolish slavery here," she said. "It would work out for the better if that happened before my father could figure out where I am."

"I mean, if he did manage to find you, Lord Sasori wouldn't be a problem, abolition or otherwise," he chuckled, setting the cup down. "Lord Komushi seems to be very...attached to you. Would you like something to try and fend him off?"

"He is an entirely different problem," she muttered, looking away. She could feel her expression change instantly. Since the day before, she had only grown more disgusted with Komushi. "One that I need to deal with carefully because he is my master's best friend." She looked back at Utakata. "What did you have in mind?"

"Sasori isn't the only person in the village who can play with poisons," he said with a devilish smirk. He stood up and walked over to a cabinet filled with bottles and containers. His fingers traveled over each bottle before settling on a squat container. "Ah," he grinned. He turned around to place the dish on the table. "This should be fun," he smiled at her. She picked up the container and
inspected the liquid inside, a small smile appeared on her lips. She was not going to ask what it was. She wanted to find out for herself. "He doesn't need to consume the whole thing," Utakata said. "Just a little should do the trick."

Azumi chuckled softly. "Will the whole thing kill him?" she asked.

"Not kill him, but he'd be...out of commission for some time."

"Amazing," she smirked. "Thank you."

He shook his head. "It's fine," he smirked. "Anything for the princess of my home village," he teased. "I'll walk you back. Komushi should be gone but he also seems very persistent."

"Extremely persistent," she scoffed, rolling her eyes. She finished her tea and stood up. "But how much do I owe you for this?" she asked as they walked out to the main shop. She picked up the bottle of the amplifier to show him.

"Take Kaida out for a hunt and we'll call it even." He bagged up the amplifier and gave her a small pouch to put his gift to her in. "We can spend that money on something else," he smirked.

She smiled and looked at Kaida, still wrapped around Utakata's shoulders. "Whenever you are ready," she said softly to the snake. "I think you would like Naga." They made their way down the steps and outside to walk down the street to Sasori's shop.

"They should meet," he smiled. "Where did he come from?" he asked, knowing full well there was no way the slave traders would have let her keep any personal belongings.

"He was in the caravan that brought me here. A snake used for charming and nomadic shows. When I was sold, they put him in front of me and had us dance together. I just...took him with me when Lord Sasori bought me."

He nodded, frowning slightly. "They made you dance," he said softly. "I saw you dance often at parties. They didn't deserve to see that." A small flicker of anger for his kinsman snapped to life in his chest.

"Dancing is not the worst thing I have been made to do," she said. "In fact, I am a bit grateful for each opportunity I have been given to dance since becoming a slave." They approached the shop and stopped in front of the door. "Thank you for walking with me," she said. "It is nice to see someone who is from the same place. It actually eases something in me."

His frown deepened. "Me too," he said softly. "Come back anytime you want," he told her. "I...cannot offer much help but I—" He was not sure what he was trying to offer. He could not stand very tall against someone like Sasori but looking into her eyes, eyes so familiar, he could not just do nothing.

She smiled at him. "I will be back," she said. She gave him a bow before heading into the shop. Gaara was at the counter, finishing up the last of the inventory paperwork. "I told you I would not be long," she said softly to him.

Gaara's face lit up. "I knew you wouldn't be," he grinned. He glanced quickly at the back room before leaning in to kiss her very quickly. "Komushi is here," he whispered as he rounded the counter. "Did he bother you? He's been complaining loudly to Sasori since he came in about five or ten minutes ago." He resisted pulling her close.

She gasped softly. "He is here?" she whispered. "What has he been saying?" She looked into the
back room and leaned in closer to Gaara. "He saw us last night."

All the color drained from Gaara's face. "He what!" he hissed. "When?" His eyes snapped to the back room. His hand slipped into hers. "You...he didn't hurt you, did he? As far as I know, he's just pouting that Utakata kicked him out of his shop." His heart was beating wildly. He tried to rack his brains to recall if he had seen Komushi. "I won't let him or Sasori hurt you," he promised again.

"I do not know exactly when," she said, keeping her voice low. "But he saw us kiss." She gently retracted her hand, not wanting to make the situation worse. "He approached me on my way to Utakata's shop and harassed me about it until Utakata told him to leave."

"Fuck!" The curse was low and sharp. "He...Sasori would have done something by now," he frowned. "There's no way he would wait for you to come back." He shook his head, running his hand through hair. "We'll...have to keep an eye on him. If I get the feeling he might out us and cause you harm, I'll take care of him," he said looking her dead in the eyes.

She set the bag in her hand on the counter and took the container Utakata gave her out. "I do not know what it does, but Utakata gave it to me after he had to intervene. If you are willing to find out with me, then we may have a solution for a little while."

He looked down at the container then back to her. "Let's do it," he smirked. "We should be able to figure out how to slip it to him easily. When did you want to?"

"Why not now?" she hummed. "I am a firm believer in eradicating problems before they spread." She thought for a second. "We can slip it into his tea."

"You really are devilish," he smirked. "Okay, let's do it. I don't think they've had any yet so you can go in to offer them some and I'll distract them."

She smiled and nodded, lifting his hand to kiss his knuckles then went into the workshop to start brewing the tea. She grabbed four cups and set them out on the worktable then went up the ladder, poking her head up to the second level. "I am making tea," she said. "Would you like some?" Her gaze fell on Komushi who seemed to be wearing the same smirk he left Utakata's shop with.

"You're back," Sasori noted. "Tea would be nice." He gave Komushi a confused sidelong glance. "Did you get what you needed from the shop? Did he price gouge again?"

"As always," Komushi sighed. "I didn't buy anything though since he was going to be like that."

Azumi stared at Komushi for a moment. "Would you like tea as well?" she asked him.

"You aren't going to spike it, right?" he asked with a smirk.

Sasori gave him another hard look. "She would never," he scoffed. "If either of us was notably poisoned after this, I'd have to kill her." He said it like it was a minor irritation.

Azumi scoffed and rolled her eyes, annoyed that Komushi could not just answer her question. "I will make you some anyway," she said, heading back down the ladder. She grabbed the container Utakata gave her and put a couple of drops of what was in it into one of the four cups she set out. Once the tea was ready she poured it and pointed out to Gaara which one was spiked so he could give Komushi the correct one.

Gaara nodded and took the cups on a tray to the second level, setting down Sasori's cup next to him on his desk and offering Komushi's to him on the tray.
Komushi eyed it then chuckled before knocking back a big gulp. "Our little snake would never poison me," Komushi cooed. "She loves me too much. Right, Azumi?"

"Right," Azumi deadpanned, rolling her eyes as she went back to making her fragrances and a couple of other things that needed to be restocked in the front.

"Leave her alone," Sasori grumbled. "You're starting to annoy me."

Komushi tilted his head, looking at him. "When am I not annoying you?" he countered.

"Good point," Sasori muttered. "I told you to come here in a couple of days for the experiment. You should leave."

Azumi deflated a little bit. She wanted Komushi to leave but she was still very curious to know what the liquid that Utakata gave her would do.

"You're kicking me out already?" He suddenly yawned hard. He was hit with a heavy wave of exhaustion. He frowned, leaning against the railing to brace himself. "Have you made any progress —" His eyes started to draw heavy. He could not fight the heavy tiredness. His body became dead weight and he started to fall over the edge of the railing. Sasori's eyes widened, whatever retort he had for his friend lost as he bolted across the small space to stop him from hitting the ground but he was a moment too late. Komushi hit the lower floor with a hard thud.

"Oh," Gaara winced. "I think the floor's damaged."

'It knocked him out?' Azumi thought, turning to look at Komushi who had fallen behind her. She kneeled down next to him, checking to see if he had cracked his head open. He did not, but there was a crack in the floor as Gaara predicted. "Well, he is alive," she said. "So much for him leaving," she muttered.

Sasori got up and leaned over. "Are you serious!" he growled. "What the hell did you put in the tea?" he glared at Azumi.

"You're seriously about to blame her when sticky fingers over there could have easily poisoned himself?" Gaara cut in. "He was playing with the belladonna extract earlier. Don't needlessly start pinning blames."

Sasori shot him a glare but could not deny this was a likely possibility. Komushi had done it before. "Annoying. Move him to the corner and we'll watch him," he practically whined, running a hand through his hair.

Gaara sighed and moved to lift Komushi into a chair that Azumi brought over. Once he was in the chair, Azumi traced the bruises that started to form on his cheek and shoulder. "He is going to feel that as soon as he wakes up," she hummed. She looked at the crack in the floor. "And he will have the worst headache."

"All of those are meaningless and treatable," Sasori rolled his eyes. "I'm more concerned about my floor! This wood was expensive and imported," he grumbled, coming down to check on the damage.

"Make him fix it," Gaara muttered. "He cracked it." Azumi went back to her work, not at all concerned about Komushi or Sasori's floor.

Sasori rolled his eyes. "I'm going to. Doesn't make it any less annoying." He climbed back up to the second floor and resumed his work as Azumi and Gaara resumed theirs. They went about their day.
while they ignored Komushi's unconscious presence.
For nearly a full twenty minutes Komushi sat ignored in the corner. He came to with a panicked and loud gasp. "Wha-aaarugh, my head!" he groaned. "What happened?"

Azumi was the only one near him when he woke up. She turned to face him, lowering the fire she was working with. "Good morning, sleeping beauty," she smirked. "Did you enjoy your nap?" She walked up to him with an ice pack for the headache she knew he had.

"What did you do?" he growled, accepting the ice pack and pressing it to his head.

"I did nothing," she said, making a smaller ice pack and pressing it gently to the bruise on his face. "Lord Gaara and Lord Sasori said you were messing with an extract that might have done this."

His head hurt too much to even remember what he had touched earlier. He ached down his whole right side. "Did I fall from up there?" He glanced up at the second floor, wincing slightly.

She looked up at the railing and nodded. "You did." Her gaze lowered to where he fell. "And you did that," she said, pointing to the crack in the floor.

"Ooooh," he winced again. "Sasori's going to make me fix that, isn't he?" he sighed heavily.

"He did say he would."

"Where did they go?" he asked, trying not to move too much.

"They went to get food," she hummed, sitting back on her stool to go back to her work. "I told them to bring something back for you in case you woke up." She started bottling the fragrances she made and writing labels for them.

"I see." He closed his eyes. "How sweet of you, despite you knowing what I know." He tried to rotate his arm. His breath caught in his throat as he did.

She turned back to him and frowned. "What good would it do me to get back at you?" she asked. Whether he believed her charade or not did not concern her. She only needed Sasori to believe her. He was the one that could kill her. However, she was sure Sasori did not care that much about him. "Had I done it, it would not have worked in my favor in the long run."

He narrowed his eyes. For a split second, he wondered if Sasori would even bother to kill her if she had poisoned him. He leaned back in the chair, deciding it was not worth it to push it. "Sasori has painkillers in the cabinet. Give me two," he demanded lazily.

She nodded and got up to head over to the cabinet, looking for the painkillers he mentioned. Once she found them, she poured two into her hand and replaced the bottle. "I will get you water," she said softly, handing him the two pills. She grabbed a glass and filled it with water then set it down next to him before sitting back down in her seat. She moved all of the bottles aside to let them cool.

"Yeah, no, I can get it myself," he said to her, very slowly standing up. He grunted in pain as he crossed over to pour himself water in a new teacup. He knocked back the pills and closed his eyes. "These are going to feel great in a few minutes."

She chuckled softly at his blatant distrust for her, resting her chin on her hand as she leaned against the worktable. "I am sure the shawarma you are about to get will help as well." She knew there
was no way to avoid suspicion so she played it off as best she could.

He grunted again in slight agreement. He did love shawarma. He sat back down on the chair and deflated. "Fuck, this hurts." He could not wait for the painkillers to kick in.

"Yes, falling from another floor tends to hurt," she hummed, closing each of the bottles and setting them on a tray to take them out front. She looked at him and noticed he was slumped in the chair, just holding the ice pack. "Put the ice pack to your head," she sighed.

He begrudgingly did as he was told, knowing full well it would feel amazing. "You really know how to run your mouth," he murmured.

"I see it more as agreeing with you," she said as she set up everything for another batch of fragrances. "But take it as you wish."

"I hope you don't think this little incident will deter me from telling him," he said after a minute. He started to feel lightheaded and the pain began to dilute.

She turned to look at him, not saying anything for a moment. "Then should I think of something else?" she smirked. She knew that he knew that she poisoned him. However, if he told Sasori, there was a good chance he would not even believe him.

Komushi's face twisted into a sneer. He pushed himself up and pushed her back hard into the edge of the table. "You're really pushing your luck with me, Little Snake," he whispered, looking into her eyes as he leaned in close. He slid his hand up her throat and traced his fingertips along her jaw to tilt her lips to his. Their lips brushed as he spoke again. "But I'm patient," his voice was low as he spoke. He licked her lip just as they heard Sasori and Gaara return.

"You fucking..." Gaara growled, nearly dropping the food when he saw them.

Komushi turned his head, flashing a toothy grin. "Look, your desert prince has returned." Gaara put the food down and slammed a fist into Komushi's bad arm.

Azumi gasped, processing everything that just happened as she backed away from both Gaara and Komushi, wiping her mouth.

Sasori looked at her and frowned. "How many of those pills did he take?" he asked. He could see immediately that Komushi was high on painkillers.

"Two," she groaned. "That is how many he asked for."

Gaara growled again, knocking Komushi to the ground hard. "You idiot," Sasori huffed. "One. I don't know how many times I need to tell you that." He rolled his eyes. He did not even bat an eye as Gaara started to punch Komushi hard and repeatedly in the gut. He looked back at Azumi. "He licked you, didn't he?" he asked her, moving to the cabinet with the pills to pull a bottle out. "Here." She took the bottle and went to the counter at the front of the shop to clean her entire face. There was a dumb laugh coming from Komushi on the ground. He was very high off of the pills. The laugh only spurred Gaara's rage. His punches came down harder. Sasori looked over at them for a moment and sighed. "I'm surrounded by children. He walked over to Azumi to give her a once over. "Did he do anything else?"

"No," she said softly. "Had you and Lord Gaara not come in at the moment you did, he would have," she huffed, pouring a little of the liquid onto a cloth and wiping her mouth. Her disgust with Komushi only grew more. Especially when she thought about what he would do to her if he was given even the slightest chance. She started to feel more nauseous than before. "I am going
to vomit," she groaned, putting her head on the counter.

Sasori clicked his teeth and pulled a vile out of the cabinet. "No, you aren't." He shoved the vile under her nose and grabbed a bin. "At least not on my counter, you aren't." He pulled her to the floor with him and pulled her into his lap, leaning her over the bin. "You're being a little dramatic now."

"I have been feeling nauseous all day," she sighed, grabbing onto the bin and inhaling the contents of the bottle and exhaling slowly. She almost felt like she was going to actually vomit but a quiet groan forced it back down. She leaned up, inhaling the bottle again. Sasori rolled his eyes a little but started to rub her back. He was starting to worry something was actually wrong with her. He considered for a moment that the food and atmosphere were starting to catch up with her. The region they were in was presumably very different from where she originated. Drastic changes like that could make a person very sick. On top of that, he had two literal children fighting in the back. She cleared her throat and took the bottle from him, keeping it under her nose. "I will be fine," she groaned. She moved to sit against the counter instead of against his chest, pulling the bin toward her. "You should deal with your pet scarab," she said, looking at Komushi taking every punch from Gaara with a grin.

Sasori groaned lowly. "I guess I should." He pulled himself from the floor slowly. Crossing the room, he wrenched Gaara back by the scruff of his neck. "Go take a walk." He pushed Gaara back. Gaara's mouth twisted into a snarl. "Why! He deserves it!" Gaara pushed off the ground, prepared to step on Komushi with his full weight.

"Well, aside from me not wanting to deal with another dead body, he's knocked out again and I can't see that being very for filling for you," he deadpanned.

Gaara's eyes snapped down to the sleeping, bruised man. He clicked his tongue and turned on his foot, heading out to the front. He stopped at the counter and looked down at Azumi. He kneeled next to her. "Are you alright?" he asked her softly.

She nodded, keeping the bottle close to her face. "He did not do much else to me," she said. She stood up slowly. "It seems to put him to sleep in intervals," she said. "I wonder how long it lasts."

"Seems so. Hopefully, it's a permanent effect. Fucking bastard," he spat.

Sasori poked his head out. "I said take a walk. I can tend to my slave," he drawled with a warning in his tone. Gaara sighed and turned to leave. Azumi went back into the workshop. She looked down at Komushi and scoffed, stepping on him to cross the room to brew more tea to help with her nausea. Sasori snorted, watching her step on Komushi. He sighed, stooping to pull one of Komushi's arms over his shoulders and up off the floor. He pushed him back into the seat he had been in earlier. "We'll close the shop for the day once you're done with that tea," he said to her.

She nodded and sat down in her usual stool. "I take it he is usually like that when he gets high," she huffed, getting her cup ready once she heard the water begin to boil.

"His behavior is pretty standard, yes," he nodded. "The almost kiss and lick included. If it assures you, he's tried to do it to me several times on the grounds that my lips 'look very soft,'" he air quoted.

She hummed, pouring her tea into her cup. "They are," she said, more to herself. There have been enough times where he got close enough to her for her to be able to attest to that fact.
The corner of his mouth ticked up in a smirk. He sat down on his stool and leaned against the railing. "If this nausea persists, I'll have to do something about it," he hummed. "You...do you get your period?" he asked her, suddenly perking up.

"I...do," she said. She took a sip of her tea. "I suppose that is what is happening," she hummed.

He groaned and stood up again. He started to grab several jars. "What are your usual symptoms?"

"Headaches, nausea, cramps that incapacitate me for almost a day." She hummed in thought. "I tend to crave lokum..."

"Lokum?" he chuckled. "Okay, all of this is pretty standard. He started to grind up herbs into a fine powder. "You'll take this as soon as you think it's starting. Mix it into your tea."

She watched as he ground up the powder and placed it into a small container. He handed the container to her and she set it down on the worktable next to her. "Thank you," she said softly and then downed the rest of her tea.

"Mei has really nasty periods. I just made you what I usually make her," he shrugged. "I'll adjust it to what you need if that doesn't work for you."

"Right..." she hummed, nodding a little. She did not care about Mei or her periods. She knew the source of her nausea. She stood up from her stool and picked up the container again. "Are you going to leave him here?" she asked, gesturing to Komushi.

He squinted hard. So hard his eyes closed. "No," he sighed. "We'll have to bring him home," he ran a hand through his hair.

"We are taking him?" she asked with a groan. The last thing she wanted was to deal with him longer. Taking him home would mean she would have to keep an eye on him to make sure he did not reveal anything to Sasori about what he saw the night before. They heard Gaara walk back into the shop.

"We'll have to," Sasori shrugged. "I don't want to but no one from his house will come to get him and I'm not in the mood to have him wake up here. Too many risks that he'll destroy something." He rolled his eyes.

"I suppose," she grumbled.

Gaara walked into the workshop and barely spared Komushi a glance. "Help me get this asshole to my house," Sasori told him.

"I'll get the rope," Gaara huffed. He gripped the counter and squatted low to open a cabinet.

"We aren't dragging him," Sasori said with finality. "We can carry him. You take one arm and I'll take the other."

"I suppose we could be humane about it," Gaara sighed as he stood up straight. Azumi stifled a laugh at how the roles briefly switched. As Gaara and Sasori picked Komushi up, she gathered everything that Sasori usually took home when they closed the shop. She quickly cleaned everything up and locked up the front then met them at the back door to walk home with them. The walk home was long and hot. By the time they reached the mansion, both men were drenched in uncomfortable sticky sweat.

"I swear he got heavier," Gaara grunted as they threw Komushi down onto the bed.
Sasori pressed his hand hard into Komushi's back to keep him from bouncing off the bed. "He might have." He wiped a trickle of sweat from his forehead. "He's not worth this fucking effort. We all need baths now."

Without missing a beat, Azumi went straight into the bathroom and started running both baths. Assuming Sasori was going to make Gaara use the one she usually used, she used different salts and oils than what she normally would use for herself. If there was no time to rerun the bath for herself when Gaara was finished, she did not mind using those scents as well. If she was honest with herself, she would have preferred to bathe somewhere else in the house while they bathed in Sasori's bathroom.

"All three of us are going to bathe together?" Gaara asked, a bit surprised.

Sasori did not miss the hurried way Azumi ran off. "No, you're going to bathe with me and Azumi can use Chiyo's bath." He folded his arms. He was not going to let that happiness happen on his watch.

Azumi nodded as she walked back into the room with her usual salt and oils in her hands. "That is what I figured," she said. 'A private bath!' She was ready to live this small luxury.

"There are fresh towels over there for you to use," Sasori told her.

"Come on, Naga," she whispered excitedly as she walked to the door. Naga, who had been coiled up on the daybed the entire day, followed her quickly as she made her way to the other side of the mansion to bathe. 'It is going to be so quiet!'

Gaara and Sasori settled into their baths, enjoying them in silence. About fifteen blissful minutes of peace went by before they heard the unfortunate sound of an even more unfortunate creature groan.

"Your gremlin is awake," Gaara grumbled.

Sasori sighed heavily, sinking lower into his tub and hoping that Komushi would not call for him. "Sasoriii," Komushi whined like a helpless child, earning a groan from Sasori. A moment later, Komushi entered the bathroom. "Aw, you're bathing without me?"

Like the cousins they were, Sasori and Gaara drew in a long-suffering breath. "Just get in the pool," Sasori ordered. "The water is still warm enough."

Komushi was already stripping as Sasori spoke. Gaara let out another groan as he was joined in the pool by Komushi and moved to the other side to be as far away from him as possible. Komushi sighed loudly as he sunk into the water. "Ugh, this feels amazing," he moaned. "Wait." He perked up. "Where is the little snake?" Gaara's eyes narrowed.

"You think I would force her to deal with you and have a naked Gaara in one go?" Sasori muttered. "Not a chance."

Komushi pouted, sinking lower into the water. His gaze fell upon Gaara and he smirked.

"You think I would force her to deal with you and have a naked Gaara in one go?" Sasori muttered. "Not a chance."

"Stop looking at me," Gaara grumbled. Sasori sighed, ignoring the two children in the other bath. Gaara sighed and stood up a few minutes later. "I'll go check on Azumi," he said, walking over to dry off.

Sasori snorted. "You can sit back down," he said with a lazy command. Gaara frowned at him. "She's grown enough to not die in a bath. Unlike you two." Gaara nearly sputtered and Komushi
chuckled into the water then looked at Sasori just offended. Gaara rolled his eyes, drying off and moving to the bedroom to sit and wait for everyone to finish their baths.

"Thanks for bringing me here," Komushi said, relaxing more in the pool now that he was in it alone. "You really do care," he smirked.

"Don't get it wrong," Sasori said. "I didn't want you in my shop unsupervised."

"It's okay," Komushi chuckled. "You don't need to hurt yourself. Whatever you want to say, I know you care," he grinned.

Sasori rolled his eyes and started to get out of his tub. "You get dumber every day," he grumbled. "You know where everything is. Just meet us in the room when you're done." He dried off and pulled on his robe.

Komushi's pout returned full force. "You're leaving me?"

"I've been in the water for a while," Sasori said, leaving the bathroom before Komushi could say anything else. He let out a sigh, enjoying the feeling of being clean and laid out on his bed. "Now that he's awake we can get rid of him," he hummed.

"But how?" Gaara flopped back next to his cousin. "He's going to want to hang out."

"Easily," Sasori grinned devilishly.

"Absolutely not," Gaara deadpanned. "I will not walk him home."

"Why not?" Sasori smirked. "It's on the way to yours."

"Except it's not," Gaara scoffed. "I live in the opposite direction. Remember, I live on my own now?"

Sasori clicked his tongue. "That's right." He, in all honesty, had forgotten his little cousin had moved out. "Well, I'll just get the servants to take him I guess." He rolled his eyes. He did not like having them leave the house if it was not with him because Chiyo had given them too much freedom in the past and they took forever to return to their posts.

"Since neither of us wants to do it, that might be the best idea," Gaara muttered. A few minutes went by as they waited in silence.

Komushi emerged from the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist and laid down on the daybed. "That bath smelled good," he hummed. He was starting to feel tired again. Slowly, he could feel himself about to fall asleep.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Sasori snapped, kicking Komushi off of the daybed. Except, it was too late. He was snoring again. "Fucking..." Sasori's rage flared then simmered almost instantly. "I don't have time for him to have some weird sleeping sickness!" He rubbed his face. "We need to check him for bites. This isn't acting like any poison I know." He ground his teeth.

"Or maybe your best friend's a narcoleptic now," Gaara sighed. "Can't be good for the mischief you two like to cause."

"I can cause mischief with or without him," Sasori scoffed. "We'll take samples from him to test and as soon as he wakes up, we send him home."
"And if he falls asleep on the way there?"

"Not my problem." Gaara shook his head and walked over to the workshop to grab what was need to take samples. Sasori clicked his teeth again. Gaara had moved too fast and now he was saddled with moving the sleeping ass back onto the daybed. "You owe me," he muttered, hoisting Komushi up and back onto the hard cushion. Gaara came back with all of the tools he needed and handed them to Sasori. Sasori looked at the tools and then at Gaara. "You're the doctor," he said.

"He's your best friend," Gaara countered with a smirk. Sasori scoffed and handed one of the tools back to Gaara so they could get the samples at the same time and get it over with.

Once they were taken and tucked away in the workshop, Sasori walked to the door. "I'll be right back," he sighed. He made his way over to Azumi first. With no announcement or warning, he walked into his grandmother's bath. "Out," he ordered, finding his slave all too blissfully enjoying her alone time with Naga.

Azumi groaned, sinking below the surface of the water at the same time that Naga let out a dramatic whiny hiss. Sasori rolled his eyes at their reactions. "It was nice while it lasted," she muttered to herself as she came up and moved to get out of the tub. As she stepped out and wrapped the towel around herself, Naga moved to coil around her. "Did he wake up?" she asked.

"He did. Long enough to be annoying and now he's asleep again." There was the smallest hint of concern in his tone. It was a bit amusing to Azumi to see Sasori sound concerned. "We took samples so you and I will be up late running some tests. I'm not dealing with this for the rest of his life," he said, turning on his foot to leave.

'But I do not want to test his samples!' Azumi thought, resisting the urge to act like an actual child. She did not care what happened to Komushi. She quickly got dressed and gathered her things to put back into Sasori's bathroom then followed him across the mansion to his side. She noticed Komushi was still in his towel which meant he was awake long enough to take a bath. She put her things back where they belonged then approached Komushi, pulling his eyelids back and chuckled softly. "Can we draw on him?"

"No...you know what, sure," Sasori chuckled. "He deserves at least that after getting himself poisoned." He rolled his eyes.

Gaara blinked, a little surprised but grinned, walking over to grab Sasori's makeup for Azumi. "Think you can make him sort of easy to look at?" he teased.

"I can try my best," she chuckled. She took the makeup Gaara handed her and straddled Komushi's stomach. Looking through what she had to work with, she grinned wide. "How mad do you think he would be if we plucked his eyebrows?"

"Do it!" both men said in unison.

"We've been trying to get him to do it for years!" Gaara giggled.

"This may be the only time we can get him to stay still enough," Sasori snorted.

Azumi chuckled and leaned in close, starting her masterpiece on Komushi's face. She began with his eyebrows, making them significantly less thick then moved on to his eyes, finding colors that worked for him and matched what he usually wore. The whole process took about ten minutes as she got lost in her work. "You are going to be the most beautiful lady at the party," she hummed softly as she winged out eyeliner on his eyes. "And you will definitely find a husband." She leaned
back, taking in her work. "I think I am done here."

Sasori and Gaara were fighting back tears of laughter. They both leaned in to take in her work. "Oh yes. The men will trip over themselves to get to him," Sasori said through strangled laughter.

"I can't..." A tear escaped Gaara's eye. "His eyebrows...he actually looks nice," he wheezed.

"Of course he does," Azumi smirked. "I take great pride in my work. You have seen how I do my makeup." She looked down at Komushi, adding a couple of finishing touches. Komushi let out a soft groan, his face scrunching up a little. "Oh," she hummed, realizing he was waking up.

His hands started to slip up her thighs. He squeezed his fingers around the thickest part and hummed. "I've died," he mumbled. "And gone straight to heaven." He smiled dreamily. He cracked his eyes open just as a hand came flying in fast to flick between his eyes hard. "What the fuck, Gaara!"

"You're such a predator!" Gaara snapped.

Azumi quickly got off of Komushi, standing next to Sasori as Komushi sat up. She watched as he lifted his hand to rub his eyes and she gasped. "No, you will ruin my work," she growled.

Komushi paused to give her a confused look. "Your work?" He looked at Sasori and Gaara for an explanation.

Sasori smirked and Gaara was still rolling his eyes. "Go look at yourself," Sasori told him.

Komushi's confused look did not move as he got up and went to the bathroom to look at what they were talking about. A chorus of stifled laughs came from the other three as they awaited his reaction.

"He better appreciate it, he looks great," Azumi muttered, folding her arms.

After a solid minute of silence, the cry of "MY EYEBROWS!" echoed into the room. "What have you doneooone!" He ran back into the room, a hand dramatically thrown over his forehead. "They have been sculpted! My boyish thick charm."

"Boyish for sure," both Gaara and Sasori grumbled.

"Charm?" Azumi asked, raising an eyebrow. "I did you a service," she scoffed.

He pouted, folding his arms. "Well," he snapped. "At least I look better than these two mudpies now." He stuck his nose in the air. "This shade is perfect for my eyes. Thank you, Azumi, for knowing me so well!"

"You are welcome," she smirked. "I will give you a tattoo next but before you fall asleep again, what do you want? I can only do snakes," she laughed. Gaara snickered again behind his hand.

Komushi's eyes widened in horror. "How could you, Azumi!" he sighed.

"You're not giving him a tattoo," Sasori said.

Komushi held a hand up to Sasori. "No, if she wants to touch me that bad, then let her."

Sasori sucked his teeth loudly and grabbed Komushi by the ear. "That's it!" he growled, tugging him into the workshop.
Gaara's eyes widened as he drifted over to Azumi. "Oh...is he actually getting in trouble?" he hummed in her ear softly.

"It looks like it," she said as they watched the other two disappear. They sat down on the daybed together and listened for what was happening. "It is about time," she said. "Lord Sasori has warned him enough times and he has only gotten worse. I slapped him once and each time after that, he has gotten bolder with how he touches me."

Gaara slipped his hand into hers and squeezed it. He glanced at the workshop and risked pressing a kiss to her knuckles. "Maybe now he'll get it through his thick head he can't do as he pleases."

In the workshop, Sasori backed Komushi into a seat. "Who do you think you are?" he asked with a hiss to his voice.

Komushi was baffled by the sudden anger in his friend. "Your best friend?"

"Not for long if you keep pushing me the way you are!" Sasori snapped.

"What do you—"

"You know exactly what I mean," Sasori said. "There is a line between teasing and blatant sexual harassment. And you've crossed that line and kept going."

Komushi's lips twitched into a scowl. "It's not like you've cared in the past. And I haven't been that pushy!" he defended. "How would you react to finding a woman as beautiful as her straddling you the minute you woke up?"

"You've been extremely pushy. You've never gone this far with other slaves," Sasori said. "I feel like I need to keep you on a leash and five feet away from her at all times."

Komushi's nose wrinkled. "You're very overprotective of her." He circumvented everything Sasori said.

"Well, I own her and you're bothering my property so I don't see how that's remotely surprising."

In the room, Azumi and Gaara tensed up as they listened to the conversation, hoping Komushi would not bring up Gaara and how he saw them at the club the night before.

"You should be having this conversation with your—" Komushi cut himself off, feeling tired again. "What the fuck is happening to me?" he mumbled.

"I don't know but we're going to run some tests," Sasori said when Komushi's eyes started drooping once more.

"This is really...pissing...me..." He yawned and was soon asleep.

Sasori caught him as his body tip forward. "You and me both," he grumbled. "Gaara, help me get him to Chiyo's room. He can sleep there for now. I'm not letting him sleep in my room," he called from the workshop.

Gaara slid his hand out of hers quickly. "He only knows how to be annoying. That's his only talent," he grumbled, taking long steps to the workshop. Once he was finally in there, they each took one of Komushi's arms and lifted him out of the chair. They walked out of the workshop and started carrying him to the other side of the mansion to Chiyo's room. Azumi followed them, bringing the clothes he left in Sasori's bathroom. "Are you going to dress him?" Gaara asked Sasori.
"He's can dress himself when he wakes up," Sasori grumbled.

"That towel is very secure," Azumi hummed, trying not to laugh.

Sasori grunted in acknowledgment. They laid Komushi out in the bed. "Let's go. I'm tired of dealing with him." He ran a hand through his hair. "He's not worth all this effort. Let's go start those tests."

Azumi folded up Komushi's clothes and set them next to him before following them back to Sasori's room. The three of them went into the workshop and Sasori took out the samples that were taken from Komushi earlier. "Maybe he is just narcoleptic now," Azumi hummed, repeating what Gaara said earlier.

Gaara frowned, looking over their samples. "It can happen," he hummed. "But it's not common." He did not care much about Komushi but his duty as a doctor told him he needed to at least pretend to help. "It doesn't run in his family either."

Azumi hummed, folding her arms. She knew what was wrong with Komushi but she was very curious as to what was in the stuff she gave him. She looked around at the samples they took and then grabbed the blood sample. She looked through a couple of drawers and cabinets, knowing for a fact that Sasori had a microscope somewhere. Once she found it in the back of a low cabinet and picked it up, she sneezed from how dusty it was. "I take it you never use this," she chuckled.

Sasori looked over with a raised eyebrow. "No, I don't have a reason to most of the time. At least not here."

"We use the one at the shop more often," Gaara elaborated.

She set it up on a worktable and sat down in front of it, wiping it down before sliding the sample underneath it. She hummed softly as she inspected the sample, looking at what she poisoned Komushi with. 'Well, it entered his bloodstream very quickly,' she thought. 'Where did Utakata get this?' She lifted her head and found a piece of paper to write her observations down. She planned on asking Utakata about it at some later point.

Gaara and Sasori looked at each other then at Azumi. They both crept over to read her notes. "Do you perhaps know something about this poison?" Sasori asked, pulling a stool over.

Gaara's brow furrowed. "So it is a poison? You don't have anything like this in the shop?"

Sasori shook his head. "No, I don't," he frowned. He glanced at Azumi out of the corner of his eye. Could she have poisoned Komushi? She had the motive to—not that he blamed her—but where would she have gotten her hands on something like this?

"It is just as foreign to me as it is to you," she said. She pushed the microscope in front of Sasori. "It looks nothing like any poison or venom I have ever seen." She chuckled softly. "But it makes a pretty pattern." Gaara chuckled a little at the comment of the poison's aesthetics.

Sasori hummed as he pressed his eye to the glass and nodded. "This...could have come from an insect." His brows furrowed harder. A hard line pressed between them and he shook his head. "Only that idiot would contract something so irritating. If we can figure out the type of insect I can make anti-venom."

"That's only assuming it is an insect," Gaara commented, taking the microscope from his cousin to take a look at the sample.
"There are not many insects that I know of that are poisonous or venomous in the desert," Azumi hummed. "It could be another arachnid like a spider. And in that case," she smirked at Sasori, "that would be your area. Spiders are basically a scorpion's cousins. Like lizards are a snake's."

Sasori's nose wrinkled. "I don't like spiders," he mumbled. He looked at the poison again then sighed as he got up to get a book off of the shelf. He put the large tome down on the desk and turned to a section of spiders. They scanned the pages, looking at the examples of different patterns that each venom composition made. After a couple of minutes of it, Sasori found it. "Brown recluse," he said, tapping the section.

"Ugh," Azumi groaned, unable to suppress the shudder that went up her spine.

Gaara's eyes widened. "How the hell?" he asked, looking back at the microscope. "Those aren't native to this area."

"No, they aren't," Sasori frowned. "Which means it's going to be very difficult to make antivenom." He paused in deep thought. A low whine escaped his throat in the silence. "There is...that cave."

Gaara grimaced. "That place is infested!" he shuddered.

"I do not want to deal with spiders," Azumi whined. "Arachnids are gross."

"Whoa, watch it," Sasori warned.

"Is he even worth any of that?"

Sasori pouted, drumming his fingers on the books.

"Ugh," Gaara huffed. "You owe me," he told Sasori. "I'll go." He was willing to sacrifice himself so Azumi would not have to.

"You should not have to," Azumi said. "Let him be a narcoleptic for the rest of his life. It is not like he is dying."

"Yeah, but I use him for stuff," Sasori whined. "Otherwise, I get bored."

"Gods forbid you're bored," Gaara rolled his eyes, folding his arms.

Azumi groaned, tilting her head back. As she gave it a bit of thought, she realized she would rather let Komushi be used for Sasori's weird experiments than herself when he was bored. "Where is this cave?" she asked.

"Not far from the city," Sasori said. "We'll have to take a camel."

"We don't. You're just being a priss," Gaara countered with a smirk. "It's a ten-minute walk."

"And three minutes by camel."

"You're not even going into the cave."

"Doesn't mean I want to walk out there," Sasori sniffed with finality. "We still have to go out there together. But we should go at night. The spiders are more active and it's less hot." There was a collective sigh among the three of them and then they sat there in silence for a moment, contemplating if Komushi was worth traveling to a cave infested with brown recluses. While Azumi and Gaara agreed that he was not, Sasori's opinion made the decision. "Until the sun goes down, I will start on making the antivenom so the last ingredient we need is the venom from the
spider."

Just the word 'spider' made Azumi shudder again. 'Disgusting,' she thought.

The moment the decision was made, it seemed like the sun was in a hurry to set. Sasori was still reluctant to go. He worked on the antidote slowly. Komushi was surprisingly still soundly asleep which was the only thing pushing Sasori to even go. This was the longest stint he had slept. "I'm going to check on him first. This will be all for nothing if he's dead." He started for the door. "I'll be right back," he told them.

As soon as he was gone, Azumi groaned again. "This is his best friend," she said. "He should be the one to do it."

"Yes, that's not remotely like Sasori at all," Gaara grumbled, bracing himself for the nasty job he was about to deal with. "Where would he have gotten bitten by one of those? He's such an idiot."

"Yes, he is an idiot, but you know he did not get bitten by one," she said. "This is the poison that Utakata gave me. I did not even put a lot of it into his tea so it is a bit surprising that it has lasted this long." She stood up and stretched hard. "I wonder how much longer it will last or if the only way to counteract it is with an antidote. On another note, it could have been so much worse for him. He is lucky that falling in and out of sleep is all that this poison is doing to him."

Gaara's head whipped around. "THAT'S what Utakata gave you!" He blinked wide-eyed. "I didn't think he'd give you something so strong! You could easily have killed both of them!" Gaara's heart picked up a little. "You...still could," he said softly. "No one would ever know." He said the words but instantly felt a sick sensation at the very thought of killing his cousin. Could he be just as bad as Sasori?

She looked at him and smirked, reaching a hand out to run her fingers through his hair. "That would be entirely too suspicious," she said. "As if this was not suspicious enough. Plus, it would not be satisfying to kill them both with a poison. That is your cousin's game, not mine."

He sighed, leaning into her hand. He ached to hold her again. "I know," he pouted a little. "It's just so easy. The tools are right there but you're right." He slipped his hand once more into her free one, gently rubbing his thumb over the back of hers. "It would attract a lot of attention."

She gripped his hair gently to tilt his face up and kiss him. "This poison was only given to me by Utakata to keep him from bothering me for a while," she said. "I do not intend to kill either of them." She kissed him again. "At least not yet," she said against his lips.

He smiled slightly, pushing back into the kiss. "I will have to personally thank him then." He kissed her again then pulled away. "You don't think Utakata has an antidote, does he?"

"Ooh, he might," she hummed. "But...I think it is a bit funny to see how far Lord Sasori is willing to go for his best friend. To see how much he cares is interesting."

"You're pretty evil," Gaara chuckled. He kissed her cheek once more just as they heard Sasori coming up the hall. Gaara pulled away, putting a healthy distance between them.

"He's still knocked out," Sasori rolled his eyes. "Let's go."

Azumi grabbed the vile that they were going to collect the spider venom in and Sasori grabbed the container he started the antidote in. The three of them left the room and went to the front of the mansion. "Do you have camels or do you have to go to stables here?" Azumi asked.
"We have them," Sasori said as he rolled his eyes. "The stables are around back," he told them, heading out. Gaara rolled his eyes at her, flashing a smirk. The walk was not too long and the stables were absurdly large. Inside were stalls upon stalls of camels and horses.

Azumi smiled at the horses, walking up to one to pet it. "Hello," she said softly to it. "You are beautiful." She peeked around the horse, noticing all of its defined muscles. "And probably very strong," she hummed. Another horse made a noise, wanting attention. She walked up to it and pet it the same way. Then another horse made a noise and she went up to it.

Both redheads watched her move down to each horse. "We should take them instead," Gaara said softly to Sasori.

Sasori hummed softly, running a hand through his hair. "I suppose they are faster. But we only have one saddle right now."

"I'm fine riding bareback," Gaara smirked.

Azumi had moved to three more horses when she heard that. She shared a look with the horse she was petting and then whipped around with a quiet gasp. 'That is one of the sexiest things I have heard,' she thought.


"I...can," she said. 'It has been a very long time, though,' she thought. She went up to the horse that was the tamest when she pet it.

"Then you can ride with Gaara." Sasori waved his hand towards them as he readied his saddle.

Gaara walked up next to her and put his hand over hers. "Do you like this one?" he smiled at her.

"I do," she grinned. She watched as he opened the stall and walked the horse out. The horse remained calm and she moved her hand down the horse's body. "She is perfect."

"She seems to like you," Gaara smiled, walking into her stall to grab the reigns, bridle and bit.

"Hurry up, you two," Sasori said, riding past them on his horse. "Don't keep me waiting," he snapped. Gaara rolled his eyes and set up everything on the horse. He walked to the other side of the horse and helped Azumi onto it before climbing on himself. Then they met Sasori right outside the stables. The moment Sasori saw them riding up, he took off down the road towards the cave. "It won't take that long to get there," he said over his shoulder.

"For someone who doesn't want to deal with any of this," Gaara spoke lowly in her ear, "he sure is moving fast."

"He cares," she chuckled. They followed quickly after him. Just as Sasori predicted, they reached the cave quickly. The two horses stopped right outside the mouth of the cave. They stayed quiet for a moment, listening to the noises inside the cave. There was the sound of the entire world's population of brown recluses moving around inside. Azumi shuddered again. "It is not worth it," she groaned.

Gaara chuckled, kissing the back of her neck. "Good thing you two are staying out here then," he smirked, halting the horse.

Sasori circled his horse back around to stand next to Azumi and Gaara's. "Well, if you die in there, at least you were doing it for science," Sasori smirked. "And you got to ride with my very sought-
Gaara rolled his eyes as he slid off. "Be back soon," he promised, slipping his hand into Azumi's just long enough to squeeze it. He took what he needed off Sasori's horse and walked into the cave fearlessly.

Azumi and Sasori watched him disappear into the darkness. "You just sent your cousin to his death," she hissed at him.

"He volunteered," Sasori said, shaking his head. "Maybe...I'll have you make him something nice if he comes back."

Gaara was in there for nearly ten whole minutes. He looked around for the choicest spider to milk. Once he found it, he easily plucked it off a nest of webs and went about milking it into the vial he brought with him. Once he was done, he turned on his foot and walked back out like it was nothing.

Azumi gasped softly when she saw him emerge from the darkness. "You lived," she grinned.

"Try not to fall off the horse," Sasori sighed, noticing how far forward she was leaning.

Gaara chuckled, picking a few spiders out of his hair. "Don't sound so thrilled, Cousin," he teased.

Sasori rolled his eyes, jumping down from his horse. "Shut up or I'll make you travel back naked," he folded his arms.

'I would not complain about that,' Azumi thought.

"Arms up," Sasori said to Gaara. "I'm not risking you bringing any of those monsters home with us."

Gaara held his arms up and Sasori circled him, gently patting him down to look for any more spiders. He found one and pointed it out to Gaara. "You're not going to take it off of me?" Gaara chuckled.

"No," Sasori scoffed.

Gaara smirked and pulled the spider off of himself and any other ones that Sasori pointed out. Azumi chuckled softly, watching the interaction. Once he was sufficiently debugged, the cousins climbed back onto their respective horses. Sasori pulled ahead once more on the way home.

Gaara slowed down a bit behind him. He leaned in and kissed Azumi's shoulder. "Were you two okay out here?" he asked, wrapping his arms around her to keep her 'secure.'

"Yes," she said softly. "I only worried about you." She leaned back against him and checked to see if Sasori was looking at them. He seemed focused on getting back so she risked a kiss to Gaara's jaw.

He smiled, burying his face in her hair. "Thank you." He hugged her a little closer, kissing her cheek. "Let's hope that was enough to 'save' his precious princess," he chuckled. "Do you...want to meet up tonight?" he asked her softly as they approached the house.

"I would love to," she said just as softly. He got off of the horse first and then helped her down.

Sasori got off of his horse and took the spider venom from Gaara. He immediately started to mix it
into the container he had with him that he started the antidote in. "Put the horses back and then meet me in Chiyo's room," he told them.

Azumi took the reins of Sasori's horse and started to walk it back to the stables. The horse she and Gaara rode on just followed. Sasori wasted no time in making his way back into the house, leaving her and Gaara alone.

Gaara raised an eyebrow. "Wow, he cares enough about Komushi to not care about us being left alone together," he chuckled. He waited for her to put the horses away before pulling her into a real, soft, heated kiss.

She hummed softly, wrapping her arms around him and pressing her body against his. "Let us just take every chance we get," she smirked, biting his lip.

"Agreed," he grinned, kissing her again as he laced his fingers into her hair. He used his other hand to press their bodies closer as they kissed. "With Komushi like this, he won't have a chance to say anything to Sasori. Maybe we should...sabotage the antidote," he said softly, cupping her face.

"Sabotage it?" she asked, placing her hands over his. "How so? He has already taken it to him. Chances are by the time we get there, he will have already administered it."

"You have more of the poison right?" He asked her. "We'll just dose the antidote too," he grinned. "Just enough to keep Komushi sick and Sasori worried. He'll be too distracted to pay attention to us and Komushi won't be able to stay awake long enough to say anything."

"And you called me evil," she chuckled. She kissed him again. "It is worth a shot." She pulled his hands from her face and kissed his knuckles. "Now, we should get back before he gets even more suspicious."

He gave her a devilish grin before kissing her once last time. He pushed a little more into it this time. "Is it evil when they are the ones who kill for fun?" he asked, walking back towards the house with her.

"Mm," she hummed through a chuckle. "I suppose you are right."
Chapter 34

Just as Sasori got the antidote into a syringe and was about to administer it to Komushi, he heard his cousin and slave walk into the room. “Took you long enough,” he grumbled.

“Sorry,” Gaara said with a shrug.

Sasori narrowed his eyes, shaking his head and then stuck Komushi in the arm. “Azumi, bottle the rest of the antidote and label it,” he said with a sigh. “We’ll have to observe him and see if there are any side effects.” Azumi nodded and took the container with the antidote from him then went to his workshop to bottle it. “I’m going to have someone come check on him every hour or so,” Sasori told Gaara. “If he wakes up on his own, then I’ll test him to see if it worked or if he’ll fall asleep again.” He dropped Komushi’s arm and stood up.

Gaara nodded, looking down at Komushi. “Only you would have this happen to you,” he said. “We should probably check the shop for any more in case they are making a nest,” Sasori said with a shudder. “I’ll leave that to you, Gaara.”

“Of course.” The young doctor rolled his eyes. Sasori sighed and started heading towards his room and Gaara followed. “I didn’t think you cared this much for him,” Gaara said with a slight chuckle.

Sasori’s eye twitched. “Yeah, well,” he shrugged it off, “it would not look very good for the best friend of an apothecary shop owner to die of poisoning.”

“You can admit that you’re a human being sometimes, you know,” Gaara grumbled.

"That would hurt me just the same as saying I can be patient," Sasori scoffed.

"I forgot," Gaara smirked. "You take damage from admitting to being nice."

"Don't use that language around me."

“I don’t know how you’re a grown man,” Gaara scoffed. “This is the reason you’re still single.” He folded his arms.

Sasori narrowed his eyes. “No, I’m still single because no one has met my expectations!”

“They’re probably too high and nearly impossible,” Gaara said as they entered Sasori’s room. “Not all of us are willing to set ours in the dirt,” Sasori countered. “And it’s not like you’ve found yourself a wife. You seem to be content pushing the limits with my slave.”

Gaara paused. "I just treat her like a human," he defended. "Unlike your best friend who has no idea how to keep his hands to himself." He lied as best as he could. Azumi walked out of the workshop, drinking another cup of tea.

Sasori narrowed his eyes. He was not going to cover for Komushi. He could not now. Not after reaming him out for his behavior so publicly. However, Sasori was nothing if not prideful. “His hands, your eyes,” Sasori said as he cocked an eyebrow. “You speak so righteously about not owning her and yet the way you look at her says you’d like nothing more,” he snorted.

Gaara’s eyelids nearly flew off with how fast he was blinking. “You’re kidding me!” Gaara snarled. His temper flared for a moment. “You literally bought her! I’m not the one threatening
people’s lives for just being a decent human being to another HUMAN BEING!” His voice raised. Sasori stood up, getting very close to Gaara.

“She is mine and I have every right to do what I want with her,” he hissed. “You nor Komushi have any say in what or how I treat her. You do not get to look at her,” he jabbed Gaara in the chest hard, “speak with her or so much as be in the same room with her unless I wish it! Because I allow her to be!” He pushed Gaara hard then his gaze snapped to Azumi. “Is that understood! You still live by my rules! Do not allow me to think I’ve given you too much leeway or I will take it all away!”

Azumi tried her best not to flinch but took a step back when he looked at her. She nodded, thinking for a moment that he found out that she went out with Gaara the night before. Then it dawned on her that she would have experienced something worse than him just yelling at them if he did find out. "Yes, Lord Sasori," she said softly, trying to hide her fear behind another sip of her tea.

Gaara’s body went stock still. It was taking every fiber of his being to not lunge at his cousin and slam his head hard into anything his body connected with. He clenched his jaw tightly, picturing the scene before his eyes.

Sasori glared at his property for a moment longer then nodded. He ignored the strong killing intent rolling off his younger cousin. It suddenly felt like there were two large cats vying for the top spot but Sasori knew well enough Gaara would never do anything.

“Best you leave now, Doctor,” he sneered the title. Gaara’s eye twitched. Without a word, Gaara nodded to Azumi politely, rage still boiling just below the surface, then turned to leave. His fists curling and uncurling as he did.

He shot her a nasty look as he rubbed his temples. “Don’t ask stupid questions,” he snapped. “Of course it is!”

She flinched again, watching him cross the room. "I...am sorry," she mumbled, standing up. She went into the workshop and poured him a cup of tea.

He accepted the cup when she offered it to him. He took a sip then rolled his shoulders. “Stupid fools. Both of them!” he growled. “I’m getting really tired of people butting into my business and life!”

"That is understandable," she hummed. She watched him sit down and run a hand through his hair. She sighed and walked up behind him then started to rub his shoulders. "If it is any consolation..." she started, "at least he is not dead."

“Thank the gods for small miracles,” Sasori tried to grumble but it came out as a soft moan as she worked his shoulders. “I mean it, Azumi, I won’t let either of them touch you,” he warned.

She frowned and nodded even though he could not see her nod. “Right...” she said softly. She pressed harder into his muscles then moved between his shoulder blades.

He moaned softly, relaxing under her hands. “You tell me if Komushi tries anything again,” he told her. His voice lost some of its intensity but he meant it. “I don’t care how he drives off his own personal conquests. I need you focused on tasks at hand and having you skittish around him will be irritating.” He relaxed further.

She appreciated that he helped keep Komushi away from her. However, it bothered her that he was also keeping Gaara away from her. “Alright,” she said. She sighed softly and retracted her hands.
“Would you like a proper massage before we run tests on Lord Komushi?”

Sasori stifled a pout when her hands disappeared. “No, let’s do that after the tests. I’ll just tense back up. Might as well go to bed as close to relaxed as I can for once in my life.” He ran a hand through his hair again as he stood up and went into his room. He paused to strip down and pulled on his robe before leaving the room. Azumi followed him, figuring that she was going to be stuck dealing with this all night and that she would not be able to sneak away to see Gaara. They made their way through the halls to the other side of the mansion. As they entered Chiyo’s room, Komushi was just waking up.

“How—“ Komushi went to speak but his throat was hoarse and dry.

“The longest you’ve been out so far,” Sasori told him. “Bring us some tea,” he told Azumi. “And water,” he added as he placed a hand on Komushi’s head and pulled back his eyelids to check his pupils. Azumi nodded and left to get tea and water.

“Have you figured out what’s happening?” Komushi rasped. He was pretty positive he was poisoned by Azumi, but he would not jump to the conclusion just yet.

“Not yet,” Sasori hummed and then pulled away. “I made an antidote so you should be awake for a while.”

“I trust you,” Komushi gave him a genuine smile. “You’ll figure this out.”

Sasori looked into his still done up eyes. He laughed softly, shaking his head. “You better. Who else do you know that could help you?” He chuckled as he went through the rest of the tests.

Komushi’s smile lingered. “No one half-decent. Or that really gives a shit about me,” he shrugged. “Guess we’re stuck with each other.”

“Yeah, I guess so, too,” Sasori sighed.

Azumi returned with a tray with tea and water. She walked up to Komushi and set the tray down next to him. She would have handed him the cup but she was unsure if he still did not trust her. Not that she would blame him. She definitely poisoned him. Komushi did indeed tense up when she set the tray down. He watched her intently as she poured out the tea in plain view. Sasori held his hand out for the cup first with a slight eye roll. Komushi watched him take a sip first. They sat for a few minutes and when Sasori was fine he refilled the cup and handed it to Komushi. ‘Wow,’ Azumi thought, rolling her eyes. She moved to stand behind Sasori as he continued his tests on Komushi. She watched him, considering the idea of being nice and helping him wipe off his makeup but opting not to and letting him continue to look like a pretty fool. Instead, she poured another cup of tea.

"Let me know if you're starting to feel tired again," Sasori told Komushi.

Komushi nodded and went to rub his eyes when he stopped himself. “I’m still wearing makeup, aren’t I?” he sighed.

Sasori shook his head. “Nope,” he lied.

“I’m convinced you’re a compulsive liar,” Komushi sighed. “I can feel it on my face.”

“If you knew then why did you ask?” Sasori countered.

"I trusted you to tell me the truth," Komushi smirked.
Azumi sighed softly and went into the bathroom, finding a small cloth and a bottle of micellar water. She came back out, wetting the cloth a little bit and handed it to Komushi. "You can remove it if you wish," she said.

"But then how will I find a husband?" Komushi chuckled as he took the offered cloth. "You don’t seem too pleased that I want to remove your work."

"I think she just wants you to shut up about it," Sasori said as he pinched his friend’s arm hard. "Besides, who wants to look at such an ugly mug?" he grinned.

Komushi yelped, rubbing his arm hard. "You do!" he pouted.

"It got a little ruined when you slept on it anyway," Azumi said, folding her arms. "And if you end up falling asleep again, it is not good to sleep with makeup on your face. I will not be responsible for your face breaking out. Go ahead and wipe it off."

"Yes, ma’am," Komushi chuckled as he started to wipe his face. Sasori finished up his tests and stood up. "So how am I, Doc?"

"You seem to be fine...for now. But as I said, if you start to feel tired again or off, tell me right away."

"Will do," Komushi grinned. He was not doing a great job with wiping his makeup off so Azumi grabbed a small mirror to hold in front of him so he could watch himself ruin her work.

"Oh, thanks," he chuckled, finally able to properly wipe away the black and brown smudges he had made of her work. "Jeez, this kohl stuff really sticks. No wonder Gaara uses it." He rolled his eye up to wipe the eyeliner away as best he could.

Sasori smirked. "That stuff’s going to linger for a few days," he teased. "Most people just clean it up and reapply it."

"It took a week of washing my face in a river to remove it when I was being brought here," Azumi said softly. "But what you are using right now should get it off in a couple of days." Once he got off what he could, she put the mirror back where she found it.

"You should let her wear makeup," Komushi pursed his lips at Sasori.

Sasori gave him a blank look. "No," he deadpanned. "It’s a waste of time and I need her energy focused on more important things."

Komushi clicked his tongue. "Can you make your own cosmetics?" Komushi asked Azumi. Sasori would not have been remotely surprised if she said yes but he was still curious to know.

"I can make some things," she said softly. "Mainly eyeliners and eyeshadows. But I do not want to waste his resources on that."

"Aw, come on, Sasori! Let the lady make and wear makeup! Women love that stuff and there are enough men in this city who are always looking for quality kohl."

Sasori shook his head, running a hand down his face. "I’ll consider it," he said with a tone of finality. "I’m an apothecary, not a general store."

"In his defense, he has let me wear makeup and he has given me a box of makeup to keep," she said. "I am fine with only wearing it to parties. I do not need to wear it every day."
“So shut up and keep your nose in your own business,” Sasori folded his arms over his chest, giving Komushi a pointed look.

The other man held his hands up in surrender. “Alright, alright,” he chuckled. His stomach growled loudly suddenly.

Sasori sighed. “I guess we should feed you,” he grumbled.

Komushi grinned sheepishly. “Being poisoned sure takes a toll on you,” he laughed again.

"Can you move?" Sasori asked. Komushi nodded and got up from the bed. His body felt stiff from all of the sleeping he had done. He stretched hard, feeling his back crack.

Azumi winced, hearing the sound go up his whole spine. 'I bet that felt amazing,' she thought. It was confirmed by the audible moan Komushi let out.

"We'll head to the kitchen then," Sasori said.

The trio made their way down to the kitchen. The other servants had made enough food for all of the expected guests in the house but since Gaara had left there was a little extra. Komushi took a deep breath and his stomach roared. “This is going to be amazing,” he groaned, honing in on the food quickly.

"Have at it," Sasori said. Without missing a beat, Komushi sat down and started serving himself. "With civility," Sasori sighed.

"Why?" Komushi asked. "It's just you here," he laughed. Sasori shook his head as he sat down at the table as well and began to serve himself. “Come join us!” Komushi said to Azumi when she did not sit down with them.

Sasori rolled his eyes, sighing in irritation. “You may sit,” he told her stiffly, glaring at Komushi.

“Oh, save the glare. Where was she supposed to eat otherwise?” He shoved food into his mouth. Sasori could not answer that. He never made her eat with the other servants. Azumi sat down next to Sasori and started to serve herself. “Where’s Gaara?” Komushi asked, remembering he was around the last time he woke up.

“He went home for the night,” Sasori said easily. “He and I had a talk just like you and I had. You both have been pushing my buttons and boundaries.”

Komushi’s eyebrows shot up. He looked at Azumi. “I see,” he as he narrowed his eyes. He smirked darkly at Azumi. Sasori’s eye twitched and he smacked the back of Komushi's head. Azumi frowned, looking away from Komushi to start eating. She had not yet dosed the antidote with the poison but if he was going to give her any more problems, she would not hesitate to poison him again. Komushi’s smirk barely wavered as he began to eat again.

“I swear, I will kick you out!” Sasori huffed. “You’ve baited me enough today.”

“Calm yourself, friend,” Komushi chuckled. “I’m not in the mood to die just yet. Though, winning over Azumi would be a noble death.” He winked at her.

Azumi’s brow furrowed. “As if,” she scoffed quietly. “You will die unhappy if that is your goal.”

“Ouch!” Komushi winced, chuckling. “You’d be surprised. I’m full of secrets and tricks.”
“Komushi, this is your final warning,” Sasori growled lowly.

“Right, right,” he smirked. “The ‘boundaries,’” he said in a mocking tone.

“It would be in your best interest to grasp that concept very soon,” Sasori told him.

“You two are so alike,” Komushi smiled at them. “So demanding and authoritative,” he mocked.

“It proves that she is competent enough,” Sasori said.

"Minus the killing, the work I do with Lord Sasori is similar to the work I did back in my village," Azumi told Komushi.

"Only proves my point further," Komushi smirked. They ate dinner with less hostile and more comfortable conversation for a change. As they finished up, Komushi stretched contently. “We should eat like this more often.”

“No,” Sasori deadpanned. “And before you start pouting, I don’t need people over my house every week while I am trying to work!”

"Ugh, you're such a hermit," Komushi smirked.

"Not everyone has the drive to go out to a club every night," Sasori muttered.

'Every night?' Azumi thought.

"I don't go every night," Komushi chuckled. "Just most nights."

"Yeah, you and Kankuro. And you know who else has their own designated booths?" Sasori raised an eyebrow with pursed lips. “You and Kankuro.”

Komushi said the statement with Sasori a little glumly. “It gets boring at home and you’re always so busy,” he said as he folded his arms.

“I’m sorry I’m a functioning adult,” Sasori rolled his eyes.

"I'm a functioning adult, too," Komushi pouted.

"Could've fooled me," Sasori scoffed. "Look at the situation you're in now. I have to talk to you like a child and you got yourself poisoned."

“You just like to baby me. Which is your own issue and what was I even poisoned by?” Komushi shot a very indiscreet glare at Azumi once more.

“I don’t do anything unwarranted. You act like a baby and I treat you as such.” Sasori folded his hands. “As for your poisoning, you were apparently somehow bitten by a brown recluse spider.”

"Is that what it was?" Komushi asked, very skeptical. "Those aren't native to this area. Where would I even have come across one?"

“There is a cave not too far from the city. I’m theorizing one of the customers brought it in with them. In all honesty, it was probably Kenzou. I don’t know why he would be near a cave like that but he’s the only traveler we’ve had in a long while.”

"That place?" Komushi shuddered. "Gross." He was surprised there was a plausible reason for his poisoning even though he was certain that Azumi poisoned him. She even admitted it to his face
but that could have easily been a joke and a plot to get him in trouble with Sasori. "I see," he hummed.

Sasori nodded in agreement. “I’m surprised they haven’t sent someone out there to destroy it.” He sighed, standing up.

Komushi hummed, still eyeing Azumi from the corner of his eye. He was not going to let this rest easily. “How neat and tidy,” he muttered under his breath. This was not sitting right in his gut at all.

“You’re staying the night by the way,” Sasori told him, snapping him out of his thoughts.

Komushi blinked wide and his usual grin returned. “My sweet guardian wants to keep me close.” He batted his lashes.

“Well, I still have to run tests on you,” Sasori muttered. “There is still a chance of you falling asleep again.”

“Ugh, you’re always so sensible. Where is your sense of romance!” Komushi sighed dramatically.

Sasori ignored him. He started down the hall towards his room. “You will sleep in Granny’s old room and if you need anything,” he paused and looked hard at Komushi, “and try very, very hard not to need me, you can come to my room.”

Komushi grinned. "Right," he said. "Goodnight, then." He made his way back to Chiyo's room. Since he had slept all day, he was not tired and super restless. He was probably going to soak in the bath, despite taking a bath earlier.

Azumi followed Sasori back to his room. "He seems to be doing fine," she said.

“He has always had a knack for bouncing back.” Sasori rolled his eyes but inside he was relieved. He sat down heavily on his bed and laid on his stomach. “We’ll keep running tests. He should be fine though.” He stretched out like a cat. “Now...about that massage.”

"Right," she chuckled. She grabbed the massage oil from his bedside table and got on the bed to straddle him. She dripped a little of the oil onto his back and put the bottle aside then started the massage, beginning where she left off between his shoulder blades.

He moaned into the pillow he had reached for and bunched up under his chest. “How did you get so good at this? Was this part of your training as the village heiress too?” he grunted softly.

"I am not the village heiress," she said. "My oldest brother is the next head. And as I said before, I learned this from having it done to me. I used to receive massages after my performances." She moved her hands a little further down his back, frowning at just how tense he was from having to deal with Komushi.

“Right,” he groaned again. “You did tell me all—“ He stopped short when she pressed into a particularly nasty knot. It took his breath away. “Oh, gods.” He bit his lip hard to compose himself.

She noted his reaction and pressed hard into it. This was one he needed to get rid of. It was probably bothering him the most. "Almost there," she whispered, working it until it released. He gripped the sheets tightly and moaned even louder into the pillow. He cursed between breaths as she worked it.

Down the hall, Komushi had grown to restless to stay in bed. He doubted his best friend was asleep.
yet and he had deemed his boredom reason enough to pay his room a visit. He stopped short when he heard Sasori cry out suddenly. He knew that sort of cry. The vocalization of pure pleasure. His eyes nearly popped out of his head. The only person with him was Azumi! He nearly ran to the door. If she was the one making him make those noises then he had so much more blackmail. He pressed his ear to the door, listening intently and gasping when he heard Sasori moan again. He crept into the room, standing at the door as he bore witness to Azumi giving Sasori a very intimate massage. "It all makes sense now," he said, unable to hide his grin.

Azumi flinched, not expecting him to be there and then growled softly as soon as she saw him. She wanted to slap that stupid grin off of his face. Sasori’s brows drew together. He craned his neck to look back at her. “Something wrong?” he asked, his voice a little rough.

"Nothing other than the fact that you couldn't just tell me why you were being so protective of her," Komushi said to him with a chuckle. "You clearly have something very special going on."

The instant Sasori heard Komushi’s voice, his eyes slid closed very, very slowly. His head dropped back into his pillow. He tapped Azumi’s leg, indicating for her to get off. He waited until she was seated next to him to roll over and level Komushi with a glare. “What is it that you needed so urgently that you needed to come to my room and bother me why my slave gave me a massage?” he asked with plain and blatant irritation in his tone.

Komushi held his hands up. “Boredom,” he admitted. “But I can clearly see I interrupted a very important master-slave interaction,” he grinned.

“‘You’re reading into this.’ Sasori was already tensing back up.

"Am I?" Komushi laughed. "Or am I finally seeing something that so many people suspected?" He looked at Azumi. "Are you having a hard time choosing?"

Azumi scoffed, almost vaulting over the bed to attack him but Sasori put his arm out to stop her.

“If there is nothing you need from us right now,” Sasori got up, pushing a hand against Komushi’s chest. Komushi did not take his eyes off of Azumi. “You can go back to bed. Or walk yourself home since you seem to be in such good health.” He has noted the comment about choosing. He shoved Komushi hard, making the man stumble back a bit.

Komushi did not answer at first. He and Azumi continued to glare at each other for a few moments before his grin faded into a smirk. “I suppose I can go back to bed,” he lied. “I’m starting to feel tired again,” he lied. He backed out of the room and went back to the other side of the house.

Meanwhile, on the bed, Azumi was trying to not let her rage get the best of her and doing a poor job of talking herself out of sending Naga to kill Komushi.

With shoulders nearly hiked to his ears, Sasori turned around to look at Azumi. “Go,” he snapped. “I just want to sleep,” he huffed. “And if I wake up and he’s dead, I’m not asking questions. It’ll be your head,” he said, flopping onto his bed heavily.

She growled softly as she got off of the bed and made her way to her room. She hated that no matter how shitty Komushi was, Sasori would always protect him. “ Fucking ridiculous,” she huffed as she entered her room and pressed her back to the door as it closed.

“That sounds like he’s awake,” Gaara said from her bed. He had climbed in through her window when Sasori told him to leave.

“Yes, he is awake,” she sighed. “And he is only causing more problems.”
He could see the rage visibly radiating off of her. He reached out for her to take his hand. “What did he do?” he asked, his own temper ready to flare at any mention of him laying a hand on her. “I can take care of him right now if you want me to,” he said, pulling her into his lap. He tucked a piece of her hair behind her ear.

“He almost outed us to your cousin, for one,” she said. “He walked in on me giving him a massage and assumed it meant we were sleeping together.” She scoffed and rolled her eyes. “As if I would ever sleep with either of those fucking monsters. Then he asked me if I am having a hard time choosing between you and Lord Sasori.”

His heart nearly stopped. “In front of Sasori?” He clutched her closer. “Did...did Sasori say anything?” His blood was starting to run cold. He could lose her. She could die or worse. Sasori would do unspeakable things to her if he did know. His fingers curled into the fabric of her dress. He shook his head. “This might be good. If Komushi starts to think you and Sasori are sleeping together, he might forget all about us...” His face twisted in disgust. “Sorry.” He looked away from her. “That felt wrong just thinking that.”

She looked up at him and frowned, gently turning his face back to hers. “He would not assume I have chosen,” she said. “He would continue to think I am sleeping with both of you. In truth, I have never slept with either of you, but that would not change his mind. He lives to cause problems.”

He pressed his hand over hers, leaning his cheek into her hand. “He’s always been like that.” He held her gaze. “But I won’t let him hurt you. We’ll just have to poison him sooner,” he said seriously.

“I left it at the shop,” she frowned. “We will not be able to do it tonight. Plus, since he is still awake, it will be a bit hard to sneak it into his tea again.”

“It’s fine.” He shook his head. “If it’s you who is around and makes him sick, it will look suspicious. Next time we’re at the shop, I’ll grab it and take care of it,” he assured her. He leaned in and pressed their foreheads together. “I won’t give them any excuse to look your way.”

She kept his gaze for a moment before softly pressing her lips to his and sliding her hand into his hair, gripping it gently. "It will also be hard to be kept away from you," she hummed.

He pulled her a little closer to his body, kissing her again. “We’ll figure it out,” he whispered against her lips. “I don’t want to stay away. He won’t keep you every night,” his lips quirked up.

“The risks have only gotten higher,” she chuckled. There was a hiss coming from the window. She looked over and saw Naga slithering back into her room. “And where have you been?” she asked him. He hissed softly at her as he coiled up on the dresser. “With friends?” she laughed.

Gaara laughed softly with her. “I think your snake gets out more than you do,” he said half-teasingly. Naga hissed again, slithering between them. Gaara shivered a little when he brushed up against his stomach.

“Yes, well, it is easier for him to sneak out,” she smirked, petting Naga’s head. “He is technically free. He does not exactly belong to me and he can leave whenever he wants. He stays because he worries about me.”

Naga hissed once more, nuzzling into her hand. Gaara’s smile softened and he leaned in to capture her lips in a soft kiss once more. “I’m glad he stays then,” he said softly as they broke apart. “I wish it was under better circumstances but I’m glad all three of us left,” he told her honestly. Naga wrapped around Azumi’s stomach and gave her a light squeeze.
She gently pushed Gaara backward until he laid down as Naga moved to coil on the corner of the bed. She leaned down and kissed him again then leaned back up and straddled his waist. “Are you staying the night again?” she smirked. “Are we not letting up on the risk-taking?”

“Would you like me to?” he asked her with a cheeky grin. “There’s no one waiting for me at home.” He ran his hands up her thighs, careful to avoid the bandages.

“That depends,” she chuckled, leaning back down, “are you tired of me yet?” She kissed up his neck softly and then trailed along his jaw.

“Has the river outside run dry?” he countered with a smirk. Naga lifted his head to look out the window and shook his head. With a small laugh, Gaara looked from Naga back to her. “Then there’s your answer.” He moved his hands up to her hips, tightening his grip a little. He tilted his head to give her better access to his neck.

“Then yes,” she hummed, trailing her kisses up to his lips, “I would love for you to stay and continue our risk-taking streak,” she smirked, biting his lip.

Perfect,” he breathed against her lips, pushing back against them. He moved one of his hands to lace into her hair, curling his fingers slightly as he pulled her back into the kiss. He bit her lip a little harder, sucking on it gently. His other arm pulled her down a little closer. “We should jam the door again,” he said breathlessly.

She chuckled softly, pressing her forehead against his. She completely got lost in the moment. “Right,” she said. “Good idea.” She leaned up, tilting her head back a little before getting off of him and positioning the chair against the door under the handle. “Cannot forget that,” she smirked. The moment the door was jammed, he pulled her back onto the bed and switched their positions, pinning her under him. He pushed his hands up her arms and pinned them over her head as he leaned down to kiss her slowly. He was crossed between wanting to savor every moment with her and rush to enjoy their time together. She hummed softly in the kiss, biting his lip gently. She smirked against his lips and wrapped her legs around him as she pushed back further into the kiss.

He smiled into the kiss, trailing down her jaw. He paused on her neck. “How easily do you bruise?” he asked her softly.

"I do not bruise very easily," she hummed. She thought back to the one time Sasori bruised her and realized it was because he had an actual death grip on her jaw. "I also heal quickly."

He smiled against her neck. “Perfect,” he whispered as he opened his mouth to bite down hard on her neck with no warning. She gasped softly, letting out a quiet moan as a shiver went up her spine. If he marked her, she would deal with it later. At that moment, she did not care. He pulled back, grinning to look at his handiwork. “Perfect and pure as the goddess that you are,” he chuckled, looking up at her. He leaned back down to kiss her neck again, trailing down to her chest. He sucked gently, just above the burn Sasori left on her.

She bit her lip through a chuckle, holding back a second quiet moan. "Pure?" she smirked, rolling her hips against his softly. "That is a first."

He was nearly caught by surprise when she moved her hips. Nearly. He smirked, pushing his back against hers. “There’s a first for everything, isn’t there?” He kissed up the other side of her neck. His hands wandered down her sides, slipping under the folds of her dress.

With her hands being freed, she laced her fingers into his hair, tilting his head up to kiss him roughly. As his hands slipped under her dress, she slid hers down to his hips. She gripped them,
pressing their hips together again and biting his lip harder than she did before. "There certainly is," she whispered. He nearly moaned at the sensation but bit it back as he pressed into the kiss. He grinned against her lips, loving how rough she was. "Hm," she hummed, pushing against him to roll them over. She straddled his waist once again, sliding her hands up his arms and lacing their fingers together. She kissed the knuckles of each of his hands before leaning down to kiss him again. "We have already come this far," she smirked as she let his hands go, trailing her kisses down his chest and stomach and gliding her nails down his sides as she moved down.

He shuddered slightly under her touch. He looked down his stomach at her, lifting a hand to lace into her hair again. “How far did you want to go?” he asked, rolling his hips ever so slightly under her.

She kissed further down his stomach, gripping the waistband of his pants and then looked up at him. "All the way," she smirked.
The next morning, Gaara wrapped his arms tightly around the warmth he had been sleeping with all night. He pressed his face further into Azumi’s fragrant hair and smiled happily. He was in utter bliss. Nothing could be more perfect than waking up next to the one you were definitely starting to love.

Azumi felt him move and groaned softly, burying her face into the pillow. She pushed back against him before opening her eyes slowly, recalling the night before. She twisted around a little and smirked, kissing him softly. "Good morning," she said.

He smiled sleepily into the kiss. “Good morning,” he replied softly. “Sleep well?” he asked her, running his hand up her side lazily.

"Mm, absolutely," she hummed, turning around to face him and wrapping her arms around him. "Did you?" she smirked, biting his lip.

“The best I have in years,” he told her honestly. He did not realize how good it would feel to sleep next to someone even in such a small bed. He glanced up at the window, noting the sun barely cresting in the sky. “How long do you think we have before someone comes around?” he asked her softly, stealing another kiss.

She looked out the window as well and then buried her face in his neck. “Maybe another hour or so,” she hummed. “Lord Sasori does not like to be awake before the sun completely rises.”

Gaara snorted, threading his fingers into her hair. He rubbed gentle circles into her scalp with his fingertips. “What a spoiled brat,” he said softly, kissing the top of her head. “But I guess that works in our favor.” He smiled, pulling her closer with his other arm.

“It sure does,” she chuckled, kissing up his neck. “It gives us enough time to cover up any marks you left on me, find our clothes,” she kissed his lips, “maybe more,” she smirked.

“I’m very interested in this ‘more’ concept,” he grinned. However, the reminder of potential marks made him frown a little. He lifted her chin on his fingertip to give her neck a small once over. “I was pretty careful.” He stole a kiss from her. “You, on the other hand,” he smirked. He could feel a particularly stiff little hickey at the bend of his shoulder and neck.

She chuckled softly, biting her lip. “You are not the enslaved one with a murderous master,” she smirked, bringing a hand up to caress his face. “You can get away with it.”

“I know,” he grinned mischievously. “And I want so many more from you.” He kissed her again, biting her lip a little harder. His hand moved down her side, lightly raking his nails along her skin. He pulled her hips back against his and sighed a little into her mouth.

"I would be happy to oblige," she smirked, rolling on top of him. She kissed along his jaw and down his neck, pausing to bite down on his skin and leaving a lighter mark than her previous ones. Smirking against his skin, she kissed the new mark.

He breathed out softly, grinning at her enthusiasm. “I want you to be able to look at me and know I’m yours,” he said with the slightest blush on his cheeks.

She hummed as she kissed her way back up to his lips. "I want the same for you," she said softly, looking into his eyes. She raked her fingers through his hair, pushing it back and leaned down to
kiss him slowly.

He pushed back into the kiss, wrapping an arm around her to push up her back. He pulled her down closer and smiled into the kiss. “Soon,” he whispered. “We’ll mark each other to our hearts’ content and no one can say otherwise.” He kissed her again with a little more passion.

She smiled against his lips. "I like the sound of that," she whispered, rolling her hips against his.

Down in the kitchen, Sasori was up, making coffee. Komushi was slumped on the table blinking blearily. “What part of ‘if the sun isn’t up, I’m not up’ don’t you understand?” Sasori grumbled, grabbing two mugs for them.

Komushi chuckled softly, grinning. “You’re fine. You waste so much of the day that way!” He brushed his friend’s irritation off.

“I’m usually up well into the morning! I know how to utilize my day outside of sunlight hours,” he ground out.

"Stop being such a vampire,” Komushi smirked. "I'm surprised you were even able to survive living in the desert your entire life." Sasori handed him his mug and he poured himself some coffee. "I'm feeling much better by the way, since you were so worried."

"I wasn't worried," Sasori muttered, sipping his coffee.

"Except you were very worried," Komushi chuckled.

“You’re pushing my limits first thing in the morning,” Sasori warned over a sip. “It’s good that you feel better but I still want you watched. At least for one more day in case of a delayed reaction to anything.”

Komushi began to pout. “More bed rest? But, Sasori, I get so restless!” he whined.

"You should have thought about that before you got yourself poisoned,” Sasori huffed. "One more day of bed rest isn't going to kill you." He grabbed two bowls and handed one to Komushi so he could serve himself.

“Fine,” Komushi relented, taking the bowl.

Sasori was not sure how many times he had rolled his eyes in the last two days but he was sure it was nearing the fifty mark by now. “I have to go to the shop today so I’m going to have Gaara come around and check on you.”

“You sure he won’t just kill me and make it look like a relapse,” Komushi half-joked.

"He wouldn't be so bold,” Sasori waved it off. Only after he said it did he start to doubt it a little. His cousin had grown quite bold recently. Sasori shook his head, dismissing the thought. "Try not to blow up my house while I'm gone."

“Yeah, yeah,” Komushi waved off Sasori’s worry. “I’ve never done it before.”

“The threat is always there with you,” Sasori countered. He stood up, finishing his breakfast and making a new bowl. “Might as well start the day,” he huffed, walking out of the kitchen. He decided he would wake Azumi up, bathe, and then leave for the shop. He could send another servant to give Gaara the news.
He made his way down the halls and stopped in front of her door. In his normal fashion, he went to open it unannounced and was surprised to find that it did not open easily.

Inside the room, Azumi and Gaara panicked silently. "He is awake very early," she whispered, getting off of him and tossing his clothes onto him.

"Azumi?" Sasori tried the door again. "You aren’t allowed to lock your door against me," he said with a warning tone. It was too early for him to be truly irritated.

Inside, Gaara quickly dressed and rolled off of the bed. "I’ll see you later," he said in a rush. He kissed her quickly once last time before vaulting as quietly as he could out the window.

"Azumi!" Sasori’s called sharply. "Open this now!"

Azumi got up, grabbing her dress from the floor and putting it on as she crossed the room to the door. She moved the chair and with Sasori's constant trying, it opened. "It was not against you," she told him. "It was against your pet scarab."

Sasori paused, peering into the room. "Did he come down to bother you?" he asked her seriously. He was in the mood to beat Komushi up anyway.

She shook her head as she continued to get dressed. "No," she said. "Jamming the door was merely a preventative measure. I like to be able to sleep soundly knowing I cannot be harassed."

"Fair enough," he nodded. "He’ll be gone by tonight so you won’t have to worry about him. However, today, you and I are going to the shop. I have some errands I need you to run in town and a lot of orders to catch up on there.” He handed her the bowl. “So eat up and prepare yourself. Oh, and tell one of the other servants to fetch Gaara. I need him to watch Komushi today.”

She mumbled her thanks as she accepted the bowl and started eating. "Alright," she said. A few seconds later, Naga slithered into the room through the window. He had left as soon as Azumi and Gaara started taking their clothes off the night before and seeing Gaara leave meant it was okay to come back in.

"Meet me out front in ten minutes then," Sasori told her before looking down at Naga. "So it’s safe for him to leave again?" he chuckled.

"It is," she said with a small smile. "But even so, he does not go too far. And he does not stay out for too long." She finished eating quickly and picked Naga up, wrapping him around her. She felt bad about him having to leave so she decided to take him with her to the shop. "I will go tell a servant about Lord Gaara," she said.

"I see," he nodded and turned on his foot when he saw she was ready. “And be aware that Komushi is up and on his feet,” he warned as he walked down the hall.

Azumi scoffed and rolled her eyes at that particular bit of news. She looked at Naga and he hissed teasingly at her, tapping his nose against her neck a couple of times to mimic Gaara biting her. "Shut up," she grinned, pushing his face away. "I am sorry about putting you in that situation, though," she said softly as she left her room. She walked down the halls, looking for a servant that did not look too busy. She found one in the tea room and approached them. "Lord Sasori would like you to get Lord Gaara and bring him here," she said to them. "He wants him to look after Lord Komushi for the day." The servant bowed low to her then nodded. They said nothing to her but looked mildly freaked out when she approached them. All of the servants gave off very skittish vibes. Naga swayed next to her, hissing softly like he was rolling his eyes. She watched them as
they backed out of the room. "I suppose a backbone is not allowed in this house," she hummed softly. She still had a few minutes before she had to meet Sasori in front of the house so she went to the kitchen to get coffee. "You should tell me about your friends," she said to Naga. "Where did you meet them?"

“Your snake has friends?” Komushi perked up the moment she walked into the kitchen. Naga tensed around her shoulders and hissed, leaning forward. “Whoa, there, boy.” He held up his coffee mug. “He’s a boy, right?” he asked Azumi.

Azumi gently pressed her finger against Naga's nose to push him back toward her. "Yes, he is a boy," she sighed. "And yes, he has friends." She poured herself a cup of coffee and took a sip.

“Good to know.” He leaned back in his chair. “So sorry I interrupted last night,” he grinned. “Did you get a good enough feel to decide or will you need a few more rounds with each of them?”

She almost choked on her coffee and shot him a glare. "Excuse me?" she growled, setting her mug down. "In case you have forgotten, I work for Lord Sasori and if he wants a massage, whether I want to or not, I have to give him one because if I refuse, he can kill me. In no way does that mean I am sleeping with him."

He hummed, finishing off his coffee. “What a good excuse,” he chuckled. “I’m really intrigued to see who wins,” he said, getting up. He crossed the room, walked right up to her, and pressed in close to her. “For your sake, I hope one of them is dead before the other knows,” he whispered in her ear as he set his mug down behind her.

Naga started hissing aggressively. Azumi stepped away from Komushi, trying to calm Naga down. "Your life must be quite dull if you must stir up this sort of drama where there is no need for it," she scoffed.

"Well, we sort of live in the middle of the desert," he chuckled, looking at Naga. "Even a big city like this can get it can boring," he grinned.

"I suggest you find some other source of entertainment," she said. "You should know better than anyone how he is about people butting into his business." She gently pet Naga's head as she moved toward the door.

"Oh, I do but I also love living on the edge," he smirked. He stepped back and walked to the door. "Everyone else’s business is always more entertaining and Sasori needs me as much as I need him," he winked at her then left the room.

She rolled her eyes. "No one needs you," she muttered. She made her way to the front of the house and met Sasori there, trying to compose herself as best as she could. They made their way to the shop quickly, getting there just before it got too hot for Sasori to want to be outside.

Sasori pulled down several books and started up the ladder to get to work. "Here," he called over the railing, dropping a folded note down to her. "You can make multiple trips or do it in one go. I don't care. As long as it gets done."

She caught it and nodded. “Right,” she said, sharing a look with Naga. He opened his mouth as if he was grinning at her. He was excited to go on this small adventure with her. “I will be back then.” She grabbed a bag to put everything in and made her way out of the shop to the market for the first errand. "I might bring back some churros and coffee for him,” she hummed. Naga hissed softly, agreeing that it would be a good idea and that he also wanted a snack. “I can figure something out for you, too,” she chuckled. The market was not overwhelmingly busy. It was early
and the rush had not hit yet. The scents of coffee and fresh baked goods permeated the warming air. Azumi went around to each of the stalls, getting everything that Sasori needed first. She figured it was better to finish the errands first before spending a little time for herself. Running Sasori’s errands took her almost an hour. She was at the last stall when she smelled a churro stand a few stalls down. "I think I have found the jackpot, Naga," she smiled as she paid the stall owner and made her way to the churros. Naga hissed softly, laughing a little as she made her way towards the stall. However, his little laugh was cut short when he noticed a woman at the stall. He hissed to Azumi softly and squeezed. He did not like this woman. Azumi stopped behind the woman and frowned. "Why not?" she asked Naga softly. When the woman turned around, she knew exactly why. It was Sasori’s mother.

The woman’s mouth was turned down in the same sort of frown her son often wore. Although, it vanished the moment she laid eyes on Azumi. “You’re Sasori’s slave!” she purred, her eyes twinkling. “Where is he?” she asked, looking around her.

"Ah, Lord Sasori is still at the shop, my Lady," Azumi said with a slight bow. "He sent me out on a couple of errands while he finished up some work he said he was behind on."

“Oh.” Her eyes flashed with something dangerous. “You’re the first I think he’s ever trusted to go out on their own,” she smiled. This woman made as much intense eye contact as her son. “Are his errands urgent or do you think you can entertain an old mother for a little while?” She smiled, looking at the coffee and churros she had just bought.

Azumi chuckled softly and nodded. "I have actually finished his list. I do not think he can say much about me not coming back immediately if I am with you." Naga hissed softly, advising against that. He had a bad feeling about this.

"Perfect!" she grinned. “Then we can take our time walking back and enjoying these.” She offered Azumi a churro. “Sasori has always had an addiction to these since he was small,” she giggled. “I blame his father. It seems all the men in the family have a bad sweet tooth,” she hummed happily.

"It is understandable," Azumi smiled, taking a churro and thanking her. "They are very good. I used to eat them a lot back in my village. I suppose maybe I also have an addiction," she chuckled.

"So you grew up with them, too?" she smiled. “Your village must not be very far from us then?” she asked, keeping an air of casual conversation. “I admit, we didn’t take Sasori traveling as much as we should have when he was young. Did you travel much before coming here?"

"Actually, my village is quite a few regions from here," Azumi hummed. "It took a couple of months to get here from there. And no, I actually have never left my village before coming here."

“Oh my!” she gasped. “That must have been hard on you,” she said with a sympathetic tone. “And your village must have fallen on hard times then?” She tilted her head in question. “I only ask because your manner of speech is far too refined for someone born into slavery and you are clearly educated.”

"It is very likely that it has," she said. She frowned slightly. "My father is the leader of the village so for his only daughter to be gone is not exactly...ideal." Naga hissed softly at her, nuzzling his nose against her jaw to make her smile again.

"Lone daughter?" The expression of a hurt and worried mother played across the woman’s features. “So you have a large family? Oh, I’m so sorry you had to be sold off,” she said assumingly. “I could never imagine giving up Sasori for any reason.”
"My family is of a fair size," she hummed. "And there is no reason to feel sorry. I am not here because my father sold me off. He actually did not know about this. I am here in place of someone else. I volunteered to take the place of a girl younger than me who was almost taken by the slavers."

Genuine shock appeared on the older woman’s face. “You volunteered for someone else?” She stopped in her tracks, staring at the young woman from far away. “You are very courageous,” she said seriously. And now she needed to have this clearly elite woman in her family. “Tell me more about you and your village. Did you only make fragrances there? How did you come to know how to make them?” The questions came out rapid-fire.

Azumi tried not to freak out at the nonstop questions and thought of her answers as quickly as she could. "My village is settled on an oasis. I did make fragrances, but I also made antivenoms and antidotes for our own apothecary since handling snake venom is something that comes easier to my family. Everyone in my family is a scientist in some way so it is just something I grew up with."

The woman’s mind raced. If she could get this girl hitched to her son, their family could be brought to the next level. They all were involved in some form of art or science themselves and she had not seen her son so responsive to a woman since the Terumi girl. “You must miss home dearly,” she said, putting a hand on Azumi’s forearm. “But Sasori treats you well, right?” she smiled. “He’s always has a soft spot for women. I think I spoiled him a little too hard as a child,” she laughed softly. “I’m glad he got you and you weren’t sent to work in the quarries. Your mind is too brilliant for that.” They continued to walk. “Did you have many suitors back home? You must have, being so lovely and bright.”

'A soft spot for women?' Azumi thought. 'Is burning them with acid something he does regularly?' She smiled politely at her. "We do get along," she said. It was almost the truth. “And my father was trying to set me up with someone before I left," she said, "but anyone my father chose for me was not the one.” Naga tapped his nose against her neck a couple of times to, once again, mimic Gaara biting her. She chuckled softly. 'I cannot tell you that I am very interested in your nephew right now,' she thought.

“Ah,” she nodded. She giggled a little behind her hand. “Fathers never know how to choose for their daughters. Even when they mean well. I chose Sasori’s father after oh...shot down about twenty suitors. My father never knew the type of men I liked.”

"The men he had chosen for me were very...boring," she huffed. "He also disapproved of the men I dated on my own.” She scoffed and rolled her eyes. "But I suppose his opinion means nothing now. Seeing as I am in this situation."

“You mustn’t say that,” Sasori’s mother scolded. “You never know what the future holds,” she grinned like a cat. They turned down the alleyway that Sasori usually took. Without hesitation, his mother opened the back door and stepped into the back workshop.

“You sure took your time—“ Sasori started in an irritated voice but the scent of churros hit his nose. He quickly got up and saw his mother. “You’re a rare visit,” he grinned, slipping down the ladder faster than he ever had before. He kissed his mother’s cheek then stole a churro. “What brings you here, Mother?”

"I was in the market and I ran into this young lady by the churro stand," his mother grinned. "She was just entertaining me with some girl talk on the way here." She kissed his cheeks. "And how are you, my son?"

Azumi took the opportunity to start putting away everything she bought for Sasori while they
conversed. She left the conversation, heading up the ladder to listen without being caught. He raised an eyebrow, glancing at Azumi. He chuckled a little at the thought of girl talk. “You’ve never been so friendly to one of my slaves,” he smiled at her. “I’m just catching up on orders now. Komushi was bitten by a spider and now he’s at my house resting but I had to do a lot to make sure he didn’t die.” He rolled his eyes.

"That troublemaker friend of yours?” his mother chuckled. "That does not surprise me one bit. I doubt he’ll ever get married,” she sighed, taking a seat on one of the stools and making herself comfortable. Azumi stifled a laugh. She could not audibly agree with her, but hell, did she agree. "So how has looking for a wife been going for you?"

Sasori tensed up then laughed sheepishly. “I’ve been working, Mother.” He tried not to blush. “I really don’t have time to go out on...” He trailed off when he saw his mother’s lips were pressed into a thin line.

“Thought so,” she huffed. “You’re lucky your mother has been looking for you!”

“Mother, you really don’t have—" She gave him a severe look and he stopped short once again.

“Of course I have to,” she told him. “If I leave it to you then it will never happen.” Sasori let out a defeated sigh. From the upper level, Azumi tried not to laugh as she listened to the conversation.

“Mother,” he came as close to whining as he would allow himself. “Just give me a few more years,” he tried but flinched at the terrifying look his mother sent him.

“Sasori Akasuna, do you know how old your father and I were when we married?”

Sasori winced again, hearing his full name. He glared at Azumi, his cheeks on the verge of burning red. “Yes, Mother.”

“Then you know you are already almost two years late and I’m not getting any younger!”

"I know, Mother, but I have—"

"You will always have your work, Sasori," she cut him off again. "But right now it's time to focus on settling down."

Sasori stared at her for a moment before closing his eyes and sighing heavily. "Then I assume you have found a suitor already?" He knew his mother was the kind of person to do things and then tell him about it.

Her mouth curled into a very uncomfortably triumphant grin. “As a matter of fact, I have,” she hummed. “You two will look beautiful together and she comes from an excellent family. You two have so much in common. There is just a snag or two that we can work through,” she grinned.

Sasori frowned. “That all sounds too good to be true. What do you mean by a snag or two?”

“She’s in a situation that isn’t exactly ideal at the moment,” she hummed.

Sasori’s brow furrowed. “Is she already married or something? I’m not going to break up a marriage because you think we’ll make cute kids.”

His mother blinked at him. “I’m not sure who you think you are talking to, darling son of mine but even if that was the case you would not have much of a choice.” She took a bite of a churro. “But that is not the case, so you don’t need to worry that brilliant little head of yours. Leave it to your
mother and just say “yes, Mother.”’ She crossed the room to cup his face gently. “You’ll love her, I just know it.”

“You know I trust you,” he said, placing his hand over hers. He sighed a little again. “So when I am supposed to meet her?”

She thought for a moment. “Well, your uncle is going to have that party soon,” she murmured, frowning in concentration. “But I could have you two meet today.”

“The party? That’s coming up already?”

“It’s in two nights but I think I’d rather you meet her before and take her to the party as a date,” she grinned.

“A date,” Sasori repeated a little questioningly. He really did not want to do this.

“You two would be perfect for each other and I want you to be able to show her off.”

Sasori did whine this time. It was a short, hitched, almost pained sound in his throat. “Mother, I…” he sighed. “Wouldn’t it be better if I met her before that? You know how I am at parties and it wouldn’t be fair to either of us if we got there and hated each other.”

She looked at him sternly. “That’s what I’m saying,” she said, gently hitting him in the head. “If you were listening, I said I want you to meet before the party.”

On the top level, Azumi started one of the tasks that Sasori said he needed to get done. She once again stifled a laugh at how he was being treated like a child. He shot Azumi a glare then looked back at his mother. “Fine…set up the date,” he relented. His head was spinning at the very concept of this. He did not want to deal with any of this but he knew she was not going to let up. He had done this before. He could manage to scare the girl off…or be scared off and then it would be over. His mother would be back to square one and he would be left alone for at least six months.

“Perfect,” his mother grinned. “Then you will meet today and over the next two days will be able to fall in love with each other.”

“How close is she that they would be able to meet today?’ Azumi thought. ‘I am glad I do not have to deal with this anymore from my father.’

“Give her an hour. I also need your slave,” she smirked, tapping his nose. “We’ll be quick,” she grinned. “Meet us at the coffee shop.”

‘Me?’ Azumi thought. ‘I cannot help whoever this poor woman is.’

“What do you need my slave for?” Sasori asked. Azumi came down the ladder anyway, just as confused as him.

“Don’t worry about it,” his mother smirked. “Just trust me.”

“That is the last thing I want to do,” Sasori chuckled tightly. “Just please have her back after the hour. I’m genuinely backed up with orders, Mother.”

“Yes, yes,” his mother said, waving it off. “Don’t worry about that.” She nodded for Azumi to follow her out the door. “Come along now.” Azumi followed her out the door, hoping she was at least going to get coffee out of this outing. She wanted to ask why she was needed but seeing her reactions to Sasori questioning her made her stay quiet. “Okay, we’ll head over to my house and
I’ll do your hair. You can use any of my makeup and I think I have an outfit that will fit you,” she rattled off the moment they were out of the shop. “Make yourself up as lovely as you want,” she grinned at Azumi.

Azumi frowned. ‘Is this woman so special that his slave has to look good for her, too?’ she thought. Naga hissed softly into her ear. “Wait, what?” she asked, stopping in her tracks. She blinked in confusion for a few moments before running to catch up to the older woman who had kept moving. “My lady, I am sorry to question you but am I the one you were talking up to him?”

“Oh of course, child,” she scoffed with a laugh. “I thought it was pretty obvious. Considering how much you two have in common and how well you get along.” She almost rolled her eyes. “Why do you think I was asking you all those questions?”

“Those were questions I have been asked many times since becoming his slave, I thought nothing of it,” she sighed, running her hands down her face. “We only get along because I know what I am doing when it comes to working in the shop. But aside from that, I do not think I am a good match for your son. We do clash on a lot of things.” She tried her best to persuade the decision.

“Marriage is comprised of compromises,” she brushed off Azumi’s worries. “Once you are his wife, he’ll treat you different and you two can work it out.” She continued to walk towards her home. “And think of how beneficial a union between you and my son would be for your village,” she grinned. “Unless,” she stopped short, folding her arms, “you are trying to say you are better than my son?” She raised her eyebrows questioningly.

“No, no, I am not saying that. There is nothing wrong with Lord Sasori,” she said even though she thought there was everything wrong with him, "but my village is very reclusive, a union such as that is not exactly ideal."

“A village can not thrive in permanent reclusion,” she countered. “And they don’t have to open their doors instantly. You two can be ambassadors."

“This is something that my father would need to be aware of first,” she tried. “I cannot just return to my village betrothed or married.”

“Of course. Please, child, I went through this and nearly every other woman in our domestic world. I know how the rules work.” She led her into the mansion. It was a little smaller than Sasori’s but not by much. “You’ll meet as equals, we’ll get Sasori to fall for you and then you can send word to your father of the match. Simple.” Azumi groaned softly. She did not want to do this. She would rather die by Sasori’s hand than marry him. She followed the woman through the house to a bedroom. "And you'll have to get rid of that," Sasori's mother said, pointing at Naga who was still wrapped around Azumi.

Both Azumi and Naga gasped. 'I cannot go through with this,' Azumi thought.

“Whoa,” a pleasant chuckle followed the noise. “Did I just hear a goddess herself float into my home?” It was Sasori’s father. He wrapped his arms around his wife from behind and kissed her neck.

She giggled, leaning against him. “Oh, hush, you,” she teased.

“What are you up to?” he asked half-teasingly.

"I have found a suitor for our beloved son," she grinned, gesturing to Azumi.

"A suitor?" he blinked, looking at Azumi. He tilted his head a little. "Aren’t you Sasori’s slave?” he
"I am," Azumi nodded.

He frowned, his brow scrunching. He opened his mouth to tell his wife what he thought but she silenced him with a finger over his lips. "I can see your thoughts but you should see the two of them interacting. They are made for each other!"

"Right," he said softly, gently taking her wrist and pressing a kiss to her finger. "If you say so."

'Do not leave me alone with this crazy woman,' Azumi thought.

"Darling, could you get the servants to bring my," she paused to look Azumi over, "my red outfit, and the jewelry that goes with it?" She kissed his jaw sweetly.

"Of course, Dear," he smiled, kissing her temple. "I'll be in our room. It was nice to meet you. I hope you two get along," he winked at Azumi as he pulled away.

Azumi gave him a polite smile and nod but internally, she was screaming. Sasori’s mother looked at her and pulled her to a vanity laid out with different makeup. "You can use whatever you need," she smiled. Azumi looked at all of the makeup in front of her. She hated this situation and she wished anything to not be in it, but she could not resist the different makeup that she was being allowed to use. She started doing her makeup, not knowing what the outfit looked like but using whatever would look nice with red.

Not too long later, a group of women came in with a beautiful and fine outfit of deep red and gold. The fabric was even finer than the one Sasori had made for her. The ladies laid out the chosen jewelry, glancing over at her as they did. "You’re the first we’ve seen our lady this excited over," one dared to speak up to her.

Azumi set down the makeup brush, almost lost in the moment of doing her face and forgetting why she was even there. She looked at the outfit and frowned. ‘Ugh, it is beautiful,’ she thought. She was led out of her seat and the ladies started undressing her and redressing her in the red outfit.

They helped her with the jewelry and put final touches on her hair then took a step back. As if timing it, Sasori’s mother drifted into the room. With a grin that would put any cat to shame, she sauntered over to Azumi. "I knew this was the perfect outfit for you." She tilted her chin upon her fingertip, surveying her make up. "Simply stunning. My son has always had an eye for beautiful things and you are certainly one of them. There is no way he can turn you down looking like this.” She dropped her hand. "Come, the hour is almost up."

'She does not realize how many times we have seen each other naked and not done anything,' Azumi thought, rolling her eyes as she followed. Naga followed quickly after them, knowing that if he coiled around her body, something would be said about it. They made their way to the coffee shop quickly. 'This is not going to go well.'

Sasori sat in his usual booth, waiting for his mother with another round of churros and fresh coffees. He stored his own with one of the cinnamon sticks when he spotted his mother. He smiled at her then noticed Azumi trailing behind. His face fell instantly. "Mother," he stood up. "What is this!" he hissed as they got closer.

"Isn't it obvious?" she grinned. "You two are meant for each other!"

"You're trying to set me up with my slave?" Sasori tried not to lash out on his own mother. The tension was thick in the air. His mother had a lot of power over him but he would be damned
before sitting down to a date with his own property.

“It’s an hour, Sasori. Sit down and do this for your mother!” she sniffled.

Sasori nearly got whiplash. She never used this tactic on him. He growled low in his throat. His eyes snapped to Azumi. “Sit,” he ordered.

Azumi sat down across from him, staying quiet for a moment. Naga slithered up her leg and coiled in her lap.

"You'll see that I'm right," his mother smirked, stepping away to sit at another table.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Azumi noted the look on Sasori’s face. "Before you think I had anything to do with this, let me tell you that I had no idea she was talking about me," she said.

Sasori groaned, following it up with a very long, suffering sigh. “No, this is so unbelievably typical of my mother.” He rolled his eyes. “How far did you get with the orders?” He figured that since they were stuck there, they could make use of the time.

“Sasori!” His mother’s eyes blazed from across the room.

“Fucking...” He realized she was reading his lips. He looked physically pained.

Azumi chuckled softly, a bit amused. “I finished everything,” she told him. “Your mother caught me just as I finished the last errand and I was going to bring you churros and coffee. But then she...plotted this.”

“I already know you,” he grumbled. “We live together! We bathe and hell, even sleep together so I don’t know what she is expecting from this.” He started chewing through another churro. “We don’t have time for this nonsense. As if this would ever happen! Your father would never accept it and I have no intention of letting him find out where you are anyway.” He turned his head slightly so his mother could not read his lips anymore.

“She thinks we get along better than we actually do,” she smirked. “Something about you having a soft spot for women.” Just saying it caused her to roll her eyes and scoff a little. “To her, we are sitting at this table as equals, but we both know you would never do that.” She wanted to grumble something about being of a higher status than him outside of their slave-master relationship but left that part out. “So, what do you think we should do about this situation?” Her smirk returned. “How are you going to tell your mother it will not work out between us.”

He groaned, running his hands through his hair so roughly it almost looks like he was going to rip out the thick red strands. ‘I’ll figure it out,” he breathed through his nose harshly. “And we get along just fine,” he snapped.

'The burns and other injuries on my body beg to differ,’ she thought.

His hands shifted to the table. One to lift his coffee while the other fingers drummed furiously on the table. “You’re enjoying this,” he growled after a few moments of stressful silence.

“Am I making it too obvious?” she grinned. “One of us has to or your mother will be upset.” She did not even have to turn to look at his mother to know she was staring them down very hard. “I already tried convincing her that we are not a good match. And this is not my father I am dealing with so I cannot go about my usual plans of turning down a suitor. This one...” she sighed, “this one is all yours.”
He ground his teeth, making his jaw bone pop softly. "She’s never sat and watched like this!" He resumed his finger tapping. He tipped his mug to his lips only to find he had finished his coffee. Setting the mug down, he tried to collect himself. "She’s barely seen us together, I don’t know where she got the notion we would work well together like this!" He was racking his brain for any way to get out of this. "I usually just ditch the girl and make up something to tell my mother," he huffed, exasperated.

“This is rich," she said through a slight evil chuckle. "You could just leave me like you do every other girl. I would not be too upset about it."

Sasori gave her a blank stare. “Nice try.”

“It was worth a shot.”

“We can’t even go back to the house because she’ll just follow us.” He went silent, folding his arms as he thought. After some more minutes of silence, he sighed again. “We’ll have to put on a show for her. And I think I know exactly where we can go.”

Azumi narrowed her eyes slightly. “What are you thinking?” she asked, leaning forward and resting her chin in her hands. “How will you just lose her?”

“We have to look like we’re having fun.” He leaned in. “So we might as well have a little fun. She won’t follow us into the desert and I know the perfect place to take a nap,” he smirked. “Since it seems today is going to waste, we might as well.” He glanced at his mother before speaking again. “You just have to follow me.”

She hummed softly and nodded. Then she hummed again a bit urgently, almost placing her hand over his to stop him from getting up. “Can we get more coffee and churros?” she grinned.

He laughed a little at her sudden urgency. He made a show of considering it then smirked. “Fine,” he said. “Go order some.”

Her eyes lit up and her grin widened. She got up quickly, letting Naga wrap around her body and then went up to the counter to order coffee and churros for their escape. Sasori’s mother leveled her son with a narrow look. She knew they were up to something. She frowned, disapproving of the sudden appearance of Naga. Sasori gave his mother a charming smile from across the room while he waited for Azumi to return. This was going to be a cinch. Well, so long as the universe remained on their side. For once, he and Azumi were fully on the same team.

Azumi returned a couple of minutes later with two orders of churros and two coffees. “I hope you like icing because they kind of gave us a lot,” she chuckled.

He looked at the quantity and chuckled. “It’s perfect for what we’re going to do. But don’t eat too much on the way. We want something for when we get there,” he told her as he got up. He made sure to take her arm as if they really were on a date as he led her out of the shop. His mother followed them immediately into the now crowded streets of the city.

They did not even have to look back to see her, they could just feel her following them. “Um, she is —“ Azumi started.

“I know,” Sasori cut her off. “But she won’t for long.” He continued to lead her through the city, strategically losing his mother around each corner until they were finally at the edge where the city met the rest of the vast desert.

“That was a bit nerve-wracking,” she hummed, eating a churro.
“It was,” he agreed, reaching over to take one for himself. He dipped it in the icing before continuing on. “She’s going to have a million questions for us when we get back,” he sighed. “This isn’t over. But for now, we’re safe.” He led her out to the rock formation they had taken a walk to before. “She’d never come out here,” he said to her while walking up the side of the rock.

She climbed up the rock as well. “Let us hope that she and Lord Komushi do not start to conspire together about this,” she hummed, handing him one of the orders of churros and the second coffee. Naga coiled up in her lap as she sat down.

“Ugh, stop,” he groaned, taking the sweets. “I want to enjoy these, not get indigestion from them.” He sat down on a comfortable spot that he had clearly worn into the rocks. The landscape stretched out around them. “I’m not even good with kids. I don’t understand why she insists on this. This is the worst she has ever been.” He started to relax now that they were away from the bustle of the city. “I can’t even go to my father because he’s such a pushover for us both!”

"I saw the way he did not have a say in this whole situation," she hummed, drinking her coffee. She smirked, getting an interesting thought. "Since we are stranded out here for a little while," she chuckled, "I know you said you are not good with children, but if you were to have one, what kind of person would you want them to be? I honestly cannot imagine your child being much different from you but is that what you would want?"

He was taken off guard by the boldness of the question but recovered quickly. He hummed in thought for a moment, chewing it over with a churro. "Without question, they will be intelligent but I also need them to be smart." His eyes rolled back. "Have common sense but be creative. Have a mind to learn. I almost don’t care what they learn just as long as they put their whole heart into it." He started to get lost in the description. "I’d hope they like to dance,” he said softer, looking down into his cup. “My parents and I used to dance when I was little."

"You would dance with your child?" she grinned. "That is actually quite precious." That was something she never thought she would say about someone like him, but the thought of it was actually quite adorable. "I suppose I would want my child to be the same," she hummed. "Though, I think I would want them to be a bit more...adventurous than myself..."

Sasori leaned his cheek into the palm of his hand and looked over at her. “More adventurous,” he repeated. “I’d say you are pretty out there already but,” he snorted softly, “you were holed up in an oasis prior to this.” He took a sip of coffee. “Though you can’t really blame yourself if your father is as overprotective as you say.”

"I am sure the moment he found out I was gone, he raised hell," she frowned. "If he ever found out where I am, I would actually be afraid to face him."  

Sasori raised his eyebrow. “I’m curious,” he chuckled. “Why would a father be mad at his daughter for being taken by slavers? Seems a little backward.”

“Because he knows I would not have been ‘just taken’ by slavers,” she said. “He would know that I made the decision to go in someone else’s place. And it would anger him because he thinks I am reckless and he would have assumed I did not think about this decision.”

Sasori hummed softly in thought. His brows stayed furrowed. “It sounds like your father is only half right,” he said to her. “You are reckless.

“I am not,” she scoffed. “You have only known me for a few weeks. What reasons do you have to call me reckless?”
“It should say something about that if I’m saying you’re reckless and have only known you a few weeks,” Sasori smirked, not really answering the question.

“It says nothing,” she hummed. “Because you have no real reason.” She finished her churros and laid back, letting Naga coil on her stomach.

“Definitive are we?” he teased, eating another of his own. “You don’t think the boundary-pushing is reckless in spite of what I would do to you if you keep it up?”

“I do not think I am pushing boundaries.” She took a sip of her coffee. “Unlike your pet scarab, I do not try to kiss people who clearly do not want it. And I do not challenge you much.” She tapped Naga’s nose gently and moved her finger around for him to follow. “And regardless of all that, the threat of what you would do is there no matter what I do. Whether I obey or not.”

He watched her move her fingers, still thinking the little game was kind of cute. He smirked, glancing back down at her. “You know, I’ve killed people just for the tone of voice they used,” he said, shifting to tuck his arms behind his head and lay down. “I consider a lot that you say to be sass but I enjoy it and you can do your job,” he chuckled. “I had one kid,” he groaned, rolling his eyes dramatically. “Every single time I told him how to do something, he incessantly asked why. It was twenty million questions with him.”

“And how long did that one last?” she hummed. She figured it was not long. If the shortest one was only a few days, she could imagine that it was that particular slave.

“A week and a half. I liked his enthusiasm but Gods, he was annoying.” He started to play with his hair a bit as he looked up at the sky. “As for Komushi...if he bothers you again like that, I’ll deal with him.”

“Right...” she muttered. She wondered if Gaara had the chance to poison Komushi again. It would just be easier if they could keep him asleep so she would not have to deal with him at all. “You should probably deal with him regardless of what he does to me. Now that he thinks you and I are...” She groaned at the mere thought of being with Sasori.

“You’re right,” he groaned. “I’ll handle it. I’m not in the mood right now.” He yawned, closing his eyes. “He’s such a pain. Did you have a best friend?”

“I did...” she said softly, frowning a little. “But he left my village shortly before I did. He was not very fond of living in a desert, despite being on an oasis.”

Sasori snorted, half surprised she did and half about her friend’s reasons for leaving. “Where do you think he went? What was he like?” He kept his eyes closed, content to just listen for now.

"He was indifferent to most things. Sometimes he could be too much but most of the time he was relaxed. Except around my father. He was a bit terrified of my father." She hummed in thought for a moment. "He said he wanted to be closer to an ocean...and he was pretty deadset on just leaving the desert."

Sasori’s eyes opened wide, lifting his head a little to look at her. “The ocean?” He laughed, relaxing back into his arms. “He must have traveled far then. Think he would have stopped you?”

“I think he would have,” she said. “If he was there, he would have tried to convince me to not sacrifice myself and leave with him instead. Would I have done that? Probably not.”

“Why not?” He was genuinely curious about that. “I know your father is protective but are you not adventurous? You aren’t even the heir.”
“I have no interest in the ocean,” she said simply. “Of course, I would love to travel. An ocean is almost no different from the desert. Vast nothingness.”

He thought for a moment then laughed. “Fair enough.” He sighed, starting to drift. “I’m tired of this nonsense already. I just want to make medicine and poisons in peace.” In the distance, the sun was starting to shift to the other side of the sky. “I almost left this city for good once.”

“Oh?” she mumbled. “What stopped you from leaving?”

“My mother,” he admitted.

Azumi did her best not to laugh but Naga held no restraint. “I know I admitted to being a daddy’s girl...” she said, “but I think you are a worse mama’s boy.”

“I am not!” His cheeks suddenly burned as bright as his hair. “She was sick and Gaara wasn’t a doctor yet. And Chiyo was completely fucking useless,” he said defensively. “She would have died without me.”

She turned to him and smiled. “You do not need to give me a reason,” she said. “You love your mother. There is nothing wrong with that.”

He huffed, pouting uncharacteristically. “I don’t need validation from you of all people,” he muttered but he started to relax again. “My mother is probably thinking she could play off me owning you as us rescuing you from slavery,” he snorted. “I have no regrets or intentions of letting you leave my side but I think we can both easily agree that marriage will never happen.”

“Speaking of,” she smirked. “Have you figured out what you are going to tell her?”

“Yes,” he chuckled, all signs of vulnerability vanishing. “I’ll simply tell her that due to your village’s standards of making you immune to snake venom, you’ve become infertile.” He grinned cheekily at her. “She wants grandchildren and you ‘can’t’ provide them. She’ll have to keep looking.”

Her brow furrowed and she nodded slowly. “Alright,” she said. “I hope that works.” They fell into another silence. As they enjoyed the quiet between them, after a couple of minutes, they both fell asleep.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

We finally made use of the "Eventual Smut" tag on this story. 36 chapters is pretty "eventual" right? Well, we think so. So now there's smut.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sun had begun to set when Naga noticed how long they had been out. He moved closer to Azumi’s face, gently tapping his nose against hers to wake her up. She groaned a little, stretching hard. Naga dared to tap Sasori’s nose with the tip of his tail. It tickled the man’s nose, making him scrunch it up. Naga hissed a laugh and kept doing it until Sasori sat up and sneezed hard enough to accidentally bite his tongue. “Naga!” he growled with a slight lisp. He glared at the laughing serpent. “I can still make you a belt!”

The snake hissed as he moved back towards Azumi, not at all threatened and telling her his threats were empty. “I know,” she chuckled, kissing the top of his head. She looked out at the desert and then back toward the city. “It has to be safe to go back now,” she hummed.

Sasori mimicked her actions and nodded with a deep breath. “Yeah. We can head back to the house directly,” he said, standing up with a long stretch. “I’ll check on Komushi and you start a bath,” he told her as he started to descend the rock.

She gathered their trash up as Naga coiled around her body and then followed him down. “A bath would be nice,” she hummed. “After sleeping on a rock for a couple of hours.”

They made their way back into the city where the daytime traffic was dying down now that the sun was setting. It did not take them very long to get home. They entered the house and stopped at the fork. “I’ll meet you in the room,” Sasori said, turning to walk towards Chiyo’s old room when he heard a painfully familiar giggle come from the sitting room. “Nonononono,” he whispered, running his face. He looked to the sky for a moment before steeling himself and walking in. Komushi, Gaara and his mother were sitting together, talking over tea.

“Ah, the love birds have returned!” Komushi grinned. “Well, a love bird. Where is Azumi?”

Sasori noted that Komushi still looked haggard, maybe even worse than before but well enough for teasing. He sighed. “She’s running a bath,” he answered. “Are you feeling better?” He figured he could change the subject for a bit.

“I...sort of,” Komushi admitted.

“Sort of?”

“He had a severe relapse today,” Gaara said as he set his cup down. “His intervals of sleeping have increased but they don’t seem to provide him any rest. I also tried the dose him again with the antidote but it isn’t having an effect,” he said coolly.

Sasori frowned. “That doesn’t make sense,” he grumbled. This was not what he needed or wanted to hear.
“That’s very odd,” his mother frowned.

“Yeah, I’ve never heard of brown recluse venom doing this,” Komushi said. “Are you sure that’s what it was?”

“That’s the only thing we found to remotely resemble the what was in your blood.” He started to chew his lip.

His mother got up and took his arm. “Sit down, my love.” She guided him to the chair. “You’ll figure it out.” She ran her fingers through his hair. Komushi yawned and went to add something but could not get it out. He was slumped against Gaara in moments.

Gaara rolled his eyes and pushed him off. “We have more books at the shop and I have my own stores. I can check when I get home,” he said. Sasori nodded.

“How did the rest of your date go?” his mother asked, wasting no time on a transition in conversation. Gaara tensed, gripping his teacup tighter.

“Mother,” Sasori huffed. “It...the....it won’t work.” His mother instantly opened her mouth to retort. He held up a hand to stop her. “You want grandchildren, right? Well, her village put her through training that caused her to become infertile.” He noticed Gaara’s sudden stillness.

“Infertile?” she gasped. Sasori nodded. “What kind of training?”

“The immunity to snake venom,” he answered. “It’s something she’s had to go through since she was a child.” Gaara squinted in confusion. He knew Azumi’s immunity was a natural thing and he was sure it did not make her infertile.

“That’s barbaric!” His mother looked outraged. “That poor girl.” She took Sasori’s hand tightly in hers, lacing their fingers together. “Well...you two could always adopt. Or find a nice surrogate.”

Sasori’s heart dropped and Gaara’s blood ran cold. “Mother, if I’m going to have a child, I’d really rather it be with my actual wife,” he said, kissing the back of her hand. In all honesty, he did not care. But this was too much. She was really pushing for this.

“Ugh! And you two would have made such cute kids!” she pouted.

“Yes, it’s unfortunate,” Sasori hummed, feigning his disappointment.

“I can’t believe they put her through that,” she scoffed, disgusted by the idea.

“I know, Mother, but not every village is as civilized as we are,” he said in a mournful voice. Gaara was silently offended for Azumi.

His mother let out a long, disappointed and defeated sigh. “Then I suppose we should keep looking,” she said, taking a sad sip of her tea.

Sasori nodded, patting his mother’s hand. “I’m sure I’ll find someone someday,” he said, trying to sound reassuring. Gaara squinted at both of them hard. He filed the piece of information away for later to ask Azumi.

“That ‘someday’ better be soon, Sasori,” his mother said softly, just loud enough for her son and nephew to hear. Gaara tried his best not to laugh.

Sasori looked to the heavens again then back down to his mother. “Of course, Mother. Once I get
this Komushi issue figured out, I will.” He leaned over and kissed her cheek. “Have I ever let you
down before?”

“I suppose,” she hummed. Her gaze fell on Gaara who was trying to keep his composure. “And
what about you?” she asked, her motherly tone reappearing. “Have you been looking for a wife?”

He tensed up immediately. Sasori stifled his own laughter now. “I don’t really have time to look for
a wife right now, Auntie,” he said, trying not to kick Sasori hard in the shin.

“Yes, you do! Kankuro has a girlfriend and your sister is engaged! They both live just as busy
lives,” she said disapprovingly.

Gaara laughed nervously. “I’ll try to get in it. I promise,” he said not really having a good
combatant to her point.

“I want both of you getting married within the next two years,” she demanded.

“Two years?” Gaara almost coughed up his tea. “That’s hardly fair,” he chuckled, “since I’m only
twenty-three.”

“Two. Years!” she growled. She leaned forward, poking each man in the chest hard.

“Ouch!” they both winced, rubbing the spot.

“Do I make myself very clear?” she asked them.

“Yes,” they both said defeatedly.

“Good,” she said with a sweet smile. “I love you both.” She stood up and kissed each of them on
the top of their heads. “I guess I’ll leave you to deal with Komushi.” She reluctantly patted
Komushi’s head as she left the room. Once they were sure she was gone, they both relaxed.

“What was your mom thinking! You and Azumi!” Gaara cracked up.

“I don’t know where she got the idea from,” Sasori groaned. “But her and Komushi are both on
that idea and it’s getting tiring.” He sighed and rubbed his face hard.

“Komushi?” Gaara’s stomach was threatening to drop. “What do you mean?” He was not dead and
neither was Azumi so clearly he was not being taken seriously.

“He walked in on my slave giving me a massage and now he thinks we’re sleeping together,” he
groaned, standing up. “Let’s get him back to Chiyo’s bed. I just want to take a bath.”

Gaara eyeballs nearly popped out. He laughed hard, doubling over for a few seconds before trying
to collect himself. He sat up, grabbing one of Komushi’s arms and slinging it over his shoulders.
“That’s rich,” he wheezed.

Sasori rolled his eyes. “So glad you’re enjoying yourself,” he grumbled.

“Someone has to get a kick out of this situation,” Gaara chuckled as Sasori got the other side of
Komushi. They walked him back to Chiyo’s room and laid him out on the bed.

“No one really does,” he sighed heavily. He ran some tests on Komushi and sighed again. It did not
make sense for him to relapse the way he did. He was certain it was the spider. “Did you eat dinner
already?” Sasori asked, feeling his stomach growl as they walked back to his room.
“I haven’t,” Gaara answered, setting a glass of water next to Komushi got when he woke up. “I’ve been busy taking care of your gremlin. I did make sure he ate though.”

“My gremlin...I like pet scarab more;” he mumbled. Gaara gave him a funny look. “Join us for dinner then. You’ve earned it.”

“Gee, thanks,” Gaara chuckled. Sasori rolled his eyes and elbowed Gaara in the side. “So, what did your mother mean by the rest of your date?” Gaara smirked as they left the room. “Where’d you two disappear to?”

“We just took a nap up on the rocks,“ Sasori shrugged. “Nothing happened besides the overconsumption of churros.” He shook his head. “I still can’t be she thought I’d ever consider marrying my slave.”

“But is she really infertile?” He was going to ask Azumi herself to be sure but he needed conversation.

Sasori looked at him and his expression said something silently that Gaara could not quite read. “No, she isn’t.” he finally said. Gaara let out a quiet sigh. “That was just something I had to make up to get my mother off the idea of us getting married and having kids,” Sasori explained further.

“Think she will really drop it?” Gaara asked.

They walked into Sasori’s room and he started to strip down for his bath. “Yes. She tends to respect when I say no to a girl. She’s just upset with how frequent it is.”

"You do always say no," Gaara mumbled.

"Well, I have no interest in anyone so why would I say yes?" Sasori asked as he went into the bathroom.

"Fair point."

Azumi had already set up the baths and was the bathroom dancing with Naga as she removed her makeup when Sasori walked in. She stopped once she noticed him. "How is he?" she asked.

“He relapsed,“ Sasori grumbled, stripping off the remains of his clothing. “And I don’t know why, so we’re going to run some tests tonight,” he said as he slipped into the tub.

Gaara smiled at Azumi then bowed. “I’ll wait in your room,” he said to Sasori who waved him off.

“I got my mother off our case;” he told her.

"So telling her that I am infertile worked," she hummed, turning the faucet off for her bath and stripping. "That is good."

"It wasn't exactly easy." Sasori grumbled, sinking further into the tub. "She then suggested adoption or a surrogate."

"Relentless," she hummed, getting into the pool. She was just relieved that she was no longer part of the issue. She would hate to have to be hounded further to marry Sasori. "I suppose you are in the clear for now."

“For now,” he hummed, slipping low into the water. “But she gave me and Gaara a two-year limit,” he snorted into the water. I’ve got her at bay for now. I’m more concerned about Komushi’s
"A relapse is odd," she hummed, slipping under the water to wet her hair. "Do you think more of the antidote would work?" She knew why Komushi relapsed and she knew the antidote would not work. She just needed to push any suspicions toward her out of the way.

He shook his head, going deeper into thought. "No, Gaara said he tried that and it only seemed to make him worse so I think I need to rework it entirely."

"I see," she hummed. She caught a glimpse of Gaara in the room and hid a smile. Gaara caught her smile and flashed one of his own. Sasori, who was craning his neck back to wet his hair, did not notice the exchange. "Was he awake when you saw him or had he already fallen asleep?" she asked Sasori.

“He was sitting with Gaara and my mother having tea. I’m not sure how long he was awake prior to that but he fell asleep rather quickly as we started to talk,” he frowned, starting to wash his hair.

"Mm," she said. "Maybe this is one of those cases where it gets worse before it gets better," she suggested. "I am sure he will be fine soon."

“Maybe,” he hummed. “We hardly did anything today and even with that nap, I’m exhausted,” he yawned. “We’ll have dinner in the workshop so we can go right to bed afterward.” His head was starting to hurt.

Azumi nodded and finished washing up. She got out of the bath and wrapped a towel around herself then grabbed one for Sasori and set it on the table next to his tub for him. "I will bring you a bowl," she told him. "Will you be making your own tea or should I bring some for you?"

“Go with Gaara and make the tea,” he said, starting to rub his temples.

'Oh, he must be really stressed if he is letting me go with Gaara,' she thought. "We will be right back then," she said as she started getting dressed. Once she was dressed, she went into the bedroom where Gaara was sitting on the daybed. "I assume you will be eating with us," she chuckled softly, nodding for him to follow her as she walked to the door.

“I will be,” he smiled, standing up.

Sasori went into the workshop in just his robe. “Don’t doddle,” Sasori huffed, followed by a soft thud of his head on the table.

Gaara looked at her questioningly. “What’s up with him?” he asked with slightly real concern.

"He is very stressed out," she hummed as they made their way to the kitchen. "Rightfully so. His mother is demanding that he get married soon, tried to set him up with his slave and on top of all of that, his best friend is now a narcolept and he has no idea why." They entered the kitchen and she grabbed three bowls. "I actually feel a bit bad for him. It is a lot to go through all at once."

“Bad enough to stop?” he asked her. He took the bowls from her and pressed her against the counter and set the bowls down. “We can give him the real antidote,” he said softly, leaning down to steal a kiss.

"And go back to the scarab harassing me and playing it off with his gentle lover act?" she smirked. "No. At least not yet."
“Then Sasori can deal with a little headache,” he smirked, kissing her again. “His mother has been quelled for now and he’s distracted.” He put his hands on her hips.

"Mm, I suppose you are right," she hummed, sliding her hands up his chest and over his shoulders. She looked at the mark she left on him the night before, faded from whatever he used to cover it up. "You hid my work," she pouted jokingly.

He chuckled softly, turning his eyes in the direction of the mark. “You can always add more.” He pulled her closer to him and pressed a kiss to her neck with only his lips, almost mimicking Naga’s little tease.

"Oh, you do not need to tell me twice," she chuckled. "I will add more whenever I get the chance." She tilted his head a little and kissed along his jaw up to his lips. "But since we are going straight back to your cousin, it would look especially suspicious if you came back with a new mark that you did not have before," he smirked.

“Fair enough.” It was his turn to pout. “If he has a headache though he won’t be up for very long. He’s surprisingly very self-caring when his body starts to go down.” He nuzzled her neck.

She ran her hand through his hair. "Let us hope he is too tired to want to run tests on Lord Komushi," she said.

“I bet you one whole hickey that he is knocked out right now,” Gaara grinned. He stepped back, grabbing the bowls.

“I will still make him the tea,” she chuckled, setting the water up to boil. She looked at him as he filled the bowls and smirked, wrapping her arms around him from behind. “Will you be staying the night again?” she asked softly, kissing his back.

He grinned, looking over his shoulder. “I can,” he turned around in her arms, setting the bowl down again, “if you want me to.”

"Of course I want you to," she hummed. "But ultimately the decision is yours. You are free to do what you want," she smirked. "And if you decide you do not want to then I will respect your decision." She kissed him softly. "But I really want you to," she said against his lips.

“The decision was made the moment you asked me if I was staying,” he grinned. He laced his fingers into her hair, cupping the back of her head. “I can ‘leave’ and meet you in your room if Sasori is still up.”

She bit her lip in a smile. "Sounds like a plan," she said quietly. She kissed him again, pushing deeper into it. She pulled away quickly when she heard someone walking down the hall and the water beginning to boil at the same time. She grabbed a tray to set the bowls and the tea on and they made their way back to Sasori's room. Gaara’s heart raced a little but calmed down by the time they made it back to the workshop.

Sasori was working very slowly on the samples that Gaara took throughout the day from Komushi. “I shouldn’t have had so many churros,” he grumbled, reaching a hand out for the tea when Azumi approached him with the tray. “This literally makes no sense. All of his tests so far are coming back as if he got bitten all over again.”

"Maybe it just needs to run its course," Azumi said as she set his bowl down in front of him. "You should eat first," she said softly. "It will help relieve your headache a little."

“You’re probably right.” He took the bowl, slid it toward himself slowly and started to eat. He
sighed heavily while he looked over his results so far.

Gaara frowned, beginning to eat his own food. He saw what Azumi meant. He looked very rundown. Which he had seen before but something about this...it was a reminder that this monster was actually human. “Just give it a couple of days and see how he goes,” Gaara said, trying for a comforting tone.

“I guess,” Sasori mumbled.

Azumi hummed, watching the tension build up at the base of his neck. It only got worse as the three of them ate. Once she was finished with her food, she set her bowl down and moved closer to him and gently massaged the area that was tense. “If you worry too much,” she started, keeping her voice soft, “your own health will decline and that will only add more problems. He is not dead. And you will figure it out. And even if you do not, I am sure it will not last that long anyway. As I said, this is probably something that just needs to run its course.”

His eyes rolled in pleasure and pain the moment she touched the tender muscle. He forced himself to try and relax. “I know that,” he bit out. His head fell to rest on his arms as she worked her hands. And before he realized it, he had slipped off to sleep.

“Mm, I probably should have suggested he lay down before I did that,” she hummed, gently scratching his scalp.

“I didn’t think he’d let himself knock out like that,” Gaara chuckled softly.

She looked at Gaara. “Should we just leave him here?” she whispered.

“No, I can pick him up. You just start cleaning up in here and I’ll come back to help,” he smiled. He wanted to lean in for a kiss but knew it was far too risky. He hoisted his cousin into his arms and pulled him to the bed. Once he had laid him down and fixed his legs in bed, he returned to the workshop and pulled Azumi to his body, wrapping his arms around her from behind. He kissed down her neck, letting his hands settle on her hips and pressed his own flush to her as he worked his way back to her lips.

She hummed softly against his lips as she pushed into the kiss, pressing her hips back against his. She smirked and bit his lip before pulling away slightly. “I know you just put him in his bed,” she chuckled softly, “but this is still quite risky.”

“I thought we were on a risk-taking streak,” he said teasingly as he stepped back. He grinned, circling the workbench to clean up his cousin’s mess with her.

“We are,” she smirked. “And you staying is one of the bigger risks that I do not want ruined if he opens his eyes. Or worse, if his friend wakes up and decides to pay him a visit,” she scoffed, rolling her eyes. She set the tea she made on Sasori’s bedside table over a small candle to keep it warm in case he woke up. Once everything was cleaned up, they went made their way to her room, making sure to avoid anyone else who lived in the house.

Gaara wasted no time in jamming the door with the chair again. “What did you tell him about the chair?” he asked her as he wrapped his arms around her once again. He pulled her onto the bed and settled her back against his chest so he could kiss her jaw and neck. One of his hands played with the ends of her hair while the other wrapped around her stomach.

She suppressed a shudder as he kissed her neck, biting her lip hard and clutching the sheets a little. “I told him it was a preventative measure against Lord Komushi coming in here and bothering me,”

...
she answered. “He believed it.”

“Clever and probably an unfortunate truth.” He slipped his hands into the openings in her dress. He wanted skin to skin contact with her. And while he did not wear much, the light pieces of her dress kept them apart. He moved his hands up to ease the straps of her dress off and let it pool in her lap. “I wouldn’t trust him not to try something,” he whispered, turning her head by her chin so he could pull her into a slow kiss.

She pushed against him, reaching a hand up to lace into his hair. “I know,” she hummed when they pulled apart. “Neither would I.” She shifted to turn around in his lap and straddle him, pulling him close again so their chests were pressed together and into another kiss. He grinned into the kiss while shifting his hands down her back. His nails lightly grazed her skin on their descent to settle on her hips. He pressed his fingers into them, massaging them slightly as he did. She kissed his along his jaw and down his neck. One of her hands slipped back into his hair. She gripped his hair gently as she found the spot she wanted to leave another mark and bit down.

He tensed up a little, digging his nails into her back again when she bit down. He let out a soft moan, quickly biting his lip to stifle the sound. His hands slipped down further into her dress to rest on her butt. He pulled her closer, rocking his hips slightly into her. He wanted to help ease and melt the tension of the day away in her the same way just being near her made him feel. She smirked against his skin and rocked her hips against his when she felt him do it. As she kissed back up his neck, she slowly pushed him backward until he laid down and leaned down over him, staying close and keeping the body contact.

“I...” He bit his lip, his cheeks starting to turn pink. He wanted to tell her how she made him feel but just looking into her eyes made his heart melt. He laced his fingers into her hair, pulling her into a passionate kiss. He pushed harder into it, tightening his grip on her hair.

She bit his lip in the kiss, running her hands down his arms and lacing their fingers together. “Hm?” she smirked against his lips, pinning his hands next to his head and grinding ever-so-slightly against him. Just enough to feel him getting hard.

He let out another soft, raspy moan. He shook his head, grinning as he rolled his hips back into hers harder than before, being very forward with how his body was feeling. He curled his fingers over hers and turned his head to kiss her hand as he arched his back a little to press against her.

She grinned, kissing down his neck, chest, and stomach, sliding her hands down his sides as she went further down. She gripped the waistband of his pants and pulled them down a little then licked up his length before taking him into her mouth. His hands tightened in her hair. “Fu—” he breathed out hard, watching her down the length of his body. His breath caught to suppress a louder moan. She hummed softly, finding a decent pace. She kept it up for a few moments before slowing down to take him in all the way and then slowly lick her way back up.

He tightened his grip on her hair again while running his other hand through his own. His hips threatened to jerk into her mouth as he choked out another raspy moan. His head tipped back hard but he looked back down just in time to catch her eye as she licked back up. He curled up, pulling her up by her hair a little to press their lips together in a crushing kiss before laying back down. She grinned, pushing her dress off all the way and crawling over him. She straddled him once more, taking his hands and placing them on her hips as she aligned and lowered herself onto him, biting her lip through a soft moan. He looked up at her as she lowered herself down and let a soft groan of his own slip out. He waited for her to be fully settled before rolling his hips into her. He smirked, doing it again and gripping her hips a little hard as he leaned up to kiss her again. “You’re so beautiful,” he said softly as he laid back down.
"Mm," she hummed, trying to keep her noises quiet as she started to move. She lifted herself a little and then lowered back onto him, keeping it slow at first and then finding a faster pace. He moved his hips in time with her, pushing up as she came down so he could push deeper into her. He moved his hands up her back, raking his nails gently at first but as she sped up, he pressed harder, leaving light red lines down her back. He had to make sure to be careful when marking her. But he could not take his eyes off of her as she moved. She tilted her head back and bit her lip harder, trying to hold back a moan that she knew would be loud. "Fuck," she whispered. She leaned down, cupping his face and kissing him roughly to stifle her moans as she kept moving on him.

One of his hands laced into her hair, gripping it at the roots as he moved his hips a little faster for her. He wrapped his other arm around her, pulling her close again as he pushed into her harder. His kisses trailed down to her neck and he longed so badly for her and claim her as his. Her breath hitched as she gripped the sheets under him and buried her face into the bend of his neck to muffle the loud moan that she could not hold back. She kissed his neck down to his shoulder and bit down, leaving another mark on him. He growled softly and moved his other arm to wrap around her as he sat up, dragging his nails down the backs of her thighs and wrapping her legs around him as he forced his hips up harder. He pulled her into a rough, passionate kiss as he scratched up her back again. She wrapped her arms around him, lacing one of her hands into his hair and moaning into his mouth and biting his lip. She pressed her body against his, wanting to be as close as possible. He thrust harder into her, causing her head to tilt back again. She could not help the loud moan that came out.

He chuckled as his hand clamped hard over her mouth. He kissed up her neck to ear. “Ssssh, my love,” he whispered as he nibbled her earlobe. He pulled her closer, pushing himself deeper into her. Her nails dug into his back more and her eyes rolled back. Her breath hitched again as she felt her orgasm start to build up quickly. She buried her face into his neck again, kissing him softly as he kept moving. She let out a breathy moan as her orgasm hit. He grinned, feeling her contract around him. He did not let up his pace, letting her ride out the climax. He kissed her shoulder and neck and gradually slowed down as she calmed. Lifting her chin, he pulled her into a kiss once more. “Tired?” he grinned against her lips. His voice was darker and had a rich huskiness to it.

"Mm, no," she gasped, biting her lip as she still felt the pulsing. She smirked and kissed him again. "One orgasm cannot tire me out," she whispered.

“That’s my girl,” he grinned, kissing her back. He held her close and shifted them smoothly so she was under him without pulling out. He dragged his nails up the back of her thigh and propped her leg up on his shoulder as he kissed her again. He started to move his hips again slowly.

She covered her mouth to muffle the moan that escaped when he started moving. Her other hand clutched the sheets and she tilted her head back. "Oh, fuck," she groaned behind her mouth. He grunted softly, enjoying the sound of her slight struggle to stay silent. He grinned, kissing her neck as he moved his hand up her other thigh and rested it on his other shoulder. He pushed into her hard, getting rougher with each thrust. Her eyes rolled back again and she bit her lip harder, reaching both hands under her pillow and clutching it harder than she did the sheets. She let out quiet, gaspy moans, not wanting to be too loud but also unable to truly keep herself quiet. He pushed her knees to her chest, growling softly as he sucked gently on her neck, careful not to leave a mark on her skin. He worked his way up to pull her into a kiss.

She practically screamed into his mouth. She could feel her second orgasm building up quickly. "H-ah," she squeaked. She looked into his eyes, reaching up to cup his face and push deeper into the kiss. He could feel how close she was. His breaths came quicker and he moaned softly against her skin, doing his best to fight against his own release. He knew he could hold out until she was
finished but only just. He reached between them and played with her clit as he moved his hips. She let out another gaspy moan, feeling herself go over the edge. "Mm, Gaara," she whined, pulling him into another kiss as she felt her second orgasm hit harder than her first.

He almost lost it the moment he felt the first flutter around him but he kept together. He moaned softly, loving the sound of his name from her lips. He kept moving, doing his best to keep it together long enough for her to ride out most of her orgasm before pulling out and coming hard across their stomachs. "Ah! So-sorry," he gasped. He felt bad since she had just bathed.

She smiled up at him, wrapping her arms around him and pulling him on top of her. "Do not be sorry," she said softly, kissing along his jaw to his lips. She ran her fingers through his hair, humming quietly in the kiss as she felt the last pulses of her orgasm.

He smiled, relaxing against her as he calmed down. He took slow deep breaths and held her close, reveling in the sensation of her kisses and her hand in his hair. "I love you," he said softly, shyly. He kissed her slowly, cupping her face.

She let out a small gasp and grinned, pushing back into the kiss. "I love you, too," she whispered against his lips. His heart skipped a beat and he wrapped his arms around her tightly. He kissed her again, rolling them on her bed so she was on top of him. He squeezed his arms and kissed her cheeks and nose followed by her forehead. He grinned widely at her, his cheeks burning a little. Each kiss was soft and gentle but he hoped he expressed the butterflies in his stomach that she gave him. She hummed softly, nuzzling against him. "He cannot keep me away from you," she said softly. "I am glad we can be together uninterrupted for a little while." She leaned her head up and kissed his lips softly.

"He can try all he wants," he said softly. He kissed her again. "I will always find a way to you. I will take any and all stolen moments to be with you like this." His voice remained soft but it was passionate and filled with conviction. He wanted her. He almost dared to say he needed to be with her and the intensity of his feelings for her scared and excited him because he had never felt this way for anyone. He rubbed her back gently, tracing his fingertips up and down her back.

She hummed, nuzzling him again and leaving gentle kisses on his neck and even gentler kisses on the marks she left on him. "We should wash up," she said with a soft chuckle.

"Mmm, we could try sneaking into Chiyo’s bath," he frowned. "Unless you don’t mind the river," he smirked devilishly.

She hummed through another chuckle. "The river sounds like a fun idea," she smirked. "Because I am not in the mood to try and sneak past our neighborhood scarab." She kissed him softly and leaned up. "Plus, a quick bath in the moonlight sounds nice."

He chuckled at the nickname she gave Komushi and kissed her. "Perfect. Then I’ll go grab us towels and be right back." He stole another kiss as he sat up and eased her off of him without breaking the kiss. He slipped out of the room and returned moments later with two neatly folded cloths and soap tucked under his arms. "Let’s go," He grinned.

She chuckled as she took one of the towels and wrapped it around herself rather than putting her dress back on. They slipped out the window and made their way to the river quickly. Azumi dropped her towel just before stepping into the water. The water had cooled down a lot since the sun went down and she let out a small shudder. He chuckled, following after her but his feet slowed the moment she dropped the towel. He was still so dumbstruck by her beauty and the moonlight only seemed to enforce her ethereal appearance. His heart raced as he dropped his towel and stepped into the cool water. It was refreshing. "This is going to wake us up," she hummed,
stepping further until she was just about hip-deep in the water.

“We don’t have to go to sleep yet,” he whispered against her skin as he wrapped his arms around her from behind. He kissed down her neck to her shoulder as he laced their fingers together and rewrapped their arms around her together.

She grinned, turning her head to catch his lips in a kiss. “You are right,” she whispered. She turned around in his arms and wrapped hers around him, resting her head against him. “I am content here,” she hummed through a smile.

“Me too,” he said softly, looking down at her. He pressed a kiss to her temple. They fell into silence for a little while. “I wish I could steal you away now. So these moments would never end, he said after a little while.

“I would love that,” she chuckled. “But when your uncle accomplishes his goal, we can have this all the time.” She kissed him and then pulled away, lacing her fingers with his and walking backward to pull him further into the water.

He smiled, letting himself be pulled until they were floating. He pulled her back to him and wrapped her legs around his waist, kissing her slowly but with passion. “I’ve been dreaming about that day since my uncle mentioned it,” he smiled against her lips. “He’s getting close. I know it. You can feel the tension in a lot of the other noble houses.”

“Is that so?” she smirked, wrapping an arm around him and cupping his face with her other hand. “That is quite interesting. I wonder if the other nobles would be half as upset as your cousin.”

“There...there are a few that will be,” he nodded in her hands. “And there’s a few slaves who will never leave their master’s side.”

"I am aware," she frowned. "It is unfortunate. But as long as they have the choice, it is a different story." She ran her fingers through his hair and looked up at the sky. "It looks a bit different in this part of the desert," she hummed.

He hummed, enjoying the feeling of her hands once more in his hair. He closed his eyes for a moment then cracked them open again to glance up at the sky. “What’s different?” he smiled at her. Wading through the water with her in his lap was blissful.

“The positions of some of the stars,” she said. “They are shifted over. Also, this city seems to have a lot of lights...we cannot see everything.” She looked at him and smiled. “But that does not matter.” She kissed him softly.

He hummed, looking up for a moment longer before turning back to her. He smiled into the kiss, cupping the back of her head. “Will I see you tomorrow?” he asked her. “Or is Sasori holing up in the mansion?”

She hummed in thought for a moment. “We are probably going to be stuck inside all day,” she frowned. “He is going to want to run more tests on Lord Komushi and figure out what is wrong with him.”

He almost pouted. Tipping his head back to wet his hair a bit, he thought for a moment himself. “I have a few patients tomorrow and have to help my uncle with a few things but I could come around again.” He looked back at her, stealing another kiss. He trailed his lips down to her neck, pressing each kiss very deliberately.

She let out a small delighted squeal. “I would love that,” she grinned. “We should actually wash up
now,” she chuckled. “This water is cold.”

He laughed, kissing her again. “You’re right and adorable.” He let her go so they could wash up. Once they were done, he got out first, handing her her towel as she got out and then wrapped himself in his own. He pulled her close once more, kissing her with passion. “I’m sorry,” he laughed softly. “I...I can’t help it.”

She shook her head slightly and bit her lip. “No,” she smiled. “Do not be sorry.” She pulled him into another kiss, pushing into it a little harder than usual.

He pulled her close and spun her around so her feet lifted off the sand for a moment. “I really do love you,” he said softly. He bit her lip gently and pressed their foreheads together. “I’ve never felt this way about anyone before.”

“I love you too,” she said just as softly with another kiss. “And I am honestly grateful for you.” She pulled away from him slightly and laced her fingers with his as they started walking back to the mansion.

As they crawled through the window, Naga lifted his head and hissed softly from the bed. “Oh, I think we’ve been caught,” Gaara whispered teasingly.

“And where did you go?” Azumi chuckled. Naga hissed again, telling her that when they left Sasori, he stayed behind for a bit, suspecting what they were going to do. “Oh...I am sorry,” she frowned. Naga hissed his little laugh and slithered over to coil around Azumi. He looked over at Gaara’s neck and hissed and bumped his nose against Azumi’s neck.

Gaara chuckled, seeing the action. “I’ll bring you something for the trouble,” Gaara smiled at Naga. “Do you...have a favorite food?”

Naga hissed excitedly. “I do not know if those are around here,” Azumi hummed. “He says he likes kangaroo rats.”

Gaara chuckled at the excitement. “Aaah,” he tapped his chin, furrowing his brow in thought. “I know a place that might have them.” He flashed Naga a grin. “If I can’t get it, you know I’ll bring you a feast to make up for it.”

Naga hissed again, moving from Azumi to Gaara and coiling around him. He tapped his nose against Gaara’s. “He says ‘thank you,’” Azumi said as she got back into the bed. “But I am sure you understood that.”

“You’re welcome,” he chuckled again. He joined her on the bed and threw his arm over her stomach, pulling her close. He kissed her jaw and neck softly. “Want me to stay or shall I give you and Naga some alone time?” he teased but was genuinely asking her.

She groaned softly, wrapping her arms around him and nuzzling against him. Naga moved to coil just behind her, hissing a soft goodnight. “Stay,” she whispered.

“Goodnight,” he smiled, pulling her closer. He kissed the tip of her nose, feeling himself starting to drift as he rested his head on her chest and listened to her heartbeat, content to be with her.

Chapter End Notes
Oh, and there's also declarations of love, but you probably saw that coming ;)}
Chapter 37

The next morning, just when the sun started to shine through the window, Azumi woke up with a quiet groan. She nuzzled more against Gaara and pulled him closer, not wanting to wake up or move at all just yet.

Gaara curled closer to her, mumbling softly into her chest. "I don't want to go," he spoke softly but his voice was rough and almost sounded like a whine.

Naga hissed at them, nudging both of them to get them to start moving. He tried to warn them that Sasori could show up at any minute. "The door is blocked," Azumi mumbled to him. He hissed again. "I would be surprised if he was even up right now." Naga tapped her harder. "Ugh, fine."

Gaara made a pouty sound but he sat up slowly, stretching as he did. He leaned down and pressed a kiss to Azumi's lips. "Good morning," he said with a smile. "Sleep well?"

"I did," she smirked. She lifted his hand and pressed a kiss to his knuckles. "Did you?" she asked, lacing her fingers with his.

"Soundly," he grinned. He rolled them so she was on top of him and he kissed her. "I wish I could make you breakfast again," he said, running his hands up her stomach as she leaned up.

"Mm, you do make a pretty amazing breakfast," she hummed. Naga hissed again. "I know," she rolled her eyes. She looked over at the snake and pet his head. "I understand the risks and I assure you we are fine right now." She stretched hard on top of Gaara then ran her hand through his hair.

"But you probably have patients you need to be getting to."

Gaara sighed, sending Naga a slight pout. "You want to get rid of me so bad?" he teased. He pulled her in for another kiss and nibbled her lip. "I do," he admitted when they pulled apart. He nuzzled his nose against hers. "I'll make you breakfast any day you want. Just tell me and I'll figure it out."

He gasped. "We could visit Shira again! He makes an amazing midnight breakfast."

She chuckled softly. "I would love to," she said. "That sounds really good." Her stomach growled quietly. "Mm, I should probably go eat now." She stretched again. "And bring breakfast for your cousin," she said through a yawn. She still did not get off of him.

"Mmm, you probably should," he chuckled, clasping his hands behind her back. He resisted the urge to roll his hips into her, knowing they really did not have time to indulge in normal couple morning activities. "Before someone has a conniption." She rubbed her face and chuckled a little. She leaned down to kiss him, lingering there longer than necessary. She hummed again as she pulled away reluctantly and got off of him, picking up her dress and figuring out which way to put it on. He chuckled, watching her struggle a little as she got dressed. He was a boy in love and his stupid, wide grin showed that. Naga slithered up his leg as he let out a long happy sigh. The snake's canned head suddenly blocked Azumi from his view. Naga hissed and Gaara huffed. "Alright, alright, I'm getting up," he chuckled, pulling himself from the bed and getting dressed.

"It is almost like having another father," she grumbled. She looked at Naga and smirked. "Except you do not try to tell me who to be with. And you are an actual snake." She finished getting dressed and pet Naga gently. "But I think you two would get along well." Naga nuzzled her hand as she pet him.

Gaara chuckled behind them. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her shoulder. "I promise,
I won't get her into trouble," he told Naga as if he were speaking to a father figure. "And I'll always have her home by sunrise," he chuckled, kissing her cheek.

Azumi chuckled as Naga moved from Gaara to her when she cupped Gaara's face and kissed him. "I will see you later," she said softly. He said goodbye to both of them and slipped out of the room through the window.

Down in the kitchen, Sasori and Komushi were already eating. "How does someone who contributes almost nothing to society get up so early?" Sasori grumbled.

"I love life!" Komushi grinned. "Also because I've been asleep so much, I just wake up whenever," he shrugged.

A few moments later, Azumi entered the kitchen. She frowned a little when she saw them sitting at the table. "You are up early," she hummed. "How are you feeling?" she asked both of them.

"Exhausted," Sasori grumbled.

"Alert! And much better!" Komushi tried to appear as alive as he said he was.

"I'm going to need you to tone it down and reel it all the way back in," Sasori grumbled. "You may be filled with zest but some of us barely slept last night."

"You fell asleep quite early," Azumi said softly to Sasori. "Did you wake up a lot?" She hoped he was not awake around the time she and Gaara went into the river. The last thing we should have wanted was to get caught with naked in a river with his cousin. She poured a cup of coffee and put it in front of him when she saw that he did not have one.

He pulled the mug closer to him and took a deep sip of it as if his life depended on it, gasping a little when he finally put the cup down."I spent most of the night in the workshop. I got maybe two hours of sleep."

"What kept you up?" Komushi frowned.

Sasori gave him a dead look. "You're not even worth it." He pouted into his coffee when Komushi asked 'what?'. The other man looked up at Azumi questioningly.

Azumi shrugged and served herself. "But you have come this far already," she told Sasori. "You might as well see it through." She sat down next to him and started eating.

He cracked a smirk at her and Komushi felt like he was being talked about suddenly. Sasori chuckled into his mug and joined her in eating.

"Think that poison is out of my system yet?" Komushi asked.

"Hard to say," Sasori said. "If you only relapsed yesterday then chances are that it isn't."

"How long have you been awake as of right now?" Azumi asked.

"About twenty minutes," he told them.

Sasori frowned, squinting at him. "You might go down soon." He watched him for a few more moments. "How are you feeling?"

"I feel fine," Komushi said. "But I don't feel tired until right when I'm about to knock out."
"I did notice you have a hard time giving a warning," Azumi hummed. She found the whole situation amusing.

He noted the amusement and stuck his tongue out at her playfully over Sasori's head. "I don't, it kinda just happens—" and he was down.

Sasori rolled his eyes. "At least he didn't start eating. So every twenty minutes." He logged the time in a notebook. "What a pain."

Azumi laughed softly at how quickly he fell back asleep. "Can we leave him here?" she asked as she continued eating. She did not want to touch Komushi, let alone help get him to another room.

"Yes, I'll have someone else come around for him," Sasori sighed as he slid her his coffee. "More," he muttered as he stood up. "Let's head back to the room." He waited for her to grab the coffee before stepping out to return to his room.

She refilled his cup and poured one for herself then followed him to his room. He found two servants on the way and told them to bring Komushi to his room. They nodded and did as they were told. Azumi and Sasori went straight into the workshop and she handed his mug to him.

"That is going to take days," she hummed. "I think the dosage of venom is wrong in the antidote," he sighed. "I don't know if it was me or Gaara. This isn't a mistake either of us would normally make but it happened. We're just lucky it hasn't killed Komushi." He ran a hand through his hair and grabbed his notebook. "That and this is a different animal so we need to start from square one."

"I think we would have found him passed out in front of my door if he did try," she said as she put her hair up to work on one of the samples. "Or at least on the way to my room."

"That would be kind of funny," Sasori chuckled. "I'd have to beat him up but it would still be funny."

"You beating him up would also be funny," she mumbled, setting the sample up underneath a microscope. "I still think this is just something that needs to run its course. Like the flu. He probably needs to flush it out of his system but he cannot stay awake long enough to do that."

"You really think so?" Sasori took a deep breath. "Well...I'll consider anything you want to suggest
to keep him awake."

She turned to him, an almost sinister smirk appearing on her lips. "Will you allow me to hit him?" she asked.

"Uuuh," he paused. "Hitting no, occasional pinching and needling yes," he responded after a long, blank stare. He had to really think of what he was okay with putting his friend through.

Azumi scoffed and turned back to her work. "That is no fun," she pouted. "Then, fine, we pinch him to keep him awake."

Sasori laughed a little at her reaction. "Okay, fine." He tried to stifle his laughter. "If he tries anything or flirts with you again, I give you full permission to hit him. Try to aim for the face."

"I cannot imagine another place I would want to hit him," she grinned. She suddenly got very excited at the possibility of hitting Komushi. She turned back around to face him. "What if you hit him to wake him up and I hit him to keep him awake?" she laughed.

"I'd say you're more than a little evil and very eager," he laughed at her enthusiasm. "But we aren't doing that. So don't push your luck," he chided with a smirk. "We can just wait for him to wake up again and go from there."

She tilted her head back and sighed like a child. "Fine," she said, turning back to work once again. They worked on the samples she took for a little over an hour before they heard a groan coming from the bedroom.

"I just keep waking up in a different spot than I fell asleep," Komushi chuckled through a groan as he stretched.

"It's like a game," Sasori called back, getting up. "Maybe next time you'll wake up at the bottom of the river," he said, leaning in the doorway.

Komushi scoffed, smirking widely. "You forget I can swim." He threw his legs over the edge of the bed.

"Not when you're asleep with all those rocks you use for a brain sitting in your head."

"You know, you're kind of an asshole," Komushi said, getting up to throw an arm around Sasori's shoulders.

"Kind of?" Sasori frowned. "Damn, I need to step it up then. I can't have you thinking I like you." He brushed Komushi's arm off and turned to walk back into the workshop.

"You love me," Komushi smiled as he rolled his eyes and followed Sasori into the workshop. "Have you found anything out yet?"

Azumi switched the sample she was working on with a different one. "You only have three days left to live," she smirked.

Komushi's jaw dropped then shut in a fit of laughter. Sasori rolled his eyes as he crossed the room to sit back down. "Then I guess that means you'll give a dying man his final wishes?" Komushi slinked over to slide an arm over her shoulder. He cupped her face, giving her an impish grin. Sasori pressed his lips together to keep himself quiet. Azumi could not help the grin on her face when she slapped Komushi in the face.
"Ooh, that was hard," Sasori muttered with a slight wince.

"But it felt so good," Azumi sighed, practically moaning.

Komushi stumbled back, clutching his face in real, pure shock. "What the fuck was that!" His one eye watered a little from the force of her blow. "Who the fuck do you think you are!"

"Are you awake?" she smiled, shaking her hand a little to get rid of the stinging. "Alert?"

Komushi gaped at her for a moment. "Yes! Yes, I'm fucking awake! Sasori, what the fuck!" he growled, pissed at his friend's lack of action.

Sasori grinned at him. "We just need to make sure you don't fall asleep," he shrugged.

"You need to let us know exactly when you start to feel tired again," Azumi said. "We are going to try to keep you awake. Because there has to be a way to counter whatever is in you." She could see a red mark forming on his face where she slapped him.

He looked at her, appalled. "And your grand thought was to slap me across the face!"

"She only did that because I gave her permission to any time you tried to make a pass at her," Sasori explained. "Otherwise, you'll simply get pinched." Komushi blinked rapidly. His head was spinning from both the slap and the information that his best friend authorized it.

"So, no, I will not be giving you your final wishes," Azumi smirked.

"For right now, you can help us figure out what's wrong with the antidote and how to fix it," Sasori said.

"And remember, let us know when you start to feel tired." She winked at him and turned back to the sample she was working on.

Komushi snarled at her as he took his seat. Sasori chuckled silently as he went back to his own samples. They worked silently for a while when Komushi started to drift. "You guys gotta give me something to do or I'll go to sleep out of pure boredom!" he groaned.

Azumi had brewed some coffee for them while they worked. She poured a cup for Komushi and put it in front of him and then pushed the microscope in front of him. He took the coffee with a muttered thank you then frowned at the microscope. "You can look at the pretty patterns in your blood," she said. Just to make sure he stayed awake, she pinched his arm.

Sasori glanced up in time to see Komushi flinch when she pinched him. "It's like watching a toddler," he whispered. "If you don't want to do that, you can go clean the bathtubs," he raised his voice a little.

Komushi scoffed at the idea. "Make your slave do that," he said.

"She is a bit busy trying to figure out what is wrong with you," Azumi smirked. "But," she hummed, "you did not take a bath yesterday, did you?" Komushi shook his head. "You can take one now. Just...do not fall asleep and drown in the bath."

She nodded for him to follow her to the bathroom then started to set up the bath for him, using a different salt and oil scent than what she would normally give Sasori, figuring he did not want to share.

He stared at her from across the bath, arms folded. "I don't know how you're doing this but I know this isn't just a slip of dosage or whatever," his voice was low, almost menacing as he spoke. He
circled the tub and leaned down to look her in the eyes. "You can't have them both and Gaara really
doesn't have that much power," he smirked.

She pressed her finger to his nose gently and pushed his face away from hers. "I do not want them
both," she said. "And I did nothing. But as I have told Lord Sasori, this is just something that needs
to run its course through your system. You will live and you will be fine."

He squinted at her skeptically for a moment more before starting to strip down. She did her best to
avert her eyes. "Fine," he finally huffed. "I'll pretend I believe you for now." He slipped into the
water once it was ready. He sunk low, watching her from the water and forgetting that it probably
was not the best idea.

She grabbed a towel for him and placed it on a stool by the bath then she paused. "Lord Sasori
never really has guests...is there a robe for people that are not him?" she asked. She never used a
robe but she was sure Sasori had enough decency to have a robe for a guest on the very rare
occasion he had them.

"He does," Komushi chuckled. "But I'm really the only one who uses it. It's in the cabinet over
there." He pointed to the corner of the room, pushing himself up just enough to look over the tub.

She looked at where he was pointing and went up to the cabinet. "Nice," she hummed, pulling out
the second robe. She hung it up close to the bath Komushi was in. "Will you need anything else?"

He hummed for a moment and considered the punishment for making a move. "No," he finally
said. "I'm fine. You can leave." He waved her off with a flick of his hand.

"Right," she said with a slight bow. "Scream when you feel tired. One of us will come and pinch
you," she smirked before turning and leaving the bathroom. She took her seat on the stool in the
workshop and sighed.

Sasori glanced up from the microscope when she returned. "Not staying with him?" Sasori
hummed. "Passing up a chance to get another potential smack across the face in?"

"It is not as satisfying if I provoke him," she said. "However, I do think we need to check on him
every couple of minutes because he may not be able to give us a warning from the bath." She
looked over and saw Komushi's coffee was still on the workbench. "He did not drink all of it, so it
might not work," she mumbled.

"I should have a bell somewhere," he said, getting up. "Mmm, but that could get annoying. Maybe
we should just let him drown." He rifled through a few drawers until there was small tinkling
sound.

Azumi watched him pull the small bell out. He handed it to her and she rang it a little. The noise
was soft but it could definitely be heard from another room. "This could work."

"Give it to him," Sasori said. "And let him know if he uses it for anything other than telling us he's
about to fall asleep, we'll let him drown."

Azumi chuckled a little. "Alright." She highly doubted that Sasori would actually let Komushi die
considering all of the work he had been doing to try and help Komushi. She got up and went back
into the bathroom. Komushi was relaxed against the wall of the pool, his head tilted back. "So, in
lieu of screaming," she started as she walked around the pool and kneeled down by the edge, "Lord
Sasori is giving you this to ring when you feel you are about to fall asleep." She showed him the
bell and set it down next to him.
He looked at the bell then at her. "And if I used it for anything other than falling asleep, he'll let me die?" he asked seriously as he picked up the bell and gave it a test ring.

"Those were his words, yes," she chuckled. "But if we are honest, his words hold no weight when he says that or he would not have gone through all of this trouble already. When you ring it one of us will come."

"And pinch me?"

"Yup!" she grinned.

"You're enjoying this far too much," he sighed. "Could you bring me my coffee?"

With a nod, she stood up and went back into the workshop to grab Komushi's coffee then brought it back to him. She kneeled down again to set it next to the bell. "Anything else?" she asked.

Komushi resisted the urge to ask for a kiss. "No," he yawned until tears formed in his eyes.

She saw the yawn and grinned, reaching out slowly to pinch his shoulder. "Wake up," she smirked.

He flinched awake hard. "I'm awake!" he pouted as he drank his coffee. "Leave me alone."

Her smile softened and she ran her hand through his hair, scratching his scalp gently. Just to mess with him. He leaned into her hand for a moment, completely enjoying the sensation. "Enjoy your bath and your coffee," she said as she got up and went back to the workshop.

"You're as cruel as your master," he grumbled when she pulled away.

Azumi sat back down in her seat and went back to her work.

"So if this is something that will go away on its own, then we won't be giving him the antidote anymore," Sasori told her. "We'll see if he gets better but if he doesn't then we may have to go back to using it."

"But you would have to redo it," she hummed. "Since the first one did not really work. And that would mean——"

"Going back to the cave," he shuddered.

"Not exactly an ideal situation."

"Speaking of the cave," he shuddered again, "I did promise you could make something for Gaara if he returned alive. Which he did," he flashed her a smirk. "Make him a 'thank you' and a 'do it again' gift...just in case."

'Oh, I gave him a 'thank you' gift alright,' she thought. "What should I make him?" she asked.

"Another cologne?"

"I'll leave it up to you," he smirked. "You're the one with the crush," he teased.

"I am not," she scoffed. 'This is definitely not a crush...it is so much more,' she thought. She stood up and went to the shelf where he kept all of the oils and scents. "I will make him another cologne," she said, getting all of the things for a new cologne. She decided to make him something very special.

"Make him a hair oil too," Sasori smirked. "He likes those."
"Does he?" she asked softly, unable to hide her smile. "Alright." She grabbed a couple of more ingredients for a hair oil, wanting it to match the scent of the cologne well.

"Yeah," Sasori chuckled. "He used to dump them all over himself when he was younger. It was a pain. I had to teach him how to use it. He likes to keep his hair very soft."

"Mm, that makes sense," she hummed, realizing that Gaara's hair was very soft. She paused for a second, hoping Sasori did not hear what she said and get suspicious. "Then I will make him one of those as well."

"Make me one, too. It's been a little while since I had one," he said, returning to the samples and his notes.

"Alright," she said. She grabbed ingredients for a new hair oil for him and got started on making everything. About five minutes later, they heard the bell ring from the bathroom. "Oh, he actually used it," she chuckled as they both got up to go check on him.

Just as they walked in, they saw the top of Komushi's hair slip under the surface of the water. "Tch," Sasori clicked his teeth. "He couldn't have timed it a little better?" he huffed, stripping down. "Help me pull him out. How did I know this idiot would do this?" He rolled his eyes. Azumi scoffed and kneeled down as he got into the pool. He lifted Komushi up and she hooked her arms under his so she could help pull him out. "Oh, he is a rock," she groaned as she hoisted him while Sasori pushed him. Sasori pushed him a little too hard and Azumi fell backward on her butt, still holding Komushi who ended up between her legs. His solid mass was practically pushing her to lay down and she could already feel the water dripping from him soaking her dress.

Sasori grunted as they flopped out of the tub. His head rested firmly against Komushi's chest for a moment before he pushed himself off of his friend. "He's always been dense. In every way," he grumbled. "Now I'm going to need a bath." He knelt back down to check Komushi's pulse and make sure his airways were clear. "You're literally the worst," he grumbled, sitting back. Azumi sighed, trying to maneuver Komushi off of her but he was actually quite heavy. She pinched him in the side hard, hoping he would wake up. His body twitched but he did not wake up. "Hold still," Sasori commanded as he squatted low and rolled Komushi off of Azumi. Panting slightly, he offered her a hand to help her up. "We're both going to need baths. Let's just leave him there for a little bit." He waved at the slumbering sack of human rocks.

"Does be workout religiously or something?" she asked, fixing her dress as Sasori dried off and got dressed. "That is all muscle mass, he is so solid." They went back into the workshop and sat down with a sigh.

"He doesn't have much else to do in his life." Sasori downed his coffee. "And he is surprisingly very into taking genuine care of his body."

"Maybe your mother should help him find a wife," she muttered. "Then he would have other things to do." She went back to making the cologne and hair oils.

He laughed, shaking his head. "Oh, she most likely will," he snorted. "She's definitely heard about his most recent heartbreak by now and he is probably on her list of babies to be married off in two years."

"Two years?" she hummed. "I think he needs more time than that." She hoped his mother would stay away from the idea of trying to set Komushi up with her as she did with Sasori. "He needs five, maybe."
"Yeah, my mother is fast-tracking all of us to two years," he rolled his eyes. "I'm not sure why considering she is so young and in perfect health."

Azumi let her hair back down as she finished up what she was making. She picked up the hair oil for Sasori and smelled it. "She is your mother," she said. "She wants to be able to enjoy grandchildren while she is still young and in good health." She moved closer to him and held the oil under his nose so he could smell it.

He frowned, hating how reasonable that sounded. "I'm just not ready to be a father yet." He took a deep breath of the oil and hummed. "Perfection," he gave the one-word praise. "What did you make for each of us?"

“For you, it is a cleaner scent. Something with a very underlying hint of sweet. For Lord Gaara, I made something a bit woodier.” She opened the cologne she made and sniffed it then held it out for him to smell. “The scent for the hair oil is a cleaner version of this.”

Sasori leaned in and he could have sworn he felt his pupils dilate. “That is amazing,” he muttered, taking another whiff. “Yeah, that should show your thanks enough,” he smirked, leaning back. He knew if he was allowed to, he would just sniff it all day.

She smirked, knowing full well that she already thanked Gaara in her own way. “Alright,” she chuckled. She put the cologne down and closed up all three bottles once they were set. She labeled them and then took Sasori’s hair oil to the bathroom to put on his shelf where he kept all of the other oils and fragrances but stopped short in the doorway of the bathroom when she saw Komushi and decided to throw a towel over his crotch area. “A thick boy indeed,” she muttered, shaking her head as she put the oil on the shelf and made her way back to the workshop.
“I suppose once he wakes up and gets out of the bathroom, we take our baths?” Azumi asked Sasori. They had been waiting for almost a half-hour for Komushi to wake up from his near-death experience in the bath.

“He’s still not up?” Sasori mumbled. He nodded to answer her question then stood up and walked into the bathroom.

Moments later, Komushi was groggily being dragged to the bed. “You weren’t joking about the bottom of the river,” he wheezed, flopping onto the bed.


Azumi went into the bathroom and cleaned up the water around the pool and Komushi’s coffee so neither she nor Sasori slipped then she started running both baths and grabbed the towels and Sasori’s robe.

“I rang the bell,” Komushi said.

“Not soon enough, dimwit.” There was a soft thud.

“Hey! I could be dying and you’re hitting me!” Komushi pouted.

“You’re not dying,” Sasori sighed. “Narcolepsy wouldn’t have lasted this long if you were. But I’m going to try and get it flushed out of your system. This should only be for another day or two.”

“Another day or two,” Komushi repeated softly. “Of falling asleep and being hit.”

Sasori smirked, pushing Komushi further onto the bed. “You’ll be fine,” he said, ignoring Komushi winces at being pushed. “Just ring the bell with a little more warning and try not to come on to my slave. Don’t come on to her and all you’ll get is pinched.”

"Not exactly a win-win situation, but fine, whatever," Komushi grumbled.

"Stop being an actual child," Sasori huffed as he turned and went into the bathroom. "That's why you can't get any girls."

"That's rich coming from you," Komushi muttered softly, folding his arms.

Inside the bathroom, Azumi was trying to figure out how to get undressed and in her bath without being seen by Komushi who had an almost clear line of sight to her bath. She moved to the side just out of view from him.

“I could have one at any moment,” Sasori countered, shedding his clothing easily. He shook his head and slipped into the water. “I can’t wait for him to go back to his house and be out of my hair!”

“You made the commitment of helping him,” she hummed, staying on the side closest to his tub so Komushi could not see her. “But you could always just send him home and leave him the way he is. No one is telling you that you have to see this through.”

“Would you let your brothers die?” he asked her flatly. He knew she had a point but he also could not do that. Komushi, for all his irritation and flaws, was still his best friend.
“You make a point,” she chuckled. “But he is not dying.” She sighed and sunk lower into the water. “It will be over soon. Do not worry.”

“One can only hope so,” he muttered, relaxing back into the water. “He just woke up so we should have another twenty minutes by my understanding of his cycle.”

“Sounds about right,” she hummed. She got an idea and sat up straight. “However, if it is undisturbed as it exits his system, the intervals could change,” she suggested. “There could be more time in between when he wakes up and falls asleep again and he could be asleep for less time.”

“That would make sense,” Sasori nodded, speaking slowly. “And would be a very hopeful sign that it is leaving him.” He raised an eyebrow at her.

“He just needs to be monitored closely,” she hummed as she quickly washed up and looked up at him. “He may spend more of tomorrow being awake than today but he has already spent more of today being awake than the previous days.” She stepped out of the tub and grabbed her towel, wrapping it around herself. “And with that, he may also be sleeping lighter and lighter each time so we can probably wake him up easily if he does fall asleep.” She shrugged as she dried herself off. “But these are only hypotheses.”

He smirked at her as he washed himself up and got out of the bath to dry off. “And to think,” he grinned, “you were going to be locked away in some tiny little hidden village. What a waste that would have been,” he tutted, pulling on his robe. “Let’s go check on the princess.”

“I can hear you, you know,” Komushi pouted, putting one of Sasori’s books down.

Azumi scoffed as Sasori walked past her and went into the room. “Unreal,” she muttered. She looked at the dress she was wearing before and realized it was still soaked from when Komushi landed on her then let out a soft groan as she went to the workshop in her towel, knowing Sasori had a cabinet with her clothes in there. She found the outfit she was wearing when he bought her and decided she was going to wear it until her usual dress was dried. Quickly, she got dressed in it and went back into the bathroom to grab her previous dress and the robe for Komushi. “Now that you are awake,” she said to him as she walked out, “please...put this on.” She held out the robe to him. He was still only covered by the towel and it was just barely.

He looked at the robe then at what was protecting his already dashed modesty. “Thanks,” he said, pulling it on carefully. He threw his legs over the bed and tied the robe shut.

“Wow, one smack across the face and we’re free of your egotistical dick jokes?” Sasori grinned. “I should have let you hit him sooner,” he said to Azumi. Komushi shot him a dirty look.

Azumi smirked as she hung her dress up to dry. “Let us see how long it lasts,” she hummed, taking the towel from Komushi now that he was decently covered.

“Yeah, no,” Komushi glared at them. “Unless I’m doing it or it’s in bed, I’m not about it,” he scoffed.

“You’re so sensitive,” Sasori laughed.

"And I am not doing that just to be able to smack you," Azumi smirked. "But aside from that, that was the shortest amount of time you were asleep, so I think I am onto something here."

“I agree,” Sasori smirked at her. “This is good progress already but we can’t get too ahead of ourselves.” He looked at Komushi. “You won’t be in the clear until you make it through the day
and night normally,” he told him.

Komushi sighed and groaned, flopping back onto the bed. "Then what am I supposed to do?" he whined.

"I could do your makeup again," Azumi a little excitedly with a grin. "Make you pretty."

He pouted for a moment or two then huffed heavily. “Fine,” he relented. “Not like there is much else to do,” he grumbled.

She let out an excited squeal and grabbed his hands to pull him over to the vanity. "I will let you pick out the colors," she said softly. "And I promise I will not make you look...very feminine. It will be lighter than the last time."

Komushi blinked at her in surprise. He cracked a fond smile and looked over the colors. Sasori raised an eyebrow but went back to his notes. “What about, um...wait, what colors did you use last time?” Komushi asked her.

"Bronze and copper," she said. "Because your eyes are green." She held out the ones she used. "Gold and black also goes well...and maybe...purple?"

He leaned in closer to look at the colors. “Purple will be too dramatic,” he frowned.

“Do something with gold,” Sasori spoke up.

Komushi hummed for a few moments, squinting at the colors. “Yeah, let's do something with gold,” he finally said.

"Gold," she nodded, taking out all of the gold things. She took a small towel and put micellar water on it to wipe his face then set to work on his makeup. After a couple of minutes of doing the gold eyeshadow with a little bronze to darken it, she picked up an eyeliner pencil and leaned in close. "Look up for me," she hummed. "This is going to feel a little uncomfortable." Once he did that, she tight lined his upper eyelid. "I will not wing your eyes, I promise."

"Just do it," Komushi chuckled. "You've already come this far," he smirked. "I look great in eyeliner anyway!"

Sasori wound up watching them for most of the little interaction. "Most men wear eyeliner here," he said with his head resting against his hand.

"Men wear it where I am from as well," she hummed, picking up the eyeliner pen. "But I did not think he wanted bold." She stood up and grabbed Komushi's face, careful not to ruin the work she already did. "But if he wants it, then I will oblige." She carefully lined his eyes, not making the wings dramatic and stopping at the corner. "You are beautiful," she hummed softly, taking a step back to look at her work. "My best work yet. I can get any woman in this city a husband."

"Someone's a little cocky," Sasori smirked.

"I need to see myself to be the judge of that," Koushi smirked. He blinked a few times to clear his vision a little then reached for the hand mirror nearby. "Oh, she's cute," he grinned at himself, running a hand through his own hair. "Oh, yes, she will get a date for any party. Hello, rich husband and four kids I don't actually have to take care of."

"I will do your makeup for your wedding," Azumi chuckled. She handed him a clean small towel and the micellar water for whenever he was ready to take it off. "And you are still awake."
"Did you feel tired during that at all?" Sasori asked.

"No, but," he tried to stifle a yawn, "I-I'm starting to feel it now." Tears threatened to prick in the corners of his eyes but he blinked rapidly to preserve the makeup.

Sasori noted the time and wrote it down. "That was about ten minutes longer than your previous bouts."

Azumi pinched Komushi's arm, unable to not grin wide when she did. "Do not fall asleep and ruin my work," she said.

"Ouch!" he whined, rubbing the spot. "I could have just been sleeping beauty!"

"With no one would kiss you awake," Azumi said, putting the makeup away. "You need to find someone who would do that first."

“Well, you could always,” he leaned back, “ask Sasori to do it because he cares so much about me!”

Sasori raised an eyebrow. “Try again,” he snorted.

Azumi smirked, putting her hand down after getting ready to slap him. "Funny," she chuckled. Komushi winked at her and she let it slide. "What else could we do to keep you busy and awake?” she hummed.

“Teach him how to make scents,” Sasori suggested.

“Oh, yeah! That would be cool! Then I could make you one!” He batted his lashes at Sasori. The gold was very striking against his green eyes but Sasori still managed to ignore him. Komushi chuckled and then started wiping off the makeup.

"Alright," Azumi said, nodding for Komushi to follow her to the workshop. She still had all of the ingredients out from the ones she made earlier and decided it would be a good place to start. "How much do you have left of the one I made for you?" she asked.

"It's almost finished," he grinned.

She grabbed the ingredients for his specific cologne and placed them in front of him. "These are the individual notes in it." He picked each one up and sniffed them separately. He let out a pleased hum when he realized that he could smell them in the final product. "Then when I put them together, I add a few drops of this." She placed the amplifier in front of him. "It has no scent of its own, but it amplifies the scents of the rest and makes them blend together very well."

“Interesting.” He looked at the little bottle. “Is this what you bought from the weird little incense shop?"

"Utakata's shop is not weird," she sighed. "And yes. This is what I bought from there." She hoped he would not bring up the conversation they had at the shop before Utakata kicked him out. "It is a bit hard to find so Utakata is going to be a good supplier." She combined the ingredients over a small fire. "It only needs to be warmed for five minutes. And then it takes about five minutes to cool after it is bottled."

“I see.” He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. He was toying with the thought of bringing it up but he figured since she was the one keeping him alive at the moment, he might not. “And do you have a process for picking scents for someone?”
“I do,” she nodded. “I choose whatever would smell good with their natural scent. It generally blends in very well. So the cologne I made you was made to match your natural scent and would smell different if it were on Lord Sasori.”

“Our natural scents,” he smirked. “It must be easier to make scents for those you’re close to then.” He leaned in a little closer to her and took a deep breath.

“Yes,” she said, taking a step back from him. “Since I spend just about all of my time with him, I have gotten to know his scent quite well.”

He backed off and sat down on the stool. “Did you ever see your stuff in your village?” he smirked. There was something looming behind his eyes.

She furrowed her brow and looked at him. "What do you mean?" she asked. "As in the stuff I make? Not exactly. I did not really sell them to people. I only made them for myself and my family."

“I see,” he hummed. “So what did you pick for Gaara?” He moved to look closer at the other man’s chosen scents. “Are these ones you like on him?”

She looked at him for a moment with narrow eyes. "It is what I think blends well with his natural scent, yes," she said. "No different than what I did for you and Lord Sasori."

He nodded and locked eyes with her. His smirk remained for a few moments before he yawned hard again. “Alright, show me how to make this layered and non-layered stuff.”

She stepped closer again started the flame to start making a new fragrance. "I can expand on the one I made you before," she hummed. "It was not layered. I can make it one though. Making it layered would take more than five minutes over a flame. Choose three of these," she told him, pointing to the oils in front of him. Once he did that, she set them aside. "Now choose another three." He did as he was told again and she set them apart from the first three he chose. "Now the last three." He set his last choices in a separate group from the first two. "We are going to start with the first three you picked." She opened up the bottles and poured them into a very small pot and set it over a flame. "It will take five minutes for it to warm, then we have to let it cool. As it is for the normal ones. Once it is cool enough, we put it back over the flame and add the second group. Then repeat those steps over. In between each cooling session, we add the amplifier."

Komushi watched in fascination as she worked. “And you learned how to do this just because?” he asked curiously.

She shrugged and nodded. "Pretty much," she mumbled. "Because sometimes the work I did in the labs with my father got boring sometimes so I decided to do something fun with my knowledge of how these things work."

“What did you and your father work on?” Komushi asked. “It’s so weird that you’re village seems so advanced but it’s so reclusive.”

She sat on another stool and leaned against the counter, resting her chin in her hand as she watched the fragrances warm. "Antivenoms, medicines, things of the same nature as what Lord Sasori does...but centrally focused on snakes," she sighed.

“Well, that is boring,” Komushi grumbled. “Did you do anything actually fun? You sound very sheltered.”

She hummed through a smirk and turned to look at him. "I did," she said. "Whenever I could sneak
away from the labs, at least.” She paused and thought for a moment, thinking back to the things she used to do for ‘fun’ and could only recall mostly sexual things. "Mm, I suppose maybe that is why my father never liked the people I dated," she said softly, mostly to herself with a slight chuckle. She looked back at Komushi. "Other than...certain activities ,” she said with a wink, "I did do archery. It was a nice release."

Komushi’s eyes widened in understanding then narrowed while his smirk grew. “Naughty little snake,” he purred. “You must have run your father ragged,” he mockingly pouted.

Sasori gave her a confused look for a moment, the tone of voice almost going over his head until Komushi spoke. “Ah,” he finally said in small recognition. “Did you do archery on foot or horse?” he asked, trying to steer clear of any sexual talk.

“Both,” she answered as she took the fragrance off of the flame and set it in front of her and Komushi. “But I think I prefer it on foot.”

“Didn’t Gaara compete in horseback archery for a little while?” Komushi asked Sasori over his shoulder.

“He did but he doesn’t do it much anymore since he’s working so much. But Temari is the best archer in the family,” Sasori added with a small proud smile.

Azumi smiled a little at the new knowledge. ‘That would be fun to do with him,’ she thought. “You have competitions out here?” she asked. “That is quite interesting.”

“Oh, yeah!” Komushi grinned. “They are a biannual event, one for the summer months and one for the cooler months. We do different sports for them.”

“Lots of sweaty men and woman,” Sasori rolled his eyes. “Sales for balms and pain relief go up and a million ‘enhancement’ potion’ requests come in,” he huffed. “It’s so annoying.”

“You think that now but you used to participate in them, too,” Komushi grinned.

“You did?” Azumi smirked at Sasori. She never took him for one to do any sort of competition.

“As a teenager,” Sasori scoffed. “A waste of my time really.”

“But it made your mommy happy,” Komushi teased him. Sasori clicked his teeth and glared at Komushi. “His whole family has a tendency to compete. Even Sandaime. Any event he’s in is impressive but impossible to see,” he chuckled. Both men rolled their eyes.

“The women of this city really treat him like a god among people,” Sasori said as he put away some slides.

“Okay, but he could probably throw a javelin the full length of the city. Just saying.”

“Oh, I bet he can,” Azumi muttered with a smile as she imagined it. She set the fragrance back over the flame and added the second group of ingredients. She looked over at Komushi who looked like he was about to start dozing off and pinched his arm again.

“I’m awaaaake,” he whined, sitting back up. He took a deep breath and blinked rapidly. “Yeah, so anyways, Sasori did swordplay, knife throwing and,” he grinned evilly.

Sasori’s face fell. “Don’t!”
“She deserves to know.”

“She is a slave and we agreed those years would never come up!”

“Mmmm, but they have and we can’t leave her hanging!” he said in a sing-songy voice.

“I should have let you die,” Sasori growled.

“Hurry up and tell me,” Azumi grinned, kicking Komushi gently in the shin. “Before he kills both of us.”

“Full-on. Naked. Mud. Wrestling!” he grinned. “Ah! And he was the reigning champion for three years! It was great!”

Sasori almost whimpered. “I hate you,” he grumbled.

“His mom thought it was the perfect way to showcase his body and prowess.” He deepened his voice before breaking down into a giggle. “Oh, man, the fight between him and Shira! I’m pretty sure every woman in the vicinity became pregnant.”

“That sounds amazing,” Azumi said, her grin practically matching Komushi’s. “I would never have expected you to do any sort of competitions, let alone...that.”

“I’m going to kill you both now,” Sasori said.

“It’s so unexpected!” Komushi laughed, ignoring the threat. “But man! He could throw down! They even wrestled crocodiles one year and phew!” Komushi winked.

“Are you working for my mother right now?” Sasori snapped.

“Maybe,” Komushi smirked.

Azumi took the fragrance off of the flame again and set it in front of him. “I will leave you responsible for putting it back and adding the last of the ingredients,” she told him. She cleaned up everything else, only leaving out the four small bottles they still needed and went to check on her dress to make sure it was dry.

“If you are working for my mother, then you’re a traitor,” Sasori said to Komushi.

“Oh, please.” Komushi did as he had been told to as he spoke. “If I was really working for your mother, you’d have slept with her at least once already,” he said confidently.

“That’s a lot of confidence from someone who hardly gets laid himself,” Sasori said lowly.

“I get laid!” Komushi scoffed, actually offend.

“No amount of coercing and pestering will convince me to sleep with her.”

“But she’s your type,” Komushi’s smirk returned. “And honestly, you’re not going to be able to hold your mother off for much longer. You don’t even want to get married. And...” He hesitated to say it but took a deep breath. “You don’t have to love her to get her pregnant. You can raise the children and never tell them who their mother is. It’s not like she would have the privilege to tell them. This is a win-win situation for you.”

“I cannot even begin to express how flawed that is,” Sasori deadpanned. “You’re right, I don’t want to get married. But I also don’t want children. And that genetic mutation of her eyes is most
likely hereditary which means the children would most likely have them so it would be hard to hide who their mother is. Also, I don’t want children.”

“Alright, fair point about the eyes,” Komushi conceded. “However, I don’t think your mother will be content with just marriage. The whole point of her doing this is so that she gets grandchildren out of her only son.”

“Believe me, I know her scheme,” Sasori grumbled, folding his arms. “And she sunk really low trying to set me up with my slave.” He shook his head. “As I said, there’s nothing that can convince me to sleep with her or marry her. So, both you and my mother can back off of that particular subject.”

Komushi chuckled, leaning back against the workbench.

“I’ll let it go,” he smirked. “For the time being. Any word from Mei?”

“No,” Sasori said. “She should be engaged to that guy by now though.”

Azumi returned a moment later in her normal dress. She put the other outfit back into the cabinet and went to check on how Komushi was doing with the cologne. “Not bad,” she hummed, noticing he did not let it boil over.

He turned to Azumi and grinned. “Did I do everything right then?”

“You did,” she nodded, adding the last drops of the amplifier to the mixture. “Now we just have to bottle it and let it cool one last time. Then you have yourself a new cologne.”

“Yay!” He clapped excitedly. “And look at that this is the longest I’ve stayed awake, right!”

“It is,” she said. “I think combating the urges is actually doing something to flush it out.”

“But you should also drink water or tea,” Sasori suggested. “That could only help more.”

“You guys are like my parents right now,” Komushi chuckled as he bottled the cologne and left it on the counter to cool.

“Um, no,” both Azumi and Sasori said.

Komushi’s face twisted a bit in disgust. “Parents,” he repeated. He got up and stretched. “I’ll make us all tea. What kind do you want?” he asked them as he grabbed his bell.

"Raspberry," they both said at the same time.

"Oh, this is really not helping," Azumi smirked at Sasori.

Komushi smirked at Sasori, wiggling his eyebrows for a moment. Sasori snarled at him and Komushi laughed as he ducked out of the room. “Just saying!” he called back.

Azumi cleaned up the rest of the ingredients used for Komushi’s cologne. "I do not think that bell can be heard from here if he is in the kitchen," she hummed.

“Then I guess you better follow him,” Sasori smirked. “From a distance, of course.” He was cleaning up the last of his notes the test material as he spoke. “We don’t need him burning himself or the house down.”

"But I do not like him," she groaned, tilting her head back. "I spent the last hour babysitting him,"
she muttered as she turned to leave. "I just thought it meant you were okay with him collapsing in
the halls." She walked through the bedroom and out into the hall toward the kitchen. She could
hear the soft bell in Komushi's hand as he walked. As she followed him, she made sure to keep a
good distance so he would not know he was being supervised on a trip to the kitchen.

He turned into the kitchen and set the bell down on the counter. He hummed as he got out the
teapot and chosen raspberry tea then set it all up on the stove to boil the water. He paused to yawn
hard and long, tears pricking in his eyes again as he reached for the teacups but his hand missed,
nearly knocking a cup over. "Shit." He braced himself for impact then relaxed when there was
none. "Shit, I’m really exhausted," he yawned again. He kept cursing, trying to get a hold of
himself long enough to grab the mugs. "I might not make it back to the room," he muttered to
himself.

Azumi watched him from the doorway as he stood over the water, waiting for it to boil. She
noticed him start to sway a little and then wake up really hard, catching himself on the counter. ‘It
seems to be exiting his body,’ she thought. ‘This extreme exhaustion has to be an effect of that.’ She
continued to watch him, preparing to help him if he collapsed. ‘I sure as hell am not going to catch
him. He will crush me.’

He moved the pot from the fire and placed it on the tea tray with the cups and tea then leaned hard
against the counter. “I think...I’m just going to take a minute,” he said, slipping to the floor of the
kitchen slowly. He leaned against the cabinets and started to doze off.

“Um, no,” Azumi said, moving toward him to pinch him hard in the arm. “If you want to actually
get better, you need to stay awake. If you give in to the exhaustion, it will make it worse.”

Komushi actually almost started to cry. “You’re a demon,” he whined. “I’m so tired! I’ve been
fighting it for thirty minutes now.” He blinked, rubbing his eyes hard.

“Please,” she scoffed, “if I was a demon, I would have killed you already.” She grabbed his arm
and tried to pull him up. “Come on. If you are going to fall asleep, at least do it somewhere that is
not the kitchen because I cannot carry you back to Lord Sasori’s room.”

“Fine, fine!” He grumbled, pulling himself up off the floor. With her help, he took the tea tray and
they made it very slowly back to Sasori’s room.

Sasori had moved to his desk in the time they were gone. He got up the moment he saw his
dropping friend and straining slave. “Seriously?” he grumbled, helping him to the bed.

Azumi took the tray from Komushi as Sasori helped him to the bed and set it on the desk.
“Someone thought it was okay to take a nap in the kitchen,” she said, pinching Komushi.

“I’m tiiiired,” Komushi whined.

Sasori sighed and pinched Komushi again in the same spot and Komushi flinched and rubbed the
spot. “The point of this is to keep you from falling asleep! We know you’re tired! That’s a given!”

Komushi whined again and Azumi made him his tea. She helped him sit up and handed them the
cup. "It will all be over soon," she said softly. "The more you combat the urge to fall asleep, the
faster it will be flushed out of your system."

He sighed heavily and sipped the tea, ignoring the burning on his lip. “How long do I have to stay
up?” he asked them.

Sasori thought for a moment. "At least until sundown," he said. "We can try getting you on a
"What do you know about a normal sleep schedule?" Komushi chuckled, earning a shrug and an agreeing nod from Azumi.

Sasori’s eye twitched. “I’ll pinch you again!” he threatened. “Anyway,” he poured himself a cup of tea, “sundown and then tomorrow we will come to wake you up. Or rather, Azumi will.”

"Me?" Azumi groaned.

"Oh, yeah, send her," Komushi smirked.

"Oh, no, you do not want me to do it," she said with a grin. She gently scratched his scalp. "It would be a very rude awakening."

His eyes rolled back as she scratched his head. “This,” he moaned softly, “is why you’re a demon.”

Sasori retook his seat and rolled his eyes. “Her permission to hit you still stands if you try to make any moves,” he reminded Komushi.

"And I will take full advantage of that," Azumi muttered just loud enough for Komushi to hear.

"I know you will," Komushi sighed.

"Drink your tea," she told him as she retracted her hand and went into the workshop.

“You and your slave are devils,” Komushi muttered to Sasori with a slight smirk.

“You’re not too far off from us so I don’t know what you’re complaining about. You are only getting what you’ve earned.”

Komushi scoffed, almost choking on his tea. "Whoa, whoa, how did I earn this?" he defended.

"You're the one who went and got himself poisoned," Sasori told him.

“I drank some tea!” he retorted. “I fail to see how I earned random poisoning.”

“Maybe the gods decided you needed some punishing,” Sasori chuckled.

“That’s really rich coming from you! When is your reckoning then?”

"I don't need it. I'm a saint," Sasori smirked, earning a genuine laugh from Azumi in the workshop, in turn making Komushi laugh.

“To you, I’m a god,” Sasori called to her. “No one is above me.”

'A god, huh?' Azumi thought, recalling all of the moments she witnessed him get bested by Sandaime and his own mother. "Right," she chuckled.

“Yeah, I don’t think your mom or uncle agree with that statement,” Komushi grinned.

“She doesn’t answer to them so that doesn’t matter!” Sasori snapped. He put his teacup down harder than he needed to.

"Whoa, relax," Komushi chuckled, getting comfortable against the pillows as he sipped more of his
tea. "I'm only messing with you."

“You’ve been ‘messing’ with me all day and it’s starting to irk me, Komushi,” Sasori ground out.

“Oooh, the name usage,” Komushi grinned. “I really am in trouble now, aren’t I?”

"It sure sounds like it," Azumi called from the workshop.

For the next couple of hours, Azumi helped Sasori catch up on any work he had missed while dealing with Komushi while at the same time babysitting Komushi and making sure he stayed awake until sundown. As the sun started to set, Komushi let out a huge yawn and stretched hard. "Finally," he groaned. "I get to go to sleep."

"The sun hasn't fully set yet," Sasori told him. "You still have some time."

“Ugh, but what is there even to do right now?” Komushi was bordering on a fit at the moment.

“Dinner, you dimwit,” Sasori rolled his eyes. “I’ll go get it since you’re incapable of even keeping yourself upright for more than ten minutes at a time,” he said, getting up to fetch their dinner.

"Thanks, Dad," Komushi grinned as Sasori left the room. Sasori made sure to give him the finger on his way out.

Azumi chuckled softly at their interaction as she cleaned up the mess that Sasori made all over the workshop. She picked up the teacups they had been drinking from and a spider crawled up to the rim of one, startled by the movement of the cup. Azumi, startled by the spider, screamed and dropped all three cups, taking a couple of steps away from the whole area.

Komushi was on his feet faster than he should have been able to be. “What’s wrong?” He stumbled into the workshop, a little dizzy as the blood rushed to his feet. He looked around for anyone or anything that might be hiding in the room. “Are you okay?” he asked Azumi.

She pointed to the spider which moved toward her really fast and seemed bigger to her than it actually was. "It attacked me," she whined, getting onto a stool. She covered her mouth to hold back another scream when she saw the spider still moving toward her. Komushi looked over at the small spider with a raised eyebrow.

“What is going on in here! I could hear you screaming all the way down the—“ Sasori started angrily but then saw the spider. He grew quiet and retreated back to his room.

Komushi shook his head and walked over to the spider, grabbing a glass jar and lid as he did. He slammed the opening of the jar over the spider, brought it to an edge then slid the lid over it, sealing it away. “Your knight hath slain the dragon,” he announced, shaking the jar with the small arachnid.

Azumi relaxed a little on the stool. "Thank you," she said softly.

"Want to see it?” Komushi smirked, holding the jar close to her.

It activated her fight or flight response and her fangs came out when she gasped hard and backed away even more against the counter, practically climbing onto it. "Get it away," she growled. Komushi laughed as he pulled the jar back.

Sasori poked his head into the workshop. “You heard the woman! Get rid of it, Komushi!” he growled, keeping a safe distance.
“Aren’t scorpions arachnids?” Komushi chuckled as he walked over to the workbench and pulled out a match. He opened the jar and blew out the lit match then resealed the jar. The smoke from the burning wood would choke out the spider. “You two are safe again.”

“That doesn't make spiders any less gross,” Sasori said.

Azumi looked at the jar, still not getting anywhere near it as she got off of the stool. She retracted her fangs and shuddered before quickly finding a broom to clean up the broken ceramic.


She huffed a little as she threw away the broken pieces. "I do not want to talk about it," she said softly, slightly embarrassed.

“Look, she’s embarrassed,” Komushi cooed.

Sasori chuckled, brushing off his own fear of the spider. “That actually is pretty funny,” he said as he set the plates down.

“Did you plan on biting it?” Komushi teased.

She frowned and looked away from him. "No," she answered. "I just could not control them."

Komushi laughed harder then pulled himself together. “It really is adorable,” he said, taking a seat.

“That seems to have woken you back up, though,” Sasori smirked, laughing a little himself.

“It did. And now I’m tempted to see what else makes you deploy your fangs.” Komushi reached out to pinch Azumi’s cheek.

She caught his hand between both of hers before he could touch her face. "You may not find much,” she told him, pulling his hand away from her. "It will not be worth the time."

He raised an eyebrow. “I’ve always loved a challenge,” he grinned.

“If you distract her from her work, it’s your veins I’ll put her venom in,” Sasori said offhandedly.

"Which would only, like, what? Paralyze me?” Komushi scoffed. "Big deal."

"It would be best to let this one go, Lord Komushi," Azumi told him, taking a few steps away.

“It’s like you don’t even know who I am!” Sasori said with a flair of drama to his voice. Well, drama for his usual dead tone.

“Oh, no, Sasori, I know,” Komushi smirked. “And I know you love me.” He winked at the man.

“I hate you,” Sasori deadpanned. “Now eat so we can all go to sleep.”

"I've been waiting to sleep all day," Komushi grinned as he started to eat. Azumi sat on the other side of Sasori, away from Komushi. The three of them ate in almost near silence while Sasori and Azumi finished up the last bit of the work that needed to be written down. Halfway through his meal, Komushi yawned hard as if he was about to fall asleep right then.

Sasori wasted no time in punching him in the arm. "Stay awake for at least another half hour," he
“But why?” Komushi whined loudly. It was loud enough for it to echo in the small room. “The sun is down, what could you possibly...” he yawned again, pouting, “need me for!” he finished, whimpering.

"We're going to check you one more time and then you have to make it to the other side of the house to go to bed," Sasori told him. "Finish eating."

Komushi pouted again and then quickly finished his food in a couple of minutes. "Done," he grinned, like a child.

Sasori sighed quietly, picking up a syringe and, without warning, drawing a small sample from Komushi.

“Is that it?” Komushi continued to pout. “Was that my checkup?” he asked them.

"That was me drawing the blood for your checkup," Sasori said, carefully putting the blood onto a slide and then handing it to Azumi for her to check.

She took the slide to the microscope and looked it over for a few moments, noting the differences between it and the earlier samples. His blood was going back to normal. "There is a lot of progress," she mumbled. "I say about one more day of forcing him to stay awake and he should be fine to leave."

Sasori was giving him the rest of his physical checkup as she worked. “Right, then you have one more day and we can all finally go back to normal,” he grinned at Komushi. “And yes,” he said as Komushi opened his mouth, “you can go to bed.”

“Walk with me, Azumi,” Komushi grinned. “You know, in case I don’t make it.” He batted his lashes at her.

Azumi let out a quiet whine and then stood up. 'At least I get to slap him if he tries anything,' she thought. "Right. Come on," she said, heading out of the workshop.

He grinned as he stood up and followed her into the bedroom. He offered his arm to her with wiggling eyebrows. “In case I start to fall,” he smirked, knowing she would not agree to it right away.

She looked at him and groaned softly. "It would not be much help," she said. "I cannot hold you up. If anything, I would get stuck under you."

“Just take my arm,” he said as he rolled his eyes. “I saved you from that vicious spider!”

She closed her eyes and sighed. "You did," she groaned, taking his arm. "Thank you for that," she said softly.

“You’re welcome,” he grinned when she finally took his arm. “I’d do it for you anytime you need protecting, Milady.” He winked at her as they walked out of the room. He called a good night over his shoulder to Sasori.

"Is that something you have to do for Lord Sasori?” she asked as they walked down the hall. "Save him from spiders? Because he does not like them either."

“All the time,” Komushi chuckled. “Sasori doesn’t scream. He just freezes and backs away,” he
laughed again. “One time, there was a spider in his bathtub and he had a servant come over to my house to get me and the entire time he sat in his robe, waiting for me to come over.”

”That is a bit much,” she muttered. “I would have just burned the house down. I used to have my oldest brother kill the spiders for me.”

Komushi stopped dead in his tracks and blinked at her rapidly. He suddenly doubled over in laughter, holding onto the wall. “Oh, my gods, you two are really so dramatic,” he grinned, coming back to her and taking her arm again. “I had a pet tarantula for years and she was the best pest control!”

”A tarantula,” she said, the discomfort clear in her tone and on her face. She shuddered a little. ”It should not surprise me that that would be your choice of a pet.”

He laughed, feeling her tense up next to him. “She was a sweetie,” he grinned. “She used to ride in my hair and then one day Sasori accidentally killed her,” his voice softened a little.

“I am sorry to hear that,” she said. “Are you sure it was an accident? I have a hard time believing he would ‘accidentally’ cause the death of a spider.”

“Normally, I’d agree with your train of thought,” he chuckled. “But, uh, I don’t think his method of killing her would have been ideal for him,” he laughed harder. “He sat on her.”

She shuddered again. She could not imagine sitting on one, even by accident. The thought of any type of spider touching any part of her body made her extremely uncomfortable. “Certainly not ideal,” she groaned.

”Yeah, no, that’s the closest I’ve seen Sasori ever come to crying,” he smirked. They got to the room and Komushi released her arm. “May I have a goodnight kiss?” He batted his lashes, offering his cheek.

She stared at him in surprise and scoffed a little. “You are really asking for a lot,” she muttered. She hesitated hard for a few moments and then took a deep breath. “For killing the spider,” she said, leaning in to kiss his cheek.

His eyes widened in surprise when he felt her lips press against his cheek. His cheeks threatened to blush when he stood up straight. He gave her a lopsided smile. “Any time, Little Snake,” he winked at her and then said goodnight.

“Goodnight, Lord Komushi,” she said before turning to head back to Sasori’s room. “And that is all he is getting from me,” she grumbled to herself as she walked back into the bedroom.

When she returned Sasori was in bed with his ledger and a new cup of tea.

”Did he make it?” He joked.

”He did,” Azumi answered. “Though, I am sure he was out as soon as I turned to leave.” She sat down on the daybed. “He told me you killed his pet,” she smirked.

”His pet?” he repeated, looking up to recall what in the world she was talking about. “Oh.” His eyes widened. “Oh, that hairy monstrosity he had for like five years!” he hissed. “Yes. I didn’t mean to, though. I never liked being anywhere near that thing! He named it Nieth and I told him the gods were going to smite him.”

She chuckled softly. “You dealt with your best friends eight-legged demon for five years?” she
asked. “You are much braver than I.”

“We spent a lot of time at my house for those years,” Sasori admitted. “Nieth was not allowed out of his house,” he smirked.

“Clever,” she chuckled. “So...if he is not better by tomorrow night, will you just be leaving him here alone while you attend your uncle’s party?”

He set his ledger down with a thoughtful, heavy sigh. “Mmm, I’ll have to,” he frowned. “He’s making good progress so I don’t see why he would get worse but clearly he can relapse. But I’ll wager tomorrow will be the last hurdle and we won’t even have to worry about him by the party.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Otherwise, I’ll have to leave you here with him. I don’t trust anyone else.”

Her face scrunched up a little, not wanting to be left alone with Komushi for a night. However, she found it a bit funny that he only trusted her to deal with Komushi when she was the one who poisoned him. “Right,” she said softly.

“It’s been a long day. You can either stay or go,” he waved her off. “But I’m going to sleep.” He set his ledger down and blew out his light then rolled over and settled into sleep. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Lord Sasori,” she said softly as she got up. She went into the workshop to grab the dishes they used and tucked the cologne and hair oil for Gaara into her dress before leaving. She dropped the dishes off in the kitchen and then headed to her room.
Chapter 39

The next morning, Sasori walked down to Azumi's room. He was getting up irritatingly early lately and he could not wait to go back to his normal sleep schedule. He knocked on her door with a sharp wrap of his knuckle before walking in. She was getting dressed just as he walked in. "Good morning," she said with a slight bow. 'It is a good thing I told Gaara to go home earlier,' she thought. She stretched hard as she came up from the bow. "Have you woken him up yet?"

"No," he said, taking a seat on her bed. He leaned back against the wall. "I believe I said you were going to do that," he smirked.

She frowned and then sighed. "Alright," she said. "Come on, Naga." Naga quickly wrapped around her and she headed to the other side of the mansion to wake up Komushi. Naga hissed at her, asking her why she had to be the one to wake him up. "Because my master is an asshole," she muttered. She knocked on the door of the room Komushi was staying in before entering because she knew Komushi was still sleeping. Quietly, she approached his sleeping form. "How should I wake him up?" she whispered. Naga looked at her and even though he could not give her any facial expressions, the look in his eyes was quite devious. He hissed challenging at her. "Jump on him? Are you insane?" He hissed again. "Okay, I am convinced," she smirked. She took Naga off of her and set him down on the bedside table then backed up all the way to the door she entered from. With a wide grin, she ran toward the bed and jumped onto Komushi to wake him up.

With a long, loud, and startled gasp, Komushi's eyes shot open. He grabbed her by the waist, switching their positions in a smooth motion so he was pinning her to the bed. He straddled her thighs and pinned her hands over her head by the wrists with one hand. It took him a moment to register just who he had under him. "Oh," his voice was still rough with sleep. "Well, this is one way to get under me, Little Snake," he smirked, leaning down to run the tip of his nose up her neck. Her breath hitched and she tried to pull away. "But next time, maybe go for a gentler approach. I am still recovering, you know." He sat back on his calves, releasing her hands.

As soon as he released her hands, she slapped him really hard. "With a quick reaction like the one you just had, I would have thought you would have seen this slap coming," she said, shaking her hand to get rid of the stinging. She half-expected him to catch her hand before it collided with his face.

He hissed in pain but his grin remained. He pressed a hand to his cheek and turned his head back to look down at her. "I knew it was coming," he chuckled. "But it was worth it considering I'm still on top of you and who wouldn't want to be hit by someone so beautiful?"

She looked down at where their bodies connected and then looked away from him, trying not to pout. "Please get off of me," she said softly.

He smirked down at her, following her line of sight. "What? I don't have red hair and a bad temper so I'm not allowed on top of you?" he asked her in a light tone.

She huffed and looked back at him. "You said it, not me," she scoffed.

"Is it wrong?"

She rolled her eyes, completely ignoring that question. "It is because you are made of solid rock and are crushing me."
He pushed down on her a little. "Thought you were into the pain stuff," he smirked. He rolled off of her, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. "Sasori up yet?" he asked her over his shoulder.

"He is," she said as she sat up and crawled off of the bed from the other side. Naga moved across the bed to coil around her. "He might be in the kitchen already."

"I'm going to convince him to make us farina," he said, pushing off of the bed with long and loud stretch. "Shit, I can't wait for this to be over so I can go back to working out," he grinned.

Azumi's eyes widened and she turned to Komushi. "He can make that?" she asked. "Please convince him."

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye with a small smirk. "Of course he can. He almost makes it better than his mom and aunts," he whispered as they started down the hall. "I'll convince him," he winked at her. "What do you like in it?"

"Just cinnamon," she said excitedly. "How does he usually make it?"

"He makes it with vanilla and a little sugar but dumps a ton cinnamon into his own bowl," he laughed. "You two are really so similar." They rounded the corner to the kitchen and walked in to the scent of coffee.

Sasori was in there, sitting at the table with a cup of coffee. "It's about time you showed up," he grumbled when they walked in.

'It was not even that long,' Azumi thought, resisting an eye roll.

"Yeah, yeah," Komushi grinned, rolling his eyes. He crossed the room, throwing his arm around Sasori's shoulder as he scooted into a seat. "So Sasori, my darling best friend, husband of mine, lord of this little castle," he batted his eyes, shmoozing hard, "I need you to do me a huge favor."

Sasori looked up at him from his coffee cup. "I'm not your husband," he deadpanned. "And what do you want?"

"You're right. I would never marry someone who is this mean to me this early in the morning," Komushi chuckled. "Can you make farina for breakfast?"

Sasori's brow furrowed and then he looked behind Komushi at Azumi who looked very hopeful. "Was this your idea?" he asked her. She shook her head, still looking very excited. After a couple of seconds, he sighed heavily. "Fine," he said as he pushed himself out of the chair. "Sit down," he told her.

Azumi sat down quickly, almost vibrating with excitement. "Thank you, Lord Sasori," she grinned.

"Uh-huh." He rolled his eyes, getting everything he needed to make breakfast. Komushi winked at her and raised his hand just a little for a high five. She high fived him and they waited patiently while Sasori made their breakfast. He set the pot in the middle of the table and took out three bowls and a small jar of cinnamon. "We spoon the cinnamon out in this house," he told them, putting a small spoon in the jar.

"How sophisticated," Komushi teased. He spooned a healthy helping into his bowl and got up to pour himself some coffee. "This is the life," he groaned. "So," he looked at both of them, "what is on the agenda today?"

"My uncle is having a party tonight," Sasori sighed. "So we will be getting ready for that."
"A party?" Komushi asked. "For what?"


"So I'm going home tonight?" Komushi asked.

"No," Sasori hummed. "If you relapse again, tonight Azumi will stay with you and I'll go to the party alone. But if you can manage to show us you're okay and in the clear, you'll spend one last night here and then go home."

"But I do not think relapse is very likely," Azumi said as she spooned the cinnamon onto her farina. "I think yesterday may have been the worst of it and then he will be fine."

"Yeah, I feel fine," Komushi said.

"Of course you feel fine," Sasori said. He waited for Azumi to finish so he could make a small cinnamon mound in his own bowl. "You just woke up. We'll check back in an hour and see if you're still up."

"Azumi was right the first time about this needing to run its course," Komushi picked up his spoon. "I'm going to hedge my bets that she's right and I'm all better."

Azumi nodded in agreement. 'Also, I do not want to stay here alone with him,' she thought as she started eating. She had a good feeling Gaara was going to be at Sandaime's party and she wanted to see him.

"Well, we still have to check you and make sure," Sasori sighed. "And remember, if you feel tired, let us know."

"I got it," he said a little glumly. They finished their breakfast some time later and made their way back down to Sasori's bedroom. "Let us pick your outfit," Komushi nearly demanded as he vaulted onto Sasori's bed.

"Could you not do that!" Sasori growled. "And no! Azumi can pick and you can observe. I never like the things you pick anyway." He rolled his eyes as he got on the bed as well.

Komushi huffed and folded his arms. "Fine," he grumbled. They both leaned against the pillows, watching her.

Azumi unwrapped Naga from around her and set him down on the daybed then went to the wardrobe and shifted through the different outfits he had. "We did red last time," she said softly as she turned toward Sasori. "Do you want to do white? I do not have clothes in any other colors," she frowned. 'Because this guy only wears white or red,' she thought.

"Where is that green outfit you used to have?" Komushi asked. "You looked great in it."

"It's somewhere," Sasori waved Komushi off. "I think we'll go with red again but the darker one. I prefer not to wear white at night," he explained.

Azumi nodded and took out the darker red outfit he was talking about. She took a long look at it before letting out a pleased hum. "This is nice," she said. She looked at the vanity where he kept jewelry. "And I know exactly what would go with it."

"By all means," he smirked. He was amused by how fashionable she was for a girl who had never left her village prior to being taken into slavery.
Azumi hung his outfit outside of the wardrobe and went over to the vanity, picking up different pieces of jewelry and holding it out toward the outfit. "Yup," she said with a satisfied nod. "This is it."

"Model it for us!" Komushi cheered.

Sasori laughed a little and nodded. "Yes, I quite enjoyed it when you were the model last time," he agreed. She let out an uncomfortable groan. She had no problem getting undressed around Sasori but around Komushi, it made her uneasy. She sighed and took a step in the direction of the bathroom but was stopped by Sasori's voice. "Where are you going?" he smirked. "You can change out here." She frowned and hesitated hard for a moment before letting out another sigh and undressing.

"Oooh," Komushi whooped when he spotted her bandages. "Wait, did you add anything to it?" he asked excitedly.

"Oh, right," Sasori tilted his head. "I honestly forgot all about that," he said, looking at the bandages as well. They looked a little dingy now. "Before you put anything on, those are coming off. Everything should be more than healed."

With a slight nod, she started unwrapping her leg. She did not want to see what he did to her and she had hoped to keep it that way by leaving her leg bandaged. However, she knew it would not last long. She kept her eyes averted from the burn as she removed the bandages from her leg completely and reached for the first part of the outfit she was trying on.

"No, wait!" Komushi crawled to the end of the bed. "Let me see what he added!"

Sasori raised an eyebrow at her. He noted the way she avoided looking at it. "You don't like my work?" he smirked. "Go on. Show him. And take a look for yourself." Still clutching the clothes in front of her, she stepped closer to them, letting Komushi see what Sasori did to her. She had a good feeling of what it was before she glanced down at it.

Without thinking or asking, Komushi reached out to trace the still raised burns of the little scorpions now skittering around the snake tattoo. Azumi flinched a little when she felt Komushi touch her and clutched the clothes harder against her. "Wow, you really went all out with this," he said softly with a smirk. "This must have hurt like a bitch."

Sasori grinned, looking over it himself to take in his healed up work. "She took it better than anyone else has," he said coolly. She looked away from the burn and them. It was exactly what she thought it was and she would have been impressed with it if it was not on her body. "Azumi," Sasori sang softly. His eyes were trained intently on her as she slowly looked at him. "Do you not like it?" he smirked. He knew she would hate it. However, he had made her a promise and he simply had to keep it.

Komushi glanced up at her and flashed a smirk of his own. He settled back into his spot so she could get dressed. "Do you plan on working down the rest of the snake?" he asked Sasori.

"Of course," Sasori watched Azumi. "But I want to take my time with it. She's not going anywhere any time soon and I enjoyed adding all those little details. It was very cathartic." She frowned again as she started to get dressed.

"I can't wait to see it when it's complete," Komushi said. "When do you think that'll be?"

"Mm, not sure," Sasori hummed. "I've decided I want to make it detailed and take my time with it."
He smirked at her. "It will be my masterpiece."

Azumi looked at him and groaned softly. She hated that there was absolutely nothing she could do about it that would not get her killed in the end. She looked away and finished getting dressed then put the jewelry on. Once everything was in place, she turned to them full-on to show them the outfit.

Komushi gasped and then immediately started to clap. "Stunning! You're going to steal the show Sasori," he chuckled.

"That's what I aim for," Sasori smirked. He twirled his finger for her to spin around and she did. Once she did a full spin, he nodded. "Perfect." She nodded as well and then started to take the outfit off.

"You should let her do your make up, too," Komushi half-teased.

"The most I wear is eyeliner," Sasori rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, but you should really let her do you up."

Sasori hummed for a moment, looking her over as she put her dress back on. She looked at him again and frowned. "You do not have to have me do it if you do not want to," she said softly. She did not want to do his makeup anyway. He could do it perfectly fine on his own.

"I'm fine," Sasori said with finality. "But I will ask to borrow your store of eyeliner," he said to Azumi. "I ran out and a while ago and didn't bother to make more."

"Since you're an anti-social pain in my ass, do you know how lame it is at the club without you?" Komushi whined.

"Like I care," Sasori scoffed, rolling his eyes. "There's nothing there worth going for."

Komushi gasped. "Of course there is! There is so much there worth going for."

"Oh, yeah? Like what?"

"Well, for one, sex," he said bluntly. "And two, your cousin started playing there and he's really good!"

"Kankuro?" Sasori raised his eyebrow. He completely brushed off the sex comment.

"Lord Kankuro plays?" Azumi hummed. "That is interesting." She started to have ideas of collaboration but brushed them off instantly, not wanting to deal with possible comments about her trying to get with Sasori's other cousin.

"Yeah, Kankuro played the other night," Komushi continued, "and it was probably his best night yet. The turnout was amazing."

"I have better things to do than go to the club," Sasori waved him off.

"You're a literal hermit and you need to get out sometimes," Komushi said with a little genuine concern in his tone. "If you don't, it can hurt your shop since your social skills will be so shit!"

Sasori squinted at him. "My shop is doing fine without me socializing," he said.

"It would not hurt to let loose just a little bit," Azumi told him. "You should go out for one carefree
"night."

"Exactly!" Komushi folded his arms. "If you won't listen to me, at least listen to her!"

Sasori groaned, rubbing his face. "I'm going to this party! That's social enough."

"No, that's going to be a family event. That doesn't count at all."

Azumi shrugged and then nodded in agreement. "He is right," she said. "It does not count."

Sasori groaned again. "The last thing I need is you two ganging up on me."

"See! If even she is saying it then you know it's true!" Komushi rolled onto his side to look at Sasori. "I'm going to get you out of this house, you damn workaholic, and you are going to enjoy yourself!"

Sasori groaned again, running his hand through his hair. "Fine," he relented. "I'll go out one night."

He really did not want to but it was easier to let this happen than to find a woman to get married to.

"Perfect!" Komushi kicked his feet in the air. "This is going to be so much better than being there alone! And, ugh, you're going to kill it on the dance floor!"

"I'm not getting on the—"

"I wasn't asking," Komushi mimicked Sasori's mother's tone.

Sasori shuddered a little as if he actually heard his mother say it. "Don't ever do that again," he growled.

Naga hissed softly, moving up Azumi's body and coiling around her in his normal fashion as she sat down at the desk. He tapped his nose against hers. He wanted to go to the party too. "I cannot take you," she whispered, kissing the top of his head. "I am sorry."

"Ah, did that freak you out?" Komushi cooed.

Sasori growled again. "Clearly." He pushed Komushi hard enough for him to tumble off the bed. "You're getting too good at that and I don't deserve two of her in my life," he said, folding his arms and leaning back against the pillows. He waited a few seconds but Komushi did not retaliate. There was no sassy jab or even a disgruntled struggle to get back up on the bed. "Shit," he cursed, leaning over the edge of the bed. Komushi was knocked out.

Azumi looked over at Komushi on the floor and rolled her eyes with a loud groan. "Really?" she grunted as she stood up. She went over to him and stood over him, kicking him gently to see if he would wake up. She kicked him harder and he still did not budge. "I do not want to stay here with you," she growled as she grabbed his hands to pull him up. She barely lifted his back off of the floor. "Get up, Scarab."

Sasori reached down to help her hoist him up onto the bed. Komushi landed with a heavy thud. He was all dead weight. "Let's give him some time and see if he wakes up. He was up for a while just now so maybe this sleep bout will be shorter." He frowned at Komushi but did not bother to hide his slight concern.

She nodded and sighed as she sat down at the desk. "What constitutes a relapse in this case?" she asked. "If he does not wake up at all or if he goes to sleep faster than he did before?"
"I'd say longer spans of sleeping and if he goes out faster than he did before," Sasori hummed. "If he doesn't wake up at all, he's comatose and then it's worse than a simple relapse." He sighed. "But if he really does stay knocked out for the rest of the day, you'll have to stay with him."

She threw her head back and groaned again. "But I do not like him," she whined softly. Naga hissed at her. "No, I am not jumping on him again." After he pinned her down, she knew he could react quicker than she could get off and she did not want to be under him again. "You better wake up," she grumbled quietly, looking over at Komushi on the bed.

"You both really are like children," Sasori sighed. "Let's leave him for now." He swung his legs over the side of the bed and started for the workshop. "There really isn't much we can do here and we have plenty of projects that have been getting backed up that I'd like to take care of," he said.

Azumi sighed and stood up to follow him into the workshop. On one of the work tables, was a list of projects he wanted to work on. She hovered over it, reading it quickly. Some of it was simple and could be completed within a couple of hours. "I can do some of these for you," she hummed. "Rather than us working on them together." It would give him time to work on the more complicated things.

"That was the plan," he flashed her a smirk. He settled down at his desk to start on a particularly complex project. She hummed and picked up the list to start the first of the simpler projects.

They worked for a couple of hours, both of them getting very lost in their work and enjoying the silence between them. At the same time, they looked up from their projects and were reminded of each other's existence.

"He has not woken up," Azumi said.

"I was just thinking the same thing," Sasori hummed, looking out into the bedroom from his seat.

"Should we try to wake him up?"

"What would you suggest?" he asked her as he crossed the room to check on Komushi's body. He checked his vitals and frowned. "His heart rate is fine and he's breathing okay. You mentioned something about jumping on him?" He turned to her with a curious look.

"I jumped on him this morning to wake him up," she said. "It was Naga's idea. It woke him up. But I did not expect a reaction as quick as the one he had."

"Ah..." He paused, staring at Komushi hard. "Do it again," he demanded, snapping to look up at her.

She frowned and looked at Komushi. There were a few moments of hesitation before she sighed heavily and set Naga down on the desk. She walked all the way to the door of the bedroom then ran at Komushi and jumped on him just as she did earlier. His body jerked up hard but instead of the swift movement, he had earlier his body just fell back to the bed. He loud a long, loud snore as he settled back down. Azumi rolled off of the bed and fixed her dress. She stood over Komushi and hummed in thought. After a few seconds, she pinched his nose closed, unable to suppress the small evil laugh that escaped her as she heard him struggle to breathe for a moment. He still did not wake up. "I have no more ideas," she said indifferently.

"He's really out," Sasori frowned. "He's usually such a light sleeper despite being an actual rock." He scratched his head then checked the time. "I have to start getting ready so it looks like you're going to have to stay with him tonight." He folded his arms, tapping the fingers of one hand along
his upper arm.

Both Azumi and Naga deflated at the news. "I guess I will go start your bath then," she muttered, heading into the bathroom to run his bath and set everything up for him.

He followed her into the bath and slipped into it the moment it was ready. "You'll have an easier night than me," he said to her. "You don't have to go out to a crowded room and pretend you are remotely social," he scoffed.

"I am not sure that spending the night with someone who touches me in a way I do not want is much of an easier night," she said. 'Plus, I want to see Gaara.' She grabbed his robe and hung it up for him then set a towel out. "Will we be moving him back to the other side of the house or is he going to stay in your bed?"

He hummed in thought for a moment. He considered her general discomfort around him and looked at her. "Which would be better for you?" he asked her. "Here, you can get to any supplies you need quickly but over there, you have distance from him. It will take him much longer to chance after you and he would probably fall asleep on the way anyway."

"Mm, I suppose leaving him here would be easier," she said. "If he followed me over here and fell asleep, there is no way I could move him."

"Then it is decided," he hummed as he washed his face. "Just don't ruin my bed or let him ruin my bed," he teased, earning a scoff from her. "I shouldn't be out too late tonight but I will be back after dinner time so make what you want."

"Right," she said softly with a nod. "Try not to have too much fun," she smirked.

Sasori rolled his eyes, "I'll do my very best," he snorted.

"I can finish more of that list of projects while you are gone."

"If you finish all the simple stuff, you can move on to some of the more complex things." He rolled over onto his side in the tub so he could look out the window. "Ugh, I really don't want to do this."

Azumi sat down on the stool. "It will only be for a couple of hours," she reasoned. "You are only going to make an appearance and say that you did go. Your mother just needs to know and see that you attended. But she does not need to know how long you will be there."

"Yes," he huffed. "But knowing my mother, she'll make me stay well into the night and dance with at least four girls." He was borderline whining now.

"Aw," she mock-pouted, "what a tragedy, you must dance and continue to turn women down." He turned to glare at her and she smirked at him. "It is nothing you have not dealt with before. You will be fine."

"Just go get started on those projects," he rolled his eyes and cracked a smile.

"Yes, Lord Sasori," she said half-teasingly. She left the bathroom and laid his outfit out on the bed then went into the workshop to work on the projects that were on the list. He got out a little while later and started to get dressed. With a heavy sigh, he called goodbye to her and left for the party.
Chapter 40

The walk to Sandaime's house should not have taken as long as it did, but Sasori stalled as much as he could, stopping at every corner and peering into windows of shops as if he was going to go in and buy something. Anything to prolong having to see his uncle and deal with his mother trying to set him up with women. Eventually, he arrived at Sandaime's house and with a heavy sigh, he went up the stairs and entered the party.

"Eeeeh," Kankuro's arm slid around Sasori's shoulder and a drink was placed into his reluctant hand. "You are late, Cousin!" He knocked back his own drink.

Sasori groaned softly, smelling the alcohol on his younger cousin's breath. "Sorry," he rolled his eyes. "I really didn't want to come," he grumbled.

"I'm sure you didn't," Kankuro smirked. "You never do and frankly, I'm surprised you even came."

"Well, not like I had much of a choice," Sasori sighed, taking a sip of the drink he was handed. "My mother is here and if she saw that I didn’t come, I would suffer more than I will at this party."

"Then praise Auntie for bringing out the Great Hermit," Kankuro laughed, hugging Sasori roughly around the shoulders. He clinked their glasses together then released him. "I better see you on the dance floor tonight!" he smiled, drifting away. The woman Kankuro brought to the last party slipped her arm around Kankuro's waist as they disappeared.

Sasori groaned, sipping from his glass again. "Where is the drink table," he muttered, turning on his heel to skulk along the wall of the party. He was content to skirt along the edge of the crowd, let his mother see he was there and then leave for the night.

A good ten minutes passed by as Sasori stood against the wall by the drink table. He downed two full drinks and was halfway through his third one when he was approached by another cousin. "I'm surprised to see you hanging out in this room and not outside, away from everyone," Gaara smirked, standing next to him. Unlike Kankuro, he did not touch him as a greeting.

Sasori growled low in his throat. "You know very well this is not optional." He finished off the glass in one sip. "Why are you here?" He looked at his cousin up and down. "And where is my mother?" he asked, reaching for another glass.

"I'm here because, much like you, I was forced to come due to this being a family-hosted event," Gaara sighed. "And your mother is over there." He pointed to the other side of the room where Sasori's mother was speaking with Sandaime. Suddenly, she turned her head and made eye contact with Sasori who flinched a little against the wall. "She’s like a hawk," Gaara chuckled.

"I think hawks evolved from her," Sasori muttered. He pushed off the wall and took another long sip of his drink. "If I go over there now, say hello and get one good dance in, I can go home," he nodded to himself.

"I think Uncle wants to say something though," Gaara said. "You might have to stay for that too."

"Like I care about whatever he has to say," Sasori grumbled. He picked up another drink and just
as he was about to take a step toward his mother, she started beelining toward him.

“That’s my cue to go,” Gaara said, walking away.

“Wait, don’t leave me!” Sasori hissed. However, it was too late. Gaara was gone and his mother was approaching quick.

“Sasori, my wonderful son,” she grinned as she walked up to him, kissing both of his cheeks and pulling him into a hug.

"Mooooooooother," he smiled tightly. "Drink?" He offered her one as they pulled out of the hug.

"Of course," she smiled, taking the cup. She looked him over and hummed approvingly into her glass. "I haven't seen you this done up in some time," she cupped his face. "This is a family affair but there are still plenty of girls I want to see you dancing with tonight."

“Of course there are,” he said, looking around at the crowd. He could spot one or two women that he knew his mother would choose for him.

“And I noticed you didn’t bring your slave girl so now I know you can’t hide behind her,” his mother said. “I know you’ve been keeping her around to deflect other women.”

“Mother!” Sasori said a little dramatically. He scoffed, acting offended at the comment even though he knew it was true.

His mother pressed her lips but it twitched into a smile. "Go on and pick someone." She gave him a push towards the dance floor. "And do not come back until you've danced with all of the ones you know I'd pick."

"But...Mom."

“No ‘butts’ Sasori,” she said sternly. “Go.”

Sasori hesitated for another moment before letting out a sigh and heading toward the first girl.

Gaara returned to his spot and stood next to his aunt once Sasori was gone. “I just want to see this entertainment,” he said softly as he sipped his drink.

“Entertainment?” She raised an eyebrow. “I do believe I also gave you a time limit.” She looked at him then the dance floor.

Gaara pouted hard. “But Auntie...” Gaara started but she shook her head and tilted it hard. “Fine,” he sighed, soon joining his cousin on the floor. She smirked as she watched him walk away. Unlike Sasori, though, Gaara could get away with just walking past girls since none of them were chosen for him. He continued on through the floor until he got to the other side and stood against the other wall next to Sandaime.

Meanwhile, on the dance floor, Sasori approached a young woman who he was sure his mother imagined his future with. “Care for a dance?” he asked smoothly.

The girl gasped softly, then bit her lip in a poor attempt to stifle an overwhelming string of giggles. "Why yes," she said. Her voice was some weird breathy sound that he was certain she thought was alluring or seductive. It was neither but Sasori said nothing. Instead, he offered her his hand and pulled her close to start dancing.
Gaara finished off his drink and grabbed another one off a passing server.

"I see your aunt is on the prowl," Sandaime chuckled.

"She is," he sighed. "She is convinced she can have me and Sasori married off in two years."

Sandaime raised an eyebrow. "Two years?" he chuckled. "That's a bit ambitious."

"Yes, but you know her," Gaara said.

"That I do. And I know once she demands something, she will see it through." Sandaime looked around the room for a couple of seconds. "Sasori came alone?"

“He did,” Gaara frowned. “I haven’t seen any indication that Azumi is here,” he sighed, almost pouting.

Sandaime smiled fondly down at him. “He doesn’t seem to be in a hurting mood but,” Sandaime frowned, “I would have rather she came with him.”

“His best friend was poisoned this past week so she is probably playing nurse for him,” Gaara spoke up. “But Komushi has a boundary issue so I’m praying he’s still knocked out.”

“That sounds very much like Komushi,” Sandaime chuckled, “getting himself poisoned.” He took a sip of his own drink. “But I do hope she is doing okay with him. I know he can be pushy, but I’m sure she can handle herself.”

“She can hold her own,” Gaara hummed. “But if he does try anything, Naga will protect her, Sasori might maim him and I will certainly murder him,” he said with absolute seriousness.

Sandaime stared at him for a moment then snorted. “She is well protected then,” he smirked.

“I promised her,” he said.

Sandaime’s smirk turned back into a fond smile. “And you’ve always been one to keep your promises.” He looked back out to the crowd and saw Sasori dancing with another girl. Even with a smile on his face, it was obvious he dreaded being there. “You can see in his eyes how miserable he is,” he chuckled.

"I know," Gaara drew the word out like it was something delicious. "And so far, it is the best part of my night."

"Oh, no, this is just the pregame to what he's going to find out tonight." Sandaime finished off his glass.

“I can’t wait to see his face,” Gaara smirked.

“It’s almost time.” Sandaime handed his empty glass to another passing server and picked up one from the tray they carried. “I’ll see you later,” he said to Gaara with a nod as he walked away.

It was not too long later that they heard the ringing of a glass being tapped at the head of the room. The music petered out slowly and the dancers slowed with it. Sasori stepped back from his more recent dance parter and stifled a wince as he bowed to her. He stared at his reddened and battered feet. She had stepped all over them and he was eager for any excuse to get away from her. He quickly found his mother and father, seated in one of the room’s alcoves. He grabbed a glass of something and joined them.
"You owe me, Mother, after that last girl," he whined.

She sighed and gave his feet a sympathetic look. "Yes, I might have misjudged that one," she hummed.

Sasori shook his head and took a sip of his drink. "Do either of you know what Uncle is going to announce?" Sasori asked his parents.

"I'm not sure," his father spoke up. "I think it's something he's been working on for a while though."

Sasori hummed his acknowledgment. He could not give a damn what his uncle had to announce. It was probably something stupid—to him at least. He looked around as the crowd grew quiet and turned toward Sandaime who stood at the front of the room.

"I want first thank all of you for attending," Sandaime said. "It means a lot to me that you all took the time out of your night to be here."

Sasori folded his arms and rolled his eyes. 'Spare me,' he thought.

"I am sure you are all aware of the donations that were so generously given for what we are working towards." There was a round of applause through the crowd and he gave the room a charming smile. "I can't thank you all enough."

'Donations?' Sasori peeked at the front of the room where there were a bunch of envelopes on a table. 'What is this a charity for?'

"Thanks to all of you, we can start working more toward our goal and within the next couple of months, see it through."

"Did you two donate anything?" Sasori asked his parents. His mother shook his head and his father shrugged. Sasori let out a quiet hum as he tried to figure out what Sandaime could possibly be asking for donations for.

"I am very happy to announce," Sandaime continued, "that with the help of all of you, we are now another step closer to our goal of seeing slavery in this region abolished." He made a point of looking Sasori in the eyes when he said the very last word.

Sasori's blood ran ice cold. His breath came hard and fast but shallow and his head started to spin. He gripped the glass in his hand tightly, causing it to shatter. Gaara looked over at his cousin, watching him carefully for his next moves.

"Sasori!" His mother's voice was muffled. He felt too hot suddenly, her hands making his skin crawl the moment she tried to reach out for him.

"Don't touch me," he growled. He got up, stumbling a little as he did not take his eyes off his uncle. Rage started to seethe through him, twisting his handsome face into something manic and horrifying. His uncle stared back, flashing him a wide, knowing and oh, so charming grin. His uncle tipped his glass to him and Sasori growled lower. His parents stood up to try and calm their son but he backed away from them. "Do not!" he snarled, turning on his foot to rip out of the hall and out into the night. He laughed to himself as he made his way back to his own mansion.

Chapter End Notes
This was a shorter chapter, BUT LISTEN TO--WAIT, LISTEN TO ME!!! Sometimes a short chapter is okay.
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

First of all, we wanna say that we are shook'd to our cores with the number of chapters we've written for this story thus far.
Secondly, we are barely near the end.

It had been a couple of hours since Sasori left for the party and Azumi was halfway through the second project on the list he left for her. Naga tapped his face against her neck to break her concentration and bring her back. He hissed softly at her, reminding her that she should eat something. "Oh, you are right," she said softly. "Thank you." She stood up and stretched hard then walked out of the workshop. Glancing over at Komushi, she noticed he was still asleep. She walked across the room and went down to the kitchen. "I suppose I should make something for him as well," she mumbled. Once she was in the kitchen, she decided she was going to make food for herself and Komushi. As she made the food, Naga talked to her about his life before he was captured by the caravan. She served two bowls and brought them back to Sasori's room along with two cups of coffee and a cup of tea. Just as she entered the room, Komushi was starting to wake up.

"Good morning," she smirked at him.

"Hmmhmm," he groaned, rubbing his eyes. "How long was I out?" his voice was rough. He cleared it as he pushed himself up to lean against the pillows. "Where's Sasori?" he asked, not seeing the other man. "What time is it?" His questions came a little faster as he woke up. "Shit, did I really lose the whole day?"

Azumi set the tray she carried onto the desk and brought him his bowl. "You have been out for a couple of hours," she answered. "Lord Sasori went to the party. The sun set about two hours ago and yes, you did pretty much lose the whole day." She set his coffee on the bedside table.

Komushi sunk further into the pillows and his lips turned down into a pout. It only lasted for a moment though because the smell of coffee made his eyes flutter. His stomach roared in hunger, too. He glanced down at the food. "You do care about me," he smirked. "Did you plan to force me awake or are our souls simply so connected?"

"I was going to force you awake," she said simply. "I had a plan to make a small incision in your side and irritate it until you woke up." She looked at him and grinned. "But now I do not have to do that."

He shrunk back from her a little and chuckled. "You and Sasori are really made for each other," he said, picking up his cup of coffee. "So what have you been occupying yourself with while I was awaiting your true love's kiss?"

"I have been working on things that he left for me to do," she hummed as she started to eat. "With you being here and him focusing most of his time on you, he has been backed up on projects."

"Aw," Komushi chuckled. "Poor businessman," he said teasingly. "I bet he's suffering tonight. Do you wanna place bets on how many girls his mother will make him dance with?" He gave her a devilish grin. "I'll buy you a whole week's worth of churros if you win and if I win....well, I'll think of something."
"I cannot buy you anything if you win," she said. "And I will not sleep with you."

"A kiss?"

"Not a real kiss."

"A quick peck on the lips."

"On the cheek."

"Deal. Buuut...you also have to dance with me."


He grinned, looking up and tapping his fingers against his chin. He hummed for a few moments then nodded. "I'm going to bank on a solid five girls," he grinned. "Bonus points if one of them stepped all over his feet."

"Five girls?" she chuckled. "That number seems a little low. However, things could be surprising, so I am going to say she picked six but he only danced with four. He does not seem to be the kind to tolerate too many dance partners, especially in one night."

"Mmm, you're learning his habits a little too well," Komushi chuckled again. "You're making me nervous. I might have to pay closer attention to him," he winked.

“Well, I have spent just about all of my time with him these last few weeks,” she said. “It would be odd for a scientist to not observe something they see on a daily basis.”

“You’re absolutely right,” he smirked.

Azumi looked at him, tilting her head slightly. “I am not the only slave of Lord Sasori’s that you have been this pushy with when it comes to your advances,” she said.

“What makes you say that?” he chuckled.

“You are very obvious.”

He let out a genuine laugh and shook his head. “You’re right. You’re not the first. But you are the first to hit me.”

“I will take that with pride,” she hummed, sipping her coffee.

“The other ones never resisted me as hard as you do. And I will say you are also the first to go after Gaara.” She frowned at him, wondering if he got his way with the other slaves on his own terms or with their consent. He noted the look on her face and smiled. “Don’t worry,” he assured her. “If I slept with them, they also wanted it.”

Azumi was not entirely surprised that Komushi slept with Sasori’s previous slaves. She was, however, surprised he admitted it to her. She could not truly be upset with the fact either, because she and Gaara had been intimate as well. However, she truly loved Gaara and she was not sure if that was the case for previous slaves with Komushi. “Does...does Lord Sasori know?” she asked.

“You think he’d still let me come around if he did?” he smirked.

“Good point,” she muttered. Sasori was very adamant to keep relationships with his slaves nonexistent. She paused for another moment. “Did you...have any true feelings for them?”
Komushi looked at her hard for a few seconds. “No,” he answered. “I didn’t love any of them if that’s what you’re asking. It was purely sex for me.”

“I see…but...do you know that was the same case for them?”

He shook his head. “None of them expressed to me their feelings if they had any so I’m assuming it was purely sex for them too. Not that it matters much now. I’m sure you realize that they’re dead now.”

She frowned again. It was not something she tried to think about because she focused so much on not suffering the same fate. She was walking on very thin ice being with Gaara and she knew it. “I do realize that,” she said softly.

They heard someone storming down the hall. "Oh...you said he was only there for an hour?” he asked her, looking towards the door but turning his head towards her.

Her brow furrowed. "I did not say anything like that," she mumbled, setting her bowl down. She heard the door open and looked in its direction. The look on Sasori's face immediately made her blood run cold. Naga knew something was wrong and started hissing loudly, telling her to run. She gasped hard, backing away from him.

"Whoa!” Komushi perked up. "What's up Saso—" Sasori held up a hand and flared his nostrils. Komushi, for once, clammed up immediately.

"You," he growled, sauntering across the room with a wide and unsettling grin. "You're a liar!" He crossed the room, backing her into the workshop. "You knew what that party was for." He backed her up against the workbench and wrapped his hand around her throat. He bent her backward, feeling her body bow up against his as he dug his nails into her neck. "I am currently loyal to you,” he scoffed, quoting her words to him. "And when exactly did those loyalties change in the last few weeks?” he hissed. "You think he can save you," his voice broke a little as he pressed down against her windpipe.

She gripped his wrist with both hands, struggling hard to breathe. "I—" she choked. "I do not know...what you are...talking about,” she grunted. She could feel him press harder every time she spoke. Naga was quick to follow them into the workshop, getting into a defensive stance behind Sasori. He was ready to strike.

Sasori whipped around, hearing the hissing behind him. He slammed Azumi hard into the ground and cabinets as he snatched a basket with a lid. He grabbed Naga by the middle of his body and chucked him hard into the basket. “It’ll be so nice to have a new belt,” he snarled softly. He put the basket down and placed an iron pot on the lid. He turned back to Azumi and kicked her hard in the ribs. "Mmm, I bet you don’t.” He kicked her again. “Bet you know absolutely nothing of tonight and haven’t been biding your time, waiting to what? Poison me next?” He kicked her hard enough to hear something crack.

She held her abdomen, almost letting out a pained scream but coughing hard instead when he kicked her. "What are you talking about?" she strained.

He hissed in irritation at her insisted ignorance. "Your beloved Sandaime is going to try and abolish slavery,” he said mockingly. He leaned down and grabbed a fistful of her hair. "But that's not going to happen for you.” He dragged her up until she was standing.

"He thought it would be a cute little surprise." He threw Azumi hard into the workbench. "Get on!" he growled. "And he thinks that charming smile won't be met with resistance." Sasori shook his head. "I bet he told you and it gave you hope," his voice dropped again, getting raspier.

"I swear I did not know that the party was going to be about that," Azumi said. "And I am not conspiring with Lord Sandaime on the matter."

"But did you know about it?" Komushi asked her. "Slavery being abolished?" She did not answer. There was a moment of silence and she looked down then closed her eyes. "That sounds like conspiring," Komushi shrugged.

"I said get on!" Sasori glared down at her. He yanked her hair hard, snapping several strands in his fist. "I've clearly been too soft on you," he shook his head. He waited for her to crawl up before forcing her onto her stomach. His fingers quickly snatched the ends of the knot holding the top of her dress up and undid it to leave her untouched back fully exposed. He strapped her down with the same leather straps he had used when he burned her.

"Oh!" Komushi grinned. "Oh! Use the switch!" he nearly giggled.

Sasori hummed, looking at her back in deep thought for a moment. His fingers traced up her spine, brushing each slightly raised vertebrae. "I think I might."

He was in no mood to be so patient. No, he could do that to her later. Right now, he needed to hear her screech.

Azumi's eyes widened and what she thought was a gasp actually came out as a whimper. Her breaths quickened and she struggled against the straps, having every intention to run away if she could get free. "I was not lying when I told you that my loyalty is currently to you," she said quickly. "Lord Sandaime may have mentioned his plans to me but that does not mean I have been living with the anticipation of it since."

"Oh, so he may have told you," Komushi chuckled, pulling up a stool. He sat down with the stool close enough to the wall so he would have the perfect seat to watch from.

Sasori snarled, dragging his nails down the length of her back. "There is nothing you can say to prove to me that that is not a lie," he whispered. "I let you get too comfortable," he muttered again, relishing the whimper that left her mouth. He was going to enjoy this. He walked over to a cabinet tucked into the back corner of the room and pulled two sticks out that varied in thickness. One was very thin and easily sprung back when he tested its bend. The other was thicker and made a heavy sound when he placed it down on the nearby countertop. "You need reminding that I own you," he said softly. He let the tip of the thinner switch trace over her shoulders. He let it move down her spine as his fingers had. "You have no hopes, no dreams. You are nothing but what I say you are."

Completely unprepared for the sensation of the impact, she let out a loud pained scream. She clenched her fists so hard that her nails drew blood from her palms. The pain in her back did not subside before he snapped it again and the raw scream that came out hurt her throat.

"Ooo-oh-ho-ho," Komushi clapped as she screamed. "Very nice," he complimented. Sasori paid him no mind verbally but enjoyed the sounds of her suffering just as thoroughly. He threw himself hard into her lashes. "How many do you plan to give her?" Komushi asked.

Sasori continued to hit her while thinking for a moment. "Fifteen," he finally responded. "To start with," he smirked.
"Count them off, Azumi!" Komushi called with another laugh.

"Yes." Sasori's face became serious. "Count," he ordered. He hit her again, waiting to hear her scream. "Now!"

Azumi choked on her scream, already crying hard at this point. "One," she said through her sobbing. She felt the switch snap on her back again. "Two," she screamed. She had barely finished saying it before he did it again. "Three."

"I didn't hear that one," Sasori said, hitting her again.

"Three," she said louder, through another sob.

He grinned, continuing on until he reached ten. He paused and put the thinner switch down to trade it for the thicker one. Komushi winced, but his grin widened. Sasori picked up a bowl of salt and started to rub it into the fresh wounds on her back. Some of her skin was peeling away and some little triangles had been snapped clean off. He back was a bright red and bloody crosshatch of Sasori's handiwork.

"Five more...or should I move it up to twenty in total?" Sasori asked her softly. "Do you think you've earned a break?" His voice was a mockery of something soothing. His fingers were a teasing lover's touch coated in pain. He grinned, pressing the large granules of salt into each wound as they passed over them.

She could not answer through the pained scream she let out when the salt started to burn. She wanted to beg him to stop but she knew that would make it worse and he would not stop until he thought she needed a break. She let out quick breaths, trying to get herself through the pain but could not focus enough on one thing. She bit her lip hard, trying to hold back more sobs.

"That's not the answer we're looking for," Komushi egged from his stool. "I think she's earned five extra." He looked at Sasori.

Sasori's mouth curved into a grin again as he stepped back. "I couldn't agree more." He pulled back with the thicker switch and hit her across both of her legs. "Maybe if we break these and make you lame, you'll stop dreaming of leaving."

"But then we can't dance," Komushi pouted.

Sasori clicked his tongue, shooting a glare toward his friend. "Fine, then we'll settle for no sitting for at least two weeks," he giggled, hitting her hard again. "How's that sound, Little Snake? " She screamed again, her throat becoming sore and her sobs becoming louder. Her fists clenched harder, drawing more blood from her palms. She tried to inhale but choked again.

Komushi took up counting for Azumi in her place and just as they reach twenty, they heard someone come barreling through Sasori's bedroom. "Oooh," Komushi hummed. "Her knight has finally arrived," he said, looking over his shoulder. Sasori growled, hitting Azumi again in the square of the back. He felt a fresh rush of adrenaline and rage course through him as he waited for his cousin to come into the room. Komushi got up, standing in the doorway of the workshop as Gaara approached. "You don't want to come in here," he smirked. "You won't like what you see." Just as he said that, Azumi screeched and sobbed when Sasori hit her again.

Gaara was hit with a wave of a coppery scent. He was all too familiar with that smell. He shoved Komushi out of the way. His blood had run cold on the way over to Sasori's but now it was threatening to boil out of his skin. The broken sounds of Azumi's sobs and the horrific sight of what
her back had become made Gaara's stomach drop. He had failed her. He went straight for Sasori and was inches away from grabbing the other man when Sasori smacked his hand hard with the switch he had been holding. Gaara recoiled for a moment, cradling his hand to his chest. Pain radiated up his arm but he shook it off, curling his hand into a fist. "You demon!" Gaara growled.

Sasori cocked his head to the side with a grin. "A demon, huh?" he asked, a low chuckle in his throat. "I'm sure you can do better than that." He did not bother to turn to his cousin, hitting Azumi a couple of more times and making her cry out again. "You knew what the announcement was going to be. You knew all along what Sandaime was plotting."

"She didn't!" Gaara defended, throwing his arms around Sasori's neck from behind. Gaara's heart broke every time she screamed. His rage swelled with every hit to her back. He thrashed, trying his best to bring Sasori down to the ground but Sasori shook him off then stumbled back to his feet and hit Azumi harder. "How could she have!"

Sasori spun, hitting Gaara across the face hard. "I'm talking about you," he growled. "You've been conspiring with our uncle and stringing my slave along, getting her hopes up and getting closer to her, trying to take her from me."

Azumi lifted her head up a little, looking at Sasori. She could not see clearly through the tears in her eyes. The pain in her back seemed to only get worse the more it was exposed to the air. Gaara felt dizzy for a moment. Did he know about them? He glanced up at Azumi and took a deep breath through his nose. "I didn't know until a week before the party," he half-lied. "So there was no way I was stringing Azumi along." He tried to put his body between Azumi and Sasori's. He looked at his cousin hard in the eyes. "I got close to her the same way you did! Because we are working together constantly. At least I don't try to force myself onto her like Komushi!"

Komushi's eyebrows shot up. "Oh, please," he scoffed. "It's kind of hard to miss those longing looks the two of you give each other," he deflected.

Gaara looked back at him with a glare. "I have reason to believe you two have become closer than you're leading me to believe."

"Yeah, you do," Komushi grinned.

"Shut up!" Gaara growled at him.

Sasori glanced back at Komushi. His eyes slid slowly back to Gaara. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill her right here." His voice was a low, dangerous whisper. "Because right now, she is feeling very replaceable."

Gaara thought carefully about his words. "You need her more than you realize," he said. "You haven't been as relaxed during work as you've been these last few weeks. You're never going to get that again if you kill her."

Sasori considered his words. They were not wrong. In fact, they were nauseatingly correct which only caused him to tighten his grip on the switch. "And you and Uncle think it's a grand idea to take that away from me?" Sasori asked sharply. He jabbed Gaara hard in the gut.

Gaara doubled over, clutching his stomach. "All you'd have to do is pay her and not treat her like a fucking meat slab!" Gaara grunted through clenched teeth. He made a grab for the switch but Sasori butted his elbow down hard on the back of Gaara's head.

"No!" Sasori growled. "That isn't how this works. With her freedom, she can decide to serve me or
leave and we all know what her decision will be. I don't want her to have that decision. She is mine." He turned around and hit her again, causing her to cry out. "And she knows it."

"If you keep hitting her like that," Gaara snarled, lifting himself up. "She won't be able to do a damn thing!" He caught Sasori's hand and dug his nails in. "You know what keeps people by people's sides? Not fucking this!" he shouted, wrenching the switch away from Sasori. Komushi stifled a hard laugh, doubling over himself now. He was going to get up to split the pair of cousins up but a sleepy spell had him tumbling to the ground in a heap and he was knocked out again.

“I know where her loyalties truly lie,” Sasori growled, discreetly moving his hand toward the bowl of salt and then rubbing salt into her wounds again. Azumi inhaled so hard that she choked again, sobbing hard. “She was never going to stay by side if I didn’t remind her of her place.”

"You've reminded her plenty!" Gaara lifted a leg and kicked Sasori away from her hard. He now stood firmly between her and Sasori. Sasori stumbled back, losing his footing and hitting his head on the other workbench. He groaned but did not get back up. His vision swam and he wanted to hit Gaara, to beat him within an inch of his life but his body was not responding anymore. He could feel the throb of a wound somewhere on his head as his vision edged in black.

Gaara watched his cousin slump down, mirroring his best friend on the floor. The moment he was sure Sasori was not going to jump back up and continue the fight, he dropped the switch and started to toward the table. "Oh, my Gods, Azumi, I'm so sorry." He circled the table and rushed to undo the straps binding her down. "Do not move," he warned her, leaning in to kiss her forehead. "I'll clean you up." His heart was surely dust with how broken it was as he surveyed the full damage of what Sasori had done.

She said nothing and did not move much. She lifted her hands slightly to look at how much blood came out of the cuts her nails made. She suddenly started to feel extremely nauseous. Her back simultaneously stung and throbbed from all of the hits she took. She tried to control her breathing. Every inhale was short and every exhale was shaky.

Gaara rushed over to the workbench, stepping around Sasori as he blended up a few herbs into a liquid. He walked back over to her and tilted her chin up. "Drink this," he said softly. "It will ease the pain," he promised. His voice was rougher than usual from the strain he had put on it earlier but it was still gentle. He pressed the shot glass to her lips and tilted it forward.

She drank it carefully, coughing just a little as she swallowed it. She pointed to the basket with the iron pot on top of it on the other counter. “Let him out,” she strained, immediately starting to cry again at the thought of Naga possibly being hurt.

Gaara turned to follow where she was pointing. "He didn't!" he gasped, rushing over to release Naga. He held the lid of the basket like a shield, knowing it was highly probable that Naga was still very agitated.

Naga came out in his defensive stance, hissing loudly and almost striking at Gaara. He stopped when he noticed Azumi looking at him from the table. His hisses turned more frantic as he moved from the basket, across a couple of counters to get to her. He nuzzled his face against hers in an attempt to comfort her, apologizing for not being able to help her.

Gaara cracked a smile. He did not need to know what the snake was saying to know how worried he was for her. He set the lid of the basket down and returned to Azumi's side. He gently took her left hand in his and uncurled her fingers. His lips pressed into a thin line when he saw the deep cuts. "I'm going to do your hands first," he told her softly. "Tell me if you need more of that drink. You should start to feel its effects soon."
She sniffled and nodded slightly, using the back of her other hand to wipe her face. Naga, feeling guilty for being trapped in a basket, used his head to wipe away some of her tears. She wanted to sit up but she knew it would make the wounds on her back and legs hurt even more. Finally able to take one normal deep breath, she exhaled slowly and closed her eyes as Gaara treated her hand. She looked down at Sasori and Komushi on the floor and wondered how long they would have until Sasori regained consciousness. She had every idea to leave before he did wake up but she could hardly move in her current state.

Gaara glanced up to see her staring at Sasori. He moved onto her next hand, wanting to tell her that he would shelter her at his place. They could run away together. He would get her out of there. But he did not. He stayed silent because how could he promise her any of that after breaking the first one he had made to her over and over again? "Your back," he started. "It will hurt too much to work on it plainly like this so I'm going to numb it but please bear with the pain until I'm done," he said softly. He looked at her and could not fathom the strength she must have had to even be conscious at the moment.

She nodded again and rested her head on her arm, trying to keep herself from crying again. Once he released her other hand after he finished treating it, she retracted her arm and rested on both of them. She was not going to try to speak. Her throat hurt too much. She closed her eyes again, listening to Gaara move around and gather everything he needed to treat her back.

He grabbed a large mixing bowl, put everything he needed into it to make the mixture then walked back over to her to work from her neck down to her butt, pouring out a thick and cold liquid gel over her back. He did his best to touch her back as directly as possible. She winced hard and then relaxed a little. "I know it hurts but that salt will help you out so much in the long run," he said softly. He continued to carefully work the gel into her wounds and back to ease the pain while taking in the damage even more. Once he was satisfied with how much had disappeared into her skin, he pressed another kiss to the back of her head. "How does it feel? I can make it stronger if you need it."

"It...feels fine," she said softly, keeping her face buried in her arms. She reveled in the relief that she was beginning to feel from the gel, letting out a sigh that was shakier than she wanted it to be. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me," he said softly. He set to work, snipping away any hanging flesh and cleaning up any particularly bad cuts. He treated each lashing down to her butt and then moved down to her legs. He examined them and sighed. "You don't have any open wounds on your legs but you're very bruised." He mixed a little more of the gel but he took his time pressing a little harder into the bruising. "I'm sorry if this is rough but I want to get your circulation going. It will help you heal faster."

She groaned slightly at the uncomfortable feeling of having her bruises rubbed but sighed at the relief of the gel. "He hit you," she mumbled. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he responded after a few beats of silence. "He didn't hit me seriously." He looked down her back, watching Naga continue to cuddle and fuss around her. "I'm sorry I didn't get here in time," he whispered.

She did not respond at first, wiping her face again and sniffling. "You came," she said. "That is what matters. If you did not come, I would probably be dead right now."

He stayed quiet. He pulled away to grab a rag and muttered an 'I'll be right back' before leaving. The sound of water running from the bathroom was heard for a moment, then he returned with a cool wet towel and a hot dry one. "Here," he said softly. "You should be able to sit up now."
offered his arms for her to grab onto.

She looked up at him before grabbing onto his arms. He helped her sit up and she let out a quiet groan of discomfort. She retracted her hands, looking down at Sasori again and then at Gaara. She started to cry again, fully processing what just happened to her. He did not try to hush her or stop her tears. She needed to let it out and he knew that. Instead, he used the wet cloth to gently wipe her face clean of sweat and tears as she wept. He saved the dry towel for whenever she would be done. He placed his hands very carefully on her shoulders and pulled her close, tucking her into his chest. He kissed her cheeks, forehead and the top of her head while he softly hummed a lullaby his sister used to sing him.

She slowly wrapped her arms around him, sobbing quietly against his chest for a while. When her sobbing turned into struggled breathing, she pulled away from him, using the wet towel to wipe her face again. Naga coiled up in her lap, hissing softly to her.

"Do you...do you want to try and go to bed?" Gaara asked her softly. "I can carry you." He dried her face gently. She nodded, letting out a shaky exhale. She was exhausted. Her body felt like it had been put through much more than she actually endured and she wanted to be as far away from Sasori as possible. She was also afraid to stay in his house much longer, worried that he would not let up on the abuse and end up killing her sooner. He pulled away from her, giving her another kiss. "Let me wrap you up and then we can go," he told her. He walked over to grab the gauze and told her to raise her arms. He waited for her to do it and then wrapped her up neatly. Once he was done, he took a step back, turned around, knelt down and waited for her to climb on.

She grabbed Naga, gently dropping him onto Gaara’s back so he could coil around him while she slowly got off the table. Carefully, she got onto Gaara’s back and hummed that she was ready to be moved.

Together, they walked down to her room and Gaara laid her on her bed. "I'm staying," he said as he took Naga off of his neck. "But I can sleep on the chair if that makes you feel better." He softly stroked her cheek then moved his hand up to run his fingers through her hair.

She shook her head, moving over very carefully to make room for him. She wanted him close. It would help her fall asleep and she felt safer. Naga coiled up next to her head, gently tapping his nose against hers.

Gaara took a moment to jam the door with the seat. For a split second, he second-guessed doing that but decided to leave it. He turned back to her and smiled as he crossed the room. As soon as he was in the bed he pulled her close as gently as he could. He gave her a soft kiss on her lips as he threaded his fingers into her hair, nothing like the violent pulling Sasori had done earlier. He started to hum again once they were comfortable.

Azumi nuzzled against him, letting a few more shaky breaths out before they came out normal and controlled. She wanted to tell him that she was afraid to stay in the house and that she feared Sasori was going to kill her once he woke up. However, the fatigue had set in as soon as she laid down and she fell asleep once she was in a comfortable position with him. Naga hissed softly as if he was crying himself and nuzzled his head against her shoulder.
The next morning the tension in the air was palpable even before they left the room. Gaara woke up before her with no concept of the time other than the sun was just rising judging by the rays coming through her window. He looked back down at her and resumed scratching her head. 'What am I going to do?' he thought to himself. Her face was still twisted in pain even in her sleep. Above her, Naga shifted, giving her a look then gently bumping his nose against Gaara's. Gaara looked at Naga and frowned when the snake hissed softly. He could not understand what he was saying but he did not want to wake Azumi up to translate. Naga hissed again, tapping his nose against Gaara's again and then nuzzling against Azumi before pulling away and quickly moving toward the window. "Wait, where are you going?" Gaara whispered. Naga did not respond, slithering out the window and heading toward the river.

He continued towards the river and veered off towards a nice stack of rocks he and a few other snakes liked to sun themselves on. There was already about five of them there, getting ready to take in the first wave of morning heat. They each lifted their heads in greeting to him as he approached. Naga bowed his head a little back to them but the snakes could instantly tell something was wrong. The one closest to him tilted its head and hissed, inquiring about his human. Naga hung his head a little, causing the other snakes to hiss worriedly and assume the worst. The one closest to him moved closer, trying to comfort him but Naga shook his head, letting them know that she was still alive but they needed to figure out how to get her out soon or else she would die. The snake farthest from Naga lifted its head higher to say something, mentioning that they knew of another snake in the city who had a human that would probably know what to do. Naga perked up at the mention of another human and snake pairing. He hissed excitedly, asking to be shown where they might be. The other snake turned their body back towards the city, indicating they lived there. Naga hissed again, begging almost to be taken to them.

The other snakes hissed excitedly, wanting to know also. The snake who mentioned the other human nodded and started moving in the direction of the city to take them to the human. Naga and the rest of the snakes followed quickly behind. The group carefully slithered through the early morning crowds, keeping as close to the sides of buildings as possible as they moved.

Not all humans could be avoided as some jumped out of the way as the small pack of snakes made their way to a cluster of buildings. The lead snake hissed for them to follow them up a small winding trellis that seemed to be made specifically for snakes. Naga followed resolutely, determined to meet this snake and human who could help his own. They all slithered on to an open balcony where a man was sitting, billowing out the gray stuff humans called smoke. The snake, Naga assumed his friend was telling him about, was wrapped around his neck. The man perked up when he noticed the group of snakes.

"Oh, you guys are early," he chuckled.

The group of snakes moved closer to him and he immediately noticed the one stranger snake in the group. "I haven’t seen you before," he said to Naga. "My name is Utakata." The snake around the man’s neck looked at Naga and hissed softly in the human’s ear. “You’re Azumi’s?”

Naga perked up at the mention of Azumi’s name. He hissed excitedly, slithering up his legs to sit in his lap. Utakata chuckled softly. "Yes, I've met her a few times now," he smiled. "Did she come with you or are you just out with your—" Naga hissed frantically, interrupting him. "Hurt? By Sasori?" he asked quickly. He put his pipe down to give the snake his full attention. Naga nodded,
jumping into a fully animated and detailed description of what had happened the night before.

“She’s still alive?” he hummed. Naga nodded, telling him that he wanted to help her get her out of Sasori’s house before it was too late. “I’m sure we can think of something.” All of the snakes hissed their different ideas from attacking Sasori to sneaking her out to telling Azumi’s father.

"Telling her father." He picked his pipe back up. He took a long, slow drag and pushed it out just as slowly. "That will take some time but will probably be our best bet." He looked over the group of snakes then wrapped Naga around his waist so he could stand up. He walked inside to grab some paper and a writing implement before returning to the balcony. "Which one of you is the fastest?"

One of the snakes moved to the front. It happened to be a black mamba. It hissed proudly, boasting about its speed. "Do you know how to get to the village?" he asked. The snake hissed again and nodded. "Then I need you to take this letter to Orochimaru," he said as he started to write.

Once he was finished, he rolled it small enough to fit in a very tiny tube and slipped it over the snake's head with a string. "Please return quickly," he said seriously to the snake who nodded before turning to take off. Utakata looked back to Naga and stroked his head. "You go back to her and protect her as best as you can," he told him gently. "Don't bite him or you will be certain to die. We don't need that. She will need you now more than ever."

Naga hissed softly, nuzzling against his jaw and hissing his thanks. "You're welcome," Utakata said softly. The other snakes hissed thanks as well even though Azumi was not their human to worry about. They hated to see Naga this upset. The snake around Utakata's neck assured them that everything will be fine. Naga moved back down to the floor with the other snakes and the group decided to escort him back to Sasori’s house.

He hissed his goodbye and thanks to them before slipping back through the window. Gaara and Azumi were not in her room though. He looked around for a moment, trying to think of where they could have gone. There was no way Azumi was going to see Sasori, so he made his way carefully—for fear of running into the nasty lord himself—to the kitchen. He found them sitting at the table with bowls of breakfast and cups of coffee. Naga slithered up her leg and wrapped around her shoulders. Gaara smiled at him as he nuzzled Azumi's tired face with his own.

"Where did you go?" she asked softly, petting his head. Her voice was still rough from the screaming and crying she did the night before. He hissed at her, telling her not to worry too much about that and that he was going to stay with her. He looked at her bowl and noticed she had hardly touched her food and tried to encourage her to eat at least a little bit. She sighed and nodded then started to eat.

Gaara reached out and took her bandaged hand, lacing their fingers together. He said nothing as he rubbed the back of her hand with his thumb. "When you're done, I'll refresh your bandages for your back. The ones on your hands should get some time to air out but I can reapply some of that numbing gel," he told her softly. They heard the sound of footsteps suddenly coming up the hall. Gaara retracted his hand quickly in case it was Sasori but he realized the footsteps were all wrong. A few moments later, Sandaime entered the kitchen. He made eye contact with Gaara, sharing a worried look with his nephew when he saw the bandages on Azumi’s body. "Uncle..." Gaara said quietly. Sandaime frowned and stepped closer to the table. Azumi looked up at him, unable to give him a proper greeting because of the pain she was in and how tired she was. She gave him a very slight nod.

He nodded back, taking a seat next to her. He cupped her face in a gentle grasp and looked into her eyes. "I know words won't fix this but I am truly sorry I allowed him to do this to you," he said softly. "I promised to free you and keep you safe and I got caught up in something petty."

rummaged in his cloak and pulled out a small jar.

Gaara gasped softly, seeing the jar. "Uncle, those—"

"Will ease the pain," Sandaime cut Gaara off without looking away from Azumi. "Where is the monster now?" he asked, looking over his shoulder.

"In his room still," Gaara answered. "He hasn't come out yet. Komushi is with him."

There was the heavy thought they all had at that moment. Literally nothing was stopping them from leaving right then. Sandaime looked at the two of them and stood with a heavy sigh. "I'll be back in a few minutes," he told them.

"We're going to head back to her room so I can change her bandages," Gaara told his uncle.

Sandaime nodded then bowed low to Azumi before exiting the room. He silently made his way down the hall to Sasori's room. "Get out here, you poor excuse for a nephew!" he roared when he found no one in the room. He heard a soft slosh from the bathroom and zeroed in on the door. He beelined for the bathroom to see Sasori in his tub and Komushi in the second pool.

"Oooh," Komushi groaned, not liking where this was going. He knew that once Sandaime gets involved in something, Sasori stood no chance.

"You're here to save her too?" Sasori scoffed.

Sandaime narrowed his eyes, smirking as he circled around to his nephew's tub. Sasori started to inch out of it the closer he got. "There is no saving her from what you put her through last night," Sandaime spoke lowly. Komushi shivered despite the hot water he was immersed in. He too started to get out of the pool and reach for a towel. This was not going to be good. "You get a little power and you think you can just go back to your old ways."

"In case you've forgotten," Sasori sneered, "she belongs to me. You may be trying to abolish the law of slavery but it currently still stands. I can do what I want because she is my property."

"I am well aware," Sandaime hummed. "And as it also stands, you are still my nephew and I am still allowed to reprimand you as I see fit." He jammed his finger hard into his chest, pushing Sasori hard over the edge of the tub and causing him to tumble into the pool. Sandaime smirked, reaching in to pull Sasori out by the leg and up onto the hard floor. "You feign this respect for women but as soon as you 'own them,' none of that matters." He pinned Sasori to the ground with a threatening foot hovering very precariously over his family jewels.

Sasori gasped, trying to get away before Sandaime could step on him. "Owned by me, they lose all humanity."

"Sasori, maybe you shouldn't egg him on this time," Komushi tried.

"And who owns you right now, boy?" Sandaime started to press his foot down. Sasori's body tensed, his breath catching in his throat as fear ticked his scalp. "Because you're looking very much like a writhing sand flea right now," he growled, leaning down and pressing his forearm into his thigh. The threat still loomed. "If you hurt that girl one more time and I find out about it, it's you who will be dying a gruesome death." Sasori wanted to say something back but he strained when Sandaime pressed more of his weight down. "Do I make myself clear?" Sandaime asked, a growl low in his throat. Komushi backed away toward the door, not wanting to be next.

Sasori glared back hard for a moment, holding his breath. He turned away from his uncle, snarling.
"Fine," he finally bit out through grinding teeth.

Sandaime grinned, pulling off of his nephew immediately. "Excellent." His charming smile was back in place. He snapped his head towards Komushi and cleared his throat. Komushi whimpered but froze. "And if you help him or continue to harass her," he hummed, walking over to tower over Komushi. "I will make sure you two are entombed together."

"Y-yes, Lord Sandaime," Komushi said softly.

"That's a good boy," Sandaime smirked. He continued past Komushi, crossing the bedroom and leaving the two children alone. He walked back down to Azumi's room to check on the other two and knocked before announcing himself.

Moments later, Gaara opened the door for him. "What happened?" Gaara asked curiously. There was a bundle of old bloodied bandages piled in the corner of the room. "I was just about to make some tea."

Azumi was sitting on the bed with Naga in her lap. She was petting his head gently. "Let's just say your cousin has lost a great amount of his dignity," Sandaime said. "Caught him in his bath. Nothing better than putting two grown naked men in their place."

"No!" Gaara breathed, gripping his stomach in a fit of giggles. "I wish I could have been there!"

"They shouldn't do anything any time soon," Sandaime nodded. He looked at the pile of bloody bandages and then at Gaara. "Will you be staying here?" he asked him.

“For a while,” Gaara nodded. He crossed the room and sat down next to Azumi, taking her hand in his. He pressed a kiss to the palm of her hand. “You know that demon would never take care of her wounds.”

“He was not finished making them,” Azumi muttered. Her throat was still a bit sore. She grabbed the cup of water Gaara left on the bedside table and took a sip. Gaara’s jaw set, wanting only to pull her close once more and run away with her.

Sandaime knelt down in front of her on one knee and took her other hand once she was done sipping her water. “I assure you that he won’t be doing it again,” he said to her with conviction. “Gaara and I have made you promises and we fell through on them. But now we will show you that we meant them.” He looked to Gaara. “Give her those pills, alright?”

Gaara nodded, rubbing his thumb across the back of Azumi’s hand. “I will,” he said.

“Thank you, Lord Sandaime,” Azumi said softly.

“There is a good future for you and all like you,” he said before getting up and giving her another low bow. “I have to go now but I’ll be sure to come back around as soon as I can. But if you need anything just send someone for me.”


Azumi bore the pain in her body to bow to Sandaime. Sandaime watched her raise from the bow and wanted to tell her that there was no need for her to do that for him. But he looked her in the eyes and knew it would only serve as an insult. He nodded one last time and turned to leave.

The moment he was gone Gaara got up to jam the door again. He pulled the pills out of his pocket and set them down. “I want to ask you first if you want to take these,” he said to her. “They are
very, very strong and put most people on their ass. But you won’t feel any pain.”

She looked at the pills, considering her options. The gel he applied to her worked but it also wore off quick. Strong pills are what she needed. “I will take them,” she said softly.

He nodded and poured her out two. “I’ll go make you some tea to go with it. You might go back to sleep for a bit,” he paused. “I...will you be okay?”

She hesitated for a second but then Naga nodded so she nodded. “I will be fine,” she said.

He looked at her for a moment longer then leaned in and lifted her chin on his finger to press a kiss to her lips. “Okay,” he said softly. “I’ll only be a moment,” he reassured them both before turning to leave the room.

Once he was gone, Azumi sighed heavily, letting out the pained groan she had been holding in. Naga moved closer to her, trying to comfort her as much as he could. She took another sip of her water and resisted the urge to lie down while she waited for Gaara. She ran her hands through her hair for a moment in slight distress. “What are we going to do, Naga,” she asked softly. Naga hissed at her, telling her to just hold on a little longer. “That sounds like you are plotting something,” she chuckled, petting him. “Do you plan on killing Lord Sasori?” Naga looked alert for a moment as if to say all she had to do was ask but he quickly relaxed and shook his head. He hissed softly, just telling her to trust him. He nuzzled her hand and reassured her that it would be worth the wait.

Gaara returned not too long later with a small teapot and cup of tea. He looked mildly irritated. "Sasori is up and functioning again," he muttered.

Azumi frowned. “Is his pet scarab with him?” she asked. He handed her the cup. She took the pills and washed them down with the tea.

“Would he be Sasori if Komushi wasn’t two steps behind him?” Gaara cracked a smile at the nickname for the man. “They looked rightfully traumatized and pretty pissed. So whatever my uncle did must have been substantial.”

“Do you think...they will come here?” she asked, a little worried. She did not want to even look at Sasori or Komushi. She was not in the mood to deal with them and she could already feel herself getting a little light-headed from the pills. “Oh, these are strong,” she muttered.

“No, I don’t think so. They don’t look to be in any shape or mood to come down and bother you.” He chuckled a little. “And you won’t be in any shape of your own in a few minutes.” He fluffed her pillow. “Best to get comfortable and stay here. I’m your acting doctor now and I’ll keep Sasori away.”

She smiled at him. “Thank you, Doctor,” she chuckled. She laid down on her stomach carefully. “I would throw myself down the stairs every day if you were my doctor,” she joked.

“There are much easier and far more pleasurable ways for you to keep me coming back,” he chuckled, running a hand through her hair. He leaned down and kissed her head as he scratched her scalp. “I’m not leaving your side. Not until you send me away.”

“Mm, I do not think that will happen,” she hummed. The pain started to go away and she was beginning to feel very nice. She almost rolled over onto her back but was stopped by a worried hiss and slight push from Naga to stay in her position. She turned her head to face the snake and hugged her pillow underneath her. “Hi,” she said very softly to Naga. Naga hissed softly, bumping his nose
against hers. He laughed another soft little hiss. Gaara smirked, recognizing that the pills were taking effect. She stretched hard and felt no pain in her back then turned to face Gaara again. She smiled at him and moved over on the bed to make room for him. She was beginning to feel slightly drowsy and figured she would take a nap since she could sleep comfortably.

He smiled, shifting onto the bed and pulling her head onto his lap. He continued to stroke her hair. “I love you,” he said softly, looking over her face. Her smile made his heart beat a little faster. He wished he had magic hands that could just heal her. Or he had the power to simply take her away.

"I love you, too," she hummed, getting comfortable on him. The drowsiness increased heavily and she was out a few seconds later. Naga hissed something about the pills being that strong.

Gaara chuckled as he continued to run his fingers through her hair, resting his back against the wall. He glanced at the door to make sure the chair was still jamming it. Seeing it was secure, he let himself doze off a little. The medication would ease her pain for a while. However, he still worried about the other effects it could have.

They napped for almost an hour when suddenly, Azumi woke up, groaning quietly. She opened her eyes and slowly sat up. There was still no pain in her back and she smiled sleepily at the lack of discomfort. Carefully, she stood up and went to the door. She grabbed the chair and moved it out of the way.

Gaara snapped out of his sleep the moment he heard the chair move. He groaned softly, opening his eyes just as Azumi opened the door to leave. "Azumi," he hissed softly. "Where are you going?" He crossed the room quickly to reach for her.

"Bathroom," she mock-whispered as she swayed down the hall. She giggled softly to herself and started humming quietly as she began to dance her way to her destination.

Gaara chuckled, looking at her a little worried as she walked off. She was adorable to watch and it was so nice to see her smile. Even if it was a drug-induced smile. He sighed, smiling as he followed after her from a short distance. He had to make sure she did not hurt herself any more than she was already. The dancing was already activating his doctor instincts but it was not doing her much harm. He continued to follow her down the halls, so focused on how precious she was and how her silent feet seemed to float her through the air that he did not notice she had wandered down the hall to Sasori’s room. "Shit!” he hissed softly, speeding up to catch her before she could reach Sasori’s room.

She opened the door before he reached her, walking into Sasori’s room unannounced and heading straight for the bathroom. She stopped halfway through the bedroom and turned to look at Komushi who was sitting on Sasori’s bed. Sasori was sitting at his desk, working on something and she turned to him, staring him down. Komushi raised an eyebrow but said nothing. He was still a little shaken from Sandaime’s threat but he was mostly interested in what the Little Snake was plotting. His lip twitched a little, watching her glare down her master. What would make her so bold after last night?

Gaara lurked in the doorway, sighing internally. He caught the way she was staring at Sasori and tensed up.

Sasori’s own eyes narrowed. He could feel the holes his slave was boring into his back. He set down what he was working on and turned to face her. “So you can walk after last night?” he remarked, looking over her bandaged form. “Did you want a second helping? Maybe an eye adjustment,” he clicked his tongue.
She stepped up to him and gently dragged her finger down from his forehead to his lips. “Shhh...so pretty,” she said softly, keeping her eyes locked on his. Before anyone could react, she slapped him hard. The room was dead silent for a solid beat. Komushi moved first, howling in laughter. Gaara’s heart nearly seized but his face split into a huge grin and stifled it quickly, rushing into the room.

“Who the fuck!” Sasori came back to himself slowly. His face twisted into a snarl. “Clearly you didn’t learn anything last night!” he growled, standing up so fast that his chair fell over.

“I learned that you are a bitch,” she smirked, ready to fight him. Sasori was about to lunge at her but Gaara got in between them quickly, stopping his cousin from getting any closer to her. “I will rip your face off,” she hissed, her fangs coming out.

“She’s high on painkillers right now,” Gaara told him.

Komushi clapped his hands loudly behind them, already in tears. “No, wait,” he wheezed. “Please, I want to see her rip his face off!”

Sasori shot him a hard glare. He was still twitching to beat her within an inch of her life again.

“Did I say she could take anything?” he growled.

“You’re kidding me, right?” Gaara held the still thrashing Azumi’s away from him.

“Do I look like I’m kidding?” Sasori deadpanned. “Where did you get them?”

“Look at her, she’s feral!” Komushi laughed.

“I’m a doctor!” Gaara rolled his eyes. “I’m privy to medications even you aren’t now.”

“You’re avoiding the question,” Sasori snapped.

“I already had them. I simply went home and—“

“Did you though?” Komushi smirked.

“Shut up,” Gaara growled at Komushi. “What would you know? You were knocked out before he was.”

“Oh, but I know a lot,” Komushi retorted. Naga quickly slithered into the room, coiling around Azumi and putting his face in front of hers. He started swaying a little, making her follow him with her eyes and calming her down a little. “Is her snake charming her?” Komushi’s attention was drawn to the display.

Sasori stepped back, only glancing at Azumi and her snake. He glared hard at Gaara. “I’m not letting her off for that, drugged or otherwise,” he snapped. “She’ll pay for it later. Right now, get her out of my sight before I decide that she has earned her punishment now!”

Naga tapped Azumi’s nose and told her to retract her fangs, turn around and walk away. She did the first thing but Gaara had to turn her around and walk her out.

“Aw, she didn’t rip your face off,” Komushi pouted.

“I’ll rip yours off if you don’t shut up,” Sasori grumbled, only glaring at Komushi from the corner of his eyes.

Komushi giggled behind his hand. “She hits hard, doesn’t she?” Komushi taunted. “Didn’t feel very nice....did it?”
Sasori did not say anything at first. “Yes, she does hit hard,” he muttered, rolling his eyes. He figured she did from the times he had heard her slap Komushi. Never did he think he would be able to actually know what it felt like.

“Hit back twice as hard,” Komushi challenged.

“I plan to.” Sasori’s eyes darkened. “This will not be tolerated. She’s still my slave and there is nothing my uncle can do about it.”

“Except hold you down and threaten your life,” Komushi chuckled, still a bit traumatized.

“Shut up!” Sasori growled, throwing a glass beaker at his head. As soon as it made an impact, Komushi was knocked out. Sasori was pretty sure it was the poisoning and not the glass but he was going to take it anyway. He ran a hand through his hair and sighed heavily as he sat back down at his desk.

Out in the halls, Azumi was released from the trance Naga had her in. She hummed softly, stumbling back a little into Gaara. “Mm,” she said, turning around to see who she bumped into. She smiled when she saw who it was.

Gaara chuckled, running his hands down her arms. He pulled her against his cheek and kissed down her neck. “You’re very reckless,” he chuckled. He took her hand and started to guide her back to her room. “Please don’t do that again...even if it would be great to watch.”

She smiled and followed him but then gasped and stopped once they reached her door. “I still have to go,” she said softly, pulling his arm gently.

“Oh, yeah.” He stopped short with her. “You never actually went, did you?” He ran a hand through his hair and chuckled softly. “Okay, let’s go to Granny’s room,” he smiled. “Maybe you can manage a bath in this state.” She followed him without question all the way to the other side of the mansion. Once they were over there, she went straight into the bathroom as quickly as she could manage, suddenly hit with the urge to go. Gaara sat down on the bed to wait for her. He looked around for Naga, wondering if the snake had followed her in. Not finding him, he laid back. He kept an ear out to make sure Azumi was alright. She used the bathroom, washed her hands and danced her way out to the bedroom. Naga moved between her feet in sync with her. Gaara smiled, watching them move together. He stood up and crossed the room to pull her close. “Even high in the clouds, you’re an amazing dancer,” he said softly, looking in her eyes. She smiled and leaned up to kiss him, sliding her hands down his arms until she could lace their fingers together. Then she pulled him into the bathroom. He let himself be pulled along, smiling a little goofy as she did. He thought back to the look on Sasori’s face and her words when she slapped him and chuckled again. “Do you feel up for a bath?” he asked her.

“Mhm,” she hummed softly with a nod as she wrapped her arms around him and rested her head against him again.

He kissed the top of her head, not quite ready to move. He wrapped his arms around her and gave her a gentle squeeze. “Okay, let me go so I can start it,” he said after a few minutes. He smirked, running a hand through her hair. He lifted her chin to kiss her lips. She smiled against his lips and giggled when she felt him unwrap her arms from him after she did not do it herself. He stepped closer to the tub to run the water and she swayed in one spot, watching him. Naga hissed softly, telling her not to fall.

Gaara kept an eye on her as he filled the bath for them. He stripped down first then crossed the room back to her. He kissed her again and chuckled. “Still feeling good?” he teased a little. He
started to help her undress.

“I feel amazing,” she hummed. She cooperated as he took her dress off but as soon as she noticed the bandages on her body, she started to tug at them. “Let me out,” she whispered.

Gaara chuckled, putting his hand over hers. "Don't," he said softly. "If you take those off, it will hurt." He took her hand in his, pressing kisses to her fingers then her palm. "I promise they will come off soon." He cupped her face so she looked at him.

She looked into his eyes for a moment then smiled, the tiniest gasp escaping her mouth. “You have very pretty eyes,” she said softly.

"You think so?" he said just as softly. He blushed a little and his smile widened. "They are nothing compared to yours though," he started to guide her over to the water. He walked in backward, leading her into the pool step by step.

She followed him easily, keeping her eyes locked on his until they were fully in the pool. She rested her arms on his shoulders and shook his head. “No...yours are very pretty. You are very handsome.” She cupped his face and kissed him gently.

He pushed back into the kiss, gently resting his hands on her hips to pull her closer. He smiled into the kissed, biting her lip gently. “I guess I shouldn’t argue with a goddess when she calls me handsome.” He wanted to wrap his arms around her and just float together for a while. However, he was still wary he would hurt her. Instead, he kissed her again and nuzzled her nose, resting his forehead against hers.

“I am not a goddess,” she whispered through a slight chuckle. “A goddess would never be in the situations I have been in.” She hummed softly and kissed him again. “But thank you,” she smiled.

“I’m not convinced,” he chuckled, kissing her again. “Do you...want me to wash your hair?” he asked her softly.

She hummed in thought for a moment then reached her hands up a little to see how it felt if she were to do it herself. “Yes, please,” she said, finding it to be uncomfortable to reach up. He chuckled, cupping her face, his hands gently traced down her neck as he laced his fingers into her hair. He leaned in to kiss her again and laughed as he pulled back. After making sure she was steady, he moved over to grab the soap for her hair then moved back over to her and relaced his fingers into her hair, starting to work the soap into her hair and scalp. He took his time, massaging her head and neck. “Mm,” she hummed softly, enjoying the head massage she was receiving. She tilted her head back a little bit, getting lost in the bliss. After what felt like a couple of minutes to her but was probably only one minute, she came back. “That feels amazing,” she whispered.

He smiled, leaning in to nuzzle his nose against hers as he continued to work his fingers. “Good.” He kissed her softly. “I’m glad. Close your eyes for me, my rose,” he said softly when he deemed her hair properly lathered he picked up a bucket and started to rinse her hair off.

She closed her eyes, bracing herself for the water to be poured over her. Once he poured it, she shook her head slightly and rubbed the water from around her eyes. She chuckled softly when she opened her eyes again. “Thank you,” she smiled.

His heart melted as he watched her. He bit his lip then smiled widely. "It was no problem," he said. "Do you want help with the rest of your body?" he asked innocently.

“Mm, probably just my back,” she hummed. She tugged very slightly at the bandages around her
“Okay, just be careful,” he said, shifting around her to her back. He frowned for a moment. “Hold on, I think we will just take these off. I’ll rewrap them here,” he told her softly, touching the knots. She grunted softly, bracing herself once again for the odd sensation of the bandages being removed. She looked ahead and moved into her sight, hissing quietly at her to comfort her. She smiled at the snake and nodded, letting him know she was okay. Once all the bandages were removed, Gaara reached for the soap again and a basin to water down the soap. He paused for a moment and his heart dropped when he saw the skin still torn to shreds. It was starting to yellow and the skin was starting to scab over in an ugly, healthy sort of way. “This might hurt a bit,” he said softly to her, pressing a kiss to her shoulder. He picked up a sponge and dipped it into the soap. His mind started to drift to what he could to do to Sasori to make him pay.

“Mm,” she hummed, wincing hard and letting out an uncomfortable groan as he started to wash her back. Biting her lip hard, she bore the pain until he was done.

He tried to be as gentle as possible, whispering his apologies every time she winced. He rinsed her back off then circled around her. “You’re so strong, darling.” He cupped her face, stroking her cheek.

She frowned and looked him in the eyes before resting her head against his chest again. “It is because you are gentle,” she said softly, “that I can bear the pain and discomfort.”

"Strength like yours is natural. I'm glad I can...make this pain at least a little bit bearable," he smiled, blushing harder. "I...um...do you want me to help with the rest?" He tucked a piece of her hair behind her ear.

She pulled away slightly and hummed. “I think I can do it,” she said. She grabbed the soap and started to wash herself down, very carefully since her back was no longer bandaged. He watched her out of the corner of her eye while he began to wash himself down. He finished up before her and got out to grab them a pair of towels. He set them close to the water and waited for her to finish. Once she was finished, he moved toward the edge of the pool and carefully stepped out. He helped her wrap the towel around herself and she wrapped her arms around him then leaned on him. “Thank you for everything,” she said softly.

He wrapped his arms carefully around her and pressed their foreheads together. "No need to thank me," he smiled at her, kissing her softly. He pulled back and took her hand to lead her over to a seat. "Give me a moment and I'll redo your bandages," he told her with a kiss to her head.

She nodded and waited patiently for him to get dressed and grab the bandages. While she waited, Naga slithered up her leg and into her lap. She smiled down at him, stroking his head gently. "And thank you," she chuckled. He hissed at her with a smile. "I love you, too."

Gaara returned moments later with his wares of trade and knelt down next to her. He gently patted her back to dry the wounds. "I'm going to remove this now," he told her to prepare her for the potential pain. He moved fast, knowing she was not so easily breakable and wanted this to be over for her as swiftly as possible.

Azumi let out a small grunt as he worked. She could feel the effect of the pills wearing off slowly and she also started to feel drowsy. Naga lifted his body up to tap his nose against hers. “I am fine,” she smiled at him.

Gaara finished up the wrapping and smiled, noticing her eyes starting to droop. "Think you can walk?" he asked her softly, kissing her cheek.
She carefully got out of her seat, setting Naga down where she was and rewrapped her towel around herself. “I think so,” she said through a yawn. She leaned against him and smiled as she wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his chest.

He smiled and nodded. "Okay, tell me if you'd prefer that I carry you." He rested his hands on her hips. He kissed her head once more then stepped back. "Let's get you to your room so you can rest." He waited for Naga to slip up his legs and coil around him they way he usually did to Azumi then they started for the door. She held his arm as they walked, resting her head against him. She tried to fight off the sleep until she got to her room but once they turned the corner from Chiyo’s room, she pushed more of her weight onto him, feeling it catch up faster.

He felt her growing weight as she leaned further onto him. "Hold on," he said with a soft chuckle. He stopped, shifted her to gather her into his arms and picked her up to carry her bridal style. "Are you comfortable?" he asked, afraid he might be hurting her back.

She shifted very slightly until his hand was no longer directly on a wound that she could feel and then chuckled softly. "I am," she said. She pulled him into a kiss and then they continued on to her room. He expertly navigated the halls while giving her periodic kisses until he arrived at her door. He shifted her a little in his arms so he could open the door. He closed it behind them with his foot and gently laid her down on the bed. He maneuvered her so she was on her side then crawled in next to her. He pulled her into a kiss, smiling against her lips. She pushed back into the kiss as much as she could then pulled away, looking into his eyes for a moment. "I love you," she said softly, nuzzling against him. The drowsiness fully caught up to her and as soon as she was comfortable, she fell asleep.

He smiled into the kiss, stroking her hair. "I love you, too," he said softly. He snuggled down next to her, stroking her hair until he too drifted off to sleep, the weight of the day finally catching up to him.
Later on, when the sun was fully set, Azumi woke up to the pain in her back. The pills had completely worn off. She groaned in discomfort, unwrapping her arms from Gaara and trying to sit up as carefully as she could. Naga woke up with her, hissing softly in concern. Gaara shifted in the bed and but did not stir. She did not want to bother him because he had already done so much for her already. Very carefully, she reached over him toward the bedside table and grabbed the pills that he left there along with her glass of water from earlier. She took two of the pills and then a sip of the water. Setting everything back on the table, she sat and waited for the pills to kick in, trying not to make any noise so she did not wake Gaara up.

After a couple of minutes, she started to feel the beginning of the lightheadedness. She did not exactly want to be high again because she had no true control over herself in that state—she hardly remembered the day because she was in that state for the majority of—but she also did not want to be in excruciating pain. She closed her eyes, staying in the upright position until she felt no pain in her body. "Mm-hm," she hummed, a smile forming on her lips. She laid back down and fell back asleep for a few more minutes before waking up with a sudden urge to use the bathroom. Still not wanting to wake Gaara up, she slowly moved out of the bed, put her dress on and moved toward the door without disturbing him. She left the room and went down the halls, swaying a little as she moved. She turned down another hall and went toward Sasori's room. Without a knock or an announcement, she walked in and went straight to the bathroom.

Sasori’s head perked up in his workshop when he heard light footsteps enter his room. Komushi had gone back to Chiyo’s room for the night and he doubted Azumi and Gaara were going to pay him any visits. So not knowing who had just entered his room, he stood up and walked out to his room. He heard someone in his bathroom. “Azumi?” he half-whispered, half growled. “What are you doing here?”

"I need to pee," she whispered back, not fully realizing who she was speaking to. She turned around and as soon as she saw Sasori's face, she was enraged. She stood there, glaring hard at him.

“What’s wrong with your bathroom?” he hissed back, lighting a lantern in the room. He took in her rage the moment the light hit her. “You can also relax. I’m in no mood to deal with your intoxication.”

Her glare did not cease. His presence infuriated her. "I do not know where my bathroom is," she said, mocking his hiss. "I only ever use this one because you told me to."

“Nothing is preventing you from exploring the servants’ quarters.” He gave her a dead-eyed look. “It’s literally up the hall from you. You passed it on the way here.” He folded his arms.

"I do not want to," she huffed, turning from him to head further into the bathroom. "I am already here. I am using this bathroom." She said it as more of a demand, completely forgetting that she was his slave.
He blinked at her, taking in her tone. “High or not, you do not speak to me that way!” he snapped, stepping into the room after her.

"Oh, how should I speak to you then?" she challenged, turning around to face him. "Master, please let me use your bathroom?" she said in a mocking tone. She scoffed and rolled her eyes. "As if." Having absolutely no concept of boundaries or repercussions in her state, she walked up to him and cupped his face with both hands, harder than what would be considered affectionate. "I am already here. Let. Me. Pee."

His eyes widened the moment she touched his face. He snarled, jabbing his whole hand sharply into her bladder. “How dare you!” He jabbed her again hard, forcing her away from him. “You will speak to me with respect! Pee if you must then leave, you asinine snake!”

She growled, pulling her arm back and taking a step forward as she swung her hand toward his face and slapped him. It hit much harder than when she did it earlier. "You are lucky I call you 'Lord,'" she hissed, thinking she was still a noble.

Sasori touched his stinging cheek. His eye was twitching. He turned back to her, one side of his mouth pulling into a smirk. “No,” he whispered. “It’s you who is lucky. Lucky to still be alive!” He gave her a sharp uppercut to the jaw then kicked her hard in the stomach. “Those pills may have let you forget but I will make you remember! You are nothing but my slave here.” He stalked towards her.

"A whiny bitch like you deserves no respect," she growled, returning his uppercut along with another one on the other side of his jaw. She lunged hard at him, pushing him to the ground and straddling his waist then continuing with the hard punches to his face.

Her punches were harder than anything he ever expected from her. He heard his nose crunch and felt his jaw shifting around. He thrashed under her, growling as he forced himself up and dug his nails into her forearms until they bled. He ripped them away from him and flopped her hard onto her back, pinning her arms over her head. “You foul-mouthed wretched serpent!” He shifted his knee so it ground into her chest. “I should kill you right now! You over overestimate your usefulness!” He wrapped his hands around her throat, pressing hard into her windpipe.

She gasped for air for a moment and her fangs came out. She reached a hand up, lacing it into his hair and pulling hard until he rolled off of her. With another gasp for air, she glared at him. "You think you are the only person with the ability to kill?" she hissed, lunging at him again and sitting on top of him. She punched him twice and then held his head against the floor with a tight grip in his hair. "I can paralyze you right now and you will have to watch me finish you off."

His heart thundered in his chest and for a split second, he was terrified of her. However, he refused to go down like this. He kept her gaze and grinned then his eyes landed on the lantern that was only a kick’s length away. “If you bite me, I will flail and we’ll both burn,” he whispered with a malicious grin.

She furrowed her brow, looking at him confused. She glanced over at the lantern then looked back at him. "You would not sacrifice yourself," she growled. She kept her grip on his hair and her other hand closed around his neck, not quite crushing his throat yet. "I know you well enough at this point."

“Do you?” he challenged with a smirk. “I can be full of surprises, you know.” As he spoke, he felt her hand press against this throat. He wiggled a little under her. “You’re always heavier than I expect.”
She gasped and immediately pressed harder on his neck. “I cannot say the same about you, small boy,” she growled.

He snarled, swinging a hard fist at her face again. He bucked hard, throwing her off of him and clawing at her hand, leaving nasty, long, bleeding marks. “I am not a boy!” he seethed. “And I am perfectly average for a MAN my age,” he snapped, pushing himself up so he could kick her hard in the gut. “Besides, it’s better than being some sad excuse of a genetic mutation!” He aimed a kick for her mouth. “I bet that father of yours did a lot more modifications to you than you know.”

She bit her tongue when he kicked her the first time and reached out to grab his ankle the second time she saw him aiming for her mouth. Her pupils dilated and she pushed his leg up, causing him to stumble backward. She could not feel the pain in her mouth but she could feel the small trickle of blood. "You know nothing about my father," she said, walking toward him as he almost stumbled into his tub.

His head was pounding as he geared up to land another blow on her. He scoffed, grinning widely. “I don’t need to know him to know he’s unobservant or flat out doesn’t care about his sorry excuse for a daughter!” He looked over her, tearing back to smack her hard. “In fact, I wouldn’t be shocked if he planned to have you sold off in the first place!”

She growled, lifting her leg and kicking him hard in the stomach to push him back. “He would never—“ She was ready to pounce on him again and bite him but she suddenly felt extremely nauseous. She gagged a little and dropped to her hands and knees, lowering her head. She coughed until she felt something crawling up her throat. Suddenly, what she thought was vomit was actually a snake coming out of her mouth and dropping to the floor under her.

Sasori stumbled back, losing his footing a little. He hit one of the towel cabinets hard and watched in pure horror as the snake slithered out of the small woman’s mouth. The snake made a thick wet sound as its tail hit the ground. It was quite a big snake for where it came out of. “What...the fuck!” He could not tell if he was screaming or not. He was in total shock. “Why was that in you! Does your family usually hoard snakes inside their bodies!” There was no logical way for the creature to have been alive inside the woman unless it was a parasite but it looked like a normal snake.

Azumi looked at the snake just as shocked, sitting back on her butt and backing away a little. She wiped her mouth and groaned, glad that it was out of her because the feeling of it coming up was the worst thing she endured right after being repeatedly hit with a switch. “I had no idea,” she said, followed by a loud gag at the memory of the sensation of the snake in her throat, “that was inside of me!” The snake made a loud hiss, getting in a defensive stance, ready to strike at Sasori.

Sasori shot her an irritated look then switched back to the snake the moment it hissed. He had to think fast. “It would seem Daddy didn’t leave you totally defenseless,” he snorted. “But a snake is a snake,” he smirked, remembering his flute. Granted, it was in his room but he was sure he could whistle long enough to keep the aggressive pair away from him. Pursing his lips, he began to whistle a slow but strong tempo song. He needed to make sure it caught the snake’s attention.

Azumi tried to fight off the trance but her intoxicated state made it harder to concentrate. She was almost instantly lost in it. The snake was a bit stronger than her, however, only faltering for a moment before advancing on him. It would take more than just whistling to control it.

Sasori cursed softly, jumping up onto the cabinet to get away from it. He was not far from the doorway but the snake was fast. He knew he had Azumi under his control. He beckoned her to move around her snake to separate him from it. She took a second to get up and step between the snake and Sasori. The snake hissed loudly at her, telling her to get out of the way but because she was in a trance under Sasori’s control, she did not. Sasori would have smirked if he was not trying
to maintain the trance. He got off of the cabinet and forced Azumi to walk in step with him. He
used her as a barrier while he moved to the door very slowly, never taking his eyes off of the
snake.

The snake hissed louder, following them and trying to find an opening between them to get to
Sasori. Frustrated, it decided to strike anyway with the intent of going just to the right of Azumi
and straight toward Sasori. Just as it reached her, she put her arm out and the snake latched on,
sinking its fangs into her arm. It started to panic, realizing it got the wrong target.

Sasori seized the moment and raced for his flute, wasting no time in pressing it between his lips
and starting to play the same melody but stronger. He was determined to put the serpent under the
trance. He closed his eyes, feeling a rocket of pain through his body. There was no way he was
going to let himself get poisoned, too. He knew how dangerous that venom was.

The snake slowly let go of Azumi’s arm. In a normal circumstance, she would have been groaning
in discomfort. However, she was high and in a trance so she felt nothing. Next to her, the snake
stayed at her hip level, swaying a little with the music.

Sasori led them slowly out of the bathroom and started to walk towards his bedroom door but he
stumbled over a basket he had not realized was there and fell hard on his butt. He lost the
connection for the trance rapidly.

Immediately, both Azumi and the snake hissed in aggression and lunged at him. Azumi straddled
his waist and began to lay punches into him again but a few seconds later, she was hit in the face
by Naga who lunged at her in an attempt to knock her off of Sasori and hissing at her to retract her
fangs. Following behind him was Gaara.

Gaara looked down to see his cousin covered in blood and bruising. He was clearly knocked out.
“Azumi,” he said quickly, dropping to his knees and taking her wrists in his. “Baby, look at me,”
he said, cupping her face. “What happened!”

She breathed heavily and focused on him until she calmed down and heard the hissing of the larger
snake. She whipped her head in its direction and then looked at Gaara. “I just...need to pee,” she
gasped, her fangs retracting.

“Okay, come here,” he said, taking her hands. “Let’s get you to the bathroom.” He helped her to
her feet and took in all of her new injuries. “Oh, Azumi,” he sighed. They got to the toilet finally
and he helped her down to the seat.

She looked down at her arms and gasped softly when she saw the blood. Then she wiped the blood
from her mouth. She was starting to come back to herself, still feeling a bit lightheaded. Suddenly,
she remembered who did this to her and she got angry again. With a small growl, she almost stood
up but was stopped and helped back down by Gaara. “I am going to kill him,” she hissed.

“Just pee, Azumi,” he said with a chuckle. “I’ll handle Sasori. But please go before you hurt
yourself more and pee yourself.” She frowned a little and then nodded. She relaxed a little and
started peeing when he went out to the bedroom. When she was done, she washed her hands and
her face then went back out to the bedroom to meet the snake that came out of her. Gaara was
lugging Sasori back to his bed. “Feel better?” he asked her over his shoulder. He chuckled a little
but was still worried about her new injuries and the possibility that she had reopened the wounds
on her back.

“I think so,” she hummed, kneeling in front of Naga and the new snake. “You came out of me,” she
whispered. “How?” The snake hissed softly at her, explaining to her that it was born with her and
put inside of her by her father. She listened intently and could not control the actual horror on her face at the memory of throwing up the snake. “I see...”

“Who are they?” Gaara asked curiously about the new snake. He had pulled out Sasori’s first aid kit and sighed at how sparse it was. He started to treat his cousin’s wound.

"Um...this is Ryuga...and he was born when I was born...and my father," she gagged, "put him inside me. He was dormant, only waking up when he could sense I was in danger." She realized that it would explain each time she got nauseous whenever Sasori or Komushi did anything to her. "But the last couple of times he tried to come out, he was suppressed."

“I...um...” Gaara nodded, trying to take in the very strange instance Azumi found herself in. “Are you both...okay?”

Ryuga nodded but Azumi shook her head. She stood up and took a deep breath and then stumbled backward, losing her balance a little. "I do not like this," she groaned. Ryuga hissed at her apologetically, telling her the unfortunate news of having to go back where he came from. "You what?!" she gasped, covering her mouth. Naga hissed, thrashing on the floor as if he was laughing hard.

“Azumi, please sit down,” Gaara said worriedly. “Your back is bleeding again and I need to see what else you did.” He looked down at the snake. “What? Do they have to go back in?” he half-joked.

She nodded and groaned at the very thought. Gaara took her hand and led her to a seat. She took in the size of Ryuga and could still feel the uncomfortable feeling in her throat. "Do you really have to?" she asked the snake. Ryuga nodded, moving closer to her. She immediately seized up and Naga laughed harder.

“What...is he trying to go back inside of you?” Gaara looked at them both quizzically. Ryuga nodded vigorously and inched closer to Azumi. “Okay, wait.” He stepped between her and the snake. “Give her some time to recoup,” he spoke urgently but kept his tone gentle.

The snake paused and looked at him. Naga calmed down and moved closer, agreeing with Gaara about giving her time. With a small hissy sigh, Ryuga nodded again.

“Thank you,” Azumi said softly, relaxing her body just a little bit.

Seeing the tension ebbed, Gaara also allowed himself to relax. He cupped her swollen cheek and kissed her forehead. “Give me a few more minutes and I’ll tend to you next, okay,” he said, lifting her face up so she would look him in the eyes.

She kept his gaze for a moment, relaxing completely. “Alright,” she said softly with a slight nod. She watched as he tended to Sasori. She yawned and Ryuga’s head whipped in her direction so she immediately closed her mouth, not giving him a chance to try and go back inside her.

Gaara gave the large snake a warning look. “Relax,” he hissed as he returned to Sasori. Ryuga coiled up, pouting a little. Gaara quickly wrapped up his treatment of Sasori. He sighed heavily before walking into the workshop to take whatever he needed to treat Azumi. He tucked everything into the first aid kit then re-emerged to take Azumi’s hand. “Come along, you three,” he smirked at all three of them. “Let’s get you cleaned up,” he said softly to Azumi.

Azumi smiled at him and followed him back to her room. The two snakes moved closely behind them, having a quiet conversation amongst themselves.
When they were finally in her room, she immediately drank the rest of the water she had on her bedside table, not realizing just how thirsty she was. “He is going to kill me,” she sighed, sitting down on the bed.

“I’m here this time,” he told her. “He’s not going to lay a hand on you,” he said seriously. “And...he might get a dose of those pills after what you did to him,” he chuckled softly. “Turn your back to the room. I need to asses the damage.”

She shifted so her back was to him. Naga coiled up in front of her, lifted his body up and tapped his nose gently against hers to let her know she was going to be alright. She smiled at him and slowly reached out to pet him. Ryuga coiled up at the foot of the bed, watching all of them.

Gaara worked just as quickly and gently as he did before. He sighed softly, taking in the reopened wounds and the added damage. “Can you remember what made you two fight?” he asked. He knew the reason she went to his room was from the effects of the pills but that would not have lead to a fight.

“He would not let me use his bathroom,” she muttered. “I was already over there so I was going to use it whether he allowed me or not.”

Gaara snorted and the snakes hissed a giggle. “Fair enough,” he reasoned. He crawled onto the bed so he could treat her hands and face.

She looked at him and frowned. “I am sorry I keep causing you this much trouble,” she said. “I just do not know where the bathroom is on this side of the house.”

He looked her hard in the eyes. His hands paused in their work to cup her face very gently. “You didn’t beat yourself,” he said softly. “You did nothing to earn any of this and aside from it being my job,” he cracked a smile, “I’ll do this a hundred times for the woman who can put my cousin on his ass like that.” He leaned in and kissed her swollen lips. “And for the woman I love.”

She smiled at him and leaned in to kiss him again, pushing into it a little too excitedly. After a few seconds, she pulled away and chuckled softly. “Sorry,” she said, realizing she needed to relax.

He smiled widely, leaning in to kiss her again. “Don’t apologize anymore,” he spoke against her lips before kissing her again. His hands slid down her arms and he wrapped them around him. “I’m yours to kiss. But please...be careful.”

She grinned, resting her head against him. She felt no pain for the most part but she knew that once the pills started to wear off she was going to be completely incapacitated. She yawned again and hummed softly. “I will not remember most of this night by tomorrow,” she chuckled.

“Well, maybe that’s for the best.” He threaded his fingers through her hair. “I’ll deal with Sasori. You focus on resting and from now on if you need to go to the bathroom just tell me,” he half teased as he finished up with her face and began to pack away everything.

She hummed through a chuckle as she laid down on her stomach and rested her head on her arms. “Yes, Doctor,” she teased. His cheeks burned pink and he smiled as he crawled into bed with her. He kissed her forehead once more while stroking her hair. She shifted to wrap her arms around him and nuzzle against him. As he stroked her hair, she drifted off to sleep once again. Both of the snakes fell asleep soon after, followed by Gaara.
The next morning, Azumi woke up to all of the pain in her body. She let out a long groan as she tried to find a position in which she felt the least pain. It hurt more than she remembered and she did not understand why.

Gaara stirred next to her and cracked an eye open. “Sssh, relax,” he said in a thick husk. “You’re going to agitate your wounds.” He started to roll over and grabbed a different pillbox. “How bad do you hurt on a scale of one to ten?” he asked, rubbing his face.

She huffed a little, thinking about every point of pain in her body and what hurt the most. She figured ten would have been a bit dramatic but it was definitely a lot of pain. “Eight,” she groaned. It was mostly her back and she could feel the area around her ribs throbbing a lot.

He nodded and grabbed another pillbox. He gave her only one of the stronger pills and a different pill. “This shouldn’t make you as high as two would but it should cut the edge.” He handed her a cup of water.

She nodded as she took the pills in one hand and the water in the other. She quickly swallowed the pills and downed half of the glass of water. She waited a few minutes to feel the pain subside. Once it started to, she let out a relieved sigh. “Thank you,” she said softly.

He nodded and leaned in to kiss her cheek. “Do you need to go to the bathroom?” he asked with a small smirk. He started to stand up, stretching hard.

She pouted a little and looked down. “Yes,” she said softly.

His smile softened and he offered her a hand. “We can go together then,” he said softly. “And then I have to go check on Sasori,” he hummed slightly to himself.

She took his hand and he led her to a bathroom that was not Sasori’s. As they walked, she took in the new bandages on her arms and the new points of pain she felt when she woke up. “I felt like I was run over by a group of horses,” she muttered.

Gaara chuckled, peeking back at her. “The other guy might say that, too,” he teased. “Do you have any memories of last night?”

She hummed in thought for a moment, trying to recollect the night. “I remember...bits and pieces...” she started. “I had to pee. But it took forever for me to be able to go.” She thought harder about what stopped her from going. “He punched me,” she gasped softly.

“I think he did more than that.” His smile faltered a little. He held the door to the bathroom open for her. “When I showed up, you had him on the floor and knocked out,” he chuckled. “I don’t exactly know how the fight started but you’re both pretty battered.”

“I knocked him out?” she whispered. “Oh, he is going to kill me when he sees me.” She was sort of interested to know exactly what she did to him but she was also a bit afraid to confront him.

“He won’t do anything to you,” Gaara said seriously. “I’ll have to go visit him and see how bad his injuries are.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “And I want to take a look at your mouth. It was bleeding a lot last night and I’m afraid he kicked you in the mouth.”

“That would explain the pain I feel there,” she muttered, rubbing her jaw a little. She gripped her
fangs gently and checked to see if they were loose. They were not and she sighed in relief.

“He might remember what happened but I’m going to gauge the damage and he’s not going to touch you,” he assured her. “You’re going to relax.”

She chuckled softly. “I must follow the Doctor’s orders,” she smirked, wrapping her arms around him. Once they got there, she kissed him softly then let him go so she could use the bathroom.

He turned his back to give her privacy. “I kind of want you to see what you did to your, uh...master,” he giggled. “Because you, my dear, were not playing. Granted, neither was he but still he looks like he got what he deserved.”

“I cannot say much because I do not remember,” she chuckled as she finished and washed up. “But I believe everything you are saying because my knuckles hurt.”

He waited to hear her finish up in the bathroom before turning around. He took her hand in his and examined the bruised joints. “Should I have given you a stronger dose?” he asked her with a little worry in his voice. The doctor in him said his dosage was fine but the man who loved her did not want her to be in any pain.

She smiled at him and shook her head slightly. “No. A little aching is nothing. I can handle it.” She kissed him softly. “I will be fine for now.”

“Okay.” His face softened. “Are you ready to go back? Or did you want to clean up a little?”

She considered a bath for a moment. It would be best to do that while she was in the least amount of pain. “I probably should,” she hummed.

“Would you like help again?” he smirked, running his fingers through her hair, twirling the ends of her hair in his fingers. He kissed her again, slowly, lingering on her lips.

She smirked against his lips, wrapping her arms around him. “How can I deny help from you?” she hummed.

“I wouldn’t want to stifle you,” he smiled back into the kiss, very gently sucking on her lip as he kissed her again. He pulled back so he could help her out of her dress and then took off his own clothes. He kissed her again and then started the bath in the much smaller tub for her.

Once the bath was ready, they got into it, not at all bothered by how close they were. She smirked, leaning in to kiss him again. “I just need help with carefully washing my back,” she said softly.

“Don’t worry,” he nodded and kissed one of the bruises on her neck. He worked down to her shoulders with his lips as his fingers started to undo the wrappings. Once they were all off, he stopped kissing her so he could reach for a washcloth. She turned around so he could get to her back easily and moved her hair out of the way for him. As he started to wash her back, she grabbed another washcloth and started to wash the rest of her body. “Try not to take any more swings at anyone,” Gaara teased gently as he moved his hands over her back. “Some of these got kind of deep after whatever you two were doing,” he frowned, kissing the back of her neck. He noted the bad bruising on the back of her arms, telling him she had hit the floor hard. Sasori was always too rough, serious or not.

She chuckled softly as she finished washing, inspecting all of the new injuries on her arms and hands. Then suddenly, she paused and stared ahead for a moment in thought. “Did...was there a new snake?” she asked softly. She vaguely remembered a second snake being involved.
Gaara had to stifle the chuckle that wanted to escape him. “There is,” he finally said. “His name is Ryuga. And he, uh...he came out of you, apparently.”

“That is...what I thought,” she muttered, trying not to shudder at the thought of it. “I was hoping that part was a hallucination or a dream.”

Gaara finished up with her back and started to wash. He hummed softly before he spoke again. “He’s very nice and seems to be getting along very well with Naga.” He rinsed off and got out before her so he could get the towels.

“Oh...” she said as she stepped out of the tub and grabbed the towel he handed her. “That is good then.” She wrapped the towel around herself and tossed her old bandages away. She grabbed their clothes as he wrapped his towel around his waist and they went back to her room.

“How is your throat though?” he asked her as he held the door to her room open for her. Naga and Ryuga perked up the moment the door opened. Naga hissed, moving to the end of the bed. Ryuga bowed his head as a little greeting.

“It feels fine,” she said softly, stepping closer to the bed so Naga could move up her body. “For now,” she said even more softly, looking at Ryuga. She reached a hand out to gently pet the new snake’s head. Ryuga nuzzled his head into her hand and hissed softly.

Gaara raised an eyebrow at the added comment. "Well tell me if it starts to bother you," he said, gently turning her head back to him. He leaned down and kissed her slowly. "Sorry," he laughed softly. "Do you want me to rewrap your back now or wait until I'm done with Sasori?"

“It might be better to do that now,” she hummed, setting their clothes onto the bed. “I can get us coffee while you deal with him.”

He nodded at her. "Alright." He ran a hand through his hair before dropping his towel and getting dressed. He grabbed the bandages and carefully wrapped her up, focusing more on the large wounds on her back then moved on to wrapping her arms and hands. He kissed her knuckles once he was done. "I shouldn't be too long and I doubt Komushi will give you any problems," he said with slight hesitation. He grabbed the pills that Sandaime had given them and unjammed the door. "Just call for me if you need me.”

She got dressed carefully and nodded for the snakes to follow her to the kitchen. They followed closely behind and coiled up on a chair while she made coffee. She poured her first cup and sat down with them. “So,” she started, looking at Ryuga, “you have to go back...and I am assuming the only way to do that is the way you came...” Ryuga nodded, hissing softly. “Right...but do you really have to go back? Would you not rather stay out in the open world?” Ryuga shook his head, telling her that these were orders from her father that he must obey. Azumi pouted a little. “Of course,” she sighed, sipping her coffee. “But while you are still out, I must ask you one favor. Do not try to kill the man that caused you to come out.”

The snake tensed and hissed lowly. He could not guarantee. Protecting her was his first and foremost order. That man was the biggest threat to his host and Lady.

She saw the snake’s hesitation and gave him a soft smile as she reached over to pet him. “Please,” she whispered. “He has something else coming for him.”

He hesitated for a moment longer before nodding and hissing again. He relented to her wishes but warned her that if she came too close to death before Sasori got his reckoning he would **have** to act.
"I understand," she smiled. She leaned down to kiss the top of his head. "Thank you."

He hissed a happy little sound when she kissed him. Naga hissed a little laugh at the reaction then moved closer to bump his head against her. He wanted one too.

She chuckled softly and kissed the top of Naga's head then picked him up so he could loosely wrap around her neck. She stood up and picked up Ryuga, wrapping him around her waist. He was significantly bigger than Naga so she could definitely feel his weight at her hips. She did not mind it, however. She poured a cup of coffee for Gaara and decided for a moment if she should wait for him to return back to her room or risk going to Sasori's room to give him his coffee. Her thoughts were halted by Komushi entering the kitchen.

"Are you healing or getting worse?" he chuckled, looking at her new injuries.

"I can ask you the same thing, considering you are still here," Azumi smirked. "Is nap time still every hour?"

Komushi snorted as he crossed the kitchen to pour himself a cup of coffee. He lifted the cup to take a sip. "I wouldn't know yet since the day just started," he smirked over the lip of the cup. "Wait." His eyes narrowed. "When did you get two of those?" he asked, flicking a finger between Naga and Ryuga. Ryuga hissed lowly, shifting on Azumi's hips. He was tensing up, getting ready to attack Komushi. Komushi looked down at the large snake and flinched back. "What's his problem?"

"You are," she chuckled. "He does not like you."

"He doesn't even know me," Komushi defended.

"That should tell you something about your character and the general vibe you give off," Azumi smirked.

Komushi scoffed and rolled his eyes. "You and that Utakata guy with the vibes," he muttered. "What does that even mean?"

"It means your presence causes a general disturbance."

"Whatever," he scoffed again, rolling his eyes hard. "Are you heading over to Sasori now?" he asked, noting the two cups she had in her hands.

She paused for a moment, not wanting to reveal that Gaara was still in the house. "I, uh...yes," she said. "I am."

"Then we can walk over together if you’re ready," he smirked. He looked at her a little funny when she hesitated but did not say anything as he turned to walk out of the room.

She let out a heavy sigh. "Right," she muttered, following him down the hall to Sasori's room. The entire walk, she hoped that Sasori was still unconscious or hopefully, by some miraculous twist of fate, he decided he was not going to hurt her when he saw her. They entered Sasori's bedroom and Gaara was still treating some of his wounds.

Komushi stopped dead in his tracks. He looked between Sasori and Azumi. "Were you two attacked last night?" he asked seriously. "You’re both beaten up? Was there a break-in?"

Gaara was going to answer for them but Sasori curled up into a sitting position before he could be stopped with a slight wince and a big smile. "Azumi and I had a bit of a scuffle last night." He gave her an apologetic look. "Ah," he tutted with a heavy sigh. "Look at you." His voice was thick with
regret. “We really did a number on each other, didn’t we,” Sasori said softly.

"Huh?” was all Azumi could get out, standing there in pure shock at his response. Both snakes hissed their confusion as well.

"Whoa, are you okay?” Komushi asked, even more concerned about how nice Sasori was being.

"He’s had a dose of those painkillers,” Gaara explained.

“But...those shouldn’t make him so—“ Komushi was cut off but Sasori pushing himself to get up.

“I’m alright, baby cousin,” Sasori smiled serenely. He ran his fingers through Gaara’s hair then gently patted his head. Komushi’s eyes were about to fall out. “Komushi,” Sasori turned to his bewildered best friend next, “did you sleep alright?”

The genuine concern on his face made Komushi flinch away from him. “I...er...yeah, I did.” He looked back at Gaara. "Could be anywhere from a couple of hours to the whole day."

“Don’t like this,” Komushi whined lowly.

Sasori chuckled as he got up and walked slowly over to Azumi. He looked her over then circled around to her back. He carefully pulled the bandages away from her skin to look at the damage and gasped softly. She tensed up a little bit but relaxed when she heard a soft guilty sound come from him. He gently traced a couple of wounds. “I overreacted last night,” he huffed. “We’re lucky to have Gaara here. He will make sure you are alright.”

Azumi furrowed her brow and turned around to look at him. She understood why he was acting this way but it was still weird and she was not sure if she liked it or not. On one hand, he was nice to her but on the other hand, she knew this would not last long and he could be even worse than before when he became sober. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. ‘I might as well enjoy it while it lasts,’ she thought. "I...apologize for punching you,” she said softly. "And...whatever else I may have done." She still did not remember the details, but he did so she hoped that covered it all.

"I deserved it," he hummed. “You don’t remember much, do you?” He chuckled again then glanced down at the large snake wrapped around her waist. “So are you staying like Naga?” He reached out to gently pet Ryuga’s head but pulled back at the last moment, thinking better of it.

The snake hissed softly, telling Azumi he did not like what was happening. "He is not staying long," she answered. "He has to go back where he came from."

Sasori nodded solemnly. “Would you like some throat numbers?” he whispered loudly.

Azumi blushed at him. “Will...will those work?” she asked. She had no idea what Ryuga going back inside her would entail but she was willing to try anything that would ease the process.

“Maybe... won’t hurt to try.” He gave her another smile. “And while we are at it, we’ll give you something for your back.” He turned on his heel quickly and started for the workshop.

Komushi shook his head, still bewildered. “This isn’t normal,” he muttered.
Azumi handed Gaara one of the coffee mugs in her hands before following Sasori into the workshop. Naga slithered off of her and coiled up on a counter but Ryuga stayed wrapped around her, refusing to let her go in this man’s presence.

Sasori walked over to his shelves and hummed softly as he looked for the throat numbers and whatever else he needed for her back.

Komushi took the stool he usually occupied in the room and continued to squint at Sasori. Nothing about this personality switch felt right. "What exactly was in those pills?" he muttered to Gaara.

"They are just a really strong painkiller," Gaara shrugged.

"With what? A personality 180 as a side effect?" Komushi snapped.

Sasori placed everything down on his workbench and chuckled softly. "It's more like...it removes the barrier or self-control for repressed feelings," he explained. "I'm no less me than when I am sober."

“But you’re a lot less you,” Komushi said. “Just like she wasn’t herself when she slapped you.”

“I slapped him?” Azumi hummed.

“You said you were going to rip his face off.”

Azumi chuckled, not wanting to admit out loud that would definitely say something like that.

“Those were her repressed emotions toward me,” Sasori told him.

"You sound so casual about this," Komushi huffed defeatedly. "Are you even in enough pain for these kinds of pills?"

"Oh, yes," Sasori laughed. "I said some horrible things last night and Azumi reacted pretty accordingly," he said, starting to make a salve in a large dish. He slid her a bottle with one hand while the other continued to work the salve. "Be careful with those," he told her. "I made them for some prostitutes a while back so they are a pretty strong throat relaxant and numbing agent."

‘I am more interested in the fact that you made this for prostitutes,’ Azumi thought as she picked up the bottle to inspect its contents. “Thank you,” she said softly.

“You're at least going back to your ways when you're sober, right?” Komushi asked Sasori.

“Regardless of if you think she was in the right to hit you, she’s still your slave.”

"I'm fully aware of who she is and yes, Komushi," Sasori maintained a patient tone, completely unfitting of his usual character, "I'll still be your favorite ball of rage and anger." He reached over with his clean hand and took Komushi's hand. I appreciate your concern."

Komushi looked down at their touching hands in near horror. “I can’t wait for you to go back to normal,” he shuddered, pulling his hand away slowly.

“On another note, you don’t feel tired, do you?” Sasori asked him, changing the subject. “You didn’t relapse as hard yesterday.”

“I feel fine so far,” Komushi pushed out through gritted teeth. “Like I told Azumi, the day is still young.” He sipped his coffee and looked away from Sasori.

Sasori nodded thoughtfully. “Okay, I’m thinking we should be in the clear today or tomorrow.” He
flashed Komushi a smile. “Then you’ll be able to go home. I know your mother might start to actually worry about you now.”

Gaara stifled a laughed behind his coffee mug and looked at Azumi with giggling eyes. Komushi shot Gaara a glare but said nothing to him. “She probably is,” he muttered.

“Cute,” Azumi chuckled. “Are you a mama’s boy as well?”

"I am not," Komushi snapped defensively.

It was Sasori who laughed now. "You're a terrible liar," he said with a fond smile. "He's almost as bad as I am when it comes to his mother."

"Sasori," Komushi growled, feeling utterly betrayed. "What the hell! Did those drugs make you a traitor too?"

Sasori shrugged. "I'm not really sure. Just seems like a dumb thing to lie about."

Azumi chuckled again. “There is nothing wrong with it,” she said softly to Komushi as she patted him on the back gently. “I have no problem admitting that I am a daddy’s girl.”

"What's it like to have parents you actually like?" Gaara half-teased. Sasori's face fell a little. He circled around the workbench and took Gaara's coffee mug from him to place it down on the counter. Gaara blinked, unsure of what his cousin was about to do. Sasori wrapped his arms around, pulling him gently into a hug. Both Azumi and Komushi’s jaws dropped, watching the display. “It’s alright,” Gaara said to Sasori. He felt like he was consoling his cousin for something neither of them could control.

“It isn’t,” Sasori said.

“Our uncle has been more of a father to me than my father so it is alright. And then there’s you, who helped me out also.”

“Aw, this is getting sentimental really fast,” Azumi whispered.

"It is and it's making my skin crawl," Komushi said as he finished off his coffee.

Sasori stepped away from Gaara and sighed. "Azumi, let me look at your back again. I'm going to apply this salve and it should lessen the pain over all of the potential scarring that may form.”

Azumi moved closer to him, unwrapping Ryuga from her waist. Or at least she tried to. The snake resisted hard, hissing loudly at her about not leaving his spot. “Get off of me,” she growled softly at him. With much reluctance, Ryuga moved to the closest counter, slithering across it to stay by her side as she moved toward Sasori.

Sasori gave the Ryuga a polite nod then pulled the bowl he had been working with closer to him. He angled her back as he unwrapped her bandages so that the large snake could see everything he was going. He took the gritty salve with one hand as he shifted her hair over her shoulder with the other. "Brace yourself," he said softly before smearing the concoction at the base of her neck. He was going to work his way down.

She winced very slightly but relaxed a second later as he moved his hand. She breathed slowly while he rubbed the salve into her skin. She hoped this would mean she did not have to take any more pills to relieve the pain in her back. She would deal with the pain everywhere else some other way. “Thank you,” she said softly when he was finished.
Sasori nodded, cleaning off his hand. "I tend to overreact," he shrugged as he rewrapped her bandages. "Causing you pain is admittedly enjoyable but I genuinely don't want to lose you." He cleaned up the bowl and packed away the rest of the salve for later use. "My uncle is going to try and take you away from me but...I need you." He nearly whispered the last part.

She frowned, looking down for a moment. "That is a shame," she told him just as softly. She turned around to look at him. "We would have made a great team. However, your treatment of me leaves me inclined to leave once I am free." Had he not been the embodiment of a demon in the way he treated her, she would have agreed to stay as his partner in business and science.

"Not surprising," he hummed softly. "We would have made a great team," he agreed. "I won't let you go without a fight," he said honestly but there was none of the rage or force in his voice. It almost sounded sad. There was a lonely look in his eyes. "Not many understand my work the way you and Gaara have."

"The way things are looking, whether you put up a fight or not, it is inevitable." She looked him in the eyes. He knew that she was not talking about the abolition of slavery. She grabbed Ryuga and rewrapped him around her waist then sat down at another workbench.

"Legal or not," Sasori looked at her innocently, "I refuse to let you go." He reached out and took her hand in his.

Gaara's eyes narrowed at his insistence. "Then why don't you try making life easier for her by treating her like a real human being and not some toy," he said tightly.

"Tch," Komushi sucked his teeth, resting his head on his fist as he leaned against the counter. "Where's the fun in that? What's the point of having someone who does what you tell them to without question if you can't torture them?"

"Stay out of this," Gaara told him. "You're disgusting."

"Get off your high horse," Komushi rolled his eyes. "You aren't perfect." He glared at the younger man. "I know plenty about your nightlife."

"You say that like I spend my nights going out and torturing people," Gaara scoffed.

"Playing with someone's heart and knowing your actions could get them killed is saintly to you?" Komushi countered.

"I never said I was a saint," Gaara said. "But you cannot compare me to the monsters that you two are."

"I'm too high for all this arguing," Sasori yawned. "Could someone bring me breakfast. I don't care which one of you does it but I need food and I've decided I don't want Azumi doing it, so get going."

Both men looked at him and then Gaara sighed. "I'll do it," he said, wanting to just get away from Komushi for a bit. He turned and left the room without another word.

Sasori sighed heavily and folded his arms on the workbench to create a little nest for his head. "Komushi, go run a bath for us," he said softly. I want to talk to Azumi alone."

Komushi looked over at Azumi then back at Sasori. He huffed, pushing himself off of the stool. "Fine," he grumbled before slipping out of the room.
Once they were alone, Azumi looked at Sasori. Ryuga hissed quietly, not liking the fact that they were alone but Azumi put her hand on his head to keep him quiet. She had no idea what to expect or what he wanted to say. However, she was sure there was going to be no violence. Otherwise, Ryuga would strike at him.

Sasori gave Ryuga a small, tired smile. Without lifting his head he looked up at Azumi. "Do you remember anything we said to each other last night?" he asked curiously.

She frowned and shook her head. "No," she said. "All I really remember is having to use the bathroom. I do know we fought from the evidence and I know he..." she pointed at Ryuga and groaned, "came out of me."

"Yeah, that was...nasty to witness. I don't want to imagine how disgusting it felt," Sasori grimaced. "You're sort of feral on these pills," he chuckled softly. "I wanted to play with that version of you more but..." he trailed off, "I was at the risk of killing you." He touched a bruise on his jaw that he could not feel. "You really hate me," he laughed softly. The lonely look was in his eyes again. "I didn't give you much reason not to. Not that I want any of your affections."

She furrowed her brow at him, watching the look in his eyes. 'Is he trying to make me feel guilty?' she thought. He was right. She hated him. However, sometimes she felt bad for him. She could see how lonely he was. Yet, he refuses companionship whenever it is offered or presented to him. He did this to himself. "So then what do you want?" she asked. "If not my affections." Not like she would give him affection anyway after what he did to her.

Sasori thought for a few minutes. He softly hummed the same tune he had whistled the night before as he thought. "I want to learn everything about you," he finally said. "Your body has so much to offer. So much I could learn about and make things from." He got an excited rush to his voice. "That's all I ever want. Is to know more. I crave information." He looked her dead in the eyes.

She sighed, resting her head in her hand. "Of course," she muttered. "So you want me to cooperate while you dissect and probe my body. You make it hard to want to cooperate with how violent you are as soon as your short-fuse temper is ignited."

"I'm impatient," Sasori shrugged. "I'm not always so awful and you can't even say I am," he pouted a little. He shoved his mouth into his arms to hide it, looking away from her. "I just want you to do as I say. You hide behind my uncle and Gaara so quickly. And you act as if I don't see the way Gaara looks at you." He grew silent once more. "I've never had any reason to reign in my temper. Everyone grates on my nerves anyway. They talk too much, act so fake and always want something from me." He fussed with his hair a bit. He was starting to speak more to himself than Azumi.

She paused for a moment and for a split second, recalled the moments where they actually got along. She closed her eyes and sighed again, unwrapping Ryuga from her and setting him down on the counter. Without a word, Azumi moved closer to Sasori. She ran her fingers through his hair for a second until he looked up at her and sat up straight, turning toward her. Once he did, she leaned down and wrapped her arms around him and brought him into a hug.

His eyes widened for a moment and his arms twitched at his sides before finally coming up to wrap around her. He buried his face in her hair and took a deep, slow breath then pulled her closer, holding on to her tightly.

"Hey, the bath is—" Komushi stopped short. "What that..." He shook his head unsure of what he was seeing.
They ignored Komushi's presence for a few more moments before pulling apart. "That does not excuse everything you have done to me and I still resent you," she said softly.

Sasori looked into her eyes. There was a glassy sheen to them now. "I know that," he said softly. Komushi crept closer, retaking his seat. "I'm not asking for your forgiveness." He took her hands in his. "Just don't...leave me."

"I will make that decision when I am free," she said. "But until that day, I will continue to serve you without question as the legality of our situation still stands." She did not want to be one of the slaves that stayed with their master after they were considered free but she decided she would make the real decision when that time comes. It would all depend on his treatment of her until that point.

"Thank you," Sasori nodded, squeezing her hands gently.

Komushi looked between them with a guarded expression. "You aren't taking advantage of my Sasori in his weakened state?" Komushi smirked devilishly. "You know he isn't in his right mind and won't remember any promises you two might make right now."

"I'm alright, Ko," Sasori turned to him with a smile. Gaara walked in just as Sasori said that. Komushi cringed just a little bit.

"We have not made any promises to each other," Azumi said. "I know very well he will not remember this."

"Did he just call you Ko?" Gaara asked.

Komushi turned his head towards Gaara but continued to look at Sasori with narrow eyes. "He...I think he did," Komushi leaned over the table, pressing the back of his hand to Sasori's forehead. "Are you sure you didn't overdose him," he asked Gaara, finally looking at him.

Gaara gave him an offended scoff and set the bowls of food down on the workbench. "I'm a professional," he clicked his tongue.

Sasori took Komushi's wrist in one of his hands and gently pulled it away. "I'm fine," he assured him. "Really, Ko, don't worry."

"He did it again," Gaara and Komushi breathed.

"He's going to cry," Komushi whispered to Gaara.

"Sasori doesn't cry. " Gaara shook his head.

"He does when he calls me ‘Ko’..." Komushi bit his lip and real worry.

Azumi sighed and pulled Sasori into another hug. "Please do not cry," she said softly, running her fingers through his hair. She smirked and lowered her voice to a whisper. "I will never let sober you live it down."

Gaara’s face felt like it was going numb. It wanted to snarl, gawk and press into pure disapproval. His body fought not to lunge and tear them apart because how could she hug him like that, treat him so tenderly after all he had done to her? His head was silently spinning. Komushi was in nearly the same state of dizziness. It was a lot for them to process.

Sasori folded his arms around her again and chuckled softly. It was a light, happy little sound tucked into the folds of her hair. "Sober me would never believe you," he whispered.
“Regardless of whether you believe me or not,” she said as she pulled away and sat down, “you will never hear the end of it. So try not to cry.”

"I'll do my best." He blinked hard and the glassiness in his eyes dissipated slightly. With that, Komushi and Gaara snapped back to reality. "Let's go take a bath and eat breakfast, Ko," Sasori said, getting up. His hand slid to hold Azumi's hand again for a moment and squeezed it tight before letting go.

Komushi did not say anything as the two of them walked out of the workshop and headed toward the bathroom, leaving Azumi and Gaara alone with the snakes. “What an unfortunate being,” she muttered.

"He wasn't always," Gaara said as he took Sasori's seat in front of her. He cupped her face and lifted her chin so she would look at him. "But don't let this high fool you," he said warningly. He leaned in, pressing their foreheads together. He laced his other hand with hers, trying to make as many points of physical contact as possible. He was not jealous. Or at least that's what he would tell himself.

She smiled softly at him and moved to straddle his lap. She pulled him into a kiss, knowing they had a few moments alone while the other two were in the bath. “Do not worry,” she said softly against his lips. “I am not so easily fooled.”

He relaxed a little, wrapping his arms around her lower back to pull her closer. He kissed her again, lingering on her lips before pulling away. "I didn't think you were," he said, whispering against her lips. "But I can't help but worry for you." He looked into her eyes.

She ran her fingers through his hair and gently scratched his scalp. “I know,” she said. “And I appreciate that. But now we both know how we truly feel about each other. He knows that I hate him and I know that he needs me and will not try to kill me on purpose.”

Gaara hummed, enjoying the feeling of her touch. He nuzzled his head into her neck and pressed a kiss to her skin. "That is a toxic symbiotic relationship," he said with a small laugh.

"It was toxic the moment I became his slave,” she smirked. “And it will remain so until I am free.”

"And free you shall be soon," he smiled, kissing her neck again. He kissed up her jaw and pulled her into another kiss. He loved the weight of her in his lap. He could not wait to have these moments with her without the tension of secrecy.

She pushed into the kiss, biting his lip gently. The snakes hissed, telling them to get a room, half-teasingly but more out of concern since they were still pretty close to Sasori and Komushi. “We are being reprimanded,” she chuckled, pulling away from Gaara very slightly.

"Is that what that was?” Gaara said, looking around with a smirk. "I just thought one of Sasori's sealed jars had a leak," he chuckled, winking at the snakes. "Alright," he kissed her again then carefully edged her back onto her stool, "whatever they are saying is probably right. We still need to be careful." He leaned forward for one more kiss. "But I am having a hard time keeping away from you." 

“Really?” she chuckled. “I would have thought you were sick of being my doctor by now,” she smirked.

"I think it's you who should be tired of being my patient," he teased back. "I'll never tire of taking care of you but I can do that without you actually being hurt, you know."
“But there is no purpose if I am not injured,” she chuckled. “Though, I do miss the sensual touches which may be hard to do in my current state. I will try not to get into any more fights so I can have that again.”

"I quite miss those," Gaara chuckled. "And I very much prefer you whole and healthy." He sat back in his seat, hearing footsteps in Sasori's room. "And I won't let Sasori do anything like he did to you last night ever again. I...just might kill him myself if he does."

She smirked at him. "That sounds like you will be staying here for a little while longer," she said softly. "And I kind of like the sound of that." Naga slithered over to the workbench they were at and hissed softly at Azumi, telling her that she should eat. "I will," she said, tapping his nose gently. "I did not forget."

"I'll be here until you send me away," Gaara smiled. "And even then it might take some convincing to get me to leave." He glanced at Naga and smiled. Naga used his tail to nudge Gaara's bowl closer to him. "Thank you," he smiled, picking up the bowel.

Azumi picked up one of the other bowls and started to eat. Moments later, Komushi and Sasori returned to the workshop in robes. They sat down and grabbed their bowls to eat as well.

“I can’t get anything I wanted to be done today,” Sasori hummed. “Since I won’t remember much of it after today.”

"You don't need to remember orders to complete them," Komushi chuckled. He nudged Azumi as he sat down. "Besides, you have her. She can just log everything for you."

"Or Azumi and I can handle everything for you today," Gaara offered. "I do it at the shop. It’s no different here."

“I don’t need to remember orders but I like to have the memory of doing them.” He looked at his cousin and slave. “You wouldn’t mind?”

“Nothing I haven’t done before,” Gaara shrugged. Azumi nodded in agreement.

"We can hang out together and just relax today," Komushi smiled. "Let them take care of all the business.” He put an arm around Sasori and gave him a small squeeze.

Sasori smiled softly and nodded. "Alright, but please keep a record of everything and—"

"Hey," Gaara cut him off. "You trust me with your shop. I can handle a few orders."

“You’re not wrong,” Sasori chuckled.

“Do not worry,” Azumi said as she finished her food. “We can handle it.”

Komushi narrowed his eyes suspiciously. He finished his own food and leaned his head against his hand. “And don’t worry, Sasori,” he smirked. “I’ll make sure these two behave.”

Gaara rolled his eyes and leaned over to flick Komushi. " Shut up. You have one job. Let’s see if you can stay awake for it,” he muttered. Sasori yawned hard and smiled.

Komushi grabbed Sasori’s arm once they were finished eating and stood up. “Let’s go,” he said as they left the workshop.

Once again, Azumi and Gaara were left alone with the snakes. “I am going to need more coffee,”
she sighed. She grabbed the empty bowls and coffee cups. “Would you like more?”

“I would,” Gaara smiled as he stood to start working. “Thank you.” He circled workbench and kissed her cheek. “Hurry back,” he said softly with a smirk.

She winked at him and walked out of the workshop. As soon as she started moving, Ryuga followed her. Together, they went to the kitchen and she set the bowls on the counter then refilled the coffee cups. “This has been a strange morning,” she muttered to herself. Ryuga hissed softly. “It still does not beat how you got out and how you will have to go back in.” Ryuga hissed a small laugh then tensed up. He hissed again as the sound of footsteps echoed down the hall.

“Good morning, Lady Azumi,” Sandaime said with a wide smile when he poked his head into the room. He looked around, seeing no one else was in the room yet. “Is he still asleep?” He raised an eyebrow. It was then that he got a good look at her and frowned. “What happened to you? Did he beat you again?” he growled.

She chuckled softly and bowed to him. “Good morning, Lord Sandaime,” she said. “Those pills you gave me...they really bring out someone’s true personality, I suppose. We beat each other and he...” She could not hide her laugh. “You should see him. He is currently under the influence of those same pills.”

He took a moment to process what she had just told him. As her words sunk in, his eyes widened and his grin returned full force. “I didn’t think that side effect would manifest like this,” he started to laugh. “You beat him so bad that he had to take them himself?” He snorted again and gently patted her head. “You truly are outstanding, Azumi,” he grinned. “What is he like? A sobbing ball of anger and guilt?” he asked half-jokingly. Part of him hoped his nephew still had those emotions.

“He is...he seems very guilty. He has admitted to needing me and begged me to not leave when I am free.” She frowned and looked at her coffee. “He is very lonely. But that is something he has brought upon himself.”

"He begged you?" Sandaime hummed, leaning his back against the counter. "He did bring it on himself and after this bill is passed, he will have to wallow in his loneliness or have a severe change in character," he said sternly. "I care for my nephew but...murder is no excuse for anything aside from self-defense." He frowned, looking her over again. "Are you still in pain?"

"Mm, minor aching," she said with a shrug. "Gaara cut my dose of those pills you gave me after I beat Lord Sasori unconscious and gave me another pill to go with it. I do not feel any of the major pain so I am fine to move around. And I have more control over my actions."

He nodded and chuckled again. "Yeah, those pills are...very strong." He ran a hand through his spikey hair. "Is Gaara still here?" he asked her, pushing off the counter. "I can't imagine the boy leaving your side."

"He is," she chuckled. "He and I are going to complete orders for Lord Sasori while he is," she lowered her voice to a whisper, "in his feelings."

He rolled his eyes hard that the mention of Sasori and his emotions. "He really never grew up." He shook his head. "I should still give him a talking to for hitting you," his upper lip stiffened. "But not until he comes down from his high. I want him to remember every excruciating moment of it." He started for the door. "Can you handle doing orders right now? Shouldn't you be resting?" he asked her.

She smiled as she followed him with Ryuga and the cups of coffee. "I should be fine. But even if I
say I can do things, I am also okay with just being Gaara's lovely assistant for the day."

He chuckled and started down the hall with her back towards Sasori's room. "Oh, I'm sure he would love that," he smirked down at her. "You don't think Sasori has caught on to you two, has he?"

"I...do not think he knows. He is very suspicious. He said something about noticing the way Gaara looks at me. But his pet scarab knows for sure and so far he has not said anything to him."

"Komushi knows and he hasn't said anything yet?" Sandaime asked her as they turned the hall. "That's...suspicious," his voice dropped. "It...goes without saying that you two need to be careful but please try to be. That boy is just as conniving as Sasori is violent."

"Oh, I am fully aware," she muttered. They approached Sasori's room and went inside. Azumi went straight into the workshop to hand Gaara his second cup of coffee. "Your uncle is here," she said softly.

Gaara smiled as he took the coffee and kissed her cheek. "Wait, really?" he frowned, looking over his shoulder to the room. "Did he say what for?"

Outside the Sandaime stood at the end of Sasori's bed. It was taking every fiber of his diplomatic being to not double over in laughter again. In front of him, Sasori and Komushi had fallen asleep together, holding onto each other like children.

"He did not," she hummed. "I selfishly assumed he was here to check to see if your cousin had killed me yet. But he may be here to talk to you," she chuckled. "Or to relieve Lord Sasori and his imp of all their dignity."

Gaara snorted a little at the mention of Komushi being an imp. He took a sip of his coffee and considered for a moment if he and his uncle even had anything to talk about. "He doesn't have any orders from me or Sasori so I think it's safe to assume he came to speak with you," he finally said, reaching over to lace their fingers together. "But I would love to see him relieve Sasori and the imp of what little dignity they have," he grinned.

"As would I," she smirked. "And I know that even though I am sure I can work on some of the orders, you will not let me do much." She brought his hand up to kiss his knuckles. "But know that I can still work until these pills wear off."

His cheeks pinkened a little when she kissed his hand. He pulled her closer and kissed her softly, lingering on her lips. "I know you can," he said softly. "And I suppose I should let you," he sighed a little dramatically as he sat back in his seat, still holding her hand. "But the moment they wear off or you start to feel fatigued, I want you to tell me," he said, his doctor voice slipping out with a stern expression. "And do not even think of lying to me," he warned.

"Of course," she smiled. "I cannot lie to you. Also, it would be hard to hide my pain and fatigue. It is not exactly easy for me to ignore."

"Good," he said firmly then stammered. "I-I mean that about not lying, not that it's good you're in pain," he clarified with a bright burn to his cheeks.

"Ah," Sandaime's deep sigh came from behind them. "Young, foot in mouth, love," he chuckled teasingly. "I hope I'm not interrupting you two." He took a seat across from them and flashed them a smile. He leaned over the counter.

"Sometimes we need to be brought back to the reality that we are not here alone," she chuckled,
still not letting go of Gaara's hand. Gaara nodded in agreement to her statement. Whatever was interrupted could always be resumed later in the slightly better privacy of her room in another part of the house. "Are they still asleep?" she asked Sandaime, looking out into the bedroom.

Sandaime noted the dusty pink his that nephew's cheeks were. "They are," he grinned, leaning harder against his arm. "And they are holding onto each other like a pair of young children," he laughed softly. "I'm a little surprised Komushi is asleep in the middle of the day like that though."

"Well," Azumi chuckled, "he may still have this poison running through his system. It has been about a week at this point, I thought it would have been flushed out by now."

"It is lingering longer than expected," Gaara hummed. "But we also messed with the antidote, too," he reasoned.

Sandaime raised an eyebrow as he looked between them. "You did what now?" he asked, leaning in more towards the love birds.

"We poisoned him," she grinned. "To keep him quiet. When he revealed to me that he knew about us, he harassed me in the incense shop and it turns out the owner is from my village so he was generous enough to give me a fun solution to my problem. All it does is make him fall asleep randomly, it is not like he is dead or dying."

"The incense shop owner?" Sandaime's wide grin returned. "Now that I think about it," he chuckled, looking her hard in the eyes, "he does have eyes like yours, doesn't he?" He laughed a little more then nodded. "Good, he deserves much more than that but I'm glad you got that little bit of retribution."

Gaara chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. "You know, sometimes I forget how devious our whole family can actually be," he laughed. "I think more people would assume you'd hate justice like this."

"Justice is justice," Sandaime smirked. "And like she said, it's not like he's dead or dying."

"It was only a little bit of fun," Azumi shrugged. "He should be fine soon. He can deal with spontaneous naps."

"Exactly," Sandaime chuckled. "As for Sasori, well... too bad that side effect won't have any lasting effects on him."

"Uncle, he nearly cried," Gaara shook his head with a grin. "It was so surreal! He kept hugging Azumi calling Komushi 'Ko!'"

"He almost cried and I wasn’t here to witness it or even cause it?" Sandaime said with a slight pout.

"Whoa, are you pouting?" Azumi grinned.

"Possibly."

"He is such a sad being in this state," she hummed. "I am not saying I prefer his usual personality over this but it is almost depressing to see how lonely he truly is."

"Well, it's as you said," Sandaime shrugged, "he's done it to himself."

"Maybe he'll luck out and find a wife as shitty as he is," Gaara muttered darkly.
“Ugh,” both Azumi and Sandaime groaned, rolling their eyes.

“Could you imagine?” Azumi laughed. “Having to deal with two of him?”

“Could you imagine him even getting married?” Sandaime countered.

Gaara stuck his tongue out and make a sound of disgust. “No, thank you.” He shook his head.

“Hard pass.”

“As if it would ever happen,” Azumi said. Suddenly, they heard movement in the bedroom. “It sounds like one of them is awake,” she mumbled, letting go of Gaara’s hand.

"Uncle," Sasori muttered as he shuffled into the room. Sleep was still thick in his eyes as he took a seat on the other side of Azumi. "To what do we owe this visitation," he yawned hard.

“I am just checking on Miss Azumi,” Sandaime answered. “As I promised her.” He could see the state his nephew was clearly in. Azumi looked at Sasori and frowned.

Sasori hummed softly and slipped his arms around her middle and hooked them on her hip. "I see.” He nuzzled his cheek against her shoulder, careful to avoid the salve that he had applied to her back. "And is she up to your par?"

Azumi sighed and Sandaime's brow furrowed. "You weren't lying," he said softly to Gaara. "She is alive and she looks to be well so I would say yes, she is."

"So then she can come to bed with me and you can go home," Sasori pouted a little. "Gaara, you don't need an assistant right now." He held Azumi a little tighter.

“Actually, I do and you should go back to sleep," Gaara grumbled. "You're going to re-hurt her if you keep pulling her like that."

"She shouldn't be working anyway if she can be so easily re-hurt," Sasori said.

"No, really, I am fine to work," Azumi said, trying to pry his fingers off of her.

Sasori started to pout but got the message. "Fine," he huffed. "Just come to bed when you get tired." He pulled away. "Ko clings too hard," he said, getting up and shuffling back to the doorway. "Hurry up and get out of my house, Uncle." Without another word, he moved back to his bed.

"If those pills really bring out someone's repressed feelings, he actually hates you, Uncle," Gaara chuckled.

"It would seem so," Sandaime hummed. "Aside from this bill, I've never actually done anything to him." He rolled his eyes.

"You're the authority he needs and no one is willing to give besides his mother," Gaara shrugged.

"And I will continue to give it to him until he learns to grow up," Sandaime nodded as he stood up from his seat. "I will leave before he comes down." He turned toward the door and then looked back at them. "Be careful, you two," he smirked. "I promise I will be back in a few days to check on you."

"Thank you, Lord Sandaime," Azumi said, bowing to him.

Gaara ran a hand through his hair and chuckled softly. “Well, this has been a more than strange morning.” He sipped his coffee. “We should probably get to work.” Azumi nodded in agreement.
and they stood up. She cupped his face and pulled him into a quick kiss then they both started working on the orders Sasori needed to be done by the end of the day.
A weird breeze flew in through the open-air sitting area where Yashamaru was lounging, nodding off as he waited for his youngest brother to return from the river. Normally, a breeze would not wake him up, but this one was particularly odd. He hummed softly, sitting up straight and looking around. As usual, no one was around. He yawned and stretched hard, putting his long black hair up. "I do not know what to make of this," he muttered to himself, still thinking about the breeze. Across the room, his younger brother was coming up the stairs. "Mitsuki," he said, lounging back again and resting his head on his fist, "did you feel that?"

"Feel what?" Mitsuki asked. Another breeze flew by, ruffling the young boy’s white-blue hair.

"That. That breeze."

"Breezes are not uncommon here."

"Yeah, but this one felt different."

"Different? Could it have something to do with this?" He held up a black mamba by the tail with a little tube strapped to it. "I found him coming up beside the river."

"It certainly could," Yashamaru said as he tilted his head, looking the snake over. The mamba curled up to hiss irritatedly at Mitsuki for the way he was carrying him then stretched out, attempting to bow to Yashamaru. Mitsuki ignored the snake’s protests. Yashamaru chuckled and reached out his arm to allow the mamba to coil around his arm. "You should not hold them like that," he reprimanded his brother gently. "Where did you come from?" he asked the mamba, reaching out to pet the creature's head. The snake hissed, telling them he came from a city a couple of regions away and it took him months to finally reach the oasis. "You traveled that far, huh?"

Yashamaru hummed. "You must be tired." The snake nodded but showed him the tube attached to his body, letting him know there was a message inside of it. Yashamaru took the tube off of him and opened it up to pull the letter out. Upon first glance, a smile appeared on his face. "It is from Utakata," he said softly, recognizing the handwriting.

"That friend of yours who left?" Mitsuki asked, taking a seat in one of the comfy seats.

Yashamaru nodded, leaning back in his seat again as he read. His smile started to fade as he continued to read. He grew silent as he took in the letter. His fingers still on the back of the mamba he had been petting. "We...Where is Father?" he asked Mitsuki, standing up quickly.

“In his lab,” Mitsuki said immediately, startled by his brother’s sudden movement. He barely finished the sentence before Yashamaru started moving very fast toward his father’s lab. Mitsuki followed suit, practically running behind his brother. “What is it, Yasha?” he asked, trying to keep up.

Yashamaru did not answer yet, wanting to get to the lab as quickly as possible. "Father!" he called
Orochimaru looked up from what he was working on, nearly jumping out of his skin. His eldest son never yelled and he certainly never looked as serious as he did at that moment. "What is wrong Yashamaru?" He noted the letter in his son's hand immediately.

"I know where Azumi is!" he said, slamming the note down on his father's lab table.

Orochimaru dropped the tools in his hands with a clatter. His hands snatched the letter quickly and suddenly his keen eyes could not read fast enough. He barely finished the letter that explained in detail the whereabouts of his daughter. "Where did you get this?" he asked Yashamaru.

"Mitsuki found this little guy by the river," Yashamaru said as he shifted the black mamba on his shoulders. The snake hissed softly and bowed low to Orochimaru.

"Have you seen her?" Orochimaru asked the snake. The snake shook its head, telling him that he only knew her companion snake.

"So she has a companion?" Yashamaru hummed. "At least we know she is still alive."

Orochimaru nodded, staring at the letter hard. He had been trying for months to come up with a plan to find out where his daughter had disappeared to and how to retrieve her. Now he had a solid direction. All they had to do was figure out how to steal her back. "You did well, young one," he told the snake and turned to a tank filled with rats. He fed it to the mamba then turned to his sons. "We are getting her back. Get ready."

"Wait, Father, we cannot all go," Yashamaru said.

"I will leave Log to take care of everything until we get back," Orochimaru said, waving off all of his son's concerns. He had thought about his plan in detail, he knew exactly the measures he was going to take.

Yashamaru sighed, knowing his father already had a plan. "Alright. We will meet you out front." He placed a hand on his brother's shoulder. "Come on, Mitsuki," he said, walking out of the lab.

"Do you think we can really get her back, Yasha?" Mitsuki asked his brother, following after him out of the room.

Yashamaru smiled down at his brother. "There is no doubt about it," he replied. "You know how Father can be once he has decided on something." He placed a hand on Mitsuki's head, ruffling the boy's hair.

"That I do," Mitsuki chuckled. They spent the next hour gathering everything they would need for the trip to the region they knew Azumi was in. Once they were done, they met their father in the open-air sitting room.

Orochimaru was already waiting at the stairs for his sons. "It would usually take a couple of months to reach that part of the desert," he said. "We are doing it in a couple of weeks."

"Whoa! How are we going to manage such a grueling pace, Father?" Yashamaru asked.

"Horseback." A set of servants came around the front of the house with four of their finest horses.

Yashamaru felt all his energy leave his body. "Can any of our thighs handle that?" he sighed.
Orochimaru ignored his eldest son's grumbling and started to pack two of the horses with gear. "Mitsuki, you will ride your own horse until we reach Azumi," he said to the younger boy. "Yashamaru, you are watching over the gear."

“Yes, Father,” they both said. Yashamaru said it with more of a sigh. He did not expect his father to make him leave the village as well.

They mounted the horses and Yashamaru grabbed the reins of the fourth horse. Once they were all set, they rode off toward the mountains. The sun was going to set by the time they reached the other side of the mountains which meant that it would not be as hot for the first part of their journey.

"I have never left the village before," Mitsuki said, a little excited for this adventure.

"Oh, that is right!" Yashamaru grinned. "Maybe on the way home we can celebrate with Azumi and let you get some experience!" Mitsuki’s face lit up at the very idea.

"I am not too sure I am keen on spending any more time outside of the village then we need to," Orochimaru grumbled.

“So what exactly is your plan?” Yashamaru asked his father.

“We know the city she is in,” Orochimaru started. “We need to find out where in that city she is.”

“I think we should find Utakata when we get there first,” Yashamaru suggested. “He has seen her. He would know where she is. Or at least how to get close to her.” The mamba around Yashamaru’s neck hissed excitedly, telling them that once they got to the city, he could take them to Utakata.

“Then that is where we will start,” Orochimaru nodded to the mamba. “You have kept in contact with Utakata then?” he asked Yashamaru.

“Off and on, yes,” Yashamaru hummed.

“Father, do you think it will be hard to find her?” Mitsuki asked. He tried to stifle a hard yawn.

“With Utakata’s help, I do not think finding her will be the issue. It is getting her out of whatever mess she has landed in that will be the hard part.”

"In that case, we need to come up with a couple of plans for her escape. That will all depend on who her master is, assuming she was sold into slavery," Yashamaru hummed. "If she has survived this long, then I am sure she can hold out a little longer until we get there. And once we get to her, we have to move fast."

"Which will not be hard on these. By the time we are there our horses will be lighter and we will not make a stop again until I am sure we are safe," Orochimaru explained.

"Father, will I be able to help?” Mitsuki asked. He missed his sister and wanted to be able to do anything to help get her back.

"You will be a lot of help," Orochimaru told him. "You have an important role once we find her and that is to talk to her."

Yashamaru furrowed his brow and then understood what his father's plan was. 'That is why he brought him along,' he thought.
"I get to talk to her?" Mitsuki grinned.

"Yes...you look different enough from her so no one would know right away that you are her brother," Orochimaru explained.

"Father, what if...are you sure it is safe to send him in?" Yashamaru frowned. "What if the person she is with is violent?"

"I can handle it, Brother," Mitsuki flashed a smirk. "I am not a baby. I know how to fight just like you and Azumi."

Yashamaru turned to his brother and laughed a little. "You are right," he smiled.

"And we will not be far away from him when we send him in," Orochimaru added.

They continued well into the night before stopping at a small oasis so the horses could rest.

Mitsuki decided to also take a nap while the horses rested. Orochimaru and Yashamaru sat by the horse with the most gear, discussing the rest of the plan.

"No matter the situation, we send Mitsuki to her and he will be how we communicate," Orochimaru explained. "It will not be a one-day thing. We need to find out what the rest of her situation entails. Whether she sleeps alone in a room or with other people and if she has any sort of free time that we can speak to her."

"Sounds like there is a lot that goes into this," Yashamaru sighed.

"I will do what it takes to get my daughter back. I would do the same for all of you."

“Do not get me wrong, Father,” Yashamaru yawned, leaning back. “I am willing to do whatever is needed for Azumi. But it will not keep me from worrying about Mitsuki.”

“Have faith,” Orochimaru said simply. “I have never let you down before.”

"This is true," Yashamaru chuckled with a nod. He looked around at the desert, making out different shapes in the moonlight. "It has been a while since I have been on this side of the mountains," he hummed.

"Yes, well I have tried very hard to keep you, your siblings, and everyone else in the village safe on the other side."

“I know but...it is good to let us out also,” Yashamaru said slowly. “Experiencing the world is good.”

“The world cannot handle us apparently,” Orochimaru frowned. His face turned stony. “You know our history. You know I keep you and everyone in for protection. Your sister...” He dug his nails into the leather of a nearby pouch. “I do not know how slavers got in but if I ever catch them I will have their heads,” he growled.

"I will help you cut them off," Yashamaru smirked.

Orochimaru sighed and stood up. "We should start moving again."

Yashamaru nodded and stood up with him. He gently nudged Mitsuki to wake him up. "We are leaving," he said softly. Mitsuki made a soft noise as he crawled on to his horse and they resumed their journey.
The sun was barely over the horizon when Azumi woke up, groaning quietly. She was feeling extremely nauseous. She unwrapped her arms from around Gaara and sat up. Naga hissed softly, asking her if she was alright. She shook her head. "No," she told him. She leaned down and kissed Gaara softly then got out of the bed. She quickly put her dress on and quietly left the room to go to the bathroom. As she left, Naga tapped Gaara's nose with his face, trying to wake him up to go check on her.

"Morning, Naga," he mumbled, rolling over to find the bed empty. His eyes snapped open, searching for his lover. "Where did she go?" he asked Naga in a rough voice. Naga hissed as he pointed his tail towards the door. Gaara sat up quickly and pulled his pants on. He ran his hands through his hair to try and smooth it down while Naga slithered towards the door.

Azumi barely made it to the bathroom before she doubled over on her hands and knees and started gagging. She coughed and tried to vomit. Once she felt it in her throat, her eyes widened. It was Ryuga. He landed in front of her with the same gross noise as the first time he came out a couple of months prior. "What..." she said, gasping for air. "What are you doing here?" A few seconds later, Gaara and Naga came up behind her.

"Azumi," Gaara said as he dropped to his knees swiftly, tucking her hair back behind her ears to help get it out of her face. "Why is Ryuga here?" he asked both her and the snake as he helped her over to the edge to the tub. He reached for a rag and turned on the water to dampen the cloth. He started to wipe down her face as Ryuga hissed why he had come up. Naga perked up excitedly.

Azumi grunted and then scoffed at the large snake. "What do you mean there is no room?" she asked. "That has not been a problem for twenty-three years," she growled. Ryuga hissed again, telling her that there was going to be something taking his place inside her. "What?" she whispered. "What could possibly take your place? Will another snake be my guardian from now on?" Naga was suddenly coiling up her body, inches from her nose. His little tongue flicked her nose as he hissed excitedly.

"What is he saying?" Gaara asked, worried about what Ryuga has said.

Azumi looked at Naga confused. "Eggs?" she asked. "What?" Naga hissed again, telling her she was having eggs. "I do not want eggs. I am not even hungry." Naga and Ryuga sighed and shook their heads, then tried to explain to her what they meant. Azumi frowned, not completely understanding them. "I...am sorry. I do not know what you mean about me having eggs."

"Eggs?" Gaara repeated, thoroughly confused. Naga shifted, bumping his nose against Azumi’s neck then Gaara’s in the way he did when he teased them. Ryuga moved closer and with Naga and they formed a heart with their tails as they hissed. Gaara’s face shifted, trying to piece together what they were telling them.

Azumi stared at the snakes for a moment, catching on very slowly. "Are you..." she said softly, "trying to tell me that there are eggs inside me?" Her first thought was that Ryuga might actually be a female and laid eggs inside of her. However, that did not seem right. Ryuga had no one to mate with other than Naga and Naga was not the type for that.

The snakes nodded together excitedly at her puzzling what they were saying. Gaara thought harder for a moment then gasped. "Um...I think they are saying...one of your eggs is..." Gaara’s heart was suddenly in his throat. He slipped his fingers into her hand and squeezed. "I think they are saying
you’re pregnant.”

Azumi gasped softly and her eyes widened as she looked down at the floor. "Pregnant?" she whispered. The snakes nodded happily. She squeezed Gaara's hand back, leaning back against him. "I...this...I do not..." She had no idea what to say. She could only think of what Sasori would do to her if he found out or when she started to show and what more he would do after that if he found out that Gaara was the father.

Gaara was filled with a conflicting sense of sheer joy and a sinking pit. He wrapped his arms around her, turning her around to face him then cupped her face, stroking her cheek gently. "This...We will get you out of here before he even knows," he told her softly. He pressed their foreheads together and pulled her closer. "Even if you don't want to keep the baby," he whispered hesitantly.

She looked him in the eyes for a moment before wrapping her arms around him and burying her face in the bend of his neck. Her heart started to race and she still could not get any words out. She was both excited but also very terrified. They stayed like that for a few minutes while she tried to collect her thoughts about the situation. “Of course I want to keep it,” she said very quietly, holding him tighter.

He was certain she could feel his heart beating hard in his chest again. He held her tight, running his fingers through her hair then pulled her into a slow kiss. “I...I love you,” he said softly. “And nothing will stand in my way of getting you your freedom back,” he said to her seriously. “And I will help you in any way I can through this.”

“I love you, too,” she whispered, kissing him again. She rested against him again and sighed heavily. “I just hope things begin to work out before I start to show...”

“It will,” he smiled softly. “We will get you out of here no matter what hell Sasori tries to throw at us,” he assured her. “Aside from Ryuga, is this your first feeling of morning sickness?” he asked her. Dr. Gaara was making an appearance.

She nodded. “It is.” She ran her hand through her hair and looked back at Ryuga. “This was never what I imagined about the moment of finding out I am pregnant,” she muttered. “Then again, I also never imagined being a slave.”

"I don't think most people not born into slavery ever consider it,” he chuckled a little. He sighed softly. "We should celebrate," he grinned. "Let's go visit Shira tonight!” He pulled back, tilting her chin upon his fingertip.

She smiled at him and nodded. “I would love to,” she said. “That reminds me, we should probably eat now,” she chuckled.

"Do you think you can make it to the kitchen?” he asked teasingly, He laced their fingers together as he stood up with her. "No other snakes hiding away?” He gave her a lopsided smirk. Ryuga hissed as if he was scoffing.

“I will be fine,” she smiled. She picked Naga up and wrapped him around Gaara as Ryuga wrapped himself around her and they made their way to the kitchen.

Naga shifted so he could boop his nose against Gaara’s. The snake hissed as if he was lecturing the redhead. Gaara chuckled, going a little cross-eyed. "Are you lecturing me?” he smiled fondly. He looked down at Azumi as they walked into the kitchen. "And here I thought I proved myself,” he chuckled softly.
“You do not need to prove yourself,” she said. She kissed his knuckles as he sat down and she poured coffee for the both of them then grabbed two bowls and served them. “It also is not Naga’s place to lecture you. He knows you are amazing.”

Naga nuzzled Gaara’s neck and hissed softly. Gaara chuckled, raising a hand to pet the snake. "I think he is just worried about you," he hummed. He pulled her seat close to his once she set the bowls down on the table. He sipped his coffee and smiled at her dreamily. "A man could only dream of having a woman as amazing as you be the mother of their child," he said softly.

She smiled and leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. “I am not that amazing,” she chuckled. “But thank you.” They ate their breakfast and finished their coffee. She served a third bowl and poured another cup of coffee for Sasori. “I will see you tonight,” she smirked, kissing him softly.

"I'll pick you up," he smirked against her lips. He pecked her again then walked with her to the hall and went back towards her room to sneak out.

Meanwhile, Sasori was up hunched over his desk, up to his ears in tomes and scrolls. He was already getting irritated with the paperwork when Azumi walked in. She stared at him for a moment, listening to him muttering quietly to himself. She rolled her eyes and walked up to his desk, setting his bowl and coffee in front of him. “You should eat first,” she told him, gently pushing the scroll he was working on out of the way. “Before you drive yourself mad trying to do anything work-related.”

He sighed, relaxing the instant the smell of coffee hit his nose. He picked the cup up and took a long, greedy sip of the beverage then sighed, slumping back in his chair. "All of this has to be done by the end of the week and I can't seem to make any headway." He clicked his tongue at the offending piles. He looked up at her and instantly noticed Ryuga wrapped around her waist. He raised an eyebrow. "What's threatened you this early in the morning?"

“There were no threats,” she answered, sitting down in another seat. “I just could not keep him down. And he refuses to leave my side so leaving him in my room was not an option.”

“I see.” He eyed the passively hostile serpent. “I think I like Naga more,” he muttered, picking up his food. As he said that, Naga slithered into the room and hissed in Sasori’s direction. He made himself a happy little coil in Azumi’s lap. Again, Sasori squinted at the scene. “I don’t like this.”

“Why not?” she asked, petting Naga’s head. “They will not do anything to you.” She looked at his half-empty cup and his very full bowl and nodded at the bowl, silently telling him to hurry up and eat.

He narrowed his eyes at her and smirked. “You’re getting bossy and you’ve got two snakes now.” He picked up his food. “I have half a mind to tell you that one has to go and I like Naga more right now.”

“I cannot exactly get rid of Ryuga,” she said as the larger snake rested his head on her shoulder. “He must stay with me and like I said, I cannot keep him down.”

Sasori raised his eyebrow higher. “I could always take him from you?” he said airily. “You’re still mine and I still say what goes.”

“And...risk your own life?” she asked slowly. “I do not mean to defy you but you know that if you came near him with ill intentions, he will strike. Do not be fooled by his size. He is just as fast as Naga.” She shrugged and pet Ryuga’s head. “I am only speaking out of concern for your life.”
“I’m sure you are,” he hummed lowly. He looked over the massive snake. Naga was no little thing and it was not sitting easy with him that his slave was so potentially well-protected from him. “If the time comes, I am sure I can figure it out.”

“I do not doubt you will figure out some plan,” she said softly, barely concerned about it. Ryuga would kill him before he could even blink. She looked at his bowl to see if he was done. “Need more coffee?” she smirked, noticing he practically finished the coffee.

“Yes.” He held out his mug for her. “When you come back, finish your food,” he said, looking at the bowl.

“I only brought your food here,” she said as she sat Naga down in her seat when she stood up. “You cannot pawn your food off on me. You must eat if you are going to try and work on as much of this,” she gestured to all of the stuff on his desk, “today as possible.” She grabbed his cup and turned to leave the room. “Fucking ridiculous,” she muttered, rolling her eyes as she walked down the hall to the kitchen. She refilled his coffee and poured herself another cup, knowing she was also going to need it. She took a deep breath before going back to his room.

He sighed heavily. She was starting to sound more and more like his mother. He turned back to the paperwork and decided what she would work on.

Azumi came back and set his mug in front of him and took his empty bowl off of his desk. “Have you taken your bath yet?” she asked, already walking toward the bathroom.

His mouth twitched in slight irritation. "What if I told you yes?” He lifted his chin. He stared down her back. There were still lingering silvery-pink scars from the lashings he had giver her months ago.

She stopped in the doorway of the bathroom and slowly turned toward him. “Then I will not run your bath,” she said. She raised an eyebrow. “But did you?”

Sasori stared at her, simply sipping his coffee for a good long moment. He squinted at her then his lips pushed out in a pout. "I have not,” he finally told her.

A slow smirk pulled at her lips. “I figured as much,” she said, turning to head into the bathroom. She went about the normal routine of running his bath and setting everything out for him. Once it was ready, she stepped back into the bedroom, setting Ryuga down on the daybed. “It is ready.”

He did not like her little smirk but he said nothing about it as he stripped down. He sunk low into the bath with a long sigh. He had been up late and this felt respite for his very bones.

She grabbed his coffee and set it next to him then grabbed his robe and towel and put them in their usual spots for when he got out. She looked around and found a spot where the sun showed the most on the floor and brought a stool over to that spot to sit and bask while he bathed. Naga came slithering in, hissing excitedly as he moved up her leg to coil in her lap. He wanted to bask with her. Ryuga poked his head into the room when Naga slithered by and noticed the two of them sunning. He hissed softly and coiled around Azumi's feet.

Sasori followed the serpents with his eyes, settling on the three sitting in the sun. "Are you not bathing?" he asked with a frown.

“Hm?” she hummed. “Oh. Yes. I will.” She smiled and nodded. “I just...needed to bask.” She chuckled and ran her hand through her hair as she got up and put Naga down where she was sitting. ‘I have never had the urge to do that,’ she thought, running her own bath.
He watched her from the edge of the tub with a mix of curiosity and what he would not call concern. "Are you feeling unwell?" he asked, drumming his fingers silently on the tub's lip.

She shook her head as she started to undress. "No, I feel fine," she said. She stepped into her bath and sunk really low, sighing quietly.

"Mhm." He gave her another suspicious look but finally decided to let it go. He leaned back in the tub again and tilted his head back. "I separated some paperwork I want you to work on with me," he told her. "We're going to have to carry a lot of it to the shop since it's backorders and people's files."

"Mm," she hummed in response as she sunk a little lower into the water and closed her eyes. She stayed still for a few moments longer before she started to wash herself up. "How is he so behind on orders?" she thought. She glanced at him and frowned then shook her head. At one point, she would have worried about him stressing over something and would have tried to help him through it. However, she no longer cared. She was just going to let him stress.

He stood up abruptly and huffed softly. He glanced at the snakes as he pulled his robe on and left the room. "Hurry up, Azumi," he said testily. There was something about her attitude he could not put his finger on that he just did not like.

Azumi looked up at him as he walked out, rolling her eyes as she got out of the tub. She grabbed her towel, dried herself off and got dressed. Nodding for the snakes to follow her into the room, she sat down next to Sasori at the desk. "Which ones do you want me to do?" she asked.

"This stack first." He patted a stack taller than him on the desk. "Then we can stop and take these down to the shop to be filed."

'Of fucking course,' she thought, looking at the stack. "Right," she said, trying to not sound annoyed with him. She sighed softly and grabbed a handful of papers from the top to get started.

The paperwork kept them occupied for the majority of the morning. It was not until Sasori stretched back hard that he noticed the time. "Ugh," he sighed. "We need to go to the shop," he muttered.

Azumi nodded and stood up, filing two separate neat piles of papers she completed and ones that needed to be completed. They made a significant dent in the piles from earlier but they still had a bit left. Sasori grabbed the rest of the papers that needed to be done and they started to head to the workshop. It was not until they were already on their way there that Azumi realized the snakes had followed them around the time they entered the city. "Naga can stay on you but the big one," he said over his shoulder, "Ryuga, has to stay back here. I don't need him scaring customers."

'I do not wear Naga when customers are here anyway,' she thought, rolling her eyes as she went back down to the main level. Naga was introducing Ryuga to the six snakes in the tanks. Azumi set everything up to makes the orders and set to work.

An hour later Gaara slipped into the workshop. His arms were full and struggling to juggle his own pile of orders. "Oh!" He gasped softly, seeing Azumi. His eyes flickered up to look up at Sasori. "I
didn’t know you were coming in today.”

“Neither did I,” Azumi shrugged.

Sasori walked over to look down at them. “It’s about time you showed up,” he muttered. “We have a lot of orders I need you two to catch up on.”

Gaara stared hard at Azumi, hoping she could hear him screaming in his head as he set his files down. “We wouldn’t be so behind if you came to the shop more often,” he grumbled. “I do have a regular job,” he added. Sasori glared down at him.

"Just get it done," he growled, walking back to his desk.

As soon as they heard the sound of him sitting down, Azumi gave Gaara a quick kiss. "I have finished a few already," she said. She pointed to the counter that was all of the completed orders she did in the last hour. Almost the entire counter was covered. "But...that is nowhere near close to finishing them all."

He looked over his shoulder at the massive pile then sighed heavily. He leaned his forehead heavily into her shoulder and let out the softest whine. He stayed there for a moment not willing to move and face all the work just yet. "I really hate this time of year," he groaned when he finally lifted his head.

She frowned and ran her hand through his hair, scratching his scalp lightly. "I will help as much as possible," she said softly. "It will go easier if both of us do it."

He smiled fondly, leaning into her hand a little. "It will," he smiled a little wider. He pulled away and kissed her palm. "Let's get started I guess," he chuckled. He took the stool closest to her and pulled a pile close to him. Azumi took to completing the pile of orders she had already been working on.

A couple of hours passed and they made a significant dent in their work but it was late in the afternoon and there was a collecting rumbling of stomachs in the workshop. “Oh, boy,” Azumi smirked.

"Hello!" a familiar voice called from the front of the shop. "I've come to ease your suffering." Sandaime walked into the back room with arms full of food.

"Uncle," Gaara said, nearly tearing up when he saw the larger man set down the Shwarma and Churros.

Azumi let out a delighted squeal and bowed to Sandaime. “I am always pleased to see you but this time is special,” she chuckled. Up on the second level, Sasori sighed, running his hand through his hair. He was hungry but he did not want to deal with his uncle.

"Oh, anything to see that smile," Sandaime chuckled at his excitement. Sasori's eye twitched. His stomach growled louder and started to ache with the scent of everything wafting up to him.

Gaara grabbed a plate and started to pile his food up high. "Thank you, Uncle!" he said through a mouthful.

"It's nothing," Sandaime smiled, waving it off.

Azumi grabbed a plate and filled it with food for Sasori before she made one for herself. She went up the ladder with Sasori's plate and set it on his desk. "Would you like water, tea or coffee?" she
asked softly.

"What?" Sandaime snorted. "He can't come down here and get his own food?" he teased.

"Please," Gaara rolled his eyes. "He doesn't even get his own breakfast most days," he mumbled lowly.

Sasori sucked his teeth hard, drumming his fingers into his desk. "Coffee," he told her.

"I will be right back then," Azumi said with a nod. She went back down the ladder to make the coffee. "What would you two like to drink?" she asked Gaara and Sandaime.

"Tea for me please," Gaara smiled.

Sandaime smiled and nodded. "Tea as well," he agreed.

Azumi grinned and set up a pot for the tea and another for the coffee. Once it was all ready, she poured the two cups of tea and two cups of coffee. She handed Sandaime his tea, then handed Gaara his with a kiss before grabbing Sasori's coffee and going back up the ladder with it. She set it down in front of him. "Let me know if you want more coffee," she whispered, scratching his scalp gently.

Sasori hummed softly, leaning into her hand as she scratched his head. "Of course." He closed his eyes a little, enjoying the feeling of her nails scratching his skin.

She smirked, waiting a few seconds before retracting her hand and heading back down the ladder to the first level. She sat back down next to Gaara and took a sip of her own coffee then started eating her food. Ryuga hissed softly at her, telling her that he was also hungry. She looked at Naga. "Take him out," she told him. "But please be careful." Naga hissed and made his way to the door. She opened it just enough for both snakes to make it outside and propped it open so they could come back in.

"That big one," Sandaime started, watching the snakes leave. "Isn't he the one who lives inside you?" Gaara glanced over at the door before resuming his eating.

"He is," Azumi said softly with a nod. "He came back out this morning. I, uh...I am having a difficult time keeping him down." Sandaime opened his mouth to ask why but Gaara held a finger up and pressed it to his uncle's lips. He discreetly shook his head. Sandaime raised his eyebrow but dropped it. "How did you know we were going to be here?" Azumi asked Sandaime, changing the subject. She chuckled softly. "And...how did you know to bring food?"

"This is around the time of year that things get particularly backed up around here," Sandaime said with a deep chuckle. "So I've started to keep track of days like these to ensure my hardworking nephews get something to eat and drink."

"How sweet," she chuckled. "They are very lucky to have such a caring uncle," she smirked. "What would they do without you?" She knew Sasori could hear her. She knew he wanted to act like a brat but could not justifiably do so because his uncle brought him food. Instead, he pressed his face further into his forms, grumbling lowly as he ate.

"Sasori would probably let us perish," Gaara shrugged. "One year, I swear we almost did."

"We did not!" Sasori finally snapped. "We had mild malnutrition and that was due to a number of reasons stacked on top of each other," he growled.
Sandaime shook his head as he took a bite of his food. "You boys better take care of yourselves while you can," he teased. "You won't be young forever." Again Sasori bristled.

"I take great care of myself," Gaara scoffed.

Azumi chuckled and rubbed his back gently, nodding in agreement. "And me," she mouthed with a smirk.

He blushed a little, reading her lips. He could not help the smile or the way he relaxed into her hand.

Behind them, Sandaime gave them a fond smile of his own as he sipped his tea. "Well, I won't be staying long," he announced much to Sasori's pleasure. "I've got a lot on my plate and I'm playing the procrastination game a little right now," he chuckled.

"Speaking of," Sasori grumbled, getting up from his desk to look over the railing. "So are these two. Finish eating and get back to work," he told Azumi and Gaara.

"Tch," Gaara glared at Sasori. He bit the inside of his cheek to restrain himself as he tried to finish his food.

"Don't make them rush, Sasori," Sandaime reprimanded. "You always pull this off in a timely manner."

"Because we don’t usually procrastinate," Sasori said back.

"You need to take a break every now and then," Sandaime said calmly.

"You know my motto about breaks, Uncle," Sasori drawled as he came down the ladder.

"We'll break when we're dead," Gaara whined.

"Yes, I know about your motto," Sandaime sighed as he stood up. "As unfortunate and depressing as it is. I suppose I will leave then. So you three can get back to work."

Azumi bowed to him as she finished her food. "Thank you for bringing us food," she smiled.

"Thank you, Uncle," both men called as Sandaime left the shop. He gave Azumi a quick wink and then he was gone.

The three of them worked well into the evening after sundown before moving again for a break. Gaara stood up first, stretching hard. Multiple bones in his back cracked with a soft moan of release slipping from his lips.

Azumi hummed through a chuckle as she watched him. "That was cute," she said softly, pulling him into a quick kiss. She looked at all of the work they did and compared it to the pile of work that still needed to be done. "We made a lot of progress," she noted, standing up and stretching herself. She looked up at the second level. Sasori seemed much more quiet than usual. She went up the ladder and poked her head into the second level. He was hunched over his desk as per usual but she recognized his breathing pattern. He had fallen asleep. With a smirk, Azumi snuck up behind him. She slowly reached a hand out and started scratching his scalp gently. "Would you like to stop for the night and continue tomorrow?" she whispered.

He made a soft, tiny mewl, his lips parting a little as she scratched his head. He nodded a little with his eyes still closed, not wanting her to stop. He was too far gone to think of how it must have
looked for him to be enjoying this little creature comfort from his slave. He turned his head more towards her hand and made the sound again. "Did Gaara leave yet?" he asked her softly. His voice was thick and tired.

"No," she answered quietly. "Not just yet. He is getting ready to leave." She looked at his desk and noticed how much he actually got done. She slid her hand down to his back and gently glided her nails up and down for a few seconds as she grabbed his plate and coffee cup with her other hand. "So should we." Gaara watched with his chin on one of the rungs of the ladder.

Sasori groaned softly, unwilling to move just yet. He rubbed his eyes hard then ran his hand through his hair. "Alright," he sighed in agreement after she pulled away. He sat up and stretched himself.

Gaara slipped back down the ladder before he could see him. He was not sure why Azumi was being so nice to his cousin after everything he had done to her. He finished packing up his things and waited for her to descend the stairs.

She came down and started cleaning up everything they worked with throughout the day. "We are still seeing Shira tonight, right?" she whispered to Gaara, taking his hand and kissing his knuckles.

"Of course," he breathed back. He glanced up at Sasori to make sure he was still busy above them then leaned in and stole a full kiss. "We can meet by the river and walk together," he smiled. He lingered almost a moment too long when Sasori turned around and started to descend the ladder. Gaara stepped back, grabbing for his bag quickly.

Sasori raised an eyebrow at his cousin but said nothing aside from a long and wide yawn. "Goodnight, Cousin," he mumbled, turning for the back door. "Lock up for me, will you?"

"Sure," Gaara nodded. 'I usually do anyway,' he thought. "Goodnight, Sasori." Sasori gave him a wave as he opened the door and stepped out.

Azumi grabbed Naga and wrapped him around her. "I will see you later," she said softly, winking at him as she followed Sasori out the door with Ryuga close behind her. Gaara's scowl melted into a dreamy smile. He watched her leave and made quick work of closing up the shop.

Sasori could not wait to get home and simply lay down. As they trudged up the steps to the mansion, Sasori called over his shoulder to Azumi. "Bring our dinner to the room," he told her tiredly.

She nodded and they parted ways once they were inside. She went straight to the kitchen and served two bowls, making her portion much smaller because she knew she was going to eat a lot later at Shira's restaurant. She made Sasori a cup of tea and then went to his room, quietly commanding the snakes to get off of her and wait by the door.

Sasori was already getting ready for bed when she walked in. He crawled into bed and waited for her to cross the room. "We managed to get most of the pile done today," he said, tucking a piece of his hair behind his ear. "But there's still so much to down." He pressed his palms hard into his temples.

Azumi sighed and sat down on his bed, handing him his bowl and setting his tea down on the bedside table. "Just take the night to relax and not think about it," she told him. "You know it will get done. As your uncle said, you always get it done in a timely manner. You are stressing too hard."
He ground his teeth at the mention of his uncle, causing his head to shoot with pain. "Ah!" He forced his jaw apart. "That old geezer only ever sees the end results never what happens in between." He pressed his tea to his lips and took a sip then took a shuddering breath. She was right, though. He was getting wound up. He stabbed his dinner and started to eat it. The fatigue from the day was about to eat him alive. He could barely keep his eyes open when he finally set his bowl to the side and curled into his bed. "Azumi," he said softly, sliding his hand down to take her hand in his. He slowly brought it up to rest on his head.

She stared at him for a moment before she realized what he wanted. She began to scratch his scalp gently just as she had done earlier. 'I hope my child is not as bratty as you,' she thought. He smiled smugly and nestled himself deeper into his bed. He soon slipped off into a heavy sleep. Once she was sure he was asleep, Azumi gently retracted her hand and got up. She cleared their dishes and left the room to change into a different outfit and meet Gaara by the river.
Chapter 47

Gaara looked up from the water's surface when he felt Azumi approaching from behind. His heart sped up with a giddiness he knew he would never get over. His mouth split into a wide grin as he walked towards her, pulling her into his arms. "You look beautiful, my rose." He cupped her face, finally kissing her properly for the first time since they parted that morning. "Did he actually go to sleep or did he just continue paperwork?"

"He is very much asleep," she chuckled. "The stress of being backed up with work knocked him out." She slid her hands down his arms and laced their fingers together. "He will probably wake up a bit late in the morning as well."

"Perfect." His eyes twinkled a little. He leaned his head down, pressing his forehead gently against hers. He turned his head a little, pulling her into a slower kiss that he could not help but smile into. "We had better get going before I keep you here all night," he said when he finally surfaced with a small chuckle. He pecked her lips again.

"Not that I am opposed to such a thing," she smirked, taking his hand in hers. She let him lead the way to Shira's restaurant, moving swiftly through the nightlife crowds of the city. She was still cautious, however. Knowing that a certain beetle also enjoyed the nightlife and witnessed her sneak out, she did not need a 'surprise' run-in with him. They made it to their destination quickly. "Shira is your best friend," she smirked, "how do you want to tell him the news?"

Gaara could not keep the smile off his face. He wrapped his arm around her waist and gave her a squeeze. "I...I never thought of how I'd tell him," he blushed. "I never thought someone would bless me with fatherhood," his voice dropped a little. "Think he could guess it just by my face?" he asked a little teasingly.

She studied his face for a moment, a smirk slowly pulling at her lips. "He definitely will," she teased back. She pulled him into a kiss and they went up the stairs to the restaurant.

"We should order something special," he grinned as they sat down. "Then again," he chuckled, "Shira will make you anything you want so I’m sure you can order anything any time as it is," she chuckled

"You are probably right," she chuckled.

"Oh, no he’s definitely right," Shira said as he approached their table. He smiled and took Azumi’s hand, pressing a kiss to the back of it. "What’s he right about?"

"Ordering anything I want any time," she smirked.

"Oh, yes," Shira chuckled. "You have free reign to order whatever you want whenever you want," he flashed her a smile.

"I told you," Gaara chuckled.

"So, are you two out for another night on the town under the old scorpion's nose?" Shira asked, pulling up a seat.

"We are," Azumi smiled.

Shira looked between the two of them, a smile slowly appearing on his face at their smiles.
“What’s going on?” he asked with a chuckle. “There’s something you two are hiding.”

"We aren't hiding anything exactly," Gaara hummed. His hand danced over the table to lace his fingers into Azumi's. "We just haven't told you yet." Shira looked between them again and shook his head saying well and clear: "Well get on with it!" Gaara looked at Azumi again, took a deep breath, gave her hand a squeeze and spoke. "We're going to be parents."

Shira’s smile immediately turned into a wide grin. He immediately got up and pulled Gaara into a big hug. “Ah! This is so great!” he said, moving to pull Azumi into a hug as well. “This is amazing! I’m so happy for you two. When did you find out?”

“This morning,” Azumi answered, unable to stop smiling.

"Well then." Shira put his hands on his hips. "We must celebrate! I'll go all out," he announced. "I'll make anything you want, Azumi," he winked at her.

"I told you," Gaara chuckled. He leaned over and kissed Azumi's cheek.

"I'll be right back with drinks," Shira smirked. "Just tell the waitresses what you want if I'm not back before you decide."

“Thank you, Shira,” they both grinned as he walked away.

Azumi chuckled softly, bringing Gaara’s hand up to kiss his knuckles. “I know we trust your uncle a lot...but should we tell him as well?” she asked.

Gaara tilted his head in thought, watching the way his hand looked in hers. He turned his hand over hers and held it firmly. "I...I think we should," he told her. "But only if you are comfortable with it," he added. "He should know there is another life at risk under Sasori's watch." He paused again. His smile twitched back to life. "Not to mention, he'll officially be a great uncle," he snickered softly.

“Oh, that might make him feel a bit old,” she laughed. “I am comfortable telling him and will be ready whenever you are. But let us not tell too many people just yet.”

"No, of course not," he agreed with a slight chuckle. "It's safer that way. But Shira can—"

"Gaara, have you seen—" Sandaime stopped short as he emerged from the lower level of the restaurant. "Lady Azumi," he grinned, bowing low. "I did not mean to interrupt."

“it is hardly an interruption, Lord Sandaime,” Azumi chuckled, bowing to him. “In fact, you are two for two with the impeccable timing today. Is that some sort of hidden talent you have?”

"My wife has always told me that I always seem to be in the right place at the right time," he flashed her a charming smile. Gaara offered him a seat and he took it along with Azumi's free hand. He pressed a kiss to the back of it. "So what am I right on time for?" he chuckled.

“Well,” Azumi started. “We have some news. Something we could not tell you earlier because...well, you know why,” she chuckled.

“Oh?” Sandaime grinned, raising an eyebrow. “What kind of news?”

“We found out this morning that I am pregnant.”

He paused for a moment. Only for a moment because in the next, his lips were pulled back into a
wide smile. He wrapped his arms around Azumi tightly. “Oh, congratulations, you two! The child
will be beautiful,” he grinned. He smiled at Gaara but it wavered. “Sasori obviously does not
know?” He looked between them, growing serious.

They both shook their heads. “No,” Azumi answered. “And I do not intend to tell him.”

“But not telling him doesn’t mean he won’t find out,” Gaara added. “When she starts to show, he
will suspect something.”

“Well, then we still have some time,” Sandaime nodded gravely. “I do not want you to hesitate,
Azumi, if you need help. My wife and I will do anything. Even give you sanctuary if you need to
run before I can get this bill passed.” He looked her hard in the eye.

Shira returned with clinking bottles in hand. “My Lord!” he grinned. “It really is a celebration now,
isn’t it!”

“Ah, Shira,” Sandaime grinned, turning toward him. “Just the man I came to see.”

“You came to see me,” Shira asked with a fake gasp. Despite the teasing, he was truly a bit
shocked.

“My next question was going to be why you are here,” Azumi muttered softly through a chuckle.

“Absolutely,” Sandaime smiled. “I have something I want to ask of you.”

"Ask away, my lord,” Shira grinned, pouring out drinks for everyone. He grabbed a fourth glass for
Sandaime and poured one for him too. "Don't worry. It's a strong berry juice, not wine," he winked
at Azumi and flashed her a smile. "I hope you like cherries.”

“I love cherries,” Azumi said softly, grinning wide. She took a sip of the juice and hummed
delightedly, taking another long sip.

“My wife’s birthday is coming up,” Sandaime started. “And I came here to ask you if you’d like to
cater the party.”

Shira froze for a moment. He just blinked in pure and utter shock. His heart was racing and his
hands started to shake.

“Oh, boy,” Gaara chuckled, lacing his fingers into Azumi’s and playing with her fingers idly.

“My wife loves your food, as I’m sure you already know,” Sandaime chuckled. “It would make her
birthday just so much more special.”

The smallest squeak came out of Shira’s mouth, causing Azumi and Gaara to giggle. “A-
absolutely, my lord,” he said. “Yes, of course.”

“Wonderful,” Sandaime lifted his glass in a toast. “We have much to celebrate. We can talk about
payment later,” he nodded to Shira.

“Don’t even worry about it, my lord,” Shira waved him off.

“Nonsense,” Sandaime chuckled. “Not another word about it. And Gaara, you know your aunt will
have to know but you can rest assured she can keep the secret.”

Gaara chuckled and sipped from his glass. “I don’t doubt it but—”
“She might...want to plan a baby shower too.”

“A baby shower?” Azumi hummed. “Would that not be a bit...conspicuous?” she asked with a nervous chuckle followed by a nervous squeeze of Gaara’s hand.

“Yes and no,” Sandaime hummed. “But don’t fret,” he smiled at her. “I’ll talk her out of it until you are free,” he smirked.

“Your dad is going to lose it,” Shira giggled.

Gaara scoffed and rolled his eyes. “What he thinks hardly matters to me,” he muttered. Azumi frowned a little, bringing his hand up to kiss his knuckles softly.

"I'm not saying it does," Shira smirked. "But the conniption he is bound to have will be beyond entertaining," he said deviously.

"My brother is willing to have a fit over anything," Sandaime rolled his eyes.

Gaara snorted while giving Azumi's hand a small squeeze back. "Do...Do you think your father will be okay with this?" he asked her softly.

Azumi's brow furrowed. She had no idea if she would ever see her father again. "I...am not sure," she said. "On the circumstance that I do get to see my father again...he will not be too happy with it at first. But he will get over it. He has to. I am having this baby."

Gaara rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand and blushed a little. He kissed her cheek, smiling against her skin. "He'll love them," he said softly. "Just like we will."

"And us!" Shira grinned. "Does Sasori let you cook your own food at home?" he asked her.

"Occasionally," she said, taking a sip of her drink. "Whenever he gets tired of what the other servants make."

"Well I'll sneak you food either way," Shira grinned. "Anytime you get a craving, you just tell Gaara or send a bird and I will be there asap."

Azumi gasped softly and her eyes lit up. "Really?" she grinned. "Thank you so much, Shira!" She stood up and wrapped her arms around him in a hug.

He chuckled, pressing his hands over her arms and hugging her back. "Anything for my sister in law." He looked up and kissed her jaw.

Azumi chuckled at the title he gave her. She found it cute even though she and Gaara were not married. She noticed the waitress and waiter approaching the table with a bunch of food. "Oh, you did go all out," she hummed, seeing just how much food he had made for them.

"I never lie about food," Shira grinned. He pressed a kiss to her arm before Gaara reached back to guide her back to her seat. "And this is a celebration."

The waitstaff set everything down on the table. "Wow," Azumi whispered, looking over it all. A slight overwhelmed squeal came out of her.

"Enjoy," Shira smirked.

"I know I made the right choice asking you to cater," Sandaime chuckled.
Shira grinned and another little squeal escaped his lips. He took Gaara's other hand under the table and squeezed tight. Gaara stifled a laugh in Azumi's shoulder but squeezed Shira's hand back. They all started eating, enjoying each other's company.

They spent a couple of hours eating, drinking and talking to one another before Sandaime finally stood up with a sigh and a quiet grunt. "I suppose I should head home," he said. He raised his glass one last time. "I wish you all a good night." He looked at Azumi and Gaara. "Congratulations, you two," he grinned. He turned to Shira. "And thank you for agreeing to cater my wife's birthday."

"Thank you, Uncle," Gaara flashed a wide smile and raised his glass in response to his uncle.

Shira stood up and bowed low. "I can be over tomorrow or the next day to discuss details, my lord," Shira walked with the man to the door. They disappeared together downstairs, leaving the Azumi and Gaara alone.

Gaara popped a small piece of food in his mouth while he leaned his head against his hand and looked at Azumi. He smiled dreamily at her. His hand came up to cup her face, stroking her cheek gently.

She looked at him and smiled then turned her face slightly to kiss his fingers. "I very much enjoyed tonight," she smirked.

"I'm glad," he said softly. He kissed her again and looked into her eyes. "You deserve only the best," he sat back in his seat, letting go of her face. "I hope I can make this as comfortable and safe as possible for you. I can't wait to meet our child," he smiled.

"I am excited to meet them," she grinned. "I know we only found out this morning but I am already growing impatient. I just...want to meet our baby. I want to know if it will be a son or daughter already. I...ugh, I wish I was not still a slave so I had the freedom to have a widely celebrated pregnancy," she chuckled.

Gaara's smile widened, listening to her talk and getting excited. He took her hands firmly in his and kissed her fingers. "You will be free soon and we will celebrate! I know my brother and sister will love you and you already heard my aunt will want to throw you a big party," he grinned. "I...I just wish I could find a way to reach your family."

She frowned a little. "It would be nearly impossible," she hummed. "At least right now. But it is okay. Eventually, I will see them again."

He shifted to wrap his arms around her. He nuzzled his head into her neck and kissed her softly. He stayed there for a moment then pulled back. "As your doctor, I will keep you very informed on everything with the baby and as soon as I know the gender you will know," he chuckled. "But you also need to tell me if anything at all ever feels off, okay?"

She chuckled softly and kissed his jaw. "I will be sure to do that, Doctor," she smirked against his skin. "Thank you."

"Good." He gently pressed his hand to her belly. "You're going to be a beautiful mother," he said softly.

"Yeah, she is," Shira said as he walked back upstairs. "I can figure out all of your meals too once you start having your cravings," he smiled as he sat down. He looked like he was on cloud nine.

"Thank you," she smiled, giving him a kiss on the cheek. "You will be having a celebration of your own tonight, I suppose," she teased him.
“I will,” he grinned, his cheeks flushed.

Gaara chuckled, looking at his best friend. “Shira has been in love with my aunt since we were kids,” he added.

“And now I get to cater her birthday,” Shira sighed dreamily. “Are you both going to be there?”

“I will be,” Gaara nodded.

“If Lord Sasori is going, then I will be as well,” Azumi said. “I do not exactly have the freedom to attend parties without him.”

“Perfect,” Shira grinned. “Then you can both enjoy my cooking at it’s finest!”

“You don’t do your finest every night for paying customers?” Gaara teased.

"Of course, I do," Shira fake-gasped, pretending to be offended. "But it will be especially fine for the one and only love of my life."

"My aunt," Gaara chuckled.

"The one and only love of my life."

“I’m sure she will love it,” Gaara chuckled. “Are you going to make her that chocolate cake?”

“Is that a serious question?” Shira smirked. “Of course! And when you two have your baby shower, I’ll cater that, too!”


“Who else would’ve done it?” Gaara chuckled. “You’d be my only choice.”

“Damn straight, I am,” Shira grinned. He leaned back in his seat and poured himself another drink. “So do you two have any plans for how to get away from demon lord yet?”

“Not...necessarily,” Azumi hummed. “But...we need to figure one out before I start to show. I am willing to run away if I must.”

“We’ll figure something out safer than that,” Gaara said, squeezing her hand. “And my uncle is still working to free you.”

“I trust Sandaime,” Shira smiled. “He’ll get you out of this for sure. When do you think you’ll tell your siblings?” he asked Gaara.

“I can probably tell Kankuro whenever I see him next,” Gaara hummed. “I hardly see Temari,” he chuckled. “The baby would probably be born before I even get to tell her.”

“The baby will probably be a child by the time my family ever finds out,” Azumi muttered, laughing quietly.


“We’ll figure out how to contact them,” Gaara reassured her. “I won’t let them be cut off from you forever.”

She smiled and kissed him softly. “We can worry about that after I am free,” she said against his
Shira smiled fondly at them over his glass. “I should get back to work,” he said, getting up. He circled the table and leaned down to kiss Azumi’s cheek and give her a snug hug. “I’ll see you again soon. Congratulations again.”

“Thank you, Shira,” Azumi grinned.

Gaara got up and gave Shira a hug. “I can’t wait to be an uncle,” Shira chuckled. He backed away from the table and waved to them as he turned and went down the stairs, once again, leaving Azumi and Gaara alone.

“This was amazing,” Azumi said, finishing off the rest of a pitcher of the juice.

“It was,” he smiled at her. He retook his seat and finished off his plate of food. “Are you tired?” he asked her. “Today was sort of exhausting.”

“A bit,” she chuckled. “It was quite a long day,” she agreed. She stretched hard and rested her head on his shoulder. “Will you be staying tonight?”

He kissed her temple and smiled against her skin. “I’ll stay only if you want me to.”

“Of course I want you to,” she chuckled. “But the decision is always yours to make.”

“And my answer is always yes,” he chuckled. “I don’t think I could sleep very well without you now.” He twirled a piece of her hair.

“I am sure we will be going back to the shop tomorrow.”

“You think so?” He started to stroke her hair. “He’s been avoiding the shop lately.”

“He will have to go to the shop. I saw how much he still needs to get done. And then there is the stuff we still have not finished. If he avoids the shop, it will only stress him out more. And I will be sure to tell him that.”

“If I didn’t know he’d hurt you, I’d say you’re being too good to him,” he half grumbled. “But you are right. He needs to get it together. Especially during the season,” he sighed heavily, running a hand through his hair.

“Too good to him,” she chuckled, taking his hand. “I have been treating him like the child he truly is. Whether or not he realizes it does not concern me much.”

“Good, he deserves it,” he laughed softly as he laced their fingers together.

She kissed him softly and stood up, pulling him up with her. “We should probably get back before Ryuga decides to come out and look for me.”

“Oh, you’ve got a keeper now,” he grinned. “I don’t want him or Naga to worry.” Together, they started for the door and made their way home quickly. They approached the house and rounded the back toward her room. He helped her through her window then followed soon after.

The snakes were coiled up on the foot of the bed. They raised their heads and hissed their welcome home to them. She smiled at them and gently pet their heads. They saw the look in her eye and knew she needed them to leave for a while. Naga hissed a laugh and started making his way toward the window. Ryuga hesitated for a moment but followed him. Suddenly, Azumi and Gaara
were alone again. She grabbed his hand and fell backward onto the bed, pulling him on top of her. She kissed him roughly and bit his lip. “We can tire each other out some more,” she smirked.
Chapter 48

The next morning, Naga and Ryuga slipped back through the window just before sunrise. They moved between the clothes that were all over the floor and made their way back to the foot of the bed. After the sunlight started to pour into the room, Naga tapped Gaara’s nose with his, trying to wake him up. After a few months of this, he figured out that Gaara was much easier to wake up than Azumi.

Gaara’s nose twitched, his hand came up sleepy to pet Naga’s head gently. “Good morning,” he rasped softly. His hand fell away from Naga’s head to slip into Azumi’s hair and gently scratch her head. “Good morning, my rose,” he kissed her softly.

Azumi hummed softly, burying her face into his chest. She took a few seconds to process that she had to be awake and what he just said. “Morning,” she said very softly.

"Did you sleep alright?” he asked her softly. He wrapped his arms around her tighter and pulled her closer.

She pressed a kiss to his chest and trailed the kisses up to his lips. "I did,” she smiled. "Did you?”

"I always do,” he smiled against her lips.

Naga hissed softly, tapping his nose against hers. His little tongue flicked against her skin and he tapped again. "Alright,” she chuckled, petting him. "I will get up." She pulled Gaara into another kiss and then sat up in the bed. "Not because you told me to," she said to Naga. "But because I have to use the bathroom.” She stretched hard and got out of bed, picking up the clothes she wore the night before, folding them up and putting them away. She picked up her usual dress and started putting it on.

Gaara sat up and let Naga coil in his lap. "Would you like me to join you?” he teased. "Or should I grab breakfast?” He felt Ryuga shift on the bed. The larger snake hissed softly and nudged Gaara’s free hand until he was also being pet. "Or I could stay here,” he laughed.

She laughed as she finished adjusting her dress. “You can stay here until they are ready,” she smirked, leaning down to kiss him. “I will meet you in the kitchen.” She turned and left the room, heading straight to the bathroom.

Gaara chuckled as the snakes cuddled in closer to receive morning love from him. When they finally freed him after a few minutes, he made his way down to the kitchen but stopped just outside the door when he heard Sasori talking to Azumi.

“I don’t even know if I want to go into the shop today,” Sasori grumbled tiredly. The stress he was under was very clear in his voice.

Azumi was facing away from him, pouring his cup of coffee. She rolled her eyes before turning around and setting the mug down in front of him. “And if you do not, what will that do for you?” she asked with a slightly disappointed sigh.

Sasori frowned, ruffling his hair. “Shut up, I know,” he huffed in aggravation. “When we get back, give me one of those rubdowns. My shoulders are going to be in my ears one we’re through,” he said to her.

She raised an eyebrow as she filled his bowl. She did not think he deserved a massage. They would
'not be if you went to the shop regularly,' she thought. She set the bowl down in front of him and filled up her own cup of coffee. She took a sip and looked behind Sasori, out the door of the kitchen and spotted a shadow just outside the door. She assumed it was Gaara. She looked back at Sasori who was tiredly drinking his coffee but not touching his food. He had not been eating much lately and he was even more unbearable when he was hungry. She stared at his bowl, crossing her arms and leaning against the counter.

He bristled slightly, feeling her gaze on him. He looked at her then the bowl and pulled it closer to him. He tapped his spoon against the rim, not particularly interested in eating. "We'll head out after my bath," he sighed. "I'll run it myself," he said tiredly.

Azumi nodded, taking a seat in front of him. "Try to eat at least a little bit," she said softly to him. She tried to be as gentle as possible so he would not spark an attitude over her sounding like a mother. "I understand you do not have much of an appetite but the work you have to do today will seem much worse if you do not eat."

"Fine, fine," he grumbled, starting to poke the food. He finally lifted his spoon, starting to eat. "You're right, Mother." He looked up at her through his lashes with a smirk. Outside, Gaara tensed for a moment. There was no way Sasori knew about the pregnancy. He waited tensely, ready to walk in if Azumi needed him to.

For a split second, Azumi paused. "I know I am," she smirked, sipping her coffee again. "I do not need you passing out on me in the shop. I cannot carry you back," she chuckled softly. Sasori snorted into his bowl. “First of all, I would never pass out like that.” He pointed his spoon at her. “And secondly, Gaara will be there. It’s not like you'll be all alone.” He rolled his eyes as he stood up. “I’ll meet you out front.”

Outside, Gaara heard his cousin stand up and silently bolted for the nearest room to hide in so he would not be seen.

Azumi watched Sasori leave and waited a few moments before walking up to the door of the kitchen. She peeked down the hall and saw Sasori was fully gone. “You can come out now,” she said teasingly to Gaara.

He poked his head out of the room, cautiously looking around. He flashed her a grin the moment they locked eyes. He walked over to her and pulled her into his arms. “He’s literally such a baby.” He rolled his eyes, leaning down to kiss her.

"I know," she smirked. "So I will continue to treat him as such." She walked backward back into the kitchen, leading him to the table. "Coffee?" she asked, already grabbing a cup for him.

“Of course,” he chuckled, taking a seat. “I’m a little surprised he wanted to run his bath by himself though,” he frowned. “It makes me a little tense.” He leaned his head into his hand. He reached out to take her hand, threading their fingers together.

"It is a little concerning," she hummed, setting his coffee down. "But I assume that is just how he gets when he is stressed. He wants to be alone." She shrugged and finished her coffee.

“That aspect isn’t entirely out of character for him,” Gaara hummed. He snaked his arm around her waist and pulled her into his lap smoothly. His lips pressed to her shoulder softly. “If he tries to take any of that stress out on you, though, and I’m not around, send Naga or Ryuga for me right away.” He wrapped his arms snuggly around her waist. “He won’t just be hurting you anymore.”
She smiled, running her hand through his hair. "Thank you," she said, kissing his forehead. "I will. I do not think he will do much unless he is truly provoked. I will try to keep that from happening to begin with."

"I trust you will," he chuckled with a soft hum. He craned his neck up to pull her down into a slow kiss. He bit her lip gently, lingering on her lips for a moment. "I can't wait to not have to hide our love," he said against her lips. He pulled back so he could reach for his coffee and take a sip. "Have you eaten yet?"

She blinked for a moment. "I have not," she hummed. "I was trying to get him to eat and completely forgot about myself."

"Then you know what to do," he teased and nudged his knee under her so she would get up. He lifted her off his lap and moved her to take his spot on the chair. He grabbed two bowls to serve them each a healthy portion of food. He set their bowls down on the table then pulled up another chair. "Is it...too soon to get excited about choosing names?" he asked shyly.

She gasped softly and grinned wide. "I do not think so," she said. "I am very excited. Do you have any in mind?"

"Well," his voice took on a hushed rush of excitement, "I was thinking maybe if we have a girl she could be named something like Sayuri," he hummed. "And if we have a boy...maybe...Masato."

"Sayuri...Masato..." she whispered softly to herself. Her eyes lit up at the names. "Oh..." she said with a quiet squeak. "I love them. I love both of those." She let out an excited squeal and covered her mouth to stop it. "They are both beautiful names."

He laughed softly at her reaction. His cheeks burned a little and he was sure they were turning pink. "You...you do?" he smiled, rubbing the back of his neck. "We can consider other ones too since it's so early," he reminded her. He did not want her to feel pressured into picking the names he had thought of.

"Of course we can," she chuckled, taking his hand and kissing his knuckles. "We have quite some time to find the perfect name." She finished off her coffee and started eating.

He smiled softly, squeezing her hand gently as he began to eat his own food. "You are very right," he smiled. "Did you have any ideas for names? Any ones you ever fantasized about in case you had any children?"

She hummed softly, resting her chin on both of her fists as she looked up in thought for a moment. "I have always liked the name Sayaka..." she said. "And for a boy...Daisuke. But also Kohaku."

"I like all those names, too." Gaara thought for a moment through a mouthful. "We might have to make a list and keep track of the options," he chuckled.

“Ooh, yes. We should keep one.”

“I’ll write it all down,” he smiled.

She finished off her food and hummed. “I must go check on the large baby,” she said with a sigh. She kissed him and stood up. “I will see you at the shop.”

His smile then turned to a pout. “I’m going to kick Sasori’s ass on the pure merit that I’m getting jealous,” he joked. He stood up and pulled her close again by the waist. He kissed her deeply then pressed their foreheads together. “I can’t wait to have you all to myself.” He kissed her again then
released her. “I’ll see you soon.”

Sasori had told her to meet him out front but she knew that with how stressed he was, he was most likely only just getting out of his bath. She made her way through the halls to his room and just as he had predicted, he was pulling himself out of the tub when she walked in.

Tired eyes leveled her with a hard looked as he pulled his robe on. He pushed his hands through his hair and pressed his lips into a thin line. “I thought I told you to meet me out front,” he said coolly. “Did you eat?”

“I did,” she nodded. "And I was not sure if there were things you wanted to take to the shop," she lied. In reality, she did not want to wait in the sun.

He looked at her a moment longer then sighed heavily. “Yeah, I have a basket set up over there for us to carry.” He flicked his hand towards an overflowing basket of scrolls and files. “We might be expecting more,” he warned her.

She looked over at the basket and frowned at the fact that there was something she actually had to carry. With a nod, she walked over to the basket and rearranged the scrolls and files so they did not fall out while she walked with it. She glanced at Sasori who was slowly getting dressed. “Is there something more than just this work that is stressing you out?” she asked him softly.

His jaw clenched hard. He drummed his fingers against the top of his dresser. “My uncle is making moves and it’s starting to slip through the grapevines. He is going to try and upheave a massive part of our culture and...” he took a deep breath, “it’s just another thing I don’t want to deal with. He can’t just leave us alone and let us have our help. He has countless servants himself,” he huffed. “And people keep sending me letters to try and stop my uncle as if he would ever listen to me,” he scoffed.

"I see," she hummed. She could not exactly feel sorry for him because it was her own freedom that was on the line. However, she hated to see him that visibly upset. She sighed heavily, stepping up behind him and immediately rubbing his shoulders. She was not going to try and console him over the matter. The last thing she needed was to sound like she wanted to continue being his slave.

He tensed under her hands for a second before relaxing. He hated how much this was affecting him. He ran a hand through his hair again and groaned softly when she dug into a particularly bad knot. “Kakuzu keeps threatening my life if I don’t do something to stop my uncle and he doesn’t seem to comprehend that I literally can’t do anything,” he sighed. “Besides, Hidan is more attached to that man than his own life so I don’t really know why he thinks anything will change.”

“Threatening your life?” she repeated with a small gasp. “That is...quite stupid. Is it not you that provides the means for his...antics?” There was an immediate fluctuation in her emotions and she started to get angry for him. “What is he going to do, buy poison from you and then use it on you? It is not you that is working toward this, so what good would it do him to come after you?”

“Kakuzu doesn’t only rely on my poisons to entertain himself.” He leaned back into her hands. “I’m related to the man causing the issue,” he smiled bitterly. “So the underground is deeming it my responsibility to...fix it, so to speak,” he clicked his tongue.

“You are not his only relative,” she grumbled. "Making it your responsibility is completely ridiculous. And if Hidan is going to stay with him then there is no reason for him to actually get upset over it."
Sasori rolled his neck, resting his head on her arms. “I know that and you know that but Kakuzu doesn’t care,” he huffed. “And Hidan might stay but the others he owns won’t for sure.” He ground his teeth then sat up. “We have to get going.” He pulled away from her and finished getting dressed.

Once he was ready, they set off for the shop where Gaara was already waiting for them.

They entered the shop and Azumi smiled at Gaara. "Hello," she said as if she had not been with him the entire night. She set the basket she was carrying down as Sasori went up the ladder to sit at his desk without much of a greeting himself.

“Good morning, Azumi,” Gaara kept up the charade. He glanced up at Sasori and raised an eyebrow to asked Azumi what was up with him.

"Same shit, as always," she said softly, rolling her eyes. She picked the basket back up. "I will be right back." She went up the ladder with the basket. She took out the files that she noticed Sasori already started working on. "I will leave these few with you," she told him. "I can handle the rest."

"Hn," he grunted softly, already pouring over a new set of files. He pulled the ones she left for him closer and opened them so he could look them over. "Make sure Gaara gets the outgoing orders done today. The courier will be coming to pick them up." Downstairs, Gaara was already pulling the orders Sasori had mentioned and setting them aside. He also pulled a few other orders that were due for the day and started to put them in their own pile.

She nodded and went back down the ladder with the rest of the files. She set the basket back down on the ground and wrapped her arms around Gaara from behind. "I can work on the ones that are not being delivered," she told him, pressing kisses to his back.

He smiled, putting his hands over hers as she kissed him. "Sounds like a solid plan," he said, lifting her hands so he could kiss her knuckles. He turned around in her arms, glanced up at Sasori to make sure he was still distracted then pulled Azumi into a very full kiss.

"Sorry," she whispered.

"You better be," he whispered back with a grin. He kissed her again, biting her lip as he wrapped his arms around her. "It'll be a long day if you start teasing me this early," he teased.

"Ooh," she grinned. "That only tempts me to tease you some more." She kissed his neck softly and then pulled away to begin working. She found the list of people that were going to be arriving that day to pick up their orders and started working on them.

"It would make work more interesting," he chuckled as he turned to his own work. He moved towards the front of the shop to prepare to hand out orders as people came in to pick them up. They had settled into a routine for a few hours when the strong scent of food wafted into the workshop.

Sasori perked up slightly, his stomach grumbling loudly. "My uncle is here," he said tiredly.

"I hope—and know—you kids are hungry," Sandaime grinned. "I brought you food again."

Azumi gasped, lowering the fire she was working with and turning toward the door as Sandaime walked into the workshop. "Hello, Lord Sandaime," she smiled, bowing to him.

"Oh, believe me, we are well aware of our imminent starvation," Gaara chuckled, following his
uncle into the workshop. He grabbed plates for everyone and set them down on the workbench with the food. Sandaime returned Azumi's bow and flashed her a charming smile.

Sasori peered over the edge of the railing and pouted. "Did you bring churros this time?" he asked softly.

Sandaime smirked up at him while setting another bag down. "What kind of uncle would I be if I didn't?" he grinned.

Sasori hid the smile that wanted to show on his face. He really just wanted the churros. He made his way down the ladder to grab his plate.

Azumi made him a cup of coffee and handed it to him then poured herself some water. "I am now fully convinced about your impeccable timing," she said to Sandaime.

"Impeccable or just practiced," Sandaime chuckled.

"Uncle has been bringing us food like this for the past few years," Gaara chimed in.

Sasori took the cup of coffee and sipped it slowly like it was the water of life itself. "The orders around this time of year have only been getting heavier and worse with each passing year," he added while filling his plate.

"I walked in here one year and found that the two of them had not eaten in almost two days!" Sandaime shook his head. "So I started to bring them food since there isn't much going on at my office around this time," he laughed, fixing a plate for Azumi. He loaded it up a little more than he usually would have for a young lady.

"How caring," she grinned. She looked at the plate and wondered if she would even be able to finish the food. She underestimated her own hunger and realized it once she started eating. She hummed happily, excited more so for the churros.

"But there is also something else I am here for," Sandaime said.

"Oh?" all three of them asked.

"As you know, your aunt's birthday is coming up," he started. The boys nodded in confirmation.

"Where are you two running off to for a month this year?" Sasori asked, swirling a churro in his coffee.

"No vacation this year," Sandaime said. "I've decided on a party this year to honor her. But I also wanted to request a gift from you two," he said, looking to Azumi and Sasori. "Namely Azumi. She would love your perfumes and bath sets. So, I'd like to request you to make her her own complete set of whatever scent you want."

"Oh," Azumi grinned. "I would be honored to make a set for her. When exactly is the party?"

"In three days," Sandaime smiled.

"Oh, that is more than enough time." She started planning in her head what the set would consist of and which scents to use. She looked over at the station she usually worked on fragrances to see what she had. Some of her ingredients were running low. 'I may have to visit Utakata,' she thought.

"Thank you so much, Azumi," Sandaime grinned.
"It is my pleasure."

"Well, I'm genuinely surprised about that," Sasori grunted softly into his cup. "But I'll leave that order to you then, Azumi," he said tiredly.

"I will still need your advice on what your aunt likes," Azumi said softly to him.

“She likes fruity and floral scents,” Sasori said tiredly. “Add some spice to them and you’re set,” he yawned.

“Oh,” she hummed. “That is very doable.” She finished the food on her plate and immediately grabbed a churro and a small cup of icing, not fully realizing that she finished everything Sandaime served her. Sandaime chuckled when he took in her empty plate. Gaara gaped, slightly impressed she could put all he had served away.

Sasori had not noticed how much food there was but he did grumble that she needed to make sure all her other orders were finished first. “So when are we expecting the formal invitation?” he sighed, taking another churro.

“Right now,” Sandaime smirked, pulling three envelopes out of his cloak. He handed one to each of them. Azumi chuckled as she was handed an invitation. It was a little amusing that he would do it in front of Sasori. Sasori glared at the envelope being handed to Azumi but opened his wordlessly. Gaara scrambled a little to put his plate down and accept his invitation. “Do you think your sister will be in town?” Sandaime asked Gaara.

“She might,” he swallowed a biscuit hard. “I can always hold on to her letter or—“

“I’ll just pass it along to Kankuro,” Sandaime chuckled. “You’ve got enough to worry about.” He waved the young man off.

"Alright then," Gaara said with a slight chuckle.

"I hope to see all of you there," Sandaime grinned. He finished off his food and cleaned up a little. "I will leave you to your work."

"Thank you, Lord Sandaime," Azumi said with a bow, "for the food." She held up the invitation and winked, silently thanking him for that as well.

He gave her a small bow and then left. Sasori was already climbing back up to the second level before his uncle had been bowed so he could finish up his work. He had a small pile of churros and a fresh cup of coffee to hold him over.

Gaara watched his cousin for a moment then pulled Azumi close and kissed her neck. “Well, this is exciting,” he said softly. “I wish I could buy you a new outfit for the occasion,” he whispered as he kissed her jaw.

She smirked, tilting his face a little to kiss his lips. "Let us save the new outfit for when I am free and we can freely celebrate this pregnancy," she whispered back. She picked up another churro and dipped it into the icing. "I want to start on your aunt's gift today, though," she said as she ate the churro. "A full set will take some time. But I need to go get some more ingredients."

“You’re right,” he smiled, nuzzling her nose slightly and kissed her again. “I can walk with you to Utakata’s shop if you want.”

"If he even lets me go," she grumbled. She pulled away from him slightly. "Let me ask him." She
went up the ladder, poking her head into the second level before fully going up. She cautiously approached Sasori then tapped his shoulder so he would lower them from their hunched position. As soon as he did, she started massaging him. "May I go get some ingredients for your aunt's gift?" she asked softly.

"Go ahead," he waved over his head. "You know where the money pouch is," he sighed. "Tell Gaara to come up here. We have some discrepancies to work out on this order for Haku."

She smiled and ran her hand through his hair, gently scratching his scalp. "I will be back shortly," she said quietly before pulling away. She went back down to the first level. "He needs you up there," she said softly to Gaara. She grabbed the pouch and pulled him into a kiss. "I will not be long."

Gaara pouted, holding her hand until she was out the door. He pouted harder as he walked up to Sasori and leaned heavily against his cousin's back. "What could you possibly need my help for?" he whined.

Sasori pushed him off with a slight growl. "I need you to fix this," he said, showing him the order with handwritten notes about what needs to be changed.

It did not take Azumi long to get to Utakata's shop. She moved up the stairs quickly, taking a look around in the shop once she walked through the door. Utakata was not at the counter, but she knew he would come out soon. She looked around, trying to find new scents that would work well together to make something for Sandaime's wife. Suddenly, she felt something wrap around her ankle. She looked down and chuckled, noticing Utakata's snake greeting her. "Hello, Kaida," she said, picking the snake up. "And how are you today?" Kaida settled around her shoulders and tapped her nose against hers. She hissed a soft reply, flicking her tongue lightly against her nose.

Utakata poked his head out of the back curtain a moment later. "Where did you—Oh! Azumi," his face light up. "It's been a while since your last visit," he smiled, crossing the small space. His sharp eyes flickered around for a moment then landed back on her. "No escort today?"

"No," she chuckled. "I am alone today. And it has been a while. But I have come to restock oils for a gift. What do you have that is rare?"

"Mmm, rare," he hummed, turning gracefully on his foot. "Well, I did just get a shipment in from a friend of mine out by the ocean and one from our village." He walked over to a few corners of the shop, pulling anything he thought she might like. "Are you looking for something particular?" He filled a shallow tray with bottles and set them down on the counter for her.

"Floral or fruity," she hummed. "But I am going to add some spice to it so I suppose anything that matches well with that." Kaida hissed, stretching out from Azumi to Utakata. Azumi helped her the rest of the way, placing her on Utakata's shoulder.

The snake hissed very softly in Utakata's ear as if telling him a secret. Utakata turned back to the piles, considering Azumi's needs until he heard the little hiss. His eyes snapped back to Azumi, wide. He gasped softly, turning to face her fully. "Is it true?" he asked, a smile already pulling at his lips. "Is...is it wanted?" he added cautiously.

Azumi looked at him a little confused. "Is what—oh," she said, realizing what he was talking about. She looked at Kaida and chuckled. "How can you even tell?" she asked. She looked at Utakata and nodded. "It is true. And it is wanted."

Kaida giggled a little hiss and shifted on Utakata's shoulders. Utakata's grin returned full force.
“Then this is cause for celebration!” He pulled her into a hug. “I’ll make something special for both of you,” he said, pulling out a notebook. “And as for the oils...they are on the house. Pick whatever you need.” He started to write down a few different things excitedly.

“Oh, no, please let me pay you,” Azumi said. “And a gift is not necessary,” she chuckled. “But I very much appreciate it.”

He chuckled and Kaida hissed, squeezing his shoulders as if reprimanding him. “Fine, fine,” he said with a soft chuckle. “A discount then.” Kaida considered it for a moment then nodded. “The lady has spoken,” he laughed. “As for the gift, it’s always been a custom in our village to give something to an expecting mother,” he smiled softly.

She smiled softly at him. “That is right,” she chuckled. “But I am still a slave as of right now, so it would be a bit hard to hide a gift.”

“Ah,” he hummed, rubbing the back of his neck. “The child's father is Gaara, right?” His smile returned. “He can keep it until you are freed!”

“Oh, haha, yes, I suppose,” she chuckled, running a hand through her hair. “You do bring up a point. Then...thank you.”

He chuckled and took a seat behind his counter. “I can bring it by the shop and leave it with Gaara but...I’d prefer to give it to you directly.”

“Well, if you are giving a customary gift for an expecting mother then it is customary that you give it to the expecting mother,” she smirked. “Gaara tends to stay with me at night, we can both meet you by the river sometime.”

“You are very right,” he chuckled. “I’ll have it ready for you within a week. Gaara can receive the baby's gift,” he winked at her.

“Thank you, Utakata,” she chuckled. She put the money pouch out on the counter and took out some money for the oils. Kaida hissed softly at her. “Naga is going well,” Azumi smiled at the snake. “I can take you on another hunt with the other snakes next week.” Kaida did a little excited spin and slithered up her arm to tap her nose against Azumi’s cheek in a little kiss.

Utakata chuckled against as he started to package any of the oils Azumi picked out. “She’s going to love that,” he placed the oils in a little basket for her and handed it to her. “Your child will be beautiful.”

She grinned, subconsciously placing her hand over her stomach. “I only hope that they have my eyes,” she chuckled. She opened her arms for a hug and waited for him to come around the counter and hug her. Kaida moved back to his shoulders and then they pulled apart. “I will see you soon,” she said to both of them as she left. She made her way back to Sasori’s shop quickly.

“You sure took your time,” Sasori said as she walked into the shop. He had moved to the front countertop.

“I was not gone that long,” she sighed. She placed the money pouch back in its usual spot. “And he gave me a discount.” She went into the workshop to put away the oils she got.

“He did?” Sasori asked, getting up to follow her to the back. “Why?” He raised an eyebrow. “That guy usually price gouges me,” he muttered.

“He price gouges you because you’re an ass to him,” Gaara called down from the upper level. He
moved down the ladder once he heard Azumi enter the workshop.

"That sounds about right," Azumi hummed. She turned toward Sasori after she finished putting the oils away. "He is not a bad guy so he might just not like the way you speak to him. He especially does not like your pet scarab."

“Does anyone actually like him?” Gaara snickered.

Sasori rolled his eyes. “He’s a supplier,” he huffed. “I hardly think I need to waste my time with niceties.”

“Then suffer with higher prices,” Gaara countered.

"You are also guilty of doing the same thing once or twice," Azumi said softly to Sasori. "You cannot blame him for doing it as well." She opened one of the oils and smelled it, humming at how pleasant it was and then handing it to him for him to smell it.

He nearly shoved the whole bottle up his nose and he breathed it in. Gaara got up to cross the room and peek over Azumi’s shoulder to see what else she got. “This is...different,” Sasori said, pulling back the bottle to look at the label. “Passion fruit,” he said softly. “Interesting. Rare and discounted.” He set the bottle down and picked up another. “It’s not going to kill my aunt, is it?” he snorted with a smirk.

"No, it is not going to kill your aunt," she sighed. "I could never do that to Lord Sandaime," she smirked, handing him another oil. "I asked Utakata for anything rare because I want to try a new line of scents." He took the bottle from her and took another deep breath.

Gaara took a bottle himself and smelled it deeply. “Is it all fruit scents?” he asked curiously.

Sasori looked over the smells. “What do you plan to use as a spice?” Sasori asked.

“Oh, star anise would be really nice!” Gaara grinned.

"I was thinking of star anise with the passionfruit," Azumi hummed. "And I have vanilla which would work perfectly with cinnamon." She thought for a moment. "I would also like to use saffron, but I am not sure what fruit would work best with it."

"Maybe this one!” Gaara grinned, smelling one labeled ‘dragonfruit.’

"You should use bourbon for the vanilla," Sasori hummed.

"I think that would just make me hungry," Gaara said, putting the bottle back down. "Oh, but this black cherry one...I like it a lot."

Azumi looked at Gaara and smirked at the black cherry bottle, already planning one out for him with that scent. "I can use bourbon," she said to Sasori. "It is a whole set which means I can play with many different combinations." She took the bottles from both of them. "But for right now, what I have in mind is what I will start on."

“Well,” Sasori started up the ladder to the second level, “this is your project so I’m sure you’ll come up with something good.” He waved over his shoulder. “And when you’re finished, we can set up a new display for you.”

Gaara slipped his hand into Azumi’s the moment Sasori turned his back. He lifted her hand to kiss her knuckles. She waited to hear Sasori sit down at his desk before pulling Gaara into a kiss. "You
and I are expecting a visit from Utakata sometime next week," she said softly.

“We are?” He smiled into the kiss. “More oils?” he asked her softly, kissing her jaw. He wrapped his arms around her waist tighter, pulling her close. He could not resist and leaned in to bite her neck.

"I am not sure what it will be," she chuckled. "But it is a gift. It is a tradition in my village to give an expecting mother and her unborn child something. I protested, but he insisted."

He laughed softly, pressing his forehead to hers. “I think that’s adorable,” he smiled. “I can’t wait to see what he makes.”

“I’m ready to go home,” Sasori called down. His footsteps were quickly moving towards the ladder. Gaara released Azumi quickly, slipping out to stand next to her as fast as he could.

"I'm going to finish these last few orders and then I'll leave too," Gaara said.

Sasori nodded as he came down the ladder. "I have no more files to bring over here so what we have left here is what all we need to get done," he said, stifling a yawn.

Azumi grabbed a small bag and filled it up with all of the oils and other ingredients she wanted to use for Sandaime's wife. "I am going to start the first few bottles tonight," she said to Sasori, indirectly letting him know that she was going to need his workshop.

“Fine by me,” Sasori nodded. He ruffled his hair and yawned hard. “We should be here tomorrow, too,” he told Gaara.

“I’ll open,” Gaara groaned, rubbing his cheeks.

"Alright. Goodnight," Sasori waved, already heading out the door.

Azumi gave Gaara a quick kiss while Sasori's back was turned. "I will see you tomorrow," she whispered. She kissed his knuckles and grabbed the bag, following Sasori out the door. Gaara melted a little as he watched them leave.
Chapter 49

Sasori walked ahead of Azumi, eager to get home and melt into a very hot and long bath. “Thank gods all of this is over,” he huffed. “Tomorrow we can finish off the last of the orders and go back to business as usual,” he yawned again. “I’ll have to come up with another gift for my aunt.” He was starting to stress again.

“You can help me with this gift and it could be from the both of us,” Azumi suggested. "Unless you really do not want to give your aunt a shared gift," she chuckled. "Otherwise, I am sure you will think of something."

They made their way up the stairs to the house and straight toward Sasori's room. Already seeing how stressed out he was, Azumi went into the bathroom to start running baths for both of them. As the baths filled up, she went into the workshop to put the bag of oils down and started making tea. The tea was ready just as the baths were and she brought a cup for Sasori just as he was settling into his tub.

He muttered his thanks as he took the cup and sunk into the water. “I guess we could do a joint gift,” he hummed. “I only hesitate because it might give my mother ideas again. But I honestly don’t want to think of an alternative gift.” He sipped his tea and set the cup down next to him.

"Your uncle came to both of us when he asked for the gift," she reminded him as she started to undress. "I think it was expected that it would be from both of us." She slipped into her bath and sighed quietly, taking a sip of her own tea. "And I am sure your mother is already off the idea of us getting married."

“We can only hope that.” Sasori let his head lull to the side to look at her. “Or he is playing a game to rile her up again.”

"Mm," Azumi hummed in disagreement. "That is unlikely." Sandaime was fully aware of her relationship with Gaara. There was no way he would provoke Sasori's mother on the idea that they would get married. Especially now that she was going to have a baby with Gaara. "I do not think that is his plan. If your mother is back on the idea, it would definitely be her own idea, not something planted into her head."

Sasori hummed again. His lips pushed out gently in a pout as he considered her words. He knew she was right but he still felt like a setup was happening. “Maybe...we should do a dance for her,” he said softly.

"A dance?" she hummed. "That is not a bad idea." She looked up at him and frowned. "You are not going to put me in a trance for this dance, are you?" she asked.

“Not...intentionally,” he admitted. “I’m still learning what music will do that to you. Unfortunately, most songs seem to have some level of effect on you.”

"I can generally control it," she muttered. "But when you do it there is something about it that is stronger." She sipped her tea and hummed again. "Anyway, a dance is a good idea. It has been a while," she said, recalling that the last time she danced with him was at the night market.

“Stronger, huh?” He sipped his tea again and nodded. “It’s been a long while. I’ll consider that effect when choosing the song. I probably won’t be the one playing it directly,” he told her. He thought back to their fight when she was on her pills and how strong the effect was. The
information was filed away for later use.

She finished her tea and rested her chin on her arms on the edge of her bath as she looked outside at the river. They sat in silence for a while before finally washing themselves down and getting out of their baths. "Do you still want that massage?" she asked, knowing exactly what his answer would be. She wrapped her towel around herself before handing him his robe.

“We’re asking silly questions now?” Sasori raised an eyebrow with a slight smirk as he pulled his robe on. “Yes, I do.” He walked into his room with her in tow. “How do you need me to lay down?”

“I see we are continuing the silly questions,” she smirked. “On your stomach.” She poked him very gently in the back as if pushing him forward onto his bed then grabbed the bottle of massage oil. He snorted softly as he eased down onto his stomach. He grabbed the nearest pillow to tuck it under his head as he got comfortable. He would never admit it but he was pretty excited about this expected rub down. She got on the bed and straddled him then pulled his robe down to expose just his back. Once she warmed up the oil in her hands, she started the massage, beginning with his shoulders and upper back because she knew those were his worst spots.

His eyes rolled back the moment she pressed into his muscles. He moaned lowly into the fabric of the pillow. “You’ve been babying me,” he said softly through another groan.

She said nothing at first, continuing the massage and moving her hands further down his back. Another smirk pulled at her lips. "You have been acting like a baby," she cooed, pressing harder into his muscles.

"Hnnnng," he moaned again into his pillow. He gripped the sheets tightly, forcing himself to relax as she pressed into the painful knot. “I’ve been stressed. I’m sure you act childish under stress,” he sniffed.

"Our stresses are different," she said. "Serving you stresses me out. And..." she chuckled softly, recalling the fact that she slapped him and knocked him out when she fought him, "we have seen what happens when I hit my limit." She did not remember it but she had been told enough about the incident.

His thoughts snapped back to the fight and he grunted again. “You are...certainly right,” he smirked. “Let’s try not to do that ever again.”

She smiled and ran her hand through his hair, gently scratching his scalp. "Agreed," she said. She resumed the massage, working her way down to his lower back.

He moaned a little softer, borderline mewling when she scratched his head. “I’ll make sure to control you better before letting you on those pills again.”

She raised an eyebrow at him. 'You can try,' she thought. She moved her hands back up to his shoulder, looking for any tense spots she may have missed. Not finding any knots in his back, she retracted her hands. "I think we are done here," she said, getting off of him to stand up. She readjusted her towel and grabbed her clothes to start getting dressed.

Sasori burrowed his face deeper into the pillow before rolling onto his back. He did not bother to fix his robe. “Are you still going to work on the present?” he asked through the pillow.

"That was my plan," she hummed, turning to look at him. "Unless there was something else you wanted me to work on." She put her hair up, knowing that a present with as many components as
she was planning was going to make the workshop really hot.

“No, go about your business,” he shook his head. He put the pillow back over his head and sat up, pulling his robe on loosely. He shifted to press against his wall to assume his nightly practice of reading. Azumi nodded and went into the workshop to start on the gift for Sandaime's wife.

Almost an hour and a half had passed and she had three bottles of perfume and two bottles of hair oils finished. She had the plan of making matching bath salts and oils as well. "I have no idea how I am going to box and present this to her," she muttered to herself.

“I have decorative boxes,” Sasori said, slinking into the room. He slid onto a stool and grabbed one of the nearest bottles to give it a whiff. “You only seem to get better and better.”

She looked at him and hummed. “Thank you,” she said. “I have had quite a bit of practice.” She pushed the other perfumes closer to him. “This is the first time I have used these combinations.”

He took his time smelling each one. He lingered on one for a moment, his eyes dilating a little. “Make more of this one,” he said softly, pushing it towards her.

She smelled the one he was talking about and smirked at him. “Alright,” she chuckled. She wrote it down next to the black cherry one she wanted to make for Gaara to remind herself to do it. She sat back with a sigh. “I am going to let these set before I work on the rest.”

“How long are you going to let them sit?” he asked, resting his chin on his arms. He glanced at them then looked at her for her answer.

“They usually take about ten minutes to set,” she hummed, fanning herself a little. “But I am making these a little bigger than normal so maybe twenty.”

“I see,” he said, still speaking softly. He got up quietly and held out his hand for her. “Get up.” He waited for her to take it before pulling her close and starting to dance slowly. She followed him easily and without much protest. They did agree that they would be doing a dance for his aunt. Even though it had been a while since they danced together, they moved as if they had always been dancing together. Sasori rested his head on her shoulder and hummed softly as they moved smoothly across the floor for a couple of minutes. His fingers curled a little into her skin, holding her a little closer. “I won’t let you leave,” he whispered.

She frowned and let out a soft sigh. "We had this conversation when you were on those pills," she said quietly. "When I am free, it will be my decision whether I stay or leave. And I will not make that verdict until I hear that I am no longer your slave."

He lifted his head to look her in the eyes. “We did?” He stopped dancing but held her close. “You...you are mine,” he repeated. “My uncle won’t make a difference. We work too well together for you to leave.” His voice stayed soft but there was the smallest rush of desperation in his tone. He had no recollection of what they talked about when he was on the pills but he knew he could not lose her. He almost dared to say he connected with Azumi in a way he had not with anyone else in a long time. “My uncle be damned.” His fingertips brushed the scarring on her back lightly.

She stared at him for a long moment, trying to think of a way to word what she wanted to say. She wanted to stay with Gaara, especially since they were having a baby together. She knew she would still have to see Sasori every now and again after being freed because she would never make Gaara leave the city. Not unless he expressed to her that he would want to leave. She closed her eyes and breathed heavily through her nose. "We do work well together," she agreed. "And we tend to get along. But that does not negate everything you have done to me. As much as I have tried to
suppress it, you now know how I truly feel about you. And I am not sure that those feelings will ever change. But...I would be willing to stay and remain a partner in business with you. But only...

She paused, trying to think about what she wanted to say. "That will all depend on how you treat me until then."

He drew to his full height, still holding her tight. He gave her a hard, hooded looked. His lips pressed into a thin line. “You are treated better than any slave I’ve owned before you,” he finally said after some time. “And I will treat you as I see fit until you are forcibly taken from me.” His fingers dig a little more into her scars. “However, I’ll consider your words.”

She winced a little, finally feeling his nails in her skin. "I am not telling you how to treat me," she said. "I am just letting you know that how you treat me will affect my decision." She gently removed his hands from her and took a step back then sighed again. 'And my child,' she thought.

He narrowed his eyes, watching her move back towards the workbench. He said nothing as he retook his seat next to her. They fell into a comfortable silence again. Sasori turned over her words in his head. He tried to ignore the sense of panic he felt thrum through his body at the thought of being alone and scooted closer to her.

The sound of him shifting broke her concentration as she started on the next few bottles of the gift. She turned to look at him. “Did you want to make something as well?” she asked him softly.

“What would you suggest?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. He had nestled his face in his arms again like a small child watching his mother work.

“A bath salt and oil set?” she hummed. She picked up the scent he said he liked a few minutes ago. “For yourself? Unless you wanted this to be a hair oil or cologne.”

“I guess I could make some hair oils and bath salts,” he hummed, getting up to gather what he needed. “Show me your method,” he asked her. He had been watching but not truly paying attention.

She went over the method with him for the next few minutes, using another scent as an example. “Then you use this,” she said softly, sliding the last thing toward him, “to make the fragrance stronger.” She put a few drops in her example and decided she was going to keep it for herself.

He hummed softly, nodding occasionally as he took in the information. He picked up the amplifier and set it aside for when he was done. “Did you come up with this method on your own?” he asked her as he started on making his own product.

“I did,” she said with a nod. “I started doing this out of boredom and mere curiosity.” She pushed hers aside to let them set and continued with the gift for Sandaime’s wife. “Then it turned out to be something I truly enjoyed and it just became something I did on the side.”

He nodded, pouring and mixing as he moved through the method. “And what about your siblings? Do they have side jobs like this?”

“Not exactly,” she shrugged. “My older brothers have other things they do. My younger brother showed a little bit of interest in this.” She smiled fondly as she continued to work. “He assisted me for a little while.”

“Interesting,” he hummed, sitting down to allow his first concoction to simmer over the heat. “Have you ever known your mother?”

She shook her head. “No,” she said simply. “Not that I cared much to know her. I have no idea
what happened to her. Whether she left or died or...” she trailed off, pushing the bottle aside to let it set then pulling another one close to start working on it.

“I see,” he frowned. “I can’t imagine not knowing my mother.” He tilted his head as he stirred his pot. “I could have done without my father though,” he smirked softly. “He and I are...nothing alike.”

“Except in looks,” she chuckled. “You are almost an exact copy of him. But...my oldest brother is also almost an exact copy of my father.”

Sasori rolled his eyes but his smirk shifted to a smile. “When I was little, I used to wear his clothes and pretend to be him. I’d smear paint on my cheeks and get plaster in my hair then try to dance with my mother,” he grinned. “She hated the little white handprints on all of her clothes but she still danced with me.”

Azumi covered her mouth, trying to muffle the squealed laugh that escaped. “That is so cute,” she chuckled, fanning herself from how hot it was in the workshop with more heat running. “I bet you were just an all-around adorable child.”

He chuckled, taking the pot off of the heat and letting it cool. “I think I was,” he blushed a little. “At least that’s what all my aunts have told me,” he laughed a little harder.

“I do not see why they would lie,” she smirked. “And since you grew up to be a handsome man, it is already a fact that you were a cute child.” She stood up, moving around him to grab another bottle to use in the next part of the set.

He paused, blinking a little wide when she mentioned how handsome he was. He caught himself and rolled his eyes. He knew he was a looker. His slave acknowledging his good looks should not have elicited any form of reaction aside from smugness. He shook his head and resumed his work, moving on to the next oil. “Is this the first time you’ve openly called me handsome?” he smirked.

She stopped for a moment to think about it. “To your face, yes,” she answered, recalling she had mentioned it a couple of times to other people. “But you already know you are, it should come as no surprise that I mention it.”

He raised his eyebrow and nodded. “I am well aware of my good looks,” his lips quirked up again. “It’s gotten me into trouble and run me into far too many irritating interactions,” he rolled his eyes. “But it’s still nice to hear once in a while.”

“Oh, I can only imagine the trouble your looks have gotten you into,” she sighed. “It has turned you into a true heartbreaker. I have seen people throw themselves at you in the last few months. And, subsequently, I have seen the rejections they have received from you.”

His grin widened. He set the pot he was working with to boil and moved back to the first one. “Tell me, honestly, that you liked any of the women we’ve interacted with at all save for yourself,” he challenged her lightly.

She hummed in thought, folding her arms and leaning against the counter. "Mm...no," she said. "Well..." she second-guessed her answer. "No," she said with finality. On top of the women that threw themselves at Sasori being a bit on the trashy and desperate side, she did not like the way they looked at her. Whether or not he noticed the dirty looks she has gotten for just being near him was beyond her. "I did not like any of them," she said.

“I didn’t think so,” he smirked. “And by the way they treated you, none of them seemed to like you
very much.” He slowly poured the fragrant oil into a little bottle. “I cannot have my potential wife fussing over things like my slave ‘being prettier’ or ‘smarter’. Petty things like that are irritating and only make a woman unattractive,” he started to pout a little. “They all act so petty.”

"A woman with no insecurities that can live without the paranoia of me stealing you from her," she hummed. She did not know anyone in the city because she was not from the region, but she could name a few women from her village who would fit that description. "Maybe you need a man," she joked.

He released a long snort and placed the pot he was working with down on the workbench. “No, men are even worse,” he smirked. “You’ve seen Komushi. He’s so flighty and is definitely jealous of how much time I spend with you now.”

"With how much he tried to come onto me, I would have assumed he was jealous of you," she muttered, sitting back down.

“That idiot probably wants to land both of us,” he half-joked.

She suppressed a shudder at the thought of sleeping with both Komushi and Sasori and pushed the image far away from her mind then smirked at him. "It seems there is no one worthy of marrying you. Pity," she hummed. "With a pretty face like yours, you would have made cute children. Intelligent, too."

His cheeks started to burn a little again but he brushed it off. “I wouldn’t make a good father.” He spaced out for a moment. “No...I don’t think I have a patient bone in my body,” he said, coming back. He gave her a devilish smile and ruffled his hair. “Children need a lot of attention and time. I don’t have that.”

"I am fully aware of how much attention children need," she teased, scratching his scalp gently.

“You’re patronizing me.” He glared at her but his lean betrayed him. He pressed his head a little into her hand so she would continue. “I don’t appreciate you considering me a child.” He poked her in the ribs gently. “I’d never let Komushi touch you. I don’t want to find out what any of his offspring would be like with your intelligence and his...ability to piss me off.”

"I...do not even want to imagine what they would look like...I just...do not want to think about ever having a child with him." She groaned, unable to suppress the shudder this time as she continued to scratch his head.

Sasori laughed softly under his breath. “I think we can both agree it would be a terrible time and choice. I bet his babies would give you indigestion,” he joked. He sat up, pulling away to finish his other bottle. “How much more do you have to work on?”

"I am just doing these," she said, gesturing to what she had over the fire at the moment. "Then I can work on the rest tomorrow night and spend more time on making it look pretty." She poured the liquids into bottles and added the last drops to finish it off then set the tops for the bottles loosely over the openings.

“Good.” He finished off his own bottle. “I’m tired and want to go to bed. You’re sleeping in my room,” he told her.

There was not much she could do in protest. She nodded and sighed then cleaned everything up without putting anything away since she was going to resume the work the next day. She stretched hard and stood up then followed him to his room. He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled
her onto the bed, bouncing a little. His head quickly found its resting place on her chest and his legs wrapped around hers. He pulled up her hand and placed it on his head with no words or requests. He just glanced up at her then nuzzled in deeper into her chest. She tensed up hard for a moment, trying not to show just how uncomfortable she was. She sighed and relaxed a little, knowing exactly what he wanted. She started moving her hand, raking her fingers through his hair and then scratching his scalp. He hummed softly when she got the message. He started to drift off to sleep once she relaxed under him. His eyes fluttered shut and he was soon gone to sleep. She relaxed even more when she felt him fall asleep, thinking about what the next few weeks would entail with hiding her pregnancy from him. She continued to move her hand in his hair until she also fell asleep.
Chapter 50

The next morning, Sasori roused before her. Her hand was still in laced in his hair and there was something comforting about it. He did not understand why he was able to relax so easily with her. His thoughts drifted to what they had talked about the night before. Had he really told her how lonely he was? Just the concept made him feel vulnerable. He sighed softly, curling tighter to her when he felt her stomach grumble beneath him. He sighed again, glancing up at her to see if she was even awake. She was not. She shifted very slightly, groaning quietly and holding him tighter.

Thinking he was Gaara, her hand subconsciously started moving in his hair again. He let himself smile and relax back against her. He did not want to move yet. All the stress of the week was almost done and he just wanted to stay in bed and bask in the pampering Azumi was giving him. He knew he was sort of acting like a child but how often did he indulge in being so human?

A while passed before Azumi finally woke up to the sun shining brighter into the room. Her stomach growled again and she hummed, slowly opening her eyes and taking in her surroundings. The smallest gasp came out of her when she realized that it was Sasori in her arms and not Gaara.

Sasori felt her shift. He had fallen back asleep at some point. His mouth twisted into a little pout when she started to move. “Your stomach is so noisy,” he rasped softly. He gently pressed his hand against her stomach. “I’ll get breakfast. Run the bath.” He pushed himself up groggily. “We slept in. Gaara’s going to be pissed,” he laughed softly as he walked out of the room.

She sat up in the bed, rubbing her face and groaning quietly. "I cuddled the wrong redhead," she muttered to herself, shivering from a sudden chill. She took a moment to stretch and fully wake up before moving into the bathroom. She ran the baths and set up their towels then basked in the most sunlit part of the bathroom while she waited for Sasori to come back.

Sasori walked into the bathroom a few moments later with a tray carrying their usual breakfast. He pulled a table close and set the tray down while watching her. “Are you not getting enough sun on our walks to work?” he asked her with a slight smirk.

"It only takes ten to fifteen minutes to walk there," she hummed. "That is not enough time out of the entire day. And when we walk back, the sun is already set." She approached him and grabbed her coffee then took a sip. "Plus I got cold," she said softly.

He gave her a skeptical look as he slipped off his robe. "Cold...in the desert?" He hummed. “I see. Well, I’ll make sure you get some time in the sun on this walk then. Maybe send you on some more errands," he cracked a smile.

She could not help the grin that appeared on her face. "That means you are sending me to get churros, right?" she chuckled as she stripped and stepped into her bath.

“That...” he stalled for a moment then laughed, “is exactly what I mean.” He slipped into the bath with his bowl of food and sighed contently. “I’m in the mood to indulge,” he grinned. “After this week, I think it’s deserved.” He pointed his toes and examined his leg.

She hummed excitedly, sipping more of her coffee. She set the cup down next to the tub and started washing herself up, taking her time to get clean since she knew Sasori was also going to take a while. She finished up but remained in the water for a little, pulling her bowl close and starting to eat. When she was done, she pulled herself out to sit on the edge of the pool and drank the rest of her coffee. "I think you should meet people from other regions," she said. "Clearly no one in this city suits your needs. But maybe you can find someone from another part of the world."
He set his cup down and looked at her confused for a moment. The meaning of her words took a solid moment to activate. When they did, he hummed softly and set his bowl down. “Maybe.” He tilted his head to the side and sighed. “But I can’t really travel. And frankly, I’ve never thought about leaving the city. I have everything I need here aside from a partner.”

"Maybe you do not have to leave," she said. "This is a big city and I assume there are a lot of tourists here. Or even people who have moved here from different regions. Just...go to where the foreigners and expats usually are." She stood up and wrapped her towel around herself then cleaned up her bowl and cup. "It is only a suggestion," she shrugged. You do not need to go through with it."

His face bunched up in slight disgust. “Tourists...” he whispered. He frowned, staring out the window and finish off his coffee. He shook his head, setting his mug down to finish off his bath before getting out of the tub. “Tourists are too transient,” he muttered to himself as he grabbed his towel and started to dry off. He said this but he had never considered going anywhere near the bustling hubs to try and find any form of a partner. “Mmm, if it goes wrong, they’d probably leave in a week,” he chuckled. “I could do a lot in a week,” he smirked. He finished off his food then proceeded to his room.

“Yes, I’m sure I could find someone,” he hummed. He started to get dressed while they talked. “They will still have to get along with you,” he flashed her a grin. “Just because they are foreign doesn’t excuse them from that. I can’t have them disrupting my life.” He crossed the room to suddenly grip her jaw. “That being said, you are foreign and I dare say you’re the person I’ve gotten along with...the easiest in a long time.”

"Does that not further prove my point?" she asked after a few seconds. "There are plenty of women who are just like me. Those who are versed in science. Or are intelligent in other aspects. Those are the type of people we can both get along with." The only thing rare about her was her heritage and certain aspects of her body and appearance. Women in science were not rare. He was just not looking correctly.

“I see your point,” he hummed, dropping his hand. “Your suggestion is under consideration.” He started for the door. “Let’s go. We’re already late and Gaara might actually start griping if I don’t show up at all today.” She followed him out the door and they quickly made their way to the shop.

Upon entering the shop, Azumi tapped the noses of each of the six snakes in the tanks. "Hello," she said softly to each and every one of them. She poked her head out to the front of the shop where Gaara was restocking a shelf.

The moment he noticed her, his face split into a wide grin. He glanced around for Sasori before pulling her through the curtain and into his arms. He kissed her deeply and gave her a light squeeze. “I missed you,” he whispered.

"I missed you, too," she grinned, kissing him again. "How long have you been here?" she asked, pulling away from him when she heard Sasori walk by the curtain. "We woke up a bit late."

"I was a little restless last night so I came in early," he chuckled, blushing a little. "I finished all of the leftover orders and most of the ones due for pick-up today have already come in."

"Then we should not have much to finish up," she hummed. "I can do the rest if you want. The ones that are not exactly part of the piles we have had the last few days. Since you have already done so much." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "He is in a better mood today."

"It's alright," Gaara smirked. "Make him do something if he is in a better mood," he chuckled,
"Mm, no, not really," she said. "I did have to sleep in his room, though. He is feeling even more lonely than normal it seems. I am just glad I am in the earlier stages of pregnancy and there are no physical changes to my body yet that he can notice."

Gaara's face fell almost instantly. He pulled her close again by the hand, holding it tightly. "He didn't hurt you again, did he?" He looked hard into her eyes. He did not like that the one night they did not spend together in months she was forced to sleep with Sasori in his bed. He bit his inner cheek, doing his best to stay in control until she gave him an answer.

She gave him a soft smile and shook her head. "No," she said, caressing his face. "He did not."

His face softened and he forced himself to relax. He pressed his cheek into her hand and lifted her other hand to press a kiss to her knuckles. "If he's feeling so lonely maybe he should stop pushing away every single person his mother suggests," he grumbled, looking at the curtain again.

She shrugged and looked back at the curtain as well. "I should probably start doing something before his mood gets brought down." She pulled him into a quick kiss and retreated into the workshop to start working on the next thing Gaara was going to do. The snakes hissed excitedly, congratulating her. "Thank you," she whispered, chuckling softly. "I still have no idea how any of you can tell."

One of the snakes hissed excitedly, trying to explain to her how they knew but Sasori's look silenced it quickly. "Why are they so talkative?" he asked her, looking up from his ledger. "Are they hungry?"

Azumi looked back at the snakes and luckily a few of them nodded. "Mm, I think they are," she said. She nodded for them to follow her toward the door. She opened it enough for them to slither out and then propped it open for them. "They will be back soon," she told Sasori.

He nodded absentmindedly. "It seems Gaara finished off most of our work," he said, setting down the ledger he was reading. "But we start prepping for that new line you want to start after we finish the little bit that's left."

"Right," she nodded, sitting down at the workbench and continuing the orders.

For the next few hours, they worked on the last of the orders. Once the last one was finished and ready to be picked up, all three of them sat back in their seats and sighed.

"It's over," Gaara sighed, leaning back hard in his chair. "Hell week is over."

"I swear this was worse than last year," Sasori rubbed his face hard, whining slightly. "We need to figure out a better system to deal with this time of the year."

"Well, having a third person this time made it go by faster," Gaara said.

"I try my best," Azumi grinned. She turned around in her seat and looked up at Sasori. "And I do believe you promised churros," she smirked.

"Yes, yes," Sasori tried to hide his own little smirk. "Your little sunshine walk." He got up to grab his money pouch and handed it to her. "Get us coffee while you're at it."

"Sunshine walk?" Gaara chuckled, looking at Azumi a little questioningly.
"Apparently she isn't getting enough sun," the smirk threatening on Sasori's lips bloomed. "So she's going to go get some while running some errands."

“I got cold this morning,” Azumi defended. She left the workshop and made it halfway through the shop before turning around to head back into the workshop. She looked questioningly at both Gaara and Sasori and then pointed to the left and then the right.

“Left,” they both said, knowing she was asking the direction of the coffee shop.

“Thank you,” she grinned, turning again to leave for real this time.

Gaara chuckled softly, getting up to start cleaning up the workshop. "She got cold?” He shook his head.

"I asked her the same thing," Sasori shrugged. "I know it can get cool at night but it was morning when she was 'sunning' herself."

"Maybe it's part of her bloodline," Gaara offered. "She has the fangs," he smirked. "I'm sure she has other snaky attributes."

“She swears she’s human,” Sasori muttered. “But she’s only been doing it recently. She’s never had to bask before.”

“Could be rare,” Gaara shrugged.

“Or something she’s not telling me. Something I might have to push to figure out.”

Gaara fought off the sudden primal feeling to protect and instead tried to redirect Sasori's thoughts. "She could have a cold," Gaara chuckled, tensely. "I'm sure it's nothing. Not everyone can live in the shadows," he teased his cousin.

Sasori rolled his eyes hard. "If she is coming down with something she can just ask me for a remedy," he frowned. "Maybe you should give her a check-up. I'm not in the mood to get sick."

“I’ll try to give her one then,” Gaara nodded.

“She said she couldn’t keep that other snake down which is why he’s out right now,” Sasori added. "That could have something to do with it."

"Ah," Gaara nodded. "If she has an upset stomach I'm sure I can find something to give her. Don't worry about it."

"I'm not worried," Sasori waved him off. "I trust you to do your job. But like I said, I'm really in no mood to get sick."

“You won’t,” Gaara sighed.

A few minutes later, Azumi returned with coffee and churros for them. “I, uh...may have eaten a few on the way back,” she said softly.

"I figured you would," Sasori narrowed his eyes at her. He took his cup of coffee from her. "Did you bring extra frosting?" he asked, peeking into the bag.

"You're worse than a little kid," Gaara rolled his eyes. "Let her at least put the food down," he chided, taking his own cup of coffee from Azumi. "Thank you, by the way," he smiled at her.
"If this was fried gizzards you wouldn't have let her get in the door," Sasori countered. "Don't act like you aren't just as bad as me," he said, taking the churros from Azumi. "Was that enough sunshine for you and your snake body?"

"Yes," Azumi sighed, "it was just the right amount." She handed him two small tubs of icing. "And yes, I did get extra frosting."

"Perfect," he grinned, taking one tub for himself while setting the other down on the table with the rest of the churros. "Oh, Gaara's going to give you a checkup."

"A checkup?" she asked, sipping her coffee. "For what?" She knew it could not be a prenatal checkup. It was too early. And if Sasori knew about that, he would not have said it so nonchalantly.

"He's afraid you're coming down with a cold or something of the sorts so we're just going to give you a physical to make sure everything is functioning well," Gaara said easily.

"You shouldn't suddenly be getting cold like you said you are unless you are coming down with something," Sasori said. "Unless...there are some more snakey features you've been withholding," he challenged lightly.

"No," she told him. She would not disclose any more information about her body to him beyond what he had already discovered. "I am sure it is nothing. But I will go through with the checkup."

"I don't remotely believe you," he said easily. "But I have time to find out about all of that. I don't, however, have time to be sick."

"Relax," Gaara said, stealing a churro from his cousin. "When would you like for this check-up to happen? Today or tomorrow?" he was asking Sasori but looking at Azumi. He gave her a soft smile, making her smile.

"Today if there's time after we finish the orders," Sasori answered. Azumi nodded in agreement. "You two could at least pretend you aren't going to enjoy this interaction," Sasori drawled lazily.

Gaara looked away from Azumi to roll his eyes at his cousin. "The check-up will be nothing but professional, Cousin," Gaara assured him. "Didn't you just say you trusted me?"

Sasori narrowed his eyes. "Don't make me regret it," he warned. He took his churros and coffee and went up the ladder to the second level.

"I do not have a cold," Azumi said softly. "I feel fine." The snakes returned, slithering through the door and making their way back into their tanks.

"He's noticed the way you've been sunning your self lately," he said with a slight question. "You told him you were cold and he saw that Ryuga is out so he thinks you might be coming down with something." He kept his voice low as he took a seat at the workbench. "Have you started sunbathing because of..." he trailed off, looking at her stomach before his eyes flickered back to meet hers.

Her brow furrowed and she gently placed a hand over her stomach. "I do not—" She was cut off by one of the snakes hissing at her, telling her that when a female snake gets pregnant, they general bask in the sun much more often than they previously did. "But I am not a sn——" The snake cut her off, telling her that even though she was human, she still possessed mannerisms of a snake in the most primal ways. "Oh..." She frowned and looked at Gaara. "I suppose that is why then."
Gaara looked between them, piecing together what he could from the broken conversation. "I'm guessing there are a few more serpentine habits you aren't aware of?" he gave her a half-smirk. "We'll have to give you a thorough check-up aside from this one for Sasori. Can you think of anything else a mother snake does?"

The snake hissed the answer. "They can get aggressive," Azumi translated. "Loss of appetite because they are so focused on protecting their clutch. Basking more often."

Gaara grabbed a notebook and jotted down everything she was listing off. He hummed softly, looking at the loss of appetite. "We will keep an eye on this one." He put a star next to it. "I'll talk to Shira and the three of us will work around that. I don't want you or the baby suffering." He looked at the rest of the list with a serious expression for a moment longer. "Okay. Aside from the sunning and protecting the...clutch?" he looked at her a little puzzled. "This is pretty normal for human pregnancy as well."

"I am pretty sure that protecting the clutch is very similar to just protecting the baby," she chuckled. "Snakes usually give birth to multiple neonates at a time. Not just one. I, for sure, am only going to have one."

"Ah," he nodded, smiling a little. "It's a little too early to tell for sure if you will only have one child but I like to keep the mindset that women know their bodies best. So you have to tell me if anything feels off or strange," he told her sternly. "As for protecting the...neonate," he smiled a little wider, "every mother puts their baby's safety first but hopefully you will be somewhere safe so you don't have to worry too much." He tapped his pen against the note pad. "As for the aggression...well, Sasori's been pretty tame lately, right?"

"This week is the tamest he has been," she hummed, sitting down with him. So long as he does not find out about this, he should remain so."

"Okay," he nodded. "We'll get you away from him before you start really showing. I promise."

She smiled and kissed him softly. "Thank you," she whispered against his lips. She lingered there for a moment longer than necessary. "We should continue working before someone has a fit."

"You're right," he smiled, kissing her again before tucking the list away in his bag under the workbench. They pulled out what they needed to work on and dug in.

A couple of hours passed as Azumi started the first few items for the new line of fragrances she wanted to make as well as preparing a display for it in the shop. Among the new ones was the black cherry oil she made for Gaara. She stepped up behind him as he worked on something else, wrapped her arms around him and held out the bottle in front of him. "I made this for you," she said softly.

"For me?" He smiled widely at the bottle. Careful not to push her arms off, he lifted his hands to take it from her and open it carefully to smell it. His eyes closed slowly and rolled a little. "Wow," he smiled widely. He turned in her arms to cup her face and kiss her deeply. "Thank you, my love." He kissed her again softly.

"You are welcome," she said softly. "It is a versatile oil so you can use it for whatever. But I suggest using it as a bath oil. It will smell even more amazing in hot water."

He smiled, pressing his forehead to hers. "I can't wait to use it," he whispered. Above them, they heard Sasori shift and they pulled apart quickly. Gaara tucked the bottle away in his back along with the notes. "Maybe we can use it together some time," he said softly.
Sasori descended the ladder moments later, stretching hard once he reached the ground floor. "Let's get going," he said, rubbing his face hard.

"Right," Azumi hummed. She gathered everything she needed to finish the gift for Sandaime's wife. She grabbed Gaara's hand while Sasori's back was turned and kissed his knuckles softly. "Goodnight," she said as she walked toward the door.

"Goodnight," Gaara could not help but smile as he watched them go.
Chapter 51

Sasori started on their usual path back to the mansion. Stretching hard, he turned his head back to look at her. "We'll have Gaara look you over tomorrow," he said with a slight yawn. "But how are you generally feeling? Did you get any more work done on your projects from last night?"

"I feel fine. I focused on making the new fragrances for the shop," she hummed. "I can finish that project tonight. It should not take that long."

"I see," he hummed. "We can set up whatever you have ready by tomorrow in the shop if you want," he told her. "Your first line sold out rather quickly so I have faith that this will as well—" he stopped short. He squinted, feeling the sudden urge to punch someone.

"Heeey," Komushi's voice greeted them before he emerged from a dark side ally. His arm easily wrapped around Azumi's shoulders from behind and pulled her close to his chest. "How was hell week?"

"It went surprisingly well," Sasori answered.

"Could you be even more of a predator?" Azumi muttered, rolling her eyes.

Komushi's eyes flickered down to Azumi's. His mouth pulled into a wider grin as his hand on her shoulder shifted to tilt her face up towards his. His lips were inches from hers. "Yes," he answered her. "I can."

"But you won't," Sasori said as he hit the back of his head hard. "Get off of her, you scarab," he snapped then paused, realizing what he had just called him.

Komushi winced but backed off, rolling his eyes. "Anyway," he said, rubbing the back of his head. "It must have been nice to have an extra set of functional hands to help around the shop but what do you say to blowing off some steam?"

Sasori hummed in thought. "What do you have in mind?" he asked. Azumi sighed, assuming it meant they were going to poison someone for shits and giggles.

"Go to a bar of course." Komushi threw his arms in the air in celebration. "We haven't been to one in so long and I think you both deserve a few drinks!"

“A bar?” Sasori repeated. “Komushi—“

“I'm not taking no for an answer,” Komushi cut him off, grabbing both of their wrists and pulling them in the direction of the bar.

Azumi tilted her head back and sighed. 'I cannot even drink,' she thought.

"Fine," Sasori relented. "I suppose you should be allowed to drink, too," he said to Azumi softly. "Order whatever you want."

"Whooa-ho," Komushi grinned over his shoulder. "Now it'll be a party!" He released their hands as they turned down another street then descended a set of stairs to a set of colorful wooden doors. Beyond the doors, they could hear boisterous voices and music.

"We haven't been here in a long time." Sasori rubbed the back of his neck. He was not entirely
keen to be around so many people.

“Oh,” Azumi said nervously, looking around at just how many people were in the bar. They found a table and sat down. “This is...an entirely different atmosphere.” She kept close to both Komushi and Sasori, not wanting to engage with anyone.

“I’ll get the drinks,” Komushi said. He looked at Sasori. “I already know what you want.” He looked at Azumi. “What do you want—never mind I have something you should try.”

“Wait, no,” she started. But it was too late. Komushi was already on his way to the bar to get the drinks. Sasori sighed, getting comfortable in his seat. He buried his face in his arms to wait for Komushi to return. “I do not want to drink,” she said softly to herself.

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "You don't?" he asked, genuinely surprised. "I thought you of all people would want a drink the most," he smirked but it quickly faded. "Are you actually getting sick?" He sat up, pressing the back of his hand to her forehead and his other hand to his own.

"No, I am not getting sick," she frowned. "I just...am not in the mood to drink."

He frowned, staring at her hard. "We're going to see Gaara first thing in the morning," he told her with finality.

Komushi came back soon after, sliding Azumi her drink then Sasori’s with a soft clink of glasses. "Why are we so serious?" he asked, looking between. He took his seat along with a sip from his cup.

"Someone here is getting sick," Sasori said, picking up his drink.

"No, I am not," Azumi repeated, looking at the drink in front of her. "This is pretty," she hummed, inspecting the presentation closely.

"Sick?" Komushi looked at her a little worried. "It tastes even better than it looks and if you're getting sick it might help you sleep, too," he offered. "Did Gaara give you a check-up yet?"

"I plan to have him give her a full check-up tomorrow," Sasori said as he took a sip of his own drink.

Azumi sighed and ran her hand through her hair. She was going to give up telling them she was not sick for now and let them find out when Gaara was finished checking her over. *I suppose one drink will be fine,* she thought. "I will not be having any more than this," she told Komushi as she picked up her glass and took a sip. It was really good and he was right, it was even better than it looked. "I like this a lot," she hummed.

"I knew you would," he grinned. "But I'll order you a tea for the next round," he assured her. "Maybe I'll make that for you at home one day," he smiled at her.

"You will not be getting my slave drunk," Sasori said firmly.

Behind them, a few tables away, a man with messy dark blond hair and violet eyes was staring down Azumi. He had just returned from the bar with drinks for his own master.

"I don't want to get her drunk," Komushi scoffed. "I just want her to have a little fun." He caught the eye of the man staring Azumi down. "Whoa, do you have any enemies?" he asked her.
"Enemies?" she hummed. "No." He gestured toward the man and she looked at him. "I have never seen that person in my life," she said.

"Maybe he likes you," he smirked.

"Absolutely not," both Azumi and Sasori said.

"Koji, hm!" a voice yelled over the din of the people around them. "Pay attention!" Sasori’s eye instantly started to twitch. "What are you even looking at, hm?"

"Deidara’s here," Sasori growled, downing his drink in one go.

"Nothing, my Lord," the man named Koji quickly brushed his master's complaints off. He continued to stare at Azumi, his eyes narrowing in disgust.

"So he's Dei's, huh," Komushi hummed. "He might have a problem with you because you're Sasori's."

Azumi stared back at Koji in the same manner of disgust. His face ignited a hatred in her. "No..." she said with a slight growl. "That is not why. There is something else." It was not like her to irrationally hate someone she never met, but there was something about this man that made her fangs want to come out. Sasori shifted in his seat to peer over his shoulder at Koji. He glanced back at Azumi, seeing her lips starting to curl.

Komushi flinched a little, noticing the look as well. "What's up with you?" he asked softly.

"Making a face like that is going draw him over to us," Sasori hissed at her.

However, it was too late. Koji was on his way over to them. His hips sashayed threateningly through the crowded right up to them. The smaller distance intensified the air of hatred between them as they stared each other down. Koji took a long look at her eyes and a smug smirk—very much like the one his own master often wore—appeared on his lips.

"What do you want?" she snapped, immediately losing all patience and already halfway out of her seat. She tried to keep her fangs from coming out, but they definitely came out a little bit. Komushi was on his feet faster than Sasori. He started to position himself between Azumi and Koji.

Koji scoffed, throwing his head back in the process. "I just wanted to validate my sense," he sneered.

"What does that even mean?" Komushi snapped, looking at him in utter confusion.

Koji turned to Komushi with a slight bow. "It simply means they really let any piece of serpentine trash into this establishment," he sneered. "And my master should not have to come in contact with creatures like her."

Azumi moved to lunge at him but was kept in place by Komushi. "I don't know where you get off speaking like that," he said.

"We can start with her inferiority that goes beyond her being a slave," Koji said.

"Inferiority?" Azumi growled. Her eyes panned down to a necklace that rested against his chest. It was the shape of a mongoose and it was immediately clear to her why she did not like him. The mongoose was the natural enemy of the snake. "Very bold of you to think that as a mongoose you have any sort of superiority over a snake."
"Mongoose?" Komushi and Sasori said out loud together.

"Wait...is this guy like you but with mongooses," Sasori asked her in slight disbelief.

"I think he is," Komushi snorted. "Azumi, come on you know he isn't worth—"

"Why are you bothering my slave, hm!" Deidara yelled at the top of his lungs as he walked over. He leaned hard on Koji's shoulder, glaring at Sasori. "You let her live this long but neglected to give her manners?" he scoffed. "Oh, wait! How could you when you have none yourself!"

"Like master, like slave," Komushi muttered, rolling his eyes. He meant it for both pairs because as much as they denied it, Azumi and Sasori were very similar. "Deidara, this really isn't—"

"Get out of my face before you no longer have one," Sasori growled at Deidara, cutting off any of Komushi's attempts to stop a fight. "Your slave came up to us and started agitating her."

"Much like a lowly mongoose would," Azumi snapped.

"I think you'll find it's your kind who is the irritating and agitating," Koji countered. "We were here first anyway! You always think you can just move in and occupy a space as if no one else was in it before you," he countered.

"What the hell?" Komushi shook his head. "She was literally sitting here doing nothing! And this is a free fucking space!"

Azumi tried to move but was once again held in place by Komushi. "Just like a mongoose to want to claim an entire space to themselves," she growled.

"You should have been killed off with the rest of your people," Koji said.

Immediately, Komushi gasped and let Azumi go and she vaulted over the table, grabbing Koji by his hair and bringing his head down as she brought her knee up to collide with his mouth. "I am going to keep your teeth as a souvenir," she hissed.

"Hot," Komushi grinned with a laugh. Sasori shook his head in slight disgust.

Koji struggled to get away from her, stumbling back hard into Deidara and knocking the man to the ground. They kept falling, hitting hard into a table. It took Koji's breath away but gave him enough time to grip Azumi's waist and spin them around. He pinned her down hard to the table, twisting her arms behind her with one hand and using the other to grip her hair and slam her forehead hard against the surface. "You will do no such thing, you vile snake!" he growled.

Behind them, Deidara screeched, pulling himself from the floor. "Leave it to you to have the worst possible slave in the whole city!" he screamed at Sasori. "You're both out of control and should be put down!"

Sasori responded to Deidara with a hard punch to his throat, making him choke on the words he was about to follow up with. Deidara let out a guttural scream and then was brought to the ground a second time by Sasori.

The bar patrons around them went dead silent, just listening and watching the first for a few moments before someone on the other end of the bar slammed their mug down and screamed: "FIGHT!" The bar was thrown into chaos. Everyone started fighting the nearest person who dared to make eye contact with them.
Azumi managed to get out of Koji's hold and kicked him to the ground, straddling him and laying a series of punches to each side of his jaw. She grabbed a cloth napkin that fell to the ground beside them when they knocked into the table and shoved it into Koji's mouth then wrapped her hands around his neck, pressing hard to choke him out.

For a moment, Komushi was torn between getting Sasori off of Deidara or getting Azumi off of Koji. Sasori glanced at what Azumi had done for a split second and grinned as he picked Deidara up by the throat and slammed his head down hard on the floor. He pulled back to punch the blond in the face and heard a satisfying crunch.

Deidara screamed in pain. "YOU BROKE BY FUCKING NOSE!" He clawed at Sasori's face. He thrashed wildly until he managed to knock Sasori off enough to knee him hard in the groin.

"Shit," Komushi laughed, looking between them. He opted to go for Sasori since Azumi seemed to have her fight under control. Komushi stepped between Sasori and Deidara and landed another punch to the throat on the blond. “I got this,” he said softly to Sasori.

Sasori chuckled softly and turned around only to be confronted by some gross-looking man he had never seen before. “You’re the fucker who outbid me in that auction!” the man yelled, pulling back and punching Sasori square in the face.

Sasori blinked, dazed for a moment, his head spinning from the impact before he came back to himself. “Not my fault that you’re fucking poor!” he snarled, lunging at the man. He tackled him, sending both of them flying into the bar counter and slamming into a huge man minding his business in the chaos.

“Sasori?” the man jingled when he turned to see who had just hit into him. Sasori was too busy breaking a bottle over the other man’s head to hear Kenzou.

Kenzou stood up and looked around. He was not paying attention to the bar brawl when it started but now that he was aware of someone he knew personally being involved, it was time to intervene. He noticed Komushi fighting Deidara and Azumi shoving her whole fist into Koji’s mouth to push a cloth napkin further down his throat. Immediately, he motioned for a few of his men to tear apart Komushi and Deidara and another few to grab Sasori and the stranger. The guys charged in dutifully. They easily picked up Sasori, restraining him in a bear hug despite his thrashing. Sasori tried his best to scratch and slip from the grasp but to no avail.

“Let me fucking go!” the other guy screamed, kicking his legs.

Kenzou was a little harder to pull from the wailing Deidara. After a few moments of struggle, one of the men was able to pull Komushi off of Deidara and another was able to get Deidara up and restrain him to keep him from retaliating on Komushi. Kenzou walked up behind Azumi, wrapping his arms around her and picking her up off of Koji. She took a death grip on Koji’s hair so he was lifted up with her.

“Let him go, Azumi,” Kenzou said sternly. He tucked her close to his body with one arm and used the other to take a firm grip on her hand, gently prying her fingers out of Koji’s hair until he dropped to the floor freely.

Koji hacked, drooling as the cloth was finally freed from his mouth. “You monstrous demon!” He coughed again, blood ran down his face, joining the drool. He scooted away from them, bumping into another guy from Kenzou’s gang.

Azumi thrashed in Kenzou’s arms, trying to kick Koji in the face one last time. Kenzou restrained
her legs against him and held onto her tighter until she could not move anymore. There was a soft hissy growl coming out of her as she kept eye contact with Koji whose eyes had gone from violet to orange with horizontal rectangular pupils at some point during their fight. Eyes very reminiscent of a mongoose.

“Ew, why do your eyes look like that?” Komushi’s face scrunched up in disgust. “Nasty!”

“THEY ARE NOT!” Koji screamed back. “These are my natural beautiful eyes! The eyes of my people!”

“So...all your people have ugly eyes,” Sasori spat some blood, smirking.

“Not as ugly as hers!” Koji growled. Azumi thrashed again in Kenzou’s arms. If her fangs could come out any more than they already were, they would have. “And that!” he almost gagged, looking at her fangs.

“Please! Her eyes are actually beautiful!” Komushi snorted.

“And what do you have as a defense?” Sasori raised an eyebrow. “Because her fangs are pretty effective.

“And pretty,” Komushi threw in. “Elegant and deadly!”

Koji did not answer. Most likely because he did not have a natural defense. “That’s what I thought,” Sasori smirked.

Kenzou looked down at Azumi who was still trying to break free of his grasp to no avail. “Retract your fangs please,” he said softly to her. She stopped moving and huffed, retracting her fangs with a pout. “Thank you.”

“Can you release me?” she mumbled quietly.

“Are you going to attack him?”

There was a long pause before she answered. She pouted again. “No.”

“I don’t believe you.” She let out another huff and went limp in his arms like a child.

“Why does she listen so easily to him?” Sasori pouted.

Komushi snickered next to him as the other men in Kenzou’s crew placed Sasori and Komushi on their feet. “Because he speaks to her nicely?” he shrugged.

Sasori rolled his eyes. “Whatever,” he huffed, folding his arms. “Did you knock Deidara out?” he asked, realizing they had not heard a peep from the irritating blond.

“I honestly blacked out,” Komushi shrugged. They looked over to where one of Kenzou’s men was holding Deidara. Deidara was whimpering softly, cupping his hands over his face to hide his bloody nose.

“No, he is very much still conscious,” Sasori frowned.

“Who the fuck is that guy though?” Komushi asked, gesturing to the other guy that Sasori engaged with that was being held by another of Kenzou’s men.

"Fuck if I know," Sasori clicked his teeth. "He claims I outbid him and stole my slave away from
"You did!" the man snarled. "I was so close to owning her! You don't deserve her!" The man started to go off but one of Kenzou's men gently placed his hand over the other man's mouth.

Azumi looked at the man that argued about owning her and frowned. "Ew," she muttered. "Be nice," Kenzou said softly to her.

Once again, she went limp in his arms with a pout. "At least my master is attractive," she said. The other man shut up instantly. His mouth hung agape.

Komushi barked out a laugh, throwing his head back. "That shut you up," he grinned.

Sasori straightened up, looking rather pleased with himself. "I also put her to actual use and don't treat her like some object to grope." He narrowed his eyes. "And I have the strong suspicion that is the only reason you were bidding for her." His voice became a low, disgusted rasp.

"What's it to you?" the man grumbled, rolling his eyes. "It's none of your business what I would do."

"Gross," Azumi frowned.

"Like your opinion on the matter makes much of a difference," he scoffed at her.

Azumi looked at Kenzou and he nodded at her then nodded to his friend who was holding the man, telling him to just carry the man out of the bar. The man started to thrash again, protesting at the top of his lungs as he was dragged from the room. On their way out, Gaara and Shira eased passed them through the door.

"What happened here?" Shira looked around, in shock. Gaara's eyes immediately landed on Azumi. He crossed the room quickly, beelining for her until he noticed Sasori and Komushi.

"What impeccable timing you have, good doctor," Komushi grinned, taking a seat at the bar counter.

Azumi noticed Gaara and gasped softly. She frowned and looked away from him as he got closer. This was not one of her most dignifying moments and she did not want to confront him about it, knowing he would be upset with her.

"Ah, Gaara," Kenzou said with a slight chuckle. "You missed quite a brawl."

"Can you please put me down now, Lord Kenzou?" Azumi asked softly. Kenzou nodded and gently put her down on the ground.

"It would seem I have," Gaara said, his voice low. He was doing his best to keep his temper reigned in as he took in the blood spatter covering Azumi. He could see where bruising was already starting to form on her body. His hands curled into white-knuckled fists.

"You all look sort of guilty," Shira chuckled, finally making his way over to everyone.

"Guilty?" Komushi snorted.

"We were minding our business," Sasori folded his arms. "That idiot over there," he gestured to Koji, "decided it was a good idea to pick a fight with Azumi."
Gaara and Shira looked over at Koji who was an even bloodier mess than Azumi. “Over what, exactly?” Shira asked.

“He claimed she was inferior to him—“ Komushi started.

“She is!” Koji interjected. Kenzou nodded to his men to take Koji and Deidara outside.

"In what way?” Gaara's temper flared for a second but he quickly pulled it back in.

Sasori smirked at his reaction. "Something about mongooses. It would seem other people have weird mutant animal bodies aside from our favorite little snake."

Gaara walked up to her, cupping her face as gently as he could manage. "All of you need to be check over," he grumbled.

“I took the least amount of damage,” Komushi chuckled.

“Because you’re made of solid rock and you were fighting Deidara,” Sasori told him.

“That was barely a fight,” Komushi scoffed.

“I’ll leave those these three to you,” Kenzou told Gaara. “My men and I will deal with the ones that started it.”

"Thank you," Gaara bowed low. Kenzou nodded, returning the bow then headed out with all of his men in tow. Gaara was getting antsy to check over Azumi and make sure she and their unborn child were okay. "Sit down," he ordered her. She held back a flinch at his tone and frowned, finding a seat. "Shira, can you find out if the bartender has a medical kit?"

"You got it," Shira nodded, setting off for the kit and anything else his friend might need.

"Oooh, he's going full doctor mode," Komushi muttered to Sasori.

Gaara's eye twitched. "You two could have stepped in and acted like grown men instead of instigating fights of your own!” he snapped.

“Hey, whoa, I tried,” Komushi defended. “But it's a little hard to intervene when there are a feral snake and a mongoose out for each other’s blood.” He could not help but laugh.

“You weren’t there to see it,” Sasori said to his cousin, folding his arms. “You can’t think we didn’t try to do anything.” Gaara stared at them silently, his lips pursing tightly.

Shira returned, holding the kit and a few bottles of clear alcohol. "I think I got everything you need," he smiled, stepping between Gaara and the others. "Take a deep breath, Gaara," he whispered.

Gaara did as he was told and turned back to Azumi. He opened the kit to grab a clean rag and poured a small amount of alcohol on to it. He cupped her face again and began to wipe it down. Azumi winced and grunted in slight pain, still not making eye contact with him as he wiped her face.

“This is the only remedy I need,” Komushi muttered, taking a shot glass and a bottle from the bartender. He poured the shot and downed it easily then poured another one and slid it to Sasori. “You too.” Sasori knocked it back with no protest.

"Have you guys even had anything to eat?” Shira asked, pouring out a shot for himself.
"Well, we would have if this hadn't happened," Komushi knocked back another shot.

"You haven't eaten since we left the shop?" Gaara's hand paused. His voice was soft and full of worry. "Azumi," he hissed. "Look at me!"

She hesitated for a moment before finally looking at him. He was looking at her completely different than he usually did and it actually made her want to cry. "No, we have not eaten," she answered softly. She flexed her hand a little, finally feeling the aftermath of punching Koji’s face in her knuckles.

His lips pressed into an even tighter line. He held her gaze, biting his inner cheek hard enough to taste copper in his mouth. "Shira," he spoke softly. "Can you make something for these three and meet us back at Sasori's?" he asked tightly. Shira raised an eyebrow and nodded.

"I have food at the house," Sasori sniffed. "If you're going to be this annoying about things, he can just cook there."

"Fine," Gaara bit out lowly. He continued to clean down the remaining blood on Azumi's body. He finished on her throbbing hand. "Azumi," he pulled his hand away quickly, wringing the rag harshly. "Do you..." He stopped short, locking eyes with her. "We'll talk later," he whispered, wrapping her hand. "I'll look at you two when we get to the house," he raised his voice slightly, looking over at his cousin.

“I’m fine,” Sasori muttered.

“You're actually bleeding a lot,” Komushi chuckled, pointing to all of Sasori’s wounds.

“Fine,” Sasori scoffed. “Let’s go then.” They all got up and left the bar.

Outside, Kenzou and his men were still dealing with Deidara and Koji, tending to Deidara’s broken nose and Koji’s messed up mouth.

“So you actually did knock his teeth out," Komushi grinned as they passed. “Nice.”

Gaara glanced at the wreckage they had left behind. The doctor in him said to go over and help them since their injuries were far more severe than what his family has sustained but he also needed to ensure Azumi did not have any other underlying injuries. He turned away from them and pulled ahead of the group with Azumi’s wrist locked firmly in his grasp.

"What's the rush?" Komushi called after Gaara. He and Sasori lagged behind, both tucking their arms behind their heads as they walked.

Gaara sighed, not sparing them a glance. He continued on back to Sasori’s house. They made it back fairly quickly, Komushi and Sasori only making it back just a minute after them with how far they lagged behind. Gaara led Shira to the kitchen, still holding Azumi’s wrist. “Use whatever you need,” he told him.

"Yeah, just make yourself at home," Sasori waved, laughing a little. "Komushi, you know where the drinks are," he said.

"Already on it," Komushi grinned, pulling a few bottles from the cabinets.

"Thanks," Shira chuckled, setting to figure out where everything was in the kitchen. "This is better than what I have at my restaurant," he muttered.
“Maybe you should open your restaurant here,” Komushi joked.

“I don’t need any more people in this house,” Sasori groaned.

“I think I like my central location better,” Shira chuckled as he got everything out to make a quick and easy dish. “But consider donating some of this to me,” he smirked.

“I don’t do charities,” Sasori smirked back.

"You don't even use half this stuff," Shira whined.

"Buy it off me," Sasori grinned.

"You're impossible," he sighed.

Komushi chuckled, clinking his bottle against Sasori's and the two of them started drinking. "So Doctor Gaara," he smirked, "as you can see, I'm fine but poor battered Sasori here is still bleeding."

"I'm fine," Sasori said through a sigh as he put his bottle down. Half of it was already gone.

"Your bloody face says otherwise," Shira smirked.

Gaara looked over his shoulder at Sasori, assessed the damage and rolled his eyes. He grabbed a new rag from out of a drawer and covered it in alcohol. "Come here," he ordered Sasori.

"No," Sasori pouted. "I'm already sitting. You come here."

Gaara scoffed and rolled his eyes again as he stepped toward Sasori. He started wiping his face, trying to get all of the blood off. "Luckily your nose isn't broken," he said.

"Good," Komushi chuckled. "His pretty face is his real money-maker. It'd be a shame if something horrible happened to it." Sasori scrunched up his face like a little kid as Gaara wiped his face.

"Well at least he has that," Shira smirked. He turned to flash them a smirk while flipping a pile of rice in a pan. "Because we very well know it's not his charming personality that's drawing everyone in."

"I let you use my kitchen and you insult my amazing personality," Sasori said. "I should sue you for defamation of character."

"Amazing," Komushi snorted, drinking the rest of his own bottle.

"You're right, Lord Sasori," Shira joked, followed by a few playful bows. "I'm so sorry, Lord Sasori."

"Yeah, you better be sorry," Sasori laughed. "Azumi, bring us a few more bottles!"

"No!" Gaara snapped, raising a hand to stop her. "Azumi, you sit down. I will get the bottles."

"She's not even that hurt, Gaara. Don't baby her," Sasori said sternly.

"Which one of us is the doctor and which one of us is the prissy herbalist?"

"Don't forget who taught you everything you know," Sasori snapped back.

"Whoa, let's not have two brawls in one night," Komushi chuckled. "I'll get them." He stood up
with a quiet grunt and grabbed a few more bottles to bring back to the table.

"You taught me medicine!" Gaara growled. "Tch," he clicked his teeth and continued his examination. "You're an idiot," he grumbled. "You're covered in bruises and you've got a head wound that's going to hurt tomorrow," he told him, reaching for the rolls of bandages.

"You're acting like a brat," Sasori narrowed his eyes. "Why? It's not like we haven't been in fights before."

"Because aren't you getting a little old to act like this!" he retorted, exasperated. "Aren't you tired of reacting to Deidara? Don't you know how to be civil and diplomatic enough to not get the people around you hurt?"

"In his defense," Komushi interjected, "it wasn't exactly a reaction to Deidara."

"I was defending my slave," Sasori said.

"And the other guy came out of left-field with his problems."

"What other guy?" Shira asked, serving the food and setting the plates down in front of everyone.

"Some gross guy came up to me and punched me in the face because I outbid him for her," Sasori grumbled. The three other men made a unified noise of disgust.

"Bet he wanted to use her as some weird sex slave," Shira shook his head.

"That's exactly what he wanted!" Komushi laughed, pulling his plate closer to him. "Ugh, this smells amazing," he groaned, grabbing a spoon and cracking open another bottle.

Gaara frowned, letting go of Sasori. "Instead she wound up with an abusive owner," he muttered under his breath. "Praise for small kindnesses."

Sasori rolled his eyes, ignoring the comment. He was well on his way to a happy drunk state and he was not going to let Gaara bring the mood down. "We're going to eat in my room," he said, grabbing his plate and standing up. He grabbed Komushi's plate as well. "Bring the bottles," he told Komushi.

"We haven't done this in so long," Komushi chuckled, grabbing all of the bottles and following Sasori out of the kitchen.

"Wow, he's really a princess," Shira snorted, taking Komushi's seat. "Come here and both of you eat."

Gaara reached out for Azumi's hand, his face finally softening. Azumi hesitated for a moment before taking Gaara's hand and letting him lead her into a seat. She looked at the food in front of her. It looked and smelled amazing but she was not in the mood to eat. She had no appetite but she forced herself to eat, not wanting Gaara to get even more upset than he already was.

He watched her intently to make sure she ate everything. "Azumi," he said again. "Why?" he clenched his jaw tightly. "We just found out about the baby!"

"It was not intentional," she muttered, not looking at him. "I had no desire to go to a bar. I did not ask for this man to walk up to me and start anything. I did not plan on getting into a bar fight." She finished what she could of her food and sat back in her seat, folding her arms.
“But you didn’t need to retaliate,” Gaara sighed. “I understand he came for your appearance and possibly culture but you have someone else to think of now.”

She frowned, keeping her eyes on the table. "I know this," she said. "And that is why I made sure he hardly got a hit on me." She was quickly learning that certain things caused her to lose her humanity and turn into an actual animal. Encountering a mongoose—the natural enemy of a snake—was one of those things.

“But what if he had, Azumi?” Gaara took her hand again, squeezing it.

“Gaara, don’t push her,” Shira chided softly.

“She could lose the baby!”

“She could but she is safe and you know that matters more to you.” Gaara released her hand to run his own through his hair. He grew silent. Shira rubbed Azumi’s back in large, gentle circles.

“You need to eat more,” Gaara finally said. He had noticed how little she had eaten.

“I am not very hungry,” she said softly.

“You should still eat,” he told her.

“We can’t force her,” Shira said. “We don’t want her to throw up.” Azumi sighed but ate a little bit more. She was not going to push herself to eat more than what she could.

Gaara bit his lip hard, drawing a little blood. He stood up suddenly, still watching her. “We’ll be right back, Shira,” he said, offering his hand to Azumi. His stare was hard but full of concern. He had to make sure there were not any other injuries on her body. He was shaking with fear and rage, little tremors shook his outstretched hand. He might have been overreacting but he did not like the idea of Azumi getting hurt in the first place and now they had this potential life he wanted to start with her.

Shira nodded. “I’m going to clean up everything in here,” he said.

Azumi hesitated for a second before taking Gaara’s hand and letting him lead her out of the kitchen. In silence, they walked down to her room. Letting go of her hand, he held the door open for her. “You can just take off your top if you don’t want to strip down,” he said in a tight, controlled voice.

She stepped into her room and immediately Naga and Ryuga perked up, excited to see her after two days. However, just as instantly as they got excited, they got worried. Naga hissed, asking if she was alright and Ryuga started asking her if it was Sasori. “I am fine,” she whispered to them, petting both of their heads before removing the top part of her dress and let hang around her hips. “And no, it was not.”

Gaara nodded to the snakes as acknowledgment but focused on Azumi. He looked her over, gently prodding anywhere that may cause concern. “Any pain?” he asked her every so often.

"No," she said every time. "The only damage I took was in my hands." She lifted her leg slightly, pushing her dress to the side to see if her knee had any wounds from when she knocked Koji’s teeth out. "Just my hands," she repeated softly. "And a headache."

He nodded, standing back. “I’ll bring you something for the headache,” he said, finally relaxing a little. He gently eased her dress top back over her shoulders. His hands slid down her arms and he
pressed his forehead to hers. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” she frowned, pulling away very slightly. “You were just worried.”

“I lost my temper,” he frowned. He felt a pang when she pulled away from him. “I shouldn’t have.”

“I am pregnant with your child and got into a fight at a bar. Of course you are in the right to get angry.” She took a step back from him. “But I will not apologize for defending myself and my heritage. And I refuse to be blamed for such a thing.”

He stepped back himself, giving her some space. Naga and Ryuga moved in to wrap around her arms, resting their heads on her shoulders. "I would never ask you to," he said softly. The guilt was starting to set in hard. "I didn't even know a mongoose tribe existed."

"Not many people do," she said. "They are not worth mentioning." She pet the snakes' heads and placed them back on the bed.

"It would seem so," he smiled. "I...you really gave it to him," he chuckled a little.

"I gave him what he deserved. You have not finished eating," she told him.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Neither did you." She stepped toward the door and nodded for him to follow her back to the kitchen where they left Shira alone.

"You're back," Shira grinned as they returned. "Is everything alright?"

"Everything is fine," Azumi answered, grabbing three cups from the cabinet. She set water to boil for tea. "I have no other injuries." Gaara's stomach was starting to sink as he took his seat.

"Are you two okay?" Shira asked, looking between them.

"We are fine," she assured him. She poured the tea into the cups and set one in front of each of them. "He was just worried." She sipped her own tea and stepped behind Gaara. "Rightfully so," she added, running her fingers through his hair. Shira nodded, looking between them.

Gaara leaned his head into her hand, relaxing further. "I just want you to be safe," he said softly. He turned his head and kissed her wrist gently.

"Well, she is," Shira smiled. "And she taught that guy a lesson. Do you want something sweet?" he asked them.

"I could go for something sweet," she hummed, sipping her tea again. "What do you have in mind?"

"Whatever you want," he grinned. He wrapped his hand around his mug. "I don't mind abusing Sasori's kitchen," he chuckled.

"It's not like he's using it," Gaara muttered, discreetly scooting closer to Azumi. At least he was trying to be discreet about it.

"He has farina somewhere in here, you can make basbousa out of it," Azumi said.

"Basbousa!" Shira's face lit up, "That takes me back! You got it!" He grinned, setting his mug down. He started searching the cabinets until he found what he needed to start making the sweet cakes.
"Can you make it with the orange syrup?" Gaara asked softly, slipping his arm around Azumi's waist. He pulled her a little closer. "It's in the back cupboard."

"Sure thing," Shira chuckled, reaching into the cupboard and pulling out the syrup. "This won't take too long. And I'll make enough so Drunk Idiots One and Two can have some."

"Why even bother with them," Gaara grumbled.

"Because they will smell it and whine about being neglected," Shira laughed.

"Ugh, you're right," he rolled his eyes.

"I know I am," Shira smirked, starting to mix ingredients together.

Gaara looked up at Azumi. "Let me go get that thing for your head," he said softly, pressing a kiss to her cheek. She nodded, taking a seat as he moved to get up and walk out of the kitchen. She leaned against the table, resting her chin in her hand and staring absentmindedly at what Shira was doing as she got lost in thought while she waited for Gaara to come back.

"I haven't seen him care so much about someone in a long time," Shira said without turning around. He chuckled a little, turning to look over his shoulder. "Did it feel good to put that guy in his place?" he asked with a grin.

“Hm,” she hummed, coming back to herself. She took a moment to process his question. “Mongoose refuse to stay in their place no matter how many times they get put into it. He is a slave of Deidara’s and his actions caused his master to leave the bar with a broken nose. Admittedly, it felt great to take out all of my aggression on him. But he will start the same shit again if given the chance. If I ever see it again, then it is on sight.”

"Deidara's slave?" He blinked a little wide then shook his head. "Yeah, I can see how that would be on sight regardless of him being your natural enemy," he chuckled. "He's owned by Sasori's personal pain in the ass. But with the way you two busted them up, I don't think you'll be seeing much of each other."

“They should both hope for the sake of their own lives that we never cross paths again,” she muttered.

“Can’t say much about never crossing paths with Dei ever again, but I don’t think he is gonna bring that mongoose boy out much more,” Shira smirked.

"He's going to need dentures," Gaara said, walking in with a small cup. "I'll probably see him in my office sometime this week," he rolled his eyes.

"Can you even make dentures for him?" Shira asked.

"Probably but they don't need to know that," he smirked, setting the cup down. "Pour some of your tea into this and drink all of it."

Azumi looked into the cup before pouring her tea into it and downing quickly. "I would not bother healing either of them," she muttered to Gaara.

“I have no intention of helping them,” he smirked. “He hurt you and insulted your identity.”

“They are also assholes,” Shira threw in. After a while, Shira finished the basbousa and put it in the middle of the table. “Enjoy!” he grinned, grabbing a knife to cut into it.
“This smells amazing,” Azumi hummed, taking a piece for herself as soon as he cut some out.

“It smells like childhood in here,” Gaara smiled.

Shira chuckled and set aside some for Sasori and Komushi. “Hopefully it tastes like childhood,” he grinned. “Here’s the syrup. I’m gonna bring this to the drunkards.”

“If they aren’t passed out at this point,” Gaara grumbled, dipping his piece into the syrup.

“Then they’ll have a nice surprise next to them when they wake up to piss or grab another bottle,” Shira smirked as he left the kitchen.

“They don’t deserve it,” Gaara called after Shira as he left. He leaned his face against his free hand, turning to look at Azumi. “So they really came to your defense?”

“They did,” she answered, eating another piece. “Lord Komushi defended me instantly. Once Deidara got involved—which did not take long—so did Lord Sasori.”

He chuckled, shaking his head slightly. “Well, this was one way for them to blow off steam,” he reached out to take her hand and his thumb ran over the clean bandages.

“I will admit it was nice to fight alongside Lord Sasori for once,” she muttered. “He got even more defensive when that man came out of nowhere about owning me.”

“What was that guy even thinking,” he snorted. He lifted her hand and pressed a kiss to it. “Now if only he could act that noble every day,” he sighed.

“If Lord Kenzou was not there, I might have killed that boy,” she hummed. “And...I am glad you showed up...to take care of my... very minor wounds.” She looked at him, placing her finger under his chin to make eye contact. “But do not look at me the way you did in the bar ever again.” She kept her voice soft, not letting the demand of the statement seep through.

He blinked wide at her for a moment then cracked a sheepish smile when he figured out what she meant. “I don’t expect you to make me genuinely angry or worried like that ever again,” he replied. He leaned in to close the space and press their lips together. “But I’ll reign in my temper,” he promised.

She hummed, kissing him again. “Good,” she said against his lips. She pulled away slightly and pressed another piece of basbousa to his lips. He smiled, opening his mouth so she could feed him. He pulled her finger into his mouth, licking it clean. He ran his tongue along her finger then kissed it.

“Wow,” Shira chuckled from the doorway. “I leave for two seconds.”

They both looked at him and Azumi ate another piece for herself. “We did not have time to make it to the bedroom,” she smirked. “This was really good. Thank you, Shira.”

“It was nice to make again,” he smiled, retaking his seat. “Should I head out and give you two kids some space?” He winked with a light chuckle.

Azumi stifled a yawn. "I would ask if you would like to stay the night but my bed is a bit small for three people and two snakes," she chuckled. "Yet it would be rude to make you leave after you made us food and dessert."

Shira stood up with a stretch and chuckled. “I’m always willing to take the floor but,” he smirked,
“I don’t mind finding my way back to my own bed.”

“I could never make anyone take the floor.” Azumi stood up with him. “In a few months, very pregnant Azumi is not going to give you much of a choice and you will have to stay,” she chuckled, wrapping her arms around him in a hug. “Have a good night, Shira. And thank you again.”

“I’ll make sure I’m prepared,” he grinned, giving her a snug squeeze. “You two get some sleep,” he kissed Azumi’s cheek after stepping out of the embrace. “And make sure you relax,” he nudged Gaara’s shoulder with a fist.

“Yes, yes.” Gaara chuckled, slipping his arms back around Azumi’s waist. “Maybe I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Sure,” Shira winked then made his way for the door to leave.

Azumi quickly cleaned up the rest of the basbousa, feeding one more to Gaara before putting the rest away. She leaned down and kissed him, taking his hands in hers to pull him out of his seat and to her room. The moment the door opened, Naga and Ryuga perked up. Ryuga hissed softly moving to the edge of the bed. They could feel the tension had lifted between Gaara and Azumi but they still wanted to make sure they were okay.

“We are fine,” she assured them, petting both of their heads as she sat down on the bed. Ryuga hissed a little sternly, asking if he needs to accompany her everywhere from now on. “No, there is no need for that.”

Gaara watched them talk, taking a seat next to her. “What is he saying?” he asked, leaning in to kiss her neck. “I can tell they are worried.”

“He thinks he needs to be with me at all times to protect me,” she answered. “But that is not necessary.”

“Oh,” he hummed. He reached out to gently pet Ryuga’s head and leaned a little more into Azumi. “She’s got all three of us worried,” he chuckled. “But if you saw that guy, you know you wouldn’t have to.” Naga hissed a little laugh then asked nudged his nose against her belly, indicating he wanted to know if the future neonate was okay.

“Yes, the baby is fine,” she said softly. “He hardly had a chance to land a hit on me.” Naga hissed again, asking why she even got into a fight. “A mongoose,” she answered. Both snakes instantly tensed, hissing loudly. Naga’s hood floated and Ryuga swayed in agitation.

“Oh, whoa,” Gaara sat back up. Ryuga hissed louder, almost yelling in his little snakey way at her.

“Exactly,” Azumi muttered, laying back on the bed. Ryuga coiled on her stomach and Naga coiled up on her chest, both hissing that she should have killed the mongoose. “I would have if I was not stopped.” Gaara shifted to sit next to her head so he could comb his fingers through her hair. He listened to the one-sided conversation and watched the snakes. They hissed, asking her why she had not been allowed to. She scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Lord Kenzou happened to be there...and he just...picked me up.” She let out a heavy sigh and looked up at Gaara then motioned for him to lay down with her.

“He really seemed to know how to calm you down,” Gaara chuckled as he did as she asked. He curled up next to her and pulled all three of them closer.

“I think...he may have dealt with people like me before...and I actually very much respect him.”
She cuddled up to him and the snakes hissed softly, moving to press against her back. He hummed sleepily and continued to stroke her hair, gently scratching her scalp. He pressed a kiss to her forehead, starting to drift. Now that he was laying down, the day was starting to catch up to him. She noticed he was falling asleep and shifted slightly so she was the one scratching his scalp. He fell asleep and they remained there until she started to see the early signs of the sunrise out of her window.
Chapter 52

When the sun was fully up, Naga woke up and hissed softly, tapping Ryuga to wake up. As the bigger snake woke, he told Azumi they were going on a hunt. They slithered over her and Gaara and out the window. She watched them and resumed running her fingers through Gaara’s hair. Gaara moaned softly, rubbing his face a little into the pillow. Sunlight gradually poured into the room and he pulled her in closer. “Did you sleep?” he asked.

"No," she said softly. She sat up and stretched hard, running her hands through her hair.

“Why not?” he frowned, moving to rest his head in her lap. “Is your head still hurting?” He moved his hands to hug her hips.

"Not too much," she hummed. She looked down at him and scratched his scalp. "I do not think we will be going into the shop today. I am sure Lord Sasori and Lord Komushi are hungover and I still have to finish the gift for your aunt."

“Do you want company?” he asked her softly. “I can make breakfast, too.” He looked up at her then buried his face back into her lap, enjoying the feeling of her hands in his hair.

"I would not mind company," she said. "You may actually be more useful than your cousin in telling me what your aunt will like."

“What did he tell you?” he chuckled. “Just fruit?” He gripped her thighs gently and stretched with a small groan. “He tries really hard with our aunt but she...knows how he actually is.”

"Well, if she is Lord Sandaime's wife, I would assume she shares the same idea of justice as her husband,” she said. "I have already made a few things, but if you know she will not like it much, I can easily redo them."

“That’s fair reasoning,” he chuckled. “Fruit is okay but she also likes spice and anything that smells like her husband,” he smirked. “She likes to put it on things when he isn’t around which...is pretty frequent.”

"Yes, he told me adding spice would be good, too," she said. "I will probably make a matching scent to what I made for Sandaime a few months ago." She scratched his head again and motioned for him to get up. "Maybe even give her a small version of what I made for him if she likes it that much."

“Oh, she would love that,” he grinned, standing up with a long arching stretch. He twisted to crack his back then took her hands and pulled her up quickly so she was flush to his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into a warm kiss. “She does like spice.”

"Come see what I have so far and we will work on the rest together," she said. "I am going to bring coffee to the princess and his trusty scarab while you make breakfast. I will meet you back in the workshop." She cupped his face and kissed him again.

“Sounds like a good plan,” he smiled against her lips. He nuzzled his nose against hers then let her go. “I’ll make something different than what they usually make.” He laced his fingers into hers and started for the door.

They made their way to the kitchen and she grabbed two cups, filled them with coffee, leaving them black to help with the hangovers that she knew they had and then kissed Gaara before
making her way to Sasori’s room.

Komushi and Sasori were on the bed, awake and groaning in pain. “Good morning,” she smirked, walking up to the bed. They both responded with even louder pained groans. She set Komushi’s coffee down on the bedside table by him and then walked around to set Sasori’s coffee down on the other bedside table. “How are you two feeling?” They both let out another groan. The smirk did not leave her lips.

“Like shit,” Komushi sighed.

“That is to be expected.

“Cover the windows,” Sasori muttered thickly. Azumi grinned, walking over to let down the linens that Sasori used as curtains. “Fuck, I hate you for this,” he glared at Komushi, picking up his coffee.

“Oh, please,” Komushi laughed then winced. “This isn’t the worst we’ve had.”

“I’m getting old, dammit.”

“We’re the same age,” Komushi grinned, covering his eyes with his arm as he rolled onto his back.

Azumi climbed into the bed, settling between them. “Thank you both for defending me,” she said softly. “It was kind of nice to be on the same side for once. And...if it were not for Lord Kenzou intervening...we would have killed them easily,” she grinned.

Sasori and Komushi froze, staring at her between them. They looked up at each other. Sasori set his mug down and together they sunk back down into the bed and wrapped their arms around her.

“You’re mine,” Sasori smirked.

“Of course we’d protect you,” Komushi gave her a squeeze. “It’s been a while since we got into a good fight,” he chuckled.

Sasori hummed, closing his eyes again and snuggling in closer to Azumi. “You only hurt your hands, right?” he asked her.

“Oh, just my hands,” she hummed. “I had a headache as well and Lord Gaara gave me something for it. But, uh,” she chuckled, looking at Sasori, “how are your wounds?”

“Sore,” he grumbled. “But a bath and sleep will fix it.”

“I’m fine though,” Komushi smirked. “I almost want to be a fly on the wall and see how that Koji guy is doing.”

“I don’t,” Sasori closed his eyes. “Deidara must be insufferable.”

“Just wait until you hear it from his grandfather,” Komushi snorted.

“Please,” Sasori scoffed. “He’ll be dead before he can get to me.”

Azumi scratched his scalp gently then crawled out of the bed. “I am going to run your baths. Lord Gaara will be here in a few minutes with breakfast. There is no way you will make it to the shop and actually function so I am going to finish the gift for your aunt...since I did not get to work on it last night.”
"What is he making?" Komushi asked, rolling onto his stomach. He stretched hard, moaning into the bed.

"Gaara stayed the night?" Sasori asked her, narrowing his eyes. "And don't make that sound in my bed." He smacked Komushi's back hard.

“I do not know if he stayed the night,” she lied. “I saw him in the kitchen when I grabbed your coffees.” She went into the bathroom and started setting up the baths.

"When did my house become the communal watering hole," Sasori grabbed his coffee again.

"Communal watering hole?" Gaara repeated. "I guess you don't want this." He walked in with four dishes and two cups of coffee for him and Azumi.

"What are those?" Komushi asked, crawling to the edge of the bed.

Gaara set the tray down. "It's a new recipe I learned from Shira. It's a cinnamon egg bread."

“That sounds really weird but they look really good,” Komushi grinned. He put his hands out like a child until Gaara handed him his breakfast.

“Your baths are ready,” Azumi said as she walked back into the room. Gaara handed her a cup of coffee. “Thank you,” she said softly.

Sasori stood up slowly, taking his cup and weird little breakfast with him to the bath. "Thank you, Gaara," he said over his shoulder.

Komushi grabbed his coffee and flashed a smirked at Gaara and Azumi. "Behave, you two," he sang over his shoulder.

Azumi picked up her food and nodded for Gaara to follow her into the workshop. “If you want to see what I have done so far, it is all over there.” She gestured to where she left the gift on the counter and then set her bowl and coffee down. Before he could move toward the counter, she grabbed his wrist and pulled him closer to her, pressing her body against his and kissing him.

He smiled into the kiss, pressing into it slightly, and wrapped his arms around her to pull her even closer. "We should have stayed in bed," he chuckled, kissing the tip of her nose. "Okay, let me sniff these gifts," he hummed, pulling away from her so he could pick up the first bottle. He took a deep breath of the first one. "Oh, she's going to love this one. What is it?"

“Passion fruit and star anise,” she answered, taking a few bites of her food and sitting on a stool. "The other one is dragonfruit and cardamom."

"Oooh," he grabbed the next one and moaned softly. "This one is my favorite. Maybe do a subtle citrus one, too. All of these so far are perfect!" He smiled, setting each bottle back down then picked them back up for another sniff. "Your oils are so amazing," he sighed.

“I am glad you think so,” she smiled, motioning him to step closer so she could kiss him again. “I will let you choose the last scent. And then we will make a small version of the cologne I made for your uncle as a nice bonus.”

“I get to choose?” He held her close while he looked over the scents she had already made. “You should do an apple and warm sugar scent,” he kissed her again. He trailed his kisses down to her neck, curling his fingers into her back. “I want to use the one you made me with you.”
“I cannot wait,” she hummed, running her hands up his chest. She tilted his face toward hers to kiss him, biting his lip gently. “We should use it tonight,” she said against his lips.

“Suddenly, I can’t wait to go for nightfall,” he grinned, licking her lip. He kissed her again then nuzzled her neck, scratching her back.

“It will be a miracle if I could focus on this work,” she smirked, wrapping her arms around him. She kissed down his neck to his shoulder and bit down.

He moaned softly, tilting his head. He turned her head to kiss her again. “I highly doubt we are going to make it until then,” he chuckled. “A hungover Sasori isn’t very active.”

"Mm, but I have to force myself to finish this," she said softly. "If the party is tomorrow night, I would like to have this done by tonight."

"Fair," he chuckled, taking a step back. "I guess I should help you instead of distracting you," he smirked. "What would you like me to do?" he asked her, kissing her again.

"You can set two pots over the fires," she said. "One with the apple scent and the other," she pulled away for a moment, looking through the cabinet with all of the oils she had, "with this one. This is one of the notes used in Sandaime's cologne. I am making multiple products of the same scent so I will be doing the bath salts and oils and hair oils. You can work on her perfume," she smiled.

"Yes, ma'am," he smiled, reaching up to grab the two pots he needed. He lit the fires and set the first oil on to boil. "She and my uncle are always busy." He took Sandaime's scent and took a deep breath. "They are surprising rarely ever actually together so anything to remind them of each other will be perfect." He set the second one on the flame to boil.

“Lord Sasori mentioned they go on a trip for her birthday every year?” she questioned, starting the other part of the project on another counter. “Is that the most time they usually spend together?”

"Usually yes," Gaara smiled. "When we were kids, she could come home with tons of gifts for all of us." He started to gently stir the apple oil. "They used to be gone for anywhere between a week and a month." He set the spoon down and turned to watch her work while he waited. "I'm genuinely surprised he is throwing her a party instead. But they throw the best ones," his smile widened. "I think you two will get along."

“Oh?” she chuckled. “What is she like? I assume if she is married to your uncle, she has to be very personable,” she smiled. ‘And probably super gorgeous like him as well,’ she thought.

"She's a housewife who is never home," he laughed. "She is constantly on the go, out doing things, helping people." He cupped his jaw. "And..." he started to giggle boyishly, "she's as pretty as you'd think someone married to my uncle would be. They like to play this game at parties where they flirt as if they don't even know each other...it breaks a lot of hearts," he shook his head. "And everything she wears, according to my sister, is always at the forefront of fashion."

Her smile widened to a grin. “She sounds amazing,” she chuckled. “I cannot wait to meet her.” She paused for a moment. “Does she...dance?”

Gaara's grin widened. "Everyone in our family dances," he chuckled. "Though...I'm unfortunately the least gifted among us. She taught Kankuro and me how to dance since our mother wasn't around."

Azumi let out a small delighted squeal. There was a lot for her to unpack from that answer. The first thing she thought was that Sandaime dances and she wanted to dance with him. And given the
chance, she wanted to dance with his wife as well. However, it also meant that she would enjoy the
dance that Sasori was planning on doing. “I bet you were so cute learning to dance from your
aunt,” she grinned.

"If you think standing on feet and falling on your butt every few spins is cute,” he chuckled,
blushing a little.

“I absolutely do,” she smirked.

"Sasori dances with her once in a while and it’s pretty impressive but watching my aunt and uncle
is...almost otherworldly." He tilted his head in through for a moment. "You and Sasori were pretty
amazing, too." He circled the workbench and slipped his hand down her waist. "But I’ll admit...I
was a little jealous seeing him that close to you," he whispered, holding her gaze.

She smirked, closing the distance between them to press and gentle kiss to his lips. “Then dance
with me,” she whispered against his lips, running her hands down his arms to lace their fingers
together.

He smiled, nuzzling his nose against hers as he pulled her closer. Slowly, he started to move with
her until he found a good rhythm. “Sorry if I step on your feet,” he said softly, blushing a little
again.

“Do not think about it too much,” she said softly. She started leading, moving slowly with him at
first until he got it. Then she started following him. “If we have a daughter, she will want to dance
with you,” she whispered.

“You think so?" he smiled, his heart jumping a little. “I’ll have to make sure I improve before she
is born,” he chuckled. “And if we have a son, I have to be a good example for him, right?" 

“You are very much correct,” she smirked. “And I will make sure you are the most amazing
dancer before the baby is born.”

“You truly are a brave and strong woman,” he giggled, twirling her into a dip. He kissed her as he
pulled her back up. “I’ll do my best to be a diligent student.”

She gasped softly and then giggled. “You are already doing great,” she said. “That dip was
perfect.” She smirked and pulled him into another kiss. “What was that you said earlier about not
distracting me?"

“Did I say that?” he chuckled, kissing her again. “I don’t recall.” He slowed them to a stop and
stole yet another kiss. “But I suppose I should let you get back to work since both my pots are
boiling now,” he smirked, stepping back.

She looked at the pots and smiled. “When they simmer down, just add those two bottles to each of
them,” she said, pointing to a couple of other oils. “Let then boil one more time and then let them
cool. Then we can bottle them.”

He nodded, moving to do as she told him. He took a deep breath of each. “Hnnng,” he moaned then
sneezed. “Oops,” he laughed, covering his mouth.

“Careful,” she chuckled. “They are still super strong at this stage.”

“You aren’t getting sick, too, are you?” Sasori sighed as he walked in. Komushi followed close
behind, drying his hair off. “What was that sneeze?”
“I’m not getting sick,” Gaara rolled his eyes. “I smelled the pot—“ Komushi walked over and shoved his face in the pot then pulled back and sneezed hard. “And did that,” he rolled his eyes.

“Oh...” Komushi shook his head. “Shit, I but my tongue but those smell amazing.”

“Thank you,” Azumi smiled. “After that, we have two more for the last part of the gift and then it is finished.”

“How much did you make her?” Sasori asked, taking the stool closest to her. “You don’t need to go overboard,” he muttered, putting his head down.

“Three fragrances,” she answered. “But each one is a perfume, bath salt, bath oil, and hair oil. Lord Sandaime asked for a set, so I am making a set.”

“I see.” He looked at the pots she was working on then at Gaara’s.

“Are you two feeling better?” Gaara asked, turning off the heat. He gathered the bottles they would be putting the products in and set everything up.

“I’m am,” Komushi grinned. “That bath was amazing and your cinnamon bread was actually pretty filling.”

“I feel better but my head still hurts,” Sasori groaned, resting against the counter in his normal childish fashion.

“That comes as no surprise,” Azumi hummed, gently touching his wounds. She set up another pot to boil water for some tea.

“It’s going to be a pain to see my uncle again,” he sighed.

“Prepare for that lecture,” Komushi grinned. “I almost want to be there for it but I might get roped into it.”

“That’s if you don’t get kicked out of it,” Gaara smirked at him.

“I’ll be doing my best to avoid any interactions with him,” Sasori grumbled. “The only time people will see me is during the dance.”

“Dance?” Komushi asked.

“The oil and salt set is my gift,” Azumi said. “We are going to dance for her as his gift.”

“Now I have to go!” Komushi grinned. “I want to see it!”

“You aren’t even invited,” Sasori narrowed his eyes. Gaara looked at Azumi. He wanted to ask her more about the dance, wanted to stop it but he kept his mouth shut.

“Actually,” Komushi grinned. “I’m always invited if you remember. Your aunt said I’m always welcome in her home,” his smile turned cheeky.

“She said that when you were eight,” Sasori countered. “You can’t possibly think she remembers something from over twenty years ago.”

“It still stands to this day unless she tells me I’m disinvited,” Komushi smirked.

“Amazing,” Sasori and Gaara said together.
“Anyway,” Komushi waved them off, “is the dance going to be like the one at the night market?”

“Not sure yet,” Sasori hummed. “I have to get the music in mind first.”

“You haven’t practiced?” Komushi asked.

Both Azumi and Sasori laughed. “Practice,” Azumi said through her laugh.

“So naive,” Sasori grinned.

“You know our family learned to dance from a young age,” Gaara smirked at him.

“Okay, that doesn’t mean you don’t practice,” Komushi shrugged. “You don’t all have to jump down my throat, you condescending dancers.”

“I generally make up the dance on the spot,” Azumi said. “Depends on the music…given it does not put me under a trance.”

“Does the trance bother you?” Komushi asked, taking a seat.

She nodded. “Aside from it being just a generally shitty thing to do to someone, I do not remember anything that happens when I am under one and they give me migraines when I come out of them.” Gaara frowned, shooting a glare towards Sasori.

“Put that look away,” Sasori grumbled at his cousin.

“Oh, that does sound shitty,” Komushi tapped his chin. “But is there ever a good reason to put someone like you in a trance?”

Azumi hummed in thought as she poured a cup of tea and placed it in front of Sasori.

“I assume it is a good way to keep her from getting too violent,” Sasori noted, remembering he used it to keep her from killing him that one night they got into a fight.

“Aside from when she is provoked, she isn’t violent though,” Gaara folded his arms. “Sounds like something we should use on you two,” he looked at Komushi and Sasori.

“I’m in pretty docile,” Komushi snorted.

Azumi poured three more cups of tea and thought about it for a moment. “When there were more people like me, I am pretty sure that is what the trances were used for.”

“That sounds…awful,” Gaara’s frown deepened.

“Are there people in your tribe not affected by the trance?” Sasori asked.

“Not that I am aware of,” she hummed. “But it may be the ones that are not…I do not want to use the term ‘pure-bred’ but…I do not know how else to describe them. You can tell when they are because their pupils are not vertical but their eyes are gold.”

The three men nodded in thought. Komushi’s brows furrowed hard in concentration. “Wait,” he tilted his head. “Utakata….has eyes like that.”

“You spend a lot of time gazing into Utakata’s eyes?” Sasori smirked.

"Fuck that guy," Komushi scoffed. "But does that mean he's also one of you?" he asked Azumi.
She seized up almost immediately, not wanting to reveal that Utakata was from her village.

Sasori lifted his head to look at her. "Is that why he gives you discounts?"

"It is possible that he may be a descendant of us," she said. "But I do not go around asking every person I see with golden eyes what their heritage is."

“He totally is!” Komushi laughed a little manically. “Why didn’t we notice before!” He smirked at Sasori. He circled the table, slipped his arm around Azumi’s shoulders and pulled around close to his side. “How interesting,” he hissed in her ear.

“Let her go, Komushi,” Sasori drawled. “I guess I’ll be sending you to see him more often if he gives you discounts,” he rolled his eyes.

"Please leave him alone," she whispered to Komushi. "For all we know, he could be someone of a different tribe. You had no idea mongooses were a thing until last night."

"Speaking of them," Sasori started, changing the subject much to Azumi’s relief, "did you know about them?"

"I did," she said. "But that was only the second time I encountered one. They are not so easy to spot for most people because they can hide their ugly eyes."

"Those eyes were pretty ugly," Komushi snorted, finally taking a step away from her when he noticed Gaara glaring him down. “Why can they hide their eyes and you can’t hide yours?"

“They are different mutations,” Gaara spoke up. “I imagine there are different limitations for each mutation.”

"That is pretty much it," she hummed. "From what I know of them, they do not understand or speak to mongooses the way my family can with snakes. All they have is...their ugly eyes and ugly mongoose personalities. And they are immune to my venom."


“How the hell did Deidara get a guy like him?” Komushi laughed. “Wait no, they suit each other.”

"The first time I encountered one was when I was being transported by the slavers," she muttered. "It was also the first time my fangs came out without me forcing them. Something about a mongoose being in close proximity makes them come out. That is usually the first telltale sign of what I am dealing with."

“That was pretty hardcore,” Komushi grinned. “We all have that one person who makes us go feral. And we all need it some time.”

“Does it hurt when they come out like that?” Gaara frowned.

"Not as much as it hurts when they are pulled out," she said. Her gaze fell upon Sasori.

Sasori shrugged. "You weren't cooperating. I had to pull them out."

“You’re a monster,” Gaara glared at his cousin. Sasori shrugged again, not at all fazed.

“You know...I’ve never seen you go feral, Gaara,” Komushi said as he turned to look at him.

“Saint Gaara doesn’t have a feral vibe in his body,” Sasori rolled his eyes.
"Because I'm not an animal," Gaara said, folding his arms.

"Or you just haven't encountered someone that makes you one," Komushi smirked.

"Doubtful," Gaara said stepping away from the table. "Can I bottle these now, Azumi?" he asked, moving one of the pots.

She looked into the pot and stuck her finger into it to test the temperature. "Yes," she smiled. "It is ready." He smiled, picking up one of the pots to pour slowly into the bottles.

"I wonder what your uncle got your aunt for her birthday," Komushi said as he leaned over Gaara's shoulder to smell the fragrance.

"He got Shira to cater and probably...a night of pampering after the party," Gaara chuckled.

"Whether he got her something or is going to do something for her or to her," Sasori said, "she is going to be happy."

"They're so grossly in love," Komushi gagged.

"You're only gagging because you know you're going to be alone forever?" Gaara said idly. He moved on to the next bottle after sealing up the first.

"You're confusing me with Sasori," Komushi chuckled.

"Leave me out of this," Sasori grumbled, sipping his tea. Azumi grabbed the bottle and labeled it, along with the ones she had done the day before.

"Neither of you has very good prospects," Gaara sniffed.

"Do you have any better?" Komushi poked Gaara cheek slowly, pressing deep.

"My love life is my business. I'm the youngest and my father hates me," he smirked, pushing Komushi’s hand away. "I can pretty much date anyone I’d like."

"Oh?" Komushi grinned. "Anyone?" Azumi tensed up but kept her back turned to them, not letting them see how uncomfortable she was with the whole conversation. She hated that Komushi would always indirectly threaten to out her and Gaara in front of Sasori.

"Yes," Gaara looked at him a little irritated. "Anyone. No one is going to bother with me."

"But you're a well-established young doctor," Sasori sipped his tea, watching the pot Azumi was working with. "You're one of the most eligible bachelors in the city."

"Being a doctor, I don’t have that much time to try and get someone," Gaara said.

"You’d have more time if you didn’t try to court a slave," Komushi smirked.

Azumi scoffed but did not turn around. "He is not trying to court me," she defended.

"Neither of you can court her so give it a rest," Sasori drawled.

"What! Why not?" Komushi whined still smirking at Azumi.

"Because she’s a slave," Sasori said. "You know this."
Komushi sucked his teeth and rolled his eyes but his smirk returned when he looked at Azumi again. “But humor me, Azumi,” he said, “which of us would you go for if you weren’t a slave?”

Azumi stopped moving her hands and looked straight ahead at the wall for a few seconds before turning around slowly and looking at Komushi with her brows furrowed. “What kind of question?” she muttered softly.

“Komushi,” Sasori said warningly. “Drop it. We already know it wouldn’t be your sorry excuse of an existence.”

Gaara snorted, sealing the other bottle. “Seriously, why would she want you when she could have the best apothecary in the city or a doctor,” Gaara teased.

“Not to mention our family has better and stronger connections domestically and internationally.”

“Don’t forget in her village she is a princess,” Gaara grinned, poking Komushi in the chest before turning fully to set the finish bottles in the workbench for Azumi to see.

“Even beyond that,” Azumi said, “you come on too strong. If you toned down the desperation, you might have had a chance.”

“Don’t get his hopes up,” Sasori smirked.

“I’m not desperate,” Komushi pouted. “It’s just my charm!”

“You should reconfigure your charm,” all three of them said.

“Whatever,” Komushi muttered.

Azumi looked at what she had so far for the gift. “Not bad,” she hummed. “We are almost done. I just need to make the salts and the bath oils now. So, um,” she turned to Komushi and smirked, “if you could tone down the charm and be less distracting,” she teased.

“Oh, I’m distracting, am I?” Komushi grinned, slinking back over to her. His arm snaked around her shoulders again.

“Leave her alone!” Sasori yanked his fingers harshly. “I want this project done already.”

“It will only take me one more hour,” Azumi said as she continued to work on what she had started earlier.

“Then we can cuddle,” Komushi grinned.

“Yeah, no,” both Azumi and Sasori said.

“Who would want to cuddle with you? From the one unfortunate occurrence I had with you in close proximity, you sweat,” Gaara smirked. “A lot!”

“Oh, gods, does he!” Sasori grumbled. “That’s half the reason I wanted to bathe this morning.”

“Sorry, but that is a dealbreaker for me,” Azumi chuckled. “I cannot lay with a sweaty man. But I can make you something to combat that issue.”

“You’re all rude but I’ll take what you got,” Komushi sighed, sitting down.

“Give me a few minutes,” she hummed. She moved to a section of the counter next to what she
was working on and started on a new project for Komushi. Within a half-hour, she had an antiperspirant for him that smelled almost like the cologne she had made him months ago. When it was finished, she handed it to him. “It should work for twenty-four hours after you apply it, given you are not as sweaty as Lord Kenzou.”

“I don’t think anyone outside of him and his gang is that sweaty,” he leaned in and kissed her cheek. “Thank you, Little Snake.” He took a whiff of the antiperspirant she made him. “I’ll use it daily.”

“Use it now!” Sasori threw a crumpled paper at him.

“Wow, I’m not even sweaty now,” Komushi defended. “I just took a bath. You were there!”

“Put it on anyway,” Sasori said, throwing another paper at him.

“Ugh, fine.” Komushi rolled his eyes and applied a little bit of the antiperspirant.

Azumi went back to work on the rest of the gift, finishing it in a little under an hour. “Finally,” she sighed. All three men took their turns smelling the finished product.

“Oh, yeah, she is going to love this,” Komushi grinned.

“Once again, you have outdone yourself,” Gaara smiled at her.

“This is becoming her standard honestly,” Sasori leaned his head against his hand.

“I have had enough practice,” Azumi said. “But thank you.” She looked at Sasori. “I am surprised you are still awake right now. I would have thought you would have gone back to bed.”

“Oh, I’m going,” Sasori groaned, grabbing Komushi by the ear. “Let’s go.”

Azumi and Gaara watched as they left the workshop, waiting a moment before getting closer. “I thought they would never leave,” Gaara muttered.

“I do not know why they stayed in here the whole time,” Azumi said softly.

“Childish curiosity and pure stubbornness.” He wrapped his arms around her waist. “These turned out perfect,” he whispered, burying his face in her neck and kissed her shoulder.

She grinned, turning her head to kiss him. “Now that the gift is finished and the kids are in bed...how about we escape,” she kissed him again, biting his lip, “and go have some fun?”

“I like the sound of that,” he grinned, her pulling her closer for another kiss. He smiled into it then gasped. “Wait,” he chuckled, pulling away to poke his head into Sasori’s room. “Okay, they are asleep.” He practically ran back to her and picked her up by the waist, wrapping her legs around his waist. She giggled softly, cupping his face and pulling him into a kiss as he started walking out of the workshop, leaving Sasori’s room and heading back to her room.
Later on, in the late afternoon, the snakes returned from their hunt, slithering through the window and between articles of clothing strewn throughout the floor. Azumi peeked over Gaara at them. “Welcome back,” she smiled. Naga poked his head through the arm of her dress, wearing it like a little dress himself. He hissed softly, asking if they should give them some more space. Ryuga snickered a hiss then they heard a soft grunt above them.

“Are they laughing?” Shira asked, swinging his leg and a very large chest in through the window. The box blocked his view of them until he was in the room. “Oh, should I uh...should I leave?” He covered his eyes, his face blooming bright red.

Gaara laughed a little and Azumi brought the blanket up to cover herself, chuckling softly. “What is all that?” she grinned, looking at the crate and sitting up.

Shira peaked through his fingers to make sure it was safe to look before setting the chest down. “It’s good,” he grinned. “I promised to bring you food and I need some taste testers for the party’s menu.”

She let out a delighted squeal. “You could not have better timing,” she said. “I was just telling Gaara that I was hungry.”

“You’re going to steal my girl,” Gaara laughed, reaching down to pick up his pants. He loosely put them on and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Not my fault she has good taste in food,” Shira chuckled, opening the chest. The smell of food wafted into the room and made Gaara’s stomach growl loudly.

“Oh, that smells so good,” Azumi moaned. She leaned forward to look at the food in the chest. “And it looks amazing.”

Shira chuckled, picking up one of the small dishes and handing it to her along with a small fork. “So we know it smells and looks good, but tell me how it tastes,” he smirked.

She took a bite of the food and hummed. “Ugh, it is great,” she moaned.

He chuckled, leaning over to hand Gaara a different dish. “If there is anything here you like, Azumi, tell me so I can start a list of foods you like,” he told her. “And if there is anything I should avoid.”

“Well, I like this,” she hummed. She looked at Gaara’s dish and used her fork to take a small bite of it. “And I like that,” she grinned. “And just...avoid seafood.” She put more of her food onto the fork to feed it to Gaara.

Gaara hummed around the fork, his eyes rolling back a little. “Shira, this is all so good,” Gaara groaned. He eyed a plate of seafood and chuckled.

Shira followed his gaze. “I know seafood is out for you,” Shira looked at Azumi’s, “but Gaara can still taste them,” he smirked.

"That is fine," she hummed, finishing her first sample dish. She looked at the rest of them and pointed to one that looked good. "Can I try that one?" she asked.
"Absolutely," Shira grinned, handing it to her.

She took a bite of it and grinned. "I really like this," she said softly, finishing it off quickly. Shira and Gaara looked at each other then at her and the plate.

“I’ll put this one on the top of the list,” Shira chuckled. Gaara laughed softly, kissing her cheek. “It’s a pretty easy dish to make, too,” he reached in and grabbed another dish. It was dessert. “Okay, I have these and a few small pieces of cake to try.” Azumi let out a small gasp, seeing the cakes. She set the two small plates she had aside and took the first slice from Shira when he handed it to her. She fed Gaara the first piece before taking a bite herself and humming contentedly as she continued to take bites. “So there are five cakes,” Shira chuckled, watching them eat through the second one. “Tell me which you two you like the most.”

They took a few minutes, taking a couple of bites of each cake. "Oh, this is hard," Azumi chuckled. "But I am leaning toward this strawberry shortcake."

"This chocolate cake is my favorite," Gaara hummed.

"Then it's settled," Shira grinned.

"Can I?" Azumi asked softly, pointing to the rest of the strawberry shortcake.

"It's all yours," he smirked. Azumi squealed, eating the rest of the cake.

"Adorable," both men swooned softly.

"She's melting my heart," Shira chuckled.

"Mine is just a puddle all the time so..." Gaara laughed softly. Naga slipped over her shoulder and nudged the cake, accidentally getting whipped cream on the tip of his nose.

Azumi smirked, wiping the whipped cream from Naga's nose then held her finger there for him to lick it. "This is what the baby wants," she said.

"Is that...your first craving?" Gaara asked.

Azumi hummed. "I suppose it is," she chuckled.

"I think I can satisfy that craving," Shira chuckled. "I'll make you your own when I make the batch for the party," he smiled at her. "Want me to run back and get the rest of the sample?" he asked her. "Think you want anything else? I didn't really bring enough to really feed you."

"Komushi and Sasori are knocked out," Gaara smirked. "You could probably use the kitchen again."

"Then I'll do that," Shira grinned.

"Whatever you do, can you also make rumman?" Azumi asked.

"I most certainly can."

She jumped up, still holding the blanket to cover herself and pulled him into a hug. "I am so excited," she said softly.

He laughed as he wrapped his arms around and gave her a tight squeeze. “Anything for my almost sister-in-law,” he grinned. “Want me to bring it here or do you want to eat in the kitchen?”
“We can meet you in the kitchen,” Gaara smiled, petting Ryuga.

“Alright,” Shira chuckled. “See you two in a minute.” He grabbed his chest and walked out of the room.

Azumi dropped her blanket and picked up her dress as soon as the door was closed. “We should get Lord Sasori and Lord Komushi drunk more often so we can enjoy more days of them being incapacitated with hangovers,” she said as she got dressed.

“I think I second that idea,” he chuckled, pulling her into a kiss. He pressed her against the door and deepened the kiss. “Maybe every two weeks until you’re free?” he smirked, pulling back.

“Sounds like a plan,” she smiled. She opened the door, lacing her fingers with his and led him to the kitchen where Shira was already getting things out to start making different dishes.

“You two came out much faster than I expected,” Shira chuckled. “I thought you would have taken advantage of a few minutes.”

“Ah, that would be rude,” Azumi sighed, sitting down.

“Not as rude as me walking in on you two. I’m sorry about that.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Gaara chuckled.

“I’ll make sure to try and knock or something beforehand from now on,” he grinned at them. “Now, milady, would you like to give me a helping hand?”

Azumi let out a soft gasp. “I would love to,” she grinned, stepping closer to him and looking over all of the stuff he took out. “What are we making?” she chuckled, picking up one of the ingredients and looking over the container.

“You are going to help me make the cream for the strawberry shortcake,” he chuckled. “And Gaara over there is going to help me cut up the strawberries!”

Gaara pouted slightly. “But those take forever and stain my hands,” he whined lightly.

“But don’t you want Azumi to have her strawberry shortcake?” Shira smirked.

Azumi took Gaara’s hand and kissed his knuckles. “It is what the baby wants,” she chuckled.

“Alright.” His shoulders slumped but his smile was bright. “For you and the baby.”

“Atta boy,” Shira grinned. He placed down a large bowl of strawberries, a knife and a cutting board. “I’ll take care of the rest,” he grinned.

Azumi kissed Gaara softly on his lips. “Thank you,” she said quietly before pulling away to start on the whipped cream. It took her a few minutes to get it to the perfect consistency and as soon as it was done, she could not help but taste it a couple of times.

Shira caught her licking her fingers a few times out of the corner of his eye and chuckled. “Taste good?” He leaned over with his mouth open for a taste.

“I think so,” Azumi giggled, feeding a little bit to him. “I like where it is as right now but what do you think?”

“I think you’re a natural at making whipped cream,” he grinned, licking his lips.
Gaara crossed the room with his bowl of sliced berries, lifting it over Azumi’s head so his arms wrapped around her. “Ah,” he said softly, mimicking Shira.


She reached for a strawberry, dipped it in the whipped cream and then fed it to Gaara. “Do you like it?” she asked softly.

He hummed happily, kissing her cheek. “It’s the best I’ve ever had,” he smiled.

“I’m going to pretend I’m not hurt and we can move on to the food while the cake bakes,” Shira mock sniffled.

Azumi kissed Gaara again before pulling away and setting the bowl down. She looked over what Shira was starting and hummed, trying to figure out what he was making. “You have barely even started and it already smells good,” she muttered.

He laughed, cutting up a vegetable and offering her a piece at the tip of his knife. “Open your mouth,” he smirked.

“Show off,” Gaara rolled his eyes with a chuckle. “My love his ego isn’t going to fit in the kitchen if you keep fan it like this.”

Azumi opened her mouth and Shira tapped the hilt of the knife, making the food jump into her mouth. She chuckled through a hum as she laced her fingers with Gaara’s. “His ego is feeding us,” she smirked, spinning into him and then spinning out. She danced around him. “I will fan it as long as the food is good.”

“Fan away,” Shira grinned over his shoulder. “The food is never bad around me.”

“Unless you didn’t make it,” Gaara chuckled, kissing Azumi’s cheeks. He pulled her close and started to slowly dance with her to a song in his head.

“That’s a given.” Shira’s smile softened, watching them move. It was good to see them both so happy.

“Shira, do you dance?” Azumi asked as Gaara twirled her. “Will you be dancing at the party?”

“Publicly...no,” he chuckled. “I’m worse than him,” he nodded to Gaara.

“Hey,” Gaara laughed, twirling Azumi. “I’ve been improving!”

“And your poor brother deserves an award for it,” he teased. “But I don’t need to dance to win the ladies. I have the best food and wine. What more could a girl want?”

“My aunt likes to dance,” Gaara flashed him a mischievous grin.

Shira paused for a moment. “She...does?” he asked.


“You want to dance with her?” Gaara chuckled, catching the little whisper. He pulled her close and sat down in a chair at the table again with her in his lap. His hands wrapped around her stomach and rested in her lap. He started to press sweet kisses to her neck.

“She must be an angel on the dance floor,” Shira sighed, putting their dinner in the oven after
mixing everything together. “You really think she’d dance with me?” He was practically floating.

“She might if you ask her,” Gaara chuckled. “I don’t exactly she why she wouldn’t.”

“Especially because you are catering her party and she loves your food,” Azumi added. “Not much reason to not dance with you.”

“But I can’t really dance,” Shira sighed.

“But she can. And if you dance with someone who can, then it is fine and you will look like you can.”

“She’s right,” Gaara chuckled. “Just give it a try. Live your dream for a moment.”

“Thanks for your support in my crush for your aunt,” Shira chuckled, moving to pull the cake out of the oven. He placed it down on the countertop for it to cool.

Azumi looked at the cake and leaned forward to get a better look only to be held back by Gaara. “Don’t get too carried away,” he chuckled.

“I know, I know,” she said with a slight pout, relaxing against him.

“Would you like me to layer it or just dress up the top?” Shira laughed.

“Layer,” she grinned. “Stick them together with the whipped cream and put some strawberries between the layers. That is what the baby wants,” she laughed.

“The baby has spoken,” Shira said in a dramatic voice. “And who am I to argue with their little decree?” he chuckled. The cake was put together easily once it was it was cooled. Once he was done, he paused to pull their dinner out of the oven and set it down on the table with Gaara and Azumi. He quickly whipped up everything else she had asked for via the baby and set it on the table. “Does this please the baby?” he smirked, putting his hands in his hips proudly.

“The baby is satisfied,” Azumi smirked, taking a sip of the rumman he made and groaned. “Very satisfied,” she chuckled.

“Good,” Shira beamed. “Baby should only get the best now that they are on their way. Baby and mother.” Both men flashed her a smile. Gaara shifted her from his lap to her own seat so he could eat too without hindering her.

“If I have time tomorrow, my love,” Gaara started, leaning his chin into his palm, “I want to give you a real exam so see how far along the baby is.”

“Wait, you don’t know yet?” Shira asked surprised.

Gaara shook his head. “Ryuga could have been pushed out due to the baby growing too large which means she could be further along then we realize. Especially if she is developing cravings.”

Azumi’s brow furrowed. “That means we may have less time than expected before I start to show,” she hummed. She pressed a hand to her stomach to feel for the possible beginning of a bump but she honestly could not tell.

Gaara slipped his hand over hers and smiled. “It will be okay.” He laced his fingers into hers and lifted her hand to kiss her knuckles. “No one will let anything happen to you or the baby.” He looked at her seriously. “Once I determine how far along you are, I’ll talk to my uncle about it.”
She smiled back at him. “Alright,” she said softly. She kissed the back of his hand and started eating, humming at how good the food was. “What made you want to own a restaurant?” she asked Shira.

Shira smiled, humming through a mouthful as he thought of his response. He held up a finger, asking her to wait until he swallowed, his grin warming up even further. “I’ve always loved cooking. It brings people together no matter what is happening in the world and I just wanted to create a space where anyone and everyone could come and get a moment of peace and comfort in this world.”

“He’s been cooking for as long as I can remember,” Gaara chimed in.

“I love learning new recipes from anyone and everyone, too. I often ask visitors about foods from their villages and try to recreate them.”

“Oh, that is so sweet,” Azumi smiled. “I bet travelers who try your food come back to this city just for it.”

"I have a few far-reaching regulars." He blushed a little.

"Kenzou loves visiting Shira's place because he is the only place in the whole city who makes a sweet from his childhood," Gaara grinned.

'I'm not the only one who makes it," Shira shook his head modestly. Gaara opened his mouth to protest when Shira spoke again. "I'm the only one who makes it right."

“He seems like a man who likes rare things so if you can make something rare the right way, then that is an accolade you should wear proudly,” Azumi chuckled.

“Oh, he’s proud alright,” Gaara smirked.

“I run a special on international dishes each month to keep things interesting. But my restaurant...it’s everything I’ve ever wanted in life,” he smiled proudly, leaning back in his seat. “Everything but the love of my life,” he sighed wistfully.

“Which, given your culinary skills and just how generally sweet you are, I am sure you will find soon with no problem,” Azumi said as she continued to eat.

“You’re going to make me blush,” Shira chuckled, getting up to get the cake. “But alas the love of my life is taken,” he sighed, placing the cake down on the table. He grabbed the bowl with the extra whip cream and strawberries for them. He put a little on his finger and dabbed it in Azumi’s nose. “But I’m glad you two found each other,” his voice softened. Gaara chuckled, reminded of Naga earlier when he looked at her. He cupped her face, turning her towards him so he could kiss her nose lightly.

She giggled, pulling him into a full kiss. “So am I,” she said softly. “But,” she turned back toward Shira, “if she is taken, she was not the love of your life. You have not found the love of your life yet. And you will.”

“Mmm,” Shira hummed, cutting the cake for them. “Maybe you’re right.” He served her a piece and then served Gaara one. “I’m in no rush though. My life is pretty good with or without someone as long as I have my best friend.”

“That is cute,” she grinned. “I hope you do not mind sharing him with me...” She smirked and put her hand over her stomach. “Not like you have much of a choice at this point,” she whispered.
“Of course, I don’t,” he laughed, his eyes lighting up. “I’m going to be their favorite uncle!”

“Oooh, Kankuro might fight you for that title,” Gaara chuckled.

“Kankuro can be runner up,” Shira smirked. “I’m not backing down on this one.”

Azumi chuckled softly. “I have three brothers than can also be contenders,” she said.

“They can battle Kankuro for runner up,” Shira smirked.

“This child is going to be very, very spoiled,” Gaara grinned. “Their aunt is going to want in on this, too.”

“When do you plan on telling your siblings?” Shira asked.

“After I talk to my uncle and figure out how far along she is. I need to ensure her safety first,” he said, taking her hand again.

“Would the snake that came out of you know how far along you are?” Shira asked her.

“Ryuga has no concept of time,” she frowned. “He spent almost his entire life in me.” She took a sip of her rumman. “However, I think we should do the test sooner...tomorrow would be hard when there is a party later on and on those kinds of days, I am stuck in Lord Sasori’s room, figuring out what clothes he is going to wear,” she rolled her eyes. “For a man who wears, like, three things, he is very picky.”

“He was worse as a kid,” Gaara rolled his eyes. “But you are right. As soon as we clean up here, I can give you the full check-up in your bathroom.” He kissed her cheek.

“Don’t you two worry about cleaning up,” Shira waved them off. “It’s therapeutic. And I want to know how soon I’ll meet my niece or nephew.”

Azumi chuckled softly. “Now you have to be the first person we tell,” she smirked as she ate the strawberry shortcake. She finished her slice quickly, letting her excitement over it get the better of her.

“And I will be honored to know!” Shira grinned, getting up to start cleaning. Gaara smiled, finishing his slice a little slower. He leaned over and pressed another kiss to Azumi’s cheek.

“Would you like to stretch your legs or be carried milady?” He asked teasingly once he finished his cake.

“If I say I can walk, you might still carry me,” she said with a wink. She leaned in to kiss him softly. “Carry me,” she whispered against his lips.

“That’s my girl,” he chuckled, picking her up the way he had earlier. He let her hook her arms around his neck before wrapping her legs around his waist. Kissing her as he picked her up, he walked towards the door. “We’ll meet you back in the room, Shira,” he said over his shoulder.

“I’ll knock first,” Shira teased.

Azumi chuckled, waving to Shira as they left the kitchen and went to her bathroom room. She cupped Gaara’s face, pulling him into a kiss as he walked. She had faith in his ability to navigate the halls without having to look.

He smiled into the kiss, making it safely to the servants' bathroom without once bumping into
anything. “Stay here for a moment so I can grab a few things.” He set her down on the edge of the tub. He kissed her again, slowly, licking her lip. “Mmm,” he hummed softly, smiling into the kiss before pulling away. He kissed her forehead then started for the door. “Strip down for me and I’ll be right back.”

She chuckled softly as she started to remove her dress. Once she was undressed, she moved over very slightly to be in the sunlight of the window and basked while she waited for him to return. She lifted her leg to look at the slave anklet she had been wearing since the day she became a slave. She was told never to take it off and she could not wait for the day she could.

Gaara walked back in moments later with a notebook and a few other things he would need. He stopped short in the doorway, taking a moment to silently watch her. "So beautiful," he said softly, out loud. He could not help the smile on his lips.

She looked up at him and smiled, putting her leg down. “That was quick,” she chuckled, opening her arms for an embrace.

"I don't need much for this exam," he smiled, crossing the room. He smoothly put his stuff down and pulled her into his arms. He kissed her deeply, running his hands up her back and into her hair. "You're so warm," he said softly when they broke apart. The sunlight caught her eyes beautifully.

She grinned, resting her head against him. “Not as warm as you,” she hummed. “Sometimes I feel like I am siphoning your warmth.”

"Siphon away," he grinned. "I can always go outside and get more," he smiled, kissing down her neck. His hands slipped down her sides and his kisses trailed down to her chest. He kept working down her body until he was on his knees in front of her. His hands settled on her hips and his nose traced down the center of her stomach, dipping a little into her navel. He pressed his lips gently to her belly. "This baby...you...mean so much to me," he said softly.

Her smile softened and she laced her fingers into his hair, gently scratching his scalp. “You are going to be an amazing father,” she said softly. “I love you.”

"And you will be an amazing mother," he kissed her belly again then stood up. "I love you too," he pulled her into a slow kiss. "Okay," he sighed happily. "Let's get this examination done." He chuckled, taking her hand and pulling her to the bathtub. "This shouldn't take too long," he promised. He pulled his notebook and tools closer. "Are you ready?" he asked, making a few initial notations.

She looked at the tools for a moment, anticipating how cold they were going to be and readying herself for it. She looked back at him and nodded. “I am ready.”

"Don't worry," he chuckled, noticing her glance. He reached behind her and turned on the water in the tub to the hottest setting. He set each tool down gently in the tub. "I wouldn't make you suffer through that," he smirked. He started asking her a few questions then set into the examination. He was in full doctor mode as he noted and verified anything and everything he needed to know about her health and the state of the baby. She answered his questions as best as she could with what she knew about her body and what was normal for her mutation.

Just as Gaara promised, the exam was over fairly quickly.

“That was not so bad,” she hummed softly to herself. She did not know exactly what to expect from a checkup like this because she had never been pregnant before.
Gaara stood up, jotting a few more notes down in his notebook as he paced the length of the room. His brows furrowed and he pulled his lip between his teeth, chewing it gently. "You...you're about two months in." He stopped in front of her. "Which means...if the baby is as healthy as I feel it to be, you're going to start showing soon." He set his notebook down and took her hands. "It won't be too much at first but at least we now have a gauge and potential timeline."

"Two months?" she repeated softly. "It might not be much but I have a feeling your cousin is going to notice the slightest change."

"He's very...observant but...women bloat," he offered her a slightly guilty smile. "He will just have to deal with you being a little 'bloated'," he nodded, repeating the word a little more confidently.

She brought his hands up to kiss his knuckles softly. "When are you going to talk to Lord Sandaime?"

He looked into her eyes. "I'll go right after the party. Talking to him at the party or before will be a waste of time."

"I understand," she nodded. She grinned, wrapping her arms around him and squealed softly against his chest. "We are going to have a baby!" she said excitedly.

"We're going to have a baby,″ he repeated, pulling her snug to his body. He picked her up bridal style and spun them around. He kissed her deeply and then kissed all over her face, giggling. "I can’t wait."

"Neither can I," she grinned, kissing him again. "Now we must go tell Shira."

"That we do," he smiled, putting her down gently. He kissed her forehead gently once she was on the ground. "I’ll clean up while you get dressed.″ He kissed her again. She got dressed and laced her fingers with his once he cleaned and put away all of his tools then walked with him back to her room.

Shira was right outside her door, leaning against the wall. "Oh!" he grinned when he saw them approaching. "I knocked and there was no answer so I assumed you two were busy,″ he smirked.

Gaara smirked, reaching for the door to allow everyone in, Azumi going first. "No, we took care of all that in the bathroom," Gaara said teasingly. "And we have news," he said, after shutting the door behind them.

"News?″ Shira grinned. "You’ve figured it out? How far along?″ he asked excitedly.

"I am two months in,” Azumi squealed.

Shira's jaw dropped. "Two months?” he grinned, opening his arms to pull her into a tight hug. "This is amazing," he stepped back then laughed and hugged her again. Gaara smiled wide, putting his arm around her shoulder once Shira released her. "But uh...when are you going to start showing?″ he asked a little hesitantly.

"Soon,” she hummed, placing her hand over her stomach. "So we are on sort of a tight schedule.”

"I see," he nodded. "Well, you know you have my help in any way. Whatever that is even if it's not food," he smiled, taking the chair in her room.

Gaara sat down on her bed and patted the space next to him for Azumi to sit. "Thank you, Shira." He leaned over and kissed her shoulder. "I'm going to talk to my uncle as soon as possible but we
might have to figure out your clothes a little sooner," he said, looking to Azumi. "Sasori had them custom made, right?" he frowned.

“He did,” she said. “After he invasively measured my entire body.” She sighed and rolled her eyes. “And I am sure as soon as he notices the smallest change he is going to measure me again.”

"How...invasive?" Shira asked hesitantly.

"Sasori is very meticulous," Gaara ground his teeth. "And anal about his measurements."

“It was...very uncomfortable,” she muttered. “Then again, he does a lot that makes me uncomfortable.” She thought about how he started cuddling with her recently because he was lonely.

Gaara's frowned deepened. He pulled her closer to his body, kissing her temple. "It will be over soon," he whispered.

"The guy's a creep. Amazing at his job but an absolute creep," Shira folded his arms. "So are you going to let the seams out on your clothes or do you think Sasori will notice?"

Azumi thought for a moment. “The outfit I was sold in would help me hide the very early signs of showing,” she hummed. “He keeps it in a cabinet in his workshop. I do not think he would say much about me wearing it. But once I get too big for that, there will be no hiding it from him.”

"Where did he have your outfits made?" Shira asked. "If you want, I can see if I can find the shop and have replica's made in a bigger size."

Gaara shook his head. "He had them made that the night market," he said. He pressed his lips together. "We will have to bank on you getting away from him before you get heavily pregnant. I don't want him near you or the baby as is but once your walking and sleeping become affected, I really...I want you away from him...preferably living with me."

She laced her fingers with his and pulled his hand up to kiss the back of it. “I was having thoughts of leaving if I am not free by the time I am noticeably pregnant,” she said softly. “I just did not think it would be this soon.”

"This will all work out," Shira smiled. "No matter what, this baby will come into the world knowing only love and freedom." He leaned back in his seat, smiling.

“That is all I want,” she grinned.

“And good food,” he added with a smirked.

“Yes,” she chuckled. “And good food.” Naga slithered to coil around her shoulders, hissing excitedly. “Name the baby after you?” she repeated. “I...am not so sure about that.” Ryuga pushed between Gaara and Azumi, hissing a little laugh. He hissed, shaking his little head and sticking his tongue at Naga.

"What?" Shira smirked. "Think they should name them after you?" he teased, not actually knowing what the snake said.

Ryuga and Naga paused, looking at him then Azumi, hissing excitedly. “No, no,” she said with a chuckle. “We are not naming the baby after either of you.” She pet both of their heads. “Sorry.”

They both started to pout, lowering their heads into her lap. They hissed softly to each other,
occasionally giving Gaara and Azumi mournful little looks.

Shira chuckled softly, shaking his head. "Hey, don't forget the little one will need a nickname!" he reminded the snakes.

"Of course," Gaara grinned, trying to control his own laughter. "Nicknames can shape the childhood of a little one and mean a lot."

Both snakes perked up and immediately started arguing with each other about whether the name was going to be Naga Jr. or Ryuga Jr.

Azumi chuckled softly. "I am going to let you two settle that one on your own," she said.

"This is adorable," Shira snorted. He stood up with a long stretch. "Alright, children, I better head out. I still have to open up shop," he grinned.

"What happened to your assistant?" Gara asked a little confused.

Shira shrugged, moaning a little as he came out of his stretch. "No idea. He hasn't shown up in, like, a week," he sighed. "But I'm not too worried."

"Is that a 'he was going to get fired anyway thing' or 'something might have happened to him' thing?" Azumi asked.

"He was going to get fired," Shira smirked. "I don't ask for a lot but this kid..." He rolled his eyes. "Anyway," he smiled, taking her free hand, he pressed a kiss to her knuckles then stood back up to grab his chest.

"Thank you again, Shi," Gaara smiled.


"Have a good night," Azumi said. The snakes moved up his body to tap their noses against his cheeks and Azumi stood up to unwrap them from him. "Sorry about that," she said softly, wrapping Ryuga around herself and Naga around her arm.

Shira gasped softly, his grin reaching his eyes. "No, I love it," he laughed. "I'll make sure to bring you two some treats next time I visit," he laughed softly while throwing one leg at a time through the window. "Later," he called one last time then he was gone.

Gaara chuckled, standing up to wrap his arms around his lover from behind. He kissed her cheek then rested his head on Ryuga who was settled on her shoulders. "We're really going to be parents," he said softly, smiling. "I can't wait to meet them and see you hold them," he hummed.

She grinned, placing her free hand over his and lacing their fingers together. "I cannot believe it," she almost whispered. She turned around in his arms to kiss him, letting the snakes move down to the floor and make their way to the bed.

He smiled into the kiss, pressing his lips hard against hers. His hands found their way down to her belly and he pressed his back closer to hers.

"At the risk of sounding foolish..." his lips brushed her's as he spoke, "would you...marry once you're free?" He pressed their foreheads together, biting his lip slightly.

"Marry," she whispered, the softest gasp coming out of her. "I...would," she smiled.
He looked into her eyes, grinning widely. He kissed her deeply then spun her around, pulling her flush to his body and kissing her again. He laughed, biting his lip. "I love you so much, Azumi," he said, cupping her face.

"I love you, too," she said, wrapping her arms around him. She pulled him to the bed, falling backward onto it and pulling him on top of her and into another kiss.

He nuzzled the tip of his nose against hers before pulling her into a kiss once more. "Are you tired?" he asked, kissing down her neck. The snakes hissed softly around them.

"Not too tired," she smirked, lacing her fingers into his hair. "But...willing to be tired out."

"Good answer," he smirked against her skin, kissing down to her chest. His hands moved up her arms to pin them over her head. "I think we have good enough reason to celebrate, don’t you?" His voice was already rougher.

"Absolutely," she breathed, smiling up at him.
Chapter 54

The next morning, Azumi woke up to Naga tapping her nose gently with his. She groaned softly, opening her eyes a little bit as Naga hissed at her to get up before Sasori decided he wanted to show up. She hummed her acknowledgment and yawned. She felt Gaara's arm wrapped around her and pressed back against him, turning a little to look at him. "Good morning," she said softly.

“Hnn,” he moaned softly in his sleep. His arms wrapped tighter around her, pulling her closer. He nuzzled her until his lips found hers. His lips were warm against hers. “Morning,” he said softly.

Ryuga tapped Gaara's back, hissing at him to get up the way Naga did to Azumi. "Our fathers are trying to get us up," Azumi teased.

“So I’ve noticed,” Gaara chuckled. “Should we behave and listen?” he smirked.

She smirked and pressed her butt against him. "I always had a hard time listening to my actual father," she hummed. "What makes them different?" Naga and Ryuga gasped, thoroughly offended.

“Mine hardly matters,” Gaara’s smirk widened. The snakes hissed louder as Gaara slid his fingers into her hair and pulled her into a deep kiss. He pulled her body closer with full intent to make the most of their morning when they heard footsteps up the hall. “He’s up early,” he pouted.

Azumi sighed and rolled her eyes. "He is going to want to spend the entire day getting ready for this party," she said, sitting up. "I will see you later," she said, giving him a quick kiss.

“He’s so fussy.” Gaara rolled his eyes, stealing one more kiss before slipping out the window. “See you tonight,” he smiled from the window then dropped down out of sight just in time.

“Oh, good,” Sasori said as he unceremoniously opened her door. “You’re up. Let’s go.”

Azumi sighed, picking up her dress and putting it on quickly. Naga quickly wrapped around her and she followed Sasori out of the room. "Is your scarab still here?" she asked as they walked down the halls.

“He is,” Sasori responded over his shoulder. “He’s grabbing breakfast. Which means you can start trying on outfits.” He ran a hand through his hair, already looking irritated. Azumi tried her best not to pout, not wanting to do this in front of Komushi again. They entered his room and she immediately went to his wardrobe, shifting through his clothes and picking out a few that she liked.

“Let’s wear something a little different,” Sasori hummed, crawling back onto his bed. “We’re dancing together tonight so we should match or at least complement each other.”

Azumi and Naga shared a look with each other. "I only have so many outfits to match with you," she muttered, hanging her choices up. She went back to the wardrobe and Naga moved his head between the clothes, picking out a few that he liked.

Komushi walked into the room and snickered as he set down everyone’s breakfast and coffee. “I’m honestly surprised you can get into this reed of a man’s clothing,” Komushi laughed. “He’s got nothing on him and you...” He looked Azumi up and down then nodded with an approving grin. She scoffed but did not turn to acknowledge him as she continued to look through the wardrobe.

“It isn’t without struggle,” Sasori smirked. “She’s broken the seams of a few times.”
Azumi rolled her eyes. “It seems to not concern you much since you still make me try on your
clothes.”

“What are a few stretched seams?” he shrugged. “It’s not like you destroyed the whole thing.”

She took out the few things Naga chose and hung them up with her choices. “Which do you want to
see first?”

He looked over her choices. “That one first,” he pointed to a bright white and gold set. It came
with a scarf that would drape the body and was tipped in the finest embroidery. The scarf would
trail on the ground for Sasori by the looks of it.

With a quiet sigh, she got changed into his first choice. As per usual, getting the bottoms on was a
slight struggle. “You should wear more black,” she muttered softly, finally getting the waistband
of the pants over her hips.

“Black in the desert?” Komushi questioned.

“It is not like he spends time in the sun.”

“Why black?” Sasori asked.

“Because black matches with everything,” she answered simply.

“Fair enough,” he smirked. “Maybe I’ll have something made at the next night market,” he
hummed. “But for right now, what do we think of this outfit?” he asked her and Komushi. He spun
his finger to tell her to spin.

She spun around like he wanted and sighed. “I am not a fan,” she muttered.

“It’s a little too loud,” Komushi hummed.

“It is the scarf,” she agreed, wrapping it around her neck a couple of times, not exactly sure what to
do with it.

“You think so?” Sasori asked, cupping his jaw and tilting his head. He watched her put the scarf on
then flicked his hand. “Alright, I see your point. Next.”

Azumi grabbed the next outfit and changed into it quickly. Naga helped her put a few things into
place with his head and hissed his opinion. “You like this one?” she muttered, looking down at it.
“I suppose if this was a little looser I would wear this myself.”

“He would like that one,” Komushi rolled his eyes.

“Mmm, but I think I like it, too,” Sasori hummed. “Pick the jewelry.”

Azumi nodded and went over to his vanity where he kept all of his jewelry. Naga pointed out a few
things that would work well and she tried them on. “You certainly have an eye for this,” she said

“You’re letting a snake choose your accessories?” Komushi asked Sasori lowly with a smirk.

Sasori shrugged, watching the pair. “I have executive say so I can always change it out. But I’ve
got a lot of pieces I just never wear so let’s see.”

Azumi finished putting on all of the accessories that Naga picked out and then turned to face
Sasori and Komushi. 'If you do not use this outfit, I am taking it,' she thought.

“Dance a little,” Sasori ordered once she was back in front of them.

“Yes,” Komushi grinned. “Show us it in action.”

With a slight sigh, she started dancing with Naga, keeping it quite short. She stopped abruptly and looked at Sasori. "Have you thought of the music yet?” she asked him.

“Don’t worry about the music,” Sasori waved her off. “I like everything you picked out. Naga has taste,” he chuckled. “Have him pick out two pieces for you.”

She went back to the vanity and Naga looked at the pieces again. After a few moments, he pointed to them with his nose and she picked them up to look at them. "Not bad," she hummed, putting them on.

Sasori waved her closer to take a better look at the choices. “Mmm, I like these but you still have to wear your bracelets.” He looked her over one more time, squinting a little. “Lay everything out then go make us some tea.”

She nodded and started to remove all of the jewelry and his outfit then put her dress back on. She neatly laid everything out on the bed then went into the workshop and started the water for the tea. While she waited for it to boil she stepped back out into the room. "Shall I run your baths now?” she asked.

“Yes,” Sasori called to her. “And the. Run one for yourself. I’ll set out the makeup for you while you’re in there,”

“Ooooh,” Komushi grinned. “I can’t wait to see you all dolled up again.” He rounded on her the minute she stepped back into the bedroom.

“We are going to doll you up, too,” she teased as she went into the bathroom.

She immediately started to set up the baths for them, going about the same routine. Then she went back into the workshop and poured the tea once it was ready. She set the cups on a small tray and went back out to the bedroom. “Your baths are ready now,” she said as she picked up her breakfast to start eating.

“You hear that, Sasori?” Komushi grinned, elbowing his friend gently in the ribs. “I’m going to get dolled up again.” Komushi put his arm around Sasori’s shoulder.

Sasori rolled his eyes, pushing Komushi off and walking into the bathroom. “No amount of makeup could make a beetle like you pretty,” he scoffed. Komushi let out an offended gasp but followed him into the bathroom.

Azumi sat down on the daybed as she ate, letting Naga coil up in her lap. “Thank you,” she said softly to him, tapping his nose gently. Naga hissed, happy he could help her in any way. He looked at the outfit and jewelry then hissed softly again. It had a worried tone to it. He wanted to know what kind of music Sasori was planning. He looked back up at her and asked if he or Ryuga could go with them. “You want to go?” she hummed. “I do not know if he would allow that...” She frowned and gently pet his head as she thought. “But it is Lord Sandaime’s party and he likes you. We can try to sneak you in,” she said softly. The large snake squirmed excitedly in her lap. He shifted, rising to tap his nose against hers in thanks. He hissed again, telling her it would make him and Ryuga feel better to know she, and by extension, her baby had some form of protection on her.
Azumi finished her breakfast and coffee then stood up with Naga, wrapping him around her as she started dancing around slowly. “You know Gaara will be there as well, right?” she said softly with a chuckle. “I will not be alone.” He swayed in time with her, moving as one. He hissed his soft little acknowledgment but reminded her that he could be in place even Gaara couldn't be. It would just make him and Ryuga feel a little better about the situation. “Right...” They continued to move as she waited for Komushi and Sasori to finish their baths. “I am glad you are this protective,” she smirked. Naga assured her that he and Ryuga would do anything for her neonate. He started to tell her all the things he was excited to do with the child when the two men emerged from the bathroom.

"He certainly is talkative today," Sasori drawled as he ruffled his hair dry with a cloth.

"Are you two gossiping?" Komushi chuckled, spreading out on the bed.

“No, we were not gossiping,” she smirked, grabbing a small nearby towel and tossing it over Komushi’s crotch area. “You should close your robe.”

“I’ve been telling him that for years,” Sasori muttered, rolling his eyes. Komushi rolled his eyes as he stretched out on the bed. He arched his back but kept the towel in place. “Modesty is for those who lack confidence in their own body,” he said factually. “And I know damn well my body is amazing.”

“So is mine,” both Azumi and Sasori smirked. Naga hissed the same answer as well.

“You can still be confident in your body and know to cover up once in a while,” Azumi said. “Sure, your body is amazing but I would rather not have a clear sign that you are aroused by something.”

“You do get random boners,” Sasori sighed, handing the towel he used to dry his hair to Azumi so she could lay it out to dry.

“Every man does,” Komushi defended. “Even you!” He flopped onto his stomach and rested his chin on his forearms. “Pretty sure you get them for new herbs.”

“I do not,” Sasori rolled his eyes. “My tastes are refined and I have much better control over my body than you. You lack discipline.”

“I believe that,” Azumi hummed. She stepped into the bathroom and drained both tubs then reran the water for her bath. Naga hissed softly, asking her to place him in the sun so he could bask while she bathed. She set him down in the sunlight, undressed and then got into her bath, sighing contentedly.

“You two are rude!” Komushi huffed loud enough for Azumi to hear him.

“And you’re a child,” Sasori countered. “Are we going to waste time pointing out obvious things or are you going to get dressed?”

Komushi scoffed. “Fine,” he grumbled as he got up and grabbed his clothes. He started getting dressed without much protest.

“What a child,” Azumi hummed, sinking further into the water. Komushi’s lack of decency meant he got dressed directly in front of the doorway to the bathroom and she did not want to see it.
Sasori noticed her line of sight and sighed. “Get over here, you idiot.” He grabbed his scarab by the ear and pulled him towards the other side of the room. “Keep strutting around in front of my slave like you’re some chicken in heat and I’ll have to cut your source off pride off.”

“Whoa!” Komushi stumbled away from the doors. “You’re being harsh! I haven’t bothered her in weeks!”

Azumi rolled her eyes and went below the surface of the water. When she came up, she started washing her hair then the rest of her body. She took her time with her bath and relaxed for a few minutes before finally deciding to get out. She stepped out, trying not to slip on the wet floor and grabbed her towel, wrapping it around herself before Komushi could glance into the bathroom. “Are you done basking?” she chuckled, picking Naga up and wrapping him around her shoulders. He hissed softly, nuzzling her jaw before settling his head on his own body just under her chin. He was comfortably warm in the sun and now she was extra warm. He was in bliss.

"I think your snake is falling asleep," Komushi teased, reaching up from his seat on the bed to curl Naga's tail around his fingers. Naga shot him a glare, curling his tail until it was tucked away.

“He is content, that is why,” she said, lifting Naga’s head to kiss the top of it as she sat down. She looked at Sasori. “Can he come with us?” she asked. “I think he should dance with us.”

Sasori paused in combing his hair back for a moment before pressing the hairpiece he had chosen into place. He stared them down for a few moments. Naga did his best to look pleading and docile. Sasori put his hands on his hips and turned up his lips. "Fine but if he gets hostile even once with me," he paused, giving Naga a very hard warning look, "I'll turn you into new ingredients. Snake oil is very in right now." Naga hissed softly, saying that Sasori would not stand a chance against him and he could kill him faster than he could blink.

“He says ‘thank you,’” Azumi grinned, kissing Naga’s head again and shoving his tail into her towel to keep it away from Komushi who had tried to discreetly reach for it.

"Uh-huh," Sasori squinted at the snake. "Get dressed then," he ordered. "We need to leave a little early since my uncle lives further away than Deidara's family."

She hummed and stood up then took a long look at the outfit that was chosen for him to decide whether she wanted to wear the red or white outfit since either would match. She decided she liked the red more and went with that one, going to the bathroom to change so Komushi would not stare at her then sitting down to do her hair and makeup.

"It's been a while since your uncle threw a party at his actual house," Komushi said, watching Azumi do her make up from the bed. "From what I remember of it, that place is pretty opulent, isn't it?"

“Opulent...obnoxious...whichever you’d prefer,” Sasori muttered. Azumi smirked at him through the mirror but said nothing. He came over to her, lifting her hands and placing the ring of the scorpion bracelets on her middle fingers then clasping the bracelets on her wrists.

“Last time I was there, I was a kid and the place was massive,” Komushi said. “I’m sure even as an adult, it’s still intimidating.”

"For a man of the people, he certainly indulges in life’s luxuries," Sasori scoffed. "He’s a hypocrite." He sucked his teeth hard, starting to get irritated again. He grabbed his cup of tea from earlier and downed its now cold contents.
"Relax," Komushi dragged out the word. "No need to work yourself into a tizzy. Your aunt is the one who designed most of it anyway, right? And she doesn't even work."

"Yes, but my aunt actually goes out and helps the community. All my uncle does is try to personally attack my way of life." Once Azumi finished her makeup, she pulled the front part of her hair back and pressed it down with a hairpiece similar to Sasori's then stood up and nodded for Sasori to take her spot. "I'm done getting ready," he told her. She nodded again a little more aggressively, basically telling him with her eyes to sit the fuck down. He scoffed and sat down and she started massaging his shoulders.

"You do not need to be this tense during our performance," she told him softly.

He looked away from her in the mirror. At that moment, he hated how good she was with her hands. His shoulders started to relax and he suppressed a moan. He was not willing to let Komushi hear that sort of sound from his lips.

"Oh, can you do me next?" Komushi asked teasingly. Sasori shot him a nasty look in the mirror. "Hey, you're supposed to be relaxing. Those eyes are looking pretty tense!"

"You probably do not even need one," Azumi smirked at Komushi. "You seem very relaxed as it is." She gestured to his lounging position.

"It's a very practiced illusion," Komushi winked at her. "I'm constantly stiff."

“Oh, I bet.”

"Aside from the gross innuendo in that statement," Sasori rolled his eyes. "She won't be touching you and maybe you should relax with working out so much."


“No,” she mouthed back. She found a bad knot at the base of Sasori’s neck and pressed hard, working it until it released.

“Huh!” Sasori gasped, taken off guard by the pain and relief. His head slumped and he bit his lip hard.

“Oh, is that the spot to shut you up?” Komushi snickered.

Azumi smirked and ran her fingers through his hair for a few seconds, careful not to mess up what he had done to it. "Feel better?" she asked softly, retracting her hand.

He took a few slow deep breaths, keeping his head down until he could collect himself. “Yeah,” he said softly. He glanced out the window to check the time and sighed. “We have to go.”

Azumi nodded and took a step back from him as he got up. She went into the workshop and grabbed her gift for Sandaime’s wife while Komushi and Sasori gathered whatever they needed. Naga wrapped himself around Azumi’s waist and rested his head on her shoulder and the three of them set out to head to Sandaime’s house.
Chapter 55

The walk was indeed further than Deidara’s house but Sasori expertly navigated them away from the setting heat of the desert sun on the way there. There was already a gathering crowd of guests in front of the seemingly glowing mansion. It was filled with color and music drifted in the air. Sasori stopped short at the base of the many stairs that lead up to the pillared entrance. He rolled his eyes, already feeling exhausted.

"Wow," Komushi whispered, looking up at the mansion. "It's even bigger than I remember." He clapped Sasori on the back. "Come on. Just get it over with," he said as he walked past Sasori and started up the stairs.

Azumi stepped up next to him. "Wait until after we dance to tense up again," she teased before following Komushi up the stairs. Sasori pouted then rolled his eyes as he followed them up the stairs. At the top, Komushi was already embracing Sasori’s aunt in a tight hug.

"Oh, I haven't seen you in so long," the woman chuckled. "You've really grown. And you're rock solid."

"I work out," Komushi grinned cheekily. He finally let her go and stepped aside.

Azumi held in a gasp at how beautiful she was. Gaara had told her his aunt was pretty but she did not expect a literal goddess to be in front of her. She had long brown hair and such a warm, welcoming face and Azumi was sure there was a glow around this woman, like some sort of angelic aura. The air around her was so pleasant and it made so much sense that this was the woman Sandaime married.

"Sasori!" she grinned, opening her arms to embrace her nephew.

“It’s been a while,” he flashed her a genuine and rare smile as he wrapped his arms around her. “Happy birthday.” He kissed her cheek.

“It’s been too long,” she scolded him gently, pinching his cheek. “And who is this?” the beautiful woman turned to Azumi.

Azumi went to introduce herself but her answer suddenly got stuck in her throat but luckily Sasori answered for her right at the same time. "This is my sl—" He was cut off by a warning look from his aunt. "Unpaid servant," he said.

"My name is Azumi," she said with a bow.

"Unpaid servant," the woman echoed. Beautifully painted lips pressed into a line that said she knew exactly what that meant. “You look stunning, Azumi.” She reached out and pulled her into her arms, pressing a kiss to her cheek. Azumi almost seized up, unsure if she was even worthy of touching this ethereal being. Naga shifted on Azumi’s hips, wanting to see what or who was causing his human to freeze. “Is that a snake?” she asked as she pulled back.

"Ah...yes," Azumi answered, looking down at the snake. "His name is Naga...I suppose he is my companion of sorts." Naga hissed a laugh, correcting his title to the love of her life. "He has been with me since I started serving Lord Sasori."

"He's lovely," the woman marveled. She held out her hand to ask permission to pet him. Naga looked at Azumi then slowly rested his head on the woman’s hand. She giggled softly and gently
rubbed his head. "Very handsome indeed."

"Sachiko," Sandaime spoke up behind her. He wrapped his arm around his wife as she straightened out. "Would you like to head inside for a drink? Azumi!" He grinned, giving her a slight bow. "Welcome to our home. I'm glad you two have met!" He gave his wife a small squeeze.

"A drink," Sachiko hummed with a smile. "Would you like one?" She flashed a blinding smile at Azumi, taking her hands. "I think I'd like to get to know you more."

Sasori felt a headache growing already. "Auntie, we still need to drop off your gift from her," he tried to smooth out his voice.

"A gift?" Sachiko looked at Azumi. "You got me a gift?"

"Actually, I made it," Azumi said softly with a chuckle. Sachiko's face lit up and Azumi suppressed another gasp.

Sandaime chuckled. "I'll take the gift from you," he said to Azumi. "And I'll put it with the others for when they're opened."

Azumi reached into the bag Sasori had made her carry and pulled out the box that contained all of the salts and oils she made then handed it to Sandaime. He took it from her, making sure to be careful with it the way she did.

Sachiko got a whiff of it as it passed her and her eyes fluttered slightly. "My, my, I can't wait to know what it is!" she giggled, taking Azumi's hand.

Sasori opened his mouth to protest but Komushi shook his head and took his hand. "Come on, I think I see Kankuro over there pouring shots," he said as he tugged his friend away. Sasori pushed down the strange feeling that welled in his stomach, watching Azumi's back disappear into the crowd.

Sachiko led Azumi over to a counter where a bartender was making drinks to order. Immediately, Azumi was impressed that there was a bartender and not a bunch of drinks just laid out on a table. When she looked around, she noticed there were multiple bartenders set up in different areas.

"What do you want?" Sachiko asked.


Sachiko frowned a little. "Is that what Sasori ordered? You are practically free in this house and my husband and I will make sure he knows that."

"Oh, no," Azumi chuckled, taking Sachiko's hand and pressing it to her stomach. Sachiko's lips parted in a soft gasp. "There is another life I have to consider," she said softly.

Sachiko's bright eyes looked from Azumi's stomach to her eyes, her lips pulling into a huge smile. She immediately pulled the younger woman into a tight embrace. "Oh, congratulations, my dear!" she whispered in her ear. "Is...Gaara the father?" she asked softly as she pulled back. She glanced around to make sure Sasori and Komushi were far away from them.

"He is," Azumi nodded with a smile. "And he has been taking great care of me to make sure that both the baby and I are healthy and safe."

“I couldn’t imagine him doing any less,” she took both of Azumi’s hands in hers and pressed kisses to the backs of them. “I have never been blessed with motherhood but I know it can be a beautiful
and trying time. You can ask anything of me.”

“Thank you so much, Lady Sachiko,” Azumi grinned, pulling her into another hug. When they pulled apart, she looked around. “Is he here yet?”

Sachiko scanned the room then put her hands on Azumi’s shoulders to gently spin her around. “He is,” she grinned. Gaara caught Azumi’s eye and grinned. He was dressed to the nines. The deep royal blue of his robe contrasted perfectly with his hair. His make up was done a little neater and he was almost wearing more jewelry than Sasori all tastefully put together. “He really dressed up tonight,” Sachiko grinned, looking between the two of them.

"He did," she said softly, unable to hide her grin as he approached them. Naga perked up, hissing excitedly when he saw Gaara. Once Gaara was close enough, he stretched out to wrapped around him, nuzzling against his jaw then moved to wrap around both of them and push them closer together.

“Your snake has the right idea,” Sachiko giggled. “It’s good to see you.” She looked between them and swooned softly.

“It is good to see you too, Auntie,” Gaara smiled, his arms wrapping around Azumi’s waist, per Naga’s encouragement.

“I heard the good news,” she whispered excitedly.

"You did?" Gaara chuckled.

"Of course," Sachiko grinned. "Congratulations! How far along are you?"

"Two months," Azumi answered. "And someone has already vowed to be a guardian," she smirked, looking down at Naga.

“Handsome, strong,” Sachiko smiled at Naga, “and caring. The complete package!” Naga hissed proudly. If he could blush, he very well might have. Gaara chuckled, brushing his fingers over Naga’s cool scales.

“I could not have asked for anyone better,” Azumi smirked, petting Naga’s head. He came up and tapped his nose against hers.

“Now, Gaara,” Sachiko said, taking Azumi’s hand. “I know she’s having your child but this is my birthday party, so I’m going to steal her away for a little while,” she grinned.

“Well, I can’t say no to you,” Gaara chuckled. Naga unwrapped from both of them and remained on Gaara’s shoulders.

“I just want to get to know her is all.”

"By all means," Gaara chuckled. "Have fun," he grinned then gave the room a sweeping look to make sure no malevolent eyes were prying before kissing Azumi’s cheek. "Naga and I are going to go find something to eat." Naga hissed excitedly, nuzzling Gaara's jaw as they rejoined the crowd.

Sachiko shook her head then gently tugged Azumi’s hand away from the drink table towards the edge of the crowd. "You two are going to be beautiful parents," she said over her shoulder.

“Do you really think so?” Azumi asked softly. “Thank you,” she chuckled. She let Sachiko lead her to a balcony area where there were fewer people and a view of the river running out of the city.
“Oh, wow,” she whispered, taking in the sights.

"Oh, yes, of course!" Sachiko purred. She turned so her back leaned against the railing of the balcony. "You're both absolutely stunning but I hope they get your eyes," she grinned. Azumi's golden eyes were practically glittering in the night light. "And from what my husband has told me, you make Gaara light up in a way that nothing else in the world has. Children deserve parents that truly love each other," she hummed, scooting a little closer to Azumi. "I also hear," her grin was practically feline, "you can dance!"

“Oh,” she chuckled, realizing just how close Sachiko was. “I can,” she smiled. “I do. I danced in my village and performed for parties. I danced with Lord Sasori at the night market as well.”

Sachiko gasped then pouted. "I knew there was a reason I wanted to go this year," she sighed mournfully. "Sasori is a good dancer but I would love to see you dance. Do you prefer dancing with a partner or by yourself?"

“Well,” she hummed in thought, “I usually dance with snakes so I suppose I prefer a partner,” she chuckled. “I have only danced alone a handful of times.”

“Oh, like your companion earlier?” Sachiko asked. “He was adorable. Moving with another person takes skill but moving with an animal is something else entirely. I would love to see you dance.”

“I would love to dance for you,” she grinned. “And I think Naga would also love to show you what he can do. We danced together when we first met.”

"From the start?" she questioned. "You two haven't been together for very long then?"

“No, but he knew who I was before we met...so it feels like we have known each other for a long time. And he is almost always with me. And very protective...at this point, I do not know what I would do without him.”

The older woman gave her a serene smile. "Animals have the most profound effects on us," she said softly. "I'm glad my nephew had enough heart to let you keep him," her smile faded. "I'm sure Sandaime has told you this already but if you ever need to run away our home will always be open to you."

Azumi nodded and smiled. “He has. And I am truly grateful to both of you for it.” She hummed softly as she turned to lean against the railing and look out at the river. “I almost begged for sanctuary a couple of months ago...right after that fundraiser when Lord Sandaime announced what he was working towards.” She rested her chin in her hand. “But a few nights later, Lord Sasori and I came to an understanding of how we truly feel about each other and I realized I can handle him a little longer. Gaara started staying more frequently and I have two snakes that will protect me if he were to come at me with malintent again. Especially now that I am pregnant.”

Sachiko's face set a little grimmer for a moment. Sandaime had told her about what their nephew had done in reaction to his announcement. They had discussed that very night if they should go over to steal her away but in the end, they had not. It made her feel much more at ease to know this incredibly strong woman before her was surviving despite the monster she lived with. "You are part of this family now," she said softly, putting a hand gently on Azumi's arm. "You and this baby will be accepted wholeheartedly. I'm glad you have all this protection."

“I do not think I would have survived this long without it, to be quite honest,” she chuckled softly. “Ah, I am sorry. I should not be bringing your mood down with this story on your birthday. That is quite rude of me.”
“Nonsense!” the birthday girl's face lit back up. "I said I wanted to get to know you! You are my future niece-in-law of course!” She grinned, opening her arms to pull Azumi into a hug. "We can never replace your family but this auntie will do her best to spoil you now that I've got you," she grinned as she pulled back. "Any woman strong enough to deal with even half of what you've put up with deserves the respect of the Gods themselves."

'So you are a goddess,' Azumi thought, taking that as Sachiko admitting to being an actual goddess and confirming her earlier suspicions. “Thank you,” she smiled. “I could not ask for much more now that I am hearing that. If I ever see my family again, I am sure they would be happy that I have been accepted into another one.”

"Alright, I think I've squirreled you away for long enough," Sachiko smiled, stepping back to give the girl space again. "You may not be able to drink but you are eating for two. And Shira has the best food in the whole city! Let's go get something to eat!"

“Oh, that is right,” Azumi grinned, letting herself get led back into the party, “Shira is here.” Sachiko led her through a crowd and toward the kitchen. As soon as they entered the kitchen, they were hit with the smells of everything Shira had made and was making. “Oh, wow,” she said, feeling her stomach growl immediately.

"Hey!" Shira turned around, wearing an apron and his hair pulled back. He grinned, setting down the tasting dish and ladle he was carrying to greet his two new guests. "My two favorite ladies! You two want anything special?" He did his best to smooth down his hair and keep his cool in front of Sachiko.

"Mm,” Sachiko hummed in thought. She spotted a dish on the counter that one of his assistants had just pulled out of the oven and gasped. “Is that macaroni bechamel?” she grinned.

Shira turned and looked at it. “It is,” he chuckled. “Your favorite, right?”

"Absolutely!” she laughed. Azumi’s has dropped slightly at how adorable this woman was. Sachiko ran over to the dish and bit her lip. “Can I have some?” she asked pleadingly with big eyes and batting lashes.

Shira was done for. He blushed hard, laughing a little loudly. “Of course, Milady,” he grinned. “It is your birthday after all. You can have anything you want!”

Sachiko grinned and cupped Shira's face, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "Thank you, Shira," she said. Azumi chuckled softly, watching Shira blush even more.

“You’re most welcome, Milady,” his voice cracked a little. He was on cloud nine when Gaara walked into the kitchen.

“Trying to kill Shira, Auntie?” Gaara chuckled. The chef handed Sachiko and Azumi each a bowl so they could dish some food out.

"Never!” Sachiko said. "I could never kill such a handsome young man.” Shira made a small whimpering sound.

Azumi served herself and stood next to Gaara, feeding him a forkful of her food before taking a bite herself. "It is hot in here," she said softly. "He is going to pass out," she teased.

“I think he’ll go happily,” Gaara chuckled, accepting another forkful. He kissed her cheek discreetly, slipping an arm around her waist. “Having fun yet?” he asked as he pulled her close.
"I am having a great time," she chuckled. "I may also have a crush on your aunt as well." She ate a few more bites of her food and reached for a glass among many of the same drink she had asked Shira to make a few nights before. Naga peeked over Gaara's shoulder and moved down a little to tap his nose against her cheek. "Are you two having a good time?" she chuckled.

“I had a feeling that would happen,” Gaara giggled softly. “She has that effect on people. Shira swears she is a goddess,” he smirked. Naga hissed a laugh and told her he was having the best time. Shira has brought food for Naga and he was now a very full and happy snake.

"I am glad to hear that," she smiled at the snake.

"Shira made extra of what he fed Naga," Gaara told her. "I'll bring it over later for Ryuga."

"Thank you," she grinned, pulling him into a quick kiss and then feeding him another bite of her food. "Did you see your cousin and his scarab?"

“I think I saw Komushi trying to talk up a few of my distant cousins and Sasori was trying to melt into the wall while simultaneously pulling Komushi away from the girls,” he chuckled. “They might both be drunk already.”

“Will he still be able to dance if he is drunk?” Azumi asked Gaara softly.

"Of course," Gaara smirked. His hand slipped to her shoulder to gently curl a loose piece of her hair. "If anything he might actually relax and be more fun." He kissed her temple. "I wouldn't worry about it."

“Oh...alright...” She supposed Sasori would be less likely to purposefully put her in a trance if he was intoxicated. She fed him one more bite then finished her food and her drink. Shira’s assistant took her bowl and cup from her once they realized she was done. She mumbled her thanks to them and wrapped her arms around Gaara.

“There she is!” Sandaime suddenly appeared in the doorway. He strode over to his wife and stole a kiss between her bites of food. “How is the food?” he asked teasingly.

“IT’s amazing!” Sachiko beamed. “As always,” she chuckled. Shira swooned softly behind her as he continued making a few other dishes.

“I hope you two didn’t get into too much trouble,” Sandaime smirked at Azumi and Sachiko.

“It’s my birthday,” Sachiko grinned. “I can get into as much trouble as I want and bring whoever I want into it.”

“She is not wrong,” Azumi mumbled softly.

"That you can, my love," he laughed boisterously. He wrapped his arms around his wife to pick her up and pull her into a kiss. "It might be good for you to find someone who can keep up with you," he grinned. "But I think right now your husband would care for a dance," he smirked. "Think you'd be interested?"

"Mmm, a dance with him," she looked over her shoulder at Azumi and Gaara. "You think I should give that Sandaime guy a chance?"

"I hear he's pretty handsome, Auntie," Gaara grinned.

Sachiko hummed and looked back at Sandaime, gently gripping his jaw and turning his face very
slightly as if inspecting. “Yes, he is handsome,” she chuckled.

“I say give him a chance,” Azumi said. “He may turn out to be the love of your life.”

"The love of my life?" She gave her husband a devilish smirk. "We'll see about that. Take me to the dance floor!" she demanded with a laugh.

"As you wish, my lady," Sandaime chuckled, spinning with her in his arms and walking towards the door.

"Come join us!" Sachiko called to Azumi and Gaara. "I want to see you two dance!"

"Careful, Gaara, she might steal Azumi again."

"Will," Sachiko corrected her husband. "I will steal her away," she giggled as Sandaime carried her further down the hall.

Gaara shook his head looking down at Azumi. "I think my aunt might have a crush on you, too," he chuckled, taking her hand. "Care for a dance?"

She brought his hand up to kiss his knuckles. "I would love a dance," she smiled, letting him lead her after Sandaime and Sachiko.

As they rejoined the main hall the party was in full swing now. People were already taking to the dance floor as the band played. Sandaime put Sachiko down, took her hand and gave her a low bow before twirling her further into the crowd.

Gaara took a deep breath, giving Azumi an almost nervous smile. "I'm sorry in advance," he chuckled, giving her a low bow.

“Do not apologize,” she smiled. “Just follow me until you feel comfortable enough to take over.”

She led him to a part of the crowd that they could move in and started moving with him, keeping it slow enough for him to follow and gradually going faster every time she felt him get comfortable with their moves. He grinned at her, wrapping his arm around her waist and pulling her closer as he felt bolder. They worked their way to the middle of the dance floor where Sandaime and Sachiko were barely touching the ground as they moved.

"Oh," Gaara whispered in Azumi's ear. "Look who got suckered into dancing." He nodded to the other side of the dance floor where Sasori and his mother were keeping up easily with his aunt and uncle.

Azumi looked over at Sasori and chuckled. “He is warming up for later,” she smirked. “I wonder if his scarab courted anyone to the dance floor yet.” Just as she asked that, Komushi drifted by with Sasori's father in his arms.

"Well," Gaara laughed as he dipped her. "He found someone." Sasori's father was clearly in the lead.

She tilted her head back to look at Komushi and chuckled as Gaara brought her back up. “Amazing,” she said. They continued to move together, Naga slightly guiding Gaara as he wrapped more around his waist.

"I told you everyone in our family dances," he grinned. He caught sight of his siblings a few people over. "Oh, you might be able to meet my sister and her fiance." He started to find his groove, taking the lead. He leaned in, tapping their noses together as they moved. He wished he
could kiss her but it was too risky.

“I would love to meet your sister,” she said. She felt the moment he was comfortable in their dance. She shared a look with Naga and the snake hissed excitedly, guiding Gaara to do more complicated moves. Much to Azumi’s surprise, he kept up very well.

"Look at you, Gaara," Sachiko and Sandaime moved closer. "I didn't know you've been working on your dancing," she grinned.

"It helps to have a good partner," Gaara blushed lightly. "Don't steal her just yet," he laughed. "I just found my rhythm."

Azumi chuckled as he spun her around. “But you should show her how well you have been doing,” she said.

“And what better way to do that than to dance with me?” Sachiko smirked.

"I guess that means we should switch partners," Sandaime chuckled. Naga hissed softly, reassuring Gaara he would continue to help him.

"I suppose it does," he laughed softly. The four of them drifted to the edge of the dance floor and Sachiko smoothly took Azumi's place.

"I don't bite," she laughed, seeing how nervous Gaara was.

"Much!" he laughed. "Wish me luck." He smiled at Azumi and his uncle before his aunt whisked him back onto the dance floor.

Azumi and Sandaime watched them for a short moment before she turned to him and chuckled. “You married a literal goddess, Lord Sandaime,” she said.

"I know," he breathed, grinning like the madly in love man he was. "And it's been nothing but a wild ride," he chuckled. "And it would seem Gaara has found one of his own." He gave her a smirk to rival his wife's. "I wonder if she would grace this mere mortal with a dance?" He offered his hand to her.

“Absolutely,” she grinned, taking his hand and letting him lead her away. She moved with him easily. “Gaara mentioned that everyone in your family dances and I believed him but it is nice to actually witness it.”

"Dancing brings everyone together," Sandaime smiled, looking around for a moment to take in his family. "No matter where you are from or what class, there is just something about it." His smile softened when his eyes returned to her. "And it really is something else when you dance with someone you love," he grinned. "Gaara's holding up well over there," he chuckled.

He spun her and she caught a glimpse of Gaara and Sachiko. “He is,” she grinned. “We have been dancing a little bit together. So he can dance with our child.”

"That's precious," he grinned. "He's going to be such a good father." His eyes softened. "There was a time Gaara didn't think he'd ever be fit for a family or even be loved." He looked back at Azumi. "It's good to see him so happy and with someone so perfect for him. Did you find out how far along the little bun is?"

“We did,” she grinned. “I am two months in. So I will start to show soon.”
"So soon!" he gasped softly. He spun her gracefully then pulled her close again. "We'll have to work hard to get you away from Sasori then," he frowned.

"He is going to notice the slightest change," she hummed. "I do not doubt that he will grow suspicious immediately."

"I'm sure after tonight, Sachiko will have a room for you and the baby already set up," he joked but there was a serious undercurrent to his tone. "We will keep you safe, no doubt about that. I just have to work out a few more kinks in the bill and get two more people on the board. Just keep holding out until then if you can."

"I will be fine," she smiled. "Gaara has been staying with me and I have the snakes. Thank you."

"Enough of this serious talk," he chuckled. Sandaime nodded then lifted off the ground a little, moving faster as the music picked up. "Let's get back to celebrating before my little goddess over there steals you away," he grinned, waving for the band to keep playing.

Azumi laughed as she followed Sandaime easily, moving through the crowd. For a moment, they ended up next to Sasori and his mother. She tried not to make too much eye contact with him, especially since they still had to dance together.

"Your little snake girl seems to be having a good time," Sasori's mother commented as the couples drifted away from them. She was gently twirling the ends of her son's hair as they danced. Her eyes landed on Gaara and her sister-in-law. "She and Gaara seem closer than ever."

"Gaara seems to think he can court my slave," Sasori muttered. "He and Komushi have had a boundary issue when it came to her. And she is always quick to hide behind Gaara and Uncle."

His mother's frown deepened. "It's unfortunate she is barren," she said softly. "Komushi I can see but Gaara has never been so disrespectful. Why do you let them near each other if that is the case?"

"Because they both work efficiently in the shop," he grumbled. "That is the only time they are really together. And a few nights ago when he took care of our wounds after a bar fight."

"Bar fight!" his mother gasped. "Sasori you are too old for that kind of nonsense!"

Sasori rolled his eyes. "Mother, it was a matter of honor," he assured her. "It simply could not be let go. That aside, don't expect to see me at Oonoki's for a long while."

His mother sighed heavily. "Don't let it happen again," she scolded.

"I don't go out looking for bar fights," he huffed.

The music slowed to a stop before the next song started. Everyone on the dancefloor slowed with the music, some to catch their breaths and others to vacate the dancefloor, leaving more room for the remaining people.

"May I cut in?" Sasori's father drifted over to them before Sasori could give her a retort. Sasori gave his mother a kiss on the cheek and stepped back with an elegant bow. He turned to Komushi and sighed.

"You're looking tense," Komushi teased. "Azumi might have to beat you up if she catches you stiff during your dance."

"If it'll help," he mumbled, pressing hard into the back of his own shoulder.
"If you can even get ahold of her for it," Komushi added. "Your aunt seems to have latched onto her."

"It's a little irritating," Sasori grumbled. "I don't need her filling her head with the notion of freedom."

"Let's go get you something to eat. You're getting fussy. Your aunt won't do that," Komushi started to tug him towards the door. "And even if she does, Azumi has already told you numerous times she isn't going anywhere. Just trust her."

"I do not trust," Sasori said flat out, shaking Komushi's hold off. "Only fools allow themselves that."

"Now you're just being dramatic," Komushi sighed. "The alcohol is starting to get to you. Now you need to eat. Let's go." He nodded in the direction of the kitchen as he continued on. Begrudgingly, Sasori allowed himself to be led to the kitchen. Everything smelled amazing. Komushi wasted no time in loading up a plate for each of them.

Back on the dance floor, Sachiko had commandeered Azumi once more. "Gaara's improved a lot!" she grinned. "I'm surprised. He's still a little slow but I'm proud of him." She swayed with Azumi to the slower music.

"He has been getting much better," Azumi smiled. "Before the baby is born, I will make sure he is an expert."

"I'm certain you two can do it," Sachiko hummed happily. "Are you hoping for a boy or a girl?" she asked.

"Ah...I am hoping for a boy..." she chuckled. "But I will be just as happy if I have a girl."

Sachiko grinned, a twinkle in her eyes. "I think you'll have a boy for sure." Her tone was resolute as if she had just decided the fate and gender of the child.

"Thank you," Azumi laughed. "I am very excited to meet my son," she smirked. "And I hope he looks like his father."

"Mmm, but I hope he has your eyes," Sachiko giggled. "Gaara's green eyes are nice but I think yours would make for the perfect blend between you and him." They spun and she waved to her husband who was handing Gaara a drink. "But no matter what the child is or looks like, they will be loved."

"This is true," she smiled. She glanced at Gaara and her smiled widened. "We will make sure of it. And hopefully one day he can meet my family."

"Well, once you are free, I don't see why you and Gaara don't take a trip out to your home village?" she asked. "Do you think you could find your way home?"

"Mm...I am not entirely sure. I know there is someone I can ask but...it took months to get here. I am not sure I am prepared for another few months of traveling through the desert anytime soon."

"You traveled mostly on foot though, right?" she asked, after a moment of thought. "I'm sure we could get you proper transport if you ever wanted to."

"I suppose," she chuckled, spinning Sachiko. "But I want to be free and have this child before I even think about traveling."
"Fair enough," she laughed with her. "Oh, I can't wait for the baby shower!" she gushed. "You're having one, no arguments about it! Sasori would lend you to me for a day," she smirked deviously. "He loves his auntie."

“I wish I met you months ago,” Azumi groaned. “Life serving Lord Sasori would have been exponentially better in the beginning.”

"I don't know why it took us so long to meet!" Sachiko huffed. "Sasori is always holed up in his shop or home but my husband manages to visit him. Maybe I should start to come by the shop more often," she giggled. "Unless that would be too obvious."

"It may be obvious but who is he to defy his aunt?" she Azumi smirked. "I am sure that he has a soft spot for you just as he does for his mother who has taken me away from him one day... granted, that was because she was trying to set me up with him."

"Oh, he does," Sachiko smirked. "Aside from you, I suppose he has very intense respect for the women in his family." She opened her mouth again to say something else when she processed the tail end of Azumi's statement. "Set you two up? As in to get married!" She threw her head back in laughter. "You have got to be kidding me! How did that go?"

"It did not go well," she chuckled. "I could never marry a man that has done what he has done to me. And he would never marry his slave. He had to tell her that I am infertile to get her to drop the subject."

"No, I could never imagine any woman would want to be with a monster disguised as a man," she frowned. "Mmm, wait until she finds out how wrong that is." She could not help a small laugh. "Sasori will never find someone to love him with the way he is right now. He does not love himself nor anyone around him. It's unfortunate but probably for the best."

Azumi's smile faded slightly. "He is... very lonely. And it is his fault. He brought it upon himself. Still, I cannot help but feel bad for him."

Sachiko slowed their dancing as the song came to a close. "It is alright to pity him," Sachiko said, glancing at her sister-in-law. "But pity is all you should give. He needs to see that he needs help and can get it without destroying anyone who gets too close to him. He has a very corrosive personality." She took Azumi's face gently in her hands. "No one, especially someone like you, deserves that."

Sandaime walked over to them, leaning down to rest his chin on the top of his wife's head. "I hate to interrupt you lovely ladies but," he kissed the top of her head, "my love, you have gifts to open and some entertainment. Would you care to start that?" he asked her.

Sachiko smiled at Azumi before letting her go then tilted her head back to grin at her husband. "I would love to," she said.

Sandaime chuckled and offered her his arm. "Then shall we?"

She squealed softly and took his arm. "We shall!"

Azumi waved to them as they stepped away and moved to where Sachiko was going to sit and open her gifts as well as view the entertainment. She looked around for Sasori but could not see him or Komushi. However, she spotted Gaara and stood next to him, unwrapping Naga from him and rewrapping him around herself. "Have you seen your cousin?" she asked, lifting his hand to press a kiss to his knuckles.
“I think I saw him and Komushi heading towards the kitchen.” He kissed her temple. “Would you like to go find them together?”

“Sure,” she chuckled, lacing their fingers together and leading him to the kitchen. She spun toward him and away from him the entire walk until the reached the kitchen then gave him a kiss before letting his hand go and walking in.

Komushi noticed them the moment they walked in. Sasori was downing another drink and asking Shira about a specific set of spices he used in the dish he was eating. With the absolute patience of a saint, Shira was trying to answer the man’s questions and grinning through the lecture that followed.

“Gaara! Azumi!” Komushi got up, throwing his arm around Azumi’s shoulders.

"You are quite intoxicated," Azumi mumbled, noticing he pressed more of his weight onto her than he normally did.

"It's a party and there's alcohol," Komushi grinned. "Of course I'm drunk!"

Azumi moved toward Sasori, slowly until Komushi finally let her go. "Are you still alright to perform?" she asked him.

Sasori narrowed his eyes at her, taking a long sip of his drink then setting the cup down. "Of course I am," he clicked his teeth. "What do you take me for? Gaara?" Komushi snorted.

"I will literally spit in your food," Shira cracked his knuckles behind them.

"There is no need to be rude," Azumi said softly. "I am only asking so you do not vomit on me while we are dancing. The gifts are being opened which means we need to be out there." She tapped him on the back. "Come on."

"I won't throw up," he huffed, standing up. "Let's go." He took her hand, pulling her towards the door once more. Gaara growled softly after they passed. He turned on his foot to follow after them with Komushi in tow.

Shira deflated the moment they left. "So intense," he breathed. He washed up before making his way out to join everyone else.
Azumi stayed close to Sasori as he led her back out to the main room where everyone was gathered around a small dancefloor in a semicircle with all eyes on Sachiko as she started opening her gifts. When they got their spots in the crowd, she turned to face him. "Relax your face," she said softly.

His mouth twisted into a tense snarl and his teeth ground together in unconscious defiance. "It is relaxed," he muttered.

She sucked her teeth and rolled her eyes, reaching up to gently rub the area between his brows and then the corners of his mouth. "You are too pretty to be making these faces," she huffed. Her hands moved to his shoulders and she gently massaged them. "Please relax. I do not know why you are so tense, but this is not the time for it."

His body obeyed her hands and worse the moment she touched him. "I'm just annoyed," he pouted. His hand slipped down to pulled her closer to him by the arm. "We have to go up soon." He led her to the edge of the semi-circle and released her hand. "Stay here," he told her then disappeared back into the crowd. He was gone for only a few moments before reappearing. "Okay, after that gift we are going up. So get ready."

"I am ready," she said softly. Naga hissed, saying he was ready too. "We both are." They watched as Sachiko giddily opened up a gift from Kurotsuchi and Oonoki and thanked them.

Sandaime stepped out into the semi-circle with a glass held high. He gently clinked a spoon against the crystal to gather everyone's attention. He waited for them to all quiet down before speaking. "This next gift," he boomed, "requires a little more space." The servants of the house started to lead the crowd back to give Sasori and Azumi enough space to perform their dance.

Sasori nodded to his uncle when there was enough space. He took Azumi's hand and led her in front of his aunt. "Aunt Sachiko," Sasori dipped into a low bow, "I did not bring you a physical gift. Instead, tonight I hope to delight you with a dance from me and my dance partner."


Azumi chuckled softly at her reaction as Sasori moved her into a starting position. Naga hissed softly, pumping himself up for the music to start.

The music started and Sasori started to move. It was nothing like what they usually heard in the city. In fact, it did not sound native at all to the country. "Just follow my lead," he whispered in her ear as he pulled her body flush to his. "This music shouldn't put you in a trance," he promised. "But," he spun her gracefully, then smoothly dipped her low until her head nearly touched the ground, "if it does, don't fight it."

She nodded, relaxing a little in his arms until he brought her back up. Finally putting all of her trust in him for these few moments, she smiled, following his lead easily. And even though Naga was not used to dancing to this type of music, he was able to figure out how to move with them.

Around them, the crowd fell into silent captivation. No one made a sound as they moved in time with the music. Sasori picked her up over his head and in a tricky move, smoothly rolled her down his back while letting Naga flow over his body to meet her back on the ground.
“Oh, wow,” she breathed softly. He flashed her cheeky smirk before pulling her back up and spinning her as he moved so they wound up back to back. They started to move faster in time with the music’s building crescendo. Naga was just in time with them, flowing between them as if he was part of them. Their feet seemed to barely touch the ground, every touch between them light. They moved for a few more minutes, keeping the crowd’s attention the entire time. Naga moved to coil around Sasori when he sensed the final move. Sasori lifted her leg, pressing it against his own hip and almost wrapping it around his waist as he dipped her. Azumi let out a small breath, unable to hide the smile on her face. "Wow," she whispered again in the silence before the roar of applause from the audience. He pulled her back up smoothly. Smirking at her, he spun them and they dipped into a low bow before his aunt and uncle.

Sachiko’s eyes were sparkling with delight. She was on her feet the moment they rose from their bow. “Phenomenal!” she cried, throwing her arms around both of them. “That was absolutely breathtaking, you two!” Naga hissed, slithering over Azumi’s shoulder. “Ah! I mean you three,” she corrected herself with a giggle.

Once she let them go, they bowed again. "Happy birthday, Lady Sachiko," Azumi grinned. Naga hissed happy birthday to her as well, reaching his head out to tap his nose against hers. Azumi reigned him in gently.

Sachiko giggled when Naga tapped his nose to hers. "I've never been kissed by a snake," she smiled, reaching out with the tip of her finger to pet the top of his head. "Thank you, both of you," she said again. She took Azumi's hand and kissed Sasori's cheek. "You two should go get something to drink and eat for all of your hard work." It was more of an order rather than a suggestion.

Sasori nodded and waited for his aunt to release Azumi’s hand. "Happy birthday," he said to her again before taking Azumi’s hand to lead her back to the kitchen.

Azumi kissed the top of Naga’s head as they walked into the kitchen. "How are you feeling now?" she asked Sasori, gently rubbing his back.

He relaxed into her hand before speaking. He was still holding her hand loosely in his. "Better," he said softly. "I haven't danced like that...with anyone before." He looked at her from the corner of his eyes through his bangs. "Did the music put you in a trance at any point?"

She shook her head. "No," she answered. "Not at all." Naga shook his head as well. She picked up a glass of water with her free hand and gave it to him. "That was also probably the most relaxed I have been while dancing with you," she chuckled.

"I could tell," he chuckled, accepting the glass. "I honestly hadn't planned that aerial move but it seemed right at the moment." He pulled to small plates out for them and started to pile it with small morsels of different foods.

Once he handed her her plate, she started eating, not realizing how hungry she was even though she had just eaten not too long ago. "We should do that again," she smirked. "If we perform at the night market."

Sasori raised his eyebrow in slight surprise. He nodded, taking a bit of his own food and humming thoughtfully through it. "That can be arranged," he tilted his head. "Maybe we can incorporate Ryuga but only if you can ensure he will behave. I trust Naga," he said, looking at the snake. "To a degree," he added.

"Ryuga will behave as long as he does not think I am in any sort of danger," she said. She gently
tapped Naga's nose. "They will both behave."

"Mmm," Sasori nodded, a little absentmindedly. "I'll make the arrangements and decide on the music. I can't guarantee the music won't affect you but trust nothing will happen to you," he told her.

She nodded as she finished up her food. Without thinking much about it, she loaded it up again and started eating. "Your aunt is a very sweet woman," she said. "Beautiful, too. But that part comes as no surprise. Everyone in your family is beautiful," she muttered.

"She is," he smiled fondly, watching her load up again. "But be careful. She comes with her own set of talons." He poured himself a cup of some dark drink and took a sip. "She's easily one of the most devious people in our family," he said with a small chuckle.

"Also not surprising," she smirked. "From the short time I have spent with her, I could tell she loves getting into a little bit of trouble every now and then. But I am sure she can get away with everything."

"Getting away is an understatement," Sasori scoffed, rolling his eyes hard. The smile tugging at the corner of his lips betrayed him. "My uncle lets her do whatever she wants and I will admit I am prone to caving to whatever she asks of me. Sandaime is almost as loved in the city as she is."

"And that golden, angelic aura around her is hard to ignore," she chuckled as she finished her second plate.

"Is that what that is?" he laughed an almost genuine laugh.

She looked around the kitchen and found a few slices of strawberry shortcake. The smallest excited gasp came out of her and she picked up two, putting them on the plate. His smile widened hearing her little squeal. "Want one?" she asked, offering one of the two slices to Sasori.

He looked at the cake in slight surprise. "Strawberries? Shira pulled out all the stops for my aunt. Those cost an arm a leg to get out here." He held out a hand to accept the offered cake.

"Do they?" she hummed, cutting off a small piece and feeding it to him. "This is my second favorite cake. And this is probably the best I have ever had of it."

"Mmm," he hummed softly, around the fork. He swayed a little, sipping from his cup to wash the piece down. "Everything Shira makes is good," he said factually. "What's your first favorite?" He looked at her with half hooded eyes. The alcohol might have been catching up to him now.

"Chantilly," she answered simply as she ate a piece. She looked up at him and noted the confused look on his face. "It is a layered chocolate cake with a frosting that is basically coconut frosting without the coconut. It is a local cake from my region."

"I see," he nodded, taking a sip. "I hear Shira likes to experiment with different regional foods," he mumbled. "Maybe he could make it so I could try it," he opened his mouth with a cute little noise indicating he wanted another piece of cake. He leaned forward a little at the same time someone walked in. His mouth snapped shut and he snarled at them. They went wide-eyed, catching the angry lord and backtracked quickly after grabbing a parfait. He humphed then opened his mouth once again with the cute little 'ah' noise.

"You want to try it? I did not even think to ask him," she chuckled, feeding him another piece and then eating one for herself. "I will ask him when I see him."
"Yes, there are so many different cuisines in this city but it seems your village has slipped through the cracks," he smirked. "It's good to try new things. His restaurant is only open at night though." He finished off his glass and poured another. "Here," he offered her the glass for a sip. "Maybe...we should go some time. It's been a while since I visited. Mmm, but my uncle likes going there," he pouted.

"Just because your uncle likes going does not mean you should avoid going," she said. She pressed the glass to her lips and smelled the wine in the glass then handed it back to him without drinking it. "It would be nice to go somewhere and not get into a brawl with...undesirables."

Sasori laughed, pulling the glass back to his lips. He took a sip and leaned heavily back against the kitchen counter. "That would be ideal," he muttered. He reached over and pulled a grape from a bowl of fruit. "I'll see about going," he said softly. He fell silent, swirling his glass for a few moments. "I want to go home," he said even softer.

She frowned, leaning against the counter next to him and eating a few more pieces until she finished the cake. "If you leave, will you have to hear anything from your mother?"

"Probably..." He paused then spoke again. "Then again, there is this point in my aunt and uncle's parties where everyone just...sections off," he sighed heavily. "Lots of drinks and places to hide usually do that. She's most likely attempting to make another child with my father at this point." His tone was a breathy laugh mixed with bitterness.

Azumi's jaw dropped slightly, trying to process what he just said. "What?" was all she could say after a few moments. 'Is there an orgy going on? Why are we not out there?'

"Yeah, I usually leave the parties around this time," he sighed, putting his cup down on the counter next to him and hanging his head. "Everyone is uh...pretty in love in my family and among their friends," he laughed humourlessly. "Imagine me as a big brother." He went silent for a few moments. "Gaara usually leaves around this time too since he doesn't bring dates," he added.

'Whatever it is they are doing out there, I want to do it with Gaara,' she thought. She looked at him and then sighed. "I see. So I suppose Lord Komushi is going to leave as well?"

"Oh, fuck, Komushi!" Sasori gasped. "I totally forgot about him," he groaned, pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes. "Let's go find him and Gaara," he grumbled. "Might as well split up." He looked at Naga, swaying on his feet as he pushed off the counter. "You might want to shield your little eyes." He gently tapped the snake’s nose.

"Are you sure about that?" she smirked, pressing a hand to his back when she saw him sway. "You look like you are about to topple over," she teased as they walked to the door together.

"I've been worse," he waved her off with a long yawn. "Just meet me by the entrance when you find either of them," he mumbled. They made their way back down the hall. The dazzling lights of the party had significantly dimmed. In place of the swinging music from earlier, there was a low, easy kind of music play. Sasori sluggishly looked down at Azumi. "The music...won’t bother you, will it?" he asked her softly. There was a soft set of giggles and possibly a moan from a nearby darkened alcove.

She could already feel a headache coming on. "I will try not to let it," she mumbled. "If I do not meet you in front within ten minutes, it would be safe to assume I succumbed to a trance."

"Noted." He nodded and set off to find Komushi. Naga hissed softly, telling her he was going to hide. He was being hit harder by the music and was quickly losing it.
"I will meet you outside," she said softly to Naga. He quickly moved to the floor and made his way out to the front to wait for them. Azumi continued on in another direction, looking for Gaara. She tried to avert her eyes from anyone who may have been a little too indecently exposed and made an attempt not to look as uncomfortable as she felt whenever she heard a moan coming from the patches of darkness that were around her. "I would rather be making the noises than awkwardly hearing them," she muttered softly to herself.

Suddenly from behind her, a hand slipped over her waist and pulled her close. "Azumi," Gaara's voice whispered in her ear. He felt her body tense the moment he touched her. "Are you okay?" he asked her softly.

She relaxed against him as soon as she heard his voice and smiled. "I am fine," she said, keeping her tone soft. She turned around in his arms and wrapped hers around him.

He cupped her face, pulling her into a deep kiss immediately. The taste of alcohol tinged the kiss. His lips started to drift down her neck but he stopped himself. "Sorry," he breathed, pulling her closer. "Is the music bothering you?" He ran his fingers through her hair.

"I am fine," she repeated, pulling him into another kiss. She pulled away very slightly and looked into his eyes. "Are you drunk?" she smirked.

"Just a little," he grinned, his cheeks flushed in the darkness. His hands slipped down from her back to hold her butt. "Kankuro may have challenged me to a drinking game while you were gone," he started to kiss down her neck again, pressing his hips closer to hers. He bit his lip, pulling back again with another laugh. "You were amazing tonight," he said against her skin. "I couldn't look away."

"Thank you," she said softly, sliding her hands up to lace her fingers in his hair. "I am glad you enjoyed it." She kissed along his jaw and down his neck, biting down gently.

He moaned softly as he pulled her legs up around to wrap them around his hips. "I'll admit," he kissed her again, biting her lip, "I was kind of jealous watching you two tonight." He licked her lip before kissing her again.

"There is no need to be jealous," she hummed against his lips. "It was only a performance." She pressed herself against his chest and pulled him into a deep kiss, almost getting lost in a trance during it but pulling herself out of it just as she pulled away from him very slightly.

Gaara hummed against her lips, following her a little when she pulled away. He pouted a little, tilting his head. "Sorry," he said again softly. He moved his hands to take hers, lacing their fingers together. "I shouldn't have gotten so drunk," he blushed a little harder than what was already there, thanks to the alcohol. "Not when you can't drink either," he was a little too intoxicated to tell if the music was bothering her or not but he felt a little guilty.

"It is fine," she chuckled. "I would never stop you from indulging." She could feel the trance coming on again and fought it off. She pulled him into another kiss and hummed softly, lacing both her hands into his hair and pushing into it. Suddenly, the music got a little more intense, all concentration was lost and before she could fight it, she was lost in a trance.

Across the mansion, Sasori was suddenly pulled into one of the many curtained alcoves he had been taking risky peeks into. A bottle of honey wine was suddenly pressed to his lips by someone and he heard the soft giggle of women around him. Too drunk to care, he started to drink and relax into the cushions and a woman who was pressing her hands along his body.
"About time you joined us," Komushi's voice broke through Sasori's hazy confusion.

Sasori pulled the bottle from his lips and grunted softly. “We have to leave,” he said, not getting up or making any effort to move.

“Aw, but the party is just getting good,” Komushi pouted, taking a long sip from another bottle as a second woman was kissing down his chest and stomach.

"It won't be good in the morning." Sasori swallowed a moan with another swig from the bottle as the woman touching him bit down on his neck.

"You need to loosen up, Sasori," Komushi grinned, pulling his woman into a kiss. "We're young and your uncle rarely throws parties!"

“That doesn’t make me want to stay,” Sasori muttered, subconsciously sliding his hand down the woman’s back to rest on her hips as she kissed down his neck and chest.

“You're not moving though,” Komushi smirked, leaning back as the woman that was on him brought his pants down.

“I'll get to it,” Sasori muttered, biting back another moan when she slid her hand into his pants and started stroking him.

Just as things started to get heated in their alcove, Kenzou walked in through the curtain, holding another woman with her legs wrapped around him.

“Aaagh!” Komushi groaned.

“Nope! We’re leaving,” Sasori shook his head. Together, both men got up quickly, vacating the women’s roaming hands. They bolted from the alcove, leaving a very confused and suddenly very lucky Kenzou with all three of the women.

They walked down the halls angrily. Sasori still had the bottle in his hand and he took a long swig.

“Give me that,” Komushi grumbled, snatching the bottle from him and taking a swig of his own.

“We’re going to need more than that to forget this,” Sasori huffed.

“There’s plenty in the kitchen,” Komushi started for the room. Sasori followed suit, ready to pour it on his eyeballs if it meant washing away the image of Kenzo getting laid. They entered the kitchen, making their way straight for the alcohol and grabbing everything they could carry in their arms then made their way back through the halls to the front of the mansion. They found a free couch and cracked open a bottle each. Each stewing in their irritation, they started to people watch.

“Is that...your aunt and Shira?” Komushi leaned forward, looking at the cook definitely making out with someone who very much resembled the woman of his dreams.

Sasori squinted hard, trying to make out the details of the woman’s face. “Can’t be,” he muttered. “She’s missing the golden aura.”


“Yeah, it’s...pretty weird,” Sasori hummed. “But she’s a literal goddess so it makes sense,” he shrugged.
“She is,” Komushi chuckled.

They continued to drink and finished most of their bottles. They each had two left before they figured they actually could not continue. At this point, they were both blacked out drunk. “Let’s take the rest home,” Sasori said through a hiccup.

Komushi laughed at his hiccup and then hiccuped himself. “Alright,” he chuckled, followed by Sasori laughing at him and then hiccuping again. The pair of them held onto each other as they made their way towards the front doors.

Somewhere deeper in the house, Gaara had slid to the ground, pulling Azumi into his lap with his back pressed against the wall. Her neck was marked beyond anything Gaara had ever risked before and for once, he did not seem to mind. Azumi moaned softly as he bit her neck again. She gripped his shoulders and pulled him down on top of her so they laid on the floor. She wrapped her legs around him tighter and pressed her hips against his and scratched up his back.

Gaara growled lowly, pressing his hips back into her. He pushed his hands up her sides, getting ready to move down her body when he heard someone pass by them. He froze, suddenly panicking silently because he thought it was Sasori. When he deduced that it was not Sasori and they continued walking the turned his attention back to Azumi only to find she passed out.

“Oh, dear,” he mumbled, pressing his ear to her chest to make sure she was breathing alright and her heart was working. Finding that she was okay, he shifted off of her and gathered her in his arms. He made sure to rest her head on his shoulder and pressed a kiss to her temple. “Let’s get you home,” he said softly, starting for the door.

Sasori and Komushi met him at the front door, still giggling like children every time one of them hiccuped. "Aw, she's asleep!" Komushi giggled, tumbling forward to gently poke Azumi's cheek.

"Aw, she's asleep!" Komushi giggled, tumbling forward to gently poke Azumi's cheek. Gaara blinked wide, seeing how absolutely sloshed his cousin and Komushi were. He shifted Azumi's prone body away from Komushi with a childish pout. "She is and we should probably go home," he mustered his best 'voice of sobriety'.

"Can't leave without Naga," Sasori giggled, rocking back and forth on the balls and heels of his feet. "Where is he?"

"He can find his way home," Gaara assure him. "Let's just head home. You two go first so I can watch you," he rolled his eyes.

Komushi grunted and then hiccuped. "Fine, Dad," he muttered, turning to start down the stairs. He stopped just before taking the first step, feeling himself almost fall forward. Sasori was smarter and leaned against the barrier wall of the stairs as he descended. Naga had been waiting for them at the bottom of the stairs the entire time. He noticed Komushi frozen at the top of the stairs and went up to wrap around him and help him down. "Naagaa," he giggled, a grateful breath leaving his lungs. The snake hissed softly, tapping his nose to his jaw then pointed forward, telling him to pay attention.

"Don't help him Naga!" Sasori hiccuped. "Let him fall, he deserves it," he giggled then stumbled himself. Gaara walked behind them, taking his time to make it down the steps with his precious cargo cradled close to his chest. When all three men finally made it to the bottom, they had to take a moment to congratulate themselves and catch their spinning vision before continuing on.
Naga shook his little head wondering how they would all make it home. He dropped to the floor, hissing loudly until all three of them turned their attention to him. He raised up most of his body and started moving in the direction of Sasori’s home, continuing to hiss loudly until they followed him. He was also calling on any other nearby snakes to help him get the group home, realizing just how drunk they were. The stumbling group was soon being herded by a fair-sized group of snakes, keeping them in line as they guided them home.

By the time they reached Sasori's mansion, Komushi had to crawl up the stairs and Sasori was trying to play off his crawl by sitting down every few steps to laugh at his friend. Gaara needed quite a bit of help from a few snakes to steady himself as he carried Azumi up the steps. Oh, so slowly, they made their way to Sasori's room.

Haphazardly, Komushi started to disrobe until he was just wearing his pants. Sasori was very carefully pulling off his jewelry while Gaara laid Azumi down in the middle of the bed. He pouted as he took off her jewelry. He wanted to kiss her forehead. He could not help but think how adorable she looked in her sleep.

"Sasori, we're staying the night," Komushi chuckled, falling onto the foot of the bed.

Sasori said nothing but grunted his response as he crawled into bed, latching onto Azumi and pouting when he realized that she was asleep and could not scratch his head like he wanted.

Gaara pouted even hard. He gently pushed Sasori's hands away but that only made the man latch on tighter.

"Mine," Sasori hissed, nuzzling his face into her hair and neck. Gaara put his hands on his hips and huffed. He backed off only so he could strip down to his pants as well and crawl into the bed and curl around the other side of Azumi.

All three of them knocked out within moments of each other. Naga coiled up on the daybed and hissed a sigh, shaking his head and how much of a mess all of them were. The snakes that helped hissed softly, asking him if he would prefer they stay to be able to take care of them. He nodded and thanked them. They all took up positions throughout the room, coiling comfortably to settle in for the night.

At some point in the night, Komushi sat up on the foot of the bed and realized he was the only one not in bed. He stood up, looking at Azumi encased between the two redheads and pouted. He wanted to hold Azumi. He sighed and opted to spoon Sasori when Gaara had elbowed him hard in the gut. His vision was still swimming when he laid his head back down. He buried his nose in Sasori's hair who in turn pressed into Komushi's chest. They all slept soundly through the night and well into the late morning.

Chapter End Notes

If you ever visit Hawai‘i, try a chantilly cake. It's absolutely bomb.
The first one to wake up was Azumi. The first thing she focused on was how nauseous she felt. ‘Ugh, morning sickness,’ she thought. She groaned softly, burying her face into whoever was directly in front of her. She thought it was Gaara until she slowly processed that she had no recollection of going to bed with him. She opened her eyes very slightly, seeing Sasori instead. With a slight pout, she pulled away as much as she could while still in his arms. She felt someone behind her who she realized also had an arm over her. She slid her hand down to lace her fingers with them and realized from the familiar feeling that it was Gaara. Confused, she turned her head to look at him. 'Is this real?' she thought. She turned back to Sasori then noticed someone behind him. The dark hair told her immediately that it was Komushi. 'What the fuck?'

The next to emerge from dreamland was Komushi. He buried his face further into Sasori’s hair, breathing in the familiar scent happily until he processed who the scent belonged to. His eyes opened wide to see a mess of moppy red hair. He looked down to see the two of them were ass to crotch like lovers. He looked around, completely unable to recall when or how he had wound up in his best friend’s bed, how he wound up spooning him. He zeroed in on the soft sound of two other's breathing and peeked over Sasori’s shoulder to make eye contact with Azumi. “What the…” he mouthed to her.

“I do not know,” she mouthed back, shaking her head. She remembered nothing after succumbing to the trance. She looked back at Gaara when she heard him groan and felt him move closer to her in his sleep. Naga hissed, poking his head up to look at her, telling her that the snakes guided them back because all three men were entirely too drunk to navigate themselves. “Oh…” she hummed.

“What did he say?” Komushi whispered, slowly trying to disentangle himself from Sasori.

Sasori whimpered and rolled over, throwing his leg onto Komushi’s hips and burying his face in the other man’s chest. He moaned softly then tensed up. His eyes snapped open in horror. “What...the...” he pulled back, looking up to see who he was wrapped around.

Komushi chuckled, finding it a great opportunity to mess with Sasori in his just-woken-up groggy state. “Finally got that foursome I always wanted,” he smirked.


The impact of Sasori hitting into Azumi jerked Gaara awake. “Hnnng,” he whined, holding onto Azumi tighter.

“What the fuck is going on here?” Sasori hissed lowly, looking around. Little snakeheads poked up from all over the room, he was in bed with the three people he spent most of his time with, his head was pounding and he had no clue how any of it had happened.
“Thank your saviors,” Azumi told him. “They brought you home last night. All three of you blacked out.” She turned slightly to look back at Gaara and scratched his head gently, trying to wake up him. She was sure he was just as hungover as the other two. “And they said they will take care of you since you are basically incapacitated today.”

“How kind of them,” Sasori grumbled, shielding his eyes from the light pouring in through a small crack in the curtains. Naga slid over and tugged the curtain shut.

“Please tell me I’m not in bed with who I think I am in bed with,” Gaara asked her loud enough for the other two to hear.

“I will push you out, Gaara,” Sasori snapped. “How are these snakes even supposed to care for us?”

"Do not question the snakes," Azumi hummed, scratching his head with her other hand. "I am not hungover, they will be helping me take care of all three of you."

“Suddenly this hangover isn’t so bad,” Komushi smirked, still wrapped around Sasori.

Sasori nearly purred, feeling her fingers in his hair. Gaara buried his face in her hair and sighed, pulling her closer.

"I am going to bring you breakfast and coffee," she said softly, discreetly pressing her butt against Gaara. He pressed his hips back into her, pressing a kiss to her neck just out of Sasori’s sight. "And then I will run baths for you."

"You mean we have to move?" Komushi whined, latching onto Sasori.

Sasori stretched, wiggling out of Komushi’s grasp. "You need it," he grumbled. "You sweat like the pits of hell live inside of you." He thrashed a little to push Komushi further away.

"Whoa! I'm about to fall off!" Komushi latched tighter onto Sasori.

Sasori growled, thrashing more to make him let go. Azumi moved away from him, pressing her body more against Gaara’s. "Calm down, you are going to make your headache worse," she told him. She reached out and grabbed Komushi’s wrists to separate his hands from around Sasori.

Sasori wriggled away from Komushi. He pulled one of the pillows supporting Komushi’s head out from under him roughly so he could use it to cradle his own pounding head.

"You are," Komushi clenched his teeth in pain, "such an asshole!"

Azumi sighed and grabbed one of the pillows from the other side of Gaara that was not being used then gently put it on Komushi’s head. With both of their visions blocked for a moment, she turned toward Gaara and pulled him into a quick kiss. "I will be right back," she said mostly to him but loud enough for the other two to hear.

"Hurry back," Komushi grinned from behind the pillow.

"Bring medication," Sasori groaned.

"Be careful," Gaara added, discreetly running his hand down her arm.

She kissed Gaara again and got out of the bed. "Stay here, Naga," she said. "Make sure those two do not kill each other.” She pointed between Sasori and Komushi then looked around the room at
the bunch of snakes scattered about the floor. "You, you, and you," she said, pointing to three of
them. "Come with me." She waited for them to move closer to her before leaving the room and
heading toward the kitchen.

"So...do you two really not remember the whole snake parade thing?" Komushi asked, rolling onto
his side. Gaara and Sasori both shook their heads then groaned. "Wow..."

"I don't even remember what caused us to drink so heavily," Sasori pressed his hands into his eyes.

"That might have been the point," Gaara snorted.

"I remember almost getting laid though," Komushi grinned, closing his eyes. "What about you
two? Did you almost get laid?"

"I was there," Sasori said. "We almost got laid together."

"You laid each other?" Gaara asked, mishearing his cousin.

Both men made retching noises. "Absolutely not! I would never!" they said in unison.

Gaara looked between them, chuckling softly. "Believe whatever you need to," he snorted.

"You're disgusting," Sasori wrinkled his nose. Gaara simply shrugged.

Komushi groaned, starting to pout. "If we were together and you two were together...that means
Gaara got laid by Azumi! Lucky bastard!"

Gaara blushed slightly and went to defend himself when Sasori spoke first.

"I doubt it," he said. "I'm sure she was in a trance by the time he found her. She was halfway into
one when we split up to find you two."

Gaara did not exactly remember what happened, but he would have known if they did anything.

"Oh, yeah, that music was the type that would do that to her, wasn’t it?" Komushi hummed. "And
you're too decent of a man to try anything, aren't you?" he teased Gaara.

"You mean not a walking piece of fecal matter? Glad you noticed," Gaara rolled his eyes. "I don't
think I was standing much. If anything, I was with Shira...I think."

"No, Shira was definitely making out with Aunt Sachiko's doppelganger," Sasori muttered.

"Oh, I remember that," Komushi breathed. A few moments later, Azumi returned to the room with
a tray of four bowls and four cups of coffee as well as a small pitcher of water. Three of the snakes
that were with her each had a glass for the water. Naga went into the workshop to grab the bottle of
pills for the headaches that all three men had. "There is something we aren't remembering,"
Komushi said with a hard frown.

"I don't know if you want to," Gaara chuckled.

"It's probably for the best that we don't," Sasori nodded, watching Azumi walk back in. The smell
of coffee made all of their eyes roll back in ecstasy but the water pitcher instantly brought the
foamy feeling in their mouths to their attention.

"Your aunt is a goddess and your slave is a saint," Komushi praised Azumi. She set the tray down
on the desk and filled up each of the cups with water. Three snakes brought them over to the three
men while Naga moved onto the bed so each man could take their dosage of pills. "Does anyone else feel...like this is bizarre?" Komushi asked, accepting the cup of water.

"It doesn't just feel like it," Sasori said, taking his own offered pills. "It is weird."

"That is because you probably do not remember anything from last night," Azumi hummed, bringing the cups of coffee over and handing one to each of them. "Granted, neither do I but that was because I was in a trance." Once they had their coffees, she brought over their bowls of breakfast. "Just accept the help and eat."

Gaara, being the good patient he was, had already taken his pill and had moved onto his coffee and breakfast.

Komushi frowned, hesitantly taking the pill and then offered food. "But I don't know where their tails have been," he whined playfully. "I want Naaaga," he chuckled. "I’m just teasing. Do they have names, too?" he asked, reaching out toward the snake to offer a knuckle.

The snake tapped its nose against his knuckle. "Of course, they have names," Azumi said. "But there are ten of them and I do not think you currently have the mental capacity to remember them all." She looked at the one that seemed to get along with him. "Just know that one's name is Vasuki." Two of the snakes went into the bathroom to start running the baths.

"Vasuki," Komushi repeated, looking at his designated helper snake. “I like it!”

Sasori watched the two snakes slip into his bathroom, listening in fascination if they could actually manage to turn the bath on. “You need to double-check that temperature,” he said in a thick voice to Azumi.

“Relax, I will not let you sit in a cold bath,” she muttered, picking up her own coffee and taking a sip. She was going to take her time and eat her breakfast before checking their baths, knowing all three of them were going to be moving slower than normal. Sasori pouted when she did not move right away to make sure everything was in order. He hated being hungover. Like a little old man, he started to eat his breakfast with a little help from his snake.

Gaara, on the other hand, was basking in being taken care of. He flashed Azumi a grin and tipped his bowl toward her to show her he was almost done. He was still exhausted and bewildered that all of them had slept...cuddled through the night but he got to cuddle her and he figured the worse options.

Once she finished her coffee and breakfast, she went into the bathroom and checked the water temperature for both tubs. The snakes got it nearly perfect and she adjusted it to where it needed to be easily. “Your baths are ready,” she said as she walked back into the bedroom.

There was a pause between all three men. They would have to get up. Which meant a head rush, followed by the pounding headache because the meds had not kicked in yet. The three of them looked at each other and a small whimper passed between the three of them.

Komushi resolved himself to move first. He slowly rolled off of the bed and rested on his knees for a moment. He looked like he was getting ready to pray at the edge of the bed for a moment before he slowly used the bed’s edge as leverage to push himself up. Gaara followed suit, exiting the bed in the same manner. Sasori opted to slowly crawl to the edge of the bed so he could swing his feet out from under him and very slowly lower his feet to the ground. All three of them paused, clenching their jaw against the expected throb in their head.
“This sucks,” Komushi groaned.

“That is what happens when you drink too much,” Azumi said, lifting Komushi’s hands to cover his eyes and then pressing a hand to his back to help him walk into the bathroom. “It is bright in here,” she warned. “Strip and get in quickly then I will give you something to cover your eyes.”

“I’ve officially decided,” Komushi started. “You are too good for Sasori and I’m just going to have to take you off his hands.”

“You must still be drunk,” Sasori scoffed behind them. Gaara waited patiently for Azumi to return after helping Komushi.

“You don’t deserve nice things,” Komushi called back then winced.

While Komushi got undressed and stepped into the tub, Azumi grabbed a small towel to cover his eyes and handed it to him once he was settled. “Who is next?” she smirked as she went back into the bedroom with another small towel.

“Me,” Gaara smiled. He reached out to take her hand so she could lead the way.

“You two are really enjoying this,” Sasori grumbled.

“Do not act like you are not enjoying it as well,” Azumi said softly, covering Gaara’s eyes and leading him into the bathroom. She kept his eyes covered while he undressed and then helped him into the tub on the opposite side of Komushi.

Sasori pursed his lips. He would not admit anything. If he was completely honest, he wanted to curl back into bed, latch onto Azumi and sleep the rest of the day away. He held out his arm for her to take and closed his eyes as she came back for him. “Let’s just get this over with,” he sighed.

She smirked, taking his arm and leading him into the bathroom. She brought him right next to his tub and grabbed another small towel for him to put over his face as he got undressed and stepped into the tub. “Do you three want more coffee?” she asked, scratching Sasori’s head.

“Yes, please,” came the tired chorus.

Sasori leaned into her hand, not wanting her to stop. “When you come back,” he said softly to her, “bring a stool and put it next to me.”

She chuckled softly as she pulled her hand away. “Alright,” she whispered back. She left and grabbed their coffee cups and headed to the kitchen to refill them. A few minutes later, she returned, setting their respective cups next to each of them and giving them a head scratch to indicate that she was back. Then she pulled a stool up next to Sasori and resumed scratching his head.

Sasori practically purred in her hands. This was all he wanted out of the wasted day. Komushi and Gaara lounged next to them in the lower pool, content to just sit in the warmth.

“We aren’t going to get anything done today,” Sasori sighed.

“Did you really think you were going to jump back into work after one of your uncle’s parties?” Komushi snickered.

“Well, yeah,” Sasori grumbled. “I didn’t expect to stay for the...after-part.”
Azumi chuckled, combing her fingers through his hair and then scratching his scalp again. “So did you get lucky?” she smirked.

“Think he’d be so grouchy if he did,” Komushi smirked.

“Or even here,” Gaara added.

“I think I was interrupted,” Sasori said grumbled. “It doesn’t matter anyway,” he frowned.

“It does,” Komushi countered. “You were way less uptight when you were fooling around with Mei.”

“I have too much to deal with right now,” Sasori sighed. “I don’t have time to fool around with anyone anymore.”

Azumi sighed, leaning forward just a little. “But maybe you need that stress reliever,” she said softly enough for just him to hear. “Or some sort of stress reliever.”

“I have you,” he said just as softly. “What you are doing right now and your back rubs are relief enough,” he sighed.

She chuckled through a hum. “I see,” she smiled. She was content to just scratch his head and give him massages until she was free. As long as he did not torture her or do anything to harm her child, she was okay with this. “Then I am here.” She brought her other hand up to join her first hand in his hair. He hummed softly, closing his eyes behind the towel.

“Wait,” Komushi perked up in the water. “Are you...scratching Sasori’s head!” he gasped. Gaara paused in his washing up to listen too.

“So what if she is?” Sasori grumbled. “I own her so she scratches my head.”

“I want my head scratched too,” Komushi pouted.

Azumi chuckled again. “Maybe later,” she said.

“Alright!” Komushi grinned then winced.

“You’re not done until I say you are,” he pouted at Azumi.

“I want some too,” Gaara said softly, nearly whispering it.

“I will scratch your head too,” she smirked at Gaara. He perked up, content to have his head scratched. He knew he could cuddle her to his heart’s content later after this all blew over.

“Can I also get a massage?” Komushi asked with a cheeky grin.

“I’m sure the snakes would have a great time crawling all over you,” Sasori growled. Azumi continued scratching Sasori’s head, waiting patiently for him to start washing himself down while the other two finished their baths. Meanwhile, Naga and the other ten snakes made the bed more comfortable for them to get back in bed and rest.

Sasori pulled, reluctantly, away from Azumi’s hands to wash his hair and clean himself up. Once all three of them washed up, the snakes returned to the bathroom to help Azumi get towels for each of them.

Azumi helped Sasori out of the bath first. He dried off and she handed him his robe. Once he had it
on, she led him back to the bed and took the towel from his face since he was comfortably in the dark. She returned to the bathroom and scratched Komushi’s head briefly, telling him that he was next. She took his hand to help him out of the tub and handed him a towel to dry off. As he wrapped it around himself, she led him to the bed and took his small towel from his face so he could find his spot next to Sasori. Then she went back into the bathroom and kneeled next to Gaara, scratching his head then turning his face toward her to pull him into a soft kiss. “Ready?” she asked him, taking his hand.

“As I’ll ever be,” he smiled, stealing one more kiss. He took her hand, letting her pull him from the pool. He felt her pressure the towel into his hand and started to dry off. Similarly to Komushi, he wrapped it around his waist and was led back into the room.

“Wow,” Komushi smirked, sipping his cup of coffee. “You two didn’t doddle as long as we thought you would.”

“We didn’t doddle at all,” Gaara rolled his eyes once his towel was removed.

Once Gaara was in the bed, she crawled onto the foot of the bed and looked at all three of them.

“Where’d all of these pillows come from?” Sasori asked, noticing there were significantly more than he usually had.

“Do not question the snakes,” Azumi repeated.

The snakes gathered behind her. Naga slithered up to rest his head on her shoulder and hissed softly. He wanted to know if they had done well and if she needed anything else.

“No,” she smiled. “Thank you. You did great. All of you.” She kissed the top of Naga’s head. “You are all free to go,” she told the snakes. The ten snakes hissed their congratulations on her pregnancy together. “Thank you,” she chuckled. They told her they were glad they could help then slithered out of the windows and doorway. The boys watched in strange fascination as they left.

“So much power,” Komushi said softly.

Naga hissed softly, telling her he was going back to her room to keep Ryuga company. “I will see you later then,” she said softly. He tapped his nose against hers and then was gone. “It would be stupid of me to ask who wants their head scratched first,” she said to the three men in front of her. “Whichever one of you moves the quickest and gets to me is going first.”

Komushi grinned and simply flipped forward. His head leaned directly in her lap.

“I hate you,” Sasori kicked Komushi in the hip.

Komushi simply gave him a cheeky grin and shifted to be more comfortable in Azumi’s lap. “I win!” he smiled.

Azumi chuckled, combing through his hair with both her hands and then scratching his scalp. “You two are a mess,” she told Komushi and Sasori. “Two bad hangovers within days of each other. How unproductive.”

“Don’t remind me,” Sasori nearly sobbed. He bunched up his knees to press his cheeks into them.

“We’ll catch up,” Gaara assured him.

“That’s not the point,” Sasori whined. “We shouldn’t be playing catch up anymore!”
“Oh, relax,” Komushi purred. “It’s okay to let loose once in a while!”

“Do not worry,” Azumi told Sasori. “It will not be too much to catch up on. We can handle it in a day.” She felt Komushi’s hands slid up her thighs. “Watch your hands,” she whispered to him. He chuckled and left his hands where they were, giving her thighs a squeeze.

“I suppose but still,” Sasori sighed.

“Your aunt didn’t open Azumi’s present at the party,” Komushi hummed. “Think she will use it today?”

“Sandaime probably gave it to her last because he wanted her to use it right away last night,” Sasori said.

“If it wasn’t used last night then it is definitely going to be used today,” Gaara chimed in.

"There's no question that she will like it," Sasori said confidently. "We can ask her about it sometime this week. We will just have to figure out how to invite her out to lunch."

"Oh, that's a fun game," Komushi chuckled. Sasori rolled his eyes, lifting his head.

“It is okay,” Azumi said. “We do not have to ask her about it. I am sure she likes it as well. I have never heard anyone say they do not like the fragrances I made.”

“That sounds cocky,” Komushi smirked.

“Do I not have the right to sound cocky? Since I was able to make something that helped out Lord Kenzou.” Komushi put his hands up in surrender.

"That is a feat," Gaara chuckled.

"I'm still impressed," Sasori shook his head. "It shouldn't have been possible but he actually smelled tolerable at the party."

“Every encounter I have had with him since I made it, he has not smelled bad which means he is using it regularly,” Azumi hummed, recalling that Kenzou is the one that pulled her off of the mongoose and while he held her, she smelled nothing.

"Maybe you should make him more before he leaves," Sasori hummed.

"And maybe we should be wondering if you're secretly a goddess," Komushi nuzzled into her lap a little more.

"If she was, I have a strong feeling you two would have had a reckoning a long time ago," Gaara sipped his coffee.

“I am not a goddess,” Azumi sighed. “This would not be happening for you if I was,” she smirked down at Komushi. She dragged her nail gently down his spine, causing him to shudder from the light touch then went back to scratching his head.

"I'm offended and yet I'm not," Komushi smirked, letting his hands inch up her thighs once more.

Gaara narrowed his eyes, catching the wandering hands and pinched the insteps of Komushi's feet. "Watch it!” he growled. Sasori raised an eyebrow at his cousin.

Azumi grabbed Komushi’s hands and placed them on the bed at either side of her. As soon as her
hands returned to his hair, his hands returned to her thighs. "You are a child," she said softly to him.

"A child does not have a body like mine," he chuckled.

"No, but someone with severe brain damage might," Sasori snapped.

"If I have any form of brain damage, I blame it entirely on you," Komushi fired back, relaxing back in Azumi's lap.

"You have five more minutes and then it's someone else's turn," Sasori growled.

"I was going to go forever," Komushi smirked.

"Oh, I do not have forever," Azumi hummed. "You will need to find a wife to do this for you."

"Problem solved," Komushi grinned. "Azumi, marry me!"

"Declined!" Sasori said with finality. "Aside from her not being free to offer her hand, no dowry you could come up with would ever match the price she is worth."

"She is priceless," Gaara said offhandedly. "The price you paid for her is practically fictional."

"A dowry is given by the bride's family." Azumi said. She looked down at Komushi. "And my father would never give you anything," she smirked. "On another note, I do not tend to find a man who continues to touch me in a way I do not want marriage material." She tapped his hands but he did not move them.

"Mmmm, you're one of those 'no sex before marriage' girls," Komushi smirked. Azumi did her best to refrain from laughing, knowing she was the complete opposite. "Fine, fine." He still did not move his hands. "But what makes you so sure your father wouldn’t like me? I can be pretty charming."

"Your five minutes are up and you aren’t nearly as charming as you think you are," Sasori flicked his feet hard.

Komushi pouted, gripping her thighs harder because he did not want to move. Azumi removed her hands from his hair, indicating that she was done scratching his head. Feeling her hands retreat, he finally admitted defeat. He slowly pushed himself up and just before he pulled away, he kissed her jaw. Gaara and Sasori gripped his shoulders and threw him back.

"Despicable," Sasori grumbled. "Gaara, your turn," he practically ordered his cousin. Gaara jabbed Komushi in the side telling him to move over so he could take his spot.

Komushi chuckled, laying back against the pillows and getting out of the way. Azumi waited until Gaara was comfortably in her lap before running her fingers through his hair and scratching his head. He hummed happily, closing his eyes and keeping his hands respectfully to himself. He nuzzled his cheek into her lap. This was all he wanted.


"You say that like you do not look the same way when I do this to you," Azumi said to both of them. "He looks just as content as anyone would."

"Mmmm, nope," Komushi smirked. "As someone who has a crush on you, I can tell Gaara is a different kind of content."
“You are literally the dumbest person I know,” Gaara rolled his eyes.

"He is a more respectful kind of content," she countered, "since he is not feeling me up like you were the entire time."

Gaara gave him a cheeky smirk and rolled over so he could get more comfortable in her lap.

“We keep telling you that if you want a girl to like you,” Sasori sipped his coffee, “you need to not be a pile of shit.”

"I know how to get a girl," Komushi scoffed.

"I would like to see your actual tactic," Azumi hummed. "Out in the real world, exactly how do you 'get a girl?'"

"Easy," Komushi scoffed. "You swoon them," he smirked as if it were obvious.

"Care to elaborate, O Wise One?" Sasori smirked, turning his cheek against his knees.

Komushi's grin sharpened. "You talk about her, pick up on those finer details you know she put effort into. Use body language and nuance. Not all talk is verbal you know," he winked.

“When was the last time you employed that strategy?” Azumi smirked. “I am honestly curious.”

“I don’t think he ever has,” Gaara mumbled.

"You two think you know a lot about me," Komushi pursed his lips. "If you must know, it was last night," he folded his arms.

"It's kind of gross but I've seen it in action," Sasori defended loosely.

“I must say I am just slightly offended you did not use it on me with how much you have come onto me,” Azumi hummed. She smiled and continued to scratch Gaara’s head. “But only slightly.”

"There's always time to swoon you,” Komushi smirked at her. "The only time it's too late is when one of us is dead."

"Wow," Sasori snorted.

"You're willing to hit on married women too?" Gaara asked but he knew he would.

"Please," Komushi rolled his eyes. "Married women are the most desperate for attention. Almost too easy. Men can really neglect their partners once they think they've nailed them down but women are like plants. They need attention, pruning, love," he said passionately.

“A man who neglects his wife was not worth marrying, to begin with,” Azumi frowned, mindlessly tracing her finger along Gaara’s jaw and the caressing his ear. “I could not imagine living that kind of life,” she muttered.

"Good thing you don't have to," Sasori said, placing his empty mug down. Gaara, who had closed his eyes, cracked one open to shoot his cousin a disapproving glare. "Glare all you want. Uncle can't force that bill through no matter how charismatic he is. Most of the council are slave owners."

“And they’re not going to want to push something through that’s going to change their whole way of life,” Komushi chuckled.
Azumi frowned, moving her hand back to Gaara’s hair. If for some reason, the bill did not pass and Sasori was still legally allowed to own her, she would leave on her own. For the safety of her child, she was willing to take that risk.

“Plus, not everyone on the council even likes him,” Sasori grumbled. "So there's no reason for me to actually worry," he smirked at Azumi. "Sorry if they got your hopes up, but you're stuck with me."

Gaara opened both of his eyes to give Sasori a fuller glare. "Could you not be a complete raging cesspit for two seconds," he grumbled. "You're talking about someone's life here."

"And that someone is rubbing your head on my permission right now," Sasori replied. "If you want that to continue then I suggest you shut up. You're on thinner ice than Komushi."

Azumi felt Gaara move slightly and gently pressed a hand to his shoulder, silently telling him not to make it worse for both of them.

"To be on thinner ice than me," Komushi laughed, "that's saying something."

“Just means she likes me more,” Gaara relaxed back down against Azumi. He clicked his teeth.

“It’s just because you two work together,” Komushi brushed off. “If you had more time with me you’d see the light,” he winked at Azumi.

"I do not think I want to spend any more time with you than I already do," Azumi smirked.

“Ouch,” Sasori hissed. “Should I make you a salve for that burn?”

“Ugh, you’re so lame,” Komushi shook his head. “You never know. I could work my charms on you and make you a believer,” he winked.

“It would take you a very long time,” Azumi chuckled. “I need a lot of convincing.”

"He, unfortunately, has a lot of time," Sasori hummed. "Pretty sure you don't actually do anything when you aren't with me," he smirked wickedly.

"As hard as this is to believe for you," Komushi drummed his fingers against his arm. "You aren't the center of my universe."

“Then what do you do when you’re not with me?” Sasori challenged.

‘Well, I know he goes to clubs,’ Azumi thought, remembering he caught her and Gaara.

"I like to enjoy the finer things in life," Komushi said with an air of refinement.

"Going to clubs and getting high with Kankuro is what you consider the finer things in life?" Sasori raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t forget getting girls,” Komushi added.

“We have come full circle,” Azumi sighed.

“Spend a day with me,” he smirked at her. “Then I’ll show you how charming I am.”

“Uh, no,” she said immediately.
"I second that no," Gaara spoke up.

"I third and finalize that no," Sasori shook his head. "You have five minutes, Gaara," Sasori informed his cousin.

"Then it's my turn again," Komushi grinned.

"I do not think your world and everything will allow that," Azumi hummed.

"He's not my world and everything," he scoffed, rolling his eyes.

"Of course I am," Sasori smirked.

Gaara pouted, pressing a little closer to Azumi. He knew the moment they all went to bed, he could be able to cuddle her again but he figured he had to at least put on a little bit of a show. "Komushi definitely got a longer round," he protested weakly. "I smell favoritism!"

"He didn't," Sasori deadpanned.

"Of course, I'm his favorite," Komushi smirked. "I'm his world and everything."

"You couldn't pay me enough to ever say that about you," Sasori scoffed. "Times up, by the way, move." He nudged Gaara's side with his foot.

Gaara huffed hard through his nose but sat up, moving away from his cousin's wriggling foot. "You're such an ass," he huffed as Sasori took his spot.

Sasori said nothing as he rested his head in Azumi's lap. She chuckled as she combed her fingers through his hair and then started scratching his scalp. "You are going to fall asleep," she teased.

"And?" Sasori closed his eyes. "This is my bed," he smirked. "Your lap is a good enough pillow anyway."

"We could all probably go for a nap anyway," Komushi chuckled. Gaara was curled around a pillow, watching her hands intently.

"I can see how tired you all are," she said softly. "I am sure you are all still fatigued from your hangovers." She could already feel Sasori starting to drift. "And you are already falling asleep," she chuckled.

"Hmm," he hummed, nuzzling her hand. He nodded slightly, drifting further. Gaara nodded, giving a small yawn.

Komushi's eyelids fought to stay open, a sleepy smile tugging his lips. "You took such good care of us," he chuckled. "How could we not?"

"Am I stuck here until you three wake up again?" she smirked, looking down at Sasori. "Or am I free to move?"

"If you can move without me noticing, sure," he smirked back without opening his eyes. "But if I catch you, I get to do something fun later." He cracked open an eye to look at her.

"Something fun?" Komushi mumbled sleepily.

"Don't hurt her," Gaara growled.
"What...do you mean?" she asked softly. 'What if I have to pee?' she thought. 'Or vomit?'

"Just nap with us," Sasori rolled his eyes under his lids. "And relax. Especially you, Gaara, or I'll make you sleep on the floor." Gaara scoffed softly and rolled his eyes.

"I suppose I could nap with you," she hummed.

"Sleep next to me this time," Komushi grinned.

"Not a chance," both redheads said. Sasori sat up and pulled Azumi down so she was pressed between himself and Gaara once more. In his usual fashion, he rested his head on her chest, wrapping his arms around her and latching onto her. Azumi resumed scratching his head as that was what she was put in position for. Gaara shifted so his hand rested discreetly over her head. He slipped his hand into her hair and started to scratch her head. Komushi pouted on the other side of them but he could not keep the sleep away. He turned over and was the first to pass out. Next, she felt Sasori fall asleep on her. She stopped moving her hand for a moment only for him to hum softly and move his head very slightly in her hand, telling her to continue. She rolled her eyes and started moving her hand again.

Gaara chuckled softly. He was going to try his best to stay awake long enough for her. He wanted to kiss her temples. He was so close but so was Sasori. He could not take the risk.

She turned her head to look at him and smiled. "Are you feeling okay?" she whispered.

"More than okay," he whispered back with a smile. "Thanks to you." He nuzzled the tip of his nose against her skin. "You?"

"I feel fine. I am not hungover. But someone is craving something sweet," she smirked.

"I could sneak off to get you something," he whispered to her.

She smiled, pressing a soft kiss to his forehead. "No. You need to rest. I can see how tired you are."

He smiled softly, moving his hand to cup her face. His thumb gently stroked her cheek. "I love you," he mouthed before kissing her nose.

"I love you too," she mouthed back. She felt Sasori shift from light sleep to deep sleep on her. She smiled and stopping scratching his head. Very carefully, she moved her hand away from him and gently gripped Gaara’s jaw to pull him into a quick kiss. "Go to sleep," she said softly. "I will be here when you wake up." He smiled into the kiss and let his eyes finally close. He soon joined the others in sleeping off the remaining effects of their hangover.

Azumi waited a few minutes before finally deciding to move. As carefully as possible, she grabbed a pillow from above her and Sasori and maneuvered herself out of his grasp, replacing her body with the pillow then slowly crawled down to the foot of the bed and stood up, looking over all three of them for a moment.

Komushi had shifted closer to Gaara, pulling him into his arms like a teddy bear. Gaara was inches from Sasori's face and Sasori clung to the pillow Azumi had given him like a small child. He made a small noise, his lips turning up in a pout for a moment before settling back down.

She chuckled softly but it was cut short by the soreness in her breasts. "Ow," she whispered, touching the sore spots lightly. She had started to feel it earlier and tried her best to ignore it but it was worsened by Sasori laying directly on her. With a sigh, she left the room to deal with her pregnancy issues and make food for them for when they woke up.
Hours passed before any of them regained consciousness. Komushi was the first to wake up, groaning softly and opening his eyes slowly. As soon as he saw who he was wrapped around he sucked his teeth and moved away. He noticed their clothes folded at the foot of the bed in front of them. He quickly grabbed his pants and slipped them on, throwing his towel onto the floor.

Gaara moaned softly in response at the sudden cool rush of air that hit his skin once he was released. It felt good but his moan was a little too loud. Sasori groaned, rolling over and nearly fell off the bed. He gasped away, failing and in turn causing Gaara to bolt upright to try and catch his cousin by the waist before he hit the ground.

“You’re a better man than I,” Komushi chuckled. “I would have let him fall.” He grabbed Gaara’s clothes and tossed them over his legs.

“If I let him fall, I’d never hear the end of it,” Gaara grumbled. “All I’d hear is ‘why didn’t you save me?’ and ‘I almost died.’” he mocked Sasori.

“I don’t need you to save me,” Sasori said.

“But you wouldn’t let me live it down if I didn’t even try to save you.”

"I won't justify that with a response," Sasori huffed through his nose. Gaara rolled his eyes, helping his cousin roll back into the middle of the bed. Gaara quickly put his pants on.

"There were four of us," Komushi sat up, pushing a pillow behind him to rest against.

"Azumi," Sasori called out tiredly.

There was no answer. “Where’d she go?” Komushi mumbled.

Suddenly, there was a slosh of water and a few moments later, Azumi stepped out of the bathroom in a towel. “You are up already?” she hummed.

"Give her a break," Gaara poked his cousin's cheek. "She's been taking care of us all day."

"I second that," Komushi spoke up. "She deserved a bath."

"You also said if you caught me moving, you would have your fun,” she said, stepping up to him. “And you did not catch me,” she smirked. She grabbed a pill bottle from the bedside table and pointed to three glasses of water on the other side of the bed. “Here.” She handed the bottle to Sasori. “Take those and then I will bring your food over.”
Sasori clicked his tongue against his teeth. He took the offered pills and then Gaara and Komushi took their own dosages.

"She got you there," Komushi grinned.


"What did you make?" Komushi turned to Azumi. "Need help carrying it here?"

Azumi hummed and looked over at the tray of food she had on the desk for them. "I might," she said softly. "I made empanadas and sancocho...I figured if you three were still nauseous, you would not take too well to too much solid food."

There was a low gurgle from all three stomachs.

“Oh, that smells heavenly,” Komushi groaned.

“Maybe I should have you cook more often,” Sasori swallowed, realizing how much his mouth was starting to water.

Gaara was already getting up. He wanted to eat. “Thank you Azumi,” he grinned.

“You are very welcome,” she smiled. He grabbed two bowls and handed one to Sasori. She handed the last one to Komushi and then grabbed the tea she had for them. "I may have made the sancocho a bit spicy," she said softly. “I am sorry.”

“Spicy is fine by me,” Komushi shrugged. Gaara hummed in agreement as he dug in. His eyes rolled at the flavor flooding his mouth.

“We have tea,” Sasori chuckled. “We will be fine.”

Azumi nodded and sat down at the desk, picking up an empanada for herself and taking a bite.

“Is that a strawberry shortcake?” Komushi grinned, looking at the small slice next to her. She smirked and pulled it closer to herself, indicating that it was hers. “Did you make that?”

“Shira did,” she said, shaking her head. “The other night when he was here.”

Sasori frowned as he chewed. “I don’t remember him making a cake,” he said, squinting.

“Pretty sure it was after you went to sleep,” Gaara shrugged.

“Is it the same kind as the one at Lady Sachiko’s party?” Komushi asked excitedly.

“It is,” she said.

“Is there more of it?” he asked.

“There should be. I did not eat all of it...surprisingly.”

"I don't know how you could stomach cake right now," Sasori shook his head.

"He's still ten," Gaara chuckled. "We're actually getting old."

"I don't see how that's an insult," Komushi rolled his eyes.
"You will when you pushed yourself too far and are throwing all this good food up," Sasori snorted.

“I just want one bite though,” Komushi pouted.

Azumi sighed, filling up her fork with a bite of the cake and walking over to him. “This is all I am giving you,” she said. Komushi gasped, his eyes sparkling as he opened his mouth wide. He hummed happily when she put the fork in his mouth and wiggled like a child.

"You're thinking of that as an indirect kiss aren't you," Sasori shook his head.

Komushi grinned, licking a little cream off his lips. "Maybe," he grinned.

“That is all you are getting from me,” she smirked, walking back to the desk and sitting down again.

He sighed dramatically, slowly chewing the cake and making a show of swallowing it slowly as he pressed his hands to his chest over his heart. "So sweet and perfect! And fed to me by a goddess," he swooned.

“Oh, please,” Azumi scoffed, trying not to roll her eyes too hard. “I am not a goddess.”

“A goddess wouldn’t feed you,” Sasori smirked at Komushi.

"You don't even deserve a normal woman feeding you things," Gaara chimed in.

"Say what you want," Komushi waved them off. "I'm content to believe you're just lying to us."

“Lying?” she chuckled.

“You lied about the venom sac,” Sasori said. “I wouldn’t put it past you.”

Azumi scoffed. “I think if I was a goddess, I would have the same glow around me that your aunt has.”

"My aunt is openly a goddess," Sasori smirked.

"What kind of goddess playing mortal would willingly give herself away like that?" Komushi chimed in.

"Exactly," Sasori nodded.

"What kind of goddess would put up with half of the shit you have put her through?" Gaara looked at the pair of them with irritation. "Or are you simply resigned to being smited when she’s grown fed up with this mortality game?"

“I do not think I would have ended up here if I was a goddess,” Azumi hummed as she finished the slice of cake. “And if I was and this happened, I would have retaliated a while ago. There is no way I would have let it go on this long if I had the power to stop it.”

"Told you so," Gaara said with a smirk.

"Told you so," Komushi mocked, rolling his eyes.

"I'm not running a daycare," Sasori grumbled. "If either of you continues this argument right now, I will kick you both out!"
Komushi chuckled a little. “She’s running the daycare,” he said.

“That is what it feels like sometimes,” she said as she stood up and went to the bathroom to get dressed.

Sasori rolled his eyes as he shifted to get out of bed. He stood up slowly and made his way to the workshop.

"There is no way you are doing work right now!" Komushi whined. "The day is practically over!"

“It’s never too late to start working,” he muttered.

Azumi emerged from the bathroom just as he went into the workshop. ‘Oh, I do not want to work on anything right now,’ she thought. She spent the day taking care of them and dealing with her own issues that came with being pregnant. The last thing she wanted to think about was actually working. She moved toward the bed and crawled onto it, settling between Gaara and Komushi. “There are more empanadas if you want,” she said. “I...may have made a lot. Too many, in fact.”

Komushi pushed his fingers through Azumi's hair much to Gaara's irritation. He rotated his fingers slightly, letting his nails gently graze her scalp like she had done for him earlier. "I'll take some to go when I leave," Komushi said.

Gaara moved down to rest his head next to hers and closed his eyes again. "Whatever he is working on he can do alone," he mumbled. Komushi nodded, mhm-ing in agreement.

"Until he wants me to be there to give him a massage while he hunches over whatever he is working on,” she muttered softly, leaning slightly into Komushi’s hand.

"He'll have to come in here and personally pull you away from us," Komushi shook his head. "We've commandeered you,” he said resolutely.

"I second that," Gaara hummed as he discreetly curled his fingers over her stomach, stroking it with his thumb.

She hummed softly, closing her eyes. “That sounds exactly like something he would do,” she said. “I will hear about it later,” she chuckled.

"Later is later." Gaara pulled her a little closer to him.

Komushi closed nodded, continuing to play with her hair. "You just take a load off now, Little Snake,” he smirked.

“I am not tired enough to nap,” she smiled, leaning further into his hand. She would not admit out loud that it felt great but she was sure he knew. “Also, the sun is only just setting so it would be dumb to fall asleep now,” she whispered more to herself.

“Suit yourself,” Komushi mumbled. They fell into an easy silence, cocooned around each other. Gaara hummed softly while Komushi’s hand only stopped to move to another part of her hair before continuing.

“Azumi,” Sasori finally called for her. “Azumi, come!”

She rolled her eyes and groaned, moving to get up but being held down by Komushi. “He can come and get you if he really needs you,” he said.
“Mm, I know you said that but I did not think you were serious,” she chuckled, still trying to move.

"Azumi, get in here!” Sasori huffed in irritation. "I seriously need your help." There was the slightest panic to his voice.

Gaara frowned, picking up on the change in tone. "You stay," he told her. "I'll see what's got him so bent out of shape."

She watched him get up and walk into the workshop. “I have never heard him sound that distressed,” she mumbled, actually feeling a little worried. She sat up but Komushi kept her on the bed, stopping her from moving toward the edge.

Sasori looked at Gaara as he walked into the workshop. “You’re not Azumi,” he huffed.

"Clearly," Gaara said with a hand on his hip. "What's got you so freaked out?"

"I want Azumi."

"She's resting," Gaara rolled his eyes. "And I'm a doctor. Anything she can do, so can I." Sasori opened his mouth to challenge his cousin but a shooting pain in his shoulder suddenly took his breath away. Gaara caught it and moved closer. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

Out in the bedroom, Azumi was still trying to move. “You treat him like he’s your baby,” Komushi chuckled, still keeping her on the bed.

“I do not,” she scoffed.

“You’re trying to run to him just like a mother whose child called for them would. He might as well have just called out for his mother.”

She stopped struggling for a moment to think about it. “Is that not what I am here for?” she asked. “To basically be his mother?”

Komushi tried hard to stifle a laugh but it came out as a raspberry. He shook his head and sighed. "No," he smirked. "You're his slave. Never his mother," he said. "Besides, Gaara can handle it."

Sasori pushed his cousin away, wincing as he did. "Go get her now," he growled. The pain took his breath away. "It's just the muscle. Just go get her," his voice came out with a slight whimper.

“Fine, fine,” Gaara sighed, backing out of the workshop.

Azumi watched him emerge from the door. “Is he okay?” she asked softly.

Gaara paused, looking at her hard when she asked. His lips set into a line. "He's fine. His muscle just seized and he insists on you fixing it." There was a moodiness to his tone. He was not sure if it was the way Sasori called for the woman he loved or the way she responded to her tormentor so caringly.

“Ah...” she said, gently pushing Komushi away from her and getting up. “I see.” She thought it would have been something more serious with how distressed he sounded. She went into the workshop and sighed softly as she approached him.

"I don't know what I did but it hurts," he gasped the moment he saw her. "Do something please." His brow was pinched hard when he looked at her with pleading eyes. She nodded and stepped closer, going around him and gliding her hand along his shoulder to find where the spot was. She
pressed in gently and felt him wince hard. As soon as she found it, she started massaging the area. Sasori strangled a groaned, pressing his forehead into the table below him.

“She really mother’s him,” Komushi shook his head. Gaara glared at the doorway from the bed, arms folded. “Glare any harder and you might set the curtains on fire,” he teased.

“Shut up,” he bit out.

“This is what happens when you try to do work while still fatigued,” she scolded him softly. “You need to let your body rest.”

“My body can rest when I’m dead,” he gasped out. He slowly felt the pain subside. He deflated against the desk, finally relaxing.

“And if you do not take care of your body, that will end up being sooner than expected,” she snapped, pressing hard into his muscles. It released almost instantly. He dug his fingers into the wood of the workbench and moaned loudly as the muscle released.

Out in the room, both Gaara and Komushi nearly snapped to their feet, hearing the moan. They looked at each other and then the curtain.

"Wouldn't that be in your best interest?" Sasori grumbled when he finally caught his breath.

“There are a lot of things that would be in my best interest and yes, maybe you dying would be one of them,” she said. “But that is not what I want.”

He slowly pushed himself up off the table, twisting. His hips pressed into hers. For a breath's moment, he looked into her eyes, inches from her face. “Humor me then,” he said, lowering his voice. “What do you want?”

She smiled at him, slowly reaching her hand up to lace into his hair and scratch his scalp like she had been doing for him. “I want you to see this bill get passed so I can watch you distress over whether or not I will stay.” Before she even realized it, he grabbed her wrist and bent her backward over the workbench.

"Distress," he repeated, leaning in close. A grin slowly pulled at his lips. He pinned her hand over her head. "There's no way I'd let you leave," he smirked, his lips brushing hers as he spoke. "I could easily break you down the day that bill is passed." He looked into her eyes, watching the fear slowly creep into them. "You're mine now and I'll never let you—" He was cut off by a rough kick to his side. Sasori stumbled, nearly hitting the floor with the force. He growled, pushing himself up to see Gaara seething in the doorway.

"You own nothing but yourself, " he growled through clenched teeth.

Sasori got up with a grunt. “There you go again,” he said, “always coming to her rescue.” Azumi started to move, taking a step away from him but he grabbed her wrist again. “You can tell yourselves that one day this will all be over but we both know that it will never happen.” He yanked her closer to him. “Until the day she dies, she is mine and there’s nothing that can change that. Not some bill, not Sandaime and definitely not you.”

There was absolute silence in the workshop save for Sasori’s heavy breathing. Komushi leaned in the doorway of the workshop, watching the scene before him.

Gaara nodded, a smile pulling at his lips. "Yours," he laughed through a growl. He sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth as he stalked towards his cousin.
Sasori narrowed his eyes. "I think I made myself quite clear." His tone was low and dangerous.

Gaara curled and uncurled his fists, clenching his fingers until his knuckles turned white. His green eyes snapped to Azumi for a moment before his fist made contact with Sasori’s face. He caught Sasori’s other hand as it came up to defend his face. Another punch. Sasori blinked hard, trying to catch himself. He felt his teeth cut into his cheek, blood filling his mouth. He tightened his grip on Azumi’s wrist and dug his nails in. Gaara snatched Sasori’s wrist, curling his fingers around the bones until his cousin hissed in pain and released Azumi’s wrist.

"You think you can fill whatever bleeding," he punched him in the gut, "pus infested," Gaara’s voice dropped lower into a growl, "sore of a blackened soul you have with hurting another human being." He knocked his cousin to the ground and dropped his full body weight onto the other man’s waist, knocking the air out of him. Sasori wheezed, feeling the muscle from earlier throb in pain along with his jaw and stomach. He reached up to claw at Gaara’s face. Gaara caught Sasori’s wrists and used his hands to slap his own face.

"Come here," Komushi hissed at Azumi, waving her over. She looked up at him and started moving to step around Gaara and Sasori. Sasori noticed her and reached his hand above his head with Gaara still gripping his wrists and grabbed her ankle, tripping her as she moved toward the door. Komushi rushed to help her up and ushered her back out to the bedroom.

There was a loud thud and then a massive tumbling crash. Both men growled. The distinct sound of someone being pounded into the stone ground could be heard.

"You fucking—" Sasori roared and there was another crash.

Komushi winced, hearing the sound of metal meet flesh. "That's going to be a welt," he winced. "And...a lot of repairs," he sighed, pressing his fingertips into the bridge of his nose. "Are you okay?" he asked her, looking her over.

She did not respond at first, still a bit shocked. She turned her attention from the doorway of the workshop and looked at him. "I am fine," she said softly, rubbing her wrist where Sasori gripped it. "But...we should stop them."

"We aren't doing anything," Komushi shook his head. "You are going to gather what you can to clean them up and put them out of their misery because you know they—" He was cut off by a loud crash and the sound of wood cracking. Sasori screamed and Gaara let out a growling laugh. "You know Sasori is going to want to die when Gaara's done with him." Suddenly, something flew past them and hit the wall across the hall, smashing to pieces. "He hasn't lost it this bad since he was ten," he mumbled as he rubbed the back of his neck.

Azumi frowned, hesitating hard for a moment before nodding and moving to grab everything she knew she would need to clean them up after their fight. "Can you...at least make sure they do not kill each other?" she asked him softly as she set everything down on the bed. "Please?"

"I...can do my best." He ran a hand through his hair, looking to the curtained doorway. He groaned softly as he walked towards the threshold. "You people owe me so hard after this." He pushed into the room. Moments later, the thrashing and screaming stopped. Gaara appeared in the bedroom, nearly ripping the curtains off the doorway. His chest was still heaving and blood covered his face, chest, and fists. Rage still bubbled in his eyes as he paced the full length of the room.

Azumi grabbed a couple of the supplies and then Gaara's hand. His head whipped in her direction and the feral look in his eyes almost made her let him go and back away. "Come with me," she whispered, gently pulling him into the bathroom. She guided him onto the stool and set the
supplies on the small table near the tub. She kept his gaze as she took a wet towel to his face to wipe the blood away.

His eyes kept searching her, flitting rapidly over her form to see if she was hurt. He zeroed in on her wrist and reached for it gently. "He hurt you." His voice was a whisper. It was hoarse and deeper than his usual tone.

She shook her head, shifting their hands so she was holding his. "I am fine," she said, wiping the blood from his hand. She gently took his other hand and wiped it as well. Once the blood was wiped away, she kissed the knuckles of both his hands and then leaned in to press her forehead to his.

He did his best to match his breathing to hers. His body still thrummed with adrenaline but he felt it slowly start to relax. He twisted his fingers in her hands and laced them together. His eyes closed and for a moment he stayed still with her, not saying anything. "If he hurt you," he whispered after a long silence. "If he hurt the baby..."

"Shh..." Her hands came up slowly to cup his face. "The baby is fine. We are both fine." She laced one hand into his hair.

He nodded, letting his nose brush against hers. His hands wrapped around her waist. He sighed, nodding again and calming down even further. "I...don't know what I'd do if he hurt you." He shifted so his lips pressed gently against hers.

She pulled him into a soft kiss. "I think I have a good idea of what you would do," she said softly as she pulled away slightly. "And it would be worse than what you just did." She took his hands in hers again and looked at his wounds. With a soft sigh, she started to clean them and then wrap them.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly after a few moments. “I...didn’t mean to lose it like that.”

“Do not apologize to me,” she said, the smallest smirk appearing on her lips. “It was not me you hit to the point of unconsciousness.”

He shifted his hand to take hers and kissed her fingers. “I won’t let him take this out on you!”

She leaned in to kiss his forehead. “I know you will not. Neither will I. I will do what is necessary to make sure this baby is safe.”

Gaara kissed her again. He opened his mouth to speak when they heard a shift in the doorway. He pulled back, catching Komushi’s shadow in the doorway.

“Azumi, he’s looking really bad.” The usual mirth was drained from the scarab’s tone.

“Alright,” she said just loud enough for him to hear. She looked at Gaara and ran her hand through his hair. “I will meet you in my room,” she whispered before backing away to go back into the bedroom.

He nodded, getting up as she left. He sighed heavily, running his bandaged hands through his hair. This was not going blow over easily. He slipped out of the room without saying so much as a goodbye to Komushi.

Komushi glanced at him from his seat next Sasori on the bed. Sasori’s face was swollen, bruises blooming bright red and purple already. He was going to be a sight for some time.
Azumi frowned, sucking her teeth quietly at the sight of him. She started wiping his face down. She cleaned him up as best as she could and tended to his wounds. “He is not going to want to take those pills when he wakes up...” she hummed. “But he should.”

"So we crush them up and tell him nothing," Komushi shrugged. "Wouldn't be the first time we've drugged someone," he smirked. The smirk soon faded. "You know Gaara won't be allowed over for a long, long time."

“I know...” she said softly. She bandaged Sasori up then looked at Komushi. “I do not know how long he will be out. Are you...going to stay?”

"You think I'd knowingly leave the person with the most motive to kill him alone with him at his weakest?" he cocked his eyebrow at her. "I'm an asshole, not a fool," he told her.

“I will not kill him,” she scoffed, actually offended at his blatant distrust for her. “I may have the most motive but it will not do me any good.”

"I'm not so sure about that," Komushi muttered under his breath. "Regardless, clean him up and I will stay with him tonight." He spoke with an authority that he never used before. He was taking the beating and what it could mean seriously.

She nodded as she finished cleaning Sasori up and bandaging his wounds. She went into the workshop, stopping short in the doorway when she saw the mess in there from the brawl. With a heavy sigh, she continued in, stepping around everything very carefully to grab the teapot and some tea as well as two cups and a tea light. She set the water to boil and then once it was ready she brought everything out to set on the bedside table. “For you and for him when he wakes up,” she said softly as she put it down. “And...” She grabbed the bottle of the very strong pills and set them down on the table as well.

Komushi glanced at it and nodded. "He's going to lose it tenfold when he sees the mess in there," Komushi sighed. "Bring me something to crush these. I'll put it in his tea."

She went and grabbed a spoon to crush the pills. “I will clean the workshop in the morning,” she said. “If he wakes up before I do...just...try not to let him go in there.”

"I'll help you tomorrow," he told her. "There is no way he's going to wake up for a while on those drugs." He waited for her to finish crushing them up into a rough powder. He dumped the whole of it into the steaming cup and stirred it until it dissolved. "It will be better if we work together. There is no way you can repair all of that on your own."

“Thank you,” she said, as she finished setting everything up. “I will be right back.” She left the room and went to the kitchen, setting up a tray with another bowl of sancocho, a couple of empanadas and a slice of the strawberry shortcake. “This is for you,” she said as she returned to the room. “Since...you know...you are staying.” She set the tray down on the desk.

He looked at the plate and nodded. "Goodnight, Azumi." He shifted to get up for the food. Sasori groaned softly in his sleep.

She frowned at Sasori and then nodded. "Goodnight," she said with a slight bow before leaving the room. With a heavy sigh, she walked down the halls to her room. She approached her door and ran her hand through her hair before walking in. She chuckled softly, seeing Gaara on her bed with the snakes moving around him, frantically hissing and asking if he was okay.

He laughed softly, feeling them tickle his skin as they moved. Ryuga was wrapped around Gaara's
shoulder, nuzzling one of the scrapes across his cheek. "I'm okay, guys," he assured them, running his fingers down their backs. Naga whipped around the moment Azumi was through the door. He slipped off the bed and was up Azumi's body in a flash. He hissed, looking her over frantically, asking if she was okay. Ryuga hiss furiously, asking if he could kill Sasori yet.

"No," she scolded softly, petting Naga's head. Naga moved his head down and tapped his nose against her stomach, asking if the baby was alright. "Yes, the baby is fine."

Gaara stood up, pulling her close by the waist and leaned down to capture to lips in a deep kiss. "How...is he?" he asked her softly, stepping back to look into her eyes.

"Still unconscious," she hummed. "No surprise there. I cleaned him up, bandaged him...left him some tea that Lord Komushi dosed with those painkillers." She rested her head against his chest, wrapping her arms around him and pressing her body against his. "In the morning, Lord Komushi and I are going to clean the workshop."

"I should help," he said softly. He rubbed circles into her back gently, keeping her close. "The painkillers should keep him asleep for a while. I made the mess." He wrapped his arms around her and lifted her to carry her over to the bed, sitting down on it with her in his lap. He cupped her face, stroking her cheek. "You don't deserve to clean up my tantrum."

"I am not sure that is such a great idea," she whispered. "When he comes down from his high, he is going to keep you away from here," she frowned. "And from the shop."

"He's barely at the shop," Gaara scoffed. "Who else is he going to get to run it?" He clenched his jaw then took a deep breath to reign himself back in. Naga gave him a gentle squeeze and tapped his nose against his jaw.

"I guess you are right," she hummed, kissing up his neck. "You are going to lose your voice if you keep talking," she smirked against his skin.

"You think so?" he chuckled softly, running his hands up her back. He scratched her skin lightly. "It is a little rough." He tilted her chin up to pull her into a kiss. Naga and Ryuga looked at each other and shifted off their bodies. They hissed softly, before disappearing out the window.

"Your voice was always rough," she chuckled. "It is straining now." She bit his lip. "It is kind of sexy." She cupped his face with both hands and looked into his eyes. "Say my name," she smirked.

"Azumi," he pushed a low growl into her name and his lips quirked up into a smirk.

She let out a small squeal and giggled. "I love it," she grinned, kissing him again. "But I do not want you to hurt yourself."

He chuckled, wrapping his arms around her once more. He pulled her flush to his chest and laid back, keeping her on his chest. He kissed the tip of her nose then her lips before he slipped to her jaw. "I won't intentionally hurt myself," he whispered "But," he breathed, "I'm glad you like my voice." He let his lips brush her neck as he spoke. He bit down hard while scratching up her back lightly.

"Of course, I do," she smiled, running her hand through his hair and resting her leg on his hip as she pressed her hips against his. "And I was aware of the temper the men in your family have...but I did not think you would get...that aggressive so quickly," she smirked.

"It's not something I try to let happen often." He felt his cheeks burn a little. He leisurely let his nails glide over her skin as he gently pressed his hips back into hers. He let his other hand rest on
her thigh. "You don't seem to bother by it," he smirked back. "Unlike my cousin, I will never direct my rage towards you." He moved his hand up her thigh to cup her butt and press their hips together a little more.

"Oh, I am bothered in a different way," she teased, kissing along his jaw. "Much like your rough voice, your aggression is sexy. Even more so because I rarely see it." She kissed down his neck and bit down.

He grinned, moaning softly when she bit him. He turned his head, pulling her into a rougher kiss. He shifted her leg off of him and smoothly moved to pin her down by her wrists. He looked at the bruising Sasori left on the delicate joint and kissed it before moving to return to her lips. He bit them harder than before then trailed down to her jaw and neck. He growled softly, licking down the bend of her neck. "I hate that I can’t mark you," he hissed.

Her breath hitched. "When I am free, you can mark me to your heart's content," she smirked. "And I will not have to touch you in secret." She gasped softly. "And I will not have to hide kisses."

“I can’t wait,” he moaned at the thought. He pressed his hips hard into hers. He moved his hands down her arms and took her lips in a rougher kiss. “That day can’t come soon enough. To see you properly ravished,” he growled, smirking.

She shuddered and giggled softly, wrapping her legs around him. "If I was not already pregnant, I would say that we should make a baby to celebrate," she joked.

“There’s always time for another afterward,” Gaara grinned. “And there’s nothing stopping us from celebrating our current baby on the way now.”

She bit her lip in a smile. "You are absolutely right," she said softly. She ran her hands through his hair and gently cupped his face as she wrapped her legs around him. "So let us celebrate," she smirked.

Chapter End Notes

We had to take a small detour to Get Wrecked Town
Chapter Notes

Don't worry. It was a small hiccup in the tracks but the Wholesome Train is still running until midnight.

Naga appeared first in the window. He hissed softly down to Ryuga to let the bigger snake know the coast was clear before entering the room. They moved onto the bed and started to gently tap their noses to their humans’ to wake them up.

Azumi groaned, gently swatting the snake away. "No," she mumbled, turning around to bury her face in Gaara's chest.

Ryuga and Naga looked at each other and hissed a heavy sigh. Ryuga wound his tail around Gaara, who had pulled Azumi closer when she pressed herself closer, working to pry his arm away. Naga tapped Gaara's nose, attempting to wake the man. Gaara whined softly and opened his eyes. The snakes were never this aggressive with trying to wake the couple up.

Azumi groaned again and started to feel nauseous. She kissed Gaara's chest and then opened her eyes. "I need to go to the bathroom," she sighed, sitting up. With another groan, she got out of bed and grabbed her dress, putting it on quickly. "I will be right back," she said, leaving the room. Ryuga followed after her quickly.

Naga hissed softly, looking at Gaara and tapping his nose against his forehead. Gaara finally sat up with a long huff when she left. He looked at Naga with heavy eyes. "What has got you two so upset?" he asked the snake softly. He reached up to gently pet him. Naga hissed, unable to tell him that they just had to get up. He wrapped around his shoulders, pointing his nose toward his clothes to tell him to get dressed. "You're bossy this morning," he said, getting up and doing as the snake commanded. He dressed quickly and made his way down to the bathroom that Azumi was in. He wrapped his knuckle against the wood. "Are you okay?" He bit his lip, gently petting Naga. There was no response except for the sound of Azumi vomiting. Naga hissed, both disgusted and worried.

In the bathroom, Azumi sat back against the tub and Ryuga coiled around her legs, trying to comfort her. She pet him gently with a shaky hand as he rested his head on her knee and reached for a nearby wet rag to wipe her face. Tilting her head back, she sighed. "You can come in," she groaned, unsure if she said it loud enough for Gaara to hear.

He took the soft moan he heard as an invitation to come in. He shut the door behind him and locked it. Grabbing another rag from the edge of the tub, he dampened it to press it to the back of her neck as he knelt down. "I'll get you some tea," he told her softly, tilting her head up so he could push her hair out of her face gently.

He took the soft moan he heard as an invitation to come in. He shut the door behind him and locked it. Grabbing another rag from the edge of the tub, he dampened it to press it to the back of her neck as he knelt down. "I'll get you some tea," he told her softly, tilting her head up so he could push her hair out of her face gently.

She smiled at him. "I will...be back in my room..." she hummed. He helped her up and Ryuga moved up her body. "I will be fine in a few minutes," she said as she started to clean herself up.

He hesitated for a moment, laughing softly. "Do you want any help?" He gave her a lopsided smile.
She looked at him and smirked. “I think I can handle it,” she chuckled.

He nodded then walked over to pull her into his arms again. He kissed her forehead gently. "Don't push yourself too hard," he told her softly, his voice still rough from the day before.

“I promise not to,” she smiled. She looked at Naga who was still wrapped around Gaara. “Stay with him,” she told the snake softly.

Naga nodded dutifully, giving Gaara a snug little squeeze. He hissed softly, promising to do just that. Gaara laughed softly and finally pulled away. "Okay, but if you need anything while I'm—" Naga hissed in Gaara's ear, gently gumming the man's ear with his mouth. "Alright, alright," he laughed, turning away. "I'll be right back." He disappeared down the hall to make the tea.

Azumi cleaned herself up as best as she could to make it look like she did not just vomit her guts out so when she saw Komushi and Sasori everything seemed normal. Ryuga hissed softly, telling her that she was going to wake up this way for a while. “Great,” she muttered. “There goes every chance of good morning sex.” She went back to her room and with a long sigh and a groan, she fell back onto her bed while Ryuga coiled up on her stomach. His weight sat directly over a cramp in her uterus and she shifted him up, closer to her chest. He hissed with concern, asking her where he could rest his head, knowing her chest was sore. “Right here,” she chuckled, putting his head down where it did not hurt.

Gaara went to the kitchen and grabbed what he needed to make the tea. He sighed, seeing the teas Sasori had available and rolled them. "For an apothecary, your kitchen is lacking in every way, Cousin," he grumbled. He knew the morning sickness would be kicking in now and she would have cramps so he pulled two different teas he knew would help settle her stomach. Naga nuzzled Gaara's jaw, hissing softly. He could feel how stressed the man was. He assured him that she was going to be fine. Gaara smiled taking a deep breath as he set everything on a tray. "I'm sorry," he told Naga. "I'm a doctor...I should be ready for this," he laughed awkwardly. His smile fell a little. "I'm just so worried about her." Naga hissed in agreement but repeated that she was going to be fine and everything was going to work out for them. Once the tea was ready, they went back to the bedroom.

Azumi and Ryuga looked at the door when it was opened, halting their deep conversation about why her father kept a lot of things from her—like putting a snake into her body at birth. She smiled when she saw Gaara and sat up slowly.

He smiled widely at her as he set the tray down on her bedside table. He sat on the edge of the bed next to her and reached up to cup her face, gently stroking her cheek with his hand. For a few silent moments, he stayed like that until Naga hissed softly and nudged Gaara's free hand towards the tea. "Sorry," he whispered, being knocked from his thoughts. "I made you something special to help settle your stomach and ease any cramping," he explained. "Does anything else hurt right now?" he asked, wanting to make sure there were no new injuries that may have, bloomed in the night.

“Just a soreness in my chest,” she hummed, reaching for her tea and taking a sip. “But that is nothing. I just have to be careful when I press my body against you,” she smirked. “Or I can just press my butt against you,” she joked.

His lip twitched into a smirk. "While I would never turn away an excuse to have you pressed against me," he leaned in to steal a kiss, "in any way," he pulled back, "let me take a look at it please," he kissed her again.

She nodded and took another sip of her tea. "It is only a dull pain," she said, setting the tea aside so he could take a look.
He pulled her dress back slightly so he could run his fingertips over her skin. Gently, he pressed into her muscle. "Okay," he nodded. "It doesn't seem to be too bad," he said more to himself than her. "Do you want anything for it?" he asked her, letting his fingers linger.

She smiled and shook her head. "No, it is not bad enough for me to want to take anything. I can handle it," she chuckled. She pulled him into a kiss. "But thank you," she said softly against his lips.

"Okay," he smiled against her lips, pressing into them to kiss her again. He shifted a little closer, biting her lip while his hand slipped into her hair. He deepened the kiss then laughed, pulling back. He pressed his forehead to hers, cupping her neck. "Tell me the moment anything changes."

"You will be the first person to know," she smirked. She kissed him again and picked up her tea to take another sip. After a few minutes, she got up to change into a different outfit. "I am going to clean the workshop with Lord Komushi," she said as she finished her tea.

He shifted on the bed to watch her change. Ryuga and Naga coiled around him, receiving long pets. "I...suppose I should go home," he pouted a little. The snakes hissed a little laugh.

She looked at him and smirked. "I almost forgot you had a house," she teased. "I thought you lived here." She opted for the original outfit she was wearing when she was sold. "Will you be coming back tonight?" She sat in his lap and rested her arms on his shoulder. "Or will I be seeing you tomorrow?" She kissed along his jaw.

"I think at this point I do live here," he chuckled, wrapping his arms around her to support her lower back. "But I'd much rather sneak you away to my place," he hummed, twirling the ends of her hair with his finger. "I'll be here so long as you want me to be." He pulled her into a kiss.

"I would love to see your house," she hummed, trailing her kisses down his neck. Naga threw his whole body at her, hissing for her to hurry up and go. She sighed as she pulled away from Gaara. "Alright, alright," she said, rolling her eyes. She stood up and gave Gaara one more kiss. "I will see you later," she told him.

"See you later," he sighed wistfully as she went. "I love you," he called to her before she was out the door.

"I love you, too," she smiled as she left. She went to the kitchen to pour three cups of coffee and serve two bowls of breakfast. She was not sure if Sasori was awake yet, but she wanted to be prepared in case he was. She gathered everything up and went to Sasori's room, setting the tray on the desk and then turning to the bed. Komushi was only just waking up. "Good morning," she said softly to him.

"Morning," Komushi grunted, rubbing his face as he sat up in the bed. Bags sat heavily under his eyes, indicating he got little to no sleep the night prior. Meanwhile, Sasori was nothing but a tuft of red hair peeking out of the sheets. He had seemingly rolled himself up tight in the fabric, leaving Komushi with nothing for the night.

Azumi grabbed one bowl and a cup of coffee and brought it over to Komushi. "If you need to sleep some more, you can," she told him. "I can do the workshop on my own."

"No," he grumbled, taking the coffee and food with a quiet thanks. "He's been up all night, crying all night for you and bemoaning his life," he sighed. "I finally got him to stop trying to crawl out of bed to go find you and get some rest. And that was only after I rolled him up like that and held him." He jerked the spoon he was eating with towards Sasori's burritoed form.
She looked over at Sasori and frowned. “He was crying for me?” she asked.

“Yeah, the way a child cries for their mother,” Komushi muttered, rolling his eyes.

“I see...” She went around to the other side of the bed and then kneeled down next to him. She reached her hand out to run her hand through what she could see of his hair. He moaned softly in his sleep, leaning towards her hand. Only his nose was poked out of the sheets so he could breathe. His eyes twitched slightly but did not open. "I do want to wake him up," she said softly. "Because I know he will attach himself to me and then I will not be able to clean the workshop." She stood up and moved away to grab a cup of coffee.

"No," Komushi shook his head. "Let him sleep until it's time to dose him again and get him up for a bath," he yawned, shaking his head again to try and wake up. "I want to get the workshop done as fast as possible so he doesn’t start bitching about it."

She nodded and sipped her coffee. "Sounds good," she said. She went into the workshop to look at what they were about to deal with. "I will start," she told him. "You can join me when you are done eating." With a heavy sigh, she began to clean the workshop, starting with all of the broken glass.

About ten minutes later Komushi joined her. He started with lifting anything heavy that had fallen over or mounting it back on the wall. He shook his head, using his forearm to wipe away some sweat once he had moved most of the bigger stuff. He looked around at the absolute chaos. "Gaara was really pissed," he sighed.

"I know," she frowned. She looked around for a moment. "I know the bad temper runs in their family but I did not expect this much from him."

"Mmm, Sasori and Rasa have a real knack for setting Gaara off." Komushi picked up a few broken bottles and set them down on a nearby shelf. "Nothing else really gets his fire burning. At least never this hot."

She smirked slightly. "It is pretty hot," she hummed to herself as she swept some powdery substance out of the way.

Komushi squinted at her for a moment then shook his head with a laugh. "You would think that."

She bent down to pick up a small box. It opened in her hand and a scorpion carcass fell out. She screamed and dropped the box. "Why?" she whined, taking a few steps away.

He turned his back on her to start a pile of papers when she screamed. He whipped around so fast that he almost fell over with the force of it. "What! What happened? Are you ok—" He spotted the insect shell and sighed. "Seriously?"

"Why does he keep a dead one?" she whined, hiding behind him.

"Would it make it better if it was alive?" he asked.

She stayed silent for a moment. "No," she answered. "But a live one would be more useful, it would make sense if he had a live one."

"I think he keeps it for sentimental value," Komushi shrugged, walking over to pick up the offending carcass. "I honestly think he and his father caught this one."

"He does not strike me as a sentimental man," she huffed. She waited for him to put the scorpion in
its box and put the box on a high shelf. "Thank you," she said softly.

"Every man has one or two things they hold on to," Komushi said sagely. "And he is, believe it or not, just a man," he chuckled. Komushi stretched and moved back to picking up papers. "He tries to keep his humanity under tight wraps."

She started sweeping again and thought about it. "I suppose," she hummed. She started reorganizing the shelves and counters to almost exactly how they were before the chaos ensued.

After about an hour and a half, they finished cleaning the workshop and put everything that was not broken—which was not much—back in its original space.

"Looks pretty good," he said, standing next to her at the front of the shop. He surveyed their work with a proud smile. "He'll think he dreamt the whole thing at this point," he laughed, holding his hand up for a high five. Behind them in the room, Sasori groaned, letting out a sad, weak little mewl of pain.

Azumi chuckled and high-fived Komushi then looked at Sasori when she heard him make noise. She hummed and moved toward the bed, kneeling down next to him to run her hand through his hair. "Good morning," she said very softly to him.

He tried to say something but it only came out as a dry, hoarse sound. It almost sounded like he was choking on his own throat. He wiggled in his cocoon to inch his fingers out and take her hand in his. His eyes were rimmed in red with a puffiness that was a dead give away for how much crying he had done the night before.

She looked at his tea that was still over the warmer. "Do you want to eat?" she asked him, already pushing the blanket completely away from his face to unwrap him.

He shook his head, pouting through the swelling in his face and trying to retreat back into the blanket until she had pushed too much away from his face. He sighed, slumping back against the wall. His eyes fell on the food and tea.

"You should still eat," she said. "Or at least drink the tea." She picked up the tea and held it in front of him, waiting for his arms to come out and grab it.

He pouted for a little longer, looking from her to the cup with his swollen eyes. His face ached and everything was bruised all over. He had half a mind to tell her to feed him but his dignity said absolutely not. A moment later, just his fingers came up to grasp the cup.

She kept her hands close to the cup in case he dropped it with how he was holding it. She watched him drink the tea, making sure he finished it. "You should start feeling a little better soon," she said, running her fingers through his hair again. "I brought you breakfast. It might be cold now, but I can go get you another serving."

He shook his head, leaning into her hand. He offered her the cup back so she could take it and switch it out for the bowl. He licked his lips, tearing a small piece of skin off with his teeth. He wanted a hot bath and to be left alone with Azumi. He was still angry but he could not do anything in the state he was. His cousin had made damn sure of that.

She took the cup from him, setting it on the bedside table and getting up to grab his bowl from the desk. "I am going to run your bath," she said softly, handing him the bowl, "and then we will redress your wounds." He nodded then winced at the action. His pout intensified as he ate. He hated feeling this run down and weak. She looked at Komushi as he emerged from the workshop.
"And you should go get some actual rest," she told him.

Komushi yawned and nodded, leaning heavily in the doorway. "I'm gonna crash in Chiyo's room," he slurred a little, rubbing his face hard to try and stay awake.

"I will bring you food later," she nodded. She watched as he walked out of the room then turned her attention back to Sasori. "I will be right back," she said softly as she stood to go into the bathroom. She started setting up his bath, making just a little hotter than normal because he was going to need it. Once it was ready, she returned to the room and sat back on the bed next to him. "It is okay if you cannot finish it," she told him, seeing how slow he was going. "In a few minutes, you will not feel much pain. Then we can move you to the bath."

He silently looked at her as he slowly chewed his food. The very thought of her trying to leave him left a gaping, sinking pit in his stomach. He did not know when or how she had become so indispensable to him but she was. And he was not entirely sure if he hated this fact or not.

Managing to work his way through half the bowl of breakfast, he handed it back to her. "Ready," he croaked. Gaara had throat punched him hard. It felt like his esophagus was bruised.

Her jaw almost dropped when she heard his voice. She did not expect it to sound the way it did and it made her feel bad. She set his bowl down on the table and started to help him out of his cocoon. Once he was free, she helped him up and to the bathroom. "Do you think...those throat numbers that you gave me will help you?" she asked.

"Only...with," he swallowed painfully, "pain. Not speaking," he spoke slowly and painfully. They shuffled slowly into the bathroom and he very slowly shrugged off his clothing. More black and blues had bloomed across his body. The cuts and scratches that littered Sasori's skin looked angrier now.

She tried not to gasp too hard when she saw all of the wounds. "Do you still want to take them?" she asked. She gently glided a finger over a bruise and shook her head. 'Holy shit, Gaara, what did you do?' she thought. Very slowly and very carefully, she helped him ease into the tub.

He groaned softly, swallowing hard when the hot water burned into his skin. He knew it would soon numb it all but it still stung either way. Once he was fully submerged, he leaned back, winced a little then and closed his eyes. "I'm..." he wheezed a little, "fine." He tilted his head back, trying to relax as best as he could.

She nodded and went to go pour him another cup of tea. She came back and set it down on the table next to the tub. "Do not push yourself too hard to talk today," she told him softly as she took a seat on the stool. "You can just rest and I can work on the orders that need to be caught up on."

He took the tea from the table and stared at her for a moment. He shook his head then took a sip of his tea. "No," he finally said. "No work. Just...stay..." He knew they had a lot of orders but he would not be able to move or at least another day and honestly, just the thought of work at the moment was making his body ache. He would catch up on it later.

She sighed softly. “Alright,” she said. She leaned forward against the tub, resting her chin in her hand. A breeze flew in through the large open windows. ‘That was odd,’ she thought. She looked out at the river, getting lost in thought while she waited for the pills to kick in for Sasori so he could gather the energy to wash up.

Slowly, Sasori started to move, pushing himself to wash his legs first. He worked his way up his body and sighed once he reached his torso, taking a break. He reached for the soap then reached for Azumi's hand to press it into her palm. He started to shift in the tub so his back faced her. She
stopped him halfway from turning and moved so she was behind him, not wanting him to do more than he should. Without saying anything, she started washing his back for him. Once she was done, she rinsed him off and stepped back to grab his towel for when he was ready to get out. He gripped the edge of the tub to help him up and eased his leg over the edge and onto the floor. He waited for her to hand him the towel. Making the mistake of rubbing instead of patting his skin, he ground his teeth tightly, letting out a choked little pained noise before resuming. He stood up and waited for her to bring him his robe.

She grabbed his robe and helped him put it on then guided him back to the bedroom, gently easing him onto the bed. “Do not lay back just yet,” she said softly as she went to grab everything to redress his wounds. Once she came back, she sat next to him on the bed and gently turned his face toward her so she could work on those wounds first.

"Where...did..." he cleared his throat, looking around, "Komushi go?"

“He went to go rest,” she told him. She looked at him and smirked. “Because you kept him up all night.” She moved down to the wounds on his neck and chest. “He will be back later.”

He grunted his reply then muttered something about he had not done anything. "Gaara..." he started, "is not allowed over." He winced as she cleaned a particularly bad wound.

She tried to focus on cleaning his wound, not saying anything for a few moments before nodding. “I understand,” she whispered. It did not come as a surprise to her that he no longer wanted Gaara around. She took a few minutes to clean and dress all of the bad wounds and then backed away when she was finished. “You can lay down now if you want,” she said softly as she moved all of the supplies to the desk.

"I will...hngh," he grunted, leaning back against his pillows, "teach you...how to...run the shop," he told her. He was fed up with his cousin trying to get involved with him and his property. He trained that boy and set him on the path to the career he holds so dearly and this was how he was thanked.

She nodded again. “Do you want me to bring you anything?” She was sure he was tired of drinking tea but she wanted to make sure he consumed something.

“Water,” he mumbled. “And more...food.” He was, surprisingly, still hungry despite the pain he was in. He took a deep breath, trying to open up his chest and airway.

“I will be right back then,” she said. She grabbed all of the dishes from the room and took them back to the kitchen on a tray. She grabbed a new bowl and filled it with some of the leftover sancocho and grabbed a few of the last empanadas. She filled a pitcher with water and grabbed a cup then took everything on the tray back to his room. He perked up at the smell of the food the moment she was in the room. He had settled back into a looser burrito. She set the tray down on the bedside and poured him a glass of water first. “I do not think solid food will be the best thing for you to have,” she said. “But I brought the empanadas anyway.”

“I can put it in my soup,” he said, eager to eat. It was going to hurt no matter what. He was going to enjoy her food.

She chuckled and handed him the bowl of sancocho and an empanada on a small plate. “Enjoy then,” she said softly. She poured herself a cup of tea and sat down on the bed, sipping it slowly. There was a soft hiss coming from the door. Naga and Ryuga slithered in to visit, getting onto the daybed and then moving toward Azumi on the bed. “Hello,” she said softly. The two serpents hissed their greeting. Naga’s jaw dropped, hanging low when he saw Sasori. He hissed frantically, slithering to him. He rose to tap his nose against the man’s.
Azumi smiled at the snake. "Let him eat, Naga," she said softly. She looked at Sasori. "He is worried about you," she explained. Ryuga moved next to her slowly, hissing softly, saying he was not worried and he could not care less about the state Sasori was in. Azumi looked at him and flicked his head gently.

"Worried...about me?" Sasori raised his hand to gently pet Naga's head. Naga hissed again, shifting back to let Sasori eat once he was done petting him. Sasori picked up his spoon and cut a piece of the empanada to dip into the soup to soften it.

She nodded as she finished her tea and set the cup on the tray then laid back on the bed with a quiet sigh. Ryuga coiled up on her stomach, once again setting his weight directly over a cramp. She grunted softly and shifted him. "You are heavy," she whispered to the snake. Ryuga hissed softly in offense before settling back down.

They settled into silence as Sasori ate. He pouted halfway through his empanada when he huffed heavily. "Too...quiet," he grumbled. "Read..." he said, pointing towards a bookshelf near the bed.

"Read?" she muttered softly, sitting up to look at the bookshelf. She set Ryuga down on the bed and moved toward the bookshelf to read the spines of the books. "These are mostly chemistry books...you want me to read about the makeup and compound of arsenic?" she smirked. She went down to another shelf, looking for some sort of novel or storybook. After almost a minute of looking, she finally found a book that sounded interesting. He watched her intently as she made her way back to the bed. He was curious to see which one she picked. Naga coiled up on Sasori's outstretched, and burritoed legs. Ryuga moved over, so she could sit down, getting as close as he cared to Sasori.

Azumi turned the book over and read the description. After a few seconds, she hummed. "You like vampires?" she asked.

"Oh...Komushi...left that..." he hummed. He could not remember any books he personally owned about the creatures. "Read...any...way."

She nodded and opened the book. "I like the description," she chuckled. "So I will enjoy this."

The next two hours were spent reading the vampire novel, full of convoluted plot twists and intense drama. Both of the snakes moved in close, getting very interested in the story as she read and then letting out long hisses when she was finally done about how much they enjoyed the story.

Sasori nodded, mulling over the book for a moment. He had long since finished eating while she read. He looked at her and then the snakes then her again. "Fuck that...hunter...and fuck that..." he had to pause, "guy who betrayed the....snake princess." He heard himself say the words then locked eyes with her.

"Oh, yeah?" she smirked. "Is that how you feel about that?" she chuckled, finding their situation to be almost no different. "She was not a princess. Just a vampire. And yes, fuck that guy for tricking her into loving him and using her to turn him into a vampire then leaving her." She set the book aside. "He deserved his death."

"He...did," he said softly, pushing his bowl towards her. "I...never...trick you."

"No," she sighed, "because legally I cannot do anything about the way you treat me or question you so you have no need to trick me."

"You...aren't...wrong," he said, slipping further into his cocoon once more. He looked away from
her, frowning. "But...I...would..." he paused, mulling over his words. "Come," he said, reaching a hand out to her. "You...are...important to me."

"Am I really?" she muttered, not really believing that. She took his hand and moved closer. "Or am I just really good at what I do?"

“That...is...precisely why...you are important.” He pulled her close to lay with him. “There is...no one...else who can do what...you do.”

"There are other people that can do what I do," she told him, laying down with him. "You just rely on slavers to find them for you."

“I don’t...rely on them...” he grumbled. “They are what is...available.” He gently moved her hand so it rested on his head.

"You should not need a slave is my point," she mumbled, scratching his head. "You should look for someone you can have as a partner in business. It is a much healthier relationship. More mutual respect."

He rolled over to look up at her like a hurt little boy. He pressed closer to her body and spoke softly. “But a partner...wouldn’t...do this.” He leaned into her hand. His hands slipped out of the sheets to pull her closer while burying his face into her chest. “I’m tired...”

“Then go to sleep,” she whispered, wrapping her arms around him and mindlessly gliding her other hand up and down his back. “Before the pain starts to come back.”

"No," he told her. "I'm tired of...trying to find...new people. The slavers brought me you...” he sighed heavily.

She frowned but said nothing at first, continuing to scratch his head. “I...suppose...” she said softly. She recalled being the last person to go up on the stage. It was not until the end that he started placing his bid. She was not going to ask him what made him want her over everyone else. She did not want to hear his reasoning. “You should rest some more though,” she told him softly.

"Don't leave...this...time," he frowned. "Not...unless you...really need to." He held onto her tighter and pecked up at her with large brown eyes.

She chuckled softly. “Alright,” she said. “I will not move.” With that, he finally gave in to the sleep he had been fighting off. He snuggled tighter to her, nuzzling his face into her chest.
Chapter 60

Sasori started to stir when he had to go to the bathroom. He groaned softly into Azumi’s skin, curling his fingers into her back. He shifted a little, slowly inching his foot out onto the floor and releasing her. He sighed, very, very slowly sitting up.

Azumi watched him move and sat up. “Do you need help?” she asked him softly, stretching since that she was free of his grasp. ‘Too long in the same position,’ she thought, shaking her head.

"No," he mumbled. "I can take...myself...to—" he paused to catch his breath, "to the bathroom." He hated that despite the painkillers he could feel a light sheen of sweat breaking out over his body. "More...tea...please," he said, rounding the bed.

Komushi walked into the room, almost slamming into Sasori as he yawned widely. "Whoa!" he stumbled back, feeling Sasori put a hand on his chest.

Azumi winced, knowing that if he was not medicated that it would have been so painful. She got out of the bed as Sasori continued on into the bathroom. She took a moment to stretch harder. “Have a good nap?” she asked Komushi.

"Wasn't long enough," Komushi yawned again, matching her stretch. "Yours?" he smirked. "Or is the old man still grumpy?"

“I wish I napped,” she muttered. “He is needy. I spent three hours trapped in his arms. Conscious.” She sighed and rolled her eyes. “I am going to make more tea. Watch our son for a few minutes, will you?” she smirked.

"Ew, I would never let you produce something so needy," Komushi snorted at her reference. "Our child would be so much better!"

She chuckled softly as she walked toward the door. “Just make sure he does not break himself while using the bathroom,” she told him just before slipping out of the room. She made her way to the kitchen and started making more tea. While she waited for the water to boil, she sat down at the table and rested her head on her arms.

Gaara poked his head into the kitchen and spotted Azumi resting at the table. He frowned, seeing how stressed she looked. He crossed the room silently. He stood behind her, slipping his hands over her shoulders to gently massage the muscles. "Are you okay?” he asked softly in her ear.

She tensed up but relaxed when she heard his voice. "Mm,” she moaned, sitting up straight as he massaged her. "I am just tired,” she said. "He is...needier than normal." She tilted her head back to look at him.

"I could only imagine," he frowned. He leaned down, closing the gap between their faces to press a kiss to her lips. "I bet he’s reasonably upset too." He pressed hard into her shoulder when he found a knot that had formed.

She gasped and bit her lip, holding back a slightly louder moan. "He," she breathed, "said you are not allowed over. And I assume he does not want you at the shop," she frowned, "since he told me he was going to teach me how to run it."

"Run the shop?” Gaara's hand stopped for a fraction of a second. "Wow," he clicked his teeth. He and Sasori had been in many fights but none of them had resulted in him being banned from the
shop ever. "There's no way." He shook his head. "It would mean he has to come down more often, you'd be left alone." He shook his head again. "He needs my help."

"I know that and you know that," she said, "and I am sure he knows that. But telling him will not work." She sighed, placing her hand over his and pulling it closer to kiss his knuckles. "And in the condition that he is in, he is not going to let me leave his room for too long." She stood up and wrapped her arms around him. "You...really fucked him up," she said very softly, the smallest smirk ghosting her lips. She pulled him into a kiss, biting his lip gently. He pressed into the kiss, biting her lip back a little harder. He sighed softly, pressing his forehead against hers. He moved his hands from her shoulders to slip into her hair, scratching her scalp gently. "But now it will be a little harder to see each other."

"I lost it," he said softly. "I'm sorry. This is the opposite of what you need right now." He cupped her face, looking into her eyes. "I will still sneak over any time you want me here though," he promised. "Just say the word."

"Of course," she smiled. She kissed him again then pulled away when she heard the water boiling. "I must bring the baby his tea," she joked, grabbing three cups.

"I suppose you'll be sleeping with the baby tonight?" He rolled his eyes. There was a ghost of a smile lingering on his lips but he still itched to take her hand and run away with her. There was an invasive thought to just run right then and there. There was no one around to stop them. They had at least two people who would take them in.

"It seems like it," she sighed. "He kept Lord Komushi up all night calling for me. We would have been caught last night if he was not stopped from coming to my room. But that being said, the hope of leaving the scarab with the manchild tonight is lost because he will still want me there."

"Great," he sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Well...thank the gods for small blessings, I suppose," he frowned, looking at her with worry and slight jealousy in his eyes. "Send one of the snakes if you need me at all for anything," he said to her, crossing the room to pull her close again. He kissed down the back of her neck.

She shuddered slightly, pressing her body back against his. "Expect a visit from Naga soon," she smirked.

"Oh, I will," he growled softly in her ear. His voice was still a deeper rasp than usual and he made sure to play that up, knowing full well how it would affect her.

She bit her lip and turned around in his arms, kissing along his jaw and then down his neck. "Very soon," she said softly against his skin.

He moaned softly, smirking widely. "I'll anticipate it." He pulled her flush to his body. He tilted her head back to pull her into one more deep kiss before he knew he had to let her go. He sighed, stepping away from her. "Okay," he chuckled. "Go bring the infant his tea," he sighed.

She sighed as well as she grabbed a small tray and set everything up on it. "I will see you later," she whispered, winking at him as she walked past him and went back to Sasori's room. Gaara sighed again, watching her disappear down the hall. The invasive thoughts continued.

"Ko," Sasori sighed, curled back up on the bed, "I finally found someone perfect," he was speaking softly to the other man, "and it seems like everything in the world is trying to take that away from me."
"I know," Komushi sighed, trying to comfort his best friend as best as he could. He looked at Azumi when she entered the room and gave her a look that screamed, 'get me out of here!'

She walked around the bed and set the tray on the bedside table. "Are you starting to feel any pain?" she asked Sasori.

"A little," Sasori mumbled, rolling over just enough to look at her. "What took you so long?" he pouted. Naga slithered over and tapped his nose against Sasori's to distract him.

"One of the servants started interrogating me," she lied, pouring his cup. "Do not worry about it." She handed the cup to him then poured one for Komushi and another for herself.

"Ugh," Sasori groaned. "They are so nosy. I hate having to keep them around," he pouted. "If I could, I would get rid of all of them." He took her hand, just wanting to hold it.

Komushi caught Azumi's eyes above Sasori and shook his head. "Needy," he mouthed to her.

She nodded in agreement at Komushi and sat down on the bed next to Sasori. She tilted his face gently in different angles to make sure she did not need to tend to any of the wounds just yet. "I can give you another dose when you start to feel more pain," she said.

"Okay," he mumbled. He gently started to tug her closer, indicating he wanted her in the bed again. "Sleep...here," he ordered weakly. He sniffled a little then seemed to remember that Komushi was there.

She nodded and got into the bed, getting into a comfortable sitting position against the wall with a pillow and gently setting his head in her lap. She raked her fingers through his hair, picking up the book she read earlier. "Can I keep this?" she asked Komushi.

Komushi squinted at the book then gasped. "Oh, shit, this is where book one's been?" he laughed, waving his hand. "Keep it. Do you want the other like...five books?" he asked her.

"There is more?" she gasped.

"Wait, really?" Sasori mumbled. "That was a long book."

"Oh, there's more," Komushi smirked. "All of them are just as dramatic and intense as the first."

"Please?" Azumi grinned. "I would love to read the rest."

"I'll bring them over next time I stop home," Komushi chuckled. Sasori made a small happy noise and the snakes hissed in excitement. "Ew...this really is turning into a family." He looked at the four of them.

Azumi’s brow furrowed. “What does that even mean?” she asked. “And why did you say ‘ew?’” she added softly.

"I said ‘ew’ because there is no way we would biologically produce such a needy and whiny son." Komushi poked Sasori's cheek gently.

Sasori swatted his hand away and accidentally knocked Azumi’s hand away from his hair. He quickly grabbed her hand and placed it back on his head for her to resume combing her fingers through his hair. “I do not even want to think about what a child between us would be like,” she muttered.

"We would make a precious child!" Komushi defended. "With your eyes and my great—"

"Your...kid...would get...your horrible bows," Sasori cut him off.

"My eyebrows are great!"

"Ugh, I would hope not," Azumi said softly. "I would rather a child between us acquire your rock-solid build. It would come in handy since they would definitely get all of the snake-like things from me. They would be able to fend off being hunted easier."

"So what you're saying is that we would make a resourceful, robust and strong child," Komushi smirked.

Sasori gagged softly. "Not...going...to...happen," he growled. "She will never...be with...child." His voice was shaky but there was a finality to it. "I will personally...kill the man...if I ever find out she is."

Azumi’s hand paused for a moment and she looked down at Sasori. She knew it but to hear him say it was different. ‘This bill needs to pass now,’ she thought.

"You say that," Komushi snorted. "But you couldn't even fight off your cousin."

“That was blind rage,” she said softly. “It is almost impossible to go up against that. It is equivalent to going up against a crocodile.”

"I fought one just fine," Komushi smirked. "In fact, so has Kankuro and Gaara." He looked down his nose at Sasori. "So I think this is just a you thing."

“Leave him alone,” Azumi scolded softly, kicking Komushi gently in the leg.

“You’re alone,” Komushi shook his head at Sasori.

“I’ve never seen...a need to...fight a crocodile,” Sasori wheezed with an eye roll. “And she’s doing her job,” he muttered, curling his fingers into her skin a little, holding her tighter.

“Only you could be this insufferable while this injured,” Komushi sighed again. “Do you want any other books?” he asked Azumi.

“Mm,” she hummed in thought. “Let me finish this series first. And then I will ask about more. I trust your taste in reading material, oddly enough, now that I have read this one book.”

"I’m glad to hear that," he smirked. "I actually have quite an expansive library." Komushi wiggled his eyebrows. "You didn't get to see much of my house when you came to visit that one time."

“"You are right, I did not but if I recall correctly, there is always music playing there and it put me in a trance. I do not think I will be seeing much of your house."

"Mmm, yeah," Komushi rubbed the back of his neck.

"Not to mention..." Sasori spoke up, "she has no reason to go there again." He started to doze off. She looked down at him, noticing him falling asleep.

“Unless she wants to have a good time,” Komushi smirked.
“Uh, no,” she groaned. “I cannot think of an actual reason I would ever go.”

“Have you ever not had a good time with just me?” Komushi asked her.

“Ummm,” she said in a high pitch, “there are a couple of times where I was alone with you and almost every time, you tried coming onto me in some way. That does not exactly constitute a good time.”

“Listen,” Komushi wagged a finger at her, “I have good taste in women and you can’t blame me for following my natural instinct,” he smirked. “So, again, I will say we’d make cute kids.”

“It is unfortunate that these cute kids will never exist,” she deadpanned, actually okay with the fact that they would not.

“Your loss,” he pouted.

She looked down at Sasori again and stopped moving her hand, unsure if he was asleep. He moved his head slightly, indicating that he wanted her to continue moving. “Do you want to go to bed?” she asked him softly.

“I am in bed,” he mumbled.

“I think she means for you to move over, scorpling,” Komushi smirked as he poked his best friend in the cheek. “You’re fat head is crushing her.”

Sasori tiredly swatted Komushi’s hands and mumbled. Azumi gently maneuvered him off of her and moved down slightly to continue rubbing her hand through his hair. She looked at Komushi. “When will it be your turn to take care of our son?” she smirked.

“My turn?” Komushi asked. “But you’re doing so well.”

“I don’t want him,” Sasori whined.

Azumi sighed and rolled her eyes. “Shh...” she said softly to Sasori, gently rubbing down his nose with the side of her finger. “Just go to sleep.”

His eyes fluttered shut and with a soft mewl, he was knocked out. Komushi watched in horror and awe. “What off lever did you pull just now?” he asked her softly.

“His nose,” she smirked. “My father used to do that to my brothers and me when we were younger.”

“Witchcraft.”

She turned around and poured herself another cup of tea. “You do not have to stay,” she told Komushi, taking a sip. “I think you can trust that I will not kill him. And...he clearly does not want you to care for him,” she smirked.

“I’ll go home but only because you want those books,” Komushi smirked. He started to inch out of the bed to keep from waking the scorpling. “I’ll be back with them soon,” he whispered. “Good luck.” He winked then slipped out the door.

She watched him leave and quickly finished her tea before she slowly got out of bed to go to the bathroom. Naga and Ryuga coiled up on the bed. Once she came back, she sighed and stretched hard, preparing herself for being stuck in the same position for the rest of the night because she
knew that as soon as she got back in the bed, Sasori was going to latch onto her and hold her there.

Sasori felt her dip into the bed and as she suspected, he reached for her. He moaned softly and waited for her to get comfortable. She got into a comfortable position and opened her arms for him to assume his normal position of laying on her chest so she could scratch his head. He buried his face her chest once again and settled back down. “He’s finally gone,” he sighed.

“He is,” she said softly. She pushed his hair back out of his face and sighed quietly. “Go back to sleep,” she whispered. They laid there for a while as she scratched his hand and waited for him to fall asleep. Eventually, she also fell asleep with him still laying on her.
The next morning, Sasori woke up with a hard stretch. He gasped loudly in pain as his body released. “Fuck,” he whispered, burying his face back into Azumi’s warmth. His stomach ached with hunger and he felt disgusting. “Azumi,” he mumbled, “food.” He held onto her tighter.

“You have to let go of me first,” she murmured, still asleep. She could still feel his hold on her. “Wake up first,” he told her with a long yawn. He did not want to move but he wanted food. “Maybe I should make one of the other servants bring us food from now on.”

She groaned and stretched under him then forced herself out of his grasp to roll over onto her stomach and stretch even harder. “That is not a good idea,” she hummed. “It will only make them talk and give them the wrong idea. I will go get it.” She collapsed back onto the bed from her stretch and sighed, also not wanting to move.

Sasori sighed, knowing she was right. He rolled onto his back with a wince. “They are childish,” he mumbled. “Fine. But hurry back,” he said, watching her not move.

“Mm,” she hummed into the pillow. After a few moments, she felt him poke her to tell her to hurry up. “Just a minute, honey. Mommy is tired,” she joked. She waited a few more seconds before she got up and stretched one last time. “I will be right back,” she said as she walked to the door. She was going to take this opportunity to deal with the morning sickness she could feel starting up.

"Mommy?" Sasori whispered to himself. He shuddered just thinking about it as he sat up slowly. He pushed the thoughts away of how she was doing everything his mother would have done for him as a child and got up to head into the bathroom.

A couple of minutes later, Azumi returned with two cups of coffee and two bowls of breakfast. Since Sasori was moving slower than normal in his injured state, he had not returned to the bed by the time she got back. She hummed softly as she set the tray down on the desk. "Do you need help?" she called him, tapping the snakes’ noses gently.

"No," he called back. He was still bothered slightly by the ‘mommy’ joke. With a soft groan, he slowly got up, cleaned himself up and returned to the bedroom. His stomach growled low in his belly the moment he smelled the coffee. He walked over to the bed and carefully crawled onto it. Once he was comfortable again, he reached for the bowl but he pressed it into a wound on his stomach, causing him to wince and nearly drop it.

Azumi kept her hands close to the bowl, ready to catch it but saw that he was able to save it. “Nice,” she hummed softly, setting his coffee next to him. “I will run your bath in a minute.” She picked up her own coffee and started drinking it.

Sasori nodded as he silently ate his food. He paused, resting the bowl in his folded legs before sighing. “I want to do something today.” His voice was still rough but he was able to string full sentences together without having to pause as frequently.

“Do something? Like what?” She picked up her bowl and started eating. “Work on orders here? Go to the shop and work on orders?” She figured he still could not move too much so whatever he wanted to do was limited.

He waved both those suggestions off with a shake of his head. “Well,” he backtracked a little, “I want to go into town.”

“Surprisingly,” he laughed softly into his cup. “The food you made was good,” he said softly. “I should have you cook more.”

"Thank you," she said. "It is not something I do very often. Not to say that I do not enjoy it, but I prefer to leave that sort of thing to people who are more passionate about it than I am."

“Fair,” he hummed. “What is your favorite thing to make?” he asked, reaching out to gently pet Naga’s back with one hand.

"Mm," she hummed in thought as she leaned against the desk, taking a few more bites of her food. "I enjoy baking much more so I have to say my favorite thing to make is bread. There is nothing more satisfying than eating a loaf of bread you made yourself."

He looked at her for a moment in slight surprise then nodded. He took a bite of his food and nodded again. “Yes, I could see you enjoying that,” he smirked. “You certainly have the aggression to knead dough.”

She scoffed but could not hide her grin. "But I also have the patience to wait for it to rise," she countered.

“A virtue I’m sure I test daily,” he snorted. “I think a trip to the shop and market would be good today,” he said, really considering it.

"I agree," she nodded as she finished up her food. She set her bowl down then finished her coffee and went into the bathroom to run their baths. Once they were ready, she went back into the room and took his now-empty bowl from him. "You can move fine on your own, right?" she asked, ready to help him to the bath if he needed it.

“I can,” he confirmed for her as he slowly moved to the edge of the bed to get up. Just as slowly, he pushed against his sore muscles and stripped down. He cursed softly when he had to pause and then start up again. When he was finally disrobed he walked to the bath and sunk low in the water. He bit his lip hard against the stinging of his wounds like last time.

She waited until he was fully in his bath before she started to get undressed. She got into her own bath and sighed. The snakes came slithering into the bathroom to bask in the sun while they bathed. It was silent in the bath and Sasori could not help but drink it in. It was bliss to finally relax fully in his own room with no one else around. He sighed as the heat took the pain away once more. He closed his eyes, dozing off a little again.

After she was done relaxing, Azumi washed herself up, taking her time when she noticed Sasori was not even moving. Once she was done, she moved to get out of the bath and grab a towel. She noticed him napping and smirked as she grabbed a towel for him then set his robe up. The snakes hissed softly, asking if she was doing okay. She smiled at them and nodded as she dried herself off and got dressed.

Sasori came back to life with a sharp gasp. He looked around, finding he was alone in the bathroom. He did his best to wash up, forcing himself and gritting his teeth through the pain. He was tired of being helpless.

From the bedroom, Azumi heard the water moving around. "Oh, he is awake now," she hummed softly to herself as she gathered all of their dishes onto the tray. She moved to the doorway of the bathroom to make sure he did not need help. She saw that he was doing fine on his own, but she
was positive he was just being stubborn about it and waited patiently for him to get dressed.

He walked back into his room and sighed heavily as he deflated on the bed. "Ugh," he groaned softly. "Hurry up with those dishes so we can leave," he told her. "And before I get tired," he chuckled.

"I will be right back," she smirked. She grabbed the tray and went to the kitchen to drop the dishes off. "There is no way he would have fallen asleep in the two minutes I am gone," she muttered as she went back to the room. Like it was his job, Sasori's head was tipped back. A soft breath indicating he was dozing once more could be heard. Naga hissed a little laugh and slithered up to Sasori to tap his nose against the man's. "You have got to be joking," Azumi chuckled, stepping closer to Sasori. "You are turning into your pet scarab, falling asleep like this," she said, running her hand through his hair. "Come on, we should go and get you moving before you succumb to narcolepsy." She grabbed his hand to gently help him to stand up.

"Hell no," Sasori said, his eyes snapping open. "Let's go. I'm not turning into that." He held onto her hand for support. They walked together slowly to the door. He stopped at the front to catch his breath and released her hand. "We'll spend two hours at the shop then go to the coffee shop."

"Sounds like a plan," she chuckled. She kept her hand out for him, knowing he was going to need a little help getting down the stairs. "I will make sure to lead you out of the direct sun."

"Good," he nodded. "The usual route should work just fine," he told her.

She nodded and helped him down the stairs, moving at the pace he set. Once they were finally at the bottom, she led him to the shop, making sure to keep out of the sun and moving just a little faster so they could get there quicker.

"It's been a little while since we've been here," he hummed, stooping to pick up a few packages that had been left outside the door before pushing the back door open. "We will have to organize some of this."

"I can do that," she told him, taking the packages from him. "I am sure you have paperwork you should catch up on."

"When you are finished with that," he started as he made his way over to one of his lower workbenches, "go organize the front and make a new display." He sat down and grabbed what he needed.

She nodded as she set the packages down on a different workbench and opened them up to sort through them. Once they were sorted, she organized them and put all of the items where they belonged. After a half-hour, she moved to the front of the shop and reorganized her original display then set up a new one next to it.

As she was setting everything up, a familiar mop of red hair peeled through the door. Green eyes caught hers in surprise. "I didn’t expect to see you here," Gaara whispered as he walked into the shop. "Did he send you alone?" There was no way he could see his cousin getting up and moving this far already.

She shook her head and pointed to the back workshop. They stayed silent for a moment and heard Sasori let out a very slight pained groan. "He is here," she whispered.

Gaara’s lip twisted into a silent scowl. He turned away from the doorway and leaned in to steal a kiss from her. "Are you okay?" he asked softly. "He hasn’t done anything, has he?"
She shook her head again. “He cannot really do anything,” she shrugged. “He could hardly speak much yesterday.”

He nodded, his scowl shifting to a frown. “He will heal up...” He cupped her face and looked into her eyes. “I’m guessing he’s been making you sleep in his room?”

She sighed and nodded. “He is...” she said softly. “I am basically his pillow until he says I can go back to my own room.”

“Such a child,” Gaara huffed in irritation. “Okay, well...I did come here to get something but I’ll come back later.” He stroked her cheek then kissed her again. “Do you want me to bring you any food?”

“Azumi!” Sasori called suddenly. “Azumi, I need you in here!”

She looked at the workshop then back at Gaara. “We are not going to be here too much longer,” she said. “He wants to go to the market.” She turned her head slightly to kiss his palm.

“Alright,” he sighed. “Tell me if you need me,” he said softly just as Sasori called for Azumi again.

“Of course,” she smiled. She pulled him into one more kiss. “I will see you later,” she whispered as she pulled away and went into the workshop.

“What took you so long?” Sasori growled, thrumming his fingers in irritation in the workbench’s surface. “I know you aren’t sleep deprived. And I didn’t hear anyone come in.” He glared at her.

“I was working on getting something settled before I could walk away from it,” she lied. “What do you need?”

“I can’t go up to the second level yet.” He continued to glare at her. “I need you to grab what’s on this list and bring it down here.” He handed her a list. “And try not to linger,” he clicked his teeth.

She exhaled quietly through her nose. “Of course,” she said, taking the list from him. She read it over once before climbing up to the second level to grab everything.

“We’ll go for coffee and churros after this,” he told her when she returned with what he had asked for. “Is there anything you want made for dinner tonight?”

“Oh,” she chuckled, “I never expected that question from you,” she said softly. “Uh...does anyone here know how to make alcapurrias?”

“I’m sure we could find someone who can make it,” he said to her, waving off her surprise. “What is it?”

“It is fried yuca and plantains filled with ground beef,” she said simply. “Something I actually kind of miss from my village.”

“Sounds simple enough,” he nodded. “We’ll pick up what you need and have it made,” he told her. “I’ve been bored with the same foods lately.”

She gasped softly, unable to actually contain her excitement. She did not know what to do and hugged him without thinking about it. The slight pained grunt from him made her back away. “Ah, sorry,” she said softly.
Sasori turned his head to hide a small, pained smile. He cleared his throat and gathered what he needed to start his project. “Finish up any small projects,” he told her. “Get as much done as you can before I’m finished. I’ll have Komushi or another servant send them out eventually.”

"Right," she said, immediately moving to the top level to work on the first of the small projects.

An hour went by and she completed four projects before she decided to peek over the edge to see if he was done or close to done with his own work. He was putting the final touches on it.

“Come down here, my creeping snake,” he called to her. “I’ll be ready to go by the time you’re here.” He closed his notebooks and wrapped up the project. She smirked as she cleaned everything up that she was working on and made her way down to the main level. She tapped each of the snakes’ noses as a goodbye. “Are they eating?” he asked her as he slowly stood up. “We don’t really come around here.” He figured Gaara let them out but he was not sure what they do.

“They are,” she said. “They do not need to eat very often and they left to eat the last time we were here. I am sure they are good for the rest of the month.”

He nodded, reaching out to take her arm to help him down the stairs when he started to stumble a little. He refused to climb down the stairs like a child. “Churros first,” he started to smile.

She grinned as she helped him down. “I have been craving them for a little while,” she said excitedly. Once they got to the bottom, he pointed in the direction of where they were heading and she helped him walk but let him lead.

“They are an addiction,” he chuckled. “At least the ones from this shop are.” They walked into the shop and found a seat. A waitress came over and he quickly ordered them coffee and their favored sweet. The waitress nodded and walked away.

Azumi looked around the shop, sitting back in her seat and watching people go about their day. “This city is full of interesting characters,” she mumbled softly to herself.

“It can be,” he said, leaning his chin against his hand. “Did you like to people-watch in your village? I’m sure it got boring since you didn’t have travelers.”

“I people watched,” she hummed, “people watched me. However you prefer to put it,” she chuckled, “I did it every now and then. There is more foliage in my village so I used to sit in a tree on the edge to get away from people. Very few people ventured there for me to people watch.” She folded her arms and smirked at him. “I would often fall asleep there so I am sure I was watched more than I watched.”

“That doesn’t sound remotely unnerving,” Sasori stifled a laugh. “And did you have a Naga to keep watch over you?” he asked her casually. “Your life sounds like it was very slow-paced.”

“A Naga?” she blinked. It took her a second to process the question. “You mean a companion snake?” she chuckled. “I did not. Unless you count the snake that was living inside me my entire life that I did not know about. Otherwise, there was no snake that I had that was with me the way Naga is. And yes, my life was quite relaxing.”

Sasori broke down in genuine laughter. He pressed his hand over his lips to quiet his giggles as the waitress returned with their churros and coffee. “Ah, your father must be a strange man,” he sighed, finally catching his breath.

“Ah...yeah,” she chuckled. “He is a bit...eccentric.” She took a sip of her coffee. “But, to be quite honest, who is not at least a little bit in some way?”
“There are some plain people in this world,” he chuckled. “And they are the most boring,” he hummed. “Your father must be frantic,” he said more to himself than her in a musing tone.

“Eh, he is surprisingly level-headed for how eccentric he is,” she shrugged, looking around some more. “You are pretty eccentric...and level-headed,” she took a churro and dipped it into the icing, “for the most part,” she smirked.

“I suppose you could say that,” he smirked. “I never really cared what people thought about me. Especially not Deidara,” he rolled his eyes.

“Oh, I know very well what you care and do not care about,” she hummed. She pushed the churros toward him for him to take one.

He picked one up and dipped it into his coffee all the while staring at her. He smirked, biting into the fried dough with a small chuckle. “I expect no less from you,” he told her. “You don’t seem to care much for others either. Mmmm, save for my cousin,” he squinted at her. “Uncle doesn’t count. All you women have a thing for that bastard.”

"I do not know what you are talking about," she smirked, sipping more of her coffee. "They are both gentlemen. Women tend to like that. You, on the other hand, know how to be one and only choose to be one in front of your mother."

“My mother has earned nothing less than the best from me,” Sasori shrugged. “I’m also a gentleman to my aunt and Mei,” he clarified.

"All three women you hardly see which only further proves the point I am trying to get across," she said, pointing a churro at him as she spoke, "that you are only a gentleman in special cases whereas Lord Gaara and Lord Sandaime are always gentlemen. You cannot grumble about women fawning over your uncle when he is charming one hundred percent of the time."

Sasori rolled his eyes. “I can complain however much I want,” he smirked. “And I could charm you. But you’d just find it creepy and it’s frankly a waste of time since I already own you,” he shrugged. “If anything, women should like me more since I am transparent. There is no telling the gentleman you meet at a party or shop will remain gentleman behind closed doors. I’m doing the women I meet a service.”

"Okay, whoa, back up," she chuckled. "You could have charmed me. Months ago when you first bought me. It is entirely too late for you to charm me at this point. And maybe women would like you more if you were transparent with another personality." She sipped her coffee again. "You are pretty and you are intelligent...but let us be real," she smirked, "that is all you really have. Your fake charm will not get you far."

“Oh, please,” Sasori scoffed. “I could still easily win you over. I’ve never attempted to charm you so you wouldn’t know what to expect,” he smirked. “I could probably bring half the women in this city to their knees,” he said confidently as he took another churro. “But there is not a single one worthy of the time or effort.”

"Your confidence is amusing," she smirked. "If you mean 'charm' as in 'trance' then you can charm me," she challenged. "But you could never woo me. Not after everything you have done to me that was the complete opposite of charming. I know the real you. It is far too late."

“I’ll save this little challenge of yours for a rainy day,” he smirked. “You think you know me, my dear Azumi,” he tapped the end of a churro on the tip of her nose. “Just you wait.”
Azumi laughed a genuine laugh and folded her arms again. "It does not rain in this desert," she grinned. "At that rate, your scarab has a better chance."

"I’m offended," Sasori gasped. "Fine, I’ll just have to show you. But you won’t be ready."

"Considering it would not happen for a century, I would have forgotten about this conversation by then," she teased. She saw that there was one more churro left and pushed it toward him while she finished off her coffee.

"You’re getting cheeky again," Sasori teased back, splitting the churro in half.

She took the churro half with a grin. "Again, I do not know what you are talking about," she chuckled. She ate her churro and hummed, looking around again.

"I’m sure you don’t," he shook his head, smiling slightly. "Have I ever sent you to the food markets?" he asked, finishing off his coffee and paying their bill. He moved to push out his seat and very slowly stand up.

"No, you have not," she said, standing up and rounding the table. She put her arm out for him to take. "But that sounds like a place I want to be," she chuckled.

"You are certainly in for a treat," he smirked, taking her offered arm. Together, they left the shop and Sasori leisurely led her into a new section of the city. It was louder and more pack than anywhere else they had been aside from the night market. The smells of food and spices surrounded them. "This is one of my favorite places in the city."

"Is it really?" she hummed, moving a little closer to him once she saw how crowded it was. She tried not to let her anxiety get the best of her. "If that is so then why have we never come here?" she chuckled.

Sasori pulled her a little closer and smirked. "Because I knew you didn’t like crowds," he said lowly to her. "I remember your reaction from the night market and while I love being here, I don’t exactly like people myself so I take it in small doses."

"Ah," she smirked, "that makes sense." She looked around at the market, noticing how similar it was to the night market. The only difference was that it was above ground and she was sure everything sold in this market was legal. "Are you here for something in particular or are you just shopping around?"

"Nothing in particular," he hummed. "I am just tired of being inside and surrounded by people we know," he told her. "But you are still allowed to pick what you need to make the dish you want. Add a dessert to it if you think of something." Something caught his eye and he started to pull her towards a shop front. He skimmed what was laid out then shook his head. "This way," he told her tugging her back into the stream of people.

She let out a soft groan as she was pulled through the crowd. "Are you a window shopper?" she teased.

"Sometimes," he grinned back evilly. "Why? You got a problem with window shoppers?"

"Not at all," she chuckled. "It shows more restraint than I know I have."

He chuckled, shaking his head as he picked up a pepper to examine it. "I can afford almost anything I want," he told her. "And I find the more I can have, the less I really want." He placed the vegetable back down. "If anything, what I want most you cannot buy."
She furrowed her brow and tilted her head as she tried to figure it out. After barely three seconds, she gave up. “Which is...what exactly?” she asked.

His lips quirked in a smirk and he squinted at her. “Really?” he chuckled. “I’m surprised at you,” he said half teasingly and half genuine. He shook his head with a heavy sigh. “Knowledge,” he finally said.

“Ah,” she said with a chuckle, “that sounds about right. My apologies.” She looked around for a moment. “We just need to find yuca and plantains.”

"Mmm, those are not native to our area so..." He scanned the crowd with his eyes. He hummed for a moment then grinned and pulled her deeper into the market. "There are a few places that specialize in imported foods." He stopped in front of one stand run by a handsome young man with bright blond hair and even brighter blue eyes.

"Looking for something in particular?" the man grinned. His voice was friendly with a rasp to it. It was easy to tell he spent a lot of time yelling.

His grin was infectious because Azumi could not help but grin when she saw him. “Do you have yuca?” she asked. “Or plantains?”

“We definitely have plantains,” he nodded, getting off his stool to move a large basket from behind him and grab one filled with green-looking bananas. “But I’ll have to look for that yuca,” he said with a grunt as he set the large basket down in front of them.

"Thank you," Azumi grinned as she looked through the contents of the basket to find the perfect ones. "Oh...it might actually be called 'cassava' in this region," she said.

"Oh!" the blond gasped, snapping his fingers. "We got those!" he grinned. "They are some of the furry ones!" he giggled a little and disappeared again into the back.

"Furry ones?" Sasori asked her lowly.

The stall owner returned moments later with a large circular basket filled with brown 'furry' vegetables piled high. "They aren't very popular around here," he smiled, setting them down next to the plantains.

"Well, I am not from around here," she smirked at the blond. "They are quite popular where I am from." She looked through the basket to pick a few of them out, matching the number of plantains she chose.

"I can tell," the boy laughed again. He tapped next to his eyes. "Only seen one other of you with eyes like that," he said. "And you are much prettier than him." Sasori rolled his eyes. He was not in the mood to listen to this sun ball of a merchant boy flirt with his slave. "Whatever you're making for your husband, he must be in for a real treat," he smiled at Sasori.


The merchant chuckled as he handed Azumi a small bag for her to place her vegetables in. "Owner, huh?" he smirked. "Don't know of many master-slave pairs that go around linked arm in arm like that." Azumi stifled a laugh as she filled the bag. She knew what they looked like but she was not going to be the one to mention it.

"She is merely my crutch," Sasori's lips twitched. "Pay him and let's move on," he said to Azumi.
The blond winked at Azumi and flashed her another wide grin. She could not stop the giggle that came out of her. "If you say so, sir," he bowed his head. "For my little mistake and since you're first-time customers, I'll give you guys a discount."

"Aw, you are so sweet," Azumi chuckled, getting the small money pouch out.

"Don't worry about it," he smiled, ringing her up for a price much less than what she was actually buying. She handed him the money and put the pouch away. "Hope to see you again sometime!" He hit them with one last bright smile before Sasori tugged her away.

They rejoined the flow of the crowd and once they were far enough away, Sasori huffed heavily. "The audacity," he clicked his tongue. "To even think I'd let my wife wear what you are in public!" His lips twisted in distaste. "I don't even like that you are wearing that as my slave." He did have a reputation for doting on the woman he respected but the boy was clearly a traveling merchant.

"Then get me new clothes," she challenged with a smirk. "I only have but so many to choose from."

"Tch," he clicked his teeth. "I suppose I will have to." He rolled his eyes. "We'll look at the fabrics at the coming night market," he told her, already considering a few color combinations. "Your original measurements should work," he started to speak more to himself. "Though...my aunt might have a few good ones."

'Ooh, my measurements are going to change drastically,' she thought, letting him lead her through the crowd some more. 'Asking him to have them made just slightly bigger would raise some sort of suspicion.' She got a little lost in thought as they weaved through the foot traffic. At some point, they got separated, their arms unlinking as Sasori moved to another stall but Azumi continued with the flow of traffic. After a few moments, she realized she was alone. "Lord Sasori?" she asked, looking behind her. "Oh, no," she groaned, looking around the surrounding area. "Oh, no...oh, no...oh, no," She started to panic a little once the realization of her being lost in a crowded area started to set in. "Fuck. He is short and I am shorter, I am never going to find him."

"Azumi?" a voice called out to her. A golden aura was parting the crowd ahead of her. People parted the way as Sachiko floated through the throng of people up to the younger woman.

"Lady Sachiko?" Azumi breathed softly, trying to keep her panic attack from getting worse.

"Azumi!" Sachiko grinned but it faded quickly into worry. "What is wrong, darling?" She placed her hands on the other woman's shoulders lightly. She quickly handed off a few bags on her arms to the two servants that had accompanied her. She laced her fingers into Azumi's hand and led her off to the side so they could speak outside the flow of traffic. "Where is Sasori? Are you alright?"

Unable to express the relief she felt seeing Sachiko, she took a deep breath. "I have no idea where he is," she said. "He let go of me and I do not know where he went. But I am glad to see you," she added with a nervous chuckle.

"It's not hard to do that in these crowds," Sachiko laughed softly. "That's an amateur mistake on his part." She shook her head. "Do you want to try finding him?" she asked. "Or should I steal you?" She grinned like a hunting cat.

"I think it goes without saying that I would rather spend time with you than with him," Azumi laughed. "I think he can find me when he realizes I am not holding him up."

"Holding him up?" Sachiko repeated. "Oh," she gasped then grinned even wider. "Gaara did say they got into a fight." She slipped her arm around Azumi's. "But he didn't say how bad it was. Is he
"Okay?" A small flicker of concern passed over her features.

"He is doing better," Azumi said. "He can speak clearly and basically move on his own but very slowly. We are here today because he had cabin fever."

"Did Gaara crush his throat?" Sachiko gasped, starting to walk and rejoining the crowd. She kept Azumi closer than Sasori did, her arm sure and firm around the other. "My, my! He does tend to get restless at the strangest of times but to know Gaara went that hard...he didn't say what the fight was about. And seeing as you are still in perfect health, I take it it was not about the little bun?"

"No, no, he does not know about that," she said. "Lord Sasori went on again about owning me and that no one would change the fact that I am his slave. And Gaara could not contain his rage. I think if Lord Sasori found out about the baby, the fight would have been much worse."

"It's rare for Gaara to lose his temper," Sachiko hummed. "Let's be grateful it didn't come to that...at least not yet," she frowned. "I have a sinking feeling I might lose a nephew," she said sadly. Azumi frowned and looked at her. "Do you think one of them would have actually killed the other?" she asked softly.

"With the way the men can be in this family...the potential is there," she answered definitively.

"Oh," she frowned even harder. "I...would rather that not happen as well. Lord Komushi was there. I had asked him to stop Gaara before he could do any more damage than what he had already done."

"We will do everything we can to not let that happen," Sachiko patted Azumi's arm. "Good to know that mooch is good for something," she laughed. They continued to walk seemingly without a destination. "You are...two months along correct?"

"I am," she smiled. "And I know my clothes are going to start getting a little tighter on me. But Lord Sasori mentioned getting me new clothes at the upcoming night market. Unfortunately, he is going to use my old measurements."

"That...dear, don't subject yourself to that," Sachiko shook her head. "You need unrestrictive clothing and things that fit," she frowned. "I have a lot of wrap dresses you can have!" she said seriously. "No woman deserves to carry a baby while wearing uncomfortable expensive clothing."

"I thought about asking him to get the clothes made bigger but I am afraid of that raising some suspicions," she sighed. "But I would love to use some dresses that would hide any growth."

"Well," Sachiko grinned. "Since you are lost...maybe we should slip away to my house." She gave the crowd a sweeping look to see if her nephew was anywhere in sight. "This way you can try some stuff on."

Azumi could not hide the grin. "I would love to. He cannot say anything about me being with you."

"He wouldn't dare," Sachiko's eyes lit up with power. "Let's go," she giggled, walking towards the exit of the market place. Her servants trailed behind them as they made their way to the waiting carriage.

“Oh,” Azumi whispered, looking at the carriage. Sachiko climbed in and held her hand to help her in as well. “Wow...” The two servants climbed in as well and sat across from them. Azumi gave them a polite smile. They each gave her a small bow. In front, the driver made sure they were
ready before taking off for Sachiko's home.

They pulled up smoothly and Sachiko helped Azumi out of the carriage. The servants followed after them, unloading the carriage while Sachiko led Azumi inside. "Okay, so I have about three closets and a room." She started up the stairs. "So we'll start with the smaller closets and try everything on in the room."

"Three closets?" Azumi chuckled.

"And a room," Sachiko added. Azumi laughed again and let Sachiko lead her to the first closet. She pulled out a few dresses of various colors. "Never mind what colors Sasori makes you wear, what do you like?" she asked.

"Um, I wore a lot of light purple and turquoise," she said softly. "But after he made me a red dress, I actually enjoy wearing that."

"Perfect," Sachiko grinned. "I went through a pastel phase a few seasons ago and I'm over that now so you can have any purple dress you want. And I wear green so I should have some decent shades of turquoise," she smiled. "As for red, well," her smile turned coy, "every woman deserves a fancy red dress."

"Thank you so much, Lady Sachiko," she grinned. She looked through the dresses and picked out the two that she liked the most. "These are beautiful," she said softly.

"Pfft 'Lady,'" Sachiko waved off the title. "I'm your auntie now," she giggled. "I'm so excited. Temari is so grown now and all the boys think they are too manly for dresses now," she laughed. "So I haven't had anyone to have fun like this with!"


The older woman laughed and wrapped her arms warmly around Azumi. She gave her a gentle squeeze and pressed her cheek to the top of her head. "Well, now you have two aunts, three uncles, a brother-in-law and sister-in-law, and, unfortunately, a cousin," she giggled at the last part. "He's a little bit of a jerk," she teased.

"So I have heard," Azumi chuckled. "Hopefully I will not see much of him very soon." When they pulled apart, Azumi picked up the dresses of her choice and Sachiko led her to the next closet.

This closet was even bigger than the last and had not only everyday dresses but party dresses. "We'll do our best to avoid him," she assured her with a wink. "Okay, I want you to have at least three really nice dresses and..." She paused to look at Azumi's feet. "Sit down really quick."

Azumi chuckled, hanging the dresses in her arms on a nearby rack and then sitting down on the boutique seat in the middle of the closet. "This is almost like shopping," she joked.

"I like to think it is," Sachiko grinned walking over to her wall of shoes. She hummed, tapping her lower lip as she picked three pairs of shoes. She carried her selections over to Azumi and sat on the other end of the bench. "Try these on," she smiled. "I know barefoot is preferable but if you have nice dresses, you might as well have nice footwear."

"Ooh," she marveled at the shoes. With a wide grin, she picked the pair she found to be the nicest and put them on. "Oh, I like these."
Sachiko’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “Oh and we’re the same size!” She gushed. “Perfect! Now I know I can give you stuff or buy you things.” She clapped her hands softly and bounced gracefully to her feet. She crossed the room and grabbed a basket to neatly put the dresses she had already picked out into. “Mmmm, you’ll need accessories, too.”

“Is that all necessary for a pregnancy?” Azumi laughed. “I only need dresses that will fit me when I grow bigger.”

“Oh, it’s not for the pregnancy,” Sachiko laughed. “It’s because I want you to have it,” she shrugged. “Considered them ‘just because’ gifts.”

“Oh,” she chuckled. “Alright. I cannot argue with that.” She stood up and walked around for a few seconds to see how comfortable the shoes were. “I love them.”

“They are yours then,” she smiled. “We can do the accessories in the last room,” she smiled.

“Alright,” she chuckled, taking the shoes off to follow her to the next room.
Chapter 62

Chapter Notes

In case you haven't realized it yet, our vision of this desert is a very heavy but healthy blend of Middle Eastern and Latino cultures. That is what we think the Hidden Sand Village is like so it carried over to our own made-up desert.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“TATSUMIIIIIIII!!!”

Sasori’s father looked up from the piece he was working on. He had jumped, dropping the tangles of threads he was using to weave a new piece. “Yes, Dear?” he called back to her. He could already feel his wife’s rage before she was even in the room.

Sasori’s mother came storming into the workshop, gracefully avoiding knocking anything down in her rage. However, if auras could destroy physical objects, everything would have shattered. “Your son!” she screeched. “He lied to me!”

“Lied to you?” he asked, turning around to face her. He gently placed his hands on her shoulders, running his hands down her arms to calm her down. “What did he lie to you about?”

Her nostrils flared as she calmed a little in his arms. She bit her quivering lip and folded her arms to take a minute to compose herself. “He told me,” her voice was shrill, “he told me his slave girl was barren!” She ground her teeth.

Tatsumi’s brows pressed together in confusion. “His slave girl?” he asked her. “So what if she is?”

“I wanted him to marry her!” she hissed like it was obvious.

His eyes widened and then he nodded slowly in understanding. “Ah, I see,” he said softly. “And he lied to you...but how do you know that she isn’t barren?”

“Because I caught her and Sachiko at the market place today.” She pushed her lips out in a pout. “And they were discussing her being pregnant! Something about her clothes getting tight which means our son has been lying to us for months! He got her pregnant and won’t even marry the poor thing!” she finished breathlessly—or at least he thought she was finished. “Dear, they would make such a perfect couple! I’ve never seen someone handle him so well! The connection they have!”

“She has been around for a while,” he nodded, unable to argue with his wife. “So if he got her pregnant, maybe he just wanted to surprise you with a grandchild?” he suggested. “I’m sure there’s a reason for all of this.” Tatsumi’s wife glared hard at him. Her full lips pressed into a thin white line that said she was waiting for him to rectify what he had just said to her. He sighed and quirked a small smile. “It’s not that strange for him,” he rubbed her arms. “He told you no and now he’s nervous is all.”

Her face softened back into its pout. “But I wanted to give her dresses and help her through her pregnancy! Not Sachiko!”

“You still can,” he told her softly. “She’s here without her family, she could probably use all of the
support she can get.”

She sighed heavily, tapping her foot in irritation. “I will have to go over there and...” she looked for the right word for a moment, “talk to him. Now that I know about it, there is no use in him hiding it.”

“Uh, Dear, maybe you should let them tell you,”

“Sachiko knows! I have the right to know and talk to my son about his impending fatherhood!”

He grabbed her hand. “But if he wants to surprise you then let him,” he told her, pulling her close. “Maybe Sachiko is helping put together an announcement party for you. He knows how much you wanted this.”

She sighed, biting her lip. “But—” she started but Tatsumi pulled her flush to his body and started to sway with her.

“But nothing, my love.” He leaned down and pulled her into a kiss. “Let them surprise you,” he said softly. He started to move his feet and pull her into a slow rhythm. “Instead, why don’t you plan a surprise gift for them?”

She relaxed in her husband’s arms, resting her head against his shoulder as they moved. “I suppose,” she sighed. “I guess I can get them a gift.”

“Please, my love, we are a family of artists,” he smirked, kissing her forehead. “We make our gifts.”

She chuckled softly. “You’re right,” she said softly.

Sasori swept into Azumi’s room, the door cracking hard against the wall as he opened it. “AARGH! Where the fuck is she!” His chest heaved rapidly. He ran a shaking hand through his already mussed hair. Not even the snakes were anywhere to be found. He could not believe that they had lost each other in the crowd. One moment she was there and the next he was ripping through the market to find her. His body thrummed with pain.

“L-Lord Sasori...” a voice said quietly behind him. He whipped around and the fire in his eyes made the servant cower and take a few steps back. “Your aunt, Lady S-Sachiko, just arrived. She’s waiting in the front.”

Sasori’s face twitched in irritated rage. What could his aunt possibly want? He pushed past the sniveling servant to make his way to the front door.

“Ah, Sasori,” his aunt beamed. She was waiting at the top of the stairs while speaking to someone. “While I’d love to talk, this is not a very—“

Sachiko held up her hand. “She is here.” His aunt stepped back to reveal Azumi.

“You let me go,” Azumi told him, stepping closer to him. “I got lost and Lady Sachiko found me just before I started having a panic attack.” She circled him once and looked him over, hoping his injuries were not too aggravated. “Are you okay?”

He snatched her wrist and pulled her closer. His eyes searched her over. “I’m fine,” he finally said.
“I don’t understand how we got separated but thank you, Auntie,” he said to her.

“It was no trouble, Dear,” she smiled. “May I come in? I’d love some tea.”

Sasori ran his hand through his hair and sighed softly. “Uh, sure...yeah, come on in,” he said.

“Thank you!” she grinned.

“I will go make the tea,” Azumi said, very gently removing Sasori’s hand from her wrist. “I will meet you in the sitting room.”

Sasori nodded and offered his arm to escort his aunt into the house. Sachiko took his arm, while discreetly gesturing to her servant to follow them in. The servant pulled a wrapped box bound in decorative cords from the carriage before following them in.

“You look better than I thought you would, Nephew,” Sachiko patted Sasori’s hand gently. She felt a few raised scratched on the formerly unscarred skin.

“I’ve been...pretty well taken care of,” he said as they disappeared into the sitting room. Azumi led the servant to her room once they were out of sight before heading to the kitchen to make the tea.

“Azumi is a good woman,” Sachiko nodded. “Don’t get mad at her for this,” she told him as he released her so she could sit down.

Sasori scoffed and sat down across from her. “I’m not blaming her for us getting separated. I knew that it was a risk.” He would never admit that he had been terrified. He had been scared she was panicking somewhere, that she would be stolen away. The idea of her running away was at the bottom of his list. He trusted her and that scared him the most.

“Good,” Sachiko smiled. “So, other then...what has happened recently...how have you been?” Her question changed the air around them. “I haven’t seen you in a while.”

"We don't get to spend much time together, do we?" Sasori hummed with a small frown. "I've been working on the usual. Projects for work and keeping the shop stocked," he said with a shrug. "I'm going to start training Azumi to run the shop."

"Oh?" Sachiko raised her eyebrows. "Gaara isn't...." She tilted her head, looking at him.

He shook his head. "I don't want him around anymore," he said. “He isn’t welcomed here or at the shop.” His hand curled into a fist and he started getting angry just thinking about Gaara. "He's disrespecting me and corrupting her." Sachiko frowned and opened her mouth to say something but Azumi walked in with the tea at that moment. "Azumi is quite capable of doing his job. It will only serve to keep me connected to the shop better and reinforce her knowledge," he continued while accepting the cup tea Azumi offered him.

Azumi handed a cup to Sachiko then sat down next to Sasori with her own tea. She frowned, realizing they were talking about Gaara.

"I mean, I'm sure she is," Sachiko said, "but—"

"He pushed too many boundaries, Auntie," Sasori cut her off, "I can't excuse something like that."

“Alright,” Sachiko soothed. “No need to get worked up,” she said gently. “But remember, he looks up to you like a brother.
“A brother would not do to me what he did!”

“I have to challenge that, my dear,” she hummed. “Brothers do very silly and reckless things sometimes but still love each other.”

Sasori clicked his teeth in irritation. “I know that,” he pinched his lips.

"So maybe give him another chance," she said softly. "You remember how bad his temper used to get when he was a child."

"I remember," Sasori grumbled. "But I don't want to see him for a while."

“That’s probably best for both of you,” she hummed into her teacup. “But be the bigger man, okay?” She smiled pleasantly and sipped her tea.

“Fine,” Sasori sighed as he rolled his eyes already irritated by the very thought. “Oh,” he perked up suddenly. “Auntie, have you tried your bath gifts?”

"Oh! Right! Yes," she grinned. "I have."

"Did you...like them?" Azumi asked.

"I love them!"

Azumi smiled. "I am glad," she said.

"She worked on them for a few days," Sasori told his aunt.

“They are perfect! And have so much variety!” She swooned a little. “I’m actually going to use them again tonight,” she told them.

"That makes me so happy," Azumi chuckled. "Let me know when you run out. I can make more for you."

"Of course!" Sachiko nodded. She finished off her tea and set the cup down. "Alright, it's time for me to get going," she smiled, standing up.

"Let me walk you," Sasori stood up slowly. He bit back a groan as his body protested any more movement.

"Oh, don't push yourself too hard, Nephew," Sachiko said.

"Nonsense," Sasori sighed, "it'd be rude to make you walk alone." He linked his arm with hers and started leading her to the front. Azumi cleaned everything up and then followed them, ready to take Sachiko's place as Sasori's crutch once she was gone. They made it to the front and Sasori gave his aunt a kiss on the cheek. "Goodnight, Auntie," he said.

"Goodnight, Lady Sachiko," Azumi said with a bow.

"Goodnight, you two," she smiled at them. She made her way down the stairs and was soon disappearing around the bend of the street.

Sasori turned around and pulled Azumi into his arms the moment they were alone. He hugged her tightly, burying his face in the bend of her neck. "Don't ever do that to me again!" he growled lowly.
Azumi tensed up for a second and then relaxed, wrapping her arms around him. "You...let go of me," she said softly, "and left me alone."

"I know," he said softly. He tightened his grip on her, digging his nails into her skin slightly. "Let's run a bath," he told her, nearly whispering as he pulled back.

She nodded and linked her arm with his to help him back to his room. She walked him to the bathroom and then started running both of their baths, going about the usual routine with the bath salts and oils. She grabbed his towel and robe and set them close to his tub. "Do you need help?" she asked him softly once his bath was ready. "Getting in, I mean."

"No," he said with a head shake. "I can handle it," he gripped the edge of the tub and gently eased himself into the hot water. "How did you...find my aunt?" he asked her as he settled in.

"She found me," she said as she started getting undressed. "I could not find you...and I started to panic." She stepped into her bath and sighed. "I think it would have been a bad attack if she did not find me right when she did."

"Mmm," he hummed softly. He leaned to the side to look at her as they spoke. "Maybe we should just tie a rope to each other next time," he said seriously.

She chuckled softly. "I suppose that would work," she said. "Or we could just...not go when it is that crowded."

"That does seem far more sensible," he chuckled then winced. He would not admit he might have panicked when he could not find her. It was also at that moment that he remembered he had trashed her room. "Sleep in here tonight."

"Alright," she said softly. She closed her eyes and leaned against the wall of the pool. "I can make the food once we are finished," she told him.

He nodded silently. He stared at her intently, humming softly. "You...still need new clothes," he started after a few minutes of silence. "I'll take your measurements before we eat. Let's do that first when we get out."

She opened her eyes and saw him staring at her. "Ah," she said, not wanting to make it look like that made her nervous. "Alright..." She grabbed her soap and began to wash herself down.

His eyes lazily shifted back towards the front and he sunk into the water. He needed to brace himself to clean himself up. His joints had grown stiff and it irritated him how long he was taking to heal. He had a feeling he had basked in Azumi's care for too long.

She took her time washing up but ultimately finished before Sasori. She got out of her bath and wrapped herself in her towel. "Do you need help?" she asked him softly.

"No," he grunted as he twisted an arm behind him very slowly to wash his back. "I'll meet you out there," he waved her off.

She nodded and went out into the bedroom, sitting down on the daybed to wait for him. She was not going to bother getting dressed, knowing from the last time he measured her that he would just make her strip.

He pushed himself to finish washing up the slowly pushed himself out of the tub to dry off and pull on his robe. He did not waste time in grabbing his measuring tape. "Up." He flicked his hand at her. "No towel," he ordered. The tape made a soft noise as it unraveled. She let out a soft sigh
before dropping her towel. She was nervous. She had not noticed any changes to her body but that did not mean he would not notice. He walked towards her, circling her so he was behind her. He wrapped the tape around her bust first and noted the number. He frowned and measured her again. "How old are you again?" he asked her as he moved to measure her waist.

"Twenty-three," she answered softly. Her eyes moved to the doorway of the bathroom where Naga and Ryuga appeared, watching them to make sure everything was alright.

"Hmmm," he hummed with a tone of confusion. He measured her stomach, recorded the number then repeated the process. "You've gained weight," he told her as he moved down to her hips.

She scoffed quietly. She was not surprised that she had gained weight but she would have rather he did not say it out loud. "Did I?" she bit out. "I do not exactly weigh myself often to know whether I have or not."

"You are several inches larger than your original measurements," he rolled his eyes. "Normally I'd ask you if maybe you're bloating but even your breasts have swollen. Maybe we need to change up what we are eating after all."

She frowned. "Well, it is a good thing we decided to make something different today," she muttered. She did not even want to know the number for her hips, knowing that was what probably grew the most.

He nodded as he recorded the number for her hips. He whistled lowly and shook his head. "No wonder my clothes felt loser after you tried them on," he sighed. "They were big before but wow." He took a step back and wrote down all the numbers he had so far before continuing on to her thighs.

She scoffed louder. "Maybe think twice before having someone a little curvier try your clothes on for you," she huffed. "Next time, I will just have Ryuga do it. He seems to be the same size as you."

"Damn," Komushi said from the doorway. "That's a double insult," he grinned. "Either you're wasting away over there, Sasori or Ryuga is really fucking fat," he grinned.

Sasori shot his best friend a glare then turned back to Azumi. "I see I touched a nerve," he smirked. "We'll organize you a diet and bring your weight into check," he smirked.

"Can't have you looking like a well-fed noble now, can we?" Komushi smirked, taking a seat on the edge of the bed.

Azumi looked at Komushi and immediately went to feeling as uncomfortable about the situation as she did the first time Sasori measured her. She went to reach for her towel but Sasori kicked it away. "It'll just get in my way," he told her. She let out a soft groan in frustration.

"No need to be shy," Komushi smirked, looking her dead in the eyes.

"You can go and make some tea," Sasori told Komushi. "You're going to distract her and I need to finish this," he said sternly.

Komushi whined deep in his throat. "But she's fine with me," Komushi pouted. "Right, Little Snake?"

She frowned and shook her head, crossing her arms over her chest. "Please go," she said.
Komushi quirked his eyebrow, his mouth curving into a smaller smirk. "I see," he nodded, standing up slowly. "Guess I'll go make tea then." He leaned forward and tilted her chin up on his fingertip. "I personally like a woman with a little meat on her bones."

Sasori growled, snapping the measuring tape across Komushi's neck. "Tea! Now!" he ordered.

Komushi chuckled as he backed away. "Alright, alright," he smirked. He walked backward toward the door, keeping eye contact with her the entire time until he was out of the room.

"Why are you best friends with such a creep?" she hissed, looking at Sasori as soon as Komushi was gone.

"I don't know," Sasori grumbled. "He latched onto me and I haven't been able to shake him," he said, finishing up the rest of his invasive measurements. He frowned as he looked over the numbers and compared the old ones to the new ones. "I really don't understand how you could have put on this much weight," he sighed. "You really will need new outfits." She huffed again and stepped away from him when he was done, grabbing her towel and wrapping it around herself. She found her clothes and put them on, trying to move quickly before Komushi came back. "I'll have four outfits made," he told her. "And this time I'll make them adjustable since your weight seems to fluctuate now." He tucked the measurements into his bedside ledger.

"I'm back," Komushi announced, carrying a tray.

"Damn," Sasori muttered. "I was hoping Ryuga would cross your path on the way over here."

"He won't come near me," Komushi pouted. "I brought those books, by the way," he told Azumi.

"Thank you," she said softly, grabbing her tea and stepping away from him.

"Looks like no one wants to come near you," Sasori smirked at him.

"Azumi is just a modest lady," Komushi smirked. "And modesty in a woman is quite sexy," he winked at her as he pulled the books she had asked for out of a satchel.

She sipped her tea and looked at the books as he set them out on the bed and picked one up. "This is the second one?" she hummed softly, ignoring his comments.

"It is," Komushi chuckled, sitting down on the bed. "The other ones I brought I just thought you'd like."

Azumi picked up one of the other books and read the synopsis. "Hm," she hummed in quiet delight. "This sounds interesting." She sat on the bed and opened the book, beginning to read the first page.

"I figured you'd say that," Sasori rolled his eyes.

"Can I help?" Komushi grinned.

"No," Sasori snapped. "You can sit your ass right here and leave her alone."

"Damn," Komushi pouted. "When did you get so protective."

"I'm not," Sasori rolled his eyes. "I just want to actually eat dinner tonight."

"What is she going to make?" Komushi asked.
"Something from her village," Sasori answered. "We went to the market today to grab what she needed for it." He stepped to the doorway of the workshop to look at her. She had laid back on the bed, getting lost in the book Komushi gave her. "You can go make dinner now," he told her.

"Oh, right," Azumi said, sitting up quickly and closing the book. She got up and grabbed the bag from the market then quickly went to the kitchen. She set everything down on the counter and put her hair up then set to making the food.

"Azumi?" Gaara asked from the hallway. He poked his head into the room hesitantly, ready to pull back in case his cousin was in the room.

Azumi grinned when she heard his voice and turned around. "Hello," she said. She moved toward him quickly, wrapping her arms around him and pulling him into a kiss. Without breaking the kiss, she walked backward to bring him further into the kitchen.

He grinned into the kiss, wrapping his arms around her waist to pull her closer. He lifted her up to rest her on the countertop as they continuing to kiss. His lips traveled down to her jaw and neck. "Are you okay?" he asked, pulling back to look her in the eyes.

"Doing great now that you are here," she smirked, running her fingers through his hair.

"I'm glad," he smiled, pressing his forehead to hers. He nuzzled the tip of his nose to hers and closed his eyes. "My aunt stopped by," he said softly. "Did you pick some nice dresses?" he asked her softly.

"I did," she grinned. "And some shoes."

"That's good," he smiled but it faded quickly when she sighed softly.

"And then your cousin measured me. He says I am noticeably bigger."

"He..." Gaara's brows furrowed harshly. "We should leave," he said to her, resting his hands on her hips. "If you're starting to show, he might start asking questions and I don't want him hurting you or the baby."

"I cannot leave right now," she frowned. "He merely thinks I am just gaining weight." She placed her hands over his and looked down. "Are these really that big? He said I stretched his clothes out. I do not think I am that getting that big. There is no way I got that big so quickly. I mean I know I have wide hips but they should not have gotten too much wider in this short amount of time. I think he was just trying to make me mad," she said rapid-fire. She took a deep breath then looked back at him.

He blinked wide for a moment then smiled at her. He gripped her hips a little tighter and stole a kiss from her lips. "They are perfect," he told her, scratching them lightly. "But I might be a little biased," he admitted with another kiss. "Don't listen to him. You know he's weird about measurements."

She smiled at him. "I suppose so," she said. "But you are right. We should...try to leave soon. I do not want to think about what would happen if he found out the reason I am gaining weight. Maybe we should talk to your uncle about some form of an escape plan."

"It might be easier than you think," he told her. "Sasori gives you a strange amount of freedom. We just have to get him to let you go back to your room for the night."

"Now that he is doing better, he may allow me to do that soon," she said. "Mm, but he did tell me
to sleep in his room tonight." She cupped his face, leaning close and barely touching his lips with hers. "I want to leave soon," she said softly.

"I will make that happen," he assured her softly, pressing his lips to hers. "I'll see my aunt and uncle tonight to make a plan." He kissed her again. "Send Naga the moment you can slip away to your room."

"I will." She kissed along his jaw and down his neck. "Do you want to make dinner with me?" she said against his skin. "I do not want you to leave just yet."

"Of course," he grinned. "What are you making?" he asked, stepping back to look at the ingredients. "He's really letting you cook?"

"I am making alcapurrias," she told him, getting off of the counters. She looked at him and saw him quietly attempting to say the word. She smirked and cupped his face again to kiss him. "I was able to find the ingredients at the market. The man who sold them to me was very charming," she chuckled.

"Not too charming thought, right?" he pouted teasingly. He kissed her again, gently biting her lip. "Only joking. I'm glad you could find everything. I'm surprised Sasori wants to try new food." He ran his hands up her sides and leaned in closer.

"I think he is tired of what the servants usually make," she hummed, pressing her hips against his. "And he said the food I make is good so he trusts that this will be. And it is. It is a food from my village. And you," she kissed him, "will be the first," she kissed him again, "to try it."

He chuckled softly between each kiss. Her excitement was adorable and he loved to see her so happy after what he heard happened at the market. "I'm honored," he kissed her again. "I can't wait to try whatever you make me. I know it will be perfect." He stole another kiss. "Too bad Sasori doesn't deserve such a gift."

"Mm, but he does not matter right now," she smirked, biting his lip. She gave him one more kiss before pulling away to turn to the counter. She grabbed the plantains and peeled them. "Can you mash these for me?" she asked, pushing them in front of him and then grabbing this cassava. "Dealing with this is going to take a few minutes," she chuckled.

"Are these plantains?" he asked, smiling as he reached for the masher. "Shira loves these," he chuckled. "What are those?" he asked, looking at the cassava's furry exterior.

"Where I am from, we call them yuca," she answered, cutting the skin off and then soaking them in a bowl of water. "But here, they are called cassava. The merchant knew it by that name. We are going to soak them in water to soften them and then mash them."

"Oh!" Gaara grinned. "I think Shira has used them before too but he always complains about how hard they are to find." He continued to mash the plantains until they were all crushed and made them perfectly smooth. "All done!" he grinned. "Do you call these plantains in your village too?"

"Mm...we toss between plantains and platanos," she hummed as she grabbed ground beef and dumped it into another bowl. She added a bunch of different seasonings and started to mix it all together. "You can use either and usually everyone knows what you mean."

He nodded, walking over to the sink to wash his hands off. As he dried them off he turned to lean on the counter, watching her cook. "Which do you use?" he asked, leaning over to kiss the back of her shoulder then up to her neck.
She shuddered slightly as he kissed her. "I usually said platanos," she said softly.

"Then I'll use platanos," he whispered as he kissed just behind her ear. His hands slipped over her hips and wrapped around her.

She bit her lip, pressing her body back against him. "It sounds nice when you say it," she smirked. She turned her head to catch his lips in a kiss.

He laughed softly, kissing along her jaw as she turned back towards the food. He pressed his hips against hers and dared to suck very gently on her skin. "I'm glad you think so," he chuckled. "I want to learn more words from your village."

"I would be happy to teach you some," she smiled. She finished mixing the meat and set it on the stove to cook then washed her hands to check on the cassava. "This is soft enough to mash up now." She turned to him. "Can you do that for me?" she asked, kissing him softly. "I am going to cook the meat and then we can do the fun part."

"The fun part?" he asked excitedly. He took the bowl from her and reassumed his position to mash the cassava the same way he had the plantains.

"We are going to wrap the meat in the mashed vegetables," she started, setting another pot with oil on the stove to heat up, "and fry them."

"Oh," Gaara grinned. "Frying is a lot of fun," he said. "But I'm not very good at it," he chuckled. "I always wind up burning my hands."

"Well," she smirked, kissing him, "that is why I am here. You can do the wrapping and I will fry."

"We're a perfect team," he smiled, kissing her cheek. "Show me how to do the first one and then I can take over," he grinned.

She nodded and brought the bowls of mashed vegetables closer to the stove. She grabbed a small handful of ground meat and wrapped some of the cassava around it, packing it tight. "And you just make it a tight little bundle. So none of the meat comes out while it is frying."

Gaara watched her intently then nodded. "Okay, I can do that," he smiled. "Do I alternate the two vegetables?" he asked, switching places with her so he could pick up his own handful of meat. He repeated Azumi's actions then held out his little wrapped bundle to show her.

"You can alternate," she hummed, "or you can do one and move onto the other when the first runs out." She smiled at him. "Whichever is better for you. We are going to separate them into two bowls no matter what. That one you just did looks good."

"You got it, Chef," he grinned, kissing her cheek. He pulled the bowls a little closer and set to work on making the little bundles of meat and vegetables.

As he made them, she fried them and placed them in bowls separated by which vegetable was wrapped around the beef. They made about twenty-three little bundles before they ran out of the vegetables and meat. "I think we are done," she grinned, pulling him into a kiss. "Thank you for helping me."

"Thank you for letting me," he grinned, kissing her again. He chuckled, pulling back to wash his hands while eyeing their work. "These smell amazing! I can't wait to try one!"

She picked one up that was made from cassava and held it close to him. "You do not have to wait,"
she smirked. "It was one of the first ones so it is not as hot."

He opened his mouth to let her feed him. "This is so good!" he groaned around the food.

"Good," she grinned, eating the other half. "You did a good job." She picked up a plantain one and fed it to him the same way before eating the other half for herself.

"I think I like the platanos one more," he grinned trying out his newly learned word. His cheeks were light pink with joy.

She chuckled and fed him another one. "We should cook together more," she said, kissing him again.

"We should!" he grinned. "When we finally get you out of here we can cook any time you want."

"I cannot wait," she smiled. They cleaned everything up and she placed the two bowls on a tray. "I suppose I must take the baby and his scarab their dinner," she sighed.

He frowned and wrapped his arms around her from behind. He kissed her neck then jaw and gently pulled her into a kiss. "I'll go talk to my aunt and uncle," he kissed her again. "Send one of the snakes if you need me sooner. For anything at all," he said seriously.

"I will," she smiled. They walked down the hall together. "I will see you later," she smiled, giving him one last kiss. "I love you."

"I love you, too." He watched her turn down the hall before turning on his foot to go talk to Sandaime and Sachiko.

Azumi went into Sasori's room. Neither Sasori or Komushi were in there so she went into the workshop. She set the tray down on a workbench and picked up two of the same type of alcapurria. "Open your mouths," she told them. Komushi snapped to attention, jaw dropped and ready to receive the alcapurria. Sasori hesitated for a moment but copied Komushi's actions since his stomach was screaming to be fed. She fed it to them easily, making them bite down on only half and then handing the seconds halves to them. "I made two different kinds," she said. "That was made from the cassava." She picked up two of the other kind. "And these are made from plantains." She placed them in their free hands.

Komushi's eyes rolled back as he chewed through the first one. He groaned, swallowing it before immediately moving on to the next one. "These are going to be addictive!" He woofed the second one down faster than the first.

Sasori chewed through his much slower than his best friend. He had never tasted anything quite like it. He took his time to savor it then moved on to the second one. "I agree," he finally said after finishing the second one. He reached for his next one and bit down. "These are addictive and I was right," he smirked, "you should cook more often."

"I am glad you like them," she smiled, eating one for herself. "This is one of the more traditional foods in my village."

"Do you make these often?" Komushi asked excitedly. Sasori popped another one in his mouth, comparing the two flavors. "Are you going to take over the kitchen too?" he asked, looking at Sasori and her.

"I personally did not make them very often," Azumi said, "but I did eat them a lot. I would rather not take over the kitchen but ultimately it will not be my decision."
"I am curious about other things you grew up eating," Sasori hummed.

"I do not mind making things from my village, I just do not want to be the one to cook every day."

"You won't be," Sasori shook his head. "As I said, I just want to eat something different once in a while."

"You better have me over every time you cook!" Komushi said with stuffed cheeks.

"Considering you sort of just show up all the time," Azumi smirked, "I do not think we have to worry about you not being here." She took one more. "Now, if you two are satisfied with this, can I...go read?" She was already slowly backing up toward the bedroom.

"Yes, yes," Sasori waved her off. Komushi suddenly looked very torn. He wanted to keep eating but there was a look in his eyes that said he wanted her to read to him. His decision was made for him by Sasori placing a firm hand on his shoulder. "Don't you dare ask to eat in my bed!"

Komushi sighed and rolled his eyes. "Fine," he said. "I'll go out there when I'm done eating," he grumbled. And so he did. He went out to the bedroom, crawling onto the bed to lay next to Azumi while she read until they both eventually fell asleep while waiting for Sasori to finish whatever he was working on in the workshop.

When Sasori finally walked out, he was too tired to kick the other man out of his bed. He laid down to wrap around Azumi’s middle and fell asleep easily.

Chapter End Notes

On that note, y'all should try alcapurrias if you've never had them. They're pretty addicting.
After a couple of weeks of traveling, Orochimaru and his sons rode up to the outer walls of the city. "This is where she is?" Yashamaru hummed. "There is no foliage whatsoever."

"There are not many oases in this desert," Orochimaru said. "This is flat land. We come from a region closer to the mountains."

"I guess," Yashamaru. "I could never survive in a place like this."

"Adaptability is something your sister has that you do not." Orochimaru got off of his horse and his sons followed suit. The brought the horses to the nearby stables and checked them in before entering the bustling city.

"You think she adapted to a crowd this big?" Yashamaru asked.

"No way," Mitsuki shook his head. "She hates crowds like this!"

"You are right," Orochimaru frowned. "She would manage but I cannot see her living in this mess." He frowned as they made their way further into the city. The more he saw how crowded the city was, the more concerned he felt about the mental state of his daughter by the second.

"It will not be easy to find her here," Yashamaru said.

"But at least we are here," Orochimaru told him. "We need to find Utakata. If he has seen her then he can get us closer to her."

The snake that had traveled to meet them at the village shifted on Mitsuki's shoulders. He hissed softly, telling them he knew where Utakata was and how to get them to him. "That is convenient," Mitsuki smiled. "Lead the way then."

"Wait," Yashamaru held up a hand. "Mitsuki looks nothing like us but the two of us are dead ringers for Azumi," he said, looking at his father. "Should we disguise ourselves at all?"

"Mm, I suppose we should," Orochimaru hummed. "However, we can only do so much. Heavy disguises will only make us stand out more than we want."

"In a city this big, is a disguise that necessary?" Mitsuki asked. "I think we can at least get to Utakata's without you two getting noticed."

"We can get headscarves," Orochimaru brushed it off. "That should be enough at least. Let us get to Utakata," he said impatiently. He was not particularly fond of crowds himself and would prefer to make a plan to get his daughter as soon as possible.

The black mamba hissed excitedly to lead them in the direction of Utakata's shop. They walked for a while before finally approaching the building.
"This is it," Yashamaru hummed, looking at the shop from the ground entrance.

Mitsuki wasted no time in opening the door and walking up the narrow stairs. "Come on!" he urged his father and brother with an excited hiss. The two older men followed Mitsuki up to the door. Mitsuki nearly barreled through and he would have if Orochimaru had not reached ahead of him and knocked politely.

A few seconds went by before the door opened very slightly. Utakata poked his head out to see who had knocked on the door. "Oh," he said in slight shock, his eyes going a little wide. "You got here quick." He opened the door all the way and bowed. "Welcome, Lord Orochimaru," he said. He locked eyes with Yashamaru when he came up from his bow. "I have not seen you in so long," he said, the smallest smirk ghosting his lips. He stepped aside to let his three guests in.

"I can almost say I missed you," Yashamaru said in a very similarly bored tone.

"Ooh, I see why they are friends," Mitsuki whispered to his father, "because they both do not have emotions."

"Yes," Orochimaru sighed. "It is something I thought he would have grown out of but it seems all four of my children have a character deficiency."

"Oh, please, Father," Yashamaru rolled his eyes. "You are the worst of us all."

Mitsuki nodded in agreement. "You do have a hard time expressing...anything," he smirked.

"I think I have expressed enough concern in getting my daughter back," Orochimaru challenged. "Speaking of," he looked at Utakata. "You have seen her, right? What do you know about the situation she is in?"

"Uh," Utakata paused to make sure he worded everything right. "She...her life is at risk and, um, so is her baby's."

"Her what!" all three men gasped.

"She is pregnant," Utakata clarified.

"We are going to be uncles!" Mitsuki gasped.

"I cannot be an uncle yet!" Yashamaru sighed.

Orochimaru was still reeling from the information. "Forget you two being uncles!" He shook his head. "That monster put his hands on your sister!"

"Ah, hold on," Utakata said. "Let me fully explain her situation. Her master did not impregnate her. I am sure that at this point, he still does not know."

"So then who is the father?" Orochimaru growled.

"Her master's cousin."

"How is that better?!"

"Father, I think it is safe to assume they actually like each other if Utakata is this calm about the pregnancy itself," Yashamaru turned to his father.

"They do like each other...very much," Utakata nodded.
Orochimaru took a deep breath. "That does not change how I feel about her being pregnant in the first place," he said. "But as long as I know she is having this baby willingly, I am fine." He composed himself again. "Tell me more about her master."

"We should sit down before I explain anything." Utakata turned on his foot. "Follow me upstairs please." He held the curtain to his apartment behind the counter open for his guests. Yashamaru and Mitsuki walked up first followed by Orochimaru. They walked out to the patio and Utakata fixed them some tea. "Brace yourself," he told them as he set the tray down.

That alone made Orochimaru very nervous. He and his sons sat down, taking their offered teas and mumbling their thanks. "That does not sound good," he said.

“Well, I cannot lie to you,” Utakata sighed. “It is not good. Of all the people in this city to end up with, Lady Azumi may have ended up with one of the worst. He is the apothecary in this city. An apothecary with a very bad temper.”

"Define bad temper," Yashamaru frowned.

Utakata took a deep breath to launch into what he knew of Sasori and Azumi’s relationship. "She is his longest-lasting slave ever." He tapped his fingers along his cup.

"Meaning?"

"I think we know what it means," Orochimaru cut his son off. "Has he hurt her. And killed his previous slaves."

"The simple answer is yes," Utakata nodded.

"There is a complicated answer?" Mitsuki asked.

"The last I know of him hurting her was a few months ago," Utakata said. "From what the snake described to me, it left her in a bad state for a little while. That is when I sent the black mamba to you." The snake around Mitsuki’s shoulders perked up at being mentioned, hissing softly. "But he goes through lulls where he is not abusive and once something happens, pertaining to her or not, he takes it out on her. And it does not take much."

Orochimaru placed his teacup down quickly and began to drum his fingers on the surface of the table quietly. "Is that so," he rolled his jaw. "And his cousin has made what moves to help her?"

"I don't know all the details but Lord Gaara is very dear to your daughter," Utakata replied. "Do you think we should find him and talk to him?" Yashamaru asked his father.

"To be quite honest, the master's uncle is probably your best bet," Utakata continued. "He is a politician in this city. And he is working to abolish slavery here. Lord Gaara is close with him and that being said, I am sure Lady Azumi is as well." 

"Where is this apothecary's shop?" Orochimaru asked.

"It is in the more central part of the city," Utakata told him. "I can take you there if you would like, Milord."

"How much of a risk is that?" Yashamaru asked.

"It is quite low," Utakata assured them. "He is hardly there."
"You can send me in," Mitsuki grinned.

Orochimaru thought hard for a moment. "Take us to the shop," he said.

"As you wish," Utakata nodded, standing up to collect their dishes. "Meet me in the shop." He vanished into his apartment and while the others stood up and made their way back out to the shop.

"Father, what are you planning to do once we get there?" Yashamaru asked his father softly.

"It is not guaranteed we will see her," Orochimaru said. "If the apothecary is hardly there, I assume she hardly is as well. But someone has to run it. I just want to get a feel for the situation. And Mitsuki is right, we will have to send him in. Utakata mentioned the uncle. We will look for him, ask him where he is with abolishing slavery. Maybe we do not have to sneak her away. We can just take her when she is free."

"If she wants to leave," Yashamaru interjected. "The father of her child is here."

"If he is as dear to her as Utakata says he is then maybe we should try to find him too."

Utakata joined them moments later, waving for them to follow him down the stairs to the crowded streets of the city. It was not a long walk to the shop but it was filled with an overwhelming amount of things to take in for the three newcomers. They exited an alleyway and the shopkeeper held his hand up to stop the three. "It is that shop over there," he told them while discreetly pointing to a shop across the street. "I believe Lord Gaara is the one who oversees the shop whenever Lord Sasori is not in but I do not know their schedule." He turned to look at them. "If they have one at all that is."

"Thank you, Utakata," Orochimaru said. "We will be visiting you again."

"I can give you a few places to go while you are here," Utakata nodded. "It seems you will be here for at least a couple of days."

"We will return to your shop after I am satisfied with the information I acquire."

Utakata bowed and turned to head back into his shop.

"Father," Yashamaru started, "we cannot just stand out here while we send Mitsuki in."

Orochimaru looked around for a moment, spotting a tea shop across the street from the apothecary shop. "So we will wait in there," he said, pointing to the tea shop. He urged his sons to follow him, trying to get a look into the apothecary shop as they passed. They saw one person in there, moving around and doing various tasks. Orochimaru had no idea what the apothecary or his cousin looked like so he could not tell which one is the one he saw. They entered the tea shop and sat a table by the window with a view into the apothecary shop. Admittedly, he was nervous about sending his youngest child into a situation like this, knowing what he did about his daughter's situation.

"Do you think she is in there?" Yashamaru hummed, resting his face against his hand.

"I am not sure."

"I am ready," Mitsuki said. The black mamba around his shoulders hissed, saying they were ready as well.

"Okay," Orochimaru took his son's hand. "Get as much information as you can about your sister, Lord Gaara, the apothecary, and if you can, the uncle," he told his son sternly. Mitsuki nodded and
waited for his father to release his hand. Orochimaru sighed, moving his hand to cup his son's cheek. "And please be careful." He looked him hard in the eyes.

"We will, Father," Mitsuki assured him. "You will be able to see me and I have them!" He pointed to the black mamba who hissed excitedly.

"Right..." Orochimaru nodded. "We will be watching."

Yashamaru gave his brother an encouraging smile. "I will come in if anything goes wrong."

Mitsuki nodded and then made his way out of the tea shop and across the street to the apothecary shop. He entered hesitantly and pushed the snake into his shirt, realizing at the last second that not everyone in the world is okay with a venomous snake hanging around. He took a few steps into the shop and looked around, taking in the various items on the shelves and the displays on the floor. There was no one in the main shop as there had been when they peeked in earlier but he could hear movement behind a curtain that separated the shop from a back room.

The movement suddenly stopped, causing Mitsuki to also pause in anticipation. He reminded himself he was supposed to be somewhat inconspicuous and turned quickly to a table to pick some bath oils. 'Azumi really does work here,' he thought, opening up the jar to smell the scent. He heard whoever was behind the curtain step out.

"Are you looking for a gift?" they asked.

Mitsuki jumped slightly, setting the jar back down. "Um...yes," he lied. "I...am." He picked up another one and opened it to smell it, smiling a little when he recognized the scent as something she had made before.

"You have a good eye then," the man said, rounding the table to pick up another jar and get a glimpse of his customer.

"Wouldn't it be better to say I have a good nose?" Mitsuki's smile turned into a smirk. He shoved his nose in a little deeper. He missed his sister.

The man chuckled. "You're right," he smiled. He watched Mitsuki take another long whiff of the scent. "Is that the one?" he asked.

"It just might be," Mitsuki said softly. "Um...did you make these?" he asked. He knew it was Azumi that did. He just wanted clarification. He set the jar aside, deciding he was going to buy it anyway then picked up another to smell.

"Oh, no," the man smiled brightly. "The woman who works here makes them by hand," he boasted. "She's pretty amazing actually. She makes these and perfumes and they last a long time." He put the jar in his hand down gently. "She even put together this display."

"Is she here?" Mitsuki asked, glancing around the shop. He had not heard anyone else in the shop but it would not hurt to ask.

The smile faded on the man's lips. "Ah, no." He forced his smile back up. "She is with the owner of this shop most days but if you have a request for something, you could write it down and I could pass it on to her. She is very kind so she might make it for you."

"I would like that," Mitsuki smiled.

The man nodded and grabbed a notepad and pen for him. "I don't know when the next time she'll
be in is but I can give this to her tonight and she can have it done by tomorrow. She’s very quick.”

“That sounds about right,” Mitsuki said softly with a smile as he wrote his order down. He remembered how quick she was and how fast she would have them done. He thought hard about the note combination, trying to remember the one she made specifically for him that they had worked on together one time. Hopefully, she would recognize it and realize it was him.

"So are you just visiting?” the man asked, making small talk with the boy. He had said very little but judging by the boy's looks and speech pattern, he was not native to the city.

“I am,” Mitsuki smiled. He handed the paper and pen back to the man. “We just arrived today. Nice city. Very crowded, though.” He picked up the jar he knew he was going to buy. “How much is this?” he asked.

The man stared at him for a moment as if recognizing him. "I'll give it to you," he said not really sure why he felt compelled to give something away like that. The boy felt so familiar. They walked over to the counter so he could wrap up the jar for him.

“Really?” Mitsuki blinked. “You are kind. Thank you, uh...”

“Gaara,” he chuckled.

“Thank you, Gaara,” Mitsuki smiled. “My name is Mitsuki.” It dawned on him that this was the guy who was having a baby with his sister. He liked him.

"Mitsuki," Gaara repeated his name. He smiled fondly at the boy as he handed the jar back. "Stop back at any time if you need anything today." 

Mitsuki nodded, smiling before turning to leave. As he approached the door, the black mamba poked his head out the back of his shirt. Gaara noticed the snake and squinted. He watched as Mitsuki turned back toward him and bowed. “Goodbye,” he said. As he bowed, the snake came up a little more and bowed with him.

“Goodbye,” Gaara said softly with a wave as he watched the boy leave.

Mitsuki walked out of the apothecary, bolting for the tea shop. The streets were even more crowded than before with the full force of the market in swing. He frowned, wading through the mass of people back to his family.

"Well?” Orochimaru asked, pulling out a chair for his son when he finally arrived.

“Well, it is the right place,” Mitsuki grinned, holding out he jar he was given. “She makes these. He said she usually is not there but I gave an order for an oil she made me so hopefully she will recognize the combination and realize we are here.”

“Smart,” Yashamaru hummed, sipping his tea.

“It was Gaara that was in there,” Mitsuki continued. “I like him. He is nice.”

Orochimaru hummed, looking back over at the shop. He wanted to go in and meet the man who got his daughter pregnant. He trusted Mitsuki’s judgment but a father had different sensibilities. However, that would have to wait. They had a decent enough lead so they could easily return to the shop at any time. "We should head back to Utakata's," Orochimaru he, looking at the jar. "We can discuss anything else once we are somewhere more private.” Both of his sons nodded and he paid their bill. The three of them stood up and made their way back to Utakata's shop.
"Let me smell that," Yashamaru said, taking the jar from Mitsuki and bringing it close to his face. "Wow..." he hummed. "I forgot how good these were."

They entered the shop and Utakata's attention turned from the book on his counter to them. He smirked when he saw Yashamaru's nose shoved into the jar. "Is that one of her oils?" he chuckled. "She buys the ingredients from me."

"Quality." Yashamaru pulled his nose out of the jar long enough to groan. "Both her stuff and apparently yours," he chuckled.

"She is going to make me one, too!" Mitsuki grinned.

Utakata's eyes widened at this announcement. "So you were able to meet with her?" he asked, mildly impressed.

"No," Mitsuki shook his head. "But I met Gaara and gave him an order for her."

"Meeting with her directly will be hard," Utakata said, "since she is usually with Sasori."

"He said he was going to give the order to her tonight so he will see her," Mitsuki added. "She can have the order done by tomorrow so I will go back in. I am hoping she will be there."

"Even if she is not and it is Gaara again, are you three going to let him in on this?" Utakata asked Orochimaru. "He is your best bet to getting closer to her."

"I am still considering that," Orochimaru spoke up. "I need to weigh the pros and cons a little more."

"Father," Yashamaru started. "I do not think Azumi is going to want to leave without him."

"He is being considered," Orochimaru repeated. "Her safety and the baby’s are the most important things to us right now."

"Right," Utakata hummed. "But at least for now you know you are getting somewhere."

"Not bad for literally just arriving in the city," Yashamaru smirked.

"In the meantime, I can show you to the nearest inn. As much as I would love to provide housing for you, my apartment is a little too small for everyone to fit," he chuckled.

"We would appreciate that," Orochimaru nodded.

"Ugh, I need a bath," Yashamaru groaned. He looked at Utakata and his smirk returned. "You left the oasis for this?" he teased.

"There are times I miss the village," he admitted. "But if you can ever come back around, I will show you just what makes living here worth it."

"Being this far from water is never worth it, dear friend," Yashamaru countered.

"You are so stubborn," Utakata sighed with a smile. He crossed the room to start for the stairs. "If you are ready we can go now."

They followed him down the stairs and back out to the streets. Utakata led them around a couple of corners to the nearest inn that he deemed was nice enough to stay in. "Here we are," he said as he turned to them in front of the door. "This is not too far from my shop or the apothecary. I know
how much you like tea so it is closer to the better teahouse in this city."

"Thank you, Utakata," Orochimaru said.

"You can stop by any time you need," Utakata said with a bow. "And if I see her, I can try to pass along the message that you are here."

Orochimaru bowed his head to thank the shopkeeper. "We cannot thank you enough," he said, handing a bag of money to Yashamaru. "Book us a room," he told his sons.

Yashamaru nodded as he took the pouch. "We need to catch up while I am here," he smirked at Utakata.

"There is so much I have to tell you," Utakata chuckled. He waved to Yashamaru and Mitsuki as they headed inside the inn.

"We will be back tomorrow," Orochimaru said.

Utakata nodded and bowed. "I will await your arrival. Goodnight, Lord Orochimaru."

"Goodnight." The older man nodded and headed into the inn after his sons. They were led up to a room which thankfully had two beds and a bath. Yashamaru beelined for the shower while Mistuski went for the bed.

"Father, do you think we can rescue her soon?" Mitsuki asked. The black mamba, still wrapped around him, poked his head out and Mitsuki began to absentmindedly pet it.

"It has been really weird without her," Mitsuki lifted his nose to let the mamba tap their's against his. "I think you will like Gaara, Father."

Orochimaru crossed the room to stare out the window that overlooked a bustling street. "I am hoping so," he said softly. He frowned at his answer and shook his head slightly. "No, we will," he demanded. "I will not leave this city until we do."

After a couple of minutes, Yashamaru came out of the bathroom in a robe provided by the inn. "Your turn, Mitsuki. I am not sleeping in the same bed with someone who smells like desert travels." Mitsuki chuckled as he grabbed the bath oil he got from Gaara and bolted into the bathroom. Yashamaru looked at his father as he sat down on the bed across from him. "You are thinking too hard," he told him. "She is here and she is alive. We are close to her. We will get her back."

"I know but so much can go wrong," Orochimaru frowned. "If what Utakata says about this man's temperament is true, we could lose her at any moment."

"She is strong enough to handle another day," Yashamaru assured him. "You did not raise weak children."
"I know," Orochimaru sighed, cracking a smile. "I just wished I raised more cautious children."

"Cautious?" Yashamaru scoffed. "Now I know this desert heat if evil. It must be melting your brain."

"If you children were more cautious, I would not be this stressed," Orochimaru smirked.

"Do you have a plan for tomorrow?"

Orochimaru paused for a second. "We will send Mitsuki back into the shop," he answered. "He needs to ask more questions. About her master. We need more details about him before we can move. Utakata can only give us so much but if that man in the shop is his cousin, he knows more."

"Makes sense," Yashamaru agreed. "Do you think it is wise to tell Azumi so soon that we are in the village?"

"I do not think she will believe we are here unless she sees us," Orochimaru said. "But her being pregnant makes this an even more urgent matter. It is either we get to her or we get to the uncle. Coordinating something with him is probably a safer route since he has political authority."

"If he is a public civil servant then finding him should not be hard," Yashamaru nodded. "We should get some sleep," he yawned. "I am sure we are going to have an early start."

"Can we have breakfast tomorrow?" Mitsuki asked, walking out of the bathroom.

"Yes, we can have breakfast tomorrow," Orochimaru said. Mitsuki grinned as he climbed into the bed. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Father," Mitsuki said.

Orochimaru made his way into the bathroom to bathe while his sons slept. He began to form several plans on how to get his daughter back.
Chapter 64

Chapter Notes

Not that shit wasn't already getting real, but shit is getting very, VERY real right now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sasori's mother paced the length of her room in, deep in thought. She could not shake the feeling of betrayal. Her son had not only lied to her but he had gotten the very girl he was trying to shy away from pregnant. Her husband had made fair points but she was his mother! She had every right to know if he was going to reproduce. She stopped with her lips pressed into a tight line. She was going to pay her son a visit. Storming down the hall, she called for a servant to bring her carriage around the front of the house. Wasting no time, the moment it was there, she climbed in. "Take me to my son!" she ordered, feeling her fury grow. The servants wasted no time in getting her to her son, feeling the very edges of her furious aura.

Upon arriving at Sasori’s house, she got out of the carriage, not waiting for anyone to help her and stormed up the steps into the home.

"M-my Lady," one of the passing servants stuttered, bowing low.

"Bring my son to me," she demanded. “Actually, never mind, I will just go to him."

Sasori was just stepping out of the bath when he heard someone burst into his room. He pulled his robe from the wall. "I wasn't expecting anyone today," he said lowly. Pulling on his robe, as he walked out of the bathroom, he stopped short when he saw his seething mother. "Mother," he said, quickly taking her hands. "Are you alright? What happened?"

She laughed bitterly, ripping her hands from him. "What happened!" she sneered. "Why don't you tell me! Where is that slave girl of yours?"

“She’s making us breakfast,” he answered. “What do you need her for?” He led her to a seat, seeing just how riled up she was.

"She can keep food down this early in the morning?" She turned her nose up. "I'm impressed."

Sasori's brows furrowed. Now he was really confused. "Did Azumi tell you she was sick?" he asked. He could not think of when his mother and slave would have seen each other recently but he also did not know the full details of Azumi's escapade to his aunt's.

“Her morning sickness should be at its worst right now,” she said.

“Morning sickness?"

“I’ve been pregnant before, I know what it’s like.”

“Pregnant?” Sasori shook head. “What is going on?"

“Why didn’t you tell me, Sasori? Especially after I tried to get you two married?”
Sasori was reeling. He took his mother's face in his hands and titled it around the ensure he had not missed any grievous injuries to her head. "I don't know hat you are talking about, Mother, but you sound a little crazy right now." He laughed a little hysterically. "Azumi is barren and can never—"

"Enough lies! That is not what she told Sachiko and I demand you allow me to help her through this!" His mother put her hands over his and then folded them into her lap. "I'm upset that you lied to me but we can make this right," she smiled. "You two can get married and all will be well."

Sasori was speechless. "She told...Aunt Sachiko about this... pregnancy?" he growled. He stood up, snatching the measurements he had taken of her. His mother swiveled around to look at her son with concern. Sasori crushed the paper in his hand and ground his teeth in rage.

"Sasori, don't be upset with the girl," his mother's sweet tone was back. "Every woman deserves help through this miracle."

"This shouldn't have happened," he growled.

"I take it maybe she didn't tell you yet. She probably saw how much you said no to marriage and children that she was scared. But these things come as a surprise to most people. And I will be here to help her through it. I mean, Sachiko doesn't have children, how much help could she—"

"Mother, I never slept with my slave," Sasori cut her off. His mother shut up instantly. She laughed softly, shaking her head. "Sasori, you really don't have to lie to me," she waved her hand at him. "I know I was upset before but this is really okay."

"No, Mother!" Sasori snarled. "You aren't listening to me!" He dashed out of the room, shaking with rage. He ripped into the kitchen and grabbed Azumi by her hair. He licked his lips and grinned as he forced her against the counter of the kitchen. She let out a small wheeze. "So who is it?" he growled. "Komushi or Gaara?" He tightened his grip in her hair, causing her to grunt softly. "What am I asking," he laughed. "You stupid, stupid girl!" His other hand came up to grip her throat tightly.

"Who..." she gasped, "is what?" She could not get anything else out as he pressed into her throat. 'Did he find out?' she thought. 'How?!' Naga and Ryuga both got into a defensive stance, ready to strike at Sasori. With a very discreet motion, Azumi commanded Naga to go find Gaara. The snake hesitated for a moment until Ryuga urged him while making his way toward the counter. Quickly, Naga slithered out to go find Gaara.

"Sasori! Let her go!" his mother cried from the doorway. "If you hurt her, the baby wi—"

"Die anyway, Mother!" Sasori's voice was a dangerous rasping hiss. "She is not keeping it!" he roared. The hand on Azumi's throat threw her hard to the ground. He straddled her the moment she was on the ground, prepping to hit her hard in the womb. Ryuga hissed loudly, lunging for Sasori at the same time his mother dove to stop him.

Ryuga wrapped around Sasori, constricting his arms. "Sasori, you cannot kill this child!" his mother yelled, trying to push him off of Azumi.

"The hell I can't!" Sasori growled, looking only at Azumi. "I own her! She has no free will! No say in what she can do with her body unless I authorize!" He struggled against Ryuga and thrashed against his mother. He used his thighs to dig into Azumi, pressing hard into her stomach.

"Sasori!" his mother screamed.
Azumi let out a pained grunt, reaching down to grip his thighs and push them apart so she could get out from under him. Ryuga constricted harder around Sasori, baring his fangs and ready to go in for the kill. Sasori's mother saw the snake rearing back for the bite and shoved her arm in the direct path of the strike. She knocked into Sasori, holding onto him tight as she felt the snake's fangs dig in. They both gasped as they hit the floor hard.

"Azumi!" Gaara skidded to a stop in the doorway. He rushed forward, pulling her out from under Sasori and into his arms.

"You!" Sasori screamed, shoving his mother off. He was too blinded by rage to notice his mother had been bitten. He lunged for Gaara as he scooped Azumi up in his arms bridal style.

Azumi watched Ryuga pull his fangs out of the wrong target and her eyes widened. “Oh, no,” she whispered. She saw Sasori coming at them and grabbed onto Gaara to kick Sasori hard in the face before he could reach them.

Sasori stumbled back, landing hard on his backside. His mother gasped in pain, grabbing his attention long enough for Gaara to bolt out of the room. Gaara did not look back as he rushed out of the mansion. Ryuga slipped out of a window so he could rejoin them outside.

“Fuck!” Sasori growled, moving to get up.

“Sa-Sasori!” His mother grabbed his arm.

Sasori's gaze shot to his mother and he looked at the bite on her arm. “No,” he breathed, immediately fearing the worst. “We have to make an antidote.” He felt like he was racing against two clocks because he needed to catch up to them but the longer he waited, the more the venom would course through her. He ground his teeth, ruffing up his hair harshly. “Fuck!” He pulled his mother into his arms and pushed off the ground hard to run back to his room. He did not know what kind of venom the snake had. He definitely did not have any on hand. His mind raced as he laid his mother on the work table.

She looked at him. “That is not the reaction anyone has to their own child,” she said.

“Because it isn’t mine,” Sasori said, mixing a few ingredients together.

“Gaara came very quickly for her...I think I understand now.”

“Glad you’re finally seeing that, Mother,” he growled, working as fast as he could to make what he needed to save her. “Why would I lie to you about having a child!”

“You lied about her being barren!” his mother countered.

“You’re the only woman I know who could argue with me while dying!”

“Don’t yell at your mother!”

Sasori put the contents into a syringe and stuck his mother in the arm. She grunted uncomfortably until he was done. “That is only going to slow the venom down,” he told her. “I have to find the snake that bit you and make an anti-venom with his venom.”

She looked at her arm and he started to wrap it up for her. “Then what are you waiting for?” she asked, looking up at him. “Go get it.”

Sasori sighed, shaking his head. “Yes, Mother.” He made sure she sat up safely before taking off.
“Don’t you dare kill that baby!” she called after him.

Gaara made sure they were far enough from Sasori’s house before putting Azumi down. She immediately picked up Ryuga and Naga slithered up to them. Both snakes moved up her body and nuzzled their faces against hers. “We need to keep moving,” she said, still panicking. “Where can we go where he will not find us?”

“Sandaime’s will be the safest.” Gaara took her hand. He pulled her down an alleyway and cupped her face. “But first, I need you to breathe with me,” he said. He pressed his hand to her heart and felt her heart racing. He took her hand again to hide the shaking of his own.

She looked into his eyes, trying to control her breathing. After a few seconds, she wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his chest, trying to keep herself from sobbing. “I do not know how he found out,” she whispered.

He wrapped his arms around her, rubbing circles into her back. “That doesn't matter right now,” he said softly. He held her closer, taking deep breaths himself. He closed his eyes, pressing his face into her hair. "The only thing I care about is you and the baby," he told her. He kissed her head repeatedly. "Are you sure you can walk?"

She took another moment to compose herself. She had not realized all of the pain in her body through the adrenaline rush of almost being killed. Her hands and legs were still shaking. “I...should be fine,” she said softly. Both snakes hissed, trying to tell him that she was lying.

Gaara looked at the snakes and nodded. "I'm carrying you anyway," he told her. He turned around and knelt down. "It will be faster and time is of the essence." The snakes hissed in agreement. She looked at him for a moment before sighing and getting on his back. The snakes moved to be around both of them. She held onto him as he stood up and buried her face into his neck.

Once he was sure she was on safely his back, he walked to the end of the alleyway to make sure the coast was clear. Not seeing Sasori or Komushi, he took off towards his uncle's house. It was almost all the way across the city but Gaara pushed through and got there rather quickly. He jogged up the stairs of Sandaime’s house, out of breath as he reached the top. He knelt down to let her off and catch his breath.

She got off of him and kneeled in front of him, taking his hands in hers. “Thank you,” she said softly, leaning in to kiss him. She turned around when she heard footsteps behind her and saw Sachiko approaching.

“Oh, what a nice surprise!” she grinned. “To what do I—what happened?” she cut herself off when she saw their faces.

"Sasori," Gaara gasped. Sachiko knelt down to help her nephew up. "He knows."

Sachiko's jaw dropped. She turned to Azumi, taking her hands and looking her over. She zeroed in on the hand marks on her neck. "Did he hurt you?" she asked, ushering Azumi into the house.

“He choked me and...tried to kill the baby,” she said softly. “If his mother was not there to stop him, he might have...” She paused for a moment, feeling worried. “His mother...I do not know why she was there but Ryuga bit her.”

"Are you okay? Is the baby okay?” Sachiko asked rapid-fire, guiding them to the nearest bathroom.
Gaara followed close behind. "We're going to find out," he said seriously, pulling out anything he could use to clean Azumi up and check on the baby. "Where is Uncle?"

"He is at the council office today," Sachiko answered. "He will be back later. But I can send for him to come home earlier if we find out the baby is hurt."

"Can you send for him now?" Gaara asked, kneeling down to start looking Azumi over. "Sasori is going to be out looking for her."

"Of course," Sachiko nodded, already turning around to send for her husband. "I'll set up a room for her, too."

"Thank you, Auntie," Gaara said. Sachiko nodded and left the room to send for her husband and set a room up. The snakes moved to the floor, coiling up at Azumi’s feet while Gaara looked her over. She felt for the marks Sasori left on her neck.

"They look worse than they are," he told her softly. He checked her vitals and then the baby. "Stand up for me," he said to her gently. He waited for her to stand before making sure there were not any other serious injuries. "What else is hurting you?" he asked in case he missed anything.

"The back of my head," she answered. "He grabbed me by the hair and threw me to the ground." She scoffed and rolled her eyes. "As usual."

Gaara clicked his tongue and gently slipped his hand into her hair. He pressed lightly against the back of her head. "How does your head feel?" he asked her, checking her eyes.

She winced slightly. "It is probably just a headache," she said. "I think..." she looked at her hands and noticed how much they were shaking, "I just need some tea..." she said softly.

"Okay, Sandaime is on his way," Sachiko rushed back into the room with a tray of tea right on cue. Gaara stepped back to look at his aunt. "You're actually a goddess," he chuckled, taking a cup from her to offer to Azumi. "The baby is okay and your head, as you said, is going to hurt for a bit," he told her.

Azumi took the cup and then sipped the tea. "Thank you," she said. She stood up and Naga moved to coil around her. He nuzzled his face against hers. "You did great," she told him softly. Ryuga hissed too, apologizing for missing his target. He nuzzled her neck gently.

"Do you want to lay down?" Sachiko asked Azumi gently. "I can get you a new dress and have food brought to you."

"I would like to lay down," Azumi said. "But...I am not very hungry..."

"I'm fine for now," Gaara declined the food as well. He pressed a kiss to Azumi’s forehead. "I need to talk to Uncle as soon as he gets here."

"Let me know when you are hungry," Sachiko nodded. "I will take you to your room." She started out the door and they followed her.

"He is going to know I am here at some point," Azumi said softly.

"Even if he does," Gaara turned to her, pressing his forehead to hers. "We will protect you," he assured her. He slipped his hand into her free hand. "Come, let's go lay down until Uncle gets here." He cupped her face to kiss her softly.
She pushed a little into the kiss and they entered the room that Sachiko brought them to.

"I will send a servant up when Sandaime gets home," she told them, closing the door so they could be alone. Naga and Ryuga immediately moved to the bed to coil up.

Azumi moved toward the bed and sat down as she continued to drink her tea. "None of this makes any sense," she said. "I do not understand how he found out and why his mother was there." She did not recall seeing his mother any time recently unless Sachiko was close enough with her to tell her about it.

"Aunt Sachiko would never be foolish enough to tell my other aunt of all people," Gaara frowned. He wrapped his arms around her, gently rubbing her back again. "But I’ll see what I can find out about his mother being there. You just worry about getting better and taking care of the baby." He bit his lip. "I...almost lost you..." He took her hand.

She shook her head slightly then pressed her forehead against his. "I do not want to think about that," she said. She finished her tea and set her cup down on the bedside table then pulled him onto the bed as she laid down.

He pulled her closer, kissing her softly and slowly. He pressed their foreheads together and laced his fingers into her hair. He very gently rubbed the area of her head that his cousin had slammed. "Would...you consider leaving the city with me?" he asked her suddenly.

She closed her eyes, pressing her body against his. After a few seconds, she nodded. "I would," she whispered.

He pulled her flush to his body, pressing kisses over her face. "I will talk to Uncle about potentially leaving," he told her. "Finding your village shouldn't be too hard and Sasori wouldn't dare follow us that far."

She nodded again. The adrenaline rush was over and she could feel the fatigue settling in. She was not going to remind him that her village was hidden and was meant to be hard to find. She was not in the mood. She wrapped her arms around him and gently dragged her nails up and down his back and buried her face into his neck. "I love you," she said softly.

He held her closer, continuing to rub her head gently. "I love you, too," he said softly. He closed his eyes, humming softly as he moved his hand. He continued until he felt her breathing change and knew she was fast asleep.

About an hour later, a servant knocked lightly on the door to inform Gaara that his uncle had arrived home. Not wanting to wake Azumi up, he gave her a kiss on the forehead before gently untangling from her and getting up. He quietly made his way out of the room and followed the servant to Sandaime's office on the other side of the house.

In the office, Sandaime and Sachiko were having a quiet conversation about the situation, halting when they saw their nephew walk in.

"How is she right now?" Sandaime asked.

"She's asleep now but she was more than a little shaken up when I got to her," Gaara said grimly. "He knows about the baby."

"So I've heard," Sandaime frowned.

"We have to get her out of here as soon as possible," Gaara started. "She can't go back to him and I
don't...I don't think we can wait for the bill to be passed, Uncle."

Sandaime's frown deepened. "I...you're right," he said.

"But go where?" Sachiko asked a little worried.

"I was thinking back to her village," Gaara said.

"That's too far of a journey for her to do while pregnant. Plus, we don't even know where it is."

"She did say it was far," Sandaime hummed. "For now, we can keep her here. Sasori can't do anything to her in this house. No matter what the laws are, he wouldn't dare come in here."

Gaara nodded in agreement. "It's the safest place for her to be," he sighed. "He's going to get really crazy now though. He's alienated me. No one is running his shop and the person who has been babying him for almost a year now is with child."

"He's going to get irrational," Sachiko frowned.

"We still have his parents to count on," Sandaime leaned against his desk. "Even if he doesn't listen to us, he will listen to his mother."

"That's all we have to count on right now," Gaara sighed.

"We can form a plan for her to leave when it's closer to the baby's arrival," Sandaime said.

"Until then, she will be safe here with me," Sachiko said with a small smile.

"Is it okay to go see her?"

"Give her some time to sleep first," Gaara said, running a hand through his hair. "She and the baby are okay but she needs to recover from everything," Sandaime nodded.

"Do you know what she would want to eat when she wakes up?" Sachiko asked.

Gaara thought for a moment. "I don't think she'll be too hungry, but she asked for rice last night so she might eat that today."

Sachiko nodded. "I'll have it made for her."

"What do you plan to do if Sasori does show up here," Gaara asked his uncle. Sachiko slipped out of the room to tell the servants about dinner arrangements. "Azumi said his mother was bitten."

"She was?" Sandaime gasped softly. "How did that happen?"

"The snake was aiming for Sasori," Gaara answered. "She got in the way."

"Which one was it?"

"Ryuga. The big one."

"I will be expecting someone to stop by for more venom to make an antidote."

"It wouldn't be surprising if Sasori himself came," Gaara frowned. He moved to take one of the seats in the room and ran a hand through his hair.

Sandaime hummed, folding his arms over his chest. "She will be safe," he assured his nephew. "If
his mother's life is in danger, we have some time before he loses himself to looking for Azumi again."

Sachiko entered the room quietly. “The food will be ready soon,” she said softly to Gaara with a
hand on his shoulder.

“You should go to her,” Sandaime said. “We’ll come to see you if anything happens and just to
check on her.”

Gaara looked up at his aunt, placing a hand over hers then looked at his uncle and nodded. “I’ll
bring her the food when she wakes,” he told them before departing down the hall.

Chapter End Notes

"It's about to go down. Just be behind me when we walk into class." - Kevin Hart
His feet could not carry him fast enough to her. He opened the door softly, crept to the bed and slipped in next to her. Pulling her back into his arms, he kissed her forehead softly. "My love," he spoke quietly, "it’s time to wake up." She groaned softly, nuzzling against him. As she woke up, everything flooded back to her and she gasped, relaxing a second later when she realized where she was and who was with her. Both snakes nuzzled against her back, hissing softly at her. Gaara held her closer, running a hand through her hair. "Sssh." He pressed another kiss to her temple. "You’re safe." His hand moved down to rub her neck. "I didn’t mean to scare you," he said softly.

She turned her head to look at the snakes and they each tapped their nose against hers. She looked back at Gaara and kissed him softly. "I am fine," she said, resting back against him.

"Did you sleep alright?" he asked, continuing to play with her hair. He did not want to bombard her with information just yet. She was still waking up and dealing with the trauma of what she just went through.

"Mm," she hummed with a nod. "I did..." She looked up at him. "You left...is your uncle here?"

"I’m sorry," he cracked a smile. "I was hoping you wouldn’t notice," he chuckled softly. "Yes, I went to speak to him. You have a safe place here. There is a high chance Sasori might come here," he told her. "But he will not be able to get to you."

"He needs an anti-venom for his mother," she said. Ryuga started hissing, explaining to her that his venom was too complicated to reverse with just his venom. "Oh..." Azumi hummed. She looked at Gaara. "I need three small cups," she said.

He hesitated for a moment, frowning. He did not want her pushing herself yet but she would be the only one who could make the anti-venom. "Do you need anything else," he asked. "I’ll gather everything. Do you want to make it in the kitchen?"

"I am not making the anti-venom," she said. "He can do that on his own. But he needs specific ingredients."

"Oh?" he laughed, blinking in a little surprise. "Are you sure he can get it right?" he asked her.

"As much as I hate him, I cannot deny that he is an intelligent man," she said. "He can figure it out. As long as he has what I am going to give him, he will be fine."

"I can’t doubt his skill," Gaara agreed. "Okay, I will be back with the cups and then...are you hungry?" he asked her as he disentangled them.

"A little," she answered as she sat up. She ran her hands through her hair and put it up. "But...can I have more tea?"

"Always," he smiled widely. "I’ll be right back." He tilted her chin up to kiss her properly. He lingered on her lips, pressing into the kiss before pulling away. "I love you," he said softly.

"I love you, too," she smiled. She watched as he left the room and sighed, looking down at the snakes. She reached out for Ryuga, gently petting him then opened his mouth, looking around for his venom tract. "Your venom was modified," she said softly. "I take it my father did that." She looked at Naga who backed away a little, not wanting his mouth to be prodded. Ryuga flicked his tongue around her fingers. Behind her, Naga watched with pity.
Gaara returned quickly with the cups in hand and a servant in tow. “You can set that down there,” he directed the servant. They put the tray of food and tea down on a nearby desk in the room. “That looks uncomfortable,” he said over Azumi’s shoulder. He also pitied Ryuga’s current situation.

“He is fine,” she said, wiping her hands. Gaara handed her the cups and she put the first one to Ryuga’s mouth. He hissed softly, telling her he did not care what happened to Sasori or his mother. “I know you do not,” she said. “Do it anyway.” He moved his head away and she grabbed him, bringing him back to the cup. “Do it.” She looked at the snake in the eyes. He let out a reluctant hiss and started filling the cup up with his venom. Once she figured she had enough, she turned to Naga. “Your turn,” she told him. Naga flicked back right away. He hissed, hiding behind Gaara for safety. Ryuga hissed, saying if he had to then Naga did too. Naga slipped up Gaara’s body, resting his head behind Gaara’s for protection. He hissed his further protest.

Gaara did not dare move. “I take it he doesn’t want to be milked,” he asked, keeping his body very stiff so she could grab him easily.

Azumi moved and reached for Naga. “None of us do,” she sighed. “But we have to.” She unraveled Naga from around Gaara and held him still, putting the cup to his mouth. Reluctantly, the snake allowed himself to be milked.

Gaara watched with some sympathy for the snakes. “Will you need jars?” he asked her, feeling Ryuga coil up his body.

“Mm,” she hummed, looking at how much venom Naga filled the cup up with and then looking at the one Ryuga filled. “I think so,” she said. She let Naga go and grabbed the third cup. “Anything that can close so this does not spill,” she explained just before deploying her fangs and pressing the third cup to her mouth to fill it up, doing her best to match the amounts that the two snakes did.

Gaara, completely taken off guard by her using her own fangs, hesitated for a moment. He watched in wide-eyed fascination. “I...whoa,” he breathed. He shook his head then stood up. “I’ll be right back.”

She chuckled softly as she watched him leave. “I forgot you never saw this before,” she smirked when she pulled the cup away from her face. She set the cups down on the table in an order she would remember so she could determine where the venoms came from. While he went to grab the jars, she wiped her fangs to get rid of any venom residue then retracted them so she could drink her tea.

It did not take him long to return with three sealable jars. He was still in slight shock over her fangs. He placed the jars next to the bowls. “So is Ryuga’s venom a blend?” he asked, trying to contain his curiosity over the fangs.

“In a way,” she answered as she transferred the venoms from the cups to the jars. “It is modified in a way that I can barely understand. I do not know what my father did but the composition of his venom is similar to a blend of a viper and a cobra. Naga is a cobra and my venom is viper venom. So all three of us together should have what is needed to make the anti-venom for your aunt.”

Gaara nodded slowly as he processed everything. “I have...a lot to learn,” he chuckled, smiling sheepishly. “Will our little one have fangs, too?”

“Ohh, I am not entirely sure,” she chuckled. “We will not know until they start growing their teeth and grow a little older. Since they are not full-blooded, I do not know what traits they will get. I know their eyes will be gold, but I do not know if their pupils will be vertical like mine.”
"I have to be honest," he laughed softly, "I'm really excited to see what traits they do get from you." He blushed a little. "And I'm glad they will have your eyes."

"Trances," she said as she sealed up the jars and labeled them. "They will get that weakness from me."

"We can work around that," Gaara smiled. "Let's hope they don't get my temper though." The smile faded.

She chuckled and took his hand in hers, pulling it close to press a kiss to his knuckles. "If this child has your temper along with my underlying ferocity then we will need those trances," she smirked.

His face lit up. He laughed a little louder, leaning in to kiss her fully. "I think we might have to pray for ourselves," he chuckled. "Either way, they are going to have our hands full. I can already tell they will love to learn. Their curiosity alone will be a lot to deal with."

"I cannot wait," she chuckled, pulling him into another kiss. "Feeding a child's curiosity is always fun."

"It is," he smiled into the kiss. He could not help but kiss her again then chuckle. "Do you need anything else for your preparations?" He asked while still holding her hands.

"No," she smiled, "this is all I need. When someone comes asking for an anti-venom, this is what they will get from me." She picked up her food and pulled him over to the bed. "Ah," she sighed in slight disappointment, "I finished that order you gave me but it is in his workshop," she frowned.

Gaara took a second to think then the image of the boy with golden eyes flashed in his memory. "I can sneak in and get it." He bit his lip, already trying to formulate his plan. "It's funny," he chuckled. "The boy who put that order in, I think he had a snake on him and golden eyes. But his pupils were round."

"Round?" she hummed. "If he is of the snake then he is also only half-blooded." She paused in eating her food for a moment. "And that order was something I...made before." She put her food down on the bedside table. "How...old did this boy look?"

"About fourteen, maybe?" Gaara asked. "Do you think there is someone else from your village living here?"

"That is quite unlikely," she said. "But not impossible...but this boy ordered something specific, very specific...that I only ever did with my brother." She paused again. "None of this makes sense," she said very softly to herself.

He moved to sit behind her and wrapped his arms around her. He hummed softly as he kissed her shoulder. "I think he said his name was Mitsuki," He told her. He kissed the fading marks from Sasori's assault on her neck.

"Mitsuki?" she gasped, realizing her suspicions were true. She just wanted a little more clarification. "Did he have white hair and an adorable smile?"

"He did," Gaara smiled, leaning his face to rest on her shoulder so he could look up at her. "It sounds like you know him," he laughed softly.

"I do," she grinned, on the verge of tears. "He is my brother." It finally hit her just how much she missed her family. All of the emotions she suppressed about missing her family since she left flooded back to her and she could not control it as she started crying.
Gaara wrapped his arms a little tighter around her to give her a squeeze. He released her so he could shift them into a proper hug. He knew the weight of what this meant. He tucked her head into his shoulder and stroked her hair. "If your brother is here," he said, pressing a kiss to her temple, "then your father could be here." He rubbed circles into her back. "This will make everything a lot easier if here." He said the last bit more to himself.

She wrapped her arms around him and sniffled. "You have to go to the shop today..." she said softly. "He will be there for his order. They should be brought here.

"Of course," he held her closer. "I can't see Sasori showing up at the shop during all of this so it should be safe." He continued to move his hand soothingly along her back. "Hopefully, they will trust me enough to let me bring them here."

"They do not exactly have a reason to not trust you," she said, wiping her face. "But...expect my father to be very cautious."

"That is fair," he hummed softly. His heart skipped a bit suddenly. He chuckled softly. "Well...this is an odd way to meet your father, isn’t it?" he asked her with a smile. "Think he will forgive me?" he asked, referencing their little bun in the oven.

"He will have no choice but to," she chuckled. "But...I am sure he will like you." She kissed him softly. "You are kind and sweet. You are well-liked in this city despite what is known about your cousin and you make me happy." She kissed him again. "That last one is the most important," she smirked.

"That last one," he chuckled, blushing brightly. "The only thing that matters." He could not help but pull her into a deeper kiss, pressing into it. "However," he smiled into the kiss, then pressed his forehead to hers, "I'm still a little nervous. Which is refreshingly normal in all of this madness."

"Ah, do not worry," she smiled, running her hand through his hair. "He cannot do anything to you. I will not tell you to not be nervous because I know that it is normal but I will assure you that there is nothing to be nervous about."

"Then I believe you," he chuckled. "Are you done eating?" he asked her, scratching up her back gently. "I'm only asking so I can run you a bath," he smiled. "There is no rush."

She rested her head on his shoulder and kissed his neck. "I am," she answered.

"Ready then?" he smirked. He wrapped her legs around him then moved his hands to cup her butt. He slowly moved them to the edge of the bed and stood up. He kissed her temple as he carried her down to their designated bathroom.

She giggled softly as he carried her. Once they reached the bathroom, he put her down and she stretched hard while he started the bath. She caught a glimpse of her reflection in a full-body mirror and frowned when she saw the top of a bruise at her hips. As she approached the mirror, she moved the fabric of her dress out of the way to reveal the full bruise where Sasori dug into her with his thighs earlier. She also caught the bruises on her neck. "Hm," she hummed.

Gaara crossed the room silently, wrapping his arms around her from behind. "Does it hurt?" he asked softly, kissing down her neck and shoulders. "I can give you a salve," he told her softly. He rested his hands on her hips gently.

"It just looks bad," she said. "I do not really feel it anymore. I can handle the bruises he gives me. They do not last very long."
"Alright." He kissed along her jaw "If anything at all hurts or changes, tell me," he said seriously as he pulled her flush to his chest. "How about we wash away some of today?"

"That sounds like a great idea," she chuckled softly, pulling him into a kiss. She pulled away from him to undress. It dawned on her that the day started very early for her and within a half-hour of waking up, she was attacked. "It has been a long day," she hummed.

"I can only imagine," he smirked, taking her hand to lead her to the bath. "But the sleep tonight should be good," he smiled. "Do you think you'll need anything to help relax?"

"I do not think so," she said as she stepped into the bath. She sunk into the water and sighed. "I think I will be fine with just tea." She pulled his hand close to kiss his knuckles.

"Tea is doable," he smiled. "Would you like it now or," he moved their hands together so he could lace his fingers into hers, kissing each of her fingers then flipping her hand over to kiss her palm, "would you prefer some help washing up?"

"I think I can handle washing up," she smiled. "But I also do not need the tea now." She reached her hand up to run her fingers through his hair. "It can wait until later."

He chuckled, leaning into her hand slightly. "Okay, my love." He turned his head to kiss her wrist. His eyes brushed over her body. "I might have to kill him," he whispered.

"I understand why you feel that way and I am not going to tell you that you are wrong...but...I do not think that is such a good idea."

"Murder is rarely a good idea." He gave her a bitter smile. "But if he lays another finger on you ever again," his voice dropped a little. He shook his head, trailing off.

She cupped his face. "I know exactly what you will do," she said softly. "But please realize the consequences of doing such a thing. Do not be like him."

He closed his eyes, leaning into her touch. "Sorry," he whispered. "I..." he chuckled softly. "I'll have to warn my aunt and uncle about our new guests," he said after a few moments. "Aside from Mitsuki, who else do you think would come with your father?"

"Ah, I cannot be too sure," she hummed. "One or both of my older brothers. I know he would not bring a lot of people. I am actually a bit surprised he brought Mitsuki."

"Mmm, let's bank on four people." He thought for a moment. "Mitsuki looks a little different from you. Maybe he brought him because of that. If I didn't know what I do about you, I don't think I would have put two and two together."

She hummed in thought as she started to wash up. "That does make a lot of sense," she nodded. "But it is still dangerous to throw him into this." She gasped softly and looked up at him. "Take Naga with you when you go to meet him later. I do not doubt they will trust you but it will be solidified if you have a snake. He can vouch for you."

"I'm sure he will very excited to meet you, family, too," Gaara chuckled. "I'm just wondering if I should wait for Sasori to show up here before I go or just leave the ingredients with my aunt and uncle." He frowned, looking hard at her. "Would you trust them with it?"

“Of course I trust them with it,” she said. “And I am sure if he is the one to show up, they will not allow him to come anywhere near me.” She rinsed off and sat up on her knees to pull him into a kiss. “Plus, you will not be gone that long.”
He leaned closer to her, pressing into the kiss. "No," he smiled against her lips, "I won't be." He kissed her again then stood up to grab her a towel. "I'll figure out how I'll sneak your family here in case he is here at the same time as them."

"This is a big place," she chuckled softly. "It will not be hard." She took the towel from him as she stood up and stepped out of the tub. She wrapped her towel around herself and then wrapped her arms around him. "Everything is going to be fine."

"I should be saying that to you," he smirked. He scooped her up in his arms again and started back for their room. "But you are absolutely right. Everything is going to work out."

She giggled, pulling him into another kiss as he carried her through the halls and into their room. She reached to open the door and as they walked in, Sachiko was in there petting Naga. "Oh!" she chuckled with a slight jump when she saw them walk in. "I figured you were in the bath so I brought you a robe." She held up a red silk robe for Azumi. "So you can go 'shopping' in my closet again," she grinned.

"Thank you so much," Azumi chuckled.

"Oh," Gaara laughed, blushing a little around the ears. "If that's the case," he set Azumi down gently on the edge of the bed, "while you ladies have fun, I will go talk to Uncle." He kissed her forehead.


“Naga,” Azumi said, gesturing for the snake to follow Gaara. The snake hissed happily, moving quickly across the bed to coil up Gaara’s body.

Gaara smiled, taking Azumi’s hand to kiss the back of it. "You two have fun, and we’ll be back soon," he said, stepping for the door.
Chapter 66

Mitsuki bolted up the steps to Utakata's shop, excited to carry out the plan for the day of meeting Gaara again.

"Calm down, Mitsuki," Yashamaru chuckled, gently pulling his brother back by the back of his collar. "We are supposed to be inconspicuous in this city."

"I am sorry," Mitsuki grinned. "I am just excited." They walked through the door and Utakata was at his counter, writing in a log while smoking his pipe.

"I see you still have that habit," Yashamaru smirked at him.

"It only got worse after coming here," Utakata answered. "The anxiety this place gave me at first is to thank for that. Welcome back," he told them as Orochimaru entered behind his sons. "What are your plans for today?"

"We are going back to the apothecary," Orochimaru answered. "Or at least Mitsuki is."

"I met Gaara yesterday!" Mitsuki grinned.

"Just you?" Utakata asked with a raised eyebrow. "Is that safe?"

"I can handle it," Mitsuki waved off his concern.

Utakata chuckled, putting his pipe down. "Well, if you are dealing with just Gaara, you should be safe," he nodded. "Speaking of him, what is the verdict? Do you like him?"

Mitsuki gasped, grinning widely. "I like him a lot! He is nothing like the guys that Azumi is usually into!" the boy nodded. "I can tell he is a good person. Father will give him a hard time at first but he will like him too."

"You sound very confident about that," Orochimaru smirked.

"I am," Mitsuki said, his wide grin still in place.

Utakata chuckled softly. "The shop will be opening very soon if Gaara is going to be in today. He usually opens early."

"We will be heading over there soon," Orochimaru nodded. "Mitsuki wanted to have breakfast and now he has too much energy to wait so we will be there very soon. He tried coffee for the first time. After my multiple advisories against it."

"I just want the order from my sister," Mitsuki said quickly.

"The order from your sister or did you just want your sister?" Utakata asked, watching the boy practically vibrate with excitement and apparently caffeine.

Mitsuki scoffed, speaking a mile a minute. "Both, of course! I ran out of my scent a few months after she left and you do not know how boring life is without her. We all miss her so much and I am pretty sure father has been crying weekly since she—"

"Whoa, there, Little Snake," Yashamaru said, putting his hands on his younger brother's shoulders. "Breathe." Mitsuki took a deep breath with a wide grin and then exhaled slowly.
"I have not been crying," Orochimaru scoffed.

"You can lie to yourself," Yashamaru smirked, "but you cannot lie to your children, Father."

Orochimaru rolled his eyes. "It is hard to. Anyway, we should start heading to the apothecary."

"Come back if you need anything," Utakata told them.

"We will," Yashamaru said over his shoulder. He steered Mitsuki down the stairs by the shoulders. Orochimaru followed after his sons out to the street. Yashamaru was barely able to keep his younger brother contained. He jittered his way down the street towards the tea shop.

Once they approached the tea shop, Yashamaru held him in place for a few seconds so their father could explain the plan to him once more.

"Remember," Orochimaru started, "find out as much as you can about the cousin and the uncle. We need to find her very soon."


Yashamaru chuckled as he let go of Mitsuki and watched him zoom across the street to the apothecary. "Maybe letting him have coffee was a bad idea," he said as he and his father entered the tea shop and took the same seats they had the day before.

"I tried to stop him," Orochimaru sighed.

Mitsuki's feet barely touched the ground as he yanked the door open. He stood in the middle of the quiet shop, his eyes flickering around rapidly. "Hello? Mr. Gaara? I am back, can I have my scent now? Did she make it?" he asked rapid-fire.

Gaara stepped out from behind the curtain to the workshop with wide eyes. "Oh, Mitsuki," he smiled widely. "Yeah, I have your order right here." He walked behind the counter to grab a wrapped jar. "You mentioned you were visiting, right?" He walked over to the teenager to hand him the jar then stopped. "Are you okay?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Yeah! I am great! I had coffee!" Mitsuki gushed. "We are visiting. From far away. We do not have coffee like this where I am from."

"Oh?" Gaara chuckled. "Is that so?"

"Very much so," Mitsuki grinned, taking the jar from him and wasting no time in opening it to shove his nose into it. He inhaled deeply and sighed. "I missed this scent so much," he grinned. "Thank you!"

"You've had this scent before?" Gaara asked, chuckling. He was mildly concerned with how blown the child's pupils were already but at least he knew Azumi's scents had that effect on people.

"Mhm!" The boy's response was muffled from how deep he was shoving his face into the jar.

Gaara chuckled again as he slowly moved back toward the counter to set a teapot over a small fire. "Did you come here alone?" he asked. "Who did you travel this far with?"

"You sure ask a lot of questions, Mister," he giggled involuntarily. "I came with my father and one of my other brothers."

"You don't have to call me 'Mister,'" Gaara smirked. "Are you just on vacation or—"
"We are looking for my sister." Mitsuki smelled the jar again.

"Oh," Gaara was trying to keep himself composed. "Could your sister's name be Azumi?"

Mitsuki's eyes went wide and he inhaled so deep he coughed. "Yes! You know!" he grinned. His head whipped around to look across the street at the tea shop and he quickly waved for his father and brother to hurry up and get into the apothecary shop, moving closer to the door to meet them right in the doorway.

The men got up quickly, crossing the street in a few steps. "What happened?" Yashamaru asked his brother lowly the moment he was in earshot.

"He knows!" Mitsuki nearly screamed even though he was right in front of them.

In the shop, Gaara was wheezing, doing his best to keep himself together. He was about to meet the father of his child's mother.

Yashamaru pulled his brother tightly to his body. "You really need to calm down," he sighed.

Gaara poured the tea into a cup once it was ready and handed it to Mitsuki. "He's fine, really," he chuckled. Mitsuki immediately took the cup and started sipping it quickly. "This should counteract that caffeine high."

"Oh, I like him already," Yashamaru hummed, watching his brother calm down a little bit.

"That's reassuring," Gaara chuckled a little. "Uh, so you must be her other bother and father," he said, bowing formally.

Orochimaru glanced at his youngest son then looked Gaara up and down. "We can save all of the formalities for when I see my daughter," he said smoothly. "And I trust you can take us to her?"

"I can," Gaara nodded. He ushered them further into the shop and locked up the front. "We'll leave out of the back. It's a bit of a walk but she is currently at my uncle's house." Naga poked his head out from behind Gaara’s shoulder and hissed softly. He was a bit starstruck at seeing Orochimaru. He had always heard of the family but to see the head of it was amazing to him since he never thought he would meet any of them.

"Thank you." The three of them followed Gaara out of the back of the shop and through the city to Sandaime's house. "So I take it she knows we are here?" Orochimaru asked after a while.

"I knew my order would work!" Mitsuki grinned, once again being held by the back of his collar by Yashamaru as they walked.

"That was very clever you," Gaara smiled over his shoulder at Mitsuki.

"And you almost did not bring me, Father," Mitsuki glowed. Orochimaru looked at his youngest son with a small cock to his delicate brow.

"Yeah, Father," Yashamaru chimed in. "Do not underestimate your children."

"I have never once underestimated any of my children," Orochimaru scoffed. "I know all four of you are very capable and smart."

The boys shared a cheeky grin with each other as they rushed through the city. They turned down another street and approached the mansion.
"This is massive," Mitsuki gasped softly.

Gaara chuckled then held his arm up to stop them. "Just give me a moment. I need to make sure someone isn't here," he told them. The three other men stopped short, having no other choice but to wait for him to return. Gaara peeked up at the front of the house, knowing his aunt and uncle were not going to let his cousin inside. Not seeing Sasori, he circled back to the other men and waved for them to follow him. They headed up the stairs quickly. Once they reached the top, Gaara led them inside and straight to Sandaime's office. He knocked lightly and waited for the muffled response from his uncle before leading them inside. "This is my uncle, Sandaime," Gaara introduced.

Orochimaru bowed to Sandaime then Yashamaru and Mitsuki followed his lead and did the same. "I am Orochimaru," he spoke up. "These are my sons, Yashamaru and Mitsuki." He gestured to each son as he said their names.

Sandaime stood up smoothly, bowing to the new group. "She is going to be elated to see you," he smiled. "She's sleeping right now but the moment she is—"

"Can I see her?" Mitsuki cut Sandaime off. "Please?" he asked his father with big eyes.

Orochimaru looked at Mitsuki and frowned, unsure if he wanted to disturb his sleeping daughter.

Sachiko chuckled as she entered the room. "You are the most adorable thing," she said to Mitsuki as she rounded the group to bow to them. "I am Sachiko," she grinned. She held her hand out for Mitsuki to take. "I can take you to her."

Mitsuki let out a soft 'wow' as his hand came up to take Sachiko's offered hand.

"Are you a goddess?" Yashamaru asked nonchalantly.

"She has to be," Mitsuki whispered softly. Sachiko giggled, making the two younger boys sigh. Orochimaru blinked in shock at his sons.

Sandaime barely stifled a laugh himself. "She is," he swooned over his wife.

"Really?" Orochimaru shook his head.

"I think I will go with you both so I can guide Father later," Yashamaru said as he started walking forward only to be yanked back by Orochimaru.

"You're staying right here."

Yashamaru sighed and rolled his eyes. "Fine."

"I will take you to her when she wakes up," Sachiko grinned at them as she led Mitsuki out of the office.

Orochimaru looked back at Sandaime. "I heard from someone that you are working to abolish slavery," he said.

Sandaime nodded. "I am. I have been working on it for a while now."

Yashamaru looked at Naga who was wrapped around Gaara with his gaze transfixed on Orochimaru the way Mitsuki reacted to Sachiko. "And who is this?" he asked.

Gaara looked down and chuckled softly when he saw how intently Naga was watching Orochimaru. "This is Naga." He gently pet the snake’s body. "He's been your daughter's
"companion since I met her," he explained. "He's been very good at keeping her safe and being there for her."

"You have been working hard," Orochimaru hummed, smiling at the snake. "Thank you, Naga." He slowly reached out to gently pet the snake's head. Naga hissed softly, in full bliss as Orochimaru pet him.

"They have been through...a lot together," Gaara said. Naga hissed again, frantically explaining to Orochimaru and Yashamaru everything that he and Azumi had gone through since the day she was sold as a slave.

"I think he deserves a little more than a thanks, Father," Yashamaru smiled, pulling a little treat out of his sleeve to offer Naga.

"He does," Orochimaru agreed. The snake took the treat happily, softly hissing his thanks. "I do not know how we will express our gratitude to you." He smiled at Naga who was quivering from the praise.

"Careful," Gaara chuckled. "I think he's about to ascend."

"The snakes see our father as a god," Yashamaru explained quietly. He looked at Naga and chuckled, realizing the snake was so transfixed on Orochimaru that he did not hear it. "I am sure even though he was with my sister this whole time he never thought he would ever get the chance to meet my father."

"Oh," Gaara hummed. He could not help but chuckle at how pure the serpent was. Over the past few months, he understood less and less how people could see them as evil or vile things when they could be so good. "Would you like him to hold you?" Gaara asked Naga softly. Naga hissed in shock and then excitement, looking between Gaara and Orochimaru then nodded frantically.

With a chuckle, Orochimaru reached out for the snake to move over to him which he did fairly quickly. "I can see how you are the perfect companion for her," he said, tapping Naga's nose. Naga hissed softly as if he was blushing and said he was actually the love of her life. "Oh, are you?" Orochimaru chuckled.

"Does he know that?" Yashamaru smirked, jerking a thumb towards Gaara.

"Know what?" Gaara laughed, looking between the three of them. Naga hissed softly, telling them to shush. He was sparing Gaara's feelings.

"Oh, nothing," Yashamaru chuckled.

Sandaime rounded his desk and sat down. "I don't know where you three are staying in the city," he started, "but this property is big enough to house you all if you would like to stay here. I know we just met," he chuckled, "however, this is the only place she is safe and I figured you'd want to stay close to her."

Orochimaru turned to face Sandaime properly, he folded his hands in his lap and smiled. "You are very gracious," he hummed. "Under normal circumstances, I would never think to impose on you but I would rather stay as close as possible to my daughter right now, so we will take you up on your offer."

Sandaime waved off the niceties. "Think nothing of it," he shook his head. "Her safety is first and foremost." He leaned forward to say more when his wife appeared in the doorway.
"I thought you'd like to know," she grinned, "Azumi's awake!" All four men perked up. Yashamaru shared a look with his father.

"You go on and see her," Orochimaru nodded. "I want to know more about who we are dealing with." He looked back at Sandaime and Gaara. "Tell more about this Sasori," his tone turned icy. Yashamaru stood up quickly, not needing to be told twice.

Sandaime waited for Yashamaru to be out of the room before speaking. He sighed softly and sat back in his seat then gestured for Gaara to take the other seat in front of his desk. Once Gaara sat down, he looked back at Orochimaru and frowned. "Sasori is...for lack of a better word, a monster. Highly intelligent and very sadistic."

"I heard he is an apothecary," Orochimaru said.

"Yes, and a beloved one at that. Everyone in this city respects him and he uses that to his utmost advantage."

"Aside from the normal clientele of the shop, he has a black-market clientele," Gaara chimed in. "He makes them poisons to commit their own crimes."

"And when he isn't doing it for a client," Sandaime added, "he's doing it for fun."

"I see," Orochimaru hummed.

"He has a short-fused temper. And a very bad one at that. Unfortunately, your daughter was usually on the receiving end of it."

"I tried to be there as much as possible to stop it," Gaara said.

Orochimaru nodded, taking in all the sickening information. It was making his blood boil just considering the possibilities afforded to this man to hurt his daughter. His rightful rage was radiating off of him in waves that nearly caused Gaara to flinch. Sandaime kept his face controlled but he felt the room's temperature rising. His outward appearance remained calm, cool and collected. "Then his death will be very notable if we simply sneak in to kill him," Orochimaru hummed.

The two men nodded, a little afraid to speak in the rising killing intent. This man's rage was nothing like their familial temper. It was far more dangerous. "It would be quite difficult to get away with," Sandaime said.

Orochimaru took a deep breath. "Dare I ask...what he has done to her?"

"Maybe you shouldn't," Gaara spoke up quickly. "It's...it's been a lot and..." He shook his head.

Orochimaru smiled at the younger man. It was meant to be kind but Gaara had to suppress a shudder as the murderous aura exuding from Orochimaru doubled down. "Tell me," he said smoothly. Sandaime was offering up prayers to any god that would listen for Gaara's soul.

"It...might be best if you see," Gaara frowned.

In the room, Sachiko was grinning wide, watching the siblings be reunited.

"How did you know to come here?" Azumi asked her brothers.
"This little guy came to us!" Mitsuki said, showing her the black mamba that delivered the message from Utakata. "And he has been with me ever since."

"Aw, so you now have a companion, too," she chuckled, reaching out to pet the mamba.

"Utakata sent him to us," Yashamaru explained. "In his letter, he said something had happened to you...it took the snake months to reach us and it took us weeks to get here."

"Utakata sent him?" she hummed. "How did he know about..." She paused, recalling the events in the days following the night Sasori came home raging over Sandaime's announcement. "Naga must have gone to him..." she said softly.

"Makes the most sense," Yashamaru hummed. "He really loves you," he smiled, feeling Ryuga slither into his lap, hissing about how he loved her, too. "Oh, we know you love her," he chuckled.

"How long have you been here?" Azumi asked Yashamaru.

"We arrived yesterday," he answered.

"Oh!" Sachiko grinned. "And how are you liking the city so far?"

"It is very crowded," Yashamaru chuckled. "I can see being a tourist here but I could not live here."

"Mm, that's fair for someone who isn't used to it," she laughed lightly. "But there are tons of places to eat and so much to buy from every corner of our country that you couldn't get anywhere else."

"How did you cope with the crowds?" Yashamaru asked his sister with slight concern. He knew how bad she was with them. It was probably the least of her concerns with everything else that had happened. It was just one more thing on the list of worries they had for her.

"Having a master who also dislikes crowds," she answered. "We hardly ventured into them except on a few occasions. When we did, he made sure I stayed close since he knew how anxious I would get."

"Except that one time a few days ago," Sachiko chuckled, "when you two got separated and I found you."

"That is right," Azumi smirked. "I do not understand how it happened but I am glad you happened to be there."

"Sounds like an easy feat for a goddess," Yashamaru chuckled.

Mitsuki moved to put his head in his sister's lap and gently hint he wanted his head rubbed. "Are we going to leave soon?" he asked. "I want to explore more but not if your master, " he mocked the title, "can still hurt you."

"Ah, I am not sure I can leave just yet," Azumi frowned, gently scratching his scalp. "I really want to..."

"But traveling the desert is not something a pregnant woman should be doing," Sachiko said. Azumi nodded in agreement.

"Oh," Mitsuki frowned. "Are you excited to be a mom?" he asked.

"I am," she said softly with a smile. "Of course, this is something I did not expect to happen but in a way...I am glad it did."
"I am just glad it is not with that monster," Yashamaru frowned.

Sachiko held up her hand suddenly to tell them to be quiet. "I think I hear them coming," she said softly. She listened more intently before peeking her head out of the doors to ensure it was not possibly Sasori first. She spotted Orochimaru making his way rapidly down the hall. She gasped softly, getting hit with a wave of that terrifying aura before he even reached the doors. She opened them wide for him. Naga followed behind him quickly, opting to coil up around Sachiko while Orochimaru continued on.

Orochimaru spared Sachiko a passing bow, stopping short at the edge of the bed. His heart was racing as he took in his beautiful baby girl. His eyes landed instantly on the handprints on her throat. Long fingers curled tightly into a fist. His gaze fell to her chest where he could see the top of her chest burn peeking through. Mitsuki sat up quickly, moving out of the way so his father could join them on the bed if he wanted to. Yashamaru reached out to gently rub his circles into his sister's back once he saw her eyes well up with tears. Orochimaru clenched his jaw tightly. "What has he done to you," he hissed.

Azumi could not answer as it dawned on her that this was the first time she had seen him in almost a year. She moved the sheets off of her lap and got up, moving down the bed to wrap her arms around him and burying her face into his shoulder. As soon as she started to feel herself cry, she clutched the back of his shirt.

He wrapped his arms around her tight, burying his face in her hair. He turned around to sit down on the bed, pulling her into his lap. He ran his fingers through her hair, pressing kisses to her head. "My Azumi," he breathed, holding her closer. He continued to stroke her hair, waiting for her to calm down before either of them tried to speak. He had missed her but seeing her now...it hit him so much harder. He did not want to let her go. For a moment, he did not even care about murdering the man who hurt her. He wanted to tuck his little neonate into his arms and carry her home.

She took a few moments to wipe her face and catch her breath. Once she calmed down, she exhaled slowly. "I missed you," she whispered, wrapping her arms around him again.

"I missed you, too," he whispered back. He kissed her head again, then pulled back to cup her face. He shook his head slightly, as he fished a handkerchief out of his robes to wipe her face. He tilted her chin up slightly to look at the marks on her neck again. He sighed mournfully. "My little girl," he said softly, looking into her eyes.

"I thought I would never see you again," she said. "And I know you are upset that I did it, but I did it to save someone else."

"I know," he told her softly. "I know, you stupid, giving girl." He held her closer. "I wish you had just come to me," he sighed. "But that is the past. Now the only thing that matters is taking care of you and the baby and then getting you home."

By the door, Sachiko was wiping her own tears, silently sobbing at the emotional reunion she was witnessing. Mitsuki discreetly slid off of the bed to offer the weeping goddess a handkerchief. Sachiko looked at it with a small gasp then took it, pulling Mitsuki into a tight hug. His face was firmly buried into her chest.

Azumi took one more deep breath before running her hands down her face. "Ah, so you know about it," she chuckled through a snuffle. "I am two months in."

"Of course, I know about it," Orochimaru scoffed, losing the fight to keep a smile off of his face. He sighed, cupping her face gently in his hand and stroking her cheek with his thumb.
Yashamaru stood up from the bed. "Did you leave anything at that monster's house?" he asked.

Azumi thought for a moment. "A bunch of dresses that Lady Sachiko gave me the other day," she answered. "Ones that will fit me once I start growing bigger."

Yashamaru nodded and then looked at Sachiko. "Is there a way we can go get them?"

"There is though it is a bit risky," Sachiko said. "I would suggest talking with my husband and Gaara about it. Gaara especially would know where exactly they are in Sasori's house."

"Thank you." Yashamaru gave her a slight bow before exiting the room. He made his way through the halls back to Sandaime's office. He surprisingly remembered his way back to the office, making it there without getting lost. He reached for the door when he heard a loud crash.

"He has a hold over her, Uncle!" the newly familiar rasp of Gaara came through the door. It was more ragged now and clearly distressed. Yashamaru pulled his hand away, opting instead to lean his back against the door to eavesdrop.

"I know, Gaara, but she also knows she can't stay with him," Sandaime reasoned with his nephew.

"I know she knows that but he deserves what is coming to him, Uncle, and I fear she will do something reckless to protect him despite that!"

There was a long pause before Yashamaru heard Sandaime's voice again. "Do you really think she would protect him?"

"She was the one who sent Komushi in to stop me from killing him before," Gaara said. "Earlier today, I threatened to kill him and she told me not to. If it were to ever come down to it and we were about to kill him, I wouldn't put it past her to try to get in the way."

"Oh, dear," Sandaime frowned. "That is an issue." There was another pregnant pause.

"Even if we keep her here there is still the risk she will escape to save him." The sound of splintering wood reached Yashamaru's ears. "I refuse to lose her to him!" Gaara growled. "He deserves this death. He deserves it," his voice started to rise again. "And she deserves to go home with her family where she is safe and can have the baby! He tried to murder the fucking baby, Uncle!"

Yashamaru's eyebrows raised in shock when he heard the last part. "Is that so?" he hummed to himself.

"I understand," Sandaime said. "And I agree with you on every point..." He paused again. "If we do carry out a plan, we can't tell her about it."

Yashamaru heard who he could only guess was Gaara sit down heavily with a sigh. "That would make the most sense," Gaara hummed.

"And with her family here," Sandaime continued, "Sachiko could easily keep her and the younger one while we exact the plan." There was another long pause.

Yashamaru frowned, staring down the opposite wall. 'The man really is a monster,' he thought as he felt his own disgust for the man bubble up a little more.

"We need to think of a plan quickly though," Gaara said. "He’s currently distracted with his mother but Azumi had no problem providing the ingredients for the anti-venom. Within the next few days,
he’s going to start hounding us for her.”

"While I'm glad your aunt's life will be saved, I see your point," Sandaime frowned. "We should probably talk it over with her family and Sachiko to come up with something." Gaara hummed in agreement. "But let's give them some time to be together."

"Time is of the essence!" Gaara huffed. "Did Sasori come by yet for the ingredients?"

"Not yet," Sandaime said, shaking his head. "But I am expecting him today. I don't think he'll waste any time. And...when he does come, it's probably best you are with her and her family. Both of your tempers at the same time will not end well for anyone." He tried to sound as calm as possible, not wanting to risk his nephew blowing up.

Gaara gave his uncle a very hard look. He could not deny his temper was running very high at the moment. His eyes flickered down to the smashed bust on the floor. However, he was pretty proud of his self-control compared to his cousin. Which, if he was honest with himself, did not say much in his defense. "You're right," he sighed heavily.

"Maybe you should try and get some sleep yourself. You look exhausted and we need you at your best for her."

Gaara took a moment, exhaling hard through his nose. "Alright," he said. Yashamaru heard him stand up and stood to the side of the door so he would not be seen when the door was opened. He watched as Gaara walked out of the office and down the hall, running his hands through his hair as he made his way back to Azumi. Whether it was because of his rage or the angle of his exit, he did not notice Yashamaru.

Yashamaru sighed, leaning back against the door once it closed. This was going to hit his sister a lot harder than they expected if everything Gaara had said was true. He folded his arms, tapping his fingers along the bend of his arm. Pushing off the door again, he turned to enter the office but stopped short when he heard someone's footsteps storming from somewhere not so distant in the house.

"One of you better come out here!" a voice roared. Yashamaru froze. The heat in the voice was almost worse than Gaara's. "Give me her damn snake!"

Yashamaru looked over in the direction of the voice just as another redhead turned the corner down the hall. 'Is that him?' he thought. He did not know what he was expecting in terms of appearance, but he was not prepared to see a man around his own age. He could feel the violent aura coming from the other man. They made eye contact for a split second before Sandaime opened the door to the office to confront his nephew, blocking the view of Yashamaru.

Yashamaru slipped around the corner quickly, pressing against the wall to listen in again.

Sasori squinted at the man who disappeared around the corner. He took a step forward to follow him but his uncle cleared his throat, throwing out an arm to stop him. He ushered Sasori into his study, shutting the door firmly behind them.

"Where is she?" Sasori glowered at his uncle.

Sandaime took his time rounding the desk to pull three jars out from a drawer. "I have what you need to save your mother right here," he told him, patting the jars. "Be thankful that girl is still giving enough to provide you even this after everything you’ve done to her." He was not going to point out that she was apparently very attached to Sasori.
Sasori looked at the jars, picking each one up and reading their labels. He squinted when he noticed that she had provided her own venom with the snakes’. At first, he thought it was a trick and that she expected him to figure out which combination of the venoms was the correct one. He considered afterward that he was to use all three. However, he was going to try every possibility to save his mother. He set the third one back down and looked at Sandaime again. "You can't hide her forever," he told him. "I will get her back."

"We can," Sandaime gave him a cool look. "And we will. You will never see her again." He folded his arms.

"She'll come crawling back," Sasori smirked. "She knows who she belongs to in the end." He tucked the jars into his arms. "I kept my promise to her."

"Any promise you make her means nothing now!" Sandaime stood up and crossed the room then held the door open for nephew. "Now go before I have you thrown out!" Sasori scoffed, staring at his uncle for a moment before walking to the door. "This...is a new low for you, Sasori," Sandaime sighed sadly as Sasori passed him.

"I can go lower," Sasori mumbled to himself as he exited the room.

Yashamaru held his breath, hoping nothing would prompt Sasori to look around the door to find him. He started moving further down the hall, his back still pressed to the wall. He froze again when the door was closed and he was once again making eye contact with the redhead. At least for a brief second before he turned around and started walking down the hall, making his way back to the room. He stopped short just outside of the bedroom and took a steadying deep breath. ‘Should I tell them what I saw?’ he thought. He would not tell his sister for a myriad of reasons. But his father? Usually, he could count on Orochimaru to be calm, cool and collected but this was a circumstance he had never seen his father in. Who knew what he would do? He shook his head, deciding to file it away for later. He wanted to focus on his sister first. He could bring it up during their planning meeting later. He composed himself before heading into the bedroom, joining his family, Gaara, and Sachiko.

"Oh, you're just in time!" Sachiko grinned. "I was just about to make tea for everyone. Are you interested?"

Yashamaru chuckled softly. "I am, thank you," he answered with a polite nod. Sachiko and her golden aura left the room to head to the kitchen. Mitsuki was still a bit transfixed on her and slowly moved to the door to follow her only to be held back by Yashamaru and guided back to the bed. Mitsuki pouted slightly, rejoining his family on the bed.

"Did you get to find out what you needed?" Orochimaru asked, having moved to the top of the bed with his daughter.

Yashamaru hummed. "Sort of," he said cryptically. His eyes fell on Gaara who was sitting on a chair he had pulled up to the bed and holding Azumi’s hand. "Azumi, have you taken a bath yet?" Yashamaru asked. He needed to get her alone. He did not think it was wise to bring up her very apparent attachment to her ‘master’ in front of their father. At least not yet.

“I did earlier,” she nodded. “Before you three arrived. Do you want one? Want me to show you where the bathroom is?”

"Can you manage?" Yashamaru asked with a teasing tone. "Your dear brother is withering in this dry climate," he sighed. Orochimaru and Mitsuki rolled their eyes.
"I don't mind showing," Gaara said, standing up.

Yashamaru flashed him a smile but waved him off. "I have not seen my sister in a long time, forgive me if I would like her to show me."

Gaara chuckled softly and nodded as he sat back down. "Fair enough," he smiled.

Azumi kissed the back of his hand. "I will be right back," she said. She got off of the bed and rounded it to walk her brother to the bathroom.

Yashamaru looped his arm into his sister’s as they walked. "So," he started, "I heard you gave that monster the ingredients to cure his mother," he said, glancing down at her.

She hummed, looking down as they walked. "I did..." she answered softly. "Ryuga bit her this morning. She was not his target. He was aiming for Lord Sasori and she got in the way. But...she was also...trying to stop him from killing my baby."

"I see," he nodded. "And have you thought about maybe sending Ryuga to attack him again?" He raised his eyebrow. "I assume you only gave him enough for her right? So it would be perfect."

"I have not thought about that," she frowned, not going to tell him that she gave him more than enough. "I have not made any plans to kill him...and I do not think I am going to."

"You do not?" he asked her. "That does not sound like my sister," he frowned, looking up at the ceiling. "Any reason why you will not be going for blood? I thought you of all people would want to." He kept his tone airy but it worried him even more to hear first hand she was not willing to kill the man who had hurt not only her but her unborn child. His eyes fell to the bruising on her neck.

"Yes, it would make sense...and," she sighed heavily, "while I know why he deserves it, I do not think I can bring myself to do it. And I realize that he deserves it, but..." she trailed off, unable to put into words that she actually cared for Sasori.

He stopped suddenly, turning to pull her into a hug. He wrapped his arms tightly around her and rested his chin on top of her head. "If you cannot do it," he spoke softly, "can you at least promise not to protect him if something does happen?" he asked her seriously. He could not believe it only took nearly a year for this man to break his strong-willed sister down like this. He trembled a little, holding her tighter. "Promise you will not risk your life to save him."

"I...alright," she said softly after a while. "I will not."

He kissed the top of her head gently before finally letting her go. "You have fought long enough," he smiled at her. "I think it is fair that we protect you now."

"I suppose," she hummed. "But...I would rather just leave without having to kill him."

"It is not set in stone that he will be killed but would you really want to leave this place knowing he could just repeat what he did to you to someone else?" He took a step back to look at her hard.

She looked away and frowned. "He would not get the chance to once Lord Sandaime’s abolition bill passed," she said.

"Laws do not stop monsters like that from doing what that one has done to you,“ he told her.

She pouted and looked down. "I guess you are right..."
“I’m rarely wrong,” he teased. “Come,” he said, offering his arm again. “Show me where the bath is. I do not know how you have been surviving a monster and this horrendous dry heat at the same time. I might shrivel up before we get home!”

“I forgot how dramatic you are,” she sighed, rolling her eyes. She continued to lead him to the bathroom. Once they were there, she pointed to a cabinet across the room. “There are towels in that cabinet,” she told him then pointed to another door. “And I believe there is an attached changing room through that door.”

“Thank you, little sister,” he smirked, kissing her cheek before releasing her. He proceeded into the room to grab a towel from the cabinet. “Try not to get into any trouble on the way back to the room,” he said before disappearing into the changing room.

Azumi scoffed and rolled her eyes as she turned to leave. “Enjoy your bath,” she said as she walked out and headed back to the room.

“Oh, I will!” he called back.
Chapter 67

Sasori rushed into his workshop where Komushi was sitting beside his mother, blotting sweat from her forehead. She was rapidly declining and he knew he had to work fast by the way her eyes were rolling back in her head.

“Did you get it?” Komushi asked.

“Yes and I now know where she is hiding,” he snarled.

"Your uncle's, right?" Komushi hummed. "Not surprising."

"Sandaime is...harboring..." Sasori's mother strained, "...the slave?"

"She thinks she's safe there," Sasori said.

Komushi frowned, not knowing the full story of why Ryuga bit Sasori's mother. "What happened?" he asked.

“Gaara rushed to her rescue.” Sasori went to his other workbench pulling whatever he would need to make the antidote. “I don’t know how he knew anything was happening but—“

“You think Naga went to get him?” Komushi asked.

“That’s the only plausible explanation,” Sasori pressed his lips together.

“Did you...know...” Sasori’s mother turned toward Komushi.

“Don’t push yourself, Mother,” Sasori sighed.

“Know what?” Komushi asked, blotting some more sweat from her forehead.

“She is...pregnant...” she answered.

Komushi’s eyes went wide for a moment. He looked at Sasori who did not turn around to look at him but he could feel the rage from such a thing emanating from him. “She’s pregnant?” he whispered. “No, I didn’t know,” he told her, “but I’m not but shocked that it happened.” He smoothed her hair back. “Azumi and Gaara were hardly subtle with their attraction for each other.” Sasori’s mother looked back at her son, glaring harder than a dying woman should have been able to.

Sasori turned to his mother and scoffed. “Don’t look at me like that,” he said. “I tried to stop them from getting closer but now I’m figuring that Gaara’s been staying here without my knowledge.” He shook his head as he turned back to his work. “I knew I gave her too much freedom.”

“St-staying here!” she gasped, enraged. She moved to sit up to scold her son but it was too much for her. Komushi caught her body before it could hit the table hard and eased her back down gently. Her body broke out in a fresh glistening of sweat from the effort.

“If you keep that up you’re going to push the venom through your blood faster!” Sasori snapped. He huffed, mixing what he assumed to be the best combination of the venoms. He hated how much of this was left to chance. He had to rely heavily on his years of experience for this to work.

“Komushi, keep her still,” he ordered his friend as he approached her with the syringe.
Komushi held her hand as she turned her face away from the needle when Sasori put it close to her arm. “I still...hate needles...” she said softly.

Komushi chuckled. “They’re not fun,” he said, trying to keep her distracted while Sasori administered the venom into her arm.

"It shouldn't hurt long," Sasori assured her, puncturing the surface of her skin. He pushed the plunger down, forcing the thick yellowish-white liquid it into her vein.

"I'll make some of my famous cooking for you when this is done," Komushi winked at her. She gave him a soft, apprehensive laugh.

"Absolutely not," Sasori shook his head. "A snake bite is enough for one day," he said, pulling the needle out. He quickly pressed a cotton ball to the spot then tied it off with a ribbon. "I don't need to treat her for food poisoning as well."

“Sasori...” his mother scolded weakly. “Don’t be mean.”

“I can’t help it,” he smirked. “It’s about ninety percent of my personality.”

“This is true,” Komushi hummed. He looked at Sasori. “So what are you going to do now? Go get her? Your uncle isn’t going to let you anywhere near her.”

"Well," Sasori hummed, "I have the sneaking suspicion that they may come here for whatever little things she has here," he frowned, cupping his jaw in his hand. "So that would mean at some point they will be here. Which I could work with...but," he trailed off, thinking back to the dark-haired man he saw who, in the small glimpse he had seen of him, looked very much like a taller version of his Little Snake.

“But what?” Komushi asked. His mother turned toward him, still holding Komushi’s hand. “If she has to come back, it shouldn’t be hard to keep her. She’ll just have to be with you at all times.”

"You know that is much easier said than done," Sasori laid him with a half hooded look. He moved to check his mother's eyes then slid his fingers down to check her pulse. He released a sigh of relief when he felt it starting to steady already. "But," he smirked, “I wonder if I could lure her back on her own will.”

“Wow, you’re not going to put her in a trance and make her dance her way back to you?” Komushi smirked.

“She can dance pretty well,” Sasori’s mother hummed, sitting up on the table.

“How are you going to lure her?”

"The trance is the most ideal means to bring her back to me," Sasori said as he wrapped an arm around his mother's waist along with Komushi. Together, they helped her to his bed so she could lay down comfortably. "But it would seem she has a soft spot for me," he grinned devilishly.

"Don't you lay a hand on that baby," his mother warned.

Sasori glared at his mother. "She can't keep it," he reminded her. "What do you plan on doing with it? Raising it as your own?" he scoffed.

“I wouldn’t be opposed—“
“No, Mother,” Sasori cut her off.

“You can just...give it away,” Komushi suggested. “Someone in this city is going to want a baby.”

“You’re an idiot normally but even more so for the suggestion,” Sasori grumbled.

“Sasori,” his mother scolded again.

“Since it seems to have escaped you, this child will look like us!” He brushed his mother’s chiding off. “Gaara and I are notably similar in appearance and her eyes are visually striking! There is no way we’d be able to just ‘give it away,’” he mocked Komushi.

Komushi rolled his eyes and sighed. “It’s almost like you’ve forgotten about your secondary clientele,” he said. “One of them will take it. Then it’ll be a way for you to win them back since they were out for your blood because your uncle is trying to abolish slavery.”

“Mmmm, yes, I didn’t even think of that,” Sasori hummed. His mother looked at him in slight horror. “Kakuzu would probably kill it within a week...”

“Konan might actually mother it,” Komushi offered.

"Ah, yes, Konan," he grinned. "Maybe this will get her to be on my side."

"That's never going to happen," Komushi snorted. "But it'll probably get her to hate you less. She probably wants a kid with her own slave. Just give them this one."

“It’s decided,” Sasori nodded. “I guess there is a reason I hang out with you,” he smirked at his best friend. His mother had fallen silent through the interaction. She was entirely at a loss. She knew her son was a bit of a monster but she had not realized just how blackened his heart had become. She pulled away from him and moved to crawl to the end of the bed. “Mother, where do you think you’re going!” He reached your pull her back, figuring she needed to go to the bathroom. “One of us has to help you get—"

“Don’t—“ she cut him off, her tone harsh. She held a hand out to keep him at bay. “Either fetch your father or I will go to him myself.”

Sasori paused, a bit shocked by his mother's tone. "He's...already on his way," he said.

Komushi nodded. "I sent for him when Sasori went to get the ingredients."

"Mother, just get back in bed until he gets here. You shouldn't push yourself too much just yet."

She turned around to look at Sasori hard. She shifted on the bed, reaching up to cup his face. Sasori leaned into her hand slightly, watching his mother. She smiled softly as she pulled back her hand and slapped his cheek hard. “I have no words for you right now,” she with a low ferocity. Tears pricked in her eyes. “I...I raised such a smart, clever boy,” she sighed, shaking her head, turning away from him again.

Once again, Sasori was shocked into silence. Komushi’s jaw dropped, hoping the same thing was not about to happen to him. “What is this about?” Sasori asked. “You want the baby to live, right?”

“That baby is your family,” she seethed breathlessly. “You took ownership of that girl! Her pregnancy is your mistake as much as it is hers!” Her lips pressed into a tight white line. “And you sit here discussing a child like it’s some toy,” she shook her head again.
"I’m discussing rehoming the child, Mother,” he countered. “I don’t want her keeping it. It’ll distract her from the work I need her to be doing.”

“Rehoming it,” she snapped the t in it. She clicked her tongue, getting up to move off the bed again. “The child will stay within this family, Sasori, or so help me...” she threatened. Komushi rushed to her side as her feet touch the ground, finally recovering from his shock.

“Mother, I—“ Sasori started but cut himself off when he saw his father walk into the room.

“What happened?” he asked, seeing his wife struggle to move. Komushi helped her over to him and they met halfway. He wrapped his arms around his wife, pulling her close.

“She was bitten by one of my slave’s snakes,” Sasori filled him in.

“Tell him the rest,” his mother hissed.

“I’m getting to it, Mother,” Sasori sighed. “Azumi is apparently pregnant—“

“And he wants to get rid of it!” his mother cut him off.

“It’s not mine, Mother!”

“You own her, do you not?”

Sasori paused for a second. “I do,” he finally said.

“So this child is yours.”

“Who is the father?” Sasori’s father asked.

“Gaara,” all three answered.

“So the child will look like you,” he spoke calmly. “I’m not seeing the issue.” There was a weight to his words that Sasori was not used to.

“The problem is, Father,” he tried to keep his voice under control, “it’s not mine and I don’t want to raise a child!”

“You are of age, Sasori! You’ve had too much time to play.” His words had a finality to them.

“You want me to raise a child with a woman I’m not even married to?”

“I tried to get you two married,” his mother scoffed. “And you drove her right into your cousin’s arms.”

“In his defense,” Komushi chimed in, “they were very into each other before you tried to get her married to Sasori.”

“You’re on thin ice, Komushi!” Sasori’s mother shot at him. Komushi’s hands shot up in defense.

“Then I suppose you’ll have to get married or send her away,” Sasori’s father said. “And I’m sure you know sending her away is out of the question since you seem so adamant about keeping her.”

Sasori wanted to argue the shitty ultimatum he was just dealt but opted not to at the last second. “I have to get her back first,” he said.
“Where is the girl now?”

“Sandaime’s,” his wife answered.

“I’ll go talk to him then.”

“Make him go with you. He needs to take full responsibility for this.”

Sasori received a hard look from his father, one he had not seen since he was a child. He felt a familiar shudder run down his spine and hated that his parents could still do that to him. “You and I are heading over there tonight,” his father said. “We are going to speak to my brother about the whole thing.”

“Fine!” Sasori threw his hands up. “I’ll be there,” he sighed, seeing no way around it.

“We’ll sleep in your grandmother’s room tonight as well.”

Sasori nodded and ran his hand through his hair as he sat back down on the bed and sighed. His parents left the room moments later, heading to the other side of the mansion to get his mother settled in. Komushi sat down on the other side of the bed. “Did you know he was staying here?” Sasori asked.

“No,” Komushi answered. “I only thought she was just sneaking out.”

“I knew she was going down to the water but I never saw h—” At that moment, he realized there was a blind spot from where he watched her. He laughed bitterly, sitting down on his bed. “I really did give her way too much freedom,” he growled, leaning back against the wall. He placed his forearm over his eyes and sighed.

“Well, you can’t do much about that now but you might still be able to do something about the baby,” Komushi said, picking at his nails.

“Like what?” Sasori frowned. “I’m not being left with much of a choice. I would prefer this baby isn’t born and I was open to giving it away but now I’m being told I have to raise it.”

“Pregnancy is fickle,” Komushi shrugged. “You’ve done your fair share of...termination teas for the girls down in the red light district.” His tone was casual and airy as if he was discussing the weather rather than killing a child.

Sasori hummed in thought for a moment. “You’re not wrong,” he said as he sat up straight. “I just have to lure her here first.”

“Your first chance to do that is tonight when you go with your father,” Komushi told him.

“Yes.” He started to gather what he would need in his mind. “It won’t be hard to get her to drink.”

“Maybe you should use the trance on her.”

“No,” Sasori shook his head. “It’s too obvious and I have to maintain the song for her to stay under the trance.”

“I see,” Komushi hummed. He looked outside to gauge the time. Sasori did the same and nodded. He knew his father was about to leave for Sandaime’s so he needed to gather everything soon. “How do you plan on luring her?” Komushi asked, laying back on the bed.

“I’m not sure yet.” Sasori pushed his hair back again. “I’m deciding between seduction or
threatening her snakes’ lives.”

“Seduction,” Komushi snorted then chuckled. “That’ll take forever. She won’t fall for it. Threatening the snakes would work faster. Especially if you can acquire one of them and show her you mean it.”

“Listen,” Sasori’s lip twitched into a smirk. “She fell for Gaara,” he countered. “But I think I’d rather the snakes. Naga would be easier to get but Ryuga is the bigger threat.”

“Can you handle Ryuga?”

“Potentially,” he hummed.

“I don’t know,” Komushi said a little worried. “He bit your mother while going for you...he might strike at you again on sight.”

“I’ve put him in a trance before,” Sasori said. “I just need to restrain him while he’s under one.”

“You have to work fast,” he frowned. “Are you...going to need help?”

Sasori thought hard. Komushi was practically family. He could not see his father turning the other man away. “Yes,” he finally said. “I’ll play and you grab for him.”

Komushi nodded. “Got it,” he said.

Sasori went into the workshop to gather everything and get it all ready.

A little while passed before his father appeared in the doorway of his bedroom. “We’re leaving now,” he told his son. Still, with some reluctance, Sasori followed his father down to the front of the house. Komushi fell in line behind them quietly. "Do you really need moral support for this?" his father asked without looking back at either man. Sasori frowned at the phrase but knew he had to play his cards right if he wanted to bring Komushi along. His father was never this serious.

“He was a witness for most of these months,” Sasori reasoned. “Plus, we’re heading to the tavern straight after,” he lied.

“Yeah, I’m going to need a drink,” Komushi chuckled softly.

His father stopped short, arms folded over his chest as he turned around. "You're really taking this whole matter too lightly," he said as he narrowed his eyes. "Komushi can come on the merit of what you just said but you, Sasori, will be coming home to tend to that woman!"

Sasori sighed. “Fine,” he said. He received a harder glare from his father before they continued on.

They arrived at Sandaime’s house and made their way up the long flight of stairs to the entrance. A servant came out to greet them and grew a little wary when they saw Sasori. “Is my brother in tonight?” his father asked.

The servant nodded and turned to lead them into the house and to Sandaime’s office. The servant held the door open for the three men with a slight bow of their head. "My Lords, please wait here for Lord Sandaime," they said formally.

Sasori’s father nodded, taking a seat in front of the desk. Komushi took the next nearest seat while Sasori chose to pace the length of the room. His thoughts went back to the dark-haired man he caught sight of instantly. ‘Who could he have been?’
His father looked at him and furrowed his brows. “Is something making you nervous?” he asked.

“No,” Sasori answered. He was about to elaborate when the door opened and Sandaime walked in.

“Good evening,” Sandaime said. “To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?” He rounded his desk and sat down. “I see you finally decided to come out of your hiding hole,” he chuckled at his brother who smirked in return.

“Well, my wife’s life was in danger.”

"Mmm, that would bring you out, wouldn't it," Sandaime teased, smiling a little. It instantly faded as he took in the serious expression on his younger brother's face. "Is...is she alright?" His eyes flickered to Sasori.

"Of course, she is," Sasori sucked his teeth in indignation. "You think I'd let my mother die?" He continued on with his pacing. Sandaime nodded, turning his eyes back to his brother.

"We are here to fetch the girl," Sasori’s father said cooly. "I'm sorry you were dragged into my son's idiocy. I hear she is pregnant with Gaara's child."

Sasori stopped abruptly, closing his eyes tightly. He forgot how scathingly blunt his father could be about things when he was...angry.

Sandaime nodded, humming softly to himself as he thought about how to word his answer. “I am afraid I cannot let her go back with him,” he said. “I'm sorry, Brother, but Sasori attacked her this morning and tried to kill the baby. It doesn’t sit right with me to send her back.”

"I understand your concern," he nodded. "But the three of us, as a family, have talked it over and Sasori will be raising the child."

"Brother," Sandaime gaped a little at his younger brother, "he tried to kill it," he repeated.

"I heard you," he replied cooly. "His punishment is going to be raising the child as his own, making sure that the girl is taken care of or he will lose everything."

Sasori froze. "We did not discuss that!" he roared in outrage behind his father.

"It's regrettable to say that I seem to have failed him as a father," he went on, ignoring his son.

“Don’t blame yourself,” Sandaime said. “Your parenting isn’t what made him like this.”

“I'm right here,” Sasori grumbled, rolling his eyes.

“Even so,” his father continued, “the baby will be his responsibility now.”

“I understand what your reasoning is,” Sandaime nodded, “however, the baby is also Gaara’s. I think this should have been discussed with him before it was decided.”

"Gaara is a very respectable doctor in the city," he frowned. "I don't want his name being pulled through the mud because of an illegitimate child." He glanced around. "And judging by the lack of Rasa being here, I take it he is not aware of it either."

"No." Sandaime instantly looked at least thirty percent more exhausted just thinking about their youngest brother. "But this could all be easily remedied if Sasori just gave the girl her freedom back. Don't you think she should raise the child as she sees fit?"
“Absolutely not,” Sasori said.

“I know you are trying to abolish slavery as a whole,” his father said, “but until then, she is still legally his slave and he doesn’t have to grant her her freedom until the bill is passed.”

Komushi took the rising tension in the room as his cue to leave. He stood up discreetly to slip out of the room, mumbling that he was going to the bathroom.

Sasori turned to follow him, saying that he always got lost. He was out the door before either of his familial authority figures could stop him. "They are actually treating me like a child!" he grumbled, curling his fingers around the flute he had brought along with them to lure Ryuga away.

“Don’t they always though?” Komushi smirked. “I see nothing different this time.” He looked down each direction of the hall then at Sasori. “Where do you think she’s staying? This place is massive.”

Sasori grunted a small agreement as he contemplated where they would have hidden her. "There was...someone I saw," he started, stopping Komushi with a hand across his chest. "They are actually treating me like a child!" he grumbled, curling his fingers around the flute he had brought along with them to lure Ryuga away.

"Don’t they always though?" Komushi smirked. “I see nothing different this time.” He looked down each direction of the hall then at Sasori. “Where do you think she’s staying? This place is massive.”

Sasori nodded and followed him toward the guest rooms. “You saw someone?” he asked. “Who?” He was curious about how it was even relevant to the situation at hand.

"I don't know who they are," Sasori admitted. "But I have a sneaking suspicion they have to do with Azumi."

“Oh?” he hummed. “Interesting...” They turned a corner and headed down the hall lined with guest bedrooms. Just as they did, a little white-haired boy bolted out of one room and into another across the hall. “Who the hell was that?” Komushi whispered. “Is that who you saw earlier?”

Sasori shook his head, looking at the door the boy disappeared into with wide eyes. “Not at all,” he whispered. “I...” His eyes went wide. A sudden sinking feeling hit him hard. “Could...it be?” He pulled Komushi flush to the wall as someone new came out of one of the rooms.

From the same room that the little boy came from, a taller man with black hair walked out. He walked across the hall and into another bedroom, right next to the one that the little boy went into. “Is that him?” he whispered, unsure if it was or not. “It is!” he hissed, staggering back a little. "Shit," he whispered. "I think..." He hesitated to say what he was thinking.

"It's her family?" Komushi finished for him.

“But how?” Sasori hissed, running his hand through his hair.
“Who cares about how,” Komushi urged. “This shouldn’t stop you. We still need to find the snake.”

"I know that," he whispered. "I just don't know how I want to go about it yet." Her family being there was going to pose a huge obstacle if they did not go about this discreetly.

Even though Sasori was not showing it, Komushi could tell he was panicking a little. “If that is her family,” he whispered, “both of those people came out of the same room. I think it would be safe to assume that she is most likely in that room they came out of.”

"Agreed, but we don't know how many more are in there or how hostile they will be!” He tried to stifle the spiking anxiety in his voice.

"Take a deep breath, man," Komushi whispered. "We know Gaara is around so that's a solid four people in the room. Two are out of the room now. We just need a diversion to draw anyone else out of the room."

Sasori took a deep breath as he began to form a plan. “Let’s not be directly in front of the rooms in case someone else decides to come out right now,” he said, moving a few doors down. He pressed his ear to a door to listen for anyone inside. He did not hear anyone and took a chance with opening it. Sighing in relief when he saw that it was vacant, he urged Komushi inside and closed the door.

“Now we can take a minute,” he hummed, pacing the room. He heard another door open and moved quickly to the door. Very slowly and quietly, he opened it to risk a peek at who was now in the hall. He saw the very end of a snake tail slither around the corner and disappear from sight.

"Where do you think they are going?" Komushi asked.

"I don't know," Sasori frowned. "But one of the snakes just left."

"Shit," Komushi frowned. "Should you just risk playing the instrument?"

Sasori shook his head, closing the door again as he turned to look at his friend. "I think our best bet is for you to go," he said. "They don't know I'm here...at least I don't think they do but even so," he waved it off, "you just creep her out. You've never hurt her so she will trust you."

“I don’t creep her out,” Komushi scoffed.

“She’s told you to your face that you creep her out,” Sasori said, opening the door and pushing him out. “Now go.”

“Those weren’t jokes?” he asked himself softly with a pout. “Fine...which way?” Sasori pointed in the direction the snake went in and Komushi headed that way.

He walked down the hall, listening for the room with the most voices. He came across one with the door sitting slightly ajar. With a quick glance around his surroundings, he wrapped his knuckles against the door. The voices ceased. There was a hushed whisper and then the boy with the white hair was suddenly in front of Komushi. He had the most hypnotic golden eyes. "Who are you?" the boy asked, lightly petting the back of a snake Komushi did not recognize.

“ ‘A friend of Sandaime’s,’” Komushi lied. “ ‘I wasn’t aware he had guests over. Who are you?’ He saw the snake reach its head out a little and tapped his finger against his nose, figuring that was what it wanted. ‘That’s how you win them over,’ he thought, trying not to chuckle at how easy it was to befriend snakes.

“I am just a visitor,” the boy said, watching his snake and the man interact. “Did you need
something?” he asked bluntly.

“I’m looking for someone,” he answered. “I heard she was hurt this morning and I wanted to see if she was okay.”

“Who is it, Mitsuki?” another voice called from deeper in the room.

The boy turned his head over his shoulder to speak with them but his body remained in the doorway. “He says he is a friend of Azumi,” he responded. There was a soft hiss from in the room. Komushi was getting a little impatient.

Sasori looked out of the room at Komushi and sighed. *What is this idiot doing?* he thought. *Why did he go to a room?*

"Is she here?" Komushi asked.

"No," the boy answered. "But she is alright so you do not need to worry."

"Could I possibly see her?" Komushi tried. The young boy stared at him blankly. "I just wanted to check in on her and give her snake, Ryuga, something. Could I, uh, at least see him?"

"I can assure you she is doing fine," the other voice said. An older dark-haired man appeared behind the boy and made direct eye contact with Komushi. As his entire body went cold, Komushi nearly flinched back. He looked exactly like Azumi, unlike the smaller boy. "Whatever it is you want to give Ryuga, you can give to us. We will make sure he gets it."

"I'd really only feel comfortable giving it to him or Naga."

"Then I suppose it will have to wait," the man told him. "She nor the snakes are willing to have visitors right now."

"Ah," Komushi nodded. He knew if he pushed any harder he was going to look even more suspicious than he already did. He bowed his head slightly. "Well, then I suppose I should go."

"I suppose you should," the man said coolly. Those eyes were starting to freak Komushi out. He got the feeling that Azumi could see through him once in a while but this man...he felt like nothing in front of him. He was being told by just the gaze alone that he was insignificant.

"Have a good night," he said to the man before turning to leave. Once he heard the door close, he shuddered and moved quickly back to the room Sasori was hiding in.

"What the fuck was that?" Sasori hissed. "Why'd you have to make your presence known? You were supposed to follow the snake."

"I think I just met...her father," Komushi said, the shock of the man's gaze only settling in more.

"Her father!" Sasori wheezed. "Fuck." He ran his hands through his hair, pulling at the red strands. Komushi shuddered again. "I...Sasori, he was terrifying," he shook his head. "We can't fuck with him."

"The hell we can't!" Sasori snapped but he was not even sure he believed that. He sighed and pushed Komushi out of the room and down the hall in the direction he saw the snake's tail disappear. "Now we've lost him," he sighed when they turned the corner.

"Where do you think the snake went?" Komushi asked.
"I don't know but I have a good feeling she's with him," Sasori said as he continued down the hall. "The snake is very protective of her so he's probably escorting her around the house."

"Where would she go?"

Sasori thought hard for a moment. "Bathroom."

Komushi paused, thinking about it. "That weirdly makes sense," he agreed. "But this place has so many."

"There is one main one for the guest rooms down this way," Sasori explained.

"You don't think Gaara might be with her?"

"I can deal with Gaara."

"You really can't."

"He trusts too much that she is safe here so he won't be hovering over her."

Komushi frowned. "Alright," he said a little worried. He followed Sasori to the bathroom and they stopped right outside the door.

Sasori pressed his ear to the door and listened closely. A few long seconds passed before he heard someone speaking very softly. He pushed harder against the door until he recognized the voice and then a following strong hiss. "She's in there," he said. "And there's at least one snake in there with her."

"So what's the plan?" Komushi's shook himself a little, getting serious.

Sasori pulled the flute out with one hand and place his other hand on the door. "Ideally, I wanted you to grab the snake while I played the flute but I think now you'll need to play lookout while I put them both in a trance."

"Right," Komushi hummed. "But you won't be able to restrain the snake while playing so I'll wait out here but lead him out here and I'll grab him. I'll make sure he won't be able to strike once you stop. Let's make this quick."

"She'll be affected by this, too, so she won't come after us for a bit," Sasori nodded then pressed the flute to his lips. He was going to make sure this song was one that hit her hard. He started to play the same melody he had the night she was on the painkillers. His free hand pushed the door open so he could slowly creep into the room. He found Ryuga already starting to sway in time with the song.

Behind Ryuga, Azumi was doubled over at the sink, trying to fight the trance. She looked up and gasped when she saw Sasori in the mirror as he crept into the room. "Fuck," she groaned. She turned around slowly to face him and moved to grab Ryuga but just before she could reach for him, Sasori made the song more intense and she could not fight it.

He was tempted to just use the trance to take her at that moment but he thought back to the man Komushi thought was her father. It was too much of a risk. He settled for the original plan as he slowly backed out of the room with Ryuga in tow. Komushi's ears perked up the moment he heard the flute get closer to the door. He turned around, getting ready to grab the snake the second it appeared.
As soon as Ryuga appeared, he grabbed him, pressing his hands just behind the snake's head to restrain him so he would be unable to strike once the trance was over. He nodded to Sasori once he was sure it was okay to stop playing.

"We need to get him in a bag or a basket now," Sasori said, looking around. He sighed, looking at the bag he had brought with him. "Put him in here. He should fit just fine." Komushi gave the canvas bag a skeptical look. "We don't have time for your doubts! Let's go!" Sasori growled.

Komushi worked quickly in shoving Ryuga into the bag before he could start thrashing. "I'm sure your uncle and father are realizing we've been gone too long," he said once the bag was closed. "My father knew something was up the moment we left together," Sasori shuddered. "But Uncle is too wrapped up in the argument they are having." They started back towards Sandaime's study.

"I don't think I've ever seen your father argue." "He rarely does," Sasori hummed. "He's definitely part of our family." His words implied his father's temper was just as bad as the rest of them. They crept back into the office and opted to stand behind Sasori's father when they felt that the tension between the brothers had only risen since they left.

"The girl is staying here," Sandaime said with finality. "Your monster of a son is unfit to father a child, especially one that isn't his. One that he was trying to kill as soon as he found out about its existence."

"He has to learn responsibility sometime!" Sasori's father shot back. "You may be the eldest brother bu—"

"I'm clearly the best father of the three of us!" The tension quadrupled instantly.

Sasori’s father stared at his brother, jaw twitching. "Between Rasa and me, I've had to raise four kids and only one of them turned out like a monster!"

"And the one that turned out like one is the one you're here in favor of," Sandaime said. He stood up from his desk. "I think it's best you leave now, Brother. You should be with your wife."

"I trust my son's work and she is strong," he narrowed his eyes.

"But I am tired and we can resume this pointless argument tomorrow!" Sandaime ran a hand down his face.

"No, we're—"

"Father," Sasori interrupted. "He's right, we can try tomorrow."

"When she's a little less traumatized from being attacked just this morning," Komushi nodded.

Sandaime moved around the desk to open the door for the three of them to leave. The glare from his brother did not cease but nothing was said as he whipped from the room, leading the way down the hall. Sasori and Komushi followed quickly.

"Shit," Komushi whispered. Sasori nodded, jogging a little to keep up with his father when they reached the stairs. He put a hand over the bouncing bag that contained Ryuga. A wave of freezing anger was wafting off of the silent artist ahead of them.
The entire walk back to Sasori's house was silent and tense. When they finally arrived, his father looked at him, unable to tone down the glare in his eyes that he was giving his own brother earlier. "Tomorrow," he said lowly, "you are getting her back."

"Yes, father," Sasori nodded, hating how humiliated his voice sounded. He actually felt like a child again under the intense gaze. His father nodded and with nothing else to say, he turned on his foot to join his wife on the other side of the house.

Sasori waited for his father's back to disappear before turning with Komushi towards his own room. "Well, the trip wasn't a total waste," he grumbled, carrying Ryuga into the workshop. He pulled out a tank from under one of the workbenches. "This is going to be a tight fit for him but it will have to do." Opening the tank, he dumped Ryuga's thick form into the glass case then shut it quickly.

"I still can't believe this thing was living inside of her," Komushi grumbled, looking at just how big Ryuga was compared to how small Azumi was.

"And I still can't get rid of the image of it coming out of her," Sasori countered, setting a couple of heavy things onto the tank so the snake could not escape.

"Now what?" Komushi asked.

"Now we wait," Sasori said. "It won't take long. She'll come for him really soon."

"How can we be certain she will come?" Komushi frowned, thinking back to the man he met earlier. "What if her father comes?"

Sasori threw himself on his bed, pressing his face into the mattress. "That...we'll deal with if he does. But I can't see her not coming for him."

"I don't think she will come alone."

"She won't come alone," Sasori said. "I know that for sure. But how we react will depend on who comes with her."

"Sasori, that guy was terrifying."

"I understand. But, just like his daughter, he has to be susceptible to trances. They will definitely need stronger triggers but a snake is a snake." Komushi frowned as he sat down on the bed as well. "Until then," Sasori continued, "we will work under the assumption that it's going to be her, Gaara, and Sandaime."

"If it's Sandaime, your father might get involved," Komushi tucked his arms behind his head as he laid back.

"My father won't even notice," Sasori shook his head. "He's already asleep," he said certainly.

"Then it's just us against whoever comes," Komushi said, actually a little scared. They moved into the workshop so Sasori could prepare for his expected visitors.
Chapter 68

Chapter Notes

It's about to go down.

Azumi woke up, feeling the onset of a horrible headache from being put into a trance. Her back was pressed against the sink of the bathroom and she looked around, bearing the pain in her head as she looked for Ryuga. "That bitch," she growled, getting up quickly and running back to the room she was sharing with Gaara. Naga lifted his head from his coil on Gaara's back and hissed softly, noticing Ryuga was not with Azumi. He tapped his nose against Gaara's gently to wake him up, immediately fearing the worst and feeling the radiating anger from her.

"What happened?" Gaara asked. He was on his knees in seconds. Naga slithered up to his shoulders, hissing the same question. He wanted to reach out and pull her close but the waves of heat told him it would be a terrible idea.

"He took Ryuga," she growled. She motioned for Naga to move closer. Once he did, she wrapped him around her. "I am not letting that bastard take him from me. We are going to go get him."

"He was here again!" Gaara's face darkened again. "Azumi, I don't want you going over there. Let me or and your family handle this!" He put his hands on her shoulders."I don't want you risking you or the baby getting hurt again!"

She placed her hands on his, giving him a hard look. "I am getting my snake back," she demanded, gently taking his hands off of her shoulders and letting his hands go. The look in her eyes told Gaara he was not going to win this one. His shoulders slumped and he sighed. He watched her take off before he could protest.

Yashamaru opened his door when he heard someone running by. He saw a small angry blur turn the corner, followed by Gaara. With a heavy sigh, he trailed after them. "Better not disturb Father with this one," he hummed as he moved to catch up to Gaara.

"Yashamaru," Gaara gasped softly.

"Fill me in," Yashamaru said, watching his sister's back. They followed her out of the house, and down the street.

"Sasori apparently paid an unprompted visit," Gaara explained. They turned down another street quickly.

"Okay, but what did he do?"

"He stole Ryuga."

Yashamaru sighed. "It is clearly a trap," he said.

"Oh, she’s fully aware of that," Gaara countered. "And honestly, Sasori will be lucky to live through the night."
"Oh, I am sure," Yashamaru laughed a little, pressing forward to keep up with her. "We are all protective of our snakes but Azumi has...."

"A bit of a temper?" Gaara chuckled. "I'm mostly going to make well..."

"You want to watch," Yashamaru chuckled.

Gaara grinned but said nothing. He did just want to watch. They continued on after her.

Azumi made it to Sasori's house, bypassing the stairs at the front completely and rounding the property to where his bathroom was. As soon as she approached his ceiling to floor windows, she rushed inside. Naga dropped to the bathroom floor and she continued on toward the bedroom. As she approached the doorway, Sasori appeared there, completely unsuspecting of her. "Give me back my snake, you bitch!" she growled, kicking him hard in the chest.

Komushi caught the suddenly hurtling Sasori in his arms, his head hitting him hard in the chest. Sasori wheezed, trying hard to catch the wind that was completely knocked out of him. Komushi's head snapped up to the seething Azumi. "I saw this coming," he sighed, hugging Sasori to his stomach so he could turn them around quickly. He jumped up onto the bed, bolting for the workshop.

Azumi chased after them, vaulting over a workbench as Komushi went around it, ending up right in front of them. "Where is he?" she hissed. "Give him to me."

"He's not here!" Komushi screamed in distress. He held Sasori tighter to his chest like a child held their stuffed animal. "Maybe check Chiyo's room!" he screamed.

Azumi paused for a second then shook her head and lunged at them. Komushi turned around again and she ended up on his back. She wrapped her arm around his neck and pushed down on his throat. "Let the bitch go," she growled, letting her fangs come out.

"Ne-never!" Komushi choked out. He thrashed his body hard in an attempt to shake Azumi off.

"You're rabid!" Sasori yelled. "Komushi, get me to the flute!"

In the other room, Gaara and Yashamaru crept further in. They were both grinning as they watched Azumi beat down on the two men.

"She's really going to kill him," Yashamaru chuckled.

"Let her," Gaara smirked.

Azumi wrapped her legs around Komushi and kicked Sasori away from him. Sasori took the opportunity to run for the flute himself while Azumi was occupied with Komushi. As soon as she saw that Sasori was free, she jumped off of Komushi and went to Sasori.

"Oh, no, you don't," Komushi grabbed her by her hair. He pulled her hard against his chest, spinning on his foot to pin her to the edge of the workbench.

"Shit," Gaara took a step forward, watching Sasori grab the flute.

"He knows about the trances!" Yashamaru took a step forward.

Sasori started playing, harder than before. Immediately, Azumi was lost in the trance. She stopped thrashing against Komushi.
"She's psycho," Komushi gasped, looking at Sasori who nodded in agreement.

Yashamaru was fighting hard against the trance. He gripped Gaara's arm tightly, digging long nails into his skin. "Get...that..flute," he pushed out, sinking to the floor.

Gaara's eyes snapped back to the flute in Sasori's mouth. He nodded, rushing for his cousin. Sasori pulled away and Gaara's fingertips just barely brushed the flute. "Fuck," he hissed. "Sasori, fucking stop this shit!"

Sasori moved to kick Gaara away and went to the other side of the workshop. Komushi moved Azumi’s arms behind her and held them tightly to her lower back so when Sasori stopped playing, she could not move much.

"Do not let her go!" Sasori growled at him.

"I'm trying not to," Komushi grunted.

Gaara lunged at Sasori again, throwing them both hard into the ground. The flute clattered to the floor loudly, rolling away from them. Gaara moved fast, pinning his cousin's hands over his head. Sasori snarled, trying to tuck his knees up between them to push his cousin off.

The moment the music stopped, Yashamaru was on his feet. He rushed across the room, snatching the flute up. He bent it over his knee, rendering it useless.

Komushi looked at Yashamaru and squinted. "Another one?" he asked. Azumi started thrashing and he tightened his grip on her.

"Let me go!" she growled.

"You know I can't do that." He pressed her harder into the counter.

Yashamaru looked around for anything hard enough to hit Komushi over his head. He found a large glass bottle and picked up quickly to break it over Komushi's head. It knocked the man out and he let Azumi go as he fell to the ground. Now free of his grasp, Azumi looked at Sasori just as he pushed Gaara off of him. She quickly lunged on him, keeping him on the ground and pressing her hands hard on his throat. "Where the fuck is he?" she hissed.

Sasori turned his head away. "You’ll have to kill me," he said stubbornly. "I won’t tell you unless you agree to come back to me!"

“Come back to you!” Yashamaru scoffed. "Kill him, Azumi. We can find Ryuga on our own."

Azumi growled, punching Sasori in the jaw twice and then gripping his hair hard and then slamming his head against the floor. "I told them not to kill you and you are ruining it for yourself."

“Tell them to leave,” Sasori spat a mouthful of blood out, “And I’ll tell you where he is,” he challenged her with narrow eyes.

“Absolutely not!” Yashamaru and Gaara said immediately. Sasori did not look away from Azumi.

Azumi stared at him for a moment, keeping her tight grip in his hair and keeping his head held against the ground. "I will be fine," she told Gaara and her brother without breaking eye contact with Sasori.
"Azumi—" Gaara started.

"Wait by the door," she told them.

Yashamaru put his hand on Gaara’s shoulder, nodding for him to follow him to the door. They were not going far. They were going to wait in the doorway of the workshop. If anything was to happen, they were going to be back in there very quickly.

Sasori kept his gaze with Azumi, reaching his hand up to take her hand out of his hair and then lacing their fingers together. “You’re mine,” he said softly.

Her glare did not cease as she slowly unlaced their fingers. "No," she said. "I am not." She sat up straight on him, keeping her other hand on his sternum to keep him down. "Not anymore."

“You think that baby will free you?” he whispered, smirking at her. “I’ll tell you what,” he started to move his legs up to wrap around her, “I’ll let you keep the baby if you come back to me,” he said airily. “And if you don’t,” he shrugged a little, “I’m sure Ryuga will make a fine trim to a new set of robes.”

She frowned, still staring at him. “Come back so you can continue to abuse me and then extend that abuse to my baby?” she asked. “I do not think so.”

“If the baby is being raised as my own of course I wouldn’t abuse it.” Sasori pulled her tighter to him. “It will be raised knowing you’re my assistant and his caretaker.” He would not promise she would not suffer any more at his hand but could tell her that the child would not. If everything went to plan, it would not even see the light of day.

“The baby being raised as yours?” she scoffed. “You are unfit to be a father. I want you nowhere near this child.”

“It’s not really a matter of what either of us wants,” Sasori clicked his tongue. “I frankly want nothing to do with the child but my mother is losing her mind over the very idea of giving it away or letting Gaara raise it and my father is involved because my mother is frantic.”

“Absolutely not,” she said. “This child is going to know who its real parents are. It is going to have nothing to do with you. I respect your parents but this is my fucking baby,” she growled, pushing him down again. “I get to say how this child is raised.”

“You have no autonomy over your own body! Thus the child is mine!” Sasori growled. “If you even manage to have it!” He struggled against her, fighting to gain control over so he could roll them over. If he could not lure her into drinking the medicine he would force-feed it to her. He managed to roll them over so he was on top of her. She struggled against him until he pinned her down by the shoulders. She grabbed his wrist and let her fangs come out, preparing to bite him. "Oh, no, you don't," he snarled, wrestling his wrist away from her. He pressed the ball of his other hand into her forehead, slamming it down hard against the floor. He wedged his forearm of his other arm below her jaw, tilting it back even further to keep her mouth shut. Moving fast, he slid his knee up her stomach to keep her body still. The hand on her head snatched one of her wrists. He cursed, realizing this was going to be a hard struggle to get her locked in.

She thrashed her body beneath him again, trying to get him off of her. She reached her free hand up to scratch at his face and grabbed his hair again in an attempt to roll them back over. Sasori pushed his arm harder into her jaw, reaching his other hand up to snatch her other wrist. He squeezed it tightly to get her fingers to release. He hissed in pain as her nails ripped at his skin. He felt a trickle of blood slip down from a cut he could not locate at the moment. He looked around for anything he
could use to tie her down or knock her out. He was having flashbacks to the night she went full feral.

Naga slithered into the room, looking for Ryuga. He went right past Azumi and Sasori, knowing they were both too distracted with each other to notice him.

Sasori quickly grabbed her other wrist and pinned her hands to the floor by her head. Unable to reach for him, she moved her lower body and he pressed more of his weight into her. “I am going to kill you,” she growled.

"You can try," Sasori grinned back. "But right now it's not looking too good for you," he grunted.

She let out a choked laugh. “It is actually looking great for me,” she smiled, looking behind him at Yashamaru who had grabbed another large, heavy bottle to break over Sasori’s head.

Before Sasori could even draw his brows in, the bottle came down heavy on his head. He froze over her, eyes wide with shock. Blood started to pour down his face as his hands went slack around her wrists. He fell over seconds later, unconscious.

Yashamaru kicked him off of his sister and reached down to help her to her feet. "Are you okay?" he asked her, looking her over quickly. He used his sleeve to clean away a few pieces of glass and some smears of blood.

She nodded, hardly concerned with herself and more concerned about Ryuga. She looked around the workshop quickly when Naga hissed loudly, telling them he found the other snake in a tank hidden behind random things on the workbench. Azumi moved quickly, pushing everything in front of the tank off of the workbench and to the floor. She slid everything on top of the tank off and opened it.

Being crushed in the tank, Ryuga's body involuntarily sprung from his confines. He hissed a long, achy groan, still a little disoriented by everything. Naga slithered up next to him to gently nudge him toward Azumi.

"Father will have to look him over," Yashamaru frowned, keeping an eye on Sasori's motionless form. "Gaara is grabbing anything you might have left behind here so we are going to meet him in your room."

Again, she nodded as she picked up the snake, gently wrapping him around her body. “I am sorry,” she whispered, petting him and then kissing the top of his head. Ryuga hissed softly, nuzzling her back saying it was not her fault. Naga wound around Yashamaru as they left the room. He hissed, reaching out to tap his nose against Azumi's cheek, also saying none of this was her fault.

“If you are that way about the snakes, I can only imagine how you would be about this baby when it is born,” Yashamaru chuckled.

“He tried to make me come back...telling me that he would raise the baby with me,” she said. “His parents came up with that plan. They do not want Gaara to have any part.” It did not sit right with her that Sasori’s parents were trying to decide what was going to happen to her baby. She knew his mother was crazy but for his father to agree to the plan felt weird to her.

Yashamaru sucked his teeth in disgust. "We might have to move to a new place to wait this baby out then,” he said, letting her lead the way to her old room. "If they were able to get so far into the mansion with no one stopping them, then it cannot be safe."

“You are right,” she hummed. They approached her room where Gaara was waiting for them.
“Where is he?” Gaara asked.

“On the floor of his workshop next to his pet scarab,” she answered.

"Perfect," Gaara nodded, handing a pile of clothing to Yashamaru. He quickly pulled Azumi into his arms, hugging her tightly. "Did he hurt you?" he asked her softly. His hands came up to cup her jaw, looking her over. There was still blood smeared on her face and he could see small cuts littering her face but nothing major.

“I am fine,” she said. “But your aunt and uncle have become a problem. I do not understand why they feel the need to get involved but they are.”

"My uncle is only concerned about Auntie," Gaara frowned, still fussing over her a little. "And Auntie is concerned about Sasori. He just wants all of this to blow over." He ran a hand his hand through her hair, smoothing a few fly-aways down.

“Their solution to having this just ‘blow over’ is having him raise this child thinking I am merely its caretaker,” she said, feeling herself get enraged at the very thought.

Gaara's eyes went wide. He let go of Azumi quickly, curling his fists tightly until his nails bit into his palm. "That child is ours!" he growled. "It is their birthright to know who their mother and family are," he ground his teeth. "Take her back to Uncle's," he practically ordered Yashamaru. "I'll have a servant walk you back."

"Where are you going?" Yashamaru asked. The tension in the room was stifling.

"I'm going to go remove a blight from this family once and for all," Gaara growled.

Yashamaru nodded and took his sister's arm. Azumi quickly pulled her arm away and pulled Gaara into a kiss. “You better come back to me,” she said softly.

He pushed into the kiss a little rougher than he meant to, pulling her close. "Of course I will," he grinned. "I have a child to raise with you. I won't let you do that alone." He kissed her again. "I love you," he whispered then stepped towards the door. "Wait here for the servant." He disappeared through the door after the command, charging back toward's Sasori's room.

"Sister," Yashamaru said softly. "Do you trust him to handle this on his own?"

“I know he can,” she said, petting Ryuga’s head.

A few moments later, a servant appeared in the room. “I’ve been instructed by Lord Gaara to take you to Lord Sandaime’s house,” they said with a bow. Azumi nodded and she and her brother followed them out to Sandaime’s.

“What should we tell Father?” Yashamaru asked. “As soon as he sees the blood on you he is going to worry.”

“We tell him the truth,” she hummed. “That this is not my blood.”

"He is still going to worry," Yashamaru frowned. The servant led them a different way back along the quiet streets of the city. They stopped at the bottom of the stairs to Sandaime’s mansion and bowed silently then started back for Sasori's.

"Oh, my gods!" Sachiko ran down the stairs, arms thrown wide to pull Azumi into a tight hug. "Are you okay? Did he hurt you? Oh, you're covered in blood!" She looked cupped her face, shaking her...
head. "He's really lost it," she sniffled. "How is the baby?"

"I am fine," she assured her. "And the baby is fine as well. I went to get Ryuga back." She gently lifted the snake’s head up. "Your nephew took him from me in a sorry attempt to get me back."

"He was here with his father earlier talking with Sandaime," Sachiko said. "I didn’t realize he had slipped out of the office."

"Is it alright...if I speak to Lord Sandaime for a moment?"

"Of course," Sachiko gushed, she took Azumi's hands in hers tightly, ready to escort her to the office when Sandaime and her father came sweeping down the stairs.

"Oh, gods," Sandaime sighed, his face setting heavily, almost aging him.

Orochimaru shared a look with his son, then looked at his daughter. His eyes fell on Ryuga. "You did well," he said softly to the snake who was trying to hiss his apology again.

"I think he needs to be checked," Azumi told him, gently uncoiling the snake from around her and handing him to Orochimaru. "He was in a very small tank." She pet the snake again and pressed a gentle kiss to the top of his head. Orochimaru nodded, coiling him around his neck. He was already assessing the creature's state of being just having him close.

"And what about you?" Sandaime asked.

"Didn't Gaara go with you?" Sachiko asked. Her beautiful face was still a little frantic over her nephew and Azumi.

"Wait," Sandaime turned towards the house. "Let's take this inside," He started up the stairs, offering a hand to Azumi. She took his offered hand and they went up the stairs and straight to Sandaime’s office. Sachiko took the clothes from Yashamaru’s arms and handed them to a servant, asking them to take the clothes to the room Azumi was staying in.

Azumi took a seat in front of Sandaime’s desk as he rounded it and sat in his own seat. "I take it since he was here with his father, you are aware of their plans for my child?" she asked. She tried to keep her composure but she was still enraged about it.

Sandaime sighed and nodded behind folded hands. "I don't know what has gotten into him," he shook his head. "That is not like my brother at all. But yours and the baby's safety comes first. I won't let another slip up like that happen again." His face was grave and his tone was grim.

"Where do they get off thinking it is okay to make decisions about my unborn child?" she asked.

"They still consider you to be his property," Sandaime said.

"But this is between me and him. Not them."

"They are treating him like the child he acts like."

"Some parents," she scoffed. "To think their childish son could raise a child."

"It's a bad time for them to try and step up, yes," Sandaime agreed.

"But it won't matter," Sachiko said fiercely, closing the door softly behind her. "They are not getting in the house again!" She sat down next to Azumi, reaching out to take her hand again. "I will personally beat his mother into her grave if she tries to say a damn thing about your baby
again!"

“My brother said he would be returning tomorrow to continue the discussion,” Sandaime said, running his hands down his face, already dreading it. “I haven’t had to deal with him that serious since we were younger.”

"They aren’t coming in," Sachiko repeated. "We can go tomorrow morning and speak with them at Sasori's," she said resolutely, her golden aura nearly flickered red.

"Yes, Darling," Sandaime sighed, still not wanting to deal with it. He looked back at Azumi. "Did Gaara stay behind?"

"He's not trying to fight Sasori on his own, is he?" Sachiko groaned.

“He is,” she hummed. “He can handle it...” She paused for a second. “Unless the scarab wakes up,” she said, looking at Sandaime. “Someone might...need to go get him.”

“Komushi is there, too?” Sachiko sighed.

“He came here with Sasori and my brother,” Sandaime nodded.

“And together they took my snake,” Azumi said. “Gaara can handle his cousin on his own but if the scarab wakes up and decides to join the fight, he might not have much of a chance,” she frowned.

Sandaime ran both his hands through his hair a little rougher this time.

Sachiko stood up, rounding the desk to put her hands over his and gently pull them away from his head.

"Don't do that," she whispered to him. She looked back at Azumi, pressing her lips into a thin line. "Okay, we will—"

"How much do you love this boy?" Orochimaru's voice cut Sachiko off. He had silently entered the room. Standing behind his daughter, he put his hands down on her shoulders.

“I endured everything I have been through to be with him,” Azumi answered. “I love him a lot.”

He nodded, taking the seat next to her. "Then your brother and I will get him for you," he said looking at her hard. "Ryuga is alright," he told her.

"You don't have to do that," Sandaime started. "We have—"

Orochimaru silenced him with a side-long glance. "While I appreciate your concern, you have done enough already with opening your home to us." He looked back at his daughter. "We will go for him and I want you to stay here," he told her, reaching up to cup her face. He gently turned her face this way and that to look it over. "Mitsuki is running you a bath."

Azumi looked over at Yashamaru who had slipped into the room right after their father. He nodded to her and she looked back to Orochimaru. "Alright," she said softly.

“Would you like for me to come with you at least?” Sandaime moved to stand up.

Orochimaru considered it for a moment. “Your nephew has a healthy fear of you,” he hummed. “But he will be expecting you to show up.”
“If you only want to get Gaara and leave, I could distract Sasori for you,” he offered.

"Thank you, but I think we can handle it on our own," Orochimaru said. He stood up from his seat and gave Sandaime and Sachiko a bow. Yashamaru did the same and they both left the room quickly.

Azumi, Sachiko, and Sandaime sat in silence for a few seconds before she looked at them and they looked at her. "He is not only going to get Gaara," she warned Sandaime. "Follow them. But stay far enough behind, just outside of the radius of the killing intent."

“I had a feeling,” he nodded, getting up. He kissed his wife before following the two men.
Doing as Azumi said, Sandaime kept his distance as best he could while keeping just outside of Orochimaru’s tangible rage. Despite his experience with his own family’s bad temper, Orochimaru was something else. Something Sandaime never wanted to be in the receiving end of. He watched Yashamaru lead the way, impressed that the man had already memorized the way to his nephew’s mansion.

They approached Sasori’s house and Sandaime hung back until Orochimaru and Yashamaru were up the stairs and inside. Once they disappeared from his sight, he followed them. They made their way towards Sasori’s room and the closer they got, the more they could hear the grunts of a brawl going on inside.

“It sounds like he is holding his own,” Orochimaru whispered to his son.

“Azumi never picks weaklings,” Yashamaru chuckled then winced hearing a loud crash and several added shatters of glass.

“No, she does not,” Orochimaru hummed. “What is the layout of the room?” he asked, listening to the brawl.

“A bathroom to the left and a workshop towards the back of the room,” he explained.

“He has a workshop in his room?” Orochimaru hummed. “Must be a recluse.”

“She mentioned something like that earlier,” Yashamaru nodded.

“How many people were in there earlier?”

“Just the monster and his friend. But his friend is kind of a big guy.”

Orochimaru’s eyes narrowed in thought. “I think I know who he is,” he said, recalling the man who showed up and spoke to Mitsuki earlier.

Yashamaru raised an eyebrow but did not question his father’s knowledge. “I hit them both over the head with bottles so I am not sure who he could be fighting right now.” There was a string of muffled smashes as if someone was throwing full jars accompanied by a few grunts.

“Only one way to find out,” Orochimaru said, walking into the room. The grunts were coming from the workshop.

Sandaime followed behind them, only making his presence known now.

Yashamaru looked back. “I see you decided to come anyway,” he said.

“I thought it was best,” he whispered.

Orochimaru glanced over his shoulder, biting back a scathing comment about the familial lack of listening. He moved towards the workshop, pulling back the ruined curtain to find Gaara with his legs locked tightly around Komushi’s neck.

Komushi was doing his best to shake Gaara off while defending his face from bloodied fists. “Fuck! Get...off!” he roared, turning hard on his foot and bending backward so Gaara slammed hard into the workbench’s top. He shifted, dragging both of them along so Gaara was hit with a
face full of jars that hit the ground with more shatters.

"Where is the other one?" Orochimaru asked. As if right on cue, Sasori slowly stood up from behind another workbench, holding his head and groaning softly. This was the first time Orochimaru saw the man who had been tormenting his daughter. He had to admit, he was not at all what he was expecting.

"That is him," Yashamaru said.

Orochimaru narrowed his eyes, taking in the small stature and physical similarities between Gaara and Sasori. He hummed thoughtfully. “We will deal with him first,” he glanced at Komushi and Gaara. “The little monster is still getting his bearings.” Yashamaru nodded, looking around for a bottle once more to know Komushi out. “No,” Orochimaru caught what his son was doing. “Find something to tie them up with.”

Yashamaru nodded and began looking around, ducking behind the worktable on the opposite side everyone else was on. He found the straps on the bottom of the table. “Will this do?” he asked his father, holding one up for him to see. “There is one on all four corners.”

“Perfect,” Orochimaru grinned. He crossed the room silently, creeping up being Komushi. A slender arm looped around Komushi’s throat, coming up hard on his windpipe to crush it hard. Komushi choked hard, losing his grip on Gaara. Without hesitation, Gaara kicked Komushi hard in the groin, causing him to go slack in Orochimaru’s arms. “You are heavy,” Orochimaru grunted as the hulking scarab became howling dead weight.

“The walls of this city are made of him,” Gaara joked.

“I believe it,” Yashamaru nodded.

Orochimaru dragged Komushi closer to the end of the worktable, pressing his back to the shorter edge as Yashamaru quickly strapped his wrists to the table.

Sandaime stood in the doorway, a little stunned at what he was watching.

Sasori stood at the other end of the room staring in dazed shock. “What the fuck is going on!” he yelled, watching his best friend groan as he was being held down by two men who looked like clones while his cousin helped. On top of all of that, Sandaime was there. “Where the fuck is Azumi?” he growled, stumbling forward.

Orochimaru stood up straight once Komushi was securely tied to the worktable. “She is not here,” he said. “It is me you have to deal with.” The rage emanating from him almost forced Yashamaru and Gaara back. They stepped away slowly, not wanting to get in the way.

Sasori was alert instantly. His eyes locked with Orochimaru's long enough for him to place who he was before the intensity of those golden eyes forced him to look away. "Oh," Sasori's lips twitched into a manic smirk. "Oooh," he started to laugh. "So Daddy really has arrived." He backed away as Orochimaru took his time creeping forward. "You can't take her from me," he snarled. "You let her go! You can't keep her sheltered forever! She's mine now!"

Orochimaru chuckled darkly as he moved closer, sending a chill down the spine of everyone else in the room and Sandaime in the doorway. Yashamaru put a hand on Gaara’s shoulder to pull him closer to the door. “Yours?” Orochimaru said, backing Sasori into a workbench and reaching out to wrap his hand around the man’s throat.

Sasori's hands flew up to try and pull the crushing hand away from his throat. He scratched at this
skin, drawing long, angry lines of bleeding cuts but Orochimaru's grasp only tightened.

Sandaime took a step forward, crossed between saving his nephew and letting him get what he deserved.

Yashamaru put his other hand on the man's chest and pushed him out of the room gently. He pulled Gaara out with him. "You do not want to see this," he said lowly. The cool night air of the desert was rapidly becoming frigid around Orochimaru.

Orochimaru bent Sasori back, still gripping his throat and slamming his head against the surface of the table.

Sasori wanted to gasp in pain but it came out as a choke due to his throat being crushed. He was suddenly thrown to the floor, his head hitting the ground harder than it hit the table. He coughed hard, trying to crawl under one of the workbenches to get away from Orochimaru. His eyes scanned the floor for anything he could use as a weapon.

"I know your type," Orochimaru's voice alone almost stopped Sasori's breath. His fingers curled around a chunk of glass from one of the bottles from earlier, biting into his skin. "The kind who are so inferior they have to dominate another, abuse them to feel alive." Orochimaru walked with no rush to loom over Sasori. His foot slowly came down on the hand gripping the glass, driving the sharp edges deep into the skin.

Sasori let out a pained noise and he could feel the blood coming from his hand. He glanced up at the man, only to look away immediately because of the look in his eyes. He tried to reach for another piece of glass with his other hand.

Komushi finally came to and struggled against his restraints. He looked over at his best friend on the floor and then up at the man who was stepping on his hand. "Sasori, that's him," he gasped. "That's her father."

"Yes, I’ve gathered that," Sasori grunted.

"Why am I tied down," Komushi muttered. "Fuck, you're bleeding a lot!" He started to panic. Orochimaru glanced at him. Komushi's eyes went wide and he hurried to look away, struggling against the restraints. "Why did you make these so well?!" His body arched high.

Orochimaru shook his head, turning back to Sasori. He bent low, reaching to take a fist full of Sasori's hair. He pulled his head back, bending the neck at a horribly painful angle. "I saw what you did to her body," he hissed in the younger man's ear. "You made her suffer," he slammed his head again. "And I'm debating of just how I should give you that same kind of pain," Sasori's face connected with the floor again, "tenfold," This time there was a nasty wet crunch. Sasori screamed in pain as his nose gushed blood into his mouth.

"Oh, that sounds horrible," Yashamaru hummed, shaking his head. Gaara stifled a chuckle and Sandaime sighed, shaking his head. He was actually starting to worry about his monster of a nephew.

Komushi panicked even more and tried to pull his arms out of the restraints. "Fuck," he grunted.

Orochimaru dropped Sasori's head back onto the ground before letting go of his hair. Sasori took a moment to spit out some blood before lifting himself just barely off of the ground. Orochimaru watched, letting the man roll until his stomach was exposed. He pulled his foot back and let it go in a hard kick Sasori's gut. He pushed the foot in deep, forcing Sasori to curl up like a dying animal.
"Huuuht!" Sasori wheeze, tear forming in the corners of his eyes. Orochimaru waited a moment, watching the sniveling creature who had attempted to destroy his daughter. He thought about all the marks he saw on her body and the pain she suffered to get them. He kicked Sasori again, hard in the jaw this time, his rage doubling down.

Komushi winced with each hard kick to his friend. “Please don’t kill him,” he practically begged, only to wince even harder when Orochimaru made eye contact with him.

"Did you beg for my daughter's safety like that?" Orochimaru asked Komushi in a terrifyingly casual tone. "Because from what I have heard, you are almost as bad as him!" His voice rapidly turned into a rough hiss.

"Mmm, he might actually kill them both," Yashamaru nodded.

"Uuuh," Sandaime took a step forward. "He really doesn't have to," he said lowly to the two boys.

"Yeah," Yashamaru shook his head, "whatever you are planning on doing to stop him is not going to work."

Sandaime sighed, listening to his nephew yell in pain while his nephew's best friend yelled in terror.

Orochimaru kicked Sasori a few more times before pushing him back onto his stomach and stepping on his back to hold him down so he could not move.

Sasori did not try to move—at least not yet. He needed to plan a way of getting out before he could attempt to move. He was starting to get a little dizzy from blood loss. He scanned the floor for anything he could possibly use to get away. His hand still seared from the cuts in his hands. He went still for a moment. For a split second, he thought maybe if he acted as if he were unconscious, the demon above him would leave.

Orochimaru stepped harder on him, causing Komushi to panic and think he was actually unconscious.

"Do you think I am stupid enough to fall for that?" Orochimaru asked.

Out in the bedroom, Sandaime stood up from the desk to help his nephew but halted as soon as he saw his brother step into the room. They paused and looked at each other.

"What is going on?" Sasori’s father asked. He moved closer to the workshop, almost stepping through the doorway but stopping when he saw a man he did not know in his son’s workshop. "What are you doing?" he asked.

Orochimaru’s eyes snapped to the Sasori lookalike. He put two and two together immediately. “I am teaching your hellspawn a lesson,” he said coolly. The other man’s eyes went wide and he looked back at his brother.

Sandaime shook his head, hurrying to stop his brother. “We’ve got it under control,” he whispered.

His brother’s eyes were blazing. His eyebrows went up in disbelief. “You’ve got what exactly under control?!” he seethed.

“Father?” Sasori wheezed out.

The sound of his son's voice enraged him, hearing just how much pain he was in. He went to rush
into the workshop, wanting to get to the other side to see Sasori but Sandaime held him back with a

grip to his arm. "Don't worry, Brother—"

"My son is on the floor dying and you're telling me not to worry?!" He tried to break away from

Sandaime's hold.

Gaara gently pulled Yashamaru away from the fight, knowing the blow-up between Orochimaru's
cold rage and his uncle's hot temper was not going to be pretty.

"Dying is a little dramatic," Sandaime reasoned, trying to calm his brother.

"Help us!" Komushi called out.

"Komushi is in there, too?" Sasori's father flared at his brother, shoving his arm away from him.

Sandaime put himself in the doorway. "Brother, seriously, just let me—"

"You can't control my family!" his voice raised. "He's my son!" He gave a final push into the

room. Sandaime stumbles back, hitting the wall.

Sasori's father rounded the workbench, stopping short when he saw his bloodied son, still being

stepped on and held down. He looked at Orochimaru, making eye contact with him and

immediately realizing who he was just by the resemblance. "Get off of him," he said.

"No," Orochimaru said, stepping harder on Sasori. He let out a strangled, breathless scream.

“You're going to kill him!” Komushi struggled again against the straps.

"That is the idea," Orochimaru said. He did not take his eyes off Sasori’s father. "I am sure you

know what your son has done by now."

“I do,” he ground his teeth. “And we are dealing with it!”

““No need. I have it covered.” The room’s temperature felt like it was dropping again.

Sasori tried to lift his head to look up at his father but Orochimaru kicked his head back down, only

fueling his father's rage even more. "It isn't on you to deal with my son."

"I think it is," Orochimaru responded, his glare hardening. "Since it was my daughter he almost

killed."

Sandaime shook his head and looked back at Gaara and Yashamaru. "I think you two should go

back."

“But I want to watch,” Gaara smirked.

“I have a right and obligation to see this,” Yashamaru nodded. He looked at Gaara who also started
to nod.

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, we're staying,” Gaara told his uncle.

Sandaime closed his eyes tight. “Don’t you want to check up on Azumi?” he tried to whisper to the
two men.

"The only threat to her is currently lying on the ground in a puddle of his own blood," Yashamaru noted. "I think she is fine. I would like to be here to support my father."

"I don't think it's your father we have to worry about," Gaara chuckled.

Sasori’s father circled the workbench, not taking his eyes off Orochimaru as he undid Komushi’s wrists.

Orochimaru dug his heel into Sasori’s head to hear him groan again. “Releasing the scarab will not do much,” he said nonchalantly.

“Three against one is much better odds,” Komushi said as he rolled his newly freed wrist.

Orochimaru looked down at Sasori and smirked. "I do not think this one is up for a fight," he said, looking back at Komushi and Sasori’s father.

"It's still two against one then," Komushi said.

Another dark chuckle came out of Orochimaru. "Hardly a challenge."

Sasori’s father released Komushi’s other wrist quickly. Komushi stood up the moment he was free.

He put a hand over Sasori’s father, pushing him back a little. “He moves like a snake,” he whispered to the older man. “And he’s way stronger than he looks.”

“He looks pretty strong,” Sasori’s father deadpanned.

Sasori gasped in pain as he tried to speak. “He’s a snake...just like his daughter,” he strained. “Put the fucker in a trance.”

“What does he mean?” his father asked Komushi who was already searching the room for a new instrument for them to play. Across from them, Orochimaru scoffed softly, his lip curling in further disgust.

“It’s some weird thing in music that affects them,” Komushi ran for Sasori’s room.

“You really think something like that would work on me?” Orochimaru glared down at Sasori.

“Like charming actual snakes?” Sasori’s father asked.

“Yes,” Sasori wheezed. “Exactly...like that.” He spat out a glob of blood that had dribbled into his mouth.

As Komushi looked for an instrument, Gaara, Sandaime, and Yashamaru watched. “He is going to try to put my father in a trance,” Yashamaru said.

“You don’t seem too bothered by it,” Sandaime frowned.

“It will affect me but not him. He is much stronger than my sister and me. It will take an entire ensemble to affect my father.”

“But they don’t need to know that,” Gaara smirked.

Back in the workshop, Orochimaru was having a stare-off with Sasori’s father while pressing Sasori’s face back into the floor.
"Why don't we keep this between fathers," Sasori’s father flashed a tight smile.

Orochimaru cracked a smile of his own and pressed down harder on Sasori’s jaw, feeling it dislocate. Sasori made a sound gasping pained noise deep in his throat. His father’s attention snapped to him, lurching forward but he quickly stopped himself. He was still unsure of how to handle the man hurting his son.

"It is not you who hurt my daughter," Orochimaru said easily. "Though I suppose I could fault you for your ignorance of even having this sack rotten muck in the first place," his tone was casual but the look in his eyes still held their edge.

“I understand,” he nodded. “I get that he hurt your daughter, but you—“

“He tortured her,” Orochimaru cut him off as he took his foot off of Sasori, not breaking eye contact with his father.

“He—“

“You do not even have a concept of what he has done to her,” Orochimaru slammed his hand down on the workbench separating the two fathers. “Did you know your son enjoys burning people with acid?” he hissed.

Sasori’s father risked looking away from Orochimaru to his son. “He what,” he whispered to himself.

“That’s right,” Orochimaru’s teeth clicked as their eyes met again.

The other man caught the glint of long, sharp fangs. His eyes widened as he took several steps back. He looked back down at his son. “Sasori...” he said, it was almost a whisper, “what is he talking about?”

Sasori turned his face away, feeling what he almost dared to call shame churning his stomach.

Orochimaru growled lowly, reaching down to grab a fist full of red hair. Sasori wailed in pain as he jaw hung loosely open. His father winced but forced himself not to look away. Orochimaru’s hand curled around Sasori’s chin and with a hard jerk, snapped the jaw back into place. “Speak!” he commanded. Blood drenched Sasori’s face. The bleeding from his nose had nearly stopped but it still coated his mouth and chin. Sasori glared up at his captor. He opened his mouth to retort. Orochimaru violently shook Sasori’s head by his hair. “Do not waste your breath on snarky comments! Tell your father what you have been doing!”

“Sasori,” his father said, speaking as calmly as he possibly could while watching this happen, “tell me what you did to her.”

Sasori took a second, unable to look his father in the eyes. After a moment, he sighed. “The burns on her chest,” he started, “I did that two days after buying her.”

“But that is not all, is it?” Orochimaru urged, knowing everything he did.

“No...”

“What else did you do?” his father asked.

“The acid burns on her thighs. The scars on her back happened the night Sandaime announced he was working to abolish slavery.”
“Is he confessing?” Yashamaru hummed, stepping closer to the door to listen in. Gaara and Sandaime followed, wanting to know as well.

Sasori’s father watched his son’s lips. Suddenly, the world felt like it was going mute around him. He ran a hand through his hair, closing his eyes. "What else have you done?" he whispered, finally opening his eyes to look at his son.

Sasori would have flinched if he was not being held in place by Orochimaru. He had never seen his father look at him with such rage. Cold, unyielding rage. "I-I tried to kill the baby," he said softly.

"Her and the baby! You threatened to murder her constantly!" Orochimaru hissed. "You put her under trances and used her body against her will!"

Sasori’s father groaned, shaking his head. “Sasori…” he said softly.

"Your uncle looks like he's about to self destruct," Yashamaru murmured.

"He might,” Gaara frowned. He had never seen so many emotions on his uncle's face. He could only imagine what it must be like to be faced with the full force of what his son was.

“I knew you were a monster...but I didn’t know it was this bad.” He looked at his son dead in the eyes. “So all of your other slaves...are dead because of you.” He paused hard for a moment. “What about your grandmother? Was that you as well?”

“You killed your own grandmother?” Orochimaru growled.

“No!” Sasori said sharply then hissed in pain. “She was an accident!” he spat out. “Her servant on the other hand...”

“For fuck’s sake, Sasori!” His father leaned against the wall.

“She was harassing Azumi and I couldn’t have her blabbing about what happened to Chiyo!”

Gaara and Sandaime looked at each other.

“Wow,” Yashamaru folded his arms. “He killed his own grandmother.”

Gaara looked down and shook his head. "No...even Azumi said it was an accident," he said. "I believe that much."

"Are you sure?" Sandaime asked softly.

"Very," Gaara nodded. "Her death was an accident and then he tried to stage it to make it look like it happened in her bathroom."

"I would ask why he would even bother if I was not witnessing this right now," Yashamaru chimed in. Sandaime curled his hand into a tight fist, taking slow deep breaths to control himself much like his brother was.

"Father, I'm serious!" Sasori pushed. "I didn't kill her!"

His father held up a finger, indicating he wanted his son to shut up. The room was dead silent for almost four minutes. "I am your father," he finally started to speak. "And I will believe you," he ground his teeth. "But..." he stopped to consider his words.

Orochimaru smirked, letting Sasori's head go and standing up straight but keeping his foot on his
Sasori tried to look up at his father but flinched away almost immediately from the glare he was receiving. "But what?" he asked softly. He sighed not sure if he could admit how he really felt about Azumi. How did he tell them he needed her. That she could not go because she understood him like no one else. He got lost in thought, thinking.

"I just...can't believe this is how you turned out," his father sighed, running his hand through his hair. "What do you think your mother would say? If she knew the full extent of everything you have been doing?"

"Mother doesn't need to know," Sasori said quickly.

"Oh, but I think she does," Orochimaru looked down on him. "You need to be fully exposed for the creature you are."

"She knows more about me than you do, Father," Sasori said bitterly, ignoring Orochimaru.

"What is that supposed to mean?" his father snapped.

Sasori looked away, resting his head against the floor in anticipation of Orochimaru stepping on him again. "Nothing," he muttered.

Orochimaru rolled his eyes, growing impatient with the conversation between the father and son. He was ready to kill the man. "That does not really matter now," he drawled. "I think it is time we get rid of this scum already." His eyes scanned the room for what he could kill the man under him with. He refused to give him a quick and easy death. No, he had to suffer the way his daughter did.

Sasori’s father lurched out of his stupor to look up at Orochimaru. "Absolutely not!" His fatherly instincts started kicking back in. He took a step forward, ready to tackle the man in case he tried anything.

"He deserves this!" Orochimaru growled.

Komushi pushed past Sandaime and the other two suddenly, diving for Orochimaru with a small copper flute in his hand. "The fuck he does!" he yelled. "Take this!" He held the flute up to Sasori’s father while pressing his full body weight down on Orochimaru.

"Do I just play anything?" Sasori’s father asked.

“Yes!” Komushi pressed down hard with his body to keep Orochimaru from moving. Orochimaru growled, opening his mouth.

Sasori groaned, rolling over now that he was no longer underneath Orochimaru. "Help me up," he said to his father. "I'll do it."

“His friend is dead if my father lands a bite,” Yashamaru commented, taking a step forward into the workshop.

Sasori’s father looked at him, his brows furrowing. "What?" he whispered.

"I am sure by now you have noticed the fangs," Yashamaru continued. "We are venomous. My father's venom can kill a man in minutes."

His eyes widened in shock followed quickly by fear. “You aren’t humans,” he whispered, staring
down at Orochimaru. He lifted the flute, pressing it to his lips without looking away.

“I can assure you,” Orochimaru snarled, “I am more human than you right now.” He turned to his son, jerking his head. “Go,” he commanded.

Yashamaru hesitated for a moment before he saw the slightly more feral look in his father’s eyes. "Right..." he said with a nod before backing out of the workshop and rejoining Gaara and Sandaime in the bedroom. "He cannot say he was not warned," he hummed.

Sandaime stepped towards the door. He felt like he was being torn in half. He wanted to protect his brother but he knew his nephew deserved anything he got.

Yashamaru held out an arm to stop him. “You should not,” he warned. “You will get caught in the middle. We do not want any unneeded deaths.”

“You think he will kill my brother?” The panic was automatic in the older man’s voice.

Yashamaru shook his head. "He has nothing against your brother," he said. "My father would not do it on purpose but if your brother gets in the way..." He frowned a little and looked back into the workshop. "It will not be pretty."

Sandaime gave the doorway one last long look. He sighed heavily looking back at Yashamaru. “Will that music affect you if you stay here?” he asked.

Yashamaru nodded, pushing a little on Sandaime’s chest. “Which is why we need to go. I will not become a weapon to be used against my father.”

Gaara put his hand on his uncle’s shoulder. “None of us are weak. He will be fine,” he assured him.

Sandaime sighed and gave a reluctant nod. “Alright,” he said. “We’ll leave.”

Komushi strained a little to keep Orochimaru on the ground as Sasori’s father tried playing something to put him in a trance.

“I said give it to me!” Sasori said. “I’ll do it!”

“How will you play with your face like that!” His father snapped back.

Sasori frowned, forcing out an arm to snatch the flute. “My jaw is fine and blood won’t hurt me!” He pressed the flute between his lips and started to play the tune he knew affected Azumi the most.

Komushi made uncomfortable eye contact with Orochimaru but he wanted to see if it was working. Orochimaru let out a low growl as he tried to push Komushi off of him. Sasori panicked a little and made the song more intense.

Still, the melody seemed to have no effect as the man under Komushi broke their eye contact. He suddenly went very still. His breathing slowed. Komushi looked up at Sasori who was watching Orochimaru intently.

“Did it work?” Sasori’s father mouthed to Komushi.

“I thin—“ Komushi cut himself off, feeling a sort of twisting and bending of the body beneath him. “What the fuck?” he whispered.

“Get off of him,” Sasori urged, dropping the instrument as he watched what was happening in front
of him. “Get off of him now!”

Komushi scrambled backward off of Orochimaru and watched as the man transformed into a large snake. A snake that just barely touched the ceiling of the workshop. “What the fuck!” Komushi repeated.

“It can’t be human!” Sasori’s father squatted to gather his son in his arms, grunting as he tried to pull him up.

Sasori tried reaching for the flute with the movement. He hissed in pain. “He’s still not under the trance!” he muttered.

“It’s clearly not going to work, Sasori!” Komushi said, getting up and backing away.

The large snake hissed loudly, it was almost a roar.

“We need to get out of here,” Sasori’s father said quickly.

“You two go! I’ll try to hold him off!” Komushi moved to put his body between them and the snake. It reared back to lunge at them. “Fuck.” Komushi pushed Sasori and his father hard towards the door.

“We’ll meet you—“

“Don’t!” Sasori yelled at his father. “The thing can understand us still!”

“It’s too big to get out,” his father noted as he helped him across the bedroom toward the bathroom.

“But nothing is stopping him from turning back into himself to follow us.”

Back in the workshop, the snake hissed loudly and whipped its tail hard into Komushi, sending him into the farthest wall.

“Oh...fuck,” Komushi wheezed, pushing out of the wall. “You’re kind of an asshole, aren’t you?” he chuckled, wiping away a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth. He glanced around at his surroundings quickly to find anything to defend himself with. He just needed to keep the creature distracted long enough for Sasori to escape. The snake hissed again, rearing back to strike but Komushi moved out of the way just in time only to be whipped by the tail again. With a glance through the bedroom, he saw that Sasori and his father made it to the bathroom and just out the window. “Perfect,” he whispered, smirking. "It was nice meeting you, terrifying snake father, but I have to go now." He bolted for the door, praying to any god that would listen he could make it out. The snake slithered around the room, blocking the doorway. Komushi’s foot caught the edge of the tubular body, stumbling forward over it. "Shit," he breathed, scrambling to push himself up before the snake could coil around him.

Orochimaru moved slowly around him, keeping his tail in front of the doorway so Komushi could not escape. He looked Komushi in the eyes and hissed again.

“I’m not telling you where they went,” Komushi said. The snake hissed again, looming closer as he coiled tighter. Komushi grunted softly, feeling his legs start to crush together. "There is nothing you can do to make me tell," he glared defiantly. Orochimaru pulled back to look at Komushi for a moment, tilting his head to look at him. Komushi watched the large snake head nod in thought. For some reason, this casual action and the silence was a lot more unnerving then him being attacked.
The snake’s mouth opened wide after a moment and Komushi watched the jaw unhinge. He knew immediately what was about to happen and he could not help the scream that escaped him. “No!” he yelled. He closed his eyes tightly, bracing himself. The massive jaw closed around him and he was enclosed in the dense heat of the snake’s mouth. It was not as wet as he thought it would be. He had to curl up tight, his feet kicking around the lips. He reached forward and caught on various strangely squishy things. He did not like this at all.

’At least it isn't chewing me,’ he thought, looking around in the darkness. It was an oddly reassuring thought until he felt the muscles of the throat contract. "YOU ARE NOT SWALLOWING ME!" he roared, thrashing. "I am not being digested today!"

Orochimaru hissed in discomfort, wishing the man would just stop moving.

Outside of the house, Sasori and his father went to the river, unable to go very far with how incapacitated Sasori was. His father helped him rest against a large rock that they could hide behind and then sat down next to him. "What are they?" he asked his son, not understanding at all how the man just turned into a snake.

Sasori took several labored breaths, trying to ignore the growing pain in his abdomen each time he exhaled. He closed his eyes, feeling a cold sweat drench his body as he ran a hand through his hair.

"She told me they were just mutated humans," he told his father. "But I don't know what that was," he glared back at the house.

"Can...can she do that?" his father asked, tearing off a piece of his clothing to dip in the river. He rung it out then gripped his son's jaw gently.

Sasori tried to turn away but his father held firm. "No," his lips pressed tightly. The blood was already turning gummy and itchy on his face. The water was not cool but it felt amazing on his skin. "She just has snake-like features."

"But they all have fangs?" he questioned. "I think you need to work under the assumption that all of them can do something like that."

"I don't doubt that they all have some strange power," Sasori hummed. "The large snake she has with her...the one that bit Mother...that one came from inside of her. It is only meant to come out when her life is in danger."

"Inside of her!" his father parroted. His eyebrows shot up to his hairline.

Sasori sighed, taking the cloth from his father to dip it back in the river. "Don't give me that look," he grumbled, continuing to wipe his face down.

"What about the other snake that's with her?" He ignored his son. "Sasori, this is serious!" He sat back in the sand. "I don't even kn—Your mother is still in the house!" He was on his feet instantly.

"Wait," Sasori quickly grabbed his father's arm. "He doesn't know that she is and he has no reason to go after her. Don't go back in there and lead him to her. As long as he doesn't know she's in there, she's safe."

His father clenched his jaw tightly for a moment. He sighed heavily then turned back to his son. "I'll carry you home and then come back for her." He knelt down in the sand, his back facing Sasori.
"I can walk, Father," Sasori tried to insist.

"Do not argue with me, Sasori!" That chilling tone was back.

Sasori sighed. "Fine," he relented, letting his father help him up. Together, they walked back to his parents' house, knowing Orochimaru could never find them there.

In the workshop, Komushi was still thrashing, yelling at the top of his lungs to be let out.

Orochimaru's eyes rolled in both irritation and the strong urge to throw up. He held the boy's body in this throat with the threat to let him drop into his stomach at any moment. He could not actually digest the man but Komushi did not know that. He waited a few minutes, figuring Sasori could not have gotten far in his state. Finally, he threw Komushi up.

Komushi groaned, rolling onto his back. Orochimaru looked him in the eyes again, waiting for him to reveal where Sasori and his father went.

"That was..." Komushi stumbled to his feet, using the nearest wall to brace himself, "disgusting! How are you even able to do that!"

The snake hissed, hitting him hard with his tail.

Komushi howled in pain. "Will you give it a rest! I'm not telling!"

Orochimaru opened his mouth again as if about to swallow him a second time.

Komushi backed away into the wall. "I won't!" he said. "I don't even know where they went!"

Orochimaru lowered his head until he and Komushi were nose to nose.

"Honestly!" Komushi gulped. "I just told them to run!"

Orochimaru sighed internally. He wrapped the end of his tail around Komushi's waist. Komushi struggled against the massive muscle. Orochimaru barely felt it as he flung the man clean across the room. Komushi hit the wall hard and then fell to the floor even harder. The impact knocked him out again.

Orochimaru turned back into himself and scoffed. "What a waste of my time," he muttered, walking over to Komushi. He nudged him with his foot to make sure he was truly unconscious. Once he was sure, he headed out into the bedroom to look for the route in which Sasori and his father escaped.

He could not find a trace of them. Which surprised him considering the monster's injuries. He figured that his father must be carrying him but the light desert breeze had shifted the sand just enough to erase their tracks. He clenched his fist tightly as he turned on his foot to head back to Sandaime's mansion.
Chapter 70

Chapter Notes

With a story this long, sometimes it's hard to figure out where the cutoff for a chapter should be. I've been having a hard time with it which is why I just post two chapters that were originally one long one. That being said, this story is super long and we thank anyone who has stuck around or gotten this far. Enjoy some wholesome family time immediately after those insane last chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The moment Orochimaru arrived back at Sandaime's house, he made quick work to return to his daughter's side. He did not find her in the room she was staying but he figured that since Mitsuki had barely left his sister's side since they had arrived, they would be in the room he was staying in. He found them curled up together with Mitsuki's head in her lap. She was scratching his head with one hand while holding up a book with the other. Naga and Ryuga were coiled up and nuzzled against Mitsuki, along with his black mamba.

Azumi looked up at him from the book she was reading. "Are you okay?" she asked softly, noticing the look on his face. "Where are Gaara and Yashamaru?"

"I am fine," he assured her. "Did they not come back here?" he asked her. He was not sure where else they would have gone.

She shook her head and put her book down. "No," she hummed. She gently maneuvered Mitsuki out of her lap, letting him settle into the bed with the snakes and got up. "Why would you not have all come together?"

"I sent them ahead. Along with his uncle."

"Ah," she nodded in understanding. "If they are with Lord Sandaime, there is not much to worry about." She circled him once, looking for any wounds he could be lying to her about. Stopping in front of him, she looked up and frowned. "Did you...meet—"

"The monster?" he cut her off. "Yes."

She nodded again. "And is he—"

"Dead?" he cut her off again. "No. At least not yet."

She hummed, slightly relieved he had not killed Sasori yet but not wanting to tell him that she did not want him dead. She looked back at Mitsuki who was still sleeping. "Come with me," she told her father softly, leading him out of the room and to the kitchen. A servant bowed and she asked them to make tea for her and her father. They sat down at the table while they waited.

Orochimaru looked at his daughter hard. He reached across the table to take her hand in his gently. "They tried to use the trance on me," he chuckled. "The fear in their eyes when they saw it was not going to work was priceless."

A smile slowly spread across her face. "Did they really?" she laughed softly. "They probably
thought that because they could easily put me into one, you were the same. Interesting how they do not assume you are just so much stronger," she hummed. The servant set the tea down in front of them and bowed before leaving the kitchen. "I thought I could fight the trances off better but I seem to succumb to them easily." She had noticed that each time she was put under a trance since becoming pregnant, they were harder to fight off.

“I should have trained you and your brothers to be stronger against them,” Orochimaru frowned thoughtfully. “But I made the foolish assumption you would never leave the village.” He glanced at her belly and then sipped his tea. “And with the child taking up most of your mental and physical concentration, I imagine you would be more susceptible to trances,” he said as if reading her mind. “Do you have any idea where they might be hiding?” he asked her.

“They got away?” she asked then shook her head. “I do not know. The shop or maybe the scarab’s house.” She frowned and took a sip of her tea. “I cannot really think of anywhere else.”

He hummed in thought, glancing back down at their hands. He gave her hand a small squeeze as he thought. “I will leave it alone for now until I can speak with your brother and the others.” He looked back at her. “Are you okay?” he asked. “Has the child given you any trouble?”

She smiled and shook her head. “No,” she said. “I think this has been a fairly normal pregnancy so far.” They finished their tea and stood up. “I am thankful for that at least,” she chuckled. Together, they walked out into the hallway and headed back toward the guest rooms. As they passed the main entrance of the house, Gaara, Sandaime, and Yashamaru walked in from outside. Azumi gasped softly, seeing all of the wounds on Gaara.

“You made it back,” Yashamaru noted, seeing his father.

“Where did you three go?” Orochimaru asked.

“We stopped by Gaara’s house for a few things,” Sandaime answered, gesturing to the things he had in his arms. He handed them to a servant to take to the guest room that Azumi and Gaara were staying in.

“Are you okay?” Azumi asked, cupping Gaara’s face gently. She looked him over and frowned. Gaara smiled widely, wrapping his arms around her so they settled on her waist. He pressed his forehead to hers and kissed the tip of her nose. “I’m fine,” he said softly. “These are all just scratches.”

Yashamaru watched the couple from the corner of his eye. “Get a room, you two,” he smirked. Azumi closed her eyes and sighed heavily. “Oh, how I missed you, my dear brother,” she deadpanned, not even looking at him.

“I am glad to hear that, dear sister,” Yashamaru smirked.

She kissed Gaara before pulling away and lacing her fingers with his. She lifted his hand and noticed how bloody it was. “These are not just scratches,” she chuckled softly. They were not very serious wounds but they needed to be cleaned up.

“Sssh,” he smirked mischievously. “I’ll be fine.” He smiled at her then lifted their hands to kiss the back of hers.

Yashamaru turned to his father. “So are we rid of the monster?” he asked, noting the lack of celebration in the room.
“No,” Orochimaru put his hand on his hip and his expression turned grim. “Sandaime, do you have any idea where your brother and the monster would flee to?”

“They got away?” Gaara gasped.

“They did,” Orochimaru nodded. “But they could not have gotten far. The monster is too injured to go far.”

“At least we know he won’t be a problem for a while,” Sandaime said. “When Sasori is injured, he’s—”

“Useless for a whole week,” Azumi cut him off, rolling her eyes.

All eyes turned to her.

“How often did you have to take care of him?” Yashamaru asked. Orochimaru folded his arms, tapping his fingers in the bend of his arm. Sandaime rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, thinking of all the times he was the reason she had to care for Sasori. Gaara held her hand a little tighter. He bit his lip hard, biting back an apology.

Azumi hummed softly in thought, counting on her free hand each time she had to take care of Sasori. “Quite often,” she said, realizing the last few weeks all she did was take care of him whether it was because he had gotten into a fight or he was hungover.

Pushing aside the re-emerging rage, Orochimaru hummed, cupping his jaw in thought.

“Wow,” Yashamaru folded his arms, watching how many fingers his sister held up. “This guy is actually an infant,” he snorted.

Gaara caught his eye and nodded vigorously. “He really is,” he mouthed.

“We can work with this,” Orochimaru interjected. “It means we have time to properly plan out making this monster suffer for what he has done.”

“We can discuss those plans in the morning,” Sandaime said. “Right now, I think all of us need rest.” He said it more for Gaara and Orochimaru since they were the ones that actually fought.

“I can agree,” Yashamaru said.

“You did nothing,” Orochimaru smirked at his son.

“I still want to rest. We have only been in this city for two days and so much has already happened,” he sighed.

“I’ll have servants prepare you all dinner and baths,” Sandaime clapped his hands. “They will come to fetch you when it’s all ready.” He gently herded them towards the hallway. “Gaara, would you like me to have someone look at that or...“ he trailed off, raising an eyebrow at Azumi. “are you taken care of?” Azumi looked and Sandaime and smirked, nodding very slightly. Sandaime chuckled. “Right,” he said. “I’ll see you all in a little while.”

“Where is Mitsuki?” Yashamaru asked. “I am surprised he is not attached to you.”

“He was,” Azumi chuckled. “He is asleep right now.” She gestured to the bedroom Mitsuki was staying in as they passed it.

“He probably crashed really hard from that caffeine high he had earlier,” Gaara chuckled.
Yashamaru shook his head, looking up to the ceiling. “He was so hyper,” he snorted a laugh. “Never again.” He stopped by the room he was staying in. “I will wake him up for a bath when they come around. You two behave,” he smirked at his sister and Gaara.

“Ugh,” Azumi rolled her eyes, turning away from him.

“I would say the same thing,” Orochimaru said, “but you are already pregnant.” He chuckled softly before heading into the room he was staying in.

Azumi pulled Gaara into their room and pulled him into a more heated kiss than what she was willing to do in front of her family. “I am sorry about them,” she said softly.

Gaara pushed back into the kiss, wrapping his arms around her again. He held her much closer than he did before. “I love them,” he chuckled. “They care a lot about you. And I like that.” He kissed her again, trailing down to her jaw. “It’s also admittedly a bit funny to see where you get your quick wit from.” He pulled back just enough to smile at her before pulling her back into a deep kiss. He gently bit her lip, pressing into the kiss.

She smiled against his lips, taking his hands in hers and walking backward toward the bed. She fell back onto it and pull him on top of her. “It makes me happy that they also like you,” she said. “My father and brother went to go get you but I take it more...confrontations happened?”

He settled on her waist, trying to stagger himself to he was not putting his full weight on her. He lifted both of her hands to press kisses to her knuckles. “‘Confrontations’ is putting it far too lightly,” he chuckled. “I am the picture of health compared to Sasori right now after what your father did.” He shifted, rolling them so she rested on top of him. He pulled her flush to his body, running his hands up her back until he reached her hair. He laced his fingers into her hair, gently scratching her scalp and ignored the little burning sensation the cuts gave him as he did.

She hummed softly, resting her head in the crook of his neck so she could kiss his neck. “My father can be a bit brutal,” she frowned. “And since he was already injured from what I did to him...and Yashamaru knocking him out, and then you...I...” She tried to refrain from saying she worried about Sasori. “I am sure he looks really bad.”

Gaara picked up the worry in her tone instantly. He fought the urge to frown, keeping his face schooled as he spoke. “He is getting what he deserves.” He turned his head, pressing a kiss to her temple while stroking her hair. “He is reaping what he sowed. Don’t you dare pity him, Azumi.”

“I know,” she whispered, clutching the blanket underneath them. She did not understand why she cared so much for someone who hurt her repeatedly. She knew he deserved everything he got. Yet, she could not help but feel bad. “I am trying not to...”

Gaara curled his arm around her, pulling her in closer. “Your heart is too good,” he said softly. “You didn’t deserve anything that happened to you and you still manage to feel bad for him.” He shook his head, sighing softly. His hand moved up her body to cup her face. “You don’t need to worry about him. The most important person who needs healing right now is you,” he said, knowing she knew this already. He kissed her softly.

She pushed into the kiss slightly, lacing her fingers in his hair. There was a knock at the door and she jumped slightly. “I think your bath is ready,” she said softly.

“No,” he whined softly. He held onto her a little tighter. “Did you take one yet?” he asked, letting the tip of his nose brush against hers. He did not want to let her out of his arms yet. He knew it was just a bath but he was sure he would never tire of having her close to him.
“I did,” she hummed, kissing along his jaw. “But would you like some company?” she smirked against his skin.

“Oh if you don’t mind,” he said softly, smiling as she kissed him. There was another knock. “Coming,” he called to the servant.

“Of course not,” she smirked, kissing down his neck and then biting down gently. He gasped a small moan and she got off of him. She stood up and held her hand out for him to take. “Come on.”

He grinned, taking her hand and pulling her back to him as he stood up. In a smooth motion, his hand moved to her back while the other swept her off her feet. “At least we don’t have to pretend around your father,” he smirked, walking forward.

“It would not have worked anyway,” she chuckled, reaching out to open the door when they approached it. “There is no pretending anything around him.”

“I had a feeling,” Gaara laughed. “Everyone in your family seems to have very keen eyes,” he hummed, smiling. The servant led them down the hall to one of the guest bathrooms. It was a little steamy and the bath was letting off a wonderful aromatic scent. “Mmm, whatever this is is nice,” he said softly, putting her down on her feet. “But I like your stuff more.”

"I will make Lord Sandaime and Lady Sachiko a set to keep in the guest bathrooms then," she smirked, kissing his hand before stepping away to give him space to undress.

“You don’t have to, my love,” he smiled as he grabbed a stool for her to sit on and pulled her to it. He sat her down and leaned in to kiss her. “Not unless you want something to do,” he said more as a question, softly. He looked into her eyes.

"It...is the least I can do," she said. "They are allowing me and my family to stay here. And it would keep me busy..."

“They really don’t mind,” he assured her. He stepped back, stepping into the bathtub. “But I will tell them you’d like to keep busy and I’ll stop by the shop to pick up whatever you need.” He smiled at her as he settled into the bath. He bit his lip as the hot water stung his wounds in the best way. “I’ll also have to tell Shira to bring any foods he makes around here and not sneak into Sasori’s.”

"Ugh, yes, that sounds amazing," she groaned, just thinking of the food Shira would make. She positioned the stool right behind him and started massaging his shoulders. "But you do not have to rush with getting anything from the shop." She kissed the top of his head. "With my father and brothers here, I will be spending most of my time catching up with them." He groaned softly, closing his eyes as she kneaded his shoulders. He hummed, letting his head lull backward to look up at her. “I think Mitsuki might enjoy making something with you,” he smiled. He pushed up a little to catch her lips in a soft peck. “But I’ll definitely tell Shira to stop by.”

"That would be nice," she smiled. "I know everyone would enjoy his food but I know for sure that Yashamaru will love it." She moved her hands between his shoulders, massaging the base of his neck and then between his shoulder blades.

“Huuuuh,” he moaned, relaxing further against the back of the tub. “Gods, you’re amazing.” He lost himself for a moment then blinked and grinned up at her. “Does Yashamaru have a favorite dish?” he asked. “I’ll ask Shira to make it for him.”

“I am sure he does but he appreciates all food so it is hard to pin exactly which one is his favorite,”
she hummed. “I will ask him.” She scratched his head gently.

“I’m sure Shira will bring over a spread,” he hummed softly, loving the feeling of her fingers in his hair.

“I will give you a proper massage later,” she smirked.

He reached up, catching her wrist in his hand. He gently gave it a pull until the palm of her hand reached his lips. He kissed it softly then cradled her hand in against his cheek. “You don’t have to,” he said, turning to kiss her wrist again before releasing her hand. He looked up at her, taking in her beautiful golden eyes. He felt his heart skip a beat and a smile spread over his lips. “You’re so beautiful,” he said softly.

Azumi smiled, crossing her arms over his chest and leaning down to kiss him. “I love you,” she said softly, kissing him again.

"I love you, too," he smiled in the kiss. He pressed into it one more time before pulling away so he could wash up. He winced a little as he cleaned up the wounds on his legs and hands. "Would you mind helping me wrap these?" he asked her sheepishly.

She chuckled softly and ran her fingers through his hair again. “Of course,” she smiled. She got up to grab anything she would need to treat his wounds while she waited for him to finish bathing. He finished up his bath and reached for the towel she set aside for him. Drying off as he crossed to the room, he smiled while watching her. He wrapped the towel snugly around his hips then slipped his arms around her waist from behind. He pulled her to his chest, peppering kisses down her neck and shoulders. She smiled and reached up to cup his face, tilting it to catch his lips in a kiss. “Let us go take care of your wounds,” she said softly, turning around in his arms. “Then maybe we can...kill some time before they tell us dinner is ready,” she smirked.

“Kill some time,” Gaara smirked, kissing her again. “I like the sound of that.” He gently scratched her lower back. He chuckled, moving his hands down to her butt and picked her up, wrapping her legs around him. “Ready?” he asked.

"Mhm," she hummed, resting her arms on his shoulders and pressing her body against his. She kissed along his jaw and down his neck as he carried her back to the room. He opened the door with one hand, chuckling softly as he kicked the door behind him shut. He gently set her down on the bed, pulling her back into a kiss. He eased her down onto her back, trailing his kisses down her neck. He bit down softly as he moved his hands down her arms to pin her hands next to her head. She unwrapped her legs from around him, arching her back a little and shuddering slightly as he kissed her neck. "I know it has only been about a week," she said softly through a chuckle, "but I missed sleeping with you."

"It's good to know that I'm not the only one," he smiled against her skin. He moved back up to bite her lip softly, pulling her into a deep kiss. "I don't think I can comfortably sleep without you anymore," he said, blushing a little. He pressed his body close to hers, letting his hands trace down her arms to her sides.

Azumi ran her fingers through his hair and smiled at him. "Let me take care of your wounds first," she said.

He whined playfully, slumping a little against her. "Later," he chuckled, kissing down her chest. "They don't hurt that bad," he assured her.

She smirked, scratching his head as he moved down. "Alright," she said softly. "I suppose that
gives us more time," she chuckled.

Gaara's face light up instantly. "Wait, really?" he grinned, shifting them so she was on top. He ran his hands up her thighs, resting them on her hips.

"You carried me to and from the bathroom so I know you are fine," she said. "And," she smirked, rolling her hips against his, "I really missed you."

"Mmm, noted," Gaara grinned, rolling his hips back against hers. He sat up and pulled her into a slow kiss, lacing his fingers into her hair. His other hand gripped her hip hard, pressing his own into hers.

She reached between them and slowly undid the towel around him. "Let me show you just how much I missed you," she smirked, pushing him back down.

Down in Sandaime's office, he was sitting at his desk, stressing over the current state of his family while Sachiko rubbed his shoulders. "So they got away," she hummed.

"Apparently," Sandaime groaned. "But I don't know where they would have gone."

"You don't think your brother would have just gone home?" she asked him, pressing into a bad knot at the base of his neck.

He groaned, resting his head on the desk. "No." He rolled his forehead on the wood. "That's too obvious."

"Rasa's?" she tried.

Sandaime hummed, sitting up with an even heavier sigh. "Actually...he might have," he frowned.

"Then we might want to check there first," she said. "And maybe...stop Rasa from wanting to retaliate against Gaara."

"Do you think he would?"

"Well..." Sachiko winced, "they already don't get along. And the way he will see it, his son attacked Sasori after getting a slave pregnant. He will not like the image that brings."

Sandaime groaned again. "You're right."

"We'll figure this out," Sachiko frowned, moving to sit down next to him and cup her husband's face. "If you want me to, I can try and deal with Rasa."

"Who is Rasa?" Orochimaru asked, drifting into the room soundlessly. The couple tensed then laughed softly together.


Orochimaru nodded in understanding, taking a seat when Sandaime gestured to it for him to sit.

"He and Gaara do not get along," Sachiko explained. "And he has no idea about...any of this."

"Not even that his son is about to be a father?" Orochimaru hummed.
Sachiko shook her head. "No...and since he only knows Azumi as Sasori's slave, to find out that she is who is going to have his grandchild will—"

"Cause more issues," Orochimaru finished with another understanding nod. "I see."

"But we have a suspicion that Sasori and his father went to Rasa's," Sandaime said as he straightened out, making himself a little more presentable.

"He does not need to know then," Orochimaru said simply.

"Well...he's going to find out," Sandaime started. "Did you have a plan?"

"He does not know me or most of Sasori's business, right?" Orochimaru asked.

Sandaime shook his head, considering his words. "No, but Rasa won't just hand his nephew over to someone who beat him to near-death, regardless of what he did."

"I will not be asking him to hand him over," Orochimaru said.

"I think...maybe I should be the one to deal with him," Sachiko said. "It'll be a little easier to get Sasori away from them so the brothers aren't involved."

"Darling, are you sure?" Sandaime asked his wife, his brows pinching further.

"He's soft on me," Sachiko assured her husband. "Don't worry about me." She ran a hand through his hair.

Sandaime frowned a little, taking his hand in hers and gently pulling it close to kiss the back of it. "Alright," he said. "But...please be careful. If Rasa already knows, he might be a little more hostile than expected."

"I'm always prepared for a hostile Rasa," Sachiko smirked. Orochimaru watched to couple quietly.

Sandaime chuckled, shaking his head. "I hope this child does not inherit this bad temper," he mumbled to himself. "Since it is settled, how soon do we want to set this plan in motion?"

"Well, we know Sasori is too injured to move much right now," Sachiko hummed, "so it is probably best to get him while he can't move. I can go over to Rasa's tomorrow and have him brought back to his own house."

"Perfect," Sandaime smiled at his wife. "But, mmm, maybe someone should still go with you."

Orochimaru shook his head. "He is not going to return to his house that easily," he started. "He knows that I know where to find him there and after what happened, that is the last place he will want to be for some time."

"He won't have much of a choice with how injured he is," Sandaime said. "We just need to get him away from his father."

"I can have him brought somewhere else," Sachiko suggested.

"We can't bring him here because this would be the first place my brother looks for him."

"I don't want him here anyway," Sachiko scoffed. Orochimaru chuckled softly. "I will figure out where I can take him by tomorrow."
"You're really a gift to us," Sandaime grinned, leaning in to kiss his wife's cheek.

"I know," Sachiko grinned. She turned her beautiful smile to Orochimaru. "Aside from Sasori, are you and your family comfortable here? Are you injured at all?"

"You have been more than accommodating," Orochimaru waved off.

Sachiko hummed, resting her chin on the back of her laced hands. "How are you dealing with the pregnancy?" She hesitated to ask a little. She knew it was a bit prying but she was admittedly curious.

Orochimaru blinked and then chuckled again. "I have been too concerned for my daughter's safety and the safety of the child to dwell on the fact that she is pregnant in the first place," he answered. "But...I suppose my initial thoughts were just like any father who has not seen his daughter in nearly a year only to find out when he is reunited with her that she is pregnant. I was shocked. Given the circumstances in which she left...it was among the last things I figured would happen." He took a deep breath and Sandaime could see that he was truly like any other father. "But...I love her and she loves him. She is an adult and so...I am happy for her."

Sachiko smiled wide, nodding at him. It was refreshing to see the man relax a little whenever he talked about his daughter. "I've never seen Gaara with, well, anyone." She looked at her husband. "Has he ever been with someone officially?"

"I think he's had one or two partners but he usually keeps to himself," Sandaime hummed, looking to his wife.

"He is definitely much better than the other men she has been with," Orochimaru grumbled.

"Sachiko was thinking of throwing a baby shower," Sandaime said, turning back to Orochimaru.

His face relaxed and he looked at Sachiko. "A baby shower?" he hummed.

"I think a celebration of life is something we all need right now," Sachiko smiled.

As if her smile was infectious, Orochimaru smiled as well. "I think you are right," he nodded. "And I think she would love a baby shower."

"Wonderful," Sachiko grinned. "Does your village have any customs for baby or mother?" She started to get excited, her golden aura growing.

Orochimaru chuckled, taking a moment to think. "We have a few. I will talk it over with my eldest son and see which ones he would like to do," he smiled.

"Sounds wonderful! Ah, and we should have Shira cater again!" Sachiko bit her lip, sitting up straight to look at her husband.

Sandaime laughed softly. "It sounds like you will be keeping yourself very busy."

"Oh, there is so much to do!" she gushed.

"I will go over to Shira's restaurant tomorrow night and ask if he would be willing to cater."

"Oh, he will be. As long as you tell him that I am throwing this party and it's for his best friend's baby."

Orochimaru’s smile softened, watching the couple interact. "I think it is safe to leave most of this
planning in your hands,” he said. “At least for the party. Are there any other family members we need to be wary of?”

“Um,” Sandaime had to truly consider this for a moment. “No,” he said after a moment. “Gaara has siblings but I can’t imagine them going against their brother.”

Orochimaru nodded. "I will trust you on that."

"In fact, I think they'll be very excited to find out their baby brother is going to be a father," Sachiko chuckled.

“Now that you bring them up, perhaps we should have them come over for dinner,” Sandaime suggested as he leaned back in his chair.

“Let us not overwhelm my daughter with too much right now,” Orochimaru put his hand up. “There will be time for all of that at maybe the party or when it is safer,” he told them.

Sachiko nodded in agreement and Sandaime hummed softly. "You're right." He ran his hand through his hair and sighed. "In the meantime, I am sure dinner is ready."

'I'll go get everyone,' Sachiko grinned. 'I'll meet you in the kitchen.' She kissed Sandaime on the cheek and left to gather everyone for dinner.

Sandaime smiled at his wife, watching her go then turned back to Orochimaru. “Was there anything else you wanted to discuss?” he asked the other man.

"I have been meaning to ask," Orochimaru hummed, "I know you are trying to abolish slavery in this city. How far along are you? Is this something that is going to happen soon?"

Sandaime’s face fell a little at the question. He looked down at the papers neatly stacked on his desk. “Honestly put: yes and no. If I play my cards right and get the right votes, this could be pushed through quickly.”

“And if you do not?”

“It could take up to a year and a half,” he said, folding his hands on the desk. He looked Orochimaru dead in the eyes.

“I see,” the other man said with a slight hiss. “I have no intention of staying that long. Regardless of the legality of her leaving.”

Sandaime nodded. "I understand," he said. "However, I do ask...please try to wait it out."

"I am only waiting until this baby is born," Orochimaru told him.

“I understand,” Sandaime frowned. “But I am confident this won’t take that long.” His smile was back.

“I will trust you with your city and its politics,” Orochimaru stood up. “Shall we go?”

Sandaime chuckled a little, standing up. “Thank you,” he said, stepping out from behind his desk to walk with Orochimaru to the door. He led the way down the hall, towards the kitchen.

Chapter End Notes
Also...we're still trying to figure out how to end this trainwreck. We literally started this story with absolutely no plan, made plans throughout, threw those plans away because the story has a life of its own and IT tells US what's going to happen. So...we're just as in the dark as you are about it.
Chapter 71

Chapter Notes

Some more wholesome family time before things probably start getting crazy again. Like I said before, we're just as in the dark about this as you are.

Sachiko walked through the hall where the guest rooms were, looking for which ones were currently occupied. When she found Mitsuki’s room, she knocked lightly. In a few seconds, Mitsuki opened the door, freshly bathed and wearing a robe that was given to him with a towel on his head. “Oh!” he grinned. “Hello, Lady Goddess,” he said with a bow.

“Hello, little Lord,” she giggled. “Are you ready for dinner?” she asked him.

“Let me get dressed. I will only be a moment,” he smiled softly.

“Okay, I’m just going up the hall to your brother.” She tapped his nose gently.

Mitsuki blushed lightly and bowed again, retreating back into his room as she walked away to go to Yashamaru.

Sachiko knocked on Yashamaru’s door. He took a few seconds longer to open it.

Unlike his brother, Yashamaru was ready the moment he opened the door. He was wearing fresh clothes and his hair was pulled to the side in a low ponytail. “Lady Sachiko,” he bowed slightly.

She smiled back at him, returning the bow. “Dinner is ready,” she informed him. “I just told your brother so he’s going to join us in a—“

“I am ready,” Mitsuki said, speedwalking up to them.

"My husband and your father are already down in the kitchen," she told them. "You go on ahead. I'll get your sister and Gaara and we'll be right behind you."

Yashamaru nodded and placed a hand on Mitsuki’s shoulder to guide him in the direction of the kitchen.

Sachiko continued her journey down the hall towards Azumi’s room. She was a little further away than the boys to give her a little more privacy. Sachiko raised her hand to knock lightly on the door when she heard a soft moan through the door followed by a low growl. Her hand paused inches from the door and her eyebrows shot up. “Oh,” she whispered, giggling silently. She lowered her hand, tucking it behind her as she turned to make her way down to the kitchen. When she arrived, the absence of the last two was quickly noted by the men. “They are sleeping,” she told the room. “I didn’t want to bother them. I’ll have a servant bring some food up later.”

"He was in the middle of a fight with Komushi when we got there," Sandaime noted. "He's probably exhausted. I hope he's alright."

"Oh, I'm sure he's fine," Sachiko grinned, taking her seat between Sandaime and Mitsuki. "I'm sure he's doing great," she chuckled.
Yashamaru nearly snorted into his glass, picking up on the connotations of what sleep actually meant. Dinner proceeded as usual though. Mitsuki stared at Sachiko in awe, hanging on her every word as she spoke about the city and places they should visit.

"This place is very different," Yashamaru hummed.

"What's it like where you're from?" Sachiko asked.

"Relaxed," Yashamaru sighed. "Quiet. Not as hot."

Sachiko chuckled softly. "Yes, this city is a bit...crowded, loud, and hectic."

"Azumi mentioned that you are the leader of your village," Sandaime said to Orochimaru.

Orochimaru nodded. "I am. I founded it."

"Ah, she did not mention that part." He looked at Yashamaru. "And with you being the eldest, are you next in line to run the village?"

"That would be how it works in most places," Yashamaru smirked, "but I am not interested in running the village. So that duty will go to the next oldest."

"He is currently taking my place in my absence," Orochimaru said.

“Oh,” Sandaime hummed in surprise. “So what do you plan on doing instead?” he asked Yashamaru curiously.

“Brother is an artist,” Mitsuki spoke up.

“How fitting!” Sachiko gushed. “It would seem our families were born for each other! A blend of science and art,” she grinned. “Which do you like?” she asked Mitsuki.

"I like both!" Mitsuki grinned.

"He has spent a fair amount of time with both Azumi and me, working on our specific crafts,” Yashamaru said.

"I enjoy making the oils she makes but I also like making sculptures."

"Do any of you dance as well?" Sachiko asked.

"No, that is her thing," Yashamaru chuckled.

“I dance with her sometimes,” Mitsuki spoke up. “But she is the best dancer. Do you like to dance?” he asked her.

“I do,” she grinned. “Everyone in our family dances. Would you like to after dinner?"

Mitsuki’s eyes nearly sparkled. “Dance with a goddess?” he smiled widely. “How could I say no?”

“It would be pretty blasphemous, huh?” Yashamaru smirked.

“I’ll dance with you too,” Sachiko told him.

“Oh,” he hid a blush, “I am not much of a dancer.”

“Nonsense,” Sachiko grinned. “It will be fun.” Mitsuki was ascending with excitement to dance
with the lady of the house. He started to eat a little faster and choked very softly. The black mamba slipped out of his shirt to hiss softly in his ear, telling him to slow down as he gave his chest a squeeze. Sachiko chuckled, rubbing Mitsuki’s back gently.

“How old are you, Yashamaru?” Sandaime asked.

“Twenty-eight,” Yashamaru answered.

“Even for someone your age, running a village is a lot of responsibility,” he muttered. “Your brother can’t be that much younger than you if Azumi is only twenty-three.”

Yashamaru nodded. “He is twenty-seven.”

“My children are more than capable of taking on such a responsibility,” Orochimaru interjected.

“From what I have seen of them so far, I have no doubt,” Sandaime said. “It’s just fascinating.”

Mitsuki finished his food as they spoke and sat back in his seat, groaning softly because he ate too fast. The snake came out in front of him to scoldingly hiss at him about what he did. With a little pout twisting his lips, Mitsuki pushed the snake away gently by the nose with the tip of his finger. He knew what he did but it would be worth it when he got to dance.

“We have all been raised to be independent despite never really leaving the village,” Yashamaru added. “But there is no rush for Father to step down,” he smirked a little.

“Watch it,” Orochimaru smirked back.

Everyone else finished their food at a normal pace and the servants came around to clear the table. Sandaime ordered them to bring tea and a light dessert into the next room as the group stood up. Sachiko took Mitsuki’s hand and Mitsuki practically floated behind her as they moved to the next room.

“I think he is in love,” Yashamaru whispered to his father with a slight chuckle as they followed behind the pair. “You better watch out,” he said over his shoulder to Sandaime.

Sandaime smiled broadly, leaning forward to watch the happy pair as they walked into the next room. “It’s okay to let him dream,” he teased. The three men took a seat each at one end of the room.

At the other, was an open space where Sachiko was already giving Mitsuki pointers on where to place his hands. “Ready?” Sachiko asked Mitsuki who looked up at her with a grin and nodded. They started moving around the space smoothly with Sachiko leading him.

“She is either picking him up off of the ground or he is actually floating,” Yashamaru chuckled.

"Your son has good moves," Sandaime laughed, looking to Orochimaru.

"No, it is your wife making him levitate," the other man smiled, watching his youngest move with Sachiko. Mitsuki was beaming.

"Think Azumi will get jealous her dance partner is being stolen?" Yashamaru asked.

"I think she will be fine," Orochimaru chuckled softly.

“She performed for Sachiko’s birthday party,” Sandaime said. “It was the first time I witnessed her dancing. She was amazing. And Sachiko absolutely loved it.”
"Oooh, what a treat for you," Yashamaru hummed.

Orochimaru narrowed his eyes. "Did she volunteer or was she forced?" he asked, keeping his tone light but there was an underlying edge to it. It was not necessarily directed at Sandaime or Sachiko.

"Sachiko would not have allowed her to perform if she was forced," Sandaime shook his head.

"Relax, Father," Yashamaru hummed.

"I am relaxed," Orochimaru countered.

The servants arrived with tea and lokum, placing them on a small table in front of the seats. "Oh," Yashamaru chuckled, looking at the dessert. "This is Azumi’s favorite. She should be here in—"

"Is that lokum?" Azumi’s voice asked behind him, peering over his shoulder.

"Record time," he laughed, picking one up and reaching back to hand it to her.

"Did you two get to eat dinner?" Sachiko asked as she was twirled around by Mitsuki.

"We did," Gaara assured his aunt as he walked into the room. He took a seat across from Yashamaru and next to his uncle. He sunk into the seat, smiling as he picked up a cup. "So you two can dance, too?" he smiled at Mitsuki.

"Just me," Mitsuki chuckled. "Yasha does not like to move much."

"If it requires moving more than one part of the body at a time, Yashamaru will not do it," Azumi smirked, taking another lokum. Gaara and Sandaime looked to the eldest.

Yashamaru nodded sagely, closing his eyes. "They speak the truth. I live only to be comfortable," he told them. Orochimaru rolled his eyes slightly.

"He’s even lazier than Temari’s fiance," Sachiko laughed. She and Mitsuki slowed to a stop and the bowed low to each other. "You were an exceptional dance partner, little Lord." She punctuated her statement with a kiss to the back of his hand.

"So were you, Lady Goddess," Mitsuki said, blushing brightly.

"Can somebody pry Mitsuki from the ceiling?" Azumi asked. "He has ascended."

"He’s almost as bad as Shira," Gaara chuckled.


"Oh, no, Auntie, I think you might get tag-teamed."

"I’m fine with that," she grinned, walking over to the group with Mitsuki in hand. "A lady can never have too many compliments," she grinned, taking her seat next to her husband. "Did you two sleep well?" she asked them with a smirk.

Azumi looked at her, realizing her smirk meant she knew what they were actually doing. She immediately returned the smirk and nodded. "Yes," she said simply, eating another lokum.

"Good," Sachiko smiled. "I think you both needed it." Gaara hid his own smile in his cup of tea.
“Well, today was eventful but not very productive,” Sandaime chuckled.

"This coming week will be productive," Orochimaru said airily.

Azumi tried not to frown, knowing he was planning on killing Sasori. She sat down next to Yashamaru who handed her a little napkin full of lokum cubes. Her smile was back almost instantly.

Sandaime looked at Azumi next to her father and brother, wondering what the mother looked like for them to be almost exact clones while Mitsuki looked nothing like them.

"It will be," Sachiko said. "We shouldn't be having any problems pretty soon."

“I still owe you a dance,” Yashamaru hummed, looking across to Sachiko.

She smiled sweetly at him as she popped a lokum into her mouth. “You do,” she grinned. “Did you care to dance?”

“I think that is supposed to be my question,” he chuckled as he stood up. He offered his hand to her in a low bow.

“Oh, wow,” Azumi said. “Even after admitting to not doing anything physical, he is going to dance.”

“I am a changed man, little sister,” Yashamaru smirked.

“No, you are not,” she scoffed.

“He really is not,” Orochimaru said softly to her.

“I think I’m the one who should feel honored,” Sachiko giggled as she took Yashamaru’s hand.

“Do not let him fool you, Lady Goddess,” Mitsuki shook his head. “He is not that special,” he teased.

“My own family,” Yashamaru sighed dramatically, “going against me in front of a goddess.”

“You will be fine,” Orochimaru smirked. “She is still going to dance with you.”

“I sure am,” Sachiko grinned.

Yashamaru grinned, leading Sachiko back to the little dance floor. With no need for guidance, he pulled her to him and began to lead her into a dance.

Mitsuki made his way over to Azumi, leaning against her. He reached over and stole one of her cubes.

She looked at him, giving him the same cold stare they were used to getting from their father until he slowly reached for another cube from the table and dropped it onto her napkin, replacing the one he stole. “That is what I thought,” she said softly to him.

"I missed you," Mitsuki giggled softly. He reached for his own little bundle and looked at Gaara. "So what made you fall for my sister?" he squinted at Gaara.

“Mitsuki,” Azumi scolded softly.
“I am just curious,” Mitsuki chuckled.

“You do not have to answer that,” she told Gaara.

“Was it her butt?” Mitsuki laughed.

“Mitsuki,” she scolded for real, pushing him off of her.

Gaara grinned widely, laughing a little. “I fell in love with her because your sister is amazingly smart and creative.” His eyes drifted back to Azumi. His grin softened into a fond smile. “She’s strong, resilient, resourceful and...so beautiful,” his voice softened towards the end. His cheeks started to heat up as he looked at her.

Mitsuki looked up at his sister then Gaara, smiling a little. “That is a nice way to say you liked her butt in front of Father,” he giggled. He liked Gaara. He liked even more that he saw all the best things in his sister. That the baby inside of her was really born out of love.

Azumi looked at Gaara and smiled. “I love you,” she mouthed to him.

On the small dance floor, they heard Sachiko giggling. They all turned to the pair and saw that Yashamaru dipped her.

“Maybe it is him you have to worry about,” Mitsuki teased Sandaime.

“No,” Azumi said, gently nudging her brother. “You have nothing to worry about, Lord Sandaime.”

"If I worried about every man—or woman, for that matter—who made Sachiko giggle I'd be dead from stress," Sandaime chuckled, smiling as he watched his wife and Yashamaru dance. "I just like to see her enjoy herself."

"How very healthy of you," Orochimaru laughed softly himself. He looked around the room at his family and soon to be family. "How is it only one of you turned out so well-rounded?" he asked teasingly. Sandaime stifled a snort behind his hand.

"He was the only one who was not dropped as a baby," Sachiko called from the dance floor.

"Hm, yes, parents tend to be most careful with their firstborn," Orochimaru nodded.

Azumi and Mitsuki paused, realizing that neither of them were firstborn. “Did you drop me?” they both asked their father in unison.

“Was I dropped?” Gaara asked his uncle softly, also realizing he was not a firstborn.

“I think I opened a sack of worms,” Sandaime chuckled.

Orochimaru chuckled, leaning his cheek on his hand. “The only one who was not dropped was Log,” he said easily.

“And, uh, your father almost dropped you out of a window,” Sandaime told Gaara.

Yashamaru stopped his dance with Sachiko abruptly. “Excuse me, what the fuck?” he asked.

Azumi and Mitsuki tried stifling their laughter. “I am the oldest. You should have been most careful with me.”

"You turned out fine," Orochimaru grinned unapologetically. He flicked his free hand at
Yashamaru to resume his dancing.

"I'm not remotely surprised father tried to kill me," Gaara sighed.

“That incident alone is why you spent most of your time with me and your aunt as baby,” Sandaime told him.

Sachiko and Yashamaru finished their dance and rejoined the group. “Today has been entirely too eventful,” Yashamaru sighed. He looked to Sandaime and Sachiko. “Thank you for the dance and for dinner,” he said with a bow. “Now if you will all excuse me, I am going to bed.”

“Night, Yasha,” Azumi and Mitsuki said, each throwing a lokum cube at him which he caught.

"Goodnight," Yashamaru said, slipping out of the room.

Mitsuki leaned against his sister again, trying his best to stifle a yawn of his own.

Sachiko giggled, leaning over to tap his nose. "Mitsuki have you ever had horchata?" she asked him.

He gasped and his eyes widened. “I love horchata,” he whispered. His head shot up and he looked at her. “Do you have some?”

Sachiko nodded. “One of the servants just made it fresh,” she grinned. Mitsuki's eyes grew to even wider. They even started to sparkle a little. "Let's go to the kitchen," Sachiko smiled. "We can have it with some tea cakes that I made the other day." She offered her hand to him. Mitsuki did not hesitate. He was on his feet in seconds, taking Sachiko's hand in the blink of an eye.

"Your wife does not want a son, does she?" Orochimaru said to Sandaime, chuckling lightly.

“Auntie Sachiko is only an aunt,” Gaara laughed.

Sandaime nodded in agreement. “She likes to spoil other people’s children and then give them back,” he said.

"I see that," Orochimaru chuckled. "I suppose it is good that you four did not grow up with any," Orochimaru smirked, looking at his daughter. "I think I will follow Yashamaru's lead and head off to bed." He stood, bowing his head slightly to Sandaime and Gaara. "Make sure you get enough rest," he told his daughter softly.

Azumi nodded and stood up to hug him. “Goodnight,” she said softly. Once they pulled away, she sat back down and he headed up to his room. “Today was a very long day,” she muttered once she, Gaara, and Sandaime were alone. She looked out the window and saw just how dark it was outside.

“Now that I think about it,” Sandaime said, “we are probably only a few hours away from sunrise.”

“Those adrenaline rushes kept us going,” she muttered.

Gaara hummed softly, moving over to lean against Azumi. The fatigue was really starting to hit him. He snuggled his face into Azumi's shoulder, slipping his hand into hers. "I doubt any of us will be up early tomorrow," he mumbled.

"I wouldn't think so," Sandaime chuckled. "Why don't you two head off to bed?"

“I think we will.” Azumi kissed the top of Gaara’s head and ran her free hand through his hair. “Ready?” she asked softly. He nodded and they stood up together. “Goodnight, Lord Sandaime,”
she said with a slight bow.

"Goodnight," Sandaime smiled, bowing his head to them. "Sleep well," he told them.

Gaara wrapped his arm around Azumi’s waist, pulling her close. "Goodnight, Uncle," he said through a long, tear-jerking yawn. He rubbed his eyes then held the door open for Azumi.

Together, they walked back to their room. As soon as they were there, Azumi laid down and opened her arms for Gaara to rest on her chest. “I may have depleted the last of your energy earlier,” she smirked.

“It was worth it,” he smiled, nuzzling his face into his chest. He wrapped his arms around her, pressing a kiss to her neck. “Are you not tired?” he asked her softly.

“I am,” she smirked, kissing his forehead. She gently tilted his face towards hers and kissed him softly on the lips. “Just not as tired as you.” She ran her fingers through his hair and scratched his scalp. “I will sleep, do not worry.”

He hummed softly against her lips, kissing her again. “I’m glad we can sleep together again,” he whispered. His eyes started to close. He kissed her cheek as he moved back to nuzzle into her neck. He smiled, biting it gently.

“So am I,” she whispered back through a smile. Her other hand glided up and down his back gently until she felt him fall asleep. She dozed off not too long after.
An hour or so later, Azumi woke up with the sudden urge to pee. She groaned softly, kissing Gaara before maneuvering herself out from under him. She scratched his head gently before getting out of the bed and heading to the bathroom. As she walked through the hall, Naga slithered out of Mitsuki’s room and followed her to the bathroom, telling her he was not going to take any chances and was still going to escort her when she was alone.

After she was done, she stretched hard on her way out into the hall again. Looking down at Naga, she ran her hand through her hair. “Want to go for a walk around the house?” she asked softly. He hissed, moving up her body to coil around her. She walked aimlessly through the halls until she came across the back balcony that looked over the desert behind the city and the river running away. She remembered standing there with Sachiko the night of her party. Leaning against the balcony, she mindlessly started petting Naga. “How is Ryuga?” she asked him. He hissed, telling her that Ryuga was doing fine and just needed to be careful with how he moved for a little while. She hummed, resting her chin in her hand. “That is good to hear.”

They fell silent, looking out at the scenery and feeling the light breeze of the desert night. Very far in the distance, she could see the sky changing colors, meaning the sun would be rising.

“How is Lord Sasori?” Sandaime asked as he drifted into the doorway. He had changed into his own pajamas, his robe catching the light morning breeze as he joined her at the railing. He was cradling a mug of fresh tea in his hands.

Azumi and Naga jumped slightly, not expecting anyone to also be awake. She turned around and looked at him. “I was,” she chuckled. “I had to use the bathroom and now I am having a hard time going back to sleep,” she hummed. “But should you not also be asleep?” she smirked.

“Shouldn’t you be asleep?” Sandaime asked as he drifted into the doorway. He had changed into his own pajamas, his robe catching the light morning breeze as he joined her at the railing. He was cradling a mug of fresh tea in his hands.

Azumi and Naga jumped slightly, not expecting anyone to also be awake. She turned around and looked at him. “I was,” she chuckled. “I had to use the bathroom and now I am having a hard time going back to sleep,” she hummed. “But should you not also be asleep?” she smirked.

“I’ll go to sleep soon,” Sandaime smiled. “Your brother and Sachiko are cuddling and I don’t have the heart to break them up,” he chuckled. “Tea?” he asked, offering her the cup.

“Oh, I do not want to take your cup from you,” she said.

He shook his head. “I can always make myself another.”

She slowly took the cup from him. “Thank you...” she said softly.

“You’re welcome,” he smiled. He took a seat on the patio set to the side.

Azumi looked at the cup, staring into the tea for a moment before looking back at him. “Um...may I ask you something?” she asked, sitting in the seat across from him.

"Of course," he smiled at her. "You never have to ask permission." He rested his chin in his palm, giving her his full attention.

“I am hoping you will be the one to not judge me about this but...when you followed my father...how bad did Lord Sasori look?” She frowned at the cup in her hands. “I know I should not worry about him...but I honestly cannot help it.”

Sandaime’s smile faded as he considered her question. He turned away from her, looking out over the vast desert. "I'll spare you what I'm sure you've heard from everyone else," he started, drumming his fingers very lightly on the table. He took a deep breath, frowning. "He didn't look good. He looked even worse after your father was done with him," he said, turning back to her.
"And I'll be honest, it was hard not going in there to save my brother or even to tell your father not to kill Sasori. He's still my nephew..." He paused, looking at her hard. "But you can't save him."

“I know I cannot,” she whispered. She took a deep breath before looking at him. “But...I do not want him dead. I understand he deserves everything he has gotten from both Gaara and my father. And I know I should not feel any sympathy towards him. And it is not my intention to save him myself...but he...is a much more sad individual than he is evil. And do not think that killing him is necessary.”

He looked at her hard, taking his time to mull over her words. He hummed softly, absentmindedly petting Naga who had decided to coil up in a puddle of growing sunlight on the table. "He is sad," Sandaime finally agreed. "And it's not my place to tell you how to feel," he said, looking back at her. His sharp eyes met hers once more. "But I want you to consider all of the people he's killed before you. What did they do to deserve death? Do you think he would have spared them because they were sad? Would he spare you?" His expression was a strange mixture of grim caring. "Did he ever spare you?"

Azumi closed her eyes and sighed deeply once more. “I see your point...” she said. She did not expect him to understand completely. She did not think anyone would. He was not there for the conversations she and Sasori had. Or for the times they grew closer and got along. “I am sorry for dropping this on you,” she frowned. “My own inner turmoil is the last thing you need to hear about.”

Sandaime reached out, taking her hand in his. “Your mental health is just as vitally important as your physical health,” he told her seriously. “Besides,” he cracked a smile, “listening to your troubles is a lot easier than listening to the city council. I’d take caring for my family over that any day.” He gave her hand a small squeeze. “And you are family.”

She smiled softly at him. “Thank you, Lord Sandaime,” she said. She paused for a moment. “Which I am still going to call you. At this point it will feel a little awkward to drop the title,” she chuckled.

He chuckled softly, running a hand through his hair. “You could always try a new title,” he smirked at her. “Like Uncle.”

Her smile turned into a wide grin. “I suppose I could try Uncle,” she laughed. “Just give me a little while to transition.”

“Take all the time you need,” he hummed happily through a yawn. “Mm, maybe I’ll find a guest room to fall asleep in,” he chuckled again. “I don’t think I can throw your brother out. Sachiko might get upset.”

She chuckled softly. “I should be getting back to bed as well.” She sipped the tea he gave her and stood up with it in her hand. She paused for a second. “Thank you again,” she said softly, “for...everything.”

He smiled at her, shaking his head. “Think nothing of it.” He stood up with her, circling the table and pulling her into a hug. “This is what family does for each other.” He smiled as he stepped back. He reached over and gently picked up Naga to wrap around him her shoulders. “Sleep well, you two,” he winked at her before heading into the house.

She finished the tea on her way back to her room. Naga went back into Mitsuki’s room with the other two snakes and, very quietly, Azumi crept back into her room and back into bed as gently as possible to not wake Gaara up.
The moment she was settled, Gaara’s arms wrapped around her, pulling her snuggly to his chest. He mumbled something softly in his sleep then buried his face in her shoulder. He pressed a kiss to it before falling back asleep.

She ran her fingers through his hair and scratched his head until she also fell back asleep.

It was nearly noon when everyone started to wake up. The snakes in Mitsuki’s room dispersed to find everyone and get them up. The black mamba went into Yashamaru’s room, hesitantly tapping his nose against Yashamaru’s to wake him. He was not sure how the man would react. This family was revered as gods to snakes, it seemed almost blasphemous to wake them up. Yashamaru groaned softly before opening his eyes. “I did not order a wake-up call,” he smirked, petting the snake’s head.

In Orochimaru’s room, Ryuga did not even dare to try and wake him up for the same reason the black mamba was hesitant to wake Yashamaru. Instead, he coiled up beside him and waited patiently for him to wake up. He also figured that unlike Azumi and Gaara, he did not need to be woken up.

Naga went into Azumi and Gaara’s room, hissing softly as he nestled himself in the very small space between them. He reached his head out, tapping his nose against Gaara’s.

“Mmmm,” Gaara whined softly in his sleep. His face twisted into a pout. His arms pulled Azumi—and by extension, Naga—a little closer. “Sleep, Naga,” he mumbled, dozing back off.

Naga sighed, moving to nuzzle his face against Azumi's and then tap her nose to wake her up. He knew these two were going to be the hardest to get up which is why he was the one to do it. Azumi hummed before opening her eyes very slightly. "Good morning," she smirked sleepily at him. He hissed, telling her it was actually noon. "Good morning," she repeated. He tapped her nose again, telling her to get up because he was sure she needed to vomit. It was not until he mentioned it that she started to feel nauseous. "Do not ever do that again," she groaned. She kissed the top of Gaara's head before unwrapping his arms from around her and got out of the bed. One her way to the bathroom, she started putting her hair up. Naga followed closely behind her, wanting to be there to help her out in any way, despite not having any arms to do anything for her.

Gaara woke up the moment Azumi was out of his arms. He pouted a little harder as he sat up in bed. He rubbed his face hard then swung his legs over the edge of the bed. He knew her morning sickness was going to leave her dehydrated and hungry so he decided to head down to the kitchen to make her a cup of tea and some breakfast.

“Finally up,” his aunt smirked at him as he walked in.

“Mm,” Gaara grunted softly. “I wish I wasn’t though,” he sighed, setting the kettle on the fire.

"Did you not sleep well?" Sachiko frowned. "Are you okay?"

"I slept fine." He cracked a smile for emphasis. "It just wasn't long enough." He yawned hard. He sniffled a little as he turned to pull out a pan. "I'll wake up after something to eat and some tea." He reached for something to his side as he placed the pan down and fumbled, nearly dropping it on his foot.

Sachiko crossed the room quickly, catching the pan in the nick of time. She laughed softly, cupping his face. with her free hand. "Go sit down," she ordered him. "I'll handle food."
Gaara chuckled softly as he nodded and moved to the table to take a seat. “Are you the only one awake?” he asked.

Sachiko shook her head. “Mitsuki is up. He’s in the next room. I think your uncle slept in a guest room,” she chuckled. “Mitsuki fell asleep with me.”

"Mitsuki is moving fast I see," Gaara chuckled, leaning his head against his hand.

"He's moving a little slower than your uncle did," she joked.

Gaara grimaced, then broke down into a laugh. "I don't know if I want to think about that," he waved a hand in front of his face. He glanced at the door then at the kettle.

Sachiko laughed, walking over to run a hand through his hair. "If you're that worried about her, go to her." She gently pinched his cheek. "I can handle everything here. The tea is ready anyway," she said just as the kettle started to squeal as if on her command.

Gaara chuckled and nodded as he stood up. “I’ll be right back with her,” he told his aunt.

“I’ll have her tea waiting for her,” Sachiko smiled.

Gaara left the kitchen to head to the bathroom.

Inside the bathroom, Azumi was sitting against the wall with Naga coiled in her lap. “If you did not remind me,” she groaned, “this would not be happening.”

Naga hissed a small protest, telling her that he gave her time to get to the bathroom. If he had not woken her, she would have thrown up on Gaara and it would have been gross.

Gaara chuckled, listening to Naga hiss sassily from the doorway. He crossed the room, dampening a rag with cool water before sitting down in front of her. “I take it it was bad?” he asked softly, lifting her chin on his fingertips. He leaned in to kiss her forehead then started to wipe her face.

She sighed softly through her nose and nodded. "It was definitely not enjoyable," she hummed. Once he was done wiping her face, they stood up and she washed her mouth out. She held back a shiver as she turned around to face him. "I need to be put under a heat lamp," she chuckled, wrapping her arms around him. She hummed softly at how warm he was.

He frowned, feeling how clammy her skin was. He pulled her closer, trying to warm her up. "Would you like to sit on the patio?" he chuckled. “It’s not a heat lamp but it’s warmer than inside.”

She giggled, nuzzling her face against his chest. “Mhm,” she hummed, nodding against him.

“As you wish,” he whispered. He smiled, kissing the top of her head. He pulled away just far enough to kiss her forehead before bending his knees a little, letting his hands slide down and scooped her butt to pick her up. He wrapped her legs around him to carry her down to the patio.

She chuckled softly, resting her arms on his shoulders as he carried her. "You sure do carry me a lot," she smirked. "When I get heavier, this will not happen as much."

"Are you doubting my strength?" Gaara smirked, challengingly. "I don't think it's your weight I'll ever be concerned about. I'll just have to carry you a little differently."

"I would never doubt your strength," she grinned. They stepped outside to the patio and he put her
"Your strength is unmatched," she said dramatically, leaning against the table. "Glad you're aware of that," he grinned, kissing her cheek. He laughed softly, running his hand through her hair. "I'll be right back with breakfast. Do you want anything special?" He knew his aunt was making breakfast but he was willing to bring anything she wanted in particular.

She tilted her head back and hummed in thought for a moment. "Farina?" she asked. She looked at Naga who nodded and then she nodded. "Farina," she said with finality.

"Farina," he repeated with a nod. "Be right back, my love." He kissed her temple one more time before turning to return to the kitchen. She smiled as she watched him walk away, sitting down to bask in the sun.

In the kitchen, Sachiko turned around when she heard Gaara return. "Is she alright?" she asked. Mitsuki was sitting at the table and she placed a bowl in front of him.

"She is better now," he chuckled. "She is sunning herself now on the patio. Good morning, Mitsuki," he smiled at the boy. He walked over to the counter to put together a tray.

"Morning," Mitsuki said, pulling his bowl towards him.

"That's good," Sachiko smiled, joining Gaara at the counter with two mugs of tea and two bowls for farina. Gaara stared at the breakfast she chose to make. "Something wrong?" she asked him. "Did she want something else? Mitsuki said it's one of her favorites."

"No, it's exactly what she wanted," he smiled.

"Oh, good," Sachiko chuckled.

Mitsuki dropped a few spoonfuls on cinnamon into his bowl. "I know my sister," he smirked.

"Thank you, Mitsuki," Gaara smiled, loading the tray with a few more things.

Sachiko placed a bowl with a spoon in it just before he started for the door. "Extra cinnamon," she explained when he looked at it inquisitively.

"You cannot have farina without the cinnamon," Yashamaru said, approaching the kitchen in tow of his father.

"Thanks," Gaara chuckled as he went back out to the patio. Ryuga had joined Azumi and Naga outside. Both snakes were coiled up on the table, basking with her. All three of them looked up at Gaara as he approached them. His smile softened, taking them in as he set the tray down on the table. "Your brother knows you well," he chuckled. He leaned down to kiss Azumi then took a seat next to her. Naga and Ryuga raised their heads, moving a little closer so Gaara could also give them kisses on their heads.

"Does he?" she chuckled, watching him kiss each snake on the head. "Or it is because it is also his favorite," she smirked. "Either way, thank you," she smiled.

"Both sound right," Gaara chuckled, picking up his cup of tea. "Auntie also sent extra cinnamon." He opened the little bowl for her to see. "Are you feeling a little warmer?"

"I am," she grinned, taking the little spoon and putting two spoonfuls of cinnamon in her bowl. She passed it to him in case he wanted some. "I am hoping this particular symptom does not last the rest of the pregnancy."
"It shouldn't," he told her as he spooned a healthy helping of cinnamon into his own bowl. "You're close to your third month and morning sickness usually goes away after the first trimester," he said, taking on his official doctor tone as he spoke.

"I cannot wait for the morning sickness to go away," she groaned, mixing her cinnamon into her farina and taking a bite. She hummed happily as she continued to eat. Naga hissed softly at her, telling her that he and the other snakes were going to go on a hunt later and to not be alone at any time throughout the day. Azumi rolled her eyes. "Yes, Father," she scoffed.

Gaara chuckled, digging into his own bowl. "Getting your daily orders?" he asked her.

"It seems so. Even though my real father is here," she muttered. She looked at Gaara and hummed. "Do you have any patients today?" she asked.

“Oh,” Gaara gasped softly. He blinked wide as if remembering at that moment that he was, in fact, an active doctor. He looked at her, laughing a little. "I think I have three or four, actually, to make rounds on.” He scratched his head. “Did you want to come with me? Stretch your legs a little?”

She chuckled softly. “Is that...something I can do?” she asked. “Will they be okay with me leaving?”

“They won’t,” Gaara shook his head slightly. “But we could force my brother to come along. Or pick up Shira. I have to go see him anyway.” He gave her a devilish grin. “But we should actually be fine on our own right now. Sasori is too much of a bitch to move right now,” he swore uncharacteristically. “He won’t be out and about.”

She grinned and then nodded. “I am convinced,” she chuckled. “I would love to go if it is alright with you.”

“It’s fine with me,” he smiled, leaning in to kiss her. “We can leave after a bath though.” He sat back again.

“Alright,” she chuckled. She finished off her food and started drinking her tea. “I do not think I have really seen your brother since that one party where...everyone had that...accident...”

Gaara grimaced through a laugh, recalling the moment she was talking about. “Ah, that.” He giggled again, trying hard to compose himself quickly. “He’s an artist so he’s kind of all over the place. We might run into him while we’re doing the rounds.”

“Oh, now I am excited,” she hummed. “To be able to walk around freely and to...see you at work,” she smirked, leaning over to kiss him.

“I can agree with the walking around,” he smiled into the kiss, “but my world is a little boring,” he stole another kiss. “I’ll go run the bath for you when I’m done eating.”

“You may think it is boring, but I think it would be interesting to see you tend to patients that are not me,” she chuckled. She cut herself off with a small gasp. “Can we get coffee and churros while we are out?” she asked softly.

“Of course,” he chuckled. “No question about that.” He finished off his tea and then the rest of his breakfast. “I’ll be back for you,” he said, getting up.

She nodded as he gathered everything from the table and went back inside, letting out an excited squeal once he was gone. The snakes looked at her. Naga hissed softly, telling her that he wanted her to be safe while she was out. He was trusting the fact that she was going to be with Gaara and
he would make sure nothing happens to either of them. “We will be fine,” she said, tapping his nose. “Do not worry.” He hissed again, tapping his nose against hers. Ryuga did the same thing and when the black mamba approached the table. He made his way onto it and tapped his nose against hers as well. “Thank you,” she chuckled. The three of them waited for Gaara to return before leaving for their hunt.

“Would you like to walk, milady?” Gaara bowed low, offering his hand to her. “Or would you like to rest your feet up for today?”

She chuckled softly, taking his hand. “I can walk,” she smiled, pulling him into a kiss. “But thank you.”

“Alright,” he grinned, walking with her down the hall to the bathroom. He pulled the door shut once they were inside. “I tried to do it how you normally do,” he told her. He had filled the bath with warm fragrant water. There was a towel already set out and a new pot of tea waiting for her.

“Oh, wow,” she gasped softly. “It smells amazing.” She grinned, wrapping her arms around him. “Thank you.” She pulled him into another kiss, sliding her hands down his arms to place his hands at her hips.

“I’m glad to hear that,” he said between kisses. He grinned into the kiss, pulling her close. His hands curled, slowly pulling up her dress. He stepped back just enough to pull it over her head. The moment the separation was gone, he pulled her flush to his chest.

“Would you like to join me?” she smirked, sliding her hands up his chest and then resting her arms on his shoulders.

“Of course,” he smirked, kissing down her jaw. He nipped her neck gently before pulling back to get undressed. He took her hand again and lead her to the sunken tub, settling in first. She settled in after him, sitting in his lap and wrapping her arms around him. She kissed along his jaw and down his neck. Her hands found their way into his hair. He scratched down her back lightly, letting his hands settle on her hips as he floated towards the opposite wall of the tub. He tilted his head a little to give her better access. His hands down ran over her hips and down her thighs as he pulled her into a slow kiss. “I love you,” he said softly, smiling at her. The tip of his nose brushed hers.

“I love you, too,” she smiled. Her smile slowly shifted into a devilish smirk. “So,” she said, pushing his hair back, “when do you want to get married?” she teased.

His cheeks turned a light shade of pink. He hummed, deep in his throat, letting his head fall back as he thought.

“Depends,” he matched her smirk. “Do you want our child in the wedding while still inside you?”

“I think it would be kind of cute to have them in the wedding,” she chuckled. “Having someone carry them would be precious.”

“My sister could carry them,” Gaara smiled. “We could have an outfit made for them, too,” he laughed a little, getting excited by the very idea.

“Oh, that would be adorable!” she squealed. “I love it. Ah, I do not know if you have different wedding customs here,” she hummed. “But...we have a few customs and traditions for our weddings.”

“We do but there isn’t anything that I’m particularly attached to,” he said as he slipped his fingers up her back, pressing into the muscle. He started to work her shoulders as they spoke. “Do you
want a traditional one from your village?"

“I think I do,” she said. “Since I am technically a princess,” she rolled her eyes, “it would make sense for me to have a more traditional wedding with our customs.”

“I sort of forgot about that,” he chuckled. It was a day of reminding shocks for Gaara.

“Do not worry,” she muttered. “So did I.”

“Do you like traditional weddings?” he asked her. “Easy would be best with the baby.” He worked his fingers up the back of her neck then back down to her shoulders.

She groaned as he massaged her. “I do...” she said, biting her lip. “They are very...inclusive of the family. Everyone has a part in the ceremony.”

“Really?” Gaara smirked at the reaction. He worked a knot gently until it released. “That sounds like how a wedding should be, honestly. Do you have a religious leader to say the ceremony?” He realized they had never really talked about any of this kind of stuff. He was suddenly very curious to know more about her culture and village more so than he had before.

“Um, not a religious leader,” she hummed. “My father usually does it. We do not exactly have a religion in my village. We are a very...science-based village.”

“That makes sense,” he chuckled, considering what he had learned about her over their year together. “Your father marrying us sounds very intimate,” he said, shifting his hands down to her lower back and continuing to knead the muscles.

“I suppose it is,” she hummed. “It will not exactly be an intimate setting though. Since it is the leader’s daughter getting married, the wedding is going to be pretty big whether we like it or not.”

“Ah,” he hummed, looking her in the eyes. “I don’t think I’ll mind it.” A soft smile pulled at his lips. “As long as we are together, that is all that will matter to me in the end.”

She pulled him into another kiss, smiling against his lips. “I am glad to hear that,” she said softly. Pulling away very slightly, she ran her fingers through his hair. “I think we should actually start bathing now,” she chuckled.

“I suppose,” he chuckled, reaching over to grab the soap.

She backed off of him to wash up as he did the same. “You know...I have never been to your house,” she said through a laugh as they finished up.

“Would you like to go?” he asked her with a smirk. “It’s nothing too fancy,” he told her. He got out first, crossing the room to grab their towels. He undid hers first so she could step right into it.

She stepped out of the tub and giggled as she walked into the towel he held out for her. “Thank you,” she said as she wrapped it around herself. She waited for him to dry off before lacing her fingers with his and heading back to their room.

They got dressed at a leisurely pace. When they were both finished, Gaara sat down on the bed, reaching out to pull her to him by her waist. He pressed his head into her stomach, kissing it softly. He looked up at her, smiling. “Ready to tell them we’re leaving?”

“Yes,” she chuckled, kissing the top of his head. She gently tilted his head back to catch his lips in a kiss. “Come on,” she said, sliding her hands into his to pull him off of the bed. He grabbed the
things he would need and they headed out.

On their way to Orochimaru’s room, they passed Yashamaru. “Good morning, you two,” he yawned.

“Good morning,” Gaara bowed slightly, smiling widely.

Yashamaru looked them over. “Why do I get the feeling one of you is up to something?”

Azumi and Gaara shared a look and then looked at Yashamaru and shrugged. “You are paranoid,” Azumi said. “Always have been. Where is your father?”

“Your father is in his room,” Yashamaru smirked. With a chuckle, she stepped closer to Orochimaru’s door and knocked.

"Good morning," Orochimaru said as he opened the door. He was already dressed for the day.
"Good morning," Gaara bowed his head respectfully.

"Did you two have breakfast already?” Orochimaru asked, noticing that they were also ready for the day.

"We did," Gaara smiled. "I was just getting ready to step out with Azumi." He watched Orochimaru as he said that last part of his sentence.

Orochimaru raised an eyebrow at them. “Step out?” he questioned. “To where?”

"I just have a few patients to see today," Gaara replied. "It would be good for Azumi to stretch her legs a little so I'm taking her with me."

He was about to protest when Azumi stopped him. “I will be fine,” she told him. “Any and all threats to me are incapacitated right now.”

Orochimaru's lips pressed into a fine line as he considered her words. He sighed, folding his arms a moment later. "Fine but be back before it gets dark," he told them sternly. "Sasori might not be a threat right now but you do not know what his father might do."

Gaara held Azumi's hand a little tighter, squeezing it gently. "Of course, Sir," he agreed readily. There could be a slim chance his uncle hired someone to go after Azumi thought it was highly unlikely.

Azumi grinned and hugged her father. “Thank you,” she said. “We will be fine and we will see you later.” Orochimaru hugged his daughter back, a little tighter than he normally would.

"I won't let anything happen to her," Gaara assured Orochimaru.

"I know you will not," he looked at Gaara. "I expect you need to get going," he smirked when neither of them made a move to leave.

"Yes," Gaara laughed sheepishly. He was sort of waiting to be dismissed by the man. Taking the mention of needing to see his patients as the dismissal, he bowed one more time then started down the hall with Azumi and out of the house.
Azumi let Gaara lead the way to the first patient. As they walked, she looked around at their surroundings. She had hardly ever been to this side of the city and something about being free of Sasori made even the familiar parts seem different. She was seeing everything in a whole new light and though it was a tad bit overwhelming, she liked it. Subconsciously, however, she squeezed Gaara’s hand a little tighter when they came across a crowd they had to weave through to get to their destination.

When they got to the other side of the crowd, Gaara paused to kiss her hand, flashing her a smile. "Are you okay?" he asked her softly.

She looked back at the crowd then at him and smiled. “I am fine,” she nodded.

“Tell me when you need a break,” he said, leaning in to kiss her cheek. He led her down a quieter back street to a two-story house. “This lady is a friend of my grandmother’s,” he told her as he raised his knuckles to knock on the door.

The door opened moments later and they were greeted by an elderly woman with a wide grin. "Oh, Lord Gaara," she said. "I knew I was expecting something today I just couldn't remember what," she chuckled. "Come on in." She moved out of the way for them to step into her house.

“Good morning, Mrs. Koharu,” he smiled politely as he was let into the house, still holding Azumi’s hand. They followed the old woman up the stairs to the second landing and into her kitchen. “How have you been feeling lately?” he asked her, raising his voice slightly.

“Oh, I’ve been alright,” she smiled, setting the kettle on for tea. She pulled two cups down, turned around to set them on the table then stopped short, seeing Azumi. “You have a ghost haunting you, my dear.” There was a genuine concern in her face.

Gaara’s eyes went wide in surprise. He followed her gaze. “She is not my shadow,” Gaara chuckled. The old woman did not look convinced. “This is my fiancée,” he said the word confidently. Azumi smiled and bowed slightly to Koharu.

“Fiancée?” Koharu grinned. She took a long look at Azumi which made Azumi slightly uncomfortable. She was hoping she would not recognize her as Sasori’s slave. Azumi remembered Koharu as the first person to approach Sasori and congratulate him on his purchase of her the day she became his slave. “You do look familiar,” Koharu hummed, unable to pinpoint exactly where she had seen Azumi.

“I have been here for about a year,” Azumi answered. “You may have seen me around.”

“A year,” the woman repeated, squinting into the distance. “Oh, yes! Weren’t you with—“

“Ah, Mrs. Koharu,” Gaara interjected quickly. “I don’t mean to rush you but we have a few more stops today and...”
“Oh, yes,” the elderly woman hummed. She took a seat, allowing Gaara to start his check-up.

As Gaara started the checkup, Azumi took a seat in another chair. “It’s good to know you’re doing better,” Gaara said.

“I’ve been taking my medications daily and on time,” Koharu said with a nod. “Since my granddaughter moved in with me, she’s been making sure of it.”

He smiled genially at her. “It’s good for you to have company.” He bit the rest of his statement back, refraining from mentioning his grandmother.

“It is nice,” she hummed through a smile. “I was quite lonely here before she moved in. She’s out right now at the market, getting things for dinner tonight.”

“That’s good,” he smiled. He pulled a small notebook out of his pocket to jot a few notes down then stood up. “Well, Mrs. Koharu, you are the picture of health right now,” Gaara grinned. “I’ll come by again or have someone bring your next round of medications in a few days.”

She smiled, taking his hand to pat it firmly. “Have your grandmother send it over it’s been a while since I’ve seen her.”

Azumi’s jaw dropped very slightly and she frowned a little.

Gaara paused for a moment and then nodded. “I will try to have her bring it,” he said.

Koharu grinned and nodded then walked them to the door. “Congratulations on your engagement,” she told them as they left.

Azumi took Gaara’s hand as soon as the door was closed behind then. She brought his hand up to kiss his knuckles. She knew he did not have the heart to tell that old woman that her friend was dead.

He curled his hand a little tighter around hers, taking a minute to compose himself. His grandmother’s death had happened in such a whirlwind of anger and who did it that he really had not bothered to process it much. He took a deep breath. “Come along,” he said softly, forcing himself to smile. “We can stick to the back streets for the next two houses,” he told her, leading her down another quiet street.

She caught the fake smile and frowned again. They stopped in front of the second house and before he knocked on the door, she stepped in front of him and pulled him into a kiss. “I understand having to do it for your patients,” she said softly, “but you do not need to force yourself to smile around me.”

His smile softened into a real one instantly. He kissed her again, pressing into it a little more this time. “Thank you,” he said softly with a small chuckle. He lingered for a minute to look at her then sighed. “Okay, let’s get these next two over with so we can have churros,” he grinned genuinely.

She smiled, stepping out of the way so he could knock on the door. After a few moments, the door opened. A servant greeted and bowed to them. "Good afternoon, Lord Gaara," she said. Her eyes fell on Azumi and they bowed again. "My lady," she added. "We've been expecting you—" She was cut off by a very violent cough from further in the house, surprising all three of them.

"Oh, dear," Azumi hummed.

"Lord Hayate has a hard time with taking his medications," the servant said. The worry was thick
“Can he not swallow it?” Gaara asked, his tone and face changed quickly to concerned professional.

“He can hardly keep anything down, My Lord,” the servant explained as she guided him and Azumi through the house. The incessant cough that started off distant grew louder as they climbed the stairs. They were taken to a bedroom and another servant rushed in with a pitcher of water. In the bed, a man with short brown hair was sitting against his pillows, coughing wildly. The servant with the pitcher set it down on the bedside table and moved to tend to their dying master. "It has gotten worse over the last week."

The man struggled to take a deep breath—noticeing he had guests—to greet them.

Gaara released Azumi’s hand to rush to the bedside. “Why haven’t any of you summoned me?” He lifted the gaunt man’s chin, covering his face with his other arm. Another servant rushed over with a piece of silk for Gaara and Azumi to cover their faces.

“I told them not to,” the dying make wheezed out. He struggled to swallow, choking a little.

"Why not?" Gaara asked.

"It's...too late for me," the man said, followed by another horrible cough.

"Don't say that, Lord Hayate," one of the servants protested. "It's not too late for you. You can still be healed."

Gaara pressed his ear to the man’s chest, going through the same routine of checking his vitals as he had earlier with Koharu. He was not so sure of Hayate was curable anymore. He did not want to lose his patient. Since his wife had passed away, the man had seemingly resigned himself to waste away. Gaara could fix his body but there was only so much he could do for his mentality. “When was the last time you took the medicine I prescribed?” Gaara asked.

Hayate coughed violently. “When was,” he wheezed, “our last appointment?”

“Hayate,” Gaara sighed.

“I have no reason to keep going,” Hayate waved off. “You’re wasting your time with me.”

“Hayate,” Gaara repeated more forcefully. “No life is worth giving up on. You’re still young. She wouldn’t have wanted this for you.”

Hayate smiled fondly at Gaara. “I know she wouldn’t but I really don’t want to exist without her,” he said matter of factly. Gaara’s lips pressed tightly. Hayate’s smile persisted. The man took his doctor’s hand in his to hold it gently. “I know you want to save me but what is the point? I have no children and my legacy could help this city.”

“You won’t have much of a legacy if you just let yourself die,” Gaara told him.

“How long has he been sick?” Azumi whispered to a nearby servant.

“Lord Hayate has always been prone to illness,” they whispered back, “but ever since Lady Yugao died, he’s just been letting it progress.”

Another servant poured a glass of water as Hayate went through another coughing fit. He could
barely reach for it.

“I will move you to the hospital,” Gaara half threatened. “You are far too young and this is preventable.”

“Lord Gaara, just let it go,” the man was finally able to gasp out once his fit subsided. He turned his sights on Azumi to change the subject. “You brought on an apprentice?” he asked, directing a gentle smile towards Azumi.

Azumi smiled back and chuckled. “I am no apprentice,” she answered with a bow.

“She is my fiancée,” Gaara said.

“My name is Azumi.”

“Azumi,” Hayate’s face lit up in joy. “Congratulations, both of you,” he managed to get out between coughs. A servant offered the cup of water again which the man downed quickly. “Oh,” he gasped. “Let me give you two a wedding gift!”

“No, there is no need to get us anything,” Gaara protested.

“Nonsense,” Hayate said, followed by another small cough. “When I got married we were showered in gifts. It is only fair you get the same.” Gaara opened his mouth to protest it again but Hayate stopped him quickly was a raised hand. “Do you like swords, Lady Azumi?” he asked her. There was an excited glint in his eyes.

Gaara’s jaw dropped. “Lord Hayate, you really intend to die like this,” Gaara breathed harshly through his nose.

Azumi grinned at his excitement and nodded. “I do like swords,” she answered.

“Help me up,” Hayate grinned at Gaara. The doctor reluctantly helped the man to his feet. “I’ll show you my wedding gift to you both. Leading the way, Hayate took them deeper into the house. They stopped in front of an ornate wooden door. He pushed it open, beckoning them to follow him through another coughing fit. Gaara gently rubbed his back, waiting for it to subside before entering the room with Hayate. From wall to wall, ceiling to floor, blades of every kind could be seen. “I have a little bit of a collection,” Hayate smirked.

Azumi’s jaw dropped as she looked around the room. She was expecting ‘a little collection’ so something like this was almost unimaginable. “This is amazing,” she whispered through a grin. “This is quite an arsenal, Lord Hayate,” she chuckled.

“Thank you,” he smiled at her, stifling a small cough. “It is all yours from now on,” he smiled at the both of them. “My wedding gift to you both.”

“All of it?” both Azumi and Gaara questioned, both a bit shocked.

“Are you sure you want to gift us all of these swords?” Azumi asked. “This collection would take a lifetime to build and to just get rid of it all—“

“I have lived a lifetime,” Hayate cut her off. Gaara was speechless. Hayate flashed him an almost whimsical smile as he passed the doctor to touch a pair of mounted, crossed, beautifully carved blades. “My wife would want you to have it, too.” His fingers traced the handle of the nearest blade. The room had been a symbol of their love and what they built together. “Let me pass this on to you please. You’ve done so much for me, Doctor.”
Gaara looked at him for a moment before sighing. “Thank you, Hayate.”

Azumi wanted to give the man a hug but she did not know if what he had was contagious and the last thing she needed was to get that sick while pregnant. “Thank you, Lord Hayate,” she said with a bow.

He smiled at her, following it with a formal bow. The grace of the movement was ruined by a coughing fit that brought the man to his knees. He fell hard and Gaara was there in seconds to help him back to his feet.

“Let’s get you back to bed. I’ll give you something to take the edge off.” Gaara’s thoughts were racing. He was not entirely sure what to do. Lord Hayate would not make the week but he was not sure if he was ready to accept that. Gaara pulled the frail man’s arm over his shoulders then placed an arm around his hips to help him back to his room once he was done coughing.

"I will have someone bring the collection to your house," Hayate said through a wheeze.

"Don't worry about that right now," Gaara told him as they started making their way back to Hayate's room.

"When is your wedding?"

"Oh, we are not getting married just yet," Azumi said with a soft chuckle. "It will be after our baby is born."

“Ah,” Hayate nodded with a softer smile. He glanced down at her stomach. “What a shame I won’t be around for it,” he said more to himself than them. “I can tell you will be good parents.” His smile brightened as he crawled back into bed. Gaara frowned, biting the inside of his lip.

Azumi watched the dying man settle into his bed, trying to keep herself from getting too emotional and crying. He seemed like a really sweet man and it was heartbreaking that he let himself get that bad.

“Would you like to try and eat something, Lord Hayate?” one of the servants asked.

Hayate hesitated but he caught the fierce glare Gaara was giving him. “For my doctor’s sake,” he chuckled a little through a cough. He wiped a trickle of blood away from the corner of his mouth. “A soup, please. My throat is raw,” he croaked.

The servant nodded and bowed. “It will be up in a few minutes,” they said just before leaving. Hayate coughed some more before clearing his throat and taking a long sip of water.

“How long has it been since the last time you ate?” Gaara asked him.

“A day or so since my last attempt,” Hayate answered.

“I’m not going to lecture you on why that’s bad,” Gaara sighed. “Azumi, we are going to stop at the shop,” he told her. “I need to see you take this medication,” he turned back to Hayate.

“There is no need—“ Hayate started.

“Yes, there is," Gaara cut him off. “I can’t have you dying on me. I won’t let you die.”

Hayate took a breath to replied but fell once more into a rough coughing fit. The man gasped for air between each spasm. Gaara curled his hands tightly.
Once the fit passed Hayate pressed back into his pillows, curling in on himself. No one spoke for a few minutes as the dying lord composed himself. A servant rushed to bring him water.

Gaara turned to take Azumi’s hand. “We will be back,” he said through gritted teeth.

“The door will be open for you,” the servant said as Gaara led Azumi out of the room.

They made their way down the stairs and out of the house. Azumi squeezed Gaara’s hand a little, causing him to stop. “If I die, please do not let yourself get that sick,” she said softly.

He let go of her hand to cup her face in both of his. “I would never,” he said lowly, looking hard into her eyes. “We are having a child. If either of us dies, we must be thinking of them. Promise me the same,” he said, moving closer to her.

She bit her lip and nodded, wrapping her arms around him and resting her head against his chest. “I promise,” she whispered. She did not want to think about either of them losing each other but after seeing Hayate, the thought of one of them purposely letting themselves get sick and losing the will to live scared her. “He does not want to be saved,” she frowned.

He laced his fingers into her hair with one hand, stroking it gently while the other hand fell to her back. He pulled her closer, holding her tighter. “He doesn’t,” Gaara agreed. “But it goes against my oath and morals to let him just die.” He kissed her head gently. “I have to make the effort to save him. Just like I wouldn’t let you go.” His heart pounded as a thought struck him. One he had been avoiding in the back of his mind. Azumi was strong but that did not guarantee she would live through the birth of their child.

She leaned up to kiss him. "I love that about you. Let us go get that medicine for him," she said. "We’ll stop and get those churros if you still want them," Gaara smiled as he stepped back. His hand retook hers, leading her down more back streets. “We’ll be passing the coffee shop.”

She bit her lip in a grin. "Yes," she chuckled. "I do still want them." She lifted his hand as they walked to press a kiss to the back of it.

Together they walked down a series of back streets until the scent of coffee and sweet cinnamon wafted through the air. He guided her down a particularly narrow alleyway that opened up to the main street right next to the coffee shop. He had purposely avoided the main roads, knowing the foot traffic would have picked up by then. They walked into the coffee shop. “Choose a table.” He kissed her cheek. “I’ll order.” He let go of her hand to make his way to the front of the shop.

Azumi giggled softly, choosing a table by the window so they could people-watch inside and outside from their seats. As she waited for Gaara, she watched as people walked by the shop. Her thoughts drifted to how sick Hayate looked then to how bad Sasori probably looked at the moment. She did not feel herself frown as she hoped he was alright after whatever her father did to him. She fought off the thought of looking for him to check on him, knowing that it would only cause more issues.

Gaara ordered their chosen snacks then turned from the counter to scan the room for Azumi. He found her easily at the window. He smiled as he crossed the room but stopped a few steps away when he saw the worried look on her face. Was something wrong? He took his seat across from her, taking her hands once more in his. “What are you thinking about?” he asked her gently. His eyes searched her face. “Are you feeling okay?” he followed up quickly.

She looked up at him and smiled. "I am feeling fine," she said. "Even better now that we have
churros,” she chuckled. She sat up straight and pulled his hand close to kiss his knuckles. "Thank you." She could not tell him what she was thinking about. She did not want to be told to stop caring about him.

He smiled at her but it was weighed down at the corners with worry. “Anything for you, my love,” he said softly. He picked up a churro to offer to her.

She grinned, taking the churro and humming happily as she bit into it. She looked at him for a moment. "Are you okay?” she asked, catching his worry. "Would you rather have gone to the shop first?"

He absentmindedly took her free hand in his. He lifted it to kiss her knuckles this time. “It won’t take me long to make the medication,” he told her. “I’m fine,” he smiled, giving her hand a small squeeze. “I’m fine as long as you are.”

“I am doing great,” she smiled, feeding him a churro. She looked out the window and saw a familiar person pass them and enter the coffee shop. “Your brother just arrived,” she chuckled.

“So he has,” Gaara said as he munched the churro. He watched his brother walk up to the counter to order. He promptly seemed to zone out. “I’ll bring him over.” He swallowed as he stood up, not letting go of her hand. He waved his hand over his head to catch Kankuro’s attention. The older man’s expression shifted to something more present.

“Gaara,” he grinned, crossing the room the second he registered the redhead was his brother. “And...Azumi.” There was a small question in his tone.

“Hello,” she smiled. She picked up a churro with her free hand and offered him one. “Would you like one?”

“Sure,” he smirked at her, accepting the sweet. “So,” he looked between his brother and Azumi. “You really beat up Sasori?”

“It wasn’t just me,” Gaara sniffed. “And he deserved it. You know he did,” he hissed.

Kankuro’s eyebrows shot up but his smirk remained. “I didn’t say he didn’t,” he said easily. Gaara’s lips turned down in a pouty frown. “Relax,” Kankuro chuckled. “I’m just surprised you finally snapped over someone.” He glanced down at Gaara’s and Azumi’s hands.

“If you are not in a rush to go somewhere,” Azumi told him, “you are welcome to sit down.”

Kankuro hummed in thought for a moment, thinking about where he was heading. With a shrug and a chuckle, he sat down with them. “So, did Sasori let you go?” he asked her.

“Mmm,” she hummed in a slightly high pitch, “not...exactly.”

His eyes lit up with intrigue. “Did you take her from him?” he asked his brother who was retaking his seat.

Gaara tilted his head mimicking Azumi’s tone. “Not exactly,” he chuckled.

“This sounds like a story I need to hear,” Kankuro said, sitting back and folding his arms over his chest. “And none of us are leaving until I do,” he smirked.

“Uh, well, as you know, I worked for your cousin,” Azumi started.
“Yes,” Kankuro nodded, following along easily.

“And he tried to kill me on multiple occasions,” she continued.

“Oh,” he frowned.

“So Gaara was around a lot. To, you know, make sure I did not die.”

“Oh-huh...”

“And we sort of grew...very close. So no, he did not take me from Lord Sasori but...you know.”

“I see.” He looked at Gaara and raised an eyebrow. “So that explains this,” he said, pointing to their hands.

“Oh, there’s more,” Gaara sighed.

“More?” Kankuro drew out the word.

“Well,” Gaara fought and lost hard to keep a smile off his face. He paused to find the right words all while his smile grew.

Kankuro’s own mouth split into a smile, guessing what his brother could look so unusually happy about. “Are you two eloping?” he teased.

“No,” Gaara said firmly. “No, but we will be married...after the baby is born.”

“Baby?!” he gasped. His wide grin remained but he could not help but worry about the possible repercussions with Sasori and their father.

“Yes,” Azumi chuckled. “I am two months pregnant.”

“Congratulations,” he said. “But who else knows about this?”

“Sasori and his parents,” Gaara answered.

“Lord Sandaime and Lady Sachiko,” Azumi added.

“Shira,” he continued.

“Utakata, my father, and my brothers.”

“And I’m only finding out now?” Kankuro gasped, feigning offense. He knew he and his brother were both busy men and hardly saw each other so he was not truly offended by not being told sooner. “So Father doesn’t know yet...”

“Of course he doesn’t,” Gaara scoffed. “And if I had my way, he wouldn’t find out until we were long gone.”

“Gone?”

“Her family is here,” Gaara explained. “And I intend on following her home.”

Kankuro took another churro, dipping it into his coffee the moment it arrived. He frowned deeply. His brother leaving the city, their father not knowing he was about to be a grandfather. This was a lot to process. “We need to tell Temari,” he finally said.
“Does she even still live in this city?” Gaara chuckled. “I haven’t seen her in a longer time than I haven’t seen you.”

“She’s a very busy woman,” Kankuro hummed. “But she needs to know. You’re her brother, too.”

“I know,” Gaara sighed.

“I’ll get ahold of her,” Kankuro assured his brother. “Are you really not going to tell father?” He did not blame his brother for not wanting to tell their father. Rasa had never cared for Gaara. However, he was mildly surprised Gaara did not want to rub the prospect of him living every dream their father did not have for his youngest son.

“He deserves nothing from me and he shall receive nothing from me,” Gaara said resolutely. “He hasn’t had a day of my life since I moved out and he certainly will not have a day now.”

“I understand,” Kankuro nodded. "So where is Sasori now if you two can just be out in public like this when he didn't exactly just let you go?" he asked.

"We actually do not know where he went," Azumi said. "After an... altercation with my father, he got away but no one knows where he went."

"He and his father are together though,” Gaara added.

"Uncle got involved?" he asked in shock that their mild-mannered uncle would be mixed up in anything to do with his son or an altercation.

"Yes, it would seem Uncle is still a better father than ours," Gaara snorted. “Oblivious but still decided to protect his son despite his son being a monster.”

"Wow, there's so much drama I wasn't aware of," Kankuro hummed.

"It has been a wild ride," Azumi nodded, sipping her coffee.

Kankuro stayed silent for a moment, taking in all of the information he was just given. "I...want to have dinner with you two and Temari one of these nights. Just the four of us. I'll tell her about it and we'll break all of this news to her there."

“That sounds like it would be really nice,” Gaara smiled.

“I’ll tell Temari,” Kankuro smiled. “Have you two met Shikamaru yet?” he asked them.

“I have,” Gaara nodded. “I like him.”

“I do too,” Kankuro chuckled. “Now that I know we both approve of him I guess she can marry him.”

Gaara chuckled, eating another churro. “And here I thought she would be halfway through her wedding plans by now.”

“Oh, she is,” Kankuro matched his brother’s laughter. “She wastes no time.”

“I know he’ll fit right in,” Gaara nodded.

“No doubt,” Kankuro chuckled. He finished off his coffee. “Well, I need to get to a consultation for a client.”
“And you have a patient to make a medicine for,” Azumi told Gaara.

“I do,” Gaara nodded, standing with his brother. He smiled, bowing to kiss Azumi’s hand once more. “Stop by Aunt and Uncle’s to talk about that dinner,” he reminded his brother.

Kankuro flashed him a devilish smirk. “I will.” He bowed low to Azumi, taking her free hand to repeat his brother’s actions and kiss the back of it. “It is nice to remeet you Lady Azumi,” he said her proper title with a mischievous grin.

Azumi chuckled softly, bowing slightly. “As it is you, Lord Kankuro,” she smirked. She grabbed the last of the churros as she stood up.

“I’ll see you two around,” Kankuro said as he backed away from them and left.

"Are you ready?" Gaara kissed her cheek. He gently gave her hand a tug for her to follow him. She smiled and nodded as she started following him out of the coffee shop, staying very close to him as they entered the crowded street. They made their way quickly to Sasori’s shop which still had its ‘closed’ sign up. Azumi frowned, realizing it had been up for quite some time. Gaara grabbed the key and unlocked the door to let them in. The air in the shop had quickly turned thick, stagnant, and dry. Everything was left the way it had been the last time they had been there for the most part. "If there is anything you need while we are here, now would be the time to take it," Gaara said as he ducked behind the front counter to pull out a few sachets of medications to start blending them together.

Azumi nodded and went into the backroom to where the snakes were being kept. She picked each one up and placed them on the floor then opened the back door. “You can all go now,” she told them sweetly. As they left, she gathered a few oils to make some new scents on her downtime at Sandaime’s and Sachiko’s house.

Gaara packaged up the finely ground powdered medication then quietly crossed the room to peek on Azumi. "Is that all you want to bring?" he asked her. He wrapped his arms around her from behind, kissing her neck.

"I think so," she hummed, pressing her body back against his. "Are you done?" she asked, turning to kiss him.

"I am," he said against her lips. He kissed her again, holding her close. He would never get enough of holding her body against his. He pulled her into another kiss, pressing into it. This was the first time in a while they were really truly alone. He wanted to relish it a little.

She hummed in the kiss, smiling against his lips. Her fingers laced in his hair and she bit his lip gently. "Let us get this medicine to Lord Hayate...deal with your last patient...then go to your house," she smirked against his lips. "You can give me a tour and we can have...a little fun with our alone time."

"I love the way you think," he moaned softly into the kiss. He bit her lip then took a step back. "Alright, let's go," he chuckled, stealing another kiss as they walked back to the front of the shop. He picked up the wrapped medication, tucking it into his bag. "Do you have everything?" He was doing a poor job of hiding his excitement.

"Mhm," she hummed, chuckling as she 'discreetly' shoved her oils into his bag. She smiled up at him as she took his hand. Together, they headed back to Hayate's house.

The servant that let them in previously opened the door for them once more. "The lord is sleeping
now," she told the doctor. "But I will wake him. Is there anything you need from us?"

"Just some water and a cup of tea," he told them.

The servant nodded and headed into the kitchen to grab the water and tea. Another servant led them back up to Hayate's room. As they entered the room, they could hear the sounds of Hayate sleeping. Azumi frowned, hearing the horrible rattling in his chest every time he exhaled. "This is actually the quietest he's slept in a while," the servant whispered.

"That could be a good thing," Gaara circled the bed, accepting the cup of water that was handed to him. He sat down on the edge of the bed then pulled the medicine from its packaging to pour it into the water. "Or a bad sign," he frowned with concern.

The servant gasped softly. "Is there really no hope?" she whispered.

"I am going to do everything I can," Gaara said. "But he needs to take his medication."

"We will make sure he takes it from now on," the servant agreed quickly, with a deep bow. Gaara waved off the bow in favor of gently nudging the sleeping lord awake. Hayate groaned, coughing as Gaara cradled him in his arms.

As Hayate opened his eyes a little, he made eye contact with Azumi. "Welcome back," he wheezed with a small smile. He looked up at Gaara and wanted to say the same to him but was caught in another coughing fit.

"Drink this," Gaara picked up the cooling tea. It was the right temperature to help calm the man's coughing fit without burning skin from his throat. Hayate struggled at first to get his lips to the edge of the cup. Once he did though, Gaara tipped the cup so he could swallow half the cup.

"Thank you," he finally was able to breathe out.

Gaara shook his head. "Don't push yourself to speak too much," he said. He waited a few moments for Hayate to settle before giving him the rest of the cup's contents. When the cup was emptied, he helped the dying lord into an upright position while the servants fluffed the pillows.

Hayate coughed softly, but much more subdued than before. "Thank you," he said softly, finally getting a good breath in.

Gaara shook his head again, picking up the glass with the medication. "I'm your doctor, this is my job," he cracked a smile. "Here is your first dosage of the new medication. You need to take this every morning and every night. Faithfully." He narrowed his eyes at the man.

Hayate frowned and looked away from the glare his doctor was giving him. He sighed but it came out as a shaky exhale. "Alright," he said. "I promise to take it."

“I believe you,” Gaara’s frowned turned to a cheeky smirk. “And your servants will be enforcing it.” He nodded to the servant nearby who bowed in response.

Hayate looked between them for a moment, his mouth open in a small o then chuckled. “Fair enough,” he smirked with a little resign. He knew there was no point in arguing. “I guess I will have to try and live,” he teased.

"Dying is not an option for you because I'm your doctor," Gaara said.

"I suppose it isn't," Hayate chuckled.
"Would you two like anything?" the servant asked Gaara and Azumi.

Azumi shook her head. "No, I am fine, thank you," she smiled.

"We actually have one more patient to be getting to," Gaara said.

"Then I don't want to take up to much more of your time doctor," Hayate smiled tiredly. He downed his medication, grimacing at the flavor, then set his glass down on his bedside table.

"I will leave the medications with your servants and check-in to make sure you are taking them," Gaara warned as he got up.

"Right," Hayate chuckled. "See you soon then," he smirked.

"I will walk you two out," the servant said.

"Have a good day, Lord Hayate," Azumi smiled, bowing to him.

"You as well, Lady Azumi," Hayate bowed his head with a kind smile. Gaara offered the lord his own bow then followed the servant with Azumi back to the front of the house.

"We can not thank you enough," the servant stopped Gaara at the door. She bowed low, letting her head touch her knees.

Gaara shook his head. "As I said upstairs," he put a hand on the servant's shoulder, "this is my job." He smiled at the servant.

The servant came up from the bow and grinned wide. "Right," she said with a slight chuckle. It was obvious they were on the verge of tears. She was afraid of losing the man she worked for. "But still, we are grateful. We'll see you soon. Take care."

Azumi took Gaara's hand in hers and gently tugged him as the servant closed the door with one last small bow. "And you told me these visits were boring and uneventful," she said, bringing his hand up to kiss his knuckles.

"They usually are," he smirked, wrapping an arm around her waist to pull her close. He pressed a kiss to her lips then stepped back. "Let’s go. We have one last patient to see and then my attention is all yours." Together, they started for the back streets once more. Gaara led her down a street that turned into a bridge, giving them a view of part of the city and many of its inhabitants going about their lives. "This next patient shouldn’t be too heavy," he chuckled.

"Thank the gods," she giggled as she followed him easily. She looked around at the new part of the city they entered. It was much more residential and a lot less crowded than what she was used to seeing. They finally approached the last house and walked up to the front door. "It is quieter over here," she hummed as Gaara knocked on the door.

"Mhm," Gaara agreed. "This is where a lot of families live so there will be a lot of kids around here once school lets out." He walked up to a door with dried flowers hanging on the front door. "And then it isn’t so quiet," he chuckled. They did not wait long for the door to be opened.

A very handsome but exceptionally pale man smiled brightly at them from the threshold. "Lord Gaara," he smiled. "Glad you could come at such short notice." He bowed his head.

"No trouble at all, Sai," Gaara returned the gesture.
Sai stepped back to let them into the house. “He is being very dramatic.” His tone held a current of mirth as he spoke.

Gaara chuckled as he and Azumi stepped into the house. “How much more dramatic than last time?” he asked.

“Last time he was ’suffering,’” Sai smirked. “This time he’s ‘dying.’”

“Well, I’ll try to prevent him from dying. Where is he?”

“He’s up this way.” Sai motioned for them to follow him up a flight of stairs. They walked down a long hall to the room at the end. The whole way there they could hear soft, whiny moans and a softer voice sighing. Sai circled the bed as he stepped into the room.

In the bed, a boy the complexion of his father sat propped up on his pillows. “Just put me out of my misery,” he groaned.

“You just have a cold, Inojin,” a woman with long blond hair was sitting next to her son’s bed, looking mildly frustrated.

"A deadly cold," the boy countered.

"It won't kill you when I'm done," Gaara told him.

"He sounds like Yashamaru," Azumi chuckled softly, knowing her brother was just as dramatic as this boy.

"Did Yashamaru die by a cold?" Inojin asked through a stuffy nose.

"No, Yashamaru is still alive," she smirked. "He beat the cold he had. And so will you."

"Mmm, I don't know about that," Inojin protested, with a small pout. "I'm weaker this time."

"I've never known you to be weak," Gaara smirked. "Have you been listening to your mother and eating right?" he questioned.


“I didn’t think so,” Gaara smirked.

“Don’t forget about swimming in the river,” his mother scolded softly.

“Ah, so that’s the cause of the cold this time.”

Inojin said nothing, looking away from both Gaara and his mother.

“You knew Dr. Gaara would figure it out,” Sai smirked from the other side of the bed. He grinned as his son sunk lower into his pillow with even poutier coughs.

“Who else was going to get Chocho’s hair ribbon back?” he grumbled.

“You told me it was a dare to see who could hold their breath the longest,” his mother countered quickly.

“While getting Chocho’s ribbon,” Ino added.
Gaara chuckled softly as he moved over to the bed and sat down to start Inojin’s checkup. “Can’t breath out of your nose?” he asked.

Inojin shook his head. “Nope. My nose is shutting down.”

“Mmm,” Gaara hummed seriously. He started to palpitate the young teen’s throat. “And you’ve been throwing up?”

“Yes, sir,” Inojin sniffled. “I can’t keep anything down for long. My stomach is rejecting everything.”

“That’s no good,” Gaara nodded solemnly. He reached into his bag to pull out his stethoscope and held it between his hands to warm it up. “Okay, well I need you to try your very best,” he fought to keep his face serious as he spoke, “and take a very deep breath for me when I put this to your chest. Can you do that for me?” Inojin’s parents stifled their laughter.

“I can try,” Inojin said softly. He waited for Gaara to press the stethoscope to his chest and took a deep breath. It was a little shaky from a small phlegm buildup. “You hear that?” he gasped. This time it was Azumi’s turn to stifle her laughter.

“I heard it loud and clear,” Gaara smirked. “And I can assure you that you will live.” He turned to Inojin’s mother as he reached into his bag. “Ino, just keep giving him tea and broth for his stomach with some ginger and this,” he pulled a brown little vile out of his bag, “ is for the phlegm.”

“What is that?” Inojin’s eyes went wide.

“Poison, son,” Sai chuckled. “Clearly.” Inojin sent a glare his father’s way.

“It’s just oil of oregano. A teaspoon of that will clear anything in your chest away.”

“Thank you,” Ino chuckled.

“You’ll be better in no time,” Gaara told Inojin.

“If I die,” Inojin started, “I’m haunting you.”

“Ooh, he sounds serious,” Azumi mock-whispered to Gaara.

“He’s very serious,” Sai smirked, running a hand through his son’s hair. He gently pushed the damp bangs out of the boy’s face.

Inojin’s lips pushed out in a slight pout. “Only thing you guys are taking seriously,” he rolled his eyes.

“Stop being a brat and say thank you,” Ino scolded him, putting her hand on her hip.

Inojin coughed softly and bowed his head to Gaara. “Thank you,” he said.

“You’re welcome, Inojin,” Gaara smiled.

“I’ll go make some tea now,” Ino said. “Would you two like some?” she asked Azumi and Gaara.

“Ah, normally I would say yes,” Gaara smiled apologetically, “but we have one more patient to see today and I don’t want to keep them waiting too long,” he explained.

“Oh, no,” Ino waves off the apology. “We understand! Come by and see us at the shop soon,” she
smiled. “Inojin will make you an arrangement on the house,” she winked.

“We’ll take you up on that,” Gaara chuckled.

“Thank you for curing our son of his deadly disease,” Sai joked with a bow.

“All in a day’s work,” Gaara smirked.

“You two have a good day,” Ino chuckled.

“You as well,” Azumi said with a slight bow before following Gaara out.

They left the house and started towards Gaara’s house. He was going his best not to pull her along or rush as they made their way to his mansion. His heart skipped in his chest as a grin pulled at his lips. He was not sure he would ever understand why he got so giddy being alone with Azumi but he did. “I haven’t been home in a while but the housekeeper that stops by once a week should have kept it pretty clean,” he told her when they turned a corner. The mansion soon came into view.

Azumi gasped softly when she saw it. It was bigger than she had expected it to be. “You live alone in that?” she chuckled as they got closer.

“I do,” he chuckled. “I don’t really need most of the space but I have it. I used to let patients stay here if they were particularly ill so I could watch over them,” he explained as they entered the grand mansion. Its design was much simpler and understated compared to Sandaime’s or Sasori’s homes. But there was an elegance to it that said a nobleman still lived there. “I don’t really keep servants either so it’s just the two of us here,” he grinned, turning to her. He shut the door, pressing her up against it as he took her lips in a deep kiss.

She slid her hands up to rest on his shoulders and pulled his body against hers so she was pressed between him and the door. “That sounds perfect,” she said against his lips.

“I’m glad you think so,” Gaara grinned, kissing down her neck. “Let’s go find somewhere more comfortable than the front door,” he murmured. He slid his hands down her waist to pull her close and pick her up without breaking his stream of kisses. “You choose. Scenic route or direct,” he chuckled.

She giggled a little, running her fingers through his hair. “I love a good scenic route,” she smirked.

“I’m glad you think so,” Gaara grinned, kissing down her neck. “Let’s go find somewhere more comfortable than the front door,” he murmured. He slid his hands down her waist to pull her close and pick her up without breaking his stream of kisses. “You choose. Scenic route or direct,” he chuckled.

She giggled a little, running her fingers through his hair. “I love a good scenic route,” she smirked.

“Perfect,” he grinned, taking her lips in a kiss as he turned them around to start down the hall. He wandered into his large airy living room first. He broke the kiss to let them break and for her to look around. Everything was simple but elegant. Not much fuss in the room. “You’ll probably think I’m boring after this tour,” he chuckled, sitting her down on the low glass table in the middle of the room. He knelt down in front of her to pull her back into a kiss.

“You day that a lot,” she chuckled. “But I would never think you are boring. I see this more as a simple, quiet lifestyle and to be quite honest,” she caressed his face, “I think that is ideal.”

He leaned into her touch, smiling. He closed his eyes before turning his head to press a kiss to her palm. “I hope I can give you something like this no matter where we live,” he said softly. He kissed her wrist then looked up at her. “You deserve it as long as you want it.”

She grinned and pulled him into another kiss. “I absolutely want it,” she said softly against his lips. “It sounds perfect.”

He grinned into the kiss, laughing softly as he deepened it and picked her back up, spinning them a
little as he started for the open hallways the ran along the river. It nearly came up to the house. He bit her lip gently then looked out over the water. “I hope our child never knows our struggles.” There was a breeze that lifted her hair a little. He smiled, threading his fingers through the black strands.

She looked out onto the river and smiled, finding this view of the river to be way better than the view of it from Sasori’s bathroom. “They will not,” she said, turning back to him. “I will make sure of it. All they need to know is that they are loved. And they will know it very well.”

“You’re right.” He swore he was falling even deeper in love with her. He kissed her again. “And I will make sure they see how loved their mother is,” he smiled, nuzzling his nose against hers. He looked into her eyes, pausing for a moment as he lost his breath. They only hear the sound of their breaths and the rush of the river. “What room do you want to see next?” he asked her softly, his lips brushing hers as he spoke.

A grin slowly spread across her lips. “Show me your room,” she said. “I am admittedly curious about what luxurious comfort you have been sacrificing all this time to just to sleep in my very small bed.”

“My luxury was sleeping next to you,” he laughed softly, moving on to continue their journey. The doors to his room were just as simple as the rest of his house. He easily opened them with one hand. The room was washed in soft blue light. It was faced away from the sun so it was washed in cool shadows. Across from them were large open windows and to their right was a massive, comfortable bed with white linen sheets and enough pillows to simulate sleeping on a cloud. He crawled onto the edge of the bed, making his way to the head of it before letting her rest back into the pillows.

She giggled through a soft sigh as she felt how soft the pillows were. “Wow,” she grinned. “This is very nice.” She ran her hand across the sheets. “I might have gotten pregnant sooner on this bed,” she joked.

“Damn,” he laughed softly. “Maybe I should have snuck you over sooner,” he teased back. He moved to lay next to her, propping his head up on his arm so he could look at her. His free hand rested on her hip. “Or maybe you would have gotten decent sleep,” he hummed.

"I slept quite decently when you were there," she smirked. She turned toward him and wrapped her arms around him, pressing her body against his. "And I would sleep amazingly in this bed as long as you are here."

“Mm, maybe we should test that theory?” he grinned, pulling her close again. “I think we could handle a nap.” He kissed her softly.

"I could not agree more," she smirked, resting against him. They settled in comfortably and she glided her nails gently up and down his back until she eventually drifted off to sleep. Gaara soon followed after her, relaxing with her safely in his arms.
“Sasori you need to let me cle—“

“Get away from me!” Sasori growled, swatting his fretting mother away. The action aggravated the pain he was still feeling run through his body. He winced, clenching his teeth hard. He had been holed up in his parents’ house since Orochimaru’s charming visit. He had not been able to move much since and it infuriated him.

“You can’t do this on your own,” she scoffed.

“I don’t need—“

“You barely made it out of there alive,” his father cut him off. “You have no choice but to let her help you.”

Sasori gave his father a hard look. He could not argue with that. He just did not want to admit to it. He looked at his mother and his face softened. “Fine,” he sighed.

“Thank you,” she sighed. “Do you think you can get up for a proper bath?” she asked him gently. She had been giving him sponge baths since being submerged was too painful. It was...not the highest point in his life.

“Yes, I think I can manage,” he grunted, starting to shift his body towards the edge of the bed so he could get up. About halfway up, pain shot through his body and he let out a soft wheeze. His mother stepped closer, ready to catch him if he fell. Sasori moved slowly as he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and stood up. With his mother very close behind him, he started moved, very slowly, to the bathroom.

Sasori’s father walked ahead of them, setting up the bath with herbs to help with his cuts and testing the water to make sure it was not too hot. His mother gently helped him undress before handing him off to his father who helped ease him into the water. Sasori was hating every single second of this baby treatment. He needed to heal fast to he could find Azumi. If she thought that her father was going to keep him at bay forever she was in for so much more than a rude awakening. He ground his teeth as the water washed over his wounds. He settled into the tub with a pained hiss.

Once he was situated, his mother brought over a towel and set it down next to him. “I’ll let you soak for a few minutes and then I’ll come and help you wash up,” she told him.

“No, I got it,” he said, leaning against the wall of the tub. He let out a soft sigh as some of the wounds started to ease.

His mother pulled back, glancing at her husband. Her brows were pulled in tightly with worry but he gave her a soft smile. “Go,” he mouthed to his wife with a gentle smile.

She sighed again, looking down at her son. "Alright. I'll go prepare dinner then," she sighed once more.

Sasori closed his eyes, rolling them behind his lips. He understood that she cared but she was overbearing. He did not need to be smothered. He needed to plot! After a few seconds, Sasori could still feel his father’s presence. “You can go too,” he said without opening his eyes. “I don’t need to be babysat.”
His father looked up as he shook his foot out of his pants. "I'm not babysitting you," he chuckled. "I'm joining you." He circled the tub to get in on the opposite side.

"Father, seriously?" Sasori sighed, on the verge of sobbing.

“Yes, Sasori,” he said, settling in on his side, “seriously. This is my house and you are my son.” Sasori stayed quiet for a long moment before letting out a groan. “I just wanted to be alone,” he muttered.

“I can’t trust you to be alone in the tub. You might drown.”

"I'm hurt, Father, not dying!" Sasori whined. He ran his hands down his face then pushed them up through his hair.

His father sighed, smirking a little as he looked at his son. "But you were dying," he reminded him airily. Sasori groaned again, resting his head against the arm he flopped down on the edge of the tub. His father smiled slightly. "I'll take your mother out for a bit after we eat and you can have your alone time," he assured his son.

Sasori sighed and sunk a little lower in the tub. “Fine,” he relented. Suddenly, he wanted to rush his bath and hurry up and eat so he could finally be alone.

His father stared at him for a moment longer. “So...” he started, “how are you going to get her back?”

Sasori blinked at his father for a moment. It was not really a surprise to him that his father assumed he was going to plot to get her back. “I need her alone. She knows she is mine. She won’t resist me.”

“She might not but her father will. And your cousin. Neither of them seemed eager to play your game, Sasori.”

“Which is why I need her alone,” Sasori hissed. “She wouldn’t dare fight back against me alone.”

“You can’t bank on her not resisting you,” he said. “Especially since her father is here. But...I’m going to trust that you can figure it out. You know her better than I do.”

"I can be very persuasive with her," Sasori smirked. He closed his eyes, thinking of what he wanted to do to her once he got her back. First and foremost, the baby had to go. He was not going to deal with all of those emotions and hormones. Secondly, he was considering keeping her chained down to certain rooms. He trusted her—or at least he had trusted her—not to run. However, he did not trust others to not steal her away.

His father hummed softly and nodded before he started to wash himself up. “You’ll have to take care of her family as well,” he said. He did not mean in a hospitable way and he was sure Sasori knew that. “That will solve the bulk of your problems.”

“Thank you, Father, for this wise suggestion,” he said sarcastically. He smirked slightly, watching his father roll his eyes.

His father narrowed his eyes, leaning across the tub to poke his son hard in the shoulder. “When did you become such a brat?” he smiled a little. It melted quickly, though, into a look of concern.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Sasori’s own smirk faded. “I can handle them.”
His father said nothing but nodded. It was not that he did not believe in Sasori but he saw just how brutal Orochimaru was and he feared losing his son. "Right," he said. He finished washing himself up and stepped out of the bath just as his wife came back into the bathroom.

"Dinner is ready," she told them both.

“What did you make, my love?” he asked, wrapping a towel around his hips. He guided his wife out of the room, leaving Sasori a moment to himself.

Sasori sighed, sinking even further into the water. He heard his mother answer his father from his room. He was not truly alone but this was decent enough for now. He needed to figure out where Azumi was and just how he wanted to lure her away. He took a few more moments to wash himself up before slowly lifting himself out of the tub. The pain in his body had soothed a little but moving was still hard for him. Yet, he still refused to ask for help from his parents. After a minute of struggling, he was finally out of the bath. He wrapped his towel around his waist and moved to the next room to get dressed. Putting clothes on proved to be harder than he wanted to admit but eventually, he was able to do it. With a heavy sigh, he ran his hand through his hair and went to the kitchen to meet his parents for dinner.

“It really took him twenty minutes,” his mother sighed the second he walked in the room. His father chuckled softly, trying his best to stifle it.

Sasori frowned, squinting at his parents. “Were you timing me?” His lips pinched.

“Yes,” his father smirked. “Your mother was concerned that you couldn’t handle it yet and I said you could do it but it would take you about twenty minutes.”

Sasori’s face fell blank. He started at his parents vacantly. “I see,” he hummed, taking his seat.

“Oh, don’t be that way,” his mother frowned, taking his hand with the continued look of concern for him on her face. It was really starting to annoy him.

He gently retracted his hand from her. "I don't need to be treated like some helpless child," he told them as he started eating. He could not stress that to them enough and it seemed like they were going to continue to baby him. His mother sighed heavily but started to eat her own dinner. Her husband pulled her, thankfully, into some conversation, leaving Sasori to his own thoughts. He downed the meal faster than he expected himself to. He stood up slowly, using the table for support. “I’m going to my room,” he told his parents.

His mother began to protest but his father spoke up first. “Alright, son.” He squeezed his wife’s hand. “Ring the bell if you need anything.”

He nodded and then headed back to his room. He immediately went to the desk, not wanting to lay down just yet. He did not want to struggle to get out of the bed and he sure as hell did not want to ask for help. Sitting was an easier position to get up from. He sighed and ran his hand through his hair, formulating a plan to figure out where she was and how to get to her. He had a feeling she was still at Sandaime's house. However, getting in there unnoticed would be nearly impossible.

Her father was the main and major obstacle he had to overcome. He drummed his fingers on the wood of the desk. He could try to sneak into his uncle's house or even send Komushi in to distract but he could not guarantee it would lure Orochimaru away. He also had to consider where his irritating little cousin would be. Gaara being with her was annoying but he could deal with it if he had to. He growled softly, deep in this throat. Then the idea struck him. He knew just how to deal with her father. He just needed to get a messenger bird.
With a small grunt, he braced himself against the desk and slowly stood up. He just needed to make it to the aviary at the back of his parents’ house. He started to move out of the room, holding onto the walls as he moved through the halls. A few servants gave him worried looks, ready to ask if he needed any assistance but he brushed off their presence, not bothering to even glance at them. He heard his parents walking down another hallway, on their way to the front of the house. He let out a small sigh of relief that his father kept his word on taking his mother out so he could be alone. It was a long and slowly walk to the aviary but he finally made it. He leaned against the wall for a moment, trying to ignore the pain in his body. He could feel his body running hot then cold, threatening to break out in a cold sweat if he kept pushing himself. He took several deep breaths before opening his eyes again. He scanned the aviary for the fastest bird his parents had. One came walking up to him, fluttering its wings a little to land on his shoulder. He winced hard.

“You’re still alive?” he asked, semi-shocked to see that particular bird. “How old are you at this point, Beetle?” The bird tilted its head and ruffled its feathers a little. Sasori shook his head. The bird was probably deaf. “Where is Yen?” he mumbled. He caught sight of the large brown bird across the room. He whistled at the bird, catching her attention. She made a small noise before flying toward him very quickly. Realizing, it would hurt a lot if she landed on him, he tried to move out of the way and get her to land on something else. However, in his state, he could not move fast enough and she landed on his other shoulder. He let out a grunt, biting back the pain as he motioned for the bird to land on the table he was moving towards.

Yen obediently hopped from his shoulder to the table. Beetle, on the other hand, leaned in to nuzzle Sasori’s cheek. Sasori sighed and he gently lifted the bird from his shoulder to place him next to Yen. He then reached for the paper pad near the table and wrote out his message before attaching it to Yen’s leg.

“Find Kakuzu,” he instructed her. He gave her a treat from the bin on the other end of the table. She made a little noise, took the treat and then was gone. Beetle watched Yen leave and then looked at Sasori, also wanting a treat. “You’re not going anywhere,” Sasori sighed. Beetle made a noise and moved closer, leaning his head down to turn Sasori’s hand over, hoping there was a treat ready for him. Sasori pursed his lips, already feeling sort of guilty. He was going to say no again and just leave but the bird made a mournful sound at the empty hand and he gave in. He reached over for a treat, leaving it on the table for the elderly bird as he left. “I’m such a sucker,” he grumbled to himself.

He made his way back to his room, once again ignoring the servants he saw in the halls. He pushed himself too much by the time he made it back to the room and sat down at the desk again and continued to form his plan while he waited. He put his head down on the desk as he thought. Closing his eyes for what felt like a moment, he suddenly heard someone shift behind him.

“We coulda killed you,” a snarky voice pulled Sasori from his unintended nap. He recognized that the slave’s voice instantly.

“Kakuzu,” Sasori said roughly. He rubbed his face then looked at the larger, looming man and his impish slave sitting on the edge of his bed.

"Your letter sounded urgent," Kakuzu mused. He looked around the room, taking in the fact that they were not in Sasori’s own home. "You're alone here?"

"For now, yes," Sasori straightened up as he spoke. "I need a favor." He looked at the hitman dead in the eyes.

"You will still have to pay," Kakuzu reminded him in a deep rumble.
"I assumed so and I'm prepared for that," Sasori folded his arms over his chest.

"But I will cut you a deal. Who are they?" He leaned onto his knees.

Sasori nodded his thanks then turned to grab the sheet he had been working on. "Here, this has all the data I could gather on him. His name is Orochimaru and he is the father of my slave. I need him disposed of as fast as possible."

Kakuzu took the sheet from Sasori, reading it over.

"Ya wanna kill your slave's father?" Hidan gave him a confused look. "How did he even find her?"

“I don’t know how he found her,” Sasori answered. “But he did and now I need to get rid of him.”

“As fast as possible, huh?” Kakuzu hummed. “You know where he is?”

“He’s most likely at my uncle’s house. Sandaime is housing her and her family like some sort of sanctuary.”

“Your slave is there, too?”

Sasori nodded. “If you see her, leave her alive. She’s pregnant and I’m going to deal with that on my own.”

"And the rest of her family?" Kakuzu raised his eyebrow.

Sasori pressed his lips in thought for a moment. "Do whatever you want," he finally said.

Hidan nearly jumped through the ceiling with a howl of excitement. "Can I have them?" he asked his master with shining eyes.

"Fine, but don't make a mess," Kakuzu warned the younger man.

"But the messier it is, the more fun," Hidan whined, only to be met with a hard look from Kakuzu. "Fine," he sighed. "I'll be clean about it."

"Gaara is also with them," Sasori added. "Obviously, leave him alive as well."

Kakuzu nodded. "Will do." He scanned the paper one more time. "Is that all?"

"That's all," Sasori confirmed. "Contact me how you want when it's done to collect your payment."

He felt a giddy skip in his chest. If they pulled this hit off—and Kakuzu was one of the best in the underground—a massive obstacle would be removed. The two men stood up and without any further conversation, Kakuzu left. Hidan hastily bowed to Sasori then followed after his master.

Sasori leaned back in his seat, sighing heavily. He covered his eyes with one of his arms, grinning as he tilted his head back. This was it. Get rid of the old snake, steal back Azumi and he would be set. He considered for a moment what he should do about his cousin. He could disable him. It was not like his siblings would not care for him. And he did not really need his legs. He caught himself chuckling softly and for a few moments, he felt no pain in his body. He sighed a little and moved to get up so he could get in bed and rest a bit more. He soon fell back asleep, content enough to finally relax.

When he came to again, he was acutely aware someone was in bed with him and probably watching him. He took a deep breath. He recognized the scent and even the weight of the person next to him. "What do you want, Komushi?" Sasori grumbled without opening his eyes.
"Well, you're my best friend," he started. "So it's my duty to come to check in on you."

"It really isn't," he sighed, rolling on to his side, away from the other man.

"Aw, don't be like that," Komushi chuckled, gently pulling Sasori onto his back and then immediately retracting his hand when he heard the pained hiss from him. "I almost died for you."

Sasori scoffed, finally opening his eyes to see how bandaged and damaged Komushi just was. It hit him hard—harder, then he was willing to admit out loud. He eased himself up onto his elbows to rest on the pillows. "You're very dramatic," he said softly.

"I wish I was being dramatic," Komushi grinned. "But I really did almost die. That guy is no joke."

"Well, we won't have to worry about him anymore," Sasori said. "I put a hit on him. Kakuzu is going to take care of it."

Komushi's brows furrowed and he hummed softly. "Are you sure Kakuzu can handle that guy?" he asked, genuinely concerned.

Sasori looked at him, slightly puzzled. "He's the best at his job. Why wouldn't he be able to?"

"That guy turns into a snake. A really big snake."

Sasori opened his mouth to contest Komushi's entirely made up and ludicrous statement. But then he remembered just who they were talking about. Azumi had fangs and a venom sac. It would not be all that strange to find out they could turn into snakes. "Regardless," Sasori waved off both Komushi and the sinking feeling in his gut, "I have faith in Kakuzu."

"Normally I would, too," Komushi frowned. "But he tried to swallow me, Sasori. The guy doesn't hold back for his kid!"

"Swallow you?" Sasori hummed. "Just how big was this snake?"

"His head touched the ceiling of your workshop."

"Ah, yes, that's pretty big."

"I don't think Kakuzu will be ready for that," Komushi frowned. "And if he takes Hidan with him, Hidan is for sure going to get eaten."

"Please." Sasori scoffed. "If he didn't swallow you then he won't swallow Hidan."

"You're right," Komushi chuckled. He shifted very slowly to match Sasori on the pillows. "I taste way better than Hidan could ever hope to."

"You'd both taste like trash," Sasori rolled his eyes. "Moving on, once her father is out of the way the baby is next."

Komushi frowned. "You're still going to kill the child?"

"Of course," Sasori answered. "I don't care what my parents want, I'm not raising it with her and I don't want to deal with her pregnancy problems."

"Why don't you just give it to me?" Komushi half-joked.

"If you're going to start fighting for that zygote's life you can leave right now," Sasori snapped.
Komushi sighed, laughing a little through twinges of pain. “Fine, fine,” he chuckled. “And how are you going to deal with Gaara?”

“We cripple him,” Sasori said simply. “Killing him would cause too much trouble. And this is already enough to deal with,” he sighed.

“Ooooh,” Komushi’s grin shifted to something much darker. “Any ideas?”

“Probably break his legs,” Sasori hummed. He was going to shrug but at the first twitch of his shoulder, he felt a spike of pain. “I can still use him like that.”

“Leave that to me then,” Komushi smirked. “If Kakuzu and Hidan take care of her family, I’ll take care of Gaara and you go after the little snake.”

"In that case," Sasori smirked. "It's all falling into place. I'll give it until tomorrow night before we hear back from Kakuzu and then I have my property again."

“So you’ll have her again,” Komushi hummed, “but how are you going to keep her this time? What if she tries to leave after she’s tasted this little bit of false freedom?”

"That will be the fun part," Sasori grinned, looking at his nails. "I'll break her down. She will have nowhere to go but me once her family is dead and her lover is a cripple."

"That's true but...she won't be the same after the baby," Komushi brought up.

"Drugs will work just fine on her. And I'll enjoy reconditioning her anyway." He looked up from his hand. "I went far too easy on her this past year. She needs to learn who her master really is."

“I guess with Kakuzu involved this plan will go much smoother than the last one,” Komushi chuckled.

“Let’s not talk about that,” Sasori interjected. “We’re still healing.”

“Right.” He closed his eyes and sighed.

“Your injuries can’t be that bad if you made it here,” Sasori hummed. He had a hard time just moving from the desk to the bed. He could not imagine making the journey through the city that Komushi had to make to get to his parents’ house.

"I was carried," Komushi chuckled. "The walk from the front door to this room though..." he trailed off, closing his eyes.

"You're an idiot," Sasori rolled his eyes. "What did you even come out here for?"

"I already told you!"

"You really don't have a duty," Sasori sighed, rolling his eyes again.

"I honestly didn't want to be stuck in my house alone," Komushi grunted. "They wouldn't stop fussing over me. It was just too much."

“It’s no better here,” Sasori rolled his eyes. “My parents are treating me like a helpless child. It was a miracle that my father agreed to take my mother out for a bit so I could finally be alone.”

Komushi grimaced, glancing at the doorway. "How is your father?" he asked. "He got hurt, too, right?"
"Not nearly as bad as us," Sasori huffed. "He's fine. And we’ll be fine, too. My mother just needs to relax."

"Well, if your parents went out then hopefully your father will fulfill some husbandly duties."

Sasori's grimace deepened. "There are things I don't ever need to picture," he muttered, "and that is one of them."

"I regret nothing," Komushi chuckled. "But if we plan on doing this by tomorrow, we need to hurry up and heal."

'I'll be fine by tomorrow,' Sasori half-lied. He knew he would definitely be able to move around much easier but he also knew it would not be without some pain.

“Good for you,” Komushi smirked. “But I’m going to need a little extra help.”

“I figured,” Sasori rolled his eyes. “I have my pain killers in the bathroom.”

“Perfect,” Komushi grinned. “Then I will be completely at your disposal.”

“You’re never not at my disposal,” Sasori sighed. He relaxed more against the bed. “Go take those pills. I’m going back to sleep.”

Komushi chuckled softly as he moved to get up and go into the bathroom. “I’ll just stay since I’m already here,” he smirked, not wanting to even think about having to head back home in his physical state.

“There is a guest room down the hall!” Sasori called to him. “Go there.”

“I can’t make that walk,” Komushi pouted. “We won’t touch each other in this bed anyway.”

Sasori groaned loudly, burying his face in the pillow. He could never win with Komushi. Komushi grinned, knowing he won as he knocked back the pills. He settled into bed next to Sasori who was already dozing off. The two men slipped off to sleep quickly.
A few hours had passed before Azumi woke up slowly to the feeling of being watched. She opened her eyes slightly, seeing that Gaara was still asleep. With a soft hum, she stretched hard in his arms and sat up a little bit only to be startled by Shira sitting on the edge of the bed smiling at them. She gasped hard and pressed her hand to her chest. “Gods, Shira,” she breathed through a nervous chuckle, “what the hell?”

“Didn’t mean to startle you,” he chuckled softly. “Did you sleep well?” he asked her, still smiling.

Gaara moaned softly next to Azumi, squeezing his arms around her. “We’re still sleeping,” he mumbled into Azumi’s hair.

“So you don’t want food?” Shira raised an eyebrow, looking at Azumi and laughing softly.

“Food?” Azumi hummed, sitting up a little more. “You brought food?”

“I always bring food,” Shira smirked. “Hungry?”

“The baby is hungry,” she chuckled.

“Would you like to eat here or can you two manage to get to the kitchen?” Shira chuckled.

Gaara sighed, stretching against Azumi. “We can come down,” he told Shira. He stretched a little again, pressing a kiss to her neck.

"Very well, then," Shira grinned, standing up.

"How long have you been here?" Azumi asked him.

"I walked in about four seconds before you opened your eyes," he chuckled. "Don't worry, I wasn't watching you two sleep."

"I would have just asked if you wanted to nap with us," she giggled.

"And I would have taken you up on that offer," he smiled. "I'll give you two a minute. See you in the kitchen." He left the room and headed down to the kitchen.

Azumi looked at Gaara and leaned down to kiss him softly. "Are you hungry?" she asked him quietly.

Gaara smiled into the kiss, pressing gently into it. When they broke apart, he curved his body to settle into her lap. He took one of her hands to gently place on his head. "Yes," he answered, turning his face to kiss her stomach. "But I'm not in the mood to rush for it." He pressed his forehead to her stomach, a small smile pulling his lips. "However," he looked up at her again, "yours and the baby's needs outweigh mine. I'll move when you are ready."

She smiled, moving her hand and scratching his head for a few moments. "And I will move when the baby is ready," she said. Suddenly, her stomach growled. "And the baby is ready," she chuckled.

He laughed, curling up so he sat on the edge of the bed. He waited for her to get up and circle the bed. Smiling as he took her hand, he gently fixed a piece of her hair, tucking it behind her ear. He leaned in to kiss her again, nuzzling his nose against hers gently. "I love you," he smiled.
"I love you, too," she said, kissing him one more time. She lifted his hand to kiss his knuckles then let him lead her down to the kitchen where Shira was waiting for them.

"Ah, you didn't take as long as I thought you would," Shira chuckled, already serving a few dishes.

"The baby said no shenanigans," Azumi smirked.

"I'm glad the baby is forward with their wants and needs," Shira chuckled. "I think it means they will be very strong and healthy like their parents."

"So you think this baby is going to turn out like Temari," Gaara teased as he pulled out a seat for Azumi.

"I said no such thing," Shira hummed. "Don't you put your fears on me," he flashed a smirk.

"That isn't a fear of mine," Gaara chuckled.

Azumi looked over the food Shira had set out. "As always, this looks and smells amazing," she smiled. She put a little bit of everything on her plate, filling it up rather quickly.

"I also just made some of this for you," Shira grinned, setting a pitcher of rumman on the table in front of her.

She let out a small excited squeal. "Ah, thank you!" she said, already pouring a glass.

Gaara smiled as he loaded up his plate. "I think you might have to move with us if we go back to her village," he chuckled.

Shira smirked, sitting down across from them. "I can visit but I'm not sure I can leave either of my loves behind," he smiled, taking a sip from his cup.

Azumi squinted at him over the rim of her glass as she sipped the rumman. "Loves," she hummed.

"Yes," Shira smirked, "loves."

She squinted harder at him. "One of those loves is not Gaara?"

"Not this time. You've stolen him from me. I've got another."

"You're cheating on me," Gaara chuckled. "Who is she?"

Shira took a deep breath. His grin nearly doubled in size as he let out a long, happy sigh. "Her name is Sayumi," he swooned. He rested his chin in the palm of his hand, getting a dreamy look in his eyes. "She's perfect."

"Sayumi..." Gaara frowned in slight concentration. "I don't recognize that name. But I'm happy for you," he lifted a glass to his best friend. "But my poor aunt," he shook his head, smirking. "How will she get free food now?"

"Oh, make no mistake!" Shira gasped. "Lady Sachiko will continue to get free food."

"Clearly she is the other love," Azumi chuckled. "How did you meet Sayumi?"

"I actually met her at Lady Sachiko's birthday party," his dreamy tone returned.

"During the..." Gaara trailed off.
Shira's eyes went wide. He actually started to blush. "We made out but we didn't go that far," he laughed, blushing harder.

"Ah," Azumi chuckled, "neither did we," she hummed, realizing she had fallen into a trance at that party. "But I am happy for you," she grinned. Her grin slowly turned into a smirk. "Will we be meeting Sayumi?" she asked.

"Of course," Shira practically purred. "She has to know who is making her an aunt," he chuckled.

"And?" Gaara pouted playfully.

"And who her other husband will be," Shira finished with a reassuring tone to Gaara.

Gaara smiled and started eating his food. "Thank you," he hummed.

"Come to the restaurant tomorrow night," Shira told them. "She'll be there."

"I think we can make that happen," Gaara nodded. Azumi hummed in agreement as she downed half of her food.

"I'll have to make something special," Shira gushed. "Do you two have any requests."

"I don't," Gaara chuckled. "Everything you make is good."

"You're never any help," he chuckled. "Does the baby want anything?" he asked, turning to Azumi.

"Hm?" Azumi asked, looking up from the spoonful she was about to shove in her mouth. She set it down and hummed in thought for a moment, gently pressing a hand to her stomach. "The baby wants papas rellenas," she said softly to herself as if the baby growing inside her said it to her. She nodded in confirmation. "It is a thing we make in my village for celebrations. Fried balls of potatoes filled with meat."

"It sounds like the perfect thing to make!" Shira grinned. "I can make that. If the baby requests anything else you let me know," he chuckled.

"We can stop to bring anything, too," Gaara hummed. "We will just have to figure out an excuse to tell the family tomorrow."

"Are you two on house arrest?" Shira asked.

"Oh, you do not know of the crazy few days we have had," Azumi chuckled, realizing that Shira had no clue she left Sasori's house because he almost killed her and her baby.

"Well, now I'm intrigued," Shira smirked, sipping more of his drink.

"Well, it was revealed that I am pregnant," she started. "I do not know how he found out but he attacked me immediately. We escaped. But at the same time, my family arrived in this city. So we are all staying at Lord Sandaime's house right now. Then he tried taking one of my snakes as a way to lure me back to him and then he got it from me."

"And then from her father," Gaara added with a chuckle.

"But because he made an attempt to get me back, my father would prefer I stay inside. However, I know that the monster is in no state to move right now so I think we are okay to move around the city."
Shira nodded, staring at the two of them while he downed his glass then refilled it. He put the cup down with a light tap. He refilled his glass then proceeded to finish it once more. Once he finished the second glass, he took a deep breath. "Insanity," he finally said. "Gods, you two, that's too much," he shook his head. "Why didn't...aaah," he reached over and took Azumi's hand in his. "If you need to slip away at any moment and Gaara isn't there, you know you can come to me." He pressed a kiss to her knuckles.

She smiled softly at him. "Thank you, Shira," she said. "I appreciate that. But I am hoping that he will not be making any more attempts. I am sure whatever my father did to him was brutal enough to deter him from trying again."

He kissed her hand again then gently placed it down. "So what exactly is being done about Sasori?" Shira asked.

"For now, he is still recovering from his back to back fights. I don't exactly know what Uncle has planned for him. I know he is having a hard time with sentencing his nephew to death."

"Death?" Shira asked incredulously

Azumi frowned slightly. "My father," she sighed, "is very adamant about a death sentence." She knew Sasori deserved it, but she did not want to support it. Yet, she knew her opinion on the matter would only be met with judgment.

Shira's eyes narrowed at her. He felt like there was more she wanted to say but he did not push it.

"He deserves any punishment he gets," Gaara's mouth was a grim line. "I personally don't think he has earned the sweet release of death." His voice was a little rougher. He curled his fingers around his cup tightly then forced himself to relax.

Shira nodded, silently taking in his best friend. "Well...when the choice is made...I am sure your father and Uncle will make the right one, whatever it will be to ensure yours and the baby's safety." He cracked a smile at the two of them.

Azumi smiled back at him. "I think you are right," she said softly with an agreeing nod. She continued eating her food, finishing it and then serving herself seconds.

"Was the baby that hungry?" Shira chuckled.

"What I just had was for the baby. This is for me," she smirked.

"Good thing I prepared second rounds," Shira gestured to a basket under the table. "Are you two staying here tonight?"

"No," Gaara cleared his throat. "The rest of the family would notice and probably send a search party."

"Fair enough," Shira chuckled. "Think your family and father would like what I make?"

"Oh, I know they will," Azumi chuckled. "My older brother is a bit of a food snob and I know for a fact he will love your food. My younger brother eats just about anything and I know he will love it as well."

"Two brothers?" Shira grinned. "Perfect. Oh, maybe I should have made more," he started to laugh, ducking under the table to check the basket. "Do you think Lady Sachiko will want some, too?" he asked Gaara, running a hand through his hair.
"Don't ask me dumb questions," Gaara snorted. "But relax, Shira, you don't have—"

"You're right! Okay, I'll be by tonight to bring you all more food!" His face lit up. He was starting to float a little in his seat.

Gaara shook his head. "How does Sayumi feel about your love for my aunt?" he asked teasingly.

Shira did not answer a first, smiling sheepishly. "I...felt a bit weird telling her about it at first..." he said. "But it turns out she also has a crush on her."

"Not surprising," Azumi chuckled. "So do I."

"I think everyone but our immediate family has a crush on my aunt," he chuckled. "Sasori and my father are particularly soft for her but I won't say it's a crush."

"Makes sense," Shira nodded. "I think...it's too early to say I'm well and truly in love with Sayumi but it's so nice to have someone." He closed his eyes, that dreamy smile returning to his face.

"It is nice that you have someone who is not already married," Azumi chuckled, finishing her food and pouring herself another glass of rumman.

"Yes, I suppose that is important," Shira chuckled. "But honestly..." he trailed off and glanced at Gaara then the most mischievous grin spread over his lips. "I wish they would throw parties more often."

"You're despicable," Gaara choked on his drink, coughing into his cup. Azumi rubbed his back gently. He laughed, shaking his head. "We never even stay that late."

"Ah, but maybe we should!" Shira laughed a little louder.

"Ugh, no, that's mostly my family!" Gaara laughed himself, wiping his mouth with a napkin.

"It would be weird to talk about it with him because it is his family," Azumi told Shira. A smirk slowly appeared on her lips. "But we can talk about it," she mouthed to him, gesturing between him and her. Shira winked at her, nodding in understanding and solidarity.

Gaara shook his head, looking to the sky. "I don't care what you two do when I'm not looking," he chuckled.


Azumi cupped Gaara’s jaw and gently turned his face toward hers to press a soft kiss to his lips. "He has no reason not to trust us," she told Shira.

"Right," Shira chuckled. "We're the loves of his life."

“That you are,” Gaara smiled, pressing into the kiss. He pressed a few more soft kisses then pulled away.

“You two are cute,” Shira smiled at them, starting to clean up his dishes. “I’m going to go so I can meet you guys back at the house with the food,” he stood up, stretching a little.

“We will see you later,” Azumi smiled, taking Gaara’s hand and standing up with him. Shira cleaned everything up and gave them each a hug before leaving. They said their goodbyes and once again, Azumi and Gaara were left alone. She wrapped her arms around him and rested her head against his shoulder. “I guess we should be getting back to your uncle’s house,” she hummed.
"Mmmmm," Gaara hummed, burying his face in her hair. His arms wrapped around her as he continued to hum, holding her closer still. He started to kiss behind her ear, then down her neck. "But I don't think I'm ready yet," he sighed. He bit down on her shoulder but not hard enough to leave a mark.

“Oh?” she smirked. “Are you not?” She ran her fingers through his hair. “Was that nap not enough?” she teased.

"The nap was just the warm-up," he grinned, cupping his hands under her butt to pick her up. "Shira will take at least an hour and a half," he said, kissing along her jaw. "I think we have some time."

"Time for another nap?" she joked, tilting his face back toward hers to kiss his lips.

"How about a more...engaging nap?" he suggested with a smirk against her lips. He started down the hall back to his room, kissing her as he moved. He liked the feeling of pretending for a moment that this is what will feel like to have their own home, to be together as a family once his cousin was taken care of. He sat down on the bed, pulling her down with him as he kissed her.

She cupped his face, pushing deeper into the kiss. "I think we both are deserving of a more engaging nap," she smirked, gently pushing him down to lay on the bed. She kissed along his jaw and down his neck, sliding her hands down his arms to lace their fingers together and pin his hands to the bed next to his head.

He grinned up at her, squeezing their hands gently. He arched up, to press their bodies together, biting her lip as he did. In a swift movement, he rolled them over and pinned her hands to the bed. “Agreed,” he smirked.

Orochimaru looked up from the scroll he was reading. Something was not sitting right with him. He had the intense feeling of being watched by...at least two people. Neither of them felt like his sons nor his daughter. His eyes flickered back down to his scroll to pretend he had not noticed them.

A few moments passed and he could feel the two entities shift to another location. The feeling of being watched was still there so he knew they were still around. He stood up, continuing to pretend as if he knew nothing and made it seem like he was heading to the bathroom. He got to the door when he felt a cord wrap around his neck and jerk upwards sharply. He gasped as he was pulled roughly against a hard, muscular chest. One of his hands flew to his throat while the other arm jerked back hard. His elbow dug sharply into his attacker's side. The attacker let out a small grunt and pulled the cord harder.

"Did ya get him?" a voice asked. Orochimaru knew it had to be the second presence he felt. "No," the attacker grunted. "Shut up."

Orochimaru started to relax his body so the cord on his throat was not pressing so hard. He reared his head back, shoving it hard under the man's jaw. The man behind him struggled to tighten the cord as his jaw stuttered. There was a very small window of time where the attacker loosened his grip to regain a harder grip. Orochimaru used that time to spin and knee his attacker hard in the gut, causing him to double over.

"Lord Kakuzu!" the other man yelled. Orochimaru looked up to see a man with purple eyes and
slicked-back grey hair.

"Shut up, Hidan," the attacker groaned as he tried to get up.

"But my Lord!" Hidan yelled, distracting the man long enough for Orochimaru to bolt for the door. He needed to get outside so he would not damage anything.

The large hitman growled as he pushed himself off of the ground, rushing after his target. "Dammit, Hidan!" he snarled. "Go find the others!"

Hidan started to follow Kakuzu but halted at the order and immediately started looking through a couple of doors to find the rest of the family. However, he figured his master was going to need help with this particular hit so after opening the third door and not finding anyone, he moved in the direction he saw Kakuzu follow Orochimaru in.

Orochimaru made it to the back balcony of the house. There was enough room out there to do what he needed to do. He walked to the edge of the balcony then turned to face Kakuzu who had skidded to a stop in the doorway, catching himself on the frame. He narrowed his eyes at Orochimaru. He figured there would be a fight but he did not like how prepared his target seemed. His hand fell to the whip on his hip. He unraveled it, snapping it slightly as he stalked towards Orochimaru.

Orochimaru's eyes narrowed at the whip. He watched carefully as Kakuzu's hand moved to snap the whip. He moved out of the way just in time but still felt the wind it produced.

Hidan came running out to the balcony. "Dammit, Hidan!" Kakuzu repeated when he saw his slave.

"I came to help ya, my Lord!" Hidan defended. He stepped between his master and their target.

"Hidan, move!" Kakuzu snapped the whip, hitting Hidan hard in the back. The silver-haired man hit the ground hard, bleeding instantly.

Orochimaru narrowed his eyes again in disgust. He was disgusted with both the whipping of another person and the semi-orgasmic sound that came from the man who got whipped.

"I'm sorry, Lord Kakuzu," Hidan said through a grin as he kneeled up. It only furthered Orochimaru's disgust.

Kakuzu stepped closer to Orochimaru, pushing Hidan down as he stepped by him. Hidan let out a pleased whimper as his knees hit the ground. Orochimaru turned his attention away from Hidan to Kakuzu. "You cornered yourself," the hitman smirked. He circled the whip on the ground, ready to snap it at any moment.

Orochimaru managed a smirk through his disgust. How he could not wait to return to his village. "You are underestimating me," he said matter of factly.

"You've put up a bit of a fight, but nothing I can't handle," Kakuzu said, snapping the whip again which Orochimaru evaded once more.

Orochimaru chuckled darkly. "Is that so?" he smirked, transforming into the large snake.

"What the fuck?" Hidan grumbled. "I told ya that ya need my need help!"

Kakuzu had no time to retort as the massive snake loomed over them. He turned to run, to put some
distance between him and the beast as it reared back. Hidan got to his feet, pulling out a short sword. Instead of running away, he charged towards Orochimaru, screaming at the top of his lungs. Orochimaru shifted at the last second, dodging Hidan easily.

As Hidan turned around, Orochimaru struck, opening his mouth wide and unhooking his jaw. Before Hidan could scream again, he was in the snake's mouth. Everything moved so fast for him as he felt the snake move. Orochimaru used his tail to reached for Kakuzu, wrapping around him and tossing him into the air. The snake struck for the hitman and the slave and master pair were both stuck in the snake's mouth.

"This is fucking disgusting," Hidan murmured, thrashing a little in an attempt to get the snake to let them go.

Orochimaru rolled his eyes and moved off of the balcony to the ground below the house and toward the back wall of the city.

Kakuzu struggled, trying to push himself or Hidan out of the snake's mouth as they were carried away. "I'm going to kill Sasori myself," he growled. He pushed his hands hard into the Orochimaru's tongue, trying to push himself out of the mouth. "Give me your blade!" he grunted at Hidan.

"I don't have it!" Hidan looked around, trying to see if he had any weapon to offer his master.

"Useless as always," Kakuzu grumbled, punching around the snake's mouth. Orochimaru threatened to swallow them with a contraction of his muscles.

"He's gonna eat us!" Hidan gasped, trying to move to the front of the mouth.

Orochimaru moved quickly to the wall, getting into a taller stance and into a position to toss his two problems away. He pulled back, turned his head away then swung back hard to spit the two men as far as he possibly could. Hidan's scream arched through the sky, fading with them into the distance. Once they were out of sight, Orochimaru slithered back towards Sandaime's mansion. He pushed himself up over the balcony before returning to his human form. "Fowl," he grimaced, running his tongue over his teeth. He walked quickly back into the mansion, beelining for the bathroom to cleanse his body.

Yashamaru stepped out of his room when he heard his father walking through the hall. "What was all of that?" he asked with a slightly amused look. He had seen Hidan running down the hall but did not bother to pursue him, knowing his father could handle it.

"Someone," Orochimaru pressed into the word, "seems to have taken a hit out on me."

"A hit?" Yashamaru raised an eyebrow. "He is desperate," he snickered softly, following his father into the bathroom. "What did you do with them?"

"I tossed them out like the trash that they are," Orochimaru answered, running the water and immediately washing his mouth out.

"You did not kill them?" Yashamaru questioned.

"I did not want to stain my clothes with their blood."

"That's reasonable," Yashamaru started the bath for his father. "Do you think they will come back for a second try?"
"Absolutely not," Orochimaru scoffed. "It does not sound like Sasori was well informed about me so they were not prepared at all."

“Not many people are prepared for your level of brutality,” Yashamaru hummed.

Orochimaru washed his face up and quickly undressed to get into the bath. “I am going to need to soak for a long time,” he muttered.

Yashamaru chuckled softly. “Then I will ask someone to bring you tea.”

Orochimaru muttered his thanks and tilted his head back with a heavy sigh. “I want to get out of this city as soon as possible.”

“That might be harder than you think it will be,” Yashamaru smirked.

Orochimaru squinted at his son. “Why? What now?”

Yashamaru started to chuckle. “Mitsuki is really in love with Lady Sachiko. Are you ready to tear him away from that?”

Orochimaru scoffed and rolled his eyes. "When Mitsuki is old enough, he can find another, more age-appropriate woman," he said.

Yashamaru laughed a little harder. “Well, at least he has good taste in women,” he reasoned.

“At least he has that,” Orochimaru rolled his eyes. “I thought you were going to get me tea?”

“Yes. yes,” Yashamaru stretched. “Be right back,” he said, the mirth still in his voice.

Orochimaru sighed again and settled further into his bath, awaiting his son’s return.
Yashamaru made his way down to the kitchen where Sachiko and Mitsuki were having a few slices of cake.

"Oh, Yashamaru!" Sachiko smiled, perking up when she saw him enter. "Would you like some?" She offered him an untouched slice on the table.

"It is so good, Yasha," Mitsuki hummed, shoving a huge piece into his mouth.

"No, thank you," Yashamaru declined the offer politely. "You can have my piece, Mitsuki."

The boy instantly lit up, pulling the piece closer to him. "Would you like to share?" he asked Sachiko with stars in his eyes.

She laughed softly, gesturing for him to put the cake down. "Is your sister back yet?" she asked Yashamaru. "I think she'd enjoy this."

Yashamaru frowned a little at the mention of Azumi. "I have not seen her since this morning," he looked behind him. "It is safe to assume she is with Gaara, but...is he usually out this long?"

"It depends on how many patients he has," Sachiko hummed. "I'm sure they will be back soon. He usually visits them all before sundown."

Yashamaru raised an eyebrow, glancing out the nearest window. "It is near sundown now," he pointed out.

"Your sister is safe with Gaara," Sandaime spoke up, walking into the kitchen. "And Sasori is incapacitated as of right now. There is nothing to worry about."

"I would not say that. Father was just attacked by two hitmen." Yashamaru's tone was far too nonchalant.

Sachiko's eyes blew wide. "He what!" she exclaimed, looking to her husband.

Mitsuki snorted a laugh as he took another bite of his cake. "Those two hitmen are probably dead by now," he said.

"Where is your father right now?" Sandaime asked, trying not to sound as worried as he felt. He saw how brutal Orochimaru was and if his two sons were not worried about it, then he did not want to overreact.

"He is bathing," Yashamaru answered. "I came down here to get him tea."

Sachiko shared a look with her husband. "Well, then we should let him recover in peace," she said to the room. "Do you think he will be hungry?" she asked Yashamaru. Yashamaru opened his mouth to reply but was cut off by Shira walking into the room, arms full of baskets.

"He better be," Shira grinned. "I brought a feast."

"Shira!" Sachiko was on her feet in seconds, reaching out to take the baskets out of his arms. "We weren't expecting you!" She leaned in to kiss each of his cheeks.

"I told Azumi and Gaara I'd be here tonight with food for everyone," Shira chuckled. "I thought
they'd be here before me. Or at least with enough time to tell you I was coming."

"You saw them?" Sandaime asked.

Shira nodded. "A while ago, they were at Gaara's house."

Yashamaru chuckled softly while crossing the room to put the kettle on for his father's tea. "Well, that explains that," he grinned, pulling a cup down and setting up the tea.

"We have so many rooms here though," Sandaime sighed, understanding the implications.

"Yes, but it's not the same," Sachiko hummed, setting the food down on the table.

"I honestly think they were just napping," Shira chuckled.

"Sounds like something Azumi would do," Yashamaru agreed, turning back to the room.

Shira took a long look at Yashamaru. "You must be her brother," he smiled, seeing the resemblance between him and Azumi.

"I am," Yashamaru nodded with a smirk.

"So am I," Mitsuki said with a wide grin.

Shira smiled at the younger boy. "It's nice to meet you both," he nodded to both of them. "I hope you two will like everything. Your sister is a big fan of my cooking," he winked at Mitsuki.

"It is not me you have to worry about," Mitsuki grinned, leaning forward to peek into the baskets. "Yasha is the snob."

"I just have taste," Yashamaru shrugged, undeterred by the teasing. Shira chuckled, walking over to the cabinets to pull some plates down for everyone.

"I really doubt there is anyone in the world who wouldn't like your cooking Shira," Sachiko smiled, running her hand through Mitsuki's hair to guide him back in his seat. The boy made a happy little noise as he sat down.

"Now I have some expectations," Yashamaru smirked. The tea was ready and he poured a cup for his father. "I will be right back to try your food," he told Shira. He left the kitchen and headed up to the bathroom to give Orochimaru his tea. He knocked gently on the bathroom door, letting his father know it was him and he was going to enter. "We have another visitor," he said as he walked in.

"Is that so?" Orochimaru sighed, not exactly wanting to deal with another visitor.

"I think he is a friend of Gaara's. He said he saw them earlier."

"She is still not back?"

Yashamaru shook his head. "No. But considering two hitmen came in, maybe it was a good thing she was gone this long."

Orochimaru hummed softly, taking the tea. "I suppose it is." There was still disapproval in his tone.

Yashamaru pulled a stool closer to his father so he would have something to put the cup down on
later. "Would you like me to fix you a plate, Father?" he asked on his way back to the door.

"No," he answered. "I will come down there when I am ready."

Yashamaru nodded and left, heading straight back to the kitchen.

On his way, he passed the opening to another hallway. He assumed the two people he saw from the corner of his eye were a couple of servants until he was halted by a whispered, "Psst! Yasha!"

He turned around to see his sister and Gaara. "I was wondering when you were going to come back," he said.

"We overslept," she chuckled. "Where is your father?"

"Your father is soaking in a bath right now," he smirked. "You missed out on quite the eventful evening," he teased.

Gaara tilted his head. "Did something happen?" he chuckled lightly.

"We just got a little visit from some hitmen," Yashamaru said nonchalantly.

"Hitmen?" Azumi chuckled. "Who were they here—oh," she stopped herself, realizing that Sasori had to be the sponsor. If he was going to send hitmen to the house to eliminate her father, it put her baby in more potential danger. "Oh, that is not good."

"Do not worry about him," Yashamaru waved off.

"It is not him that I am worried about," she said. "I know he can handle himself. But clearly, we are not as safe here as we thought."

Gaara's face turned grim. He folded his arms over his chest, settling into thought. "Maybe we should move to my home," he said lowly.

"No," Yashamaru shook his head. "I think we are still fine here," he assured Gaara. "You know how Father is," he said, looking to his sister. "Those men are most likely dead and if they are not, Sasori will probably have a hard time finding someone else dumb enough to try."

"It goes beyond that, Yashamaru," she sighed. "Sure, if it were to happen again, we can handle it. But there are other people in this house that can get hurt or worse should something else happen. Lord Sandaime and Lady Sachiko were generous enough to let us stay here and now their home is a target because it is known that we are here."

Yashamaru sighed heavily. "Alright, yes," he huffed. "I see your point but do you really want to move to the father of your child's house and put him in danger as well?"

"My place is out of the way and if Sasori thinks we are still here then it would work out in our favor," Gaara cupped his jaw.

"But your aunt and uncle would still have to relocate."

"They have a few houses," Gaara suggested. "None as big as this one but them moving would not be an issue."

"How about you discuss this with Father and Lord Sandaime," Yashamaru said. "I am sure for the rest of the evening, we have nothing to worry about." He looked at Gaara. "Your friend is here. He is in the kitchen."
"I would much rather talk about this with them anyway," Azumi grumbled, knowing her brother was usually of no help when it came to planning. She would never tell him, but she always knew he was unfit to run a village and was glad the duty went to their other brother. She lifted Gaara's hand and pressed a kiss to his knuckles. "Go. I will meet you there shortly."

"Are you sure?" he asked softly.

"She will not die from being away from you for a few moments," Yashamaru teased. Gaara sighed, cupping her face. He smiled and gave her a quick kiss before following Yashamaru down the hall.

Azumi turned and headed the opposite direction, toward the bathroom. She found the one she figured Orochimaru was in and pressed her ear to the door to listen for him. The faint sound of water sloshing told her he was getting out of the tub and she waited patiently for him to exit the bathroom. She leaned against the wall next to the door until she heard it open.

"Did you think I could not tell you were out here?" Orochimaru smirked as he stepped out of the bathroom in his robe.

She grinned up at him. "I knew you would and that it would make you come out faster," she chuckled.

"My ever clever daughter," he smirked at her. "Where have you been all day?" he asked, pulling his hair up into a neat bun. He started to walk towards his room to get dressed. "You are pushing your luck coming home so late."

She scoffed lightly as she started to follow him. "I am not a child," she said. "We told you we were going to see his patients. It is not even completely dark outside. Plus, it sounds like everywhere else is safer than here if hitmen are able to get in."

It was Orochimaru's turn to scoff this time. "No one even knew they came around until I told your brother. They were handled easily," he waved off her comment. "They were clearly here for me since Sasori thinks I am the biggest threat to get out of the way." Orochimaru slipped behind a screen to pull his clothes on. "It is neither here nor there at this point but I am considering taking the risk of leaving before the baby is born," he said easily.

She hummed softly, sitting on the bed. "What if," she started, "and here me out on this, you just quietly relocate to another one of Lord Sandaime's and Lady Sachiko's houses?"

"They have more than one?"

"With a mansion this big, they definitely have the money for multiple houses," she said. "As long as you and I stay here, more *incidents* could happen which you and I both know are more of a nuisance than they are truly dangerous. But if we move, we can live quietly until I give birth."

He poked his head out from behind the screen to narrow his eyes at her while he considered the suggestion. He stayed like that for what felt like a solid minute. Disappearing once more behind the screen, he finally gave her a response. "Are you suggesting we move to separate houses?" he asked. "Because I do not know if I am comfortable letting you out of my sights just yet." It would make more sense to separate them for safety but he really did not want her away from him in case something did happen. There were a lot of variables he was not sure he wanted to risk.

"Of course you are not and you have every reason not to be," she said, "but that is why I emphasize a quiet relocation. No one will know where we are which ensures the safety of my child."

"Fine," he agreed. She was, as per usual, sound in her reasoning and plans. He never doubted his
daughter when it came to her planning things out. "We shall discuss it with Sandaime and Sachiko at dinner then." He stepped out fully dressed and offered his arm to her. "Have you and the baby eaten yet?" he asked with an amused smile.

She chuckled softly. "We did earlier but after the nap we had, we are definitely hungry again," she smiled as she stood up and took his arm.

"Of course you would stay out to take a nap," he rolled his eyes. "Let us go get you and the baby fed then," he smiled fondly at her, walking with her to the kitchen. "The two hitmen he sent were not even remotely prepared for me," he told her with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Did you see what they looked like?" she asked.

"I tried to forget their faces but one of them had grey hair and purple eyes," he hummed.

Azumi tilted her head back in thought, trying to recall anyone she had met in the last year that fit that description. Her thoughts went back to just a few days after being bought when Sasori burned the large scorpion into her leg. They had been visited that day by Kakuzu. "Hidan," she said, rolling her eyes. "He is a slave. I suppose Kakuzu is the hitman."

"A supplier for the black market," Orochimaru snorted, turning down the hall with her. "Why is that not surprising? Well, they have been eliminated. Can you think of any others he might send?"

"I have," she nodded. "Kakuzu is a black market client of Lord Sasori's. He provides them poisons and now that I know Kakuzu is a hitman, I can only assume the poisons are used for hits."

"Not really," she hummed. "None of his other clients ever came to him, they always sent and received their orders through couriers so I never met them. But I do not think there is anything to worry about. I am sure no one else will take the job if they heard the person who is supposed to be the best at it did not succeed."

"Good," Orochimaru smiled triumphantly. They turned one last corner before entering the kitchen.

"Ah, mom and baby!" Shira's voice called jovially from the table. There was a light blush on his cheeks, a glass in his hand, and an arm around Mitsuki's shoulders.

"Welcome back, Sister," Mitsuki smiled widely.

"Thank you," Azumi chuckled. She separated from her father and took a seat between Gaara and Shira. "I did not think you would get here so soon," she told Shira.

"Or maybe you overslept," Shira smirked.

"Ah, yeah...we did," she smiled sheepishly.

"I had a feeling you would," he teased. "I set up a plate for the baby," he said, reaching over Mitsuki to slide it to her.

"I think he gave you all the best parts of stuff," Mitsuki said through a mouthful of rice. Yashamaru was dead silent as he ate. He was clearly savoring every bit of food.

"It is what the baby deserves," she smirked as she started to eat. Shira slid another pitcher of
rumman toward her. "And I deserve this," she hummed, excitedly pouring herself a glass.

"Does my food live up to your expectations?" Shira asked Yashamaru, holding back a smug smirk. Yashamaru gave a silent nod as he pushed another mouthful of food into his mouth.

Sachiko giggled lightly, leaning into her husband. "I think that's a yes," she laughed again.

Orochimaru took a seat next to Gaara and Sachiko. "I am shocked," he said, pulling a plate closer. "It must be good if Yashamaru has nothing to say at all."

"Now we know who to go to when we want him to shut up," Azumi said lowly, fist-bumping Mitsuki behind Shira.

"Got him," Mitsuki said just as softly. Yashamaru squinted at his siblings.

Sandaime chuckled, resting his arm around his wife. "Did you two have a good day out?" he asked Azumi and Gaara.

"As nice as visiting patients can be," Gaara chuckled. He poured himself a glass of rumman then took a long sip.

"It got a little dark meeting Lord Hayate," she hummed. "He, uh...gifted us his sword collection."

"Is he getting any better?" Sandaime frowned. "It's been a while since I've seen him."

"He will if he sticks to the medications I gave him but unless he does that, it isn't looking good," Gaara sighed.

"I'm sure his servants will keep him in check. They don't want to lose him, too."

"No, they don't," Gaara hummed. "The Yamanaka boy was as dramatic as ever," his lips quirked into a smile.

"Oh, he's sick again," Sachiko pouted. "Poor boy."

"He'll be fine," Gaara rolled his eyes.

"You are going to get bored in our village," Mitsuki rested his chin on the back of his hand. "People in our village do not really get sick."

“I doubt that means I’ll be bored,” Gaara chuckled.

“Doctors are not obsolete in our village,” Azumi sighed. “Just because people do not really get sick does not mean we cannot use his expertise to develop other things.” She looked at Gaara and kissed his cheek. “Not that we would use you but rather if you are willing to help,” she chuckled.

Gaara chuckled, smiling the way only a man in love could and both her brothers’ faces scrunched up on teasing disgust. “I would be honored if I could help your village in any way possible.” He took her hand to kiss the back of it.

“Gross,” Mitsuki giggled softly.

“*She* is not going to use you,” Yashamaru smirked, “*but we are.*” He flicked his finger between him and Mitsuki.

"I am willing to help," Gaara grinned.
"Do not let them use you," Azumi said. "Do not let them force you into anything."

"I won't be forced," he assured her.

"I do not trust them," she whispered, eyeing both her brothers.

"We are your brothers," Yashamaru pressed a hand to his chest. "If you cannot trust us..." he trailed off.

"Who can you trust?" Mitsuki finished with a mischievous grin.

"Enough, you two," Orochimaru gave his sons a sharp look. "Your skills will be invaluable to us," he said to Gaara.

"I can only hope so," Gaara chuckled.

"I did go to your father's home today," Sachiko started, looking at Gaara, "and Sasori was not there."

"This is a good thing," Sandaime hummed. "At least we know Rasa isn't getting involved."

"But that means we still don't know where he is," Sachiko said.

"But he can be found. There are not many places he can hide so it will be easy."

"Try the scarab's house," Azumi suggested, taking a sip from her glass. Sachiko's eyes widened, looking at her husband in disbelief.

"You guys didn't look there first?" Shira raised an eyebrow.

"No," Sachiko shook her head.

"If he is not there, then I would assume he is at his parents' house," Azumi said. "I do not think any of his...clients...would be willing to take him in." A slow smirk formed on her lips. "Especially not Kakuzu."

"Clients?" Sandaime asked, narrowing his eyes. "Of course he would have clients in the black market."

"It shouldn't be a surprise, my love," Sachiko frowned. "I'll go over tomorrow and see if I can sweet talk his parents into giving anything away."

"I'd really like someone to go with you," Sandaime shook his head. "My brother isn't thinking straight."

"I'll go," Gaara offered.

"Ooh, that is not the best idea," Azumi hummed, rubbing his back. "I do not think anyone at this table should go."

"I'll go," Shira said.

"Well, they have nothing against you," she shrugged and nodded. "That may not be an issue."

"Exactly," Shira smiled. "I can bring over food too if we need a thorough cover." He stretched to flex a little.
"I think you just want an excuse to cook," Mitsuki teased. "Can I go too?" he asked.

"No," Orochimaru said flatly. "The fewer people the better." He picked up some food to take a bite.

"Then it's settled," Sachiko smiled. "Shira and I will go tomorrow to see if he's there."

"In the meantime," Azumi said, "since he knows where we are, I think we should relocate somewhere else so this house does not get destroyed during another possible assassination attempt."

"That would be wise," Sandaime nodded. "We will move you to the house on the east end of the city. It's a little smaller but a nice quiet villa."

Sachiko's eyes sparkled. "Oh, we haven't been to the Eastern Villa in ages!" she gushed. "I'll send a group of servants over tonight to start cleaning everything up!"

"That is very much appreciated," Orochimaru said with a thankful nod.

"Thank you," Azumi grinned at Sachiko and Sandaime.

"Just when I was starting to get comfortable," Yashamaru sighed.

Azumi rolled her eyes. "Stop bitching," she told him. "You will settle into a quieter location easier than a location that keeps getting trespassed on."

"I suppose you are right."

"Once the servants cleaned it up," Sandaime started, "we can have you discreetly relocated."

"That should be done by around mid-afternoon," Sachiko added. "Azumi, if you go with Gaara tomorrow then both of you can just head over to the new location. I will have someone fetch your things."

"You can have her things brought to my house instead," Gaara said.

Sandaime gave them both a hard look. "Are you sure that's wise?" he asked.

"A hit was put on my father," Azumi said, "because your nephew is trying to get to me. If we are separated then there is less of a chance of other people getting hurt. Plus, if this is done as discreetly as we hope, he will never suspect where each of us is."

Orochimaru stared hard at his daughter. He had just spoken about not wanting her out of his sight. Every fatherly bone in his body said to not allow it. To tell her she was going with them so he could watch over her and keep her safe. However, the village leader in him told him this was the best and most sound course of action. "We will need to figure out a way for you to check-in with us," he sighed.

"Utakata and I could visit often," Shira suggested. "I did promise Azumi that I'd bring her food regularly for her cravings and I don't mind bringing food to you guys as well. And it would be a lot less conspicuous since we virtually have nothing to do with the situation. I saw Utakata earlier today and he mentioned wanting to stop by and see you all."

Azumi looked at Orochimaru and smirked, silently letting him know that everything was going to work out. He looked back at his daughter. The corner of his lip quirked up as he leaned back in his
“Very well,” he looked over to the Shira. “Thank you for your help.” He hit the man with the full intensity of his gaze.

Shira smiled widely but subconsciously scooted just a little closer to Azumi. “It’s not a problem,” he laughed. “It’s what best friends are for!”

“Now that we have a plan, we just need to set it in motion,” Sandaime said. He looked to Orochimaru. “Once you are all moved and settled in, we can discuss again what happens with Sasori,” he told him.

Orochimaru nodded but his look said he had already decided what should happen to the monster who hurt his daughter.

“We do not have much so packing will be light for us,” Yashamaru put his dish in the sink. “I can go start on mine and Mitsuki’s now.”

“Don’t you want dessert?” Sachiko asked coyly. On cue, Shira disappeared under the table to retrieve another basket and set it down on the table. It smelled sweet and pleasant.

“Dessert?” Yashamaru hummed, looking at what Shira pulled out of the basket. Immediately, Azumi gasped when she saw what it was. Yashamaru sat back down. “I am interested.” Shira set a chantilly cake onto the table.

“What is that?” Sandaime asked.

“A dessert from where they are from,” Shira answered.

Orochimaru smirked, raising an eyebrow. “How did you find out about this?” he asked as Shira cut into the cake to dish out to everyone.

“Shira has a thing for international and inter-domestic foods,” Gaara boasted. “If it’s good food, he’ll find it.”

“It helped that I had a good source,” Shira said, sliding Azumi her slice.

“I may or may not have slipped a recipe to him,” Azumi hummed. “But it was because the baby told me to.”


“We can’t have the baby upset,” Sachiko giggled.

“Does the baby actually tell you these things?” Mitsuki whispered softly to his sister.

Azumi looked at Mitsuki and smiled. “Yes,” she nodded with a chuckle.

“Or is that just an excuse for your cravings?” Yashamaru smirked.

“Shut up and eat your cake.”

Mitsuki’s eyes blew wide. “Can they hear us?” he asked.

“Do not make your brother an idiot,” Orochimaru shook his head at Azumi.

“If he turns out to be an idiot then that is on you,” Azumi retorted. “He is your son, not mine.”
“We will not take any responsibility for Mitsuki’s intelligence or lack thereof,” Yashamaru said. “You made us all what we are.”

“Whoa, are you ganging up on him right now?” Shira chuckled.

“They are always ganging up on me,” Orochimaru sighed. “My children fear confrontation except toward me.”

“Brutal,” Sandaime chuckled. “I don’t know if I could have handled that if I had children.”

“You’ve dealt with worse from men twice your age,” Gaara snorted. “And my father.”

“Yes, but that’s different. They aren’t my children and I can punt Rasa across the desert.”

“You can punt your brother across the desert and you haven’t?” Shira chuckled. “I have my doubts about you.”

“I just want to know more about the baby,” Mitsuki looked at his sister’s stomach. “I am the youngest after all,” he said, looking up to his father.

“I can tell you more about the baby later,” Azumi smiled, reaching behind Shira and gently scratching the back of Mitsuki’s head. “But right now they want to eat their cake.”

“Okay,” Mitsuki smiled brightly. “Enjoy your cake, Baby,” he said to her stomach.

They dug into their cake while Shira put a pot on for tea. The conversation shifted to more food and questions about the city for a little bit until Sachiko let out a long yawn.

“I think it might be time for us to head to bed,” she laughed a little. Standing up, she kissed her husband’s head then circled the table to kiss Shira’s. “Thank you for this wonderful food as always, Shira.”

“Any time, Lady Sachiko,” Shira said almost dreamily. It did not go unnoticed by Mitsuki who narrowed his eyes at the chef.

“Goodnight, Lady Goddess,” Mitsuki said.

Sachiko chuckled, kissing Mitsuki’s head. “Goodnight, Little Lord.”

Yashamaru stood up as well. “I will go start packing for Mitsuki and myself,” he said. He bowed to everyone at the table. “Goodnight,” he said as he left.

“Goodnight,” Gaara and Sandaime called to him.

“I’m going to go tell the servants to head over to the villa now,” Sachiko told her husband, ruffling Shira and Mitsuki’s hair one last time.

“Alright,” he smiled at her. “Orochimaru, was there anything else you wanted to go over tonight?” he asked the other man.

“Not tonight,” Orochimaru shook his head. “We have handled enough for tonight.” He stood up as well. “Where should we leave our things?”

“Right outside your doors,” Sachiko answered. “They will be collected in the morning.”

“Very well then,” Orochimaru nodded. He walked over to Azumi to kiss the top of her head.
“Goodnight,” he said to everyone before leaving.

“Will you two be going to bed?” Sandaime asked Azumi and Gaara. “Or was that nap you took enough?” he smirked.

“I am not sure,” Azumi chuckled. “I might be up for a while. It was a long nap.”

“I will be up for a little while,” Gaara nodded. "I have a few things I want to work on and two naps in one afternoon have me a little overrested," he laughed softly.

Shira chuckled as he stood up to collect the dishes. "Mitsuki, would you mind helping me?” he asked the young lord.

Mitsuki looked at Shira for a moment before answering. “Sure,” he said with a nod. He wanted to have a word with this chef.

“Thank you,” Shira smiled.

“Right,” Sandaime chuckled. “Don’t stay up too late tonight,” he warned them all before standing up. “Goodnight,” he said as he left with his wife.

Azumi stood up. “I am going to go see if Naga and Ryuga are back from their hunt,” she said. “I will be back.” With that said, she left, leaving Gaara, Mitsuki and Shira alone.

Gaara stood up to clear away anything that was left on the table. He went to set the small pile of dishes down when he felt a strong and dark energy wafting off of Mitsuki. He turned to look at the boy and then at Shira. His best friend was tense. “Are...you two okay?” he asked slowly.

"Yes," Mitsuki answered immediately with a large beaming smile. "We are fine." The boy opened his eyes and Gaara immediately noted the change in his pupils. They were round before. Now they were vertical slits like his siblings’ and father’s.

Gaara took a step back at the sudden change. “Are you sure?” he asked, looking at Shira who was shaking his head with what he dared to call fear in his eyes.

“We are fine,” Mitsuki repeated. “Right, Shira?”

"Right," Shira's voice cracked. "We were just talking about——"

"My Lady Goddess," Mitsuki cut him off.

"Oh," Gaara swallowed a laugh. "I see...should I go get Uncle so all three of you can fawn over her?"

“No, that will not be necessary,” Mitsuki said.

“Neither of us will compare to him,” Shira sighed.

“Speak for yourself,” Mitsuki snapped.

Gaara and Shira both took a step back. Gaara was not entirely sure how to handle his fiancée’s younger brother threatening his best friend. He was sure Shira could handle a thirteen-year-old but he also knew just how brutal this family was and if Mitsuki was serious then Shira could actually get hurt. “Shira has a girlfriend, you know,” he said, trying to save his friend from whatever Mitsuki was planning.
"Does Shira's girlfriend know he still gets head kisses?" Mitsuki narrowed his eyes. "Or glows from them?"

"You got one, too," Shira said, trying not to hide behind Gaara. "And your father gave one to Azumi so everyone gets them!"

"So you are saying Lady Goddess’s head kisses are not special?"

"Well, I mean...of course, but...you know," Shira said. He did think they were but no matter what he said, this kid’s fuse was going to be lit.

Mitsuki’s fangs poked out very slightly and Gaara almost panicked, knowing what it meant. “Oh, whoa, relax, Mitsuki,” he said. “Everyone finds head kisses from my aunt to be special.”

“I will fight everyone,” Mitsuki said.

Gaara moved to restrain him but Naga and Ryuga came in just in time and wrapped around Mitsuki, restraining his arms to his sides. Naga moved in front of his face, swaying slightly to get him to calm down.

"Oh, thank the gods," Shira relaxed, letting his forehead fall to Gaara's shoulder. "I was afraid this was going to turn in to a deathmatch and I don't...I don't think I would have won," he laughed shakily.

Gaara bit his lip, trying hard not to laugh too hard. "I wonder if she is his first crush?" Gaara murmured to his best friend.

"That's a pretty intense first crush," Shira breathed out.

“Go find Azumi,” Gaara chuckled, “I’ll take this one to his room.” While Mitsuki was still under Naga’s trance, Gaara turned him around and started walking him to his room. Ryuga slipped off of him and moved up Shira’s body, hissing softly about where she was as if he could understand.

Shira chuckled softly, gently petting Ryuga's head. After a minute of Shira not moving while Ryuga explained, the snake huffed. "How about you just point me in the right direction?" he asked with a sheepish smile. Ryuga rolled his eyes then nodded. His tail flicked towards the door and Shira moved.

With a few more flicks of his tail, Ryuga led Shira through the halls to the back balcony of the mansion. Azumi was sitting at the table, seemingly lost in thought. Her attention was brought to Shira as he stepped closer to her. "Oh, you found him," she said, noticing the snake wrapped around him. "They both rushed right past me. They had not seen me all day and they left as soon as I walked into the room," she pouted.

"Ah," Shira laughed, rubbing the back of his neck. "I think they left in a rush to save me," he chuckled. Ryuga hissed his affirmation as he slipped off Shira to coil in front of Azumi on the table.

"Save you?" she hummed. "From what? Did another person get into this house?"

"Oh, no," Shira chuckled, sitting down across from her. "Mitsuki...uh...how do I phrase this?" he laughed. "Mitsuki really likes Lady Sachiko." He could not help his smile but there was a twinge of fear in his eyes.

“Yes,” she said slowly with an even slower nod, not completely following where he was going.
Ryuga explained that Mitsuki almost went full feral on Shira because of their mutual love for Sachiko. “Oh...” she hummed, not completely believing that Mitsuki was even capable of going feral. “I see...” She could not completely rule it out, though, knowing how she could get sometimes.

"I've never been so afraid of a thirteen-year-old in my life," Shira sighed, leaning back in his seat. "Has he ever had a crush before?"

She thought for a moment. “None that I am aware of,” she said. “Oh...oh, if this is his first, it might be a bit intense.” She sighed heavily, running her hand through her hair. “Someone needs to remind him that she is married and also too old for him.”

"Can't be me that does it,” Shira chuckled. "He might fight me on sight." He ran a hand through his hair. "I like him though. And your other brother," His smile softened as he looked at her. "Do they like Gaara?"

“They do,” she said with a soft smile. “And that makes me so happy. I do have another older brother and I hope he will like Gaara. I do not see why he would not but there is always that underlying nervousness about it.” She sighed and leaned forward, resting her head on her fist. “And my father...seems to like him but it is always hard to tell.”

He reached over to gently scratch her head, humming softly as he looked up at the moon. "I'm sure your other brother will like him. Gaara's a pretty likable guy. So stand up and adult," he teased. "Your father...seems pretty intense from what I could tell at the table. I think..." he paused for a minute to consider his words, "I think he would have told you if he really didn't like Gaara."

She lowered her head to rest on her arms, humming through a smile as he scratched her head. “Mm, I suppose he would have,” she said softly. After a minute, a second pair of hands started scratching her back. “I was not tired earlier,” she chuckled, “but now it seems like you two are trying to put me to sleep.” She leaned up and tilted her head back to look at Gaara. He flashed her a smile, leaning in to give her a kiss as Naga moved from him to the table and coiled up next to Ryuga.

“Tired or relaxed?” Shira smirked. “We have to spoil you once in a while.”

“He’s right,” Gaara chuckled, pressing in a little harder as he moved his hands and started massaging her. “Do you want a bath?” he asked her. “I know we took one earlier.”

She bit her lip through a groan as he massaged her. “We did but I am always up for a bath,” she chuckled. If there was one thing she knew she was going to retain from almost a year of serving Sasori, it was constantly bathing.

“I’ll go run one for you,” Gaara smiled, kissing the back of her head. “And then do this properly.” He pressed in a little deeper into her muscles. He kissed her one more time then pulled away.

Shira chuckled, watching the couple. “I’m glad some good came out of you being enslaved,” he chuckled.

"I cannot deny that there have been some positive things that came out of this experience,” she hummed, watching as Gaara turned the corner back into the house. "Some very positive things," she smirked.

Shira chuckled softly, following her line of sight. “Hopefully,” his smile softened, he continued to move his fingers. “The traumas you suffered this year won’t follow you forever;” his voice dropped low. “You didn’t deserve any of this.”
She looked at him and smiled. "No one deserves to be abused," she said. She thought again about everything Sasori did to her and how much she resented him for it. Yet, no matter how much she told herself she resented him, her thoughts always shifted to how much they actually got along and how much she felt bad for him. She got lost in her thoughts again, only being brought back when Shira said something she did not catch. She blinked and saw that Shira was looking fearfully at the balcony. She followed his line of sight and saw a giant snake whose head rested on the railing of the balcony. "Oh, dear," she hummed, trying not to fear the size of the snake herself.

"Do you...know this one?" Shira asked softly, trying to hide the fear in his voice.

Azumi looked hard at the snake, slowly standing up and walking toward it. She reached out carefully to press her hand gently to the snake's nose, flinching slightly when it moved closer to her to make contact. "Do I know you?" she whispered, petting the snake. She had never seen a snake this big so she did not think she knew it but when she looked into its eyes, something about it seemed very familiar. Naga and Ryuga hissed frantically, realizing who it was and bowing to it.

Gaara returned at that moment with the words he was about to say dying quickly on his tongue. He stood stock-still and just as shocked as Shira. He took several minutes to take in the image of his wife-to-be speaking softly to a snake that should have only existed in stories. Finding his legs, he very slowly and very quietly moved to the table and whispered to Shira, "Who...what..." Shira shook his head, unable to open his mouth.

Azumi brought her other hand up, petting the huge snake with both hands. She peeked over the balcony to see just how big the snake was and then looked into its eyes again. The intense gaze almost made her shudder and want to back away. She recognized that feeling almost immediately. Only one person made her feel that way just by looking at her. "Father?" she whispered, very confused. The massive snake flicked its tongue just enough for it to slip out of its lips as acknowledgment.

"She seems to know it," Gaara whispered, sitting down to watch, worried for Azumi. He knew she could handle herself but that never stopped him from worrying. Especially in the case of prehistoric-sized serpents suddenly appearing.

"She went right over to it," Shira whispered back, still stiffly watching. "But I mean...she always talks to snakes, right?" He glanced at Naga and Ryuga who were still excited.

"They seem to know it, too," Gaara whispered, looking at the snakes. He looked closely at Naga who looked like he was about to ascend. He had only seen the snake act like that around one person. The idea he was beginning to form seemed highly impossible but given everything he has seen up until then, he was not going to rule it out.

Azumi smiled at the snake then turned around to face Gaara and Shira. "We definitely know him," she told them. The snake moved very slightly to its head was just above her.

"We?" Shira asked.

Azumi nodded. "Yes," she chuckled. "We."

That was the last detail Gaara needed to put the puzzle together. His jaw dropped so hard that there was a soft click to it. "That’s..." he started.

"Who?" Shira looked away from the massive snake to his friend. Who could they possibly know that was a snake?
"My father," Azumi chuckled.

"Your father can turn into...that?" Shira asked softly, looking back at the snake.

"Apparently." The snake moved up and carefully brought his entire body onto the balcony. "Why have you not told me about this?" she asked. The snake hissed and despite his size, the sound was only just slightly louder than when Naga or Ryuga hissed. "But that is not something you should keep from your children," she sighed. "Which one of us can do it?" Never in her life did she think or feel that she could turn into a snake so she was sure it was not her. The snake hissed again and she immediately scoffed and rolled her eyes. "Of course it would be Yashamaru," she muttered. "I take it he knows about this then?" Her father shook his head. "No?" she smirked. "Nice. I cannot wait for him to be provoked into this form." The snake hissed again and it distinctly sounded like a heavy sigh. It coiled neatly around itself to rest its head so it was facing Shira and Gaara. Both men stared at it, bewildered.

"Uh," Shira started.

Gaara blinked, trying to find his tongue again. "Azumi...is that...actually your father?" he asked, thinking back to how she had denied she was a snake. He had garnered from the half conversation that she really could not transform but suddenly it seemed more plausible that she could in the future. Would this mean their child could?

"It is," she hummed. "If you are skeptical then try to look into his eyes for more than three seconds," she chuckled.

Shira looked at the snake in the eyes and immediately had to look away, fighting the urge to hide behind Gaara. "Oh...yeah, that's him," he said.

Gaara snorted softly at his friend's reaction then took a hard look at the snake's eyes. It was indeed the intense stare of the village head. He suppressed a shudder of his own. "Is everything okay?" he finally asked. It had just dawned on him that maybe something had happened or he might have been hurt. He was grasping at straws. He could not fathom a reason for her father to turn into a massive snake.

Orochimaru nodded and hissed softly, explaining that he was just going to go out for a little while. He said it more to Azumi since she was the only one who could understand him. He had only stopped by the balcony when he saw his daughter.

Azumi frowned a little, the slightest bit of worry for what he was going out to do washing over her. "I see," she said softly. "Um...be careful then."

"Is he going somewhere?" Shira whispered to Gaara.

Gaara shrugged, not entirely sure why Azumi suddenly looked worried. "I can only assume so," he whispered back.

Orochimaru looked at the two men and gave them a polite nod. He moved his head closer to Azumi so she could pet him and once she did, he made his way down to the ground level and left. Azumi watched him leave for a few seconds and then turned back to Gaara and Shira. "He has business to attend to," she summarized. "He will be back before morning."

"Azumi," Shira's body moved stiffly to watch the snake disappear. He turned just as stiffly to look at her. "Your family is just a little, just a minuscule amount of terrifying."

Gaara finally let out the laugh he had been struggling to hold in. He doubled over, holding onto the
back of Shira's chair for support. "You didn't know he could do that?" he gasped, finding his seat so he did not fall over.

"No," Azumi shrugged. "He never mentioned it. Just like he never mentioned me having a snake inside my body my entire life." Ryuga hissed loudly as if proudly stating that he was the snake she was mentioning. "It...does not surprise me and I know that I cannot do it. Unless controlled, that is an instinctive self-defense mechanism and if I could do it then it would have happened sometime this year. Instead, Ryuga came out."

"I learn something new about you every day," Gaara smiled wearily, running a hand through his hair.

"Wait..." Shira perked up. "You said Yashamaru can do it...you don't think Mitsuki can, too, do you?" He looked at Gaara and Azumi in slight fear.

"No," Gaara shook his head. "Orochimaru would have mentioned just now." He had gathered from Azumi's half of the conversation that Yashamaru was the only other one able to transform.

"Oh, thank gods," Shira relaxed. "I wouldn't want him turning into that if he really does decide to fight me," he laughed, still a little tense.

"I will talk to him for you," Azumi assured him. "There is not much I can do about how much he likes Lady Sachiko but I will not let him get physical with you over it."

"No, wait," Gaara started to laugh again. "I want to see our favorite late-night chef fight a teenager for the love of their lives. I'll place the first bet on Mitsuki."

"Wow," Shira punched Gaara in the arm. "Thanks for the vote of confidence," he joked. He rolled his eyes then bowed his head to Azumi. "Thank you."

"I do not want to keep you out too late," she told Shira. "I am sure you have a restaurant to be running right now. I will talk to Mitsuki in the morning before he goes off to the Eastern Villa."

"Please," Shira chuckled. "I have a second in command. They can hold down the fort for one night," he chuckled. "But I'm sure you'd like a little extra alone time." He stood up, stretching his back a little then walked over to pull her into a hug. "I'll stop by the villa tomorrow with food and then swing by Gaara's with food for you and the baby," he promised.

"Thank you," she grinned, hugging him back. "The baby and I appreciate that so much." She chuckled softly as they pulled away from each other.

"It's no problem," he smiled. "I like doing this for you." He gave her another squeeze then took a step back. "I'll see you both tomorrow." He and Gaara nodded at each other as a goodbye. Shira made his way back into the house, disappearing quickly. Once they were alone, Gaara reached out to Azumi and pulled her closer.

She smiled at him and leaned in for a kiss. "I am ready for that bath now," she hummed.

"Excellent," he smiled, kissing her stomach. "I suppose I should let you walk since we could run into your brothers," he chuckled as he stood up, stealing another kiss from her as he did. "I hope you like the oils I picked." He laced their fingers together, leading her into the house. Naga and Ryuga made their way to Mitsuki’s room, wanting to make sure he was going to be alright.

"I always like the oils you pick," she smiled, bringing his hand up to kiss the back of it. "You have good taste."
"I have only the best selection," he grinned. They walked down to the bathroom. The fragrance of the oil filled the warm room. "I noticed you like to sun yourself lately," he smiled. "So I made the bath a little warmer than usual since the sun is already down."

"You are so sweet," she grinned, pulling him into another kiss. Without breaking the kiss, she started to undress. "Will you be joining me?" she asked.

"Is that even a question?" He smirked against her lips as he started to undo the folds of his own clothing. He kissed her again while letting his clothes drop to the floor around his feet.

She took his hands in hers and led him closer to the tub. They both quickly got in and settled into it with her back against his chest. They took their time bathing as she wanted to enjoy the hot water as long as possible.
Chapter 77

Chapter Notes

Sometimes chapters are short. Sometimes chapters are long. I am not consistent. I am also not sorry about that.

The next night, Sasori sat at his desk, looking over a few documents while Komushi laid out on the bed, reading a book.

"You haven't heard from Kakuzu yet?" Komushi asked.

"No," Sasori answered, not looking up from his work.

"Do you think he did it?"

Sasori was about to answer when he heard someone storming through the halls. "We're about to find out," he hummed.

Within a few seconds, Kakuzu burst into the room with Hidan in tow. "You!" he growled. "You didn't tell me the fucker could turn into a snake!"

“Aaaah,” Sasori hummed thoughtfully. “So it is true.”

Komushi looked up from his reading and nodded. “I told you so,” he smirked.

Kakuzu growled again. “You knew!” he roared.

“He ate us!” Hidan snapped from behind his master.

“Isn’t it nasty?” Komushi scrunches up his nose. “Seems like he has a habit.”

"I assure you I didn't find out he could do that until you were already on your way to the job," Sasori said airily.

"You better pay me extra!" Kakuzu snapped.

"Did you kill him?" Sasori challenged. "Or did you run away after he spat you out?" Kakuzu glowered at Sasori's smug smirk and started to growl again deep in his throat. "I didn't think so," Sasori scoffed. "I'll pay half of what was agreed because you got half the job done," he started then stopped, pausing for a second. "Were you even able to injure him?"

"Of course we did!" Hidan lied.

Komushi squinted, skeptical over Hidan's sudden rush to defense. "Oh, yeah?" he smirked. "How did you injure him?"

"Yes," Sasori agreed, "how? This will be vital for how we carry out our plan." He had a feeling that these two barely even touched Orochimaru.

Kakuzu glared down at his stammering slave. He was not going to help the silver-haired man out
of this one. "You idiot," he hissed.

Hidan rubbed the back of his neck while shifting his eyes away from the waiting eyes of the room. "We, uh, threw him around a lot. We had to have hurt him at least a little?" he offered.

"So you aren't sure if you hurt him," Komushi smirked. "A second ago you sounded pretty confident. But now, not so much."

"We did!" Hidan doubled down. "There is no way he got out of our fight—"

Kakuzu slapped Hidan hard across the face. "Stop talking!" he ordered.

Both Komushi and Sasori grimaced at the nearly orgasmic sound Hidan made after being slapped. "Right..." Komushi said after a few seconds.

"So you didn't even injure him," Sasori continued, "and you expect to get paid."

"Sounds like you're running a scam," Komushi smirked.

"Did you even get to deal with the rest of the family?" Sasori asked. Kakuzu did not answer at first, not wanting to admit that they were beaten by Orochimaru and did not even get a chance to move on to the rest of the family. Sasori smirked again, knowing exactly what Kakuzu's silence meant. "Thought so," he said.

"Sounds like you can go," Komushi waved them off. "You know where the door is." He folded his arms, smirking wider. Kakuzu glared at Sasori but the young lord did not flinch.

"You're welcome to try again," Sasori smirked. "But if you don't want to, I'll just call on my other contacts," he said easily with a shrug. He really did not have anyone else to call for this sort of work but he could bluff. Bluffing was a big part of the underground world.

Kakuzu growled again, staring both Komushi and Sasori down for another minute. "Let's go, Hidan," he finally said, turning to leave.

Hidan's eyes widened, looking at his master. "But, Lord Kakuzu—" He was cut off by a strong glare from the older man.

"I said. Let's. Go."

"Okay," Hidan sighed and followed Kakuzu out of the room and out of the house.

"Those two are..." Komushi started, trying to find the right words to use, "gross."

"And inefficient," Sasori added. "Without her father dead or at least injured, he's still a major obstacle standing in my way of getting to her."

"Do you have any other ideas on how to deal with him?" Komushi asked, getting up to lean against the edge of the desk.

Sasori shook his head, letting out a long stressed breath. "He's a fucking snake so he's going to be resistant to poison." He ran a hand through his hair, pulling it a little. "Our best hitman couldn't even land a physical blow on him..." he paused, trying to wrack his brain for anything to use against them.

"Maybe we should just go for her brother first," Komushi recommended.
Sasori shook his head. "Her brother is the one that was at my house that night," he said. "He looks exactly like their father and I can only assume he can also turn into a snake. Not only that, going after her brother makes us an even bigger target for her father who we're trying to avoid."

They stayed silent for another few moments, coming up with plans on how to get to Azumi. In their silence, they heard Sasori's father speaking with someone at the front door. Sharing a look, they crept down the hall to listen to the conversation. As they got closer, they heard it was Sachiko and Shira. Sachiko was asking where Sasori was and if his father had seen him since the night they encountered Orochimaru. Much to Sasori's relief, he heard his father tell her no and that he had no idea where Sasori was.

"We stopped by Komushi's to see if he was there," Sachiko said.

"She went to my house?" Komushi whispered, almost a little too loud. Sasori quickly covered his mouth, muttering under his breath to shut the fuck up.

"I'm sure Sasori doesn't want to be visited by anyone," he heard his father say.

"I know, I'm just worried about him," Sachiko lied.

"Bullshit," Sasori grumbled, rolling his eyes.

"I brought this basket for you and your wife," Shira said. Sasori heard the transferring of a food basket from the chef's arms to his father's.

"Thank you, Shira," his father said.

"If you see Sasori," Sachiko said, "please tell him I'm worried."

It took every ounce of his father's strength to not roll his eyes in front of Sachiko. He knew she was bullshitting and what her true intentions were for stopping by. "Will do," he said. "Thank you."

Immediately, Sasori and Komushi went back to the bedroom. "So they're looking for me," Sasori hummed.

"Is that really surprising?" Komushi snorted. "They want you dead."

Sasori stayed quiet for a moment. "Shira," he said finally. "Shira is probably the safest way to get to Azumi. He's Gaara's best friend so he has to know she's expecting. And if there's one thing he loves more than my aunt," he smirked.

"It's cooking," Komushi chuckled. "He'll want to bring her food all the time because of the cravings."

"We can use him to get to her."

"Perfect," Komushi grinned. "Do you want me to swing by his restaurant or are you going out into the world?"

"I can't leave just yet," Sasori shook his head, "now that I know they’re actively looking for me. So any and all interactions will have to be through you," he hummed, squinting at Komushi. "You can handle that, right?"

Komushi rolled his eyes. "Have I let you down yet?"

Sasori leveled him with a hard look. "You don't want me to answer that truthfully," he said.
"No," Komushi said, "I really don't."

"Just follow him to her but stay out of sight. We just need to get her alone. But we need to get closer to her to do that."

"Fine. I'll go tomorrow."

Sasori's father came into the room, holding the large basket of food Shira had given him. "You're being looked for," he told Sasori.

"So I've gathered," Sasori sighed. "You kept the food?"

"Turning it down would have been suspicious." He stayed quiet for a moment. "Do you two want it?"

Neither Sasori or Komushi answered at first. They looked at each other for a few seconds and then nodded when they telepathically decided that yes, they did want the food. They both turned to his father and nodded a second time. "We'll take it," Komushi said.

Sasori's father nodded and set the basket down on Sasori's desk. "Your mother already took out what she wanted. You two can have the rest."

"Thank you, Father," Sasori said.

His father nodded again and turned to leave, stopping in the doorway to look back at him. "Whatever you two are planning...just be careful," he said just before disappearing down the hall.

"That was a bit ominous," Komushi hummed.

"He's just worried," Sasori rolled his eyes. "We'll be fine as long as you don't fuck up tomorrow."

"No pressure or anything," Komushi smirked, looking into the basket. "It will be easy. I'm sure even if I get caught at your aunt and uncle's, I can play off like I'm looking for you, too." He pulled out a spoonful of food. "Oh!" he grinned. "Let's make everyone think you died," he joked.

"Fake my death?" Sasori rolled his eyes. "No one would believe that," he snorted. His pride would not let him even consider that at the moment. Not when it would indicate he had succumbed to Orochimaru's attacks. "Bottom line: don't get caught. And make yourself a plate, you animal!"

"I am not an animal!" Komushi pouted through a mouthful of food.

Sasori pushed past him so he could peer into the basket. He considered for a moment that the food could be poisoned but his mother was already eating it so they would have known by then if it was. Also, it was not in Shira's character to poison people. He reached into the basket, grabbing a few things to put onto a plate and then sat back down. He could never deny that Shira's food was good. He ate the food rather quickly and then stood up for seconds. He looked into the basket again, pushing a few things aside. He came across a cake he had never seen before. "What the hell is this?" he muttered, picking it up. It was only half of a larger cake.

Komushi looked at it, getting a little closer. "Chocolate cake?" he asked, looking at the layers. "The frosting looks weird." He used his finger to taste the frosting. "Oh, but it's really good. Like a coconut frosting without the coconut."

Sasori's eyes widened slightly, remembering that was how Azumi described a cake from her region. "Then this is a chantilly cake," he said softly.
"Whatever it's called, it's good," Komushi grinned. He took it from Sasori and set it down so he could cut them each a piece of it. "It doesn't sound familiar. How do you know what it is? Are you getting back into baking?" he teased his friend.

Sasori glared at Komushi as he reloaded his plate. "I was never into baking. Mother got into it and dragged Father and me along," he rolled his eyes. "It's a cake Azumi described to me from where she's from."

Komushi chuckled, taking a bite of the cake. "It's really good. It must be popular there."

"She said it's her favorite so it must be," Sasori muttered.

"I can see why." Komushi took a few more bites of the cake then gave Sasori a hard look. A smirk started to appear on his lips. "Lure her with this," he suggested. "I can get her alone and you can pull her away with her favorite cake. She's pregnant, she won't be able to resist it."

"It's devious and excellent," Sasori grinned.

"Guess we should save some of this then shouldn't," Komushi glanced down at the cake.

"There's nearly a full cake there," Sasori shrugged. "It's not like we were going to eat it all in one night anyway." Komushi pouted a little. Sasori looked at him in slight disgust. "You would think you could put a whole cake away."

"I can," Komushi smirked. "Just watch me."

"I am not going to watch you," Sasori groaned. He took a bite of his slice and bit back a satisfied hum. It was good. And while he did not think he could finish the whole cake in one night, he could see how one would feel like they could.

"You're lucky I want some of this for tomorrow," Komushi scoffed.

"Uh-huh," Sasori hummed, turning back to his papers. Half of them were useless now that he knew Orochimaru was still alive but he could salvage a few. He just had to move a few pieces around.

Komushi finished off his first slice and cut himself a second, mentally telling himself that he was going to stop after that one. He watched Sasori for a moment and then smirked. "You miss her," he teased.

"I do not!" Sasori snapped back.

"Oh, but you do," Komushi nudged his fork towards Sasori's cheek. "Otherwise you wouldn't be working this hard."

"I'm working this hard because she is my property and I have jobs for her to do," he snapped back bitterly.

Komushi nodded, eating another forkful of cake. "Whatever lie you need to tell yourself," Komushi chuckled.

"Just shut up and eat your cake," Sasori grumbled.

"I miss her, too," Komushi shrugged, finishing off his second slice and sitting on the bed. Sasori rolled his eyes. They fell into silence. There was only the sound of papers shuffling coupled with light taps of their forks. Sasori marked his notes, hunching closer to them as he wrote. "Sasori, you
need to get some sleep,” Komushi spoke up.

Sasori blinked as if coming out of a trance. His face twisted in irritation first at being interrupted and then for the light touch Komushi put down on his shoulder. He heard the click of a plate being put down on his other side. “I’m fine, Komushi. If you’re tired then go to sleep.” He jerked the concern off with the hand on his shoulder. He did not need concern. He needed to be certain.

Komushi frowned and then sighed. "You'll need to be rested to deal with her," he suggested. "I know you don't want to hear it, but you might act irrationally on no sleep and it'll be harder to get her to come back."

Sasori stopped writing, groaning low in his throat. He hated when Komushi of all people made sense. “Fine but we are taking a bath first,” he caved as he got up. “Both of us. If you are sleeping in my bed, you are bathing.”

Komushi backed up to get out of Sasori’s way. “Fine by me,” he chuckled with his hands up in surrender.

Sasori sighed and headed toward the bathroom. He ran his hand through his hair as he headed down the hall. Once in the bathroom, he grabbed a towel to set next to the tub and started running the water for his bath. His movements were slower than normal and only got slower as he lost himself in his thoughts while he put the oils and salts in. He did not want to be setting up a bath for himself. That was the job of his slave. He slowly stripped down and then shut the water off as he got into the tub. He let out a soft sigh as the hot water stung his skin in the best way. After a couple of moments, he completely relaxed and closed his eyes, tilting his head back while he ran through his plans in his mind. He needed to figure out how to get rid of her family because his plans to take her back would only truly work if they were out of the picture.

He had fallen asleep for a few minutes and woke up to the sound of a servant walking by the bathroom and dropping something. With a soft groan at his now racing heartbeat, he sat up and started bathing himself. He was suddenly drained and now he knew he was being looked for. There were too many obstacles in the way. He did not want to deal with any of them. He just wanted to go back to how things were.

Moving a little faster, he finished washing up and got out of the tub. He quickly dried off and put his robe on then headed back to the bedroom.

"I thought you died in there," Komushi smirked, standing up to head to the bathroom.

"And you didn't even think to come to check on me," Sasori teased.

"I did," Komushi tapped his chin. "But then I figured there is no way Sasori would die so quietly." He grinned at his best friend.

Sasori rolled his eyes, laying down on his bed. "I suppose you're right about that," he groaned softly, settling into the soft mattress and closing his eyes. Sleep almost retook him instantly. He heard Komushi say something back to him but he was already drifting back to his plans. How drastic was he willing to get, he wondered, all for a slave?
Chapter 78

The next morning, Sasori woke up to his best friend mumbling something about some girl in his sleep. He rolled his eyes before even opening them. Turning over very slightly, he saw Komushi in a position he was sure only a fool like him could sleep comfortably in. With a groan, he sat up and got out of bed, tightening his robe as he moved toward the door.

Before he even opened it, there was a knock. When he answered it, one of his mother’s servants was standing before him. “Oh, you’re already up,” she said with a small smile. “Your mother wants to know if you and Lord Komushi would like anything.”

Sasori looked back at Komushi, still passed out on his bed. “Just two cups of coffee for now,” he told her.

She nodded and backed away. “I will be right back.”

“You can leave it by the door. He’s indecent.” The servant chuckled as she continued her way to the kitchen. Sasori rounded the bed and nudged Komushi hard in the side. “Get up,” he said.

“Hnnn, no, you take it off,” Komushi laughed in his sleep. He nuzzled his face into the bed deeper.

Sasori shook his head, pushing against his friend harder. “We have things to do,” he grumbled, shoving Komushi hard.

Komushi jerked away, feeling his body flip over. “Mmm! What was that for, Sasori!” he whined, rubbing his eyes. “You can’t let a man dream?”

“You can dream once my slave is returned to me,” he said flatly with a hand on his hip.

"Uugh, fine," Komushi whined again. There was a light knock at the door and Sasori moved to go answer it. "So, I'm going to follow Shira," Komushi said, "infiltrate—"

"Don't use the word 'infiltrate,'" Sasori cut him off, walking back to the bed with two mugs of coffee.

Komushi smirked, taking one of the mugs from him. "Infiltrate your aunt and uncle's house. Find out where Azumi is. And then what? How do I get her to you?"

"That's what I spent most of the night thinking about," Sasori hummed. "This is going to be the hardest part. Not just getting her away from everyone but actually convincing her to be alone with you."

"No one ever has to be convinced to be alone with me," Komushi smirked.

"Must I remind you again that she doesn't really like you?"

"Why don't we just stick to the cake idea?" Komushi offered. "If she genuinely likes it then it should be able to get me close."

"She has Shira. She can get cake at any time," Sasori sighed.

"Then churros and the guise of turning my back on you," he raised a thick brow.
"Elaborate," Sasori squinted. "I don't need to worry about you defecting."

"No, of course not," Komushi scoffed, rolling his eyes. "I'd never betray you. Especially after everything I went through for you."

"Don't try to make me feel guilty," Sasori sighed. He was already feeling a little guilty about it and he did not need to be reminded.

Komushi smirked at him. "If I pretend to be turning my back on you, she might trust me quicker. It would be easier to get her out and bring her to you."

"Fine," Sasori huffed. "It's the best plan we have right now." He ran a hand through his hair.

"If you think of something better we can always change it."

"No, we will go with that. If you are taking her out for churros, I assume you're going to the coffee shop?"

"Is there anywhere else we'd go?" Komushi chuckled.

"Fair," Sasori rolled his eyes.

"I'll sweet talk her there," Komushi continued, "and then I'll bring her here."

"She's never been here," Sasori hummed, "she wouldn't think it's my parents' house. That'll work."

"Good plan?"

"Good plan."

"Good. Now let's go eat breakfast."

They got up together once their brilliant plan was solidified. They could smell breakfast wafting down the hall. They walked into the kitchen to find his parents feeding each other pieces of fruit.

His mother giggled softly at something his father said. "Good morning, sons of mine," she smiled up at them. "Did you sleep well?"

Sasori's face scrunched up at the sight of his parents being in love and he let out a small disgusted groan. "Ew," he grumbled.

"I slept great!" Komushi grinned, nudging Sasori's in the side with his elbow.

"Yeah, I slept fine," Sasori sighed. They moved to sit down at the table with his parents.

"Good, good," she smiled. "Do you have any plans today, Komushi?" she asked, getting up to pull two plates for the boys.

"Oh, I'm going out to run some errands today," he hummed, sitting down. Sasori poured himself another cup of coffee, feeling his energy already fading.

"Oh, maybe you can come with us," his mother smiled brightly, setting the plates down and then serving them.

"Yeah, we're heading out to the market today," his father chimed in.
"Oh, I'm heading in the other direction," Komushi chuckled. "The indoor market."

"Aw," Sasori's mother pouted slightly. "Maybe next time then."

"It's a date."

"Ew," Sasori muttered into his mug.

"And what are your plans, Sasori?" his father asked.

"Not much. Sitting in my room, pretending I don't exist," he answered nonchalantly.

"You can use the workshops, Sasori," he reminded his son. "You aren't confined to the bedroom."

Sasori hummed, pouring sweet cream into his coffee. "I haven't forgotten," he said to his father.

"Oh, yes! Sasori, maybe you can work on a wedding gift for your cousin!"

"Oh, that's right," Komushi chuckled. "I forget Little Temari was getting married."

"You say 'little' like she's not only a year younger than you," Sasori said.

"She's always going to be little to me."

"Don't tell her that," Sasori and both his parents said at the same time.

"Do you have any ideas for what you are going to make?" his father asked.

"Well, I didn't really plan on making anything," Sasori grumbled. "At least not today. But I guess I can make her some kind of perfume."

"Do you know anything about her fiance?" Komushi asked.

"Not really," Sasori hummed. "But I'm sure I'll meet him sometime before the wedding." He started eating his breakfast. "I could go out to lunch with them one day to figure him out." He shrugged. "I'll figure something out." There was the unspoken thought that if Azumi was there, she could have made her bath goods for them. But no one vocalized those thoughts. No one was in the mood to make Sasori brood nor was Sasori in the mood to brood.

"Anyway, you have full access to both workshops. So please, Sasori, be productive today," his mother encouraged sweetly. "What would you like to eat tonight?"

Sasori pretended to think while he finished off his coffee. "Surprise me," he said. "It's been a while since I've had anything you've made."

His mother smiled. "Prepare to be surprised then," she said.

They all ate their breakfast and cleaned up. "We're going to head out now," his father said, standing up from the table. He wrapped an arm around his wife's waist and looked at his son and his not-son. "We'll see you two later."

"See you later," Komushi called after them. Sasori waved to his parents, already heading back down the hall to his room. He mentioned to one of the servants to have a pot of tea brought to his room on the way out.

Komushi followed after him quickly. "So are you going to make anything for the wedding?" he
"Probably but like I said, not right now," he sighed, taking his seat at the desk.

Komushi nodded, picking up the rest of the chantilly cake from the night before. He covered it up a little to be able to carry it through the city. "I'll have her back before you know it," he grinned.

"See to it that you do," Sasori muttered, already shifting through papers. He would not admit that he was excited to see Azumi again. To have her back in his clutches.

"How are you going to keep your parents out of the house tonight?"

"I don't need to because we are going to keep Azumi quiet."

"Right," Komushi said softly with a slight nod. "See you later then." With that said, he left the room and headed to Shira's restaurant to follow the chef to Azumi's location.

Shira pulled the door of his restaurant shut with a satisfied sigh. He shifted a basket of food on his arm to lock the door then turned to head down the street. He squinted against the mid-morning light. "Ugh," he groaned as he shielded his eyes with his free hand, not noticing Komushi peeking around the corner.

Komushi watched him for a few moments, letting him get far enough to follow at a safe distance. He hummed softly to himself to appear as non-suspicious as possible as he walked through the streets. He refrained from tasting a little bit of the cake he was holding, having to constantly remind himself that it was part of the plan. He noticed Shira take a turn that was not toward Sandaime and Sachiko's house. Komushi let out a confused hum as he continued to follow Shira.

He looked around their surroundings, frowning as they got further and further away from the house he thought they would be going to. The area was familiar but he had not been to this section of the city in a few years. 'Who lives over here?' he thought. 'Could he not be going to visit them?' he frowned. It did not dawn on him until he saw the mansion come into view. 'Gaara's place!' His jaw dropped.

Shira walked up to the front door and knocked then took a step back. Within a few seconds, it opened and there was an excited squeal from inside. Azumi appeared in the doorway to hug him then stepped away to let him in.

"Good morning," Shira chuckled, stepping into the house.

"Good morning," Azumi grinned, walking to the kitchen with him.

"I made you all your favorites and threw in some extra leftovers from the night," he told her. "So you have lunch in there too or you can eat that first," he chuckled through a very long, tear-jerking yawn. He placed the basket down on the table and slumped against her heavily. "I'm going to go take a nap," he smiled sleepily.

Down the hall, Komushi slipped into the house, listening for where Azumi and Shira went.

"Amazing," he laughed silently. "I don't know why we didn't think of this."

"Aw," Azumi chuckled, gently rubbing Shira's back. "Go upstairs and take your nap," she told him. "Gaara should be done with his patients by late afternoon so he should be back when you wake up." She kissed his cheek. "I will be down here, eating an infant's weight in food," she grinned.

"Sounds good," he smiled, yawning again. He pressed a kiss to her head then departed to die for a
few hours.

Komushi pressed against the wall until he heard Shira disappear down the hall. He glanced back at the kitchen door then down at the cake in his hand. This would either be the best time to lure her away or the worst since she had food and knew Shira just went to bed. He waited a few minutes, wanting to make sure that Shira was definitely not coming back any time soon and that Azumi was going to remain in her spot.

Azumi pulled the first dish out of the basket and sat down at the table with it. She hummed happily as she started eating.

Komushi looked into the kitchen, sighing quietly in relief that her back was turned to him. 'I suppose now would be the ideal time,' he thought. Sasori said the cake was her favorite. She could never turn it down. He took a deep breath and readied himself to carry out the plan then made his way toward her. He crept up to the table to stand just beside her, setting the cake down so it was only in her peripherals. He held his breath a moment. If she screamed he would have to act quickly. He could not let Shira suspect anything and he doubted the man was actually asleep yet so there was still the risk he would come rushing to her aid.

Azumi looked at the cake and smiled. "How could I forget?" she chuckled, pulling it closer. She looked up at him and her smile immediately faded. She gasped hard, almost as if to let out a scream but Komushi moved quickly and covered her mouth hard with his hand.

"I come in peace," he assured her with a hiss. "Don’t scream," he told her. He kept his hand over her mouth. ‘I’m only here to ask if you have any news on Sasori.” He stared at her harder. “Are you going to scream?” he asked her.

She hummed a little and pretended to think about her decision for a moment then nodded. "Loud as fuck," she said, muffled by his hand. How could she trust him when he was the best friend of the man looking for her?

“I figured that would be your answer;” he rolled his eyes. “I guess you don’t want that cake,” he glanced at the dessert on the table. It was a stretch to think she would keep quiet for a cake. But he banked on hormones and his lack of threatening energy to win her over. “I don’t know where he is;” he lied. “So I can’t take you to him. And...” he paused, looking back to her, down at her belly and noting that she was starting to show, “I don’t want him killing that child.” A truth to balance out the lie.

There was a muffled pouting noise that came out of her when she looked over at the chantilly cake. She really wanted it. She looked back at him and stared at him for a few moments. "What do you want?" she huffed behind his hand.

“I’m going to trust that you won’t scream,” he said, carefully taking his hand away. He pulled the seat next to her out, keeping it close in case she did scream. “I just want to know if you have any information on Sasori. I’m sure you guys are keeping tabs on him,” he raised an eyebrow. “I haven’t seen him since that night at his house.”

"If tabs are being kept on him, they are not being shared with me;" she said, pulling the cake closer to her and taking a few bites of it. "I know nothing. Not where he is or if he is still injured." She went silent and took a few more bites of her cake. "Not that I care," she lied.

Komushi’s lip twitched at her last statement. “Is that so;” he hummed, getting up to cross the room and pull a fork of his own. He sat back down, digging into the cake from the opposite side. “I figured you, of all people, would be keeping the closest watch on him.” He hummed again as he
She scoffed and rolled her eyes. "I have better things to do than obsess over what he is doing," she said. "And you, as his best friend, should be the one who has the most information on him. I know you well enough to know that you would be by his side in his incapacitated state." She looked at him hard and lowered her voice. "You really think I am going to sit here and believe you have not been with him since the night you tried to steal my snake?"

Komushi leaned in, grinning wide. "If I knew where he was," he whispered back, "would I be here asking you this question?" He raised his eyebrow in challenge. He smirked, leaning back in his seat as he took another bite of cake. "No, I’d be with him. But I am a little upset with him right now if I’m being honest." He needed to win her trust. At least enough to lure her out of the house.

She narrowed her eyes at him then sighed and rolled her eyes, folding her arms over her chest. "Humor me. Why?" she asked.

“That’s easy,” he shrugged. “He wants to kill your baby,” he said matter of factly. “I don’t agree with that. I want you to have it.”

"You are mad at him because he wants to kill my baby," she muttered. "But then where was that same mentality when he beat me the night he found out his uncle was trying to abolish slavery? You were there for that and you encouraged him," she growled, her voice getting louder.

He held his hands up in surrender. “I didn’t say I was perfect,” he defended. “People can see the error of their ways and realize they are a horrible shit person, can’t they?” He pouted a little. “I’ve done a lot of terrible things and have a lot I regret. That night is definitely on the list.”

She scoffed and rolled her eyes again. She did not believe even a little that he would have changed so quickly after being the way he was his entire life. "You know that I know nothing now," she told him. "I cannot give you what you came here for." She stood up. "I suggest you leave."

“Azumi, wait,” he stood up with her. He had to get her out of the house. “Let...please believe me,” he said softly. He pushed as much apology into his tone. “I’m really not here to sell you out to Sasori or anything.” He reached for her hand, holding it firmly but gently in his hand. “Let me take you out for churros.” This was a desperate move. She could easily turn him down there. She had no reason to believe him and they both knew that. She had even less reason to leave the house but he had to make the attempt.

She looked at their hands then back at him. He did sound sincere but she was having a hard time fully believing him. A small part of her wanted to cave and go out for churros but she knew in this situation she had to keep a more level head. Gently, she tried to pull her hand away from his. "What more could you possibly want?" she asked. "Whatever it is you want to know about him, I cannot help you with." She did not want to leave in case Shira woke up. The last thing she needed was for him to panic and make Gaara panic because she was gone.

“Nothing,” Komushi shook his head. “I just want to treat you to some churros and coffee. I’m sure you’ve been stuck inside most of the day and everyone is watching you.” He gently squeezed her hand to hold it in place. “It will be my treat and then we will come back here.” He offered his most charming smile. “Come on, I’m sure the baby would love churros,” he teased.

She stared at him for a few more moments and then sighed heavily. “I am sure you mean well but me leaving would cause more problems than you know,” she said. She tried to pull her hand away again. “Let me go.”
He released her hand with a heavy sigh. “I know Gaara’s route. He’s going to be gone for hours. You won’t be missed for a twenty-minute churro break,” he pushed gently again. “We’ll go and then come back right away,” he shrugged. “You’re really content to be left here all day alone until Gaara comes back?”

She gave it another long thought and then sighed heavily, closing her eyes. “Twenty minutes,” she said, looking back at him.

“Twenty minutes,” he repeated with a boyish grin. He helped her clean up the little mess on the table quickly. When they were done, he offered his arm to her. “My lady,” he smirked as he used her title for the first time.

She hesitated for a second and then took his arm. Together, they left the house and headed toward the coffee shop. As they entered the mid-morning and early afternoon crowd, she suddenly realized exactly why she was content to stay inside until Gaara came back. The crowd. There were always so many people out. Subconsciously, she pressed a little closer to Komushi, using him to shield herself as he moved them through the streets.

Komushi noticed it instantly. He pulled her a little closer and moved towards the edge of the crowd. “You’re just like him,” he chuckled softly. “Here, we’ll take a back road,” he told her, steering them down a path that was much quieter. “There is always a way to get where you need to while avoiding the crowd,” he winked down at her as he led her out the back end of an alley and it dropped them off two doors down from the coffee shop.

She looked up at him and hummed. “I have taken a few of them with Gaara,” she said. “But I have not been able to explore this city on my own to figure them out myself.” She looked down. “Thank you,” she said softly.

“Under any other circumstances I would offer to show you more,” he smirked. He walked ahead of her to hold the door to the shop open for her. “But I promised twenty minutes,” he smirked.

“You did,” she said, a small smile appearing on her lips as she stepped into the shop.

“Go find a table,” he told her. “I’ll get the churros and coffee.” She nodded and walked toward the tables by the window, finding a table that they could people watch from. He put the order in then scanned the room. He spotted his soon-to-be captive and thankfully no one else that would foil the plan for him. He picked up their order once it was set right next to him and made his way over to her. He sat across from her, placing their food down. “It’s been a while since I was here,” he smiled, sipping his coffee. He hummed contently, making a show of looking out the window.

"I was here recently," she said. "I really like this place." She took a churro and dipped it into the icing then took a bite. She pulled her coffee close and took a sip. "I try to only have one cup of coffee a day," she hummed. "I cannot have too much since I am pregnant."

“Were you? So they let you out of your cage?” he teased then looked down at the coffee cup. “Oh, right,” he frowned. “Would you like me to switch it out for tea?” he asked. He had genuinely forgotten about the coffee rule. He did not spend much time around people having babies. “I can get an herbal tea,” he offered.

"No, no," she smirked. "This is my first and only of the day, do not worry." She took another sip, savoring the coffee. She took another bite of her churro. "I came here with Gaara yesterday," she explained.

“Alright,” he chuckled, relaxing back into his seat. “Oh, wow, that is pretty recent,” he smirked.
“You really love churros, don’t you?” He picked up his own to stir his coffee with it. “I’m surprised you are all at Gaara’s,” he said conversationally. “He never lets anyone over.”

She finished her churro. "Well, he insisted," she said. "We are having a baby together so it should not be surprising."

“Fair enough,” he said into his cup. “Mm, but isn’t it more crowded with your family all there?” He was doing his best to pose his questions delicately so as to not raise too much suspicion in her. “I mean...I’m sure they can hear you two.” He gave her a wicked smirk.

She scoffed at him. "No one can hear us," she said. "We are very careful." She gave that statement a second thought, realizing that if they truly had been careful, she would not be pregnant. "We are usually very careful. Not that we have to be at his house. My family is not always around."

“I’m sure you are,” he snorted. “Oh! Are they having fun learning the city?” His eyes scanned the room again. If her family was roaming about, he needed to be a lot more careful. However, he could not get paranoid. He forced himself to stay relaxed.

"They do not really like it here," she said. She looked at him for a moment then looked down at her coffee. She was not going to reveal the location of her family. It was none of his business where they were or what they were doing. Him knowing she was staying with Gaara was already too much information for him.

“I see,” he said, picking up another churro. “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree at all,” he licked his lips. He was not making much progress on information but he had her. He just needed to lure her back to the house now. His time was almost up with her but everything was running relatively smoothly. He tilted his head a little, setting his coffee down to look at her. “Will you miss the city?”

She took a moment to answer, looking out the window for a few seconds and then back at her coffee. "It has grown on me," she finally said. "There are things I might miss...but overall...I do not belong here."

“Mmm,” he nodded sagely. “You don’t,” he said, looking her over. “But will Gaara belong to your village? Or your child?” he asked. He picked his coffee back up and opened his mouth to say something again then he saw someone pass by the shop window that set off alarms in his head. ‘Shit!’ he thought, catching a glint of narrow gold eyes. ‘Utakata’s here? Shit, did he see us?’ He fought to keep his cool. ‘Did she see him?’ He looked at her over his cup’s edge.

She frowned, picking up her coffee again. "I...hope he will..." she said softly. She never thought about whether Gaara would truly feel at home in her village. She would feel horrible if he regretted leaving the city. "I do not want to force him...but he said he wanted to go..."

“It might be tough on him.” Komushi discreetly looked around the room, trying to spot Utakata. He kept his tone light. “He’s never lived anywhere else just like you haven’t. And by the sounds of it, our homes are drastically different.” He locked eyes with her before going back to searching the room, drumming his fingers along the side of his mug.

"I think he can adapt to things easily," she hummed, looking out the window again. "And...if he wanted to come back...I would not mind coming back with him."

Komushi’s eyes snapped back to hers. He sat up a little straighter. “Now that is interesting to hear you say,” he smirked.
She did not like the way he perked up and frowned again. "I am sure he would be fine in my village, though," she said, finishing her coffee.

He watched her finish her coffee. At the same moment, he caught Utakata out of the corner of his eye crossing the crowded room. "I’m sure he will," he said, downing his own coffee. "I suppose my time is up. We better get you back," he said, trying not to sound rushed. The bastard had noticed them. He would cause problems for them if he interrupted them.

"I suppose," she said as she watched him as he finished everything and then stood up when he stood up, a little surprised he was actually keeping his promise. He took her hand and quickly led her out of the coffee shop and back into the crowded streets.

Komushi needed to stick to the crowd this time. He stayed along the main road. He did not need the other man following them so easily if he followed them at all. The route he was taking would look relatively the same as going back to Gaara’s house until a certain point. By the time she would realize where they were actually going, he could pick her up.

Utakata narrowed his eyes across the room. The sight of Azumi out with Komushi did not sit right with him remotely. He frowned as he picked up his order of coffee, deciding he should at least check on her. He quickly left the shop, going in the direction he saw Komushi take Azumi in. Moving through the crowd, he looked around for Komushi, knowing Azumi would be too small to spot easily among the large number of people.

He spotted the other man, moving quickly through the crowd and looking around suspiciously. However, the early afternoon throng increased and more people started getting in his way, preventing him from reaching Azumi before he lost sight of Komushi.

“Dammit,” he muttered, looking around again to see if he could spot them.

Nothing.

He knew Azumi had started staying at Gaara’s house and he wondered why Gaara had not been with her. He immediately started heading to Gaara’s house to warn whoever was there about the situation.
Azumi stayed close to Komushi, confused as to why he was not taking the quieter route when he knew that she did not deal with crowds well. "Um, would it not have made sense to go the way we came?" she asked.

"Always the clever one, aren't you," Komushi teased distractedly as he looked around for any sign of Utakata. He did feel a twinge of sympathy as he felt her draw in closer to him. However, that was the last thing on his mind the second he spotted Utakata looking for them in the crowd. "Shit," he hissed. "We're going to take a much, much faster way," he said, stopping them in their tracks. Using the growing crowd as a temporary shield, he wrapped an arm around her, giving her no time to fight back as he threw her over his shoulder. "Is this okay for your baby?" he asked, starting to take off down the street. He wrapped one arm around her legs to keep her in place.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she growled. She noticed him take a turn that led them in the complete opposite direction of Gaara's house and gasped, realizing that she should not have trusted him. "You fucking asshole!" she said, punching him in the back. "Put me down!"

"No can do, Milady," he chuckled, running faster. "Just tell me if your stomach is hurting, I'll adjust for the baby." He made another sharp turn and narrowly missed clipping Azumi's head on the edge of a wall. "Oh!" he hissed. "Sorry." She thrashed a little in his grasp, trying to loosen his grip so she could slip off of him. He only held onto her tighter and she hissed softly and let her fangs come out, getting ready to bite him. She had no idea exactly how to get to Gaara's from where they were but she could figure it out. Komushi heard her hiss faintly and patted her butt as he ran. “Try not to bite me,” he chuckled, turning again. “I really don’t want to tranquilize you.” He was bluffing. Sasori had not given him anything and he was not sure why he had not thought to grab anything in case she resisted. He turned around, continuing to run backward to see if they were still being tailed.

She smacked him really hard on the back of his head for touching her butt and then caught sight of the mansion they were approaching as he moved backward. “Whose place is this?” she whispered, not recognizing the property but knowing by the look of it that it had to be someone in Sasori’s family. Everyone in the family had some sort of extravagance to their house. She let out another growl and punched him in the back a few more times. “Where are we?” she demanded.

“Ugh,” he grunted with each blow she dealt him. “I forgot how heavy-handed you are,” he chuckled, turning her back around when he did not see anyone. “You’ll find out in a bit. Patience, Little Snake,” he teased. He jogged up the steps, careful not to bounce her too hard. A servant greeted them quickly but he pressed a finger to his lips to keep them quiet. He mouthed his question, asking where Sasori was. They pointed silently and Komushi followed the direction. He followed the hall down to the studio. “Your package milord,” he said, walking through the door unannounced.

Sasori was sitting with his back turned. He nearly jumped out of his skin the moment he heard Komushi but he did not let it show. “You walk like an elephant,” he muttered, turning around.

Azumi gasped as soon as she heard Sasori's voice. It was not until she practically heard her own heartbeat that she realized how fast it was beating. She dug her nails into Komushi's back. "You fucking liar!" she growled, reaching up to grab his hair and pull his head back.

“Hnng,” he laughed as she tugged at his hair. “Now, now. You’re already pregnant, you can’t pull my hair like that unless you’re willing to give me a kid of my own,” he teased through a few
wincing and grunts. “Where should I put her?”

“Down there,” Sasori pointed to a chair while he picked up a rope. “Were you seen?” he asked.

"Briefly," Komushi admitted, moving toward the chair. "Utakata was around but we lost him quickly. He didn't seem to follow far." He smoothly moved Azumi from his shoulder and into the chair, holding her down so she could not move before Sasori tied her up.

“He’s not here,” Sasori nearly whined. “And what of her family?” He bound her hands and legs tightly to the chair. He was in no mood to have her getting away or attempting to strike at them. When he was done, he patted her body down. “No snakes?” he asked Komushi.

“No,” he shook his head. “No family. No snakes.”

"Perfect," Sasori smirked, taking her jaw in his hand tightly. He let his fingertips sink harshly into the bone. “You thought you could escape me,” he said softly. “You forgot who owns you.”

She moved her head to free her jaw from his grasp, looking away from him. "I no longer serve you,” she said.

"You don't?" His eye twitched a little but his grin only sharpened into a smirk. "That's news to me. Komushi, when did I sign the papers to give the little snake her freedom?" he asked, looking over his shoulder at his friend. "Because I don't think that happened. Which means you," he looked back at Azumi, “are still my property."

"I don't recall it," Komushi smirked, sitting down at a workbench.

"But what I do recall," Sasori said, "is you pledging your loyalty to me until your freedom was given."

"That was before you tried to kill my child," she hissed.

"It doesn't rescind your promise," Sasori chided lightly. "No one told you to go fuck my cousin."

"And be sloppy about it," Komushi chuckled. "This is a rookie mistake." He nodded to the little bump that made up her stomach.

Sasori's eye fell to her stomach. Something about seeing the baby bump caused him to freeze for a moment. It made the situation all the more real. His blood ran white-hot with rage. His eye did twitch this time. He laughed softly, curling his fingers in and out of a fist. It itched to slap her hard across the face. "You will never be free of me," his voice was a low, rough growl. "You are mine and so is that creature." He pressed a finger hard into her stomach. He angled his body away from her, eyeing her mouth.

She let out a soft grunt, trying to bring her leg up to move his hand away from her. It only caused the rope to burn her skin a little because he tied it so tight. She thrashed a little, letting her fangs come out again. Even though the bump was small, it still prevented her from leaning forward enough to bite him. She could not think of anything else she could do. Naga and Ryuga were not around. She tilted her head back and let out another soft growl. Of all the times to go feral, this would have been the best. Yet, she could not bring herself to that point. "You are so desperate," she whispered, "to hold onto whatever little power you had."

"Have," he growled the correction. "And this is not desperation. I was conspired against and then invaded. This is retaliation, my dear." He smirked, watching her struggle against the binds. "No one will think to look for you here and since my house has been ruled out as somewhere I'd be, we
will go back there to get rid of this issue," he jutted his chin at the bump again. "And then I will think of what we will do next."

"You still have to deal with her father," Komushi folded his arms over his chest.

"Yes," Sasori frowned. "You never told me he could turn into a snake," he smirked down at her.

"I did not tell you about the trances, my fangs, or my venom," she snapped. "These are all things you discovered on your own. Are you really surprised that I would not relay the fact that my father turns into a snake to you?" She did not need him to know that she only recently found out as well.

"She has a point," Komushi chuckled.

Sasori stood up straight, looking down his nose at her. "She does," he agreed with a soft hum. "I'm starting to believe you less and less about your claim to humanity."

She scoffed and rolled her eyes, letting her fangs retract. "Believe what you want, it does not matter to me anymore. I know what I am." She looked him up and down. "I am more human than you are."

"I never claimed humanity," he smirked. "But you'll find most monsters in this world are, in fact, very human." He turned to Komushi. "Go to my to my room and get the list of ingredients on the desk then fetch from the shop."

Komushi smirked and nodded then stood up with a stretch. "Don't do anything fun without me," he said as he left. It enraged Azumi that she, even for a moment, believed that he was sincere earlier.

"Just go, Komushi," Sasumi huffed. He pinched the bridge of his nose, taking a seat on a nearby stool and waiting until he was truly alone with Azumi. He rubbed his face then looked at her silently. She was back. He felt something bubble up in his chest. It felt good to have her close again. He was admittedly surprised this plan had worked. He pulled the stool closer to her, reaching out to cup her face once more, gently this time. He lifted her chin, moving her face to get a good look at her. Komushi was right. He had missed her.

She noticed his fading wounds and tried her best not to feel sorry for him. They looked bad and she knew her father was brutal so she could only imagine what they looked like before when they were fresh. She could already feel the need to take care of him and she only hated herself more for it.

She jerked her face away from his hand, looking away from him again.

"Azumi," he said her name softly, almost like he was savoring it. "Look at me." He needed her eyes on him. He needed her to know she was still his no matter what anyone said.

"No," she whispered, shaking her head and looking down. She closed her eyes and let out a heavy sigh. She knew that if she looked at him, she would not be able to control the urge to want to help him. She did not understand why she cared so much for the piece of shit that hurt her and it infuriated her that she did.

He ground his teeth, his eyes searching her face. He felt a surge of desperation to be acknowledged by her mixed with rage. "Look at me," he repeated, his voice still soft. His touch was even softer as he cupped her face. Just being so close to her took the edge off of his loneliness. His thumb stroked her cheek gently. As soon as she looked at him, she could feel tears well up in her eyes. Getting a better look at his injuries made her not only feel bad for him but she also started to feel guilty that she was not able to help him before. And that she was the cause of a few of them. "Don't leave me again," he nearly whispered. His thumb inched towards her eyes to catch any tears that fell. "I need
you." He heard the words leave his lips before he could stop them. And they were painfully true.

Her breath hitched and she bit her lip, trying to keep herself from full-on sobbing. "Stop," she choked out. It only made her feel even more guilty.

Sasori felt his own throat tighten. He found his voice useless for a moment. He shook his head, lacing his fingers through her hair with his free hand. "I can't," he finally whispered. If he could stop the way he felt, he would. Never had he been so affected by another. Never had another that touched him so rawly. It scared him.

She made the mistake of looking into his eyes and the loneliness she saw made more tears come out. She wanted to check him over and make sure he was alright. "I..." she breathed, looking away and then looking back at him. "Untie me," she said softly.

He wiped away the tears as they fell, looking back into the gold of her eyes. "You won't run?" he asked her softly. He wanted to believe her. He wanted to ignore the pounding in his chest and that the bond between them was strong enough. The hand in her hair pulled away, ready to do as she asked.

She shook her head very slightly. "No," she whispered, trying to stop crying.

He looked at her a little hard, continuing to wipe away her tears. He suddenly pulled away, moving to the door to lock it just in case Komushi returned. He wanted this to be just them. Alone.

Returning to her side, he knelt down to smoothly undo the knots around her hands. He rubbed the rope marks from her wrist while he debated releasing her feet. He moved to her other hand, repeating the action of soothing the rope marks from her skin.

As soon as he let her wrist go, she cupped his face gently, tilting it to survey the fading damage. There was a light bruise on his chest from when she kicked him and knocked the wind out of him and then an even darker bruise on his stomach from when Orochimaru repeatedly kicked him. She ran her finger very gently along his jaw, checking the bruises from both her punching him and whatever Orochimaru did. "How much pain are you still in?" she asked.

"I can move," he replied, suppressing a shudder as she moved her hands along his body. He had almost forgotten how nice her hands felt. But he did not forget how nice it felt to be cared about.

"But I shouldn't leave the house," he admitted.

She frowned and sighed, continuing to feel his bruises. He was definitely healing which both made her feel better about it but also worried her because once he was fully healed, he could go back to being himself and hurting her. "Where are we?" she whispered, looking around the workshop they were in.

"I can't tell you that," he said as he watched her probe him. "I'm not going to risk your father making an appearance and pulling the people who live here into it."

"You should have thought about that before you chose to hide out here," she muttered. She closed her eyes, retracting her hands from his face. "Let me see your back."

"You won't be staying here long," he told her as he shrugged his top off and swiveled on the stool to present his back to her.

She reached out, feeling his back for any muscle tightness and knots and making sure not to press too hard into the bruises. She furrowed her brows, thinking about what exactly his plan could even be. Whoever lived in the house they were in was taking good care of him. "But you cannot leave
"This house," she said softly.

"I'll manage," he told her, wincing a little. "If it means keeping you, I'll go where I need to," he said over his shoulder. There was a knock at the door.

Azumi jumped a little, startled by the knock. She looked at the door and then back at Sasori. A few seconds passed and he did not move. "Are you going to get that?" she whispered, retracting her hands.

"No," he told her.

She frowned, staying quiet for a little while. "They will start looking for me," she said after a few minutes. "You cannot guarantee they will just rule out your house."

"You're right, I can't," he said, looking down at his hands. "But my aunt and Shira's visit is assurance enough for me to take the risk and go back there," he hummed. "We won't be staying there for too long." He was not entirely sure what he was going to but his skills were useful in any place they settled if they did decide to leave. They only had to disappear long enough for her family to give up if he could not kill them outright. "And it's not like you can tell them where you are. Komushi said he wasn't followed either. No one knows where you are."

She ran her hands through her hair and then rubbed her face, trying to wipe away as much of the crying evidence as she could. "You are a fool," she said. "If you think my father is not going to find me...you are an absolute fool."

"And if you think I will let your father best me more than once then you're the fool," he said, turning back around to face her. "I've learned enough about him to make a better plan to deal with him." He got up to cross the room and grab a handkerchief. He dampened it then handed it to her as he retook his seat.

She took it and used it to wipe her face. "How exactly do you think you can best a man who turns into a giant snake?" she asked. "I am telling you this because I do not want you to be killed. You stand no chance against him."

"Simple," Sasori smirked. "We use his only weakness against him." He tilted his head, looking at her. "We'll use you and the baby."

"You are not turning me against my own father," she growled. She almost moved to get up but realized her legs were still bound to the chair. "And using me to get to him will only ensure that you will die."

He smirked at her. "It's cute that you think that," he told her. "I'll be right back," he said, getting up once more. In all honesty, he had no idea how he would use her against him. But he could figure that out later. Right now, he was going to bask in having her back. He crossed the room and slipped out of it to head down to the kitchen to make some tea for the both of them.

A servant entered the kitchen as he did and smiled. "Are you feeling better, Lord Sasori?" they asked.

"Much better," Sasori answered genuinely, setting the water to boil.

"I noticed Lord Komushi brought a girl over. Shall I let your parents know that you have guests when they come back?"

"No need for that," Sasori said. "They won't mind this guest."
The servant nodded and left the kitchen with whatever they came to get.

Back in the workshop, Azumi wiped her face one last time with the handkerchief then tossed it onto the workbench as she looked around while trying to form a plan of escape. If it worked out, she could get out before Komushi returned, otherwise she would have to deal with both of them. She had no idea where she was or how to get to anyone from where she was. She let out a frustrated growl. She hated herself for actually caring about Sasori and for actually trusting Komushi long enough for him to kidnap her.

Sasori smiled fondly as he set up a tray with their tea. Aside from the baby bump, he was genuinely happy to have her back. He thought about her hands on his body and the genuine care he saw in her eyes. No one really looked him like that. Sure, he had his parents but this was different. He missed baths with her, he missed...her sleeping next to him. Hell, he even missed Naga. He carried the tray back down the hall and closed the door behind him. "I brought tea," he told her.

She looked up at him, watching him as he set the tray down on the table beside them and retook his seat. He handed her a cup and took the other for himself. For a moment, she looked into the cup with suspicion, wondering if he had poisoned it. She took another look at his face and could tell by the look in his eyes that he did not. "Thank you," she said softly, taking a sip and then letting out a small, surprised hum. It was not the usual tea they drank but it was good.

"It's a new blend," he hummed. "I'm not sure how much I like it," he said softly while swirling his cup. He watched her over his cup as discreetly as he could. His eyes traced her form from her face down to stomach once more.

"It is not bad," she said, taking another sip. "I like it." She saw where his line of sight was directed. "It is different." She relaxed a little, sighing softly. "Do you trust me enough to untie my legs?" she asked softly.

"Yes," he said, setting his cup down. "But first." He got up to lock the door again. "Okay, now I'll release you." He knelt down to untie her legs.

As soon as her legs were free, she leaned a little forward to rub the marks the rope left. "Thank you," she said softly. She sat back and crossed her legs. That was the real reason she wanted him to untie her.

"Mhm," he nodded, picking his cup back up. "When was the last time you bathed?" he asked her as he sat back down.

"Last night," she answered as she finished her tea with a couple of more sips. She set her cup back onto the tray and rolled her ankles a little, still feeling the uncomfortable sensation of the rope.

"Mmm, not good enough," he chuckled. "Let's take a bath," he said with a stretch. "Those will feel better in hot water."

"I had a feeling that was where this was going," she hummed as she stood up with him. She was up for a bath.

"Good," he smirked. "Hold on a second." He took the sash that he had removed earlier to wrap around her eyes. "I'll guide you."

She huffed a little at the fact that he did not fully trust her but she could understand his reasoning. She patiently stood there as he blindfolded her and placed his hands on her shoulders. He gently started guiding her to the door and she listened to the sound of him unlocking it and then opening
it. He placed his hand back on her shoulder and resumed guiding her through the halls to the bathroom.

Once they were safely in the bathroom, he stopped them and held her still with one hand while the other reached back to lock the door. "This bath is a lot...smaller than what we are used to," he told her as he undid the sash.

She blinked a little when she could finally see. She looked around the bathroom and focused on the only thing she noticed. "There is only one tub?" she asked softly. It was a large round tub that could definitely fit a few people but she and Sasori never bathed in the same tub at the same time and she was not entirely comfortable with that setup. In fact, she was not comfortable with it at all.

"Glad to see your eyes still work," he chuckled. "Yes, there is only one tub. Believe me, I'm not fond of it either." He walked around her, grabbing a few oils and salts to add to the bath then turned it on to bring it up to the right temperature. She was not comfortable getting into the bath with him but she considered her other options and they all resulted in her getting hurt. With a sigh, she started to undress while the tub filled up.

He set up the rest of the tub then looked over at her. His eyes fell to her exposed stomach first. The bump was even more pronounced now that she was standing up and undressed. His eye twitched as he straightened out to undress. He did not like it. She did not look right like that. His eyes wandered the rest of her body to look at his handy work. He crossed over to her, tracing his finger along the burn on her chest. She flinched and immediately tensed up when he touched her. She wanted to move away but there was nowhere to go. She looked down at where his finger was moving and then looked at him.

His finger followed the curve of her chest, along the burn. He immediately noticed the hickeys littering her skin. They looked almost purposely placed so her dress would hide them. He pressed hard into one, feeling his rage spike. "So you and Gaara are still doing things despite that." His other hand pressed to the side of her swollen belly.

She winced a little and felt her heart race a bit. "Yes," she answered softly. "A pregnant woman's libido skyrockets."

He grimaced, his nose wrinkling like a child, then pulled his hands away, stepping back to get in the tub. His eyes caught a few more hickeys lower down and on her inner thighs. He shook his head, running a hand through his hair. "It doesn't...feel strange?" he asked curiously.

She looked at him confusedly. "No..." she answered. "It...feels like normal sex." She got into the tub once he was settled in and stayed on the other side.

He winced again, shaking his head. "Okay, let's change the subject," he said, not wanting to talk about her intimacy with his cousin. "Does it...make sounds yet?" he asked, referring to her stomach.

She smirked at him, sinking below the water so she was only exposed from the shoulders up. "Not yet," she said. "It is still a little too early for that to happen.

"Is it?" he asked, looking away.

"Have you not been around many pregnant women?"

"The only pregnant women my profession puts me in contact with are women who don’t want them." He looked back at her. "They come at various stages and never stay long."

"Ah," she said. "I see." She took that little bit of information and held onto it. She knew he wanted...
to get rid of her child. He outright mentioned it to her. She needed to be more careful from then on. She hummed softly, rubbing the rope marks on her ankles and wrists.

“Do you feel any different?” he asked. “When my aunt was pregnant...” he looked up as if trying hard to remember details, “her hair would grow a lot...so would her nails and Uncle Rasa had to help her a lot.” He did not quite understand why he was trying to make conversation at the moment. He was genuinely curious but he did not want to be. He wanted the thing dead.

“Not too different,” she hummed. “I am hungrier. I do tend to spend most of my time just eating.” She looked down for a moment. “I am not so big yet that I am having a hard time moving around but even this small bump stops me from leaning forward too much. I can only imagine that when it gets bigger I will need help getting up from seats.”

“It’s going to be bigger than Gaara, that’s for sure,” he hummed. “His mom didn’t seem to gain anything with him. And I’m pretty sure he fully fit in Sandaime’s hand as a baby.” He leaned back against the tub wall as he spoke. “Uncle Rasa almost killed him and my aunt actually.”

“He did mention to me that he was premature,” she frowned. “And that his father blames him for his mother’s death since she died during childbirth.” She stayed quiet for a moment then looked up at him. “What was his mother like?”

Sasori hummed, leaning against his arm as he thought. "She was...always really nice," he started. "She wasn't as glamorous as Aunt Sachiko but she took care of us. She was like a buffer between Auntie and my mother." He hummed a little longer. "She grew succulents and cacti too," he smiled fondly. His voice dropped to something almost nice. No edge to it as he spoke. "She made the best ice cream."

"She sounds like she was very sweet," Azumi said with a small smile. "I am sure he reflects a lot of what she was."

"Temari sure doesn't," Sasori snorted. "I think Kankuro is the most like her but Gaara is the most soft-spoken," he chuckled. "He barely talked as a kid. But that's definitely his father’s fault. One time he...actually multiple times, he's tried to, uh, kill him."

Her eyes widened and she sat up straighter. "He what?" she hissed, a slight growl coming through. It should not have surprised her, she knew from being told by multiple people that Gaara's father was a horrible person but the fact that someone would try to kill their own child infuriated her.

"Oh, yeah," Sasori smirked a little at her reaction. "Tried to poison him several times, then there was the time he tried to get Gaara hit by a runaway cart," he listed. "Oh, and Gaara’s voice is so rough because his father got him to swallow something. Granny had to act pretty fast with that one."

She gasped hard, immediately bringing her hands up to cover her mouth. "That is so fucked up," she growled. She almost wanted to go feral on Rasa on Gaara's behalf.

"It is," Sasori nodded without picking up his head. "This family isn’t exactly made of angels," he said, looking at her. "We all have our secrets and sins. Even Sandaime."

"Oh, I have no doubt about any of that," she huffed. "It is just..." She let out a frustrated growl. Gaara was entirely too nice of a person to have to go through any of that. "Ugh." If she were to see his father, she doubted she would be able to control herself.

"Gaara turned out fine," Sasori chuckled. "He could have been a lot worse." He sat up, starting to
wash his body. "He could have turned out like me." He flashed her a devilish grin.

She narrowed her eyes at him and scoffed. "I suppose," she said.

"Then again, if he turned out like me maybe *that*," he pointed to her stomach, "wouldn't have happened."

She rolled her eyes. "Let us just be grateful he is the way he is," she said.

"You're welcome," he smirked. "I take most of the credit," he said, picking up a nearby basin to wash his hair. "I gave him his skills and profession."

"How kind of you," she deadpanned as she started to wash up herself. She finished up and relaxed one more time while he washed his hair. She waited for him to finish before getting out of the tub. She had not really looked at her stomach but she was aware that she had started to show. She looked into a nearby mirror and took in just how much she was showing. As she let out a soft hum, she grabbed a towel and wrapped it around herself. Sasori got out of the tub soon after her and wrapped his towel around himself. He walked into his room before her to find Komushi laying on the bed.

"Feel better?" Komushi asked, reading one of Sasori's journals.

Sasori glared at him, snatching the book. "I was." He hit Komushi hard on the head with the book. "I was just getting to the good part," Komushi whined. He looked behind Sasori. "Where is she?"

Just as he asked, Azumi walked into the bedroom, looking around the foreign space. Her eyes landed on Komushi and she let out a disgusted groan. "Never mind, I will get dressed in the bathroom," she muttered, walking back into the bathroom.

"What!" Komushi gasped. "But I want to see the baby bump!" he whined.

"Oh, do you?" she snapped from the bathroom. "Do you really? You said you were just taking me out for churros and then you kidnapped me. How can I trust that you are not going to fondle me or something under the guise of just wanting to see my belly?" She emerged from the bathroom fully dressed. "I do not trust you."

Komushi broke down in a fit of laughter. "Oh, come on," he said. "I got you the churros, didn't I? And we left after twenty minutes!" he pouted. "How about Sasori ties me up and you show me?"

She stared at him for a long moment, narrowing her eyes. After a while, she scoffed and rolled her eyes then walked toward him while moving the fabric of her dress to show him her stomach and only her stomach.

"Oh," his lips curved in a soft smile. "It's still so small," he hummed softly. Behind him, Sasori paused as he got dressed, glancing at her stomach again.

"I am at the end of the first trimester," she said.

"Does it kick yet?" Komushi asked, reaching out to run his hand around her belly to feel for a kick.

"It's too early for that," Sasori told him as if he did not learn that fact himself just a few minutes ago.

"I see," his tone was a little sad. His fingertips lingered on her skin for a moment longer before
curling in on themselves. "When would it start kicking?" he asked.

"Doesn't matter," Sasori said sharply. "It won't make it."

Azumi looked at him. "I am carrying this baby to term," she practically snapped, turning to him and fixing her dress. "You are not killing it."

"Says you," Sasori smirked. "But you don't actually have a say, so your proclamation matters as much as a hot breeze," he said as he dried off his hair.

"You're an ass," Komushi frowned. "You really sh—" He stopped short at the nasty glare Sasori shot him.

"That thing is simply a parasite on all accounts," Sasori ground out. "Resources, money, and her life," he locked eyes with Azumi. "It's going."

"No," she said. "It is not." All the care she had for him earlier was flying out of the window very quickly. "You are not going to do anything to my child. Unless you kill me, which it does not seem like you will since you went through all of this trouble to get me back. It would only make you look even more like an actual fool for attempting multiple times, getting your ass kicked multiple times, and being incapacitated for as long as you have been."

"And what exactly are you going to do to stop me from killing it?" he asked her softly. He circled the bed, walking right up to her. His body was inches from hers as he looked down into her eyes. "You can't run," he smirked. "You don't even know where you are and no one knows where you are."

"Just because I do not know where I am it does not mean I cannot run," she said. "I can figure it out easily." It was sort of a bluff. If she could get back to the coffee shop, then she could make it to either Gaara's or Sandaime's. "You are in no state to chase after me."

"And you're in no state to run. I'm also not alone." He flicked his hand back towards Komushi. "You're outnumbered."

She let out a frustrated growl and brought her hand up to slap him hard across the face. Komushi saw it coming and moved quickly to stop her but the sound of it got to him before he could get to her. He winced for Sasori before going after her when he saw her running toward the door.

Azumi ran into the door with her shoulder, unlocked it, and took off in whatever direction she felt was right.

Sasori rolled his eyes while Komushi rushed past him. They took off down the hall after her. Sasori pulled ahead of Komushi, slipping into a room he knew would let him out right in front of Azumi. Komushi kept on following her to get her from behind. Sasori slipped out of the room, smirking as she charged towards him up the hall. He spread his arms wide, squatting so he was ready for her.

She focused on Sasori, letting her fangs come out when she got closer. She could tackle him, bite him, and take off again really quickly. As she approached him, she focused on where she was going to bite. She tackled him to the ground, quickly sliding her hands down his arms to hold him down and sunk her fangs into his shoulder. As soon as she deposited enough venom into him, she moved to get up and continue running. Sasori howled in pain as the venom paralyzed his arm. He curled it tight to his body cursed.

Komushi faulted for a moment but knew Sasori would want him to keep going. He rushed after
Azumi, kicking off the ground hard. He rounded the corner and charged after her. She was close to the door but he was faster. He grabbed the back of her dress, pulling her to his body roughly. One arm locked around her waist, just above the baby bump while the other held her tight by the jaw. He grinned as she struggled against him. "You're not going to like this next part," he whispered in her ear. He shifted the hand on her jaw to press down hard on her windpipe until her eyes started to flutter. He waited for her body to go slack in his arms before he moved his hand.

Sasori struggled to get up but once he did, he made his way over to Komushi. He noticed immediately that Azumi was unconscious in his arms. "We need to get to my house quickly," he said. "I left the antivenom for her venom in my workshop."

"Of course," Komushi grumbled. "I'll carry her but are you going to make it?"

"Yes, I'll be fine. Let's just get a move on," he growled, heading for the door.
Utakata made his way through the crowds. Having lost sight of Azumi and Komushi, he needed to find Gaara or Orochimaru to inform them of what he saw. The Eastern Villa was entirely too far to get there quickly and since no one answered the door at Gaara's house, he had no idea where Gaara could possibly be. "Dammit," he growled softly to himself. Kaida had gone to bask with Naga and Ryuga so he could not even tell her to let anyone know. He was beginning to fear the worst when he saw someone walking into a tavern that could probably help him.

He moved quickly, following the large man he saw and entering the tavern soon after him. Scanning the room, the distinct sound of metal hitting a tabletop hit his ears and he watched as Kenzou ordered a drink. He crossed the floor of the tavern quickly, weaving through the moderate afternoon crowd. He took a deep breath then raised a hand to tap on the massive traveler's shoulder when he spoke.

"Care for a drink?" Kenzou slid another cup out to the side.

Utakata's jaw dropped in surprise then he shook his head, bringing himself back. "We have no time for that. I need you if you are willing," he said seriously.

"You need me?" Kenzou hummed. He took immediate note of Utakata's tone. "What's the matter?" He kept his voice low in case the discussion was a bit confidential.

"I saw Azumi thrown over Komushi's shoulder and I have no idea where he ran off to but," he ran a hand through his hair, "I have a sinking feeling he took her directly to Sasori."

"Isn't she Sasori's slave?"

"Technically, but she escaped," Utakata said, realizing Kenzou had no idea of the situation. "Her family is here in the city."

"Her family?" Kenzou hummed into his drink, then nodded sagely. "And if you don't know where they went how can either of us help?" he asked the younger man.

"I...I have no idea," Utakata sighed. "But her father is too far away and Gaara was not home. She just started staying with him."

"Then we should find Gaara," Kenzou suggested.

"I am afraid by the time we find him, it will be too late." Utakata tried not to sound distressed but he was truly worried. "Please, Kenzou," he said. "Please help me. She is pregnant with Gaara’s child."

Kenzou looked at Utakata for a moment and then nodded. He finished his drink quickly and slipped the bartender money for it. The situation was much more dire than he expected now that he knew there was an unborn child involved. "Take me in the direction you saw him take her. We'll
"Strap her down to the table," Sasori barked at Komushi as he lugged himself up the steps of his home painfully.

Komushi glanced over his shoulder at his struggling friend and sighed. "Are you sure you—"

"If you ask me if I need help one more time, I'll slit your throat!" Sasori growled.

Komushi sighed and continued on into the house. He made his way straight to Sasori's room and into the workshop. The workshop was still a mess from the encounter with Orochimaru but the table with the straps was clear. He laid Azumi down and strapped her down.

Sasori entered the room moments later and went straight to the cabinet where he kept antidotes and antivenoms. He found the one he made with Azumi's venom and moved as quickly as he could to inject it into himself. He took a seat, breathing heavily while he waited for the antivenom to start working. "Did you get those ingredients?" he sighed as the paralysis started to ease away.

"Yeah, uh," Komushi started to pull everything out of the folds of his clothing. "Are you sure this will work? Isn't she immune?" he asked her.

"She isn't immune to everything," Sasori grunted. "I've been doing my research." He looked around the room for a clear spot to work.

He moved toward another workbench, pulling a stool over as Komushi set all of the ingredients in front of him. "How long is it going to take to make it?" Komushi asked.

"Ten minutes," Sasori answered. "Hopefully," he added under his breath. He set to work on making the poison for Azumi.

Komushi nodded then moved back to Azumi's side, pulling up another stool. He frowned, not wanting Sasori to kill the baby but he knew that telling him would do nothing. He gently took Azumi's hand in his. He really did not want this. But he had come this far with Sasori, he could not really go back now. He squeezed her hand and placed the other on her swollen belly.

Sasori caught the action out of the corner of his eye. "We've done this before at much later stages," he said offhandedly.

"Yeah," Komushi whispered. His throat was dry. "We have."

"So this is no different," Sasori said. "Treat it the same way."

"Right," Komushi said, moving some of Azumi's hair out of her face.

A couple of silent minutes went by as Sasori worked on the poison and Komushi sat there, holding Azumi's hand. The silence was only broken by a very soft groan coming from Azumi as she started waking up. Her face scrunched up slightly before slowly opening her eyes. She took a second to recognize where she was and gasped when she finally did. She turned her head and looked up at Komushi. It took her another moment to realize he was holding her hand and his other hand was on her belly. She moved very slightly and finally noticed she was strapped down to the table. The more realizations she had about the situation she was in, the heavier her breathing got.

"If you keep breathing like that, you're going to pass out again," Sasori smirked over his shoulder.
"You wouldn't want that, would you?"

"Sasori, cut it out," Komushi muttered lowly.

Sasori raised his eyebrow at his friend. "Gaining a conscious, are we?" he snapped. "Shut up and get the gag," he ordered.

"No," Komushi shook his head. He stood up abruptly, still holding Azumi's hand. "I can't...I'm..." He looked down at Azumi.

"You're what?" Sasori practically growled, turning toward him. He looked into Komushi's eyes and saw how he truly felt about the matter.

Azumi gently squeezed Komushi's hand through her panic attack. "I'm not going to help you kill this baby," Komushi told Sasori.

"Then you can leave," Sasori snarled. "I'm not stopping for her, for Gaara, or for anyone else." He narrowed his eyes. "Especially not for you."

Komushi squeezed her hand back, glancing down at her. He saw the terror in her eyes and his heart fell through the floor. "I'm sorry," he mouthed to her.

"Get out," Sasori growled again.

Komushi hesitated for a moment when he noticed Azumi had started crying. He closed his eyes and sighed, letting her hand go. He could not ignore the guilty feeling that washed over him when he felt her desperately grasping for him as he let her go but he left without another word.

Azumi could not help the quiet sobs as he left. As soon as she was left alone with Sasori, she started to lose all hope but made an attempt to struggle against her bindings.

"You really need to relax," Sasori sighed, placing the mixture down on the workbench. He walked over to her and smoothed her hair back. "This won't hurt. I promise. What I'm going to do before that might hurt, though." He cupped her face, wiping away a few stray tears. "But the baby process won't." He stroked her cheek gently then turned away to pick up a set of tools and another brace. "Now when this is all over, you're going to be incredibly tired. But knowing you, you'll still try to leave." He placed the brace on her knee to immobilize her left leg entirely. "And we really can't have that." Once it was locked into place he picked up the other two very heavy looking tools. They clearly were a hammer and press. He put the flat plate of the press down on her leg then looked at her. "Take a deep breath for me now." He smirked as he brought the hammer down on the plate, cracking her tibia in half.

At the front of the house, Komushi froze at the top of the steps. The blood-curdling scream he heard from deep inside the house almost made him want to throw up. He ran his hand through his hair, hating himself for not being able to do anything for her. Yet, he could not bring himself to actually leave. He sighed heavily, taking a seat at the top of the stairs.

Inside, Azumi's sobs grew louder. Her throat was already starting to hurt from just the scream and the pain in her leg was unbearable. She did not know what she could possibly do and it was hard to focus on anything at the moment.
"Ssssh," Sasori soothed, his hand returning to her hair. "It will be alright. It was a clean break so it will heal fine." His voice remained a pleasant, out of place tone as he scratched her head. He grinned, a manic look in his eye as he pulled his hand away to open a box under the table. He pulled out a gag with a set of straps on either side. "Just to make sure you don't spit it out," he said, gripping her jaw so tightly it was going to bruise worse than before. He forced her mouth open as he shoved the prongs into her mouth to keep her lips open. He looked her in the eye as he fastened the straps behind her head. "My little snake," he whispered.

She whimpered softly through her quieting sobs, closing her eyes as she tried to control her breathing. She tried to resist the urge to thrash and struggle against the straps, knowing it would only worsen the pain in her leg. She heard Sasori pick up the mixture and opened her eyes to look at him then tried to turn her head away from him.

Sasori huffed like her pain and fear was simply a minor irritation. As if she was only being difficult over a little toothache and not the potential death of her child or the severe bodily harm he caused her. He waited for a few moments to see if she would calm down. He gently turned her chin back to the center and started to pour the mixture into her mouth. His other hand massaged her throat so she was forced to swallow it.

She choked a little and panicked over what she actually swallowed. It felt like forever before he finally finished and pulled the container away from her mouth. She coughed, trying to think of a way to force herself to throw up since she did not have any use of her hands. Her throat still felt raw and it got worse as she started to sob again.

Sasori unstrapped and removed the gag from her once he figured she had swallowed everything. "I'll go make some tea while that settles in," he smiled. "And get some boiling water. You stay put." He gave her a serene smile before leaving as he said.

Azumi laid there and continued to sob, unable to move or do anything else. She tried, exhaustedly, to pull her hands through the straps of the table. Once again, she tried to control her breathing. She could feel herself getting lightheaded and she feared it was from whatever Sasori forced down her throat. There was the soft sound of broken glass shifting on the floor. She quieted her breathing for a moment to listen, unable to look around for what it could have been. The sound moved closer and before she could figure it out, there was a soft hiss next to her ear. A snake moved into her line of sight then nuzzled its face against hers.

"Kaida..." she whispered, immediately recognizing her as Utakata's snake. Kaida hissed softly, telling her not to worry and that help was coming now that she found her location. "Do not leave me," Azumi whispered through another sob. Kaida used her head to wipe away a few tears and told her she would not be leaving but she will remain out of sight. Azumi bit her lip and nodded. At the sound of Sasori entering his bedroom, Kaida quickly moved and hid completely out of sight. She was not a venomous snake so there was not much she could do aside from keeping Azumi company and watching over her until she could be helped.

Sasori walked back in with a cart carrying a tray with tea things and a large basin of steaming hot water. He picked up a rag to dip into the water then rung it out. "Brace yourself," he told her and with no other warning, he wrapped the steaming rag around her fresh break. Her breath hitched hard and her whole body tensed up, making the pain in her leg spike more and causing her to hiss and bite her lip hard. He tied it off then move to crank the table up so Azumi was sitting upright. "I made raspberry tea," he told her softly. He picked up another cloth, a much softer one, dipped it into the water and turned to wipe her face down. "I still have some of those good pain killers." He turned to grab the bottle. "You shouldn't be too bad on them right now," he chuckled.
She looked at the bottle as he turned back toward her and then at him. Tears were still coming out of her eyes but her breathing had slowed down. She did not want the painkillers, knowing it could possibly worsen the situation for her baby. She closed her eyes and bit her lip, telling herself she was going to just bear the pain.

"Don't be like that, Azumi," Sasori sighed. "I know this hurts. I can crush it and put it in your tea if you're going to be difficult," he chided her, still smiling. He was feeling good. The baby would be gone, and Azumi was all his again. All he had to do now was slip away until this all blew over. Azumi glared at him, not saying anything. Sasori chuckled softly, opening the bottle and taking out three pills. "You're going to need three," he said, crushing them up on the workbench. Once it was a powder, he slipped it into her tea and stirred it around a little. He brought the cup up to her lips but she did not open her mouth. Sasori took a deep breath in through his nose, his eyes rolling back. "Azumi," he breathed out. "Open your mouth or I will open it for you. You don't want me to dislocate your jaw now, do you?" he asked her sweetly. She looked at him, her glare almost intensifying as she opened her mouth very slightly. "Thank you," he smiled, tilting the cup to get the tea into her mouth. After a few seconds, he pulled it away so she could swallow and she spit it all out on his face. The slap to her face was nearly instantaneous. He growled at her, grinding his teeth as he wiped his face with the soft rag he had used earlier. "You're really pushing me to be a monster." He gently pressed on the towel-wrapped leg. Just enough pressure to spike her pain.

She let out a pained, gasp and tilted her head back, hitting her head hard on the wood of the table. "Fffuuuck," she hissed, breathing a little heavier as she looked back at him. He smiled at her but the look in his eyes threatened more pain if she kept resisting him.

Komushi tipped the mouth of the wine jug to his own, swallowing without so much as a breath between gulps. He sobbed harder, wailing as the throw the now-empty vessel down the stairs. He picked up another without pausing. He could not believe he just walked away. He was weak. He could not go against Sasori and he could not save Azumi. Half of him wanted to get up, storm back in, and beat Sasori himself. However, the winning half kept him rooted to his spot on the front steps of the mansion.

"Komushi," a booming voice said, coming up the stairs.

Komushi wiped his face to see two men approaching him. "Kenzou?" he asked. His eyes fell on Utakata. "And you..." he muttered.

Utakata clicked his tongue but said nothing to the other man. "We need to hurry," he said to Kenzou. "Don't waste your breath on this scum."

"Wait, are...you...help her," Komushi sobbed, scrambling to his feet. "You can get her away from him!" He clung to Kenzou, dropping the jug he was drinking from and letting it spill all over the steps.

Utakata's face twisted into a snarl. "She would not need saving if you were not such a rotting pile of camel shit." He pushed him back hard. "You will get your punishment later!"

"Keep the peace, Utakata," Kenzou said, gently loosening Komushi's grip on him. "This is too urgent for petty fights." He looked to Komushi. "Where is she right now?"

"In his workshop," Komushi breathed. "Just follow the sound of her sobs," he said through a sob of his own. Utakata's snarl stayed in place as he pushed on ahead of Kenzou into the mansion.
"Open your mouth," Sasori told Azumi, as he picked up a leather strap. "Actually, never mind." He put the strap back down. "You've earned this," he muttered as he undid the now-cooled towel around her leg. "I need to make sure this is set." He was mostly speaking to himself. He put his hands on either side of the break, assessing it closely. He hummed softly then started to gather what he needed to splint the leg. He reached for a board when he heard a soft hiss followed by a snake that was hiding underneath the board. He snapped back, dropping the wood. "How did a snake get in?" he growled. He shot Azumi a look of distrust as he backed up. His eyes flickered around to find a weapon. He did not know who the snake could be or what it could do. He found a piece of broken glass and picked it up.

"Leave her alone!" Azumi growled.

"Her?" Sasori asked softly. "So you know this one." He pulled his arm back to bring the glass down on the snake.

"Move, Kaida!" she yelled at the snake just as Kenzou and Utakata ran in.

Utakata did not stop. He charged Sasori, throwing his whole body at the man. Sasori gasped at the impact, losing his footing. He threw the glass in his hand as he struggled to keep his balance, reaching out for anything to keep them from hitting the ground hard. "Do not touch her!" Utakata growled as wrapped his arm tightly around the other man's neck, thrashing as they hit the ground hard.

"Come here, Kaida," Azumi whispered urgently. Kaida quickly moved across the workbenches and made her way to Azumi to wrap around her neck.

Kenzou stepped closer to the two men and pried them apart. He picked them both up and held onto Sasori while letting Utakata go. He nodded at Utakata to check on Azumi while he dealt with Sasori. "Get her out of here," he told him.

Utakata nodded, rushing to Azumi's side. His fingers set to work, undoing all of her straps then he saw her leg. "Shit...you cannot move, can you?" He looked her over, running a hand through his hair.

She shook her head. "It is broken," she said softly. "But that is not what I am worried about." She looked at him, unable to control the feral feeling that was growing in her. "He forced poison down my throat to kill my baby."

"Shit," Utakata repeated.

"My system can slow it down," she explained through a pained grunt when she felt a spike of pain in her leg. "But we are running out of time and we need an antidote."

Very carefully, he scooped her up. As careful he was, however, the movement was still extremely painful and she dug her nails into his back when she wrapped her arm around him. Kaida moved from her neck to his as they left. "Okay...do you know what we need to make an antidote?" he asked her as he took off done the hall. He did his best to keep her stable as they moved. He skidded around a corner and rushed down the front steps. Naga and Ryuga had surrounded Komushi, not wanting him to try and escape. Both snakes had taken on a defensive stance, ready to strike at any moment.

Komushi did not care but as soon as he saw Azumi being carried out by Utakata, he stood up again,
eyes wide. "Is...is the baby?" he slurred, thoroughly drunk off of all of the wine he poured down his throat.

"You have no right!" Utakata growled at him. "Move!"

"But..." Komushi sobbed, "the baby!"

Azumi glared at him. "The list of ingredients," she said. "Give it to me." She knew he still had it on his person somewhere from when he went to the shop. "Because if you do not, then it will be."

Komushi could not pull that slip of paper out fast enough. He pushed it into Azumi’s hand roughly. "I hope you can save it," was all he could say.

Utakata did not give Azumi time to respond or Komushi to say much more. He needed to get to Gaara as fast as he could. He mapped out the fast and quietest route in his head and took off with the other two snakes following closely behind. He prayed to the gods to carry them there faster.

“No!” Sasori growled, trying to break free of Kenzou’s grasp. “You’re letting her get away!”

“Sasori,” Kenzou said, not loosening his hold on the man, “what you have done to that girl is unforgivable.”

Sasori did not want to hear it. He did not need a lecture from a traveler. He struggled a little more against Kenzou but to no avail. “She is mine,” he hissed. “I don’t know how many times I must say that! I can do whatever I want to her!” He glared angrily like a child at the larger man.

“You own no one. You barely own yourself right now,” Kenzou said softly. He shook his head sadly at Sasori. “Your rage owns you right now, your darkness owns you. Not you.”

Sasori stayed silent for a moment then looked away from Kenzou. He tried not to let the words sink in because he did not want to realize that they were right. “No,” he said softly, shaking his head.

“No what?” Kenzou asked. “Your denial does not affect me. It only rots your soul more,” he said easily. “And I can see it was once a good soul.”

“You’re just spouting your spiritual bullshit,” Sasori snapped. “I’m not going to fall for it.”

“I need you to think about the real reason you are so desperate to keep her,” Kenzou said. Sasori growled softly. He did not have time for this. He needed to get her back. “Is it because you actually need help?” Kenzou continued. “Or is it something more?”

“Shut up.” Sasori knew the reason he wanted to keep her. He was lonely. However, he was not going to admit that to Kenzou of all people.

“Is it because you are desperate for companionship?” Another couple of silent moments went by and Sasori had no choice but to let the words sink in. He had been called out by someone who did not know him that well. “It is obvious in your eyes and your desperation, Sasori,” Kenzou said.

Sasori shook his head. Had he really been that obvious? Time stopped for him as he thought long and hard about it. Kenzou waited patiently for a long while as Sasori reevaluated himself. He could tell the younger man was lost in his thoughts. Carefully, he let him go, slowly helping him into a seat at a workbench. It was almost as if Sasori was put into a trance, much like the ones he forced
After nearly an hour of silence, Sasori looked up at Kenzou who did not seem to be bothered by all of the waiting he had just done. Kenzou folded his arms, watching Sasori carefully. “I’ve figured out what I need to do,” Sasori said softly.

“Oh?” Kenzou hummed. “Is that so?”

Sasori nodded very slightly. “And...I’m...” He closed his eyes and sighed heavily, unable to believe what he was about to say. “I’m going to need your help.”
Chapter 81

Chapter Notes

Those were some dramatic chapters...let's get a little soft again.

Gaara walked into his house, immediately sensing something was off. He was getting a bad feeling in his gut and he could not figure out what it could possibly be. He set his things down by the door and went into the kitchen and saw that the basket of food Shira said he would bring over was on the table. Peering into it, he noticed a few of the things were already eaten. "So Shira was here," he mumbled. He had expected Azumi to be in the kitchen eating. "Is she sleeping?" he asked softly. He went upstairs and into his bedroom. Azumi was not in there. He started to worry a little. Forcing himself to relax, he went into the bathroom, hoping to the gods that she was probably just taking a bath. As soon as he saw that it was empty, he rushed out of the room. As he passed the guest bedroom, he noticed someone in there. "Shira," he breathed, quickly heading in there and gently shaking Shira awake.

"Hhnng, Gaara?" He swallowed thickly, rubbing his face into the pillow. "You're back already?" He pushed himself up on to his elbows. "Did you—"

"Where is Azumi?" Gaara cut him off.

Shira woke up fast. "What...she isn't here?" he asked, throwing his legs over the side of the bed. "She was in the kitchen last." His heart started to race. His eyes widened as his blood ran cold.

"Fuck," Gaara growled. "Fuck!" He punched the wall. "She isn't here!"

"I didn't hear her leave." Shira pushed his hair back, stressed and starting to panic a little. "Maybe her brothers came over!" He tried to reason.

"No," Gaara shook his head. "No, that can't be it. Something isn't right." The bad feeling in his gut told him it was definitely not her brothers.

"Alright, alright, let's try not to panic right away," Shira said, more to himself. "Did you look all over the house?"

"Of course!" Gaara snapped, causing Shira to jump a little.

"Fuck," Shira pulled at his hair a little. "Well, then...let's go...uh..have you seen her snakes?"

"No!" Gaara started for the door. "We'll have to check...I...let's start with the coffee shop," he growled, rushing to the front door. He yanked it open and nearly slammed into the people he was not expecting to be on his doorstep.

The near impact made Azumi hiss in the pain she was anticipating. She closed her eyes, feeling the pain in her leg from a slight movement she made.

"She is going to need a splint," Utakata said to Gaara. "Her leg is broken."

Shira nearly fainted from relief and guilt at the sight of Azumi. Gaara stood in complete shock.
Utakata had to clear his throat and yell his name to get the doctor to come back to himself. And the moment he did, he was in full medical mode. He pushed his rage and fear, every emotion to the side for later. At the moment, Azumi's health was the main focus. "Bring her to the kitchen now. Lay her out on the table," he ordered Utakata, spinning on his foot. "Shira, get my bag." Both men moved immediately to do as they were told. Utakata moved to the kitchen, gently setting Azumi down on the table. Shira entered the kitchen with Gaara's medical bag and set it down on a seat. Gaara put water on to boil and then returned to Azumi's side.

"I need you to make the antidote," Azumi told Utakata, propping herself up on her elbows. She handed him the list of ingredients that Komushi gave her.

"Me?" He took the note. "It's been a long time since I've made one," he frowned.

"You were poisoned?" Gaara's head snapped to the paper then to Azumi's face. "I thought you were immune?"

"I am immune to snake venom," Azumi said through a pained hiss. "I can still be affected by regular poisons but my system slows them down so it takes a bit longer to take effect." She gasped softly, biting her lip in pain. "I will help you," she told Utakata. "You are going to need venom from Naga, Ryuga, myself, and you."

"Mine?" Utakata asked.

"Mine is weakening right now. Yours will reinforce it."

"Alright," Utakata nodded, looking over the rest of the list. "Kaida, go find the—" he started to his snake when the two snakes slithered into the room with panicked hisses of their own at all of the activity happening around them. "Perfect timing, boys," he said, crouching to speak with them about their venom.

Above them Gaara watched Azumi. "Did he do this?" he asked her softly, knowing the answer full well.

Azumi did not answer at first, staying silent for a few moments. She could barely make eye contact with him, both out of shame and the fact that the poison in her system was starting to weaken her. She nodded slightly, looking down. "He did..." she said softly.

Shira brought the boiling water over and a couple of towels. "What else do you need?" he asked. Gaara's hands paused, they were shaking with rage and he needed to compose himself again. He closed his eyes, clenching his jaw as he spoke. "Take her hand," he said tightly. "I'm going to reset the bone properly," he told her. "It's going to hurt."

Shira nodded, quickly taking Azumi's hand. "I'm so...so sorry," he said to her softly. "I shouldn't have...I'm sorry," he said again, squeezing her hand gently.

Azumi looked up at Shira. "You have nothing to be sorry for," she said through a pained grunt as she laid back. "Do not blame yourself for this. It is not your fault." She had surmised that Komushi followed Shira to the house since Komushi showed up so soon after Shira. However, that did not mean it was Shira's fault. She knew it was her decision to leave.

"But if I had stayed down here a little longer—"

"Shira," she cut him off, "we can talk all day about what-ifs but it will not change what has happened. And what has happened is not your fault. You have no reason to feel guilty."
“Brace yourself,” Gaara told her softly. Shira nodded, lifting her hand to kiss her knuckles just as Gaara started to count. “One, two,” on three he shifted her bone back into place and bound her legs together as fast as he could. Shira gripped her hand tightly hoping he could be any comfort to her.

Azumi squeezed Shira’s hand back immediately, inhaling sharply and trying not to scream but letting it out anyway. Her other hand gripped the edge of the table really hard. “Fuck!” she yelled through gritted teeth, taking deep breaths.

Gaara finished just as the last of her screamed died down. He did not stop moving though. He cleaned the surrounding area with the hot water and then wrapped two clean hot towels around her legs. “I know it isn’t much but hopefully that will reduce the pain even a little.” He circled the table to gently smooth her hair back. He kissed forehead. “I’ll go alert your family,” he said as he kissed the knuckles of her other hand.

She took his hand, gripping it a little tighter than she meant to due to the pain. "No," she told him. "Do not tell them anything." She shook her head. "Not yet."

“Azumi,” Utakata interrupted Gaara’s confused protest. “I got all the venoms but yours. Are you sure you can give any?” he asked her. He had set all the bottles to the side and had a small jar in his hand.

She sat up and looked at the bottles to see how full they were and to determine just how much of her own venom would be needed. "I can," she nodded. She let Gaara and Shira's hands go and reached for the jar in Utakata’s hand. He handed it to her and she brought it up to her mouth as she let her fangs out then filled the jar up almost halfway. By the time she was done, she was starting to feel very exhausted. She was running out of time. "You are going to need the first four items on that list," she told him as she handed the jar back. "Mix one item with one venom at a time before mixing it all together. It does not matter whose venom goes with what item. From there, make a generic antidote." Utakata nodded and stepped away to do as she instructed.

Gaara smoothed her hair back again, looking at her with so much fear. He knew she was strong but he should not have left her alone. She should not have been in this situation at all. He gently pressed a hand to her stomach while he held the other, pressing it to his forehead. He wanted to say sorry. But it was a useless word at the moment. He felt his own rage causing his body to shake again.

Azumi looked at him when she felt her hand press against his forehead. “I am sorry,” she told him softly, turning her hand in his to run her fingers through his hair.

“Don’t you dare,” he said softly. “Don’t apologize.” He looked up at her. “None of this is your fault.” He did not know how they got to her and he, frankly, did not care. It was the fact that they touched her. They entered his home and hurt her again. “I’ll skin him alive,” he growled lowly. “He likes pain so much, I’ll give it to him.” His eyes burned with a promise to her.

Shira’s eyes widened. He walked around the table and put a hand on Gaara’s back. “Hey,” he said softly. “Let’s let Utakata work. We can go set up the room for her,” he said softly. He had not heard Gaara talk like that since they were teenagers.

Gaara hesitated for a moment before nodding and getting up. “Fine,” he said softly. Azumi kissed his knuckles then let his hand go and the snakes joined her on the table, coiling on each side of her.

Shira led Gaara out of the kitchen and up the stairs to the bedroom. Once he deemed they were far enough from Azumi, he turned to Gaara. “You can let it out now.”
Gaara broke down the second he was given permission. He threw anything he could get his hands on, tears rolling down his cheeks, fat and heavy. He screamed as he threw a punch at Shira who easily caught it. Gaara did not want to hurt Shira. He knew the other man could handle him. He did not hold back as he punched, again and again, Shira taking each in stride.

After a while, the punches slowed down. Gaara ran his hand through his hair, gripping it tightly and pulling at it a little. Shira watched him for a few seconds, wanting to make sure that he had truly let it all out. "I'm going to fucking kill him," Gaara growled.

"And you have every right to feel that way," Shira said with a nod. "But right now, we can't focus on him and need to focus on her."

"I know," Gaara rubbed his face. "I know," he repeated through a hiccup. "It just feels like no matter what we do he can find her," he sniffled, then growled through another hiccup. "She isn’t even safe in my home.” The tears threatened to well up in his eyes again.

Shira guided Gaara to sit down and rubbed his back gently. "Well, now that her leg is broken, moving her would be a problem," he said. "She should stay here but we'll make sure to have someone here at all times for her." He stayed quiet for a second. "And awake." He started to feel guilty again.

Gaara put his hand on Shira’s knee, squeezing gently. “No one blames you,” he told him softly. “But we all have jobs and she needs someone who can be with her at least until I get back.”

“Sayumi,” Shira perked up. His hand on Gaara’s back stopped moving and his face lit up. “She can come over and stay with her!”

“Sayumi?” Gaara asked, slowly lifting his head to look at him. “Would she even be okay with that? They haven't met.”

“They haven’t,” Shira chuckled. “But I know they’ll love each other.”

“How soon can you get her here?”

“Tonight, if you want. I’ll ask her to come by and meet you guys.”

"Please do," Gaara nodded, his face relaxing a little. He ran his hand through his hair and looked at the door. "We need to go back. I don't like being away from her for so long," he said, getting up.

"Okay, we'll head back and I'll go get Sayumi." He stood with his friend.

Gaara nodded and crossed the trashed room to the door. He would deal with it later. Together, they headed back to the kitchen. "How is everything going?" he asked Utakata on his way over to Azumi.

"Very well," Utakata said, "I think." He finished mixing the antidote and poured it into a cup for Azumi before handing it to her.

"I am sure you made it right," Azumi told him. "It may have been a while but this is not your first antidote."

"Well, we will know for sure when you start vomiting," Utakata chuckled.

Azumi nodded and quickly downed the antidote, grimacing almost immediately at the taste. "Yeah...that was made correctly," she gagged.
"Vo-vomiting?" Gaara backed up to reach for the now cold basin of water. He dumped it out and rested it in Azumi's lap. "Uh, what exactly is this poison suppose to do?" he frowned.

"You do not want to know," Utakata shook his head. "Do not ask again."

"He is right," Azumi said softly. "I am hoping this antidote works faster than the poison. I am already feeling exhausted." She ran her hand through her hair and sighed.

"I'm going to head out," Shira said softly. Gaara nodded, his stomach sinking at the thought of whatever this poison was meant to do. The worst-case scenario jumped forward in his mind. He glanced at her stomach, swallowing hard. Shira circled the table to take Azumi's hand and kiss her knuckles. "I'll bring some more food," he told her softly. "Something light for your stomach." He kissed her hand again.

"I'll make some tea," Utakata added. "You'll need it."

"Thank you," she said to both of them. Shira left and Utakata turned to make the tea. A few seconds of silence went by and Azumi looked at Gaara, taking his hand in hers. "Everything is going to be fine," she assured him. She was sure she took the antidote in time yet there was still a small part of her that thought maybe she had taken it too late.

"I should be saying that to you," he said, his eyes glassy. He pulled up a stool without letting go of her hand. "I should have been here to protect you," he said softly. He kissed her hand again, finger by finger, lingering on each one before pressing it to his cheek.

She shook her head. "Do not blame yourself," she said softly. "If anyone is truly to blame, it is me." She caressed his face then gently tilting it up so he could look at her. "But it has happened and there is nothing we can do about it now."

"Did they get any information out of you?" Utakata asked.

"No," Azumi answered. "They know nothing." She could feel the smallest tinge of nausea coming on and then looked around, holding the basin in her lap with her free hand. "I do not want to throw up in the kitchen," she chuckled.

"Bathroom?" Gaara asked her, standing up and squatting so she could put her arm around his neck. He waited until he was sure she had a good grip before pulling her into his arms.

"I think that would be best," she hummed, wrapping her arm around him and securing the basin in her lap so she could take it with her.

"I will bring your tea to you," Utakata said.

Gaara nodded to Utakata then took off for the bathroom. It was not a far walk and he was soon putting her down on a stool near the bathtub. "Do you want to sit in the tub?" he asked, pulling another stool up to rest her legs on.

She bit back a pained grunt and shook her head. "No, this should be fine," she told him, clutching the basin close. She did not want to be moved again. Not just yet. The feeling of nausea increased but she did not feel anything coming up yet. It would be another couple of minutes before it actually started working but the nausea was already a definite sign that it was. "You do not have to stay in here if you do not want to," she told him. She started putting her hair up to get it out of the way for when the time came.

Gaara shook his head, moving to help her tie her hair up. "No, I won't leave your side until you
send me away," he told her seriously. He tucked any stray hairs behind her ear then moved to get a rag to wipe her forehead and neck down.

She nodded and looked down into the basin. "Do not tell my father," she said. "I understand the situation is very serious...but...things can get worse if he were to know about it. If you have to tell someone, tell your aunt and uncle or even Yashamaru but please," she looked up at him, "do not let my father find out."

"I won't," he said without hesitation. He was not going to argue or fight her on her father. He had seen what the man could do and how far he would go for his daughter. He wanted to see Sasori crushed but if Azumi did not what him to know then he would not.

"Thank you," she said softly. She went silent for a moment and then gasped quietly when she remembered something. "Why have you not told me that your father tried to kill you?" she asked, maybe a little bit more angrily than she wanted. She was not upset with him but the thought of his father's assassination attempts upset her.

"Uh..." He leaned away from her, blinking a little dumbstruck. "I...how did you find out...uuugh." He ran a hand through his hair, figuring out the answer to his question quickly. "That's not something people normally go telling the girl they are falling for, is it?" he asked sheepishly.

She paused for a second. "Well, no...but...that is not something you should just keep from her," she frowned at him. "Especially when you are having a child with her and made plans to marry her."

"I...would have told you eventually," he said softly. "I wasn't exactly intentionally not telling you." His cheeks started to burn a little. "He tried it a few times. Okay, several times." He looked up at her. "He...blamed me for my mother's death and really hated me. Without my siblings, Shira, and...Sasori," he growled the name, "I probably wouldn't be here."

She reached out and took his hand, running her thumb across the back of it. "If I ever see your father, I might kill him myself," she said.

"There's a long line for my father's head," Gaara chuckled, lifting her hand to kiss the back of it. "But thank you, my love," he smiled fondly at her. He let go of her hand only so he could move a little closer then took her hand again. "I love you," he said softly.

"I love you, too," she smiled. Another wave of nausea washed over her and she knew it was going to happen soon. She tilted her head back and groaned softly. "Ugh, this baby is going to grow up not knowing everything that they went through before they were even born," she hummed.

"That's fine," Gaara chuckled, moving his hand to rub her back. "All they need to know is that they are loved and their mother is strong." He kissed her temple as he continued to rub her back. He wished he could help her more.

"Eh, their father is pretty strong, too," she smirked. "I hope they are more like you because I do not want to deal with another me," she chuckled.

"I'm not so great either," he chuckled. "Let's pray for a good blend?" he teased. "Your resilience, big brain, and, uh...my...nice hair?" he laughed again.

"How about your patience and understanding," she laughed. "And your heart made of literal gold."

"You're going to make me blush," he teased her. His cheeks turned light pink. "No matter how they come out they will be perfect."
Azumi smiled and hummed her agreement. Just as she was about to say something else, she felt it coming up. "Ugh," she groaned, gripping the basin and throwing up into it. Gaara grimaced, hating the sound of her in pain. He kept rubbing her back and tucking stray strands of hair away from her face. He would run a bath for her the moment she was done so she could relax. After a solid minute, she was finally done. "I think that is all of it," she groaned. Gaara immediately started running the bath.

"That sounded horrible," Utakata muttered from the doorway with her tea. He stepped closer to set it down on the small table near the tub. He glanced at the basin and nodded. "It is supposed to be that color. It worked," he smiled.

"That's relieving," Gaara commented. "I want to give you a check-up once you've gotten some rest then. Just so I have a new baseline for your body," he said as he walked over to his shelf and realized he only had the scent she made for him. "You don't mind smelling like me, do you?" he asked, holding up the jars.

She looked at him and chuckled softly. "Of course, I do not mind," she smirked. Gaara grinned, putting the salt and oils into the bath for her. "Can you get me a cup of water?" she asked Utakata softly. "I can still taste the poison." He nodded and did as she asked so she could rinse her mouth out. Once she got rid of the taste in her mouth, she felt more at ease and set the basin in her lap onto the floor.

"We shouldn't be long," Gaara told Utakata. Getting the message, the other man nodded a bow and moved to leave the room. Gaara stripped down first then moved to carefully undo Azumi's clothing. "I'm going to get in with you since you don't really have your legs right now," he explained. He eased her clothing out of her bindings and placed it neatly to the side. "Ready?" he asked before getting ready to pick her up.

She nodded and held onto him as he picked her up. "It is almost as if all this time you spent carrying me has been in preparation for this," she joked.

"I was more hoping it was for when I'd carry you through our first home as a married couple," he laughed. "But I guess this is good too," he smiled, settling into the hot water with her. "It's not too hot?"

"No," she sighed, "it is perfect." She rested her head against him and hummed softly. Throwing up the poison took up what little energy she had left. She was running on empty at this point and knew she just needed to hold out for a few more minutes. She looked over at the table where Utakata set her tea and reached for it. It was just out of reach for her and Gaara pushed it closer very slightly, knowing she would rather have grabbed it for herself. She chuckled as she picked it up and took a sip. "I am going to hate not being able to move around on my own for a while," she grumbled.

"It won't be too long though," he chuckled. "I promise I won't dote...too much," he smiled, tucking some of her hair behind her ear. "But the moment the baby is here you'll be able to go back to moving freely," he said, slipping his hands into the water to cup her stomach. He could not wait to feel it kick.

She chuckled softly, resting her head against him again. Closing her eyes, she sighed a little. With another realization, she opened her eyes and gasped. "Aw, I cannot dance for a while," she pouted. She tilted her head back and let out a groan. "Honestly, the biggest downfall of a broken leg."

Gaara laughed softly, resting his chin on her shoulder. "It will give me time to try and catch up to you," he chuckled. "It will heal before you know it. Babies protect their mothers." He kissed her shoulder up to her neck, keeping each kiss soft.
“I cannot wait to meet this baby,” she hummed, finishing off her tea. She reached out to place it on the table and with Gaara gently nudging it onto the table from her hand, it was a success. She sat up straight to wash up, not wanting to pass out in the bathtub.

“Me either,” he smiled. “And now you will have all this time to think of things to make them or do for them while you heal,” he smiled. “Like what kind of room they will have and outfits they will wear.” He was starting to get excited all over again. He watched her wash up, his heart melting a little. She was so beautiful and so strong. He could not help reach out to gently take her face and pull her into a slow kiss. “You’re going to be so amazing as a mother.”

She looked at him and smiled softly, reaching her hand up to run her fingers through his hair. “Just like you are going to be an amazing father,” she said. She reached up to let her hair down and looked around for what she could use to pour water over her to wash her hair. “Now would the amazing father like to help the amazing mother wash her hair?” she chuckled.

“I thought she would never ask,” he smiled, reaching over the edge of the tub. He lifted a beautiful water jug just out of her reach. “This is only for my hair,” he smiled proudly at it. “I made it,” he whispered. He dipped it into the water and started to gently pour the water over her hair, running his fingers through it carefully. He set it down again nearby and started to massage her scalp.

She grinned at it. “It is beautiful,” she hummed. She reached for a bottle of hair oil and smelled it. “Is this the one I made you?” she asked. It smelled familiar because she definitely smelled it on him but she did not remember if it was her creation.

“Everything I use is something you made me,” he smiled at her. “I’ll be honest, you gave me those gifts and I came gave my housekeeper my old stuff and used yours right away.”

“Oh?” she smirked. “I am flattered.” She smelled it again. “Would you mind if I used it?” she whispered through a chuckle.

“What’s mine is yours,” he smiled at her. “Especially since you made it,” he chuckled.

She smiled and kissed his jaw. “Thank you,” she said, pouring a little bit out into her hand and rubbing it over her palms before massaging it into her hair. “I want to make you a few more,” she said she moved her hands. “It will give me something to do while I am...broken,” she chuckled.

“You aren’t broken,” Gaara chuckled. The scent smelled a little different on her. It was still intoxicating, if not more so on her. “Your leg is just healing,” he said in an exaggerated kind tone. He laughed softly and kissed her arm. “I will love everything and anything you make me,” he told her. “Did you want me to ask Utakata for anything? We can set up a workspace for you here.”

“I can make a list,” she said. “It will not be a lot.” She finished massaging the oil into her hair. “I might make something for myself,” she whispered more to herself. She reached for the jug to rinse her hair but it was, unsurprisingly, just out of reach. “What kind of products do you want?” she asked, trying to grasp for the jug.

He chuckled hooking his finger around the jug handle to pull it just in reach for her. He hummed in thought, pulling back so she could lift the jug. “Um, I still have a lot of hair oil, a scrub and bath salt would be nice,” he said, starting to wash himself up as she filled the jug with water. “I still have my original cologne but variety would be nice,” he smiled.

“Mm,” she hummed in thought as she decided exactly what she was going to make him. "Alright, this will be fun," she smiled. She rinsed her hair and waited for him to finish washing up. "I am ready whenever you are," she said like she had a choice.
He chuckled and wrapped his arms around her once he was done. "Brace yourself," he told her as he shifted to lift her up as painlessly as he could. He set her back down on her stools from earlier and grabbed a warm towel for her. "Would you like me to do your hair?" he asked her, setting aside another towel just for that.

She gasped softly and grinned. "Yes," she said, taking one of the towels to dry herself off. She did her best to wrap it around herself in her sitting position. "And if I fall asleep, I am sorry," she chuckled.

"Do you want it up or...I can try to braid it," he offered, picking up the towel and started to dry her hair the way he had seen her do it. He smiled, leaning down to kiss her head. "Don't worry about it. Go to sleep if you need to. I'll get you to bed," he said softly.

She hummed through another chuckle. "We just need to comb through it and then we can put half of it up. It will help it dry faster." She looked around for a comb and reached for it. Gaara followed her line of sight and nudged it to her so she could hand it to him. He smiled to himself as he put her hair up as she asked, taking his time to make sure it sat right for her. When he was done, she leaned back against him. She tilted her head back to look up at him. "Thank you," she smiled sleepily.

"Anything for you," he smiled, leaning down to press a kiss to her lips. "Ready to move again?"

"Mhm," she hummed with a nod. She braced herself, mentally and physically, for the movement. He moved around her and she wrapped her arm around him so he could pick her up. He carried her to the bedroom and carefully set her down on the bed. She sat up and held her towel up while she decided what she wanted to wear. She then realized she was too tired to figure it out. "I will let you choose what I wear," she laughed.

"Oh, that’s a lot of trust," he chuckled, fluffing the pillows so she would be comfortable. He then turned to the basket of clothing that was brought over for her and pulled out a deep purple dress. "How does this look."

"Purple," she chuckled softly. "It has been a while since I have worn purple. I like it," she nodded. He brought it over to her and she took it to feel the material. It was one of the dresses that Sachiko had given her so it felt very quality. Very slowly and very carefully, she started to put it on.

“I like this color on you,” he said softly as he helped her where she needed it. Once it was on, she took his hand and pulled him into a kiss as she leaned back onto the pillows. As soon as she was laying down, she could feel herself falling asleep. He pushed back into the kiss then sat on the edge of the bed to stroke her hair. “Do you want me to wake you up when Shira comes back?” he asked her softly.

"Mhm," she nodded slightly. Moments later, Kaida came slithering into the room, quickly moving onto the bed and coiling up on Azumi's stomach. "Did you come here to nap with me?" Azumi chuckled sleepily. Kaida hissed softly, resting her head so she could look at Azumi.

“Well, since you have a napping partner," Gaara smiled, “I guess I’ll go check on Utakata now.” He pulled a drawer out and placed a bell on the nightstand. “Ring this if you need me.” He kissed her head one more time.

"Thank you," she said softly, gently petting Kaida's head until she fell asleep.
Utakata sat on the back balcony of Gaara’s house, staring ahead and spacing out as he smoked his pipe. He experienced enough stress in one day to last him a few years. Naga and Ryuga were coiled on the table in front of him, a little saddened that Kaida yelled at them over who was going to nap with Azumi. "She can be a little sassy," Utakata said, "but do not let that stop you from keeping your human company." The snakes looked at each other and shook their heads rapidly. Utakata chuckled, reminding them that she was not even venomous like them. They shook their heads again and sighed heavily.

"Everything okay?" Gaara asked, stepping out onto the balcony with a new pot of tea.

Utakata looked at him. "Everything is fine," he said. "These two are a little afraid of Kaida right now."

"Afraid of her?" Gaara hummed, sitting down. "But she seems very sweet."

Both snakes hissed frantically, shaking their heads again. "She yelled at them over who was going to nap with Azumi," Utakata explained. "And why it was going to be her."

"I see," Gaara chuckled. "Did you want me to go get her then?" The snakes shook their head.

"It is the principle of the matter now," Utakata chuckled, taking a long drag from his pipe.

"That's okay, us boys can hang out. Shira is coming back," Gaara smiled at them.

The snakes moved up to nuzzle Gaara on either side of his face while he poured the tea for him and Utakata.

"Is she alright?" Utakata asked.

"She's asleep."

Utakata nodded. "The poison was draining her energy and the antidote fighting it inside of her drained it even faster. She will be out for a little while."

"Thank you," Gaara said, swirling his cup of tea, "for everything. I don't want to think about what would have happened to her if you hadn't found her." He looked up at the other man.

Utakata took another drag, taking his time before blowing out a cloud of smoke. "I saw her in the coffee shop with Komushi," he said. "When Komushi noticed I saw him, he took off with her." He took a sip of his tea. "I followed them until I lost sight of them and then I found Kenzou. He helped me find her. But by the time I got there, she had already endured quite a bit of damage...as you know."

Gaara took a long, long sip from his cup of scalding hot tea to keep his temper in check. Of course, Komushi was involved. "Kenzou," he said when he finally came up for air. "Did he stay behind then?" He could only assume since Utakata had shown up with Azumi and Kenzou did not.

"He did," Utakata nodded. "Sasori is coming completely unhinged," he shook his head.

"I don't even want to think about what he did to her while he had her for that short period of time," Gaara frowned.
"I am sure neither does she," Utakata said, taking another drag. "But..." he sighed, "she is here now and she just needs to heal. Keep someone with her at all times, especially since she cannot walk."

"That's what I'm here for," a beautiful young woman said, putting her hand on her hip in the doorway of the balcony.

"Oh?" Utakata turned around to lean on the rail on the balcony with a grin. "And who are you?"

"The love of Shira's life," Gaara grinned, crossing the space to bow to Sayumi. He took her hand and pressed a kiss to it.

"It's nice to finally meet the husband of the love of my life," she grinned, hugging Gaara.

Shira walked up behind her. "She was excited to meet you," he chuckled. "Well, now you know Gaara." He gestured to Utakata. "This is Utakata. He runs a shop in the middle of the city."

Utakata bowed to Sayumi. "Pleasure," he said.

"The pleasure is mine," she bowed back. "Is the lady of the house awake?" she asked Gaara. "I heard she had a rough day, to say the least," her smile was dazzling. Shira was nearly floating behind her.

"Ah, she just went to sleep," Gaara chuckled.

"Aw," Sayumi pouted very slightly, "no matter. I can wait until she wakes up."

"I left the food in the kitchen," Shira said.

Sayumi gasped softly, moving toward the table when she saw Naga and Ryuga coiled on it. "Oh, are these her snakes?" she cooed, petting them both. Ryuga came forward first. He slithered up to her and up her arm, nuzzling her cheek.

"They are," Gaara chuckled. "Ryuga, you aren't usually this bold," he teased.

"He thinks you are pretty," Utakata told her.

"Oh!" Sayumi grinned, petting him some more. "Thank you," she said to Ryuga. Ryuga's head snapped to Utakata, hissing to him about betrayal.

"Sorry," Utakata chuckled. "I thought you would want her to know."

"You can understand him?"

"I am from the same village as Azumi," Utakata nodded. "Our family can communicate with snakes."

"Your family?" Gaara and Shira asked in unison.

"Azumi and Mitsuki do not really know because I left when they were young but we are cousins."

"That...actually explains a lot," Gaara muttered.

"Well, I think you are very handsome," Sayumi grinned. "And you, too," she told Naga, tapping his nose gently. "Let's go eat," she said brightly as she turned on her foot to walk back in the house. Shira wore the dopiest grin on his face, watching his girlfriend walk ahead of them.
"Isn't she beautiful?" he asked them. "Lovely? Just amazing?" he sighed.

"She's all of that," Gaara nodded with a slight chuckle at how his friend fawned over her. Shira floated into the house behind Sayumi.

Utakata stepped up next to Gaara, putting his pipe out. "Gaara, she looks like your aunt," he said lowly.

"I know," Gaara chuckled as they followed the other two inside. The group went into the kitchen and sat down at the table. "So what do you do?"

"I'm an acrobatic performer," Sayumi grinned.

"She performed for Lady Sachiko's party," Shira explained.

"Your aunt is beautiful, by the way," she gushed. "But I love a man who can cook," she giggled, pulling the food out of the basket, all ready to start eating.

"Shira is the best chef in the city," Gaara chuckled, taking a seat from across from her. Utakata put the kettle on for more tea and pulled out two new cups for Shira and Sayumi.

"So are you going to take our Shira away?" Utakata teased, walking over to join them at the table.

"I could never," Sayumi laughed. "I don't think I could ever rip him away from the true love of his life," she said, gesturing to Gaara.

"He has a new love of his life," Shira said.

"Sounds like a very complicated love square," Utakata smirked.

"Eh, it's not that complicated," Sayumi grinned. "I've seen webs a lot worse," she giggled. "You see a lot of that when you travel. Been caught in a few I didn't want to be in too." She rolled her eyes, lifting a mouthful of food to her lips. She groaned softly, licking her lips. Shira gripped the back of her chair hard. Gaara and Utakata shared a look.

"Do you need a glass of water Shira?" Utakata teased.

"No," Shira's voice cracked. He cleared his throat. "No, I'm good...thanks."

Utakata chuckled softly as he started to eat. After a few minutes, the tea was ready and he set it down on the table for everyone. "Are you still traveling or did you settle in this city?"

"Settled," she said between mouthfuls. "Shira won my heart and I don't know if I can hit the road again knowing he is here," she smiled up at him. "Maybe in the future but for now I'm content to settle some roots for him."

"How did you get so lucky?" Gaara teased, resting his chin on the back of his hand.

"You got an actual princess," Shira chuckled. "I'd say we both got really lucky."

Naga hissed in slight protest, proclaiming that he was actually the lucky one as the true love of Azumi's life. Utakata stifled a laugh. "You cannot tell everyone that," he said softly. Naga hissed again with a small smug flick of his tail. Gaara chuckled, looking to Utakata for translation. "Ummm," Utakata smirked at Naga who slithered up to him to poke him hard in his chest with his tail. "He is the father." He and Naga went back and forth like this for a minute or two with the other three watching in mild confusion and amusement. Naga looked at Gaara and hissed at him as
if he could understand. "He said he likes you, you are great and all," Utakata translated, "but he is the real love of Azumi's life."

"What?" Gaara chuckled.

"That is something for you two to settle."


"They are," Gaara pouted. "After all the treats I've given you!" He was joking...mostly.

Naga moved to nuzzle Gaara's jaw, telling him that they could share her. Ryuga hissed softly, telling them that they could have Azumi and he wanted Sayumi.

"I think you both need to relax," Utakata told the snakes. "And maybe get some mates within your species." Both snakes hissed at him to mind his own business. Utakata snorted, shaking his head as he ate his food.

"I'll make up a plate for Azumi," Shira chuckled, making sure to make two plates in case the baby wanted to eat first. He picked the best pieces of everything for her and set them aside.

"Ah, I should go check on her," Gaara said. "I'll be right back." Naga immediately moved to coil up his body as he stood up. He would be less afraid of Kaida with Gaara around. Together, they made their way up to the bedroom.

Azumi had woken up and was sitting against the pillows, conversing with Kaida about how she became Utakata's companion when he left the village and practically fell in love with him. "So you have been together for a long time then," she hummed.

Kaida hissed softly to say yes and went on to say he was a bit of a mess when he first arrived but had gotten much better over the years and started to take care of so many snakes in the city. She perked up the moment the door opened. Naga hid behind Gaara a little the moment Kaida looked over at them.

"Wow, you really are afraid of her," Gaara chuckled. "Did you sleep well?" he asked Azumi. He smoothly sat down on the edge of the bed, taking her hand in his.

"I did," she smiled, lifting his hand to kiss the back of it and then gently pulling him close to kiss him softly. Naga moved to coil around her, nuzzling his face against hers and hissing softly.

"Good," he returned her smile, pressing into the kiss lightly. "Naga missed you," he chuckled as he pulled back. "And Ryuga did, too, right up until Sayumi showed up," he laughed. "I think he might be smitten."

"Sayumi?" she hummed and then gasped. "Shira's girlfriend?" she grinned. "She is here?" She paused for a second. "Wait, Ryuga?" Naga hissed, confirming that Ryuga was definitely in love with Sayumi. "Huh...he never struck me as the type of snake to fall for a human."

"She is going to stay with you when everyone else has to leave. This way, someone is here to help you no matter the time," he told her.

“Oh?" Azumi smiled. “That sounds like it will be a fun time. I do not think I have been around many women our age since I arrived here,” she chuckled. There was a quiet rumbling noise coming from her stomach. Kaida moved her head closer to Azumi's stomach, tapping her nose against it
lightly and hissing to the baby. "Yes, they are hungry," she told the snake.

"Oh, I'll be right back. Shira set two plates of food aside for you," he smiled, moving to get up. "Sorry, he set a plate out for you and one for the little one," he chuckled. He kissed the back of her hand then her forehead. "Be right back." Azumi chuckled, waiting patiently for him to return with the food. Gaara went back down into the kitchen. “She’s awake,” he announced. He grabbed a tray and set a cup of tea, a glass of water, and the two plates of food on it for her.

“Is she really going to eat all of that?” Utakata asked, looking at the piles of food.

“Oh, yeah,” Shira nodded. “And then she’s going to want dessert after.”

"I love her already," Sayumi grinned. "Should I come up with you?" she asked, finishing up her own food. "Or should I bring up the dessert?"

“She’ll love you immediately if you brought up her dessert,” Gaara chuckled.

“Then that’s what I’ll do,” Sayumi smiled. She looked into the basket and picked up both a chantilly cake and a strawberry shortcake. “Which one should I take up?”

“Both, if you want her to really love you,” Shira laughed.

“I am admittedly curious to see such a small woman put away all of that,” Utakata mumbled softly.

"It’s a sight to behold," Shira chuckled. He was beaming, between his girlfriend and his wife in-law loving his food he was a very content and happy man.

"Nothing is stopping you from visiting her," Gaara chuckled. "She just won't talk much since she will be eating."

Sayumi picked put a slice of each cake on a plate then looked at the brown one. “What is this one exactly?” she asked.

“A chantilly cake,” Utakata answered. “A cake from our village.” He cut his own small piece. “I have not had this in years.” He wanted to see if Shira made it exactly the way it was supposed to be made. As soon as he took a bite, he nodded his approval.

“Try it,” Shira smiled at Sayumi. “I’ll bring up a second slice for you.”

“Thank you,” she grinned, leaning over to kiss him and causing him to swoon. He cut a piece of cake for her and they all headed up to the bedroom.

Kaida and Naga were having a small fight in Azumi’s lap which she seemed to be enjoying a little bit. “You know, Naga, it is unfair. She is not venomous you cannot just attack her like—“ She was cut off by a frantic hiss from Naga. “Okay, yes, you are my companion, but—“ She was cut off by a hiss from Kaida. “She has a fair point,” she told Naga.

“Are we interrupting something?” Sayumi laughed with a soft knock to the door frame to announce their presence. Both snakes froze, looking over at the new voice. Ryuga was still wrapped around her shoulders.

“We can come back if you need to mediate,” Shira teased, walking in the room with Sayumi. She set the plate of dessert on the bedside table while Shira grabbed a chair for her. “Azumi, this is Sayumi,” he beamed with pride.
“Oh!” Azumi grinned, immediately opening her arms for a hug. “Hello! It is nice to finally meet you, even though the circumstances are,” she pointed to her leg, “not exactly ideal,” she chuckled.

The other woman slipped her arms around Azumi. Her hug was firm but gentle. “There’s rarely ideals in this world,” she said, pulling back. “It’s wonderful to meet you. Shira has told me so much,” she giggled.

“I am excited to be spending time with you. I see you met Ryuga,” she smirked at the snake wrapped around Sayumi. Kaida’s head perked up when Utakata walked into the room. She looked between him and Azumi as if conflicted about who she wanted to be with. Azumi smiled and pet her gently. “He is the love of your life,” she told her softly. “Go to him.”

Utakata raised his eyebrow at the phrase, smirking a little as his snake crossed the bed. He reached out an arm to let her coil around his shoulders. “So I am the love of your life, huh?” he asked softly, petting her once she was settled. She hissed softly and he chuckled.

“Has he?” she chuckled. “I am excited to be spending time with you. I see you met Ryuga,” she smirked at the snake wrapped around Sayumi. Kaida’s head perked up when Utakata walked into the room. She looked between him and Azumi as if conflicted about who she wanted to be with. Azumi smiled and pet her gently. “He is the love of your life,” she told her softly. “Go to him.”

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“Oh, yes! He’s really comfortable,” Sayumi smile. Ryuga perked up, getting excited at the compliment and then even more so when she nuzzled his face against her jaw. “You have such handsome boys!”

“Thank you,” Azumi chuckled, petting Naga who coiled comfortably in her lap now that Kaida was gone. “They are also very protective.” She looked at the tray in Gaara’s hands and grinned. He set it on a small table and brought the table closer to the bed. She reached for the cup of tea which was just out of reach but with a discreet nudge of it from Gaara, she grabbed it.

“Is the baby okay?” Sayumi asked.

“The baby is fine,” Azumi nodded. “They have been through a lot but they are going to make it.”

“This child is going to be as resilient as you,” Utakata chuckled. “That is for sure.”

“May I?” Sayumi asked softly, looking down at Azumi’s stomach. “They are lucky to have such a warm and strong family,” she smiled. “You are very loved,” she said to the fetus.

Azumi moved her arms out of the way so Sayumi could feel the small baby bump.

“I know if you two are having a girl, her father is going to spoil the life out of her,” Shira teased.

“If we have a boy, his father is going to spoil the life out of him,” Gaara smirked. “I’m just excited to be a father.”

“You’re a sap,” Shira teased.

Sayumi smiled as she pressed her hands to the warm belly. “They really are strong,” she whispered. “I hope I get to meet them when they are born,” she smiled at Azumi, pulling back. “And I hope I can help you in any way with your leg and the baby!” Her dazzling smile was back.

At that moment, Azumi was convinced that Sayumi was Sachiko’s sister. Or even a clone of Sachiko that did not inherit the golden angelic aura. “Thank you,” she smiled, setting the cup on the tray and picking up a plate. “It will just be nice to have the company while my movement is limited.” She looked at what was on the plate and grinned at Shira. “And thank you.”

“I think you should hold off on the rumman for a few days,” Shira told her. “But there is a new pitcher of it downstairs for when you can drink things other than water and tea.”
Azumi tried her best not to pout. “I appreciate that,” she chuckled.

“I’ll get it for you as soon as you can have it,” Sayumi winked. “Would you like some time alone with Gaara or—“

“We should give you time to get to know each other,” Gaara said, leaning over to kiss Azumi’s head. “I need to work out a few things for the project you want to work on,” he told her. “But I shouldn’t be too long.”

Azumi smiled at him, lifting his hand to kiss his knuckles. Both women waited for all three men to leave the room before continuing their conversation.

“So you and Utakata are from the same village,” Sayumi hummed.

“We are,” Azumi nodded as she started to eat. “He came here years ago on his own free will and I was brought here as a slave.”

“A slave?” Sayumi asked.

“Did Shira not tell you that part?” she chuckled.

“No, he just mentioned you were having problems with the city’s apothecary. I thought it was a crazy stalker ex-boyfriend type of situation.”

Azumi paused for a moment, realizing that out of context, it could be perceived as such. “No,” she said with another chuckle. “The apothecary was my master. And Gaara’s cousin.”

Sayumi’s jaw dropped slightly. She took a moment to process the news then nodded as she took Azumi’s free hand. “I wish a slow and painful death on him.” The smile she flashed her was entirely out of place with her words and sweet tone. “Especially since he put you and your baby in such danger.”

Azumi squeezed her hand slightly. She knew she never wanted to see Sasori again but she still did not wish for him to die. She just wanted to get as far away from him as possible. "You and everyone else," she said as she continued eating.

"Mmm," Sayumi tilted her head to look at Azumi. "What about you?" she asked her softly. "It's hard to leave something toxic. Even when it's good for you. Maybe especially when it's good for you." She picked up her own piece of cake and released Azumi’s hand.

Azumi did not answer at first, eating a little more as she figured out how she wanted to word her answer. As strongly as she felt about the situation, she had a hard time putting it into actual words. It bothered her to say them out loud. “I want him out of my life,” she started, “but...not dead.”

Sayumi chewed on her piece of cake, considering her words before she spoke. "That is reasonable," she smiled softly. "And it also makes you a much kinder person than he deserved to have in his life," she said, cutting into her cake again. "The way you feel, though...I've seen it before in the troupe." She looked at Azumi hard. "You'll be okay. You have a lot of support and a baby to keep you away from that man."

“Right after the baby is born, we are leaving.” Azumi grabbed the glass of water and took a sip before continuing to eat. “My family, especially, does not want to stay here. I just need to get through the rest of this pregnancy.”

"Well, you have me to keep you company until then!" she grinned. "Have you had a shower yet?"
she asked excitedly.

“I have not,” she hummed, shaking her head. She finished the first plate of food and switched it out for the second plate, taking another sip of her water before starting the second plate. “I think it is still a little early for one. But Lady Sachiko said she wanted to throw one so I suppose I will be having one,” she chuckled.

"Ah, baby showers are always so interesting." Sayumi ate another piece of her cake. "It's interesting to see how each culture celebrates their mothers and babies," she said, finishing her dessert. "If Lady Sachiko is throwing it then you know it's going to be amazing."

“I am excited to see her ideas,” Azumi nodded, “and how she would incorporate both traditions from here and where I am from.” She paused for a long moment as she thought about something. “But...I hope she does not make this like all of her other parties.”

“What do you mean?” Sayumi asked.

“The, uh...the orgy at the end.”

"Oh...that's a normal thing for her parties?" Sayumi asked with a spark of excited scandal in her eyes. "That's bold for a lady of her standing. Usually, stuff like that only happens in seedy parts of town or with creepy old men," she shuddered a little. "I'm sure she's sensible enough to not do that."

Azumi looked at her hard for a while. As pleasant as Sayumi was, she could see something in her eyes that was sad. “How long have you been traveling with the troupe?” she asked.

"About nineteen years,” she said nonchalantly. She picked up her cup of tea and sipped it slowly. "I was five," she smiled, putting the cup down. "I don't really remember how it happened. But I made the most of it over the years. I became the second-in-command to the ring leader and the leader of the acrobats."

Azumi frowned slightly. She had no doubt that this woman experienced abuse of every kind. She knew traveling acts such as that were quite notorious for mistreating their performers. “I see...” she said softly.

"Don't think too much about it," Sayumi said softly. "I've made peace with my demons. For the most part," she laughed softly, swirling her cup of tea.

“It is interesting that we are both performers,” she chuckled. “Maybe when I am healed, we can do something together.”

"We should!" Sayumi lit up again. "You do belly dancing, right? I'm not much of a ground dancer," she looked up, thinking about the phrasing, "but I'm sure I could learn quickly."

"It will be fun," Azumi smiled. "There are not many belly dancers. I have danced with a few people here but it was more...traditional types of dancing. The only person I could actually belly dance with here was," she stopped for a second, her smile slowly turning into a frown, "Lord Sasori," she finished quietly.

"Mmm," Sayumi frowned, looking the other woman over. "We will change that." She set her cup down and turned to Azumi. "I promise I won't step on your feet and I learn fast," she winked.

"How did you start dancing?"

"I learned from the snakes," she said, her smile returning almost instantly. "They all love to dance.
Naga and I actually met while dancing the day I was sold." Naga perked up, hissing softly with pride. He nuzzled Azumi's jaw, saying he wished he had met her sooner.

"Really?" Sayumi grinned, leaning in to gently tap his nose. "I would have thought you two have been together forever." Naga hissed again, saying that they will be.

Azumi grinned, petting Naga and then kissing the top of his head. "Honestly, I do not know how I survived my whole life without him. Having him around when I was serving Lord Sasori made everything...just a little more bearable." Naga tapped his nose against hers and hissed happily. "I love you, too," she chuckled.

"I could only imagine," Sayumi hummed, resting her chin in the palm of her hand. "Having a companion always makes life more bearable. Think you could help me learn to dance, too?" she asked Naga directly.

Naga hissed excitedly, nodding and raising his body so he could sway around and show her how he danced. "He is demonstrating for you," Azumi chuckled. Ryuga hissed at him, telling him to stop showing off to his woman. "Calm down, Ryuga."

“Oh, very impressive,” Sayumi nodded seriously. She looked down at Ryuga and giggled. “Would you prefer to teach me? We could dance together if you want.” She stroked his back gently. Ryuga perked up, hissing that he should be the one to teach her anyway. He moved to rest in her lap and show her how it was really done. He finished his demonstration and hissed as he bowed when he was done. "Wonderful," she grinned, clapping lightly.

Naga hissed softly, nuzzling Azumi again. "He is not upstaging you," she said softly. "You are both good dancers."

"I might need extra help," Sayumi said to Naga. "Do you two think you could work together to help me? I want to make sure I can dance really well with Azumi!” she said encouragingly as if she were speaking to small children.

Both snakes looked at each other, shared a nod, and then looked at her and nodded. "Wow,” Azumi whispered, finishing off her second plate. She looked at the two cakes Sayumi brought up for her and grabbed the strawberry shortcake first. "Can you two also work together in helping Gaara and me raise our baby?” she asked them. The snakes hissed at her as if she had insulted them. Of course, they would help raise the neonate! It was going to be a part of Azumi. Who else was going to watch it when she and Gaara were not around? "Alright, alright," she said, going back to her cake. She was about to say something else when she heard something crash downstairs. "Oh, that cannot be good," she hummed.

"What was that?" Sayumi asked, looking toward the door.

Azumi had a bad feeling that maybe Sasori had come to finish what he had started. "I do not know," she said softly.

A few seconds later, Utakata entered the room, quietly closing the door behind him and then pressing his back to it. "So, Sayumi," he started, "I need to ask you a question. Did you leave the troupe with permission...or did you escape?"

"Oh," Sayumi's mouth split into a massive, sheepish smile. "They found me fast..." she laughed but it had a biting edge of stress. "I escaped."

"You might have wanted to mention that," Utakata sighed. "Whoever they sent to look for you is
here making a mess downstairs," he sighed again, running a hand through his hair.

Sayumi bit her lip, her brows knitted in worry. "Do you want me to go down there?" she asked him. She did not want to leave Shira but she also did not want to cause any more trouble than these kind people were already dealing with.

Utakata looked at her hard. "You escaped," he said, "which means you do not want to go back."

Sayumi shook her head. "I...really don't," she said softly.

"Then do not leave this room. Gaara and Shira can handle them easily. And Gaara has a lot of pent up rage from what happened earlier."

"Ooh," Azumi winced. "I do not think they will be back after that," she told Sayumi.

"I'm not sure they will make it out," Utakata winced at the sound of something breaking. It sounded like it was over someone's head. There was the heavy thud of a body hitting the floor and a long groan.

"Thank you," Sayumi said softly. "I'm really sorry about this," she said to both of them. "I didn't think they would hunt me down so quickly."

"Looks like we are more similar than we thought," Azumi chuckled, finishing the strawberry shortcake and picking up the chantilly cake.

"You really did put all of that away," Utakata mumbled.

"I had help from the life growing inside me," she smirked. She looked at Sayumi. "Shira will not let them take you back," she assured her.

Sayumi gave her a smaller, still worried smile. "I know he won't," she said softly. "I...really am falling hard for him. I don't think I've ever connected with someone so fast. He's such a good man."

"He is a very good man," Azumi told her. "And you have nothing to be worried about."

"I'm lucky to have found him," she sighed contently.

"It sounds like they are done," Utakata hummed, opening the door very slightly to listen for the noise downstairs.

"Knowing Gaara," Azumi chuckled, "he probably punched them in the throat so if they are still going, you will not hear any screams."

Sayumi bit her lip to keep in a hard laugh. She stood up, squeezing Azumi’s hand. "We should go check in them," she said turning to Utakata. "Just in case they need a little help."

“Well, it is you who is being looked for so it is probably not a good idea that you go down there,” he said.

“And what about you?” Azumi smirked.

“Azumi, do I look like I fight?"

She stifled a laugh as she finished her second slice of cake. “I suppose not,” she said softly, setting her plate on the tray and picking up the tea.
Moments later, there was a soft knock on the door. Utakata opened it slightly to see who it was. “Ah, your knights have returned,” he said, opening the door all the way for Gaara and Shira.

“That was fun,” Gaara grinned, stretching as he entered the room. He looked a lot more relaxed. He leaned down to give Azumi a kiss. “How is the cake?” He tasted the sweetness on her lips and could not help kissing her again.

Shira followed after Gaara, beelining for Sayumi. He pulled her into a tight hug, burying his face in her thick hair. “They won’t come for you again,” he told her, cupping her face as he pulled back. “Gaara throat punched a guy so hard, I’m pretty sure his neck broke.” He chuckled, smirking at his best friend.

“I did not and it did not!” Gaara protested.

“You do not have to deny it,” Azumi said, gently tugging his hand so he would sit on the bed with her.

Sayumi looked at Shira and pulled him into a kiss. “Thank you,” she said softly.

“I had a feeling we’d be dealing with them soon,” Shira chuckled. “No one can just leave organizations like that. I wish you had told me sooner.” He turned to take her seat and pull her into his lap.

“We protect each other in this family,” Gaara smiled, kissing Azumi’s knuckles. “We wouldn’t have let you deal with that alone.”

Sayumi blushed, hooking her arms around Shira’s shoulders. “You guys are already dealing with so much,” she said softly.

“And I got to blow off some steam,” Gaara grinned.

“Some?” Utakata spoke up. “It sounded like a full bar brawl down there.”

“I had...quite a bit of rage pent up,” Gaara said sheepishly.

“Oh, we know,” Azumi chuckled, gently rubbing his back.

“They’re gone now,” Shira said. “But in case we have another attempt with different people, I should probably get her out of here.”

“I can walk with you guys,” Utakata said. “My place is on the way to your restaurant.” He looked at Azumi. “I will be back tomorrow with the items you need.”

“Thank you,” she smiled.

Gaara laid down on the bed, resting his head on Azumi’s shoulder. “It does bother me that people are finding my home so easily,” he pouted a little. “I’m not very public with my place of residence.

“Well, one person followed me and knew where you lived anyway and the other...” Shira frowned. “I feel like they followed someone here, too.” He started to look a little stressed again. “Maybe I should hold off on coming over,” he chuckled, running a hand through his hair. “I’ll still send food but...if I’m the common denominator...” he trailed off, looking at everyone in the room.

“That does not mean you should stop coming here,” Azumi hummed. “I am sure after what just happened, there will be nothing to worry about here.” She looked at Sayumi. “If anything, you are
well-protected here. You just need to be careful when you are anywhere else. Especially if you are alone."

"I hardly have anywhere to be and I'm here to be your legs until you can get around again on your own," Sayumi smiled.

"I have enough rooms here that if you wanted to stay I could set you up," Gaara offered.

Sayumi’s eyes widened at the offer. She looked to Shira then Azumi, blushing a little. "That’s very generous of you, Lord Gaara, but I don't want to stifle you and Lady Azumi," she said apologetically.


"I’m offering," Gaara chuckled. “Of course I don’t mind.”

Sayumi took a moment to think about it. “I’d love to take you up on that offer.”

“You can have one of the guestrooms,” Gaara nodded.

Kaida hissed softly in relief. She wanted to be alone with Utakata on their walk home.

Naga hissed a soft laugh and Ryuga slithered around Sayumi’s shoulders excitedly. He came up to tap her nose gently, his tongue flicking her nose. She giggled, petting her head. "Thank you," she said softly. "I really appreciate this and I'm glad I can help you two out in any way I can," she said, smiling at Azumi fondly.

"You three are too much," Utakata sighed.

"Well, then I guess I'll prep for breakfast tomorrow," Shira chuckled.

“And I have had enough excitement for one day,” Utakata hummed. “I will be by tomorrow afternoon to check on you,” he told Azumi.

She nodded and grinned, opening her arms for a hug. “Do not tell my father,” she said softly to him as he came in for the hug.

"I wouldn't dream of it," he whispered to her. He did not want to be the messenger who told Orochimaru his daughter was once again attacked and nearly lost her baby. No, that was someone else’s job if it ever did come up. He turned to leave and Gaara got up to walk him out.

"I'll be right back," Gaara said. “Shira, you can pick a room with Sayumi if you want to," said to his best friend as he kissed Azumi’s temple before pulling away to join Utakata by the door.

Shira took Sayumi’s hand and then looked at Azumi. “Are you going to be alright?”

“I am going to be fine,” she nodded. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” they both said to her.

“Ryuga,” Azumi said sternly as Sayumi and Shira turned to leave.

Ryuga poked his head out of Sayumi's hair off the back of her neck. He hissed softly to say, yes? Naga hissed a laugh again. He looked up at Azumi and hissed again, telling her not to bother with him. She had him. If Ryuga wanted to sleep with Sayumi it meant more Azumi for him.
“I do not think they want to have him in there,” she said to Naga. She looked at Ryuga. “Do not take advantage of the fact that I cannot chase you right now. Get over here.”

Ryuga hissed a pouty sound and Sayumi laughed softly. "Listen to her," she said gently. "I'll be here in the morning and all day tomorrow," she gently unwound the large snake from her shoulders. Ryuga pouted harder but tapped his nose against Sayumi’s as she turned to gently place him on the foot of the bed. "I'll see you tomorrow, okay, handsome?"

Behind her, Shira squinted hard at Ryuga. This snake was trying to steal his woman. He had just been bullied out of his crush by a thirteen-year-old and now a snake was trying to steal his actual girlfriend. What was his life coming to?

Ryuga coiled up at the foot of the bed, sighing longingly as Sayumi left with Shira. “She is not leaving forever,” Azumi scoffed. “You will see her in the morning.” Morning could not come soon enough for Ryuga. Naga moved to nuzzle against Azumi.

Gaara came back into the room and saw Ryuga was on the bed. “Not sleeping with your girlfriend tonight?” he teased. Ryuga hissed softly and rolled his eyes.

“You will get over it,” Azumi said.

"This is better than him not liking her," Gaara offered with a chuckle. He crawled back onto the bed and resumed his spot next to her and kissed her cheek. The activities of the day were starting to catch up to him. "Today was eventful," he sighed, closing his eyes. "How are you feeling, my love?" he asked her softly.

"Other than the pain in my leg," she hummed, reaching for his other to lace their fingers together, "I feel fine. But you," she smirked, "look quite exhausted." Her other hand laced in his hair, gently scratching his scalp.

"I wish there was something I could give you for that," he mumbled through a yawn. Her fingers felt good in his hair and it was only serving to lull him off faster. He blinked hard then smiled.

She leaned in to kiss him softly. "Go to sleep," she told him. "You have patients to see tomorrow."

He pushed back into the kiss weakly, already drifting off. "They can wait," he mumbled, curling close to her. He was out before he could finish his next thought. Naga and Ryuga hissed a soft laugh. Ryuga decided Gaara was the comfortable place to be and coiled up in his lap for the night.

Azumi smiled softly at him as he fell asleep. Continuing to run her fingers through his hair, she picked up a book that was left on the bedside table for her and started reading. Since she had already slept, she was going to be up for a while.
Chapter 83

By the next morning, Azumi had finished the book she was reading. "That was...a lot," she muttered softly to herself. She felt Gaara move slightly and resumed scratching his scalp. The snakes woke up slowly with him.

He groaned softly, curling in closer to her as he surfaced from sleep. His arm slipped over her stomach and he pulled in even closer to her. He buried his face into her side to breathe in her scent for a moment and bask in the silence before he had to come up for air. "Morning," his voice was a thick rasp.

"Good morning," she smiled, closing the book and setting it aside. "Did you sleep well?" Naga hissed tiredly, moving to the other side of the bed so he could stretch his body out straight. Ryuga followed his lead, taking up more of the bed and going over both Azumi and Gaara as he stretched out.

"I did," he confirmed softly. He smiled, watching the snakes stretch out and felt a stretch of his own coming on. He arched a little as he sat up straighter to give her another kiss. He glanced at the book then at her. "Did you sleep at all?" he asked, his voice still rough.

"Not really," she hummed. "I got a little caught up in the lives of others." She took his hand in hers and brought it up to kiss the back of it. "But it is not like I am going anywhere so I can nap later."

"I see," he smiled. "Were they interesting?" He moved his hand from hers to cup her face. Not really giving her time to answer, he turned her face towards him to kiss her deeply. He did not want to leave her side yet. It irked him that he even had work that day but he planned on shortening his rounds significantly so he could return home much earlier. "I won't be gone long today but is there anything you want me to pick up?"

She hummed in thought for a moment. "Churros?" she asked herself softly. She gently pressed a hand to her stomach and then nodded. "Churros," she said.

"Churros for Mom and Baby, got it," he chuckled softly. He shifted to sit upright the curled down so he could kiss her stomach, careful not to shift the snakes. He fell back into place next to her with a long groan. "Maybe I will just get those churros and skip work," he joked. His body was a little sore from the brawling he did the day before. There was also the mess left behind from said brawl that needed to be dealt with. He did not want any of it.

"Um, no," she said. "You are a doctor, not a shopkeeper. A shopkeeper can decide not to open their shop if they do not feel like it. You, on the other hand, cannot just decide to not do your job. People need you. Go to them. The churros are not so important that you should skip work to get them."

"Why are you so sensible?" Gaara sighed heavily. Naga hissed something softly, teasing him for acting like a child. Gaara squinted playfully at the snake. "I'm being made fun of, aren't I?" he hummed. "I'll remember that when I pick up your treats today," he joked. He slowly pushed himself all the way up, stretching hard as he did. "I suppose I should get ready," he said, still not moving yet.

"It is still early," she hummed. She leaned forward as much as she could to look at the damage on her leg. "Do you think Shira and Sayumi are awake?"
"Mmm," he hummed, frowning at her leg. "Do you want anything at all for it?" He knew she would say no but had to offer at least something to take the edge off. "I'll have to cast it today so we don't risk the bones shifting on you," he said as he lifted his nose to the air. He caught the faint scent of pancakes but...lighter being make. "Shira is up," he chuckled.

Azumi paused for a second, catching the scent as well. "Oh, now I am excited," she hummed. She looked at Gaara and smiled. "I do not want to take anything. I can handle the pain for now."

He nodded, figuring that would be her response. He stood up with another hard stretch then took long strides to the door. The scent of coffee was strong in the air. There was also someone in their doorway as soon as he opened it.

"Oh, good! You're up," Sayumi beamed with a tray in her hands. It was loaded up with a pot of tea, coffee, and two plates with soft, delicately folded, thin pancakes, a small bowl of chocolate spread, rose jam, and two bowls of fruit. "Shira made crepes!"

Azumi, Naga, and Ryuga all perked up when the door was opened. "You got all three snakes excited," Gaara chuckled, taking the tray from Sayumi. "Thank you." Ryuga took the opportunity to quickly move from the bed toward Sayumi and coil up her body.

"Good morning," Azumi grinned from the bed.

"Good morning," Sayumi giggled at Ryuga's immediate appearance. She pet down his body and nuzzled her jaw against his face as she walked into the room. She retook her seat from the night before, continuing to pet Ryuga. "Did you two sleep alright?"

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?" Gaara chuckled. "I hope everything was comfortable."

"The best sleep I've ever had," her eyes sparkled. "Honestly, I've never slept on a bed so nice!"

"You almost feel undeserving of it, right?" Azumi chuckled, knowing she sure did.

"Exactly!" Sayumi gushed.

"Well, that’s simply not true," Shira said, appearing in the doorway.

"If there were ever two ladies who deserved luxury, it would be you two," Gaara agreed.

Gaara brought the tray over to Azumi and set it down on the small table near the bed. She reached for the coffee first, pulling it closer with a discreet gently nudge of the cup from Gaara and taking a sip.

"You two are so sweet," Sayumi chuckled as Shira wrapped his arms around her from behind and rested his chin on her shoulder.

"Sickly so," Shira chuckled, kissing her cheek. "You have to tell me how these turned out. This is Sayumi’s recipe!" he said excitedly. "If you like them, I have more downstairs."

"Thank you," Azumi smiled. Gaara rested a plate in her lap as she set her coffee down on the table. She took a few bites of the crepe and hummed contentedly. For a second, she was sure her pupils dilated then constricted back to their normal vertical shape. She immediately started taking more bites of the crepe.

"I think that means it came out great," Gaara chuckled.
Sayumi's eyes lit up in wonder. Shira chuckled, stealing a fruit from the tray. "I'll take it," he laughed, popping the piece into his mouth.

"Your eyes do that when you're excited?" Sayumi could not help but ask. There was an air of awe in her voice.

Azumi paused for a moment. "I suppose to put it simply," she hummed, "yes. But if that were true, I think I would have had nonstop round pupils. I get excited a lot but it rarely happens. And when it does it is usually because one of my senses was overstimulated. Usually in a good way."

"That's adorable," Sayumi squeaked softly into a bite of her crepe. Gaara bit his lip to keep a laugh in, nodding to Sayumi enthusiastically. He had seen it enough times when they were intimate and he loved it every time.

"I love seeing it happen," Shira grinned. "It means I did a good job." He rocked his head in a little happy dance.

"So what are your plans for today?" Sayumi asked.

"I'm being forced to go see my patients," Gaara joked, causing Azumi to scoff.

"And I'm not doing anything until I have to go prep for the restaurant's opening so I'll be here for a while," Shira said.

"And I cannot move," Azumi chuckled.

"I'm here to hang out with you," Sayumi told her.

"Utakata is coming over with ingredients for a bath set. Would you like to learn how to make them?"

"I would love to!" Sayumi grinned.

"She makes the best stuff," Gaara gushed a little. "She even used to sell it in my cousin's shop."

"Wait," Shira pouted. "I don't think I've ever had any of your custom stuff."

"Well, I guess that means we know who we are making the bath set for," Sayumi giggled.

"Then I will gladly teach you," Azumi smiled at her as she finished her crepes and coffee then set it on the table. Naga coiled up on her lap where the plate was and hissed softly. She pet along his body and leaned back against the pillows.

Shira grinned. "I'm excited about this bath set," he said. He waited for Gaara to finish eating before taking the tray, leaving the cups of tea on the bedside table for them. "We'll let you get ready," he told Gaara.

"See you downstairs," Gaara said to him and Sayumi and they turned to leave the room. Azumi did not even try to protest Ryuga going with them.

"I'll make another plate of crepes for the baby," Shira smirked at Azumi before disappearing.

"I wonder if this baby is going to eat as much when it is born," she hummed.

"Um," Gaara paused. "Did you eat a lot?" he asked her. "Because I didn't until I was about eight. That was about the time Shira started wanting to learn to cook," he laughed.
“I do not remember, honestly,” she chuckled. “That would be a question for my father.”

He looked at Azumi’s leg and hummed. "Before I leave, I'll put your leg in the cast so we can free this one," he said, putting his hand on her right thigh.

She smiled, pulling him into a kiss and placing her hand over his. "Thank you," she said against his lips before pulling away. "Can I also be moved to the back balcony?" she chuckled. "I think I need to be in the sun for a while and as much as I love this bed, I will actually go insane being stuck in bed for so long."

"We can do that," he chuckled. "I don't want you losing your mind while having a broken leg." He pressed into another kiss. "I think I actually have a wheelchair somewhere. Give me a few minutes to go look for it," he told her. "Then you can just be pushed." He pulled away, kissing her forehead then crossed the room. "Do you need anything else while I'm downstairs?" he asked her.

She thought for a second and then shook her head. "Nope," she smiled. "Just you to come back to me," she winked.

"I'll always come back to you," he smiled, blushing lightly as he turned to leave. He made his way downstairs to look for the chair and gather what he needed for the cast. Putting it all in a basket, he started for the closet he was sure he had seen the chair in last. He had a feeling he lent it to Komushi but it never hurt to look. He set the basket down as he came upon the closet and pulled the door open. He immediately regretted it, sighing heavily as a blast of hot air hit him. He braced himself for the dense heat. Luckily for him, he found the chair resting back against the back wall. Making his way through the few obstacles in his way, he pulled the chair out of the closet and started to clean it off.

Shira came up behind him. “Ah, I’ll clean it for you,” he said. Gaara tensed up, eyes wide and he clutched a hand to his chest. "What?" Shira asked, peering over his best friend's shoulder. "Did I scare you?"

"No," Gaara rolled his eyes. He shook off the spook, turning to hand him the chair.

"I did," Shira laughed. "It's been years since I've done that," he chuckled. "Ah," he sighed, patting Gaara's shoulder. "Now I know you are stressed."

Gaara almost protested but Shira was his best friend. Of course, he could see he was stressed. “Just...a little,” he sighed, picking up the basket.

“She’ll be fine,” Shira assured him.

"I know she will," he sighed. "I just worry..."

"Too much," he smiled at Gaara. "Go back to her. Sayumi should be with her by now. And you still have patients to see."

Gaara pouted at the mention of his job. "Yeah, yeah," he chuckled, shifting the basket on his arm. "I'll meet you up there." He made the short trip back upstairs and knocked lightly before entering.

Sayumi perked up, pausing in the conversation with Azumi the moment she saw it was Gaara. "Welcome back," she said.

Azumi grinned up at him. “You came back to me,” she chuckled. She looked at the basket and tilted her head slightly. “Oh, that looks like this will be a process,” she hummed. “Will you have time?”
"I told you," he smiled, circling the bed to kiss her temple, "I will always come back to you." He turned to set the basket down on the floor and shrugged. "My first patient is Inojin. He's fine. I know he's fine because we just saw him. This won't take long at all as long as you can bear the pain. And I know you can do that," he gave her a half-smirk.

"Of course. I am an expert at bearing pain," she smirked. Naga moved to wrap around her and nuzzle against her jaw, telling her that he will help ease whatever pain she feels. "Thank you," she chuckled.

"That doesn't like a skill people should want to have," Shira chuckled as he entered the room. "But it is a useful one," Sayumi smirked. She got up to make way for the cleaned wheelchair.

"I am not saying I am proud of it, but it does come in handy," Azumi said, followed by a slight hiss in pain as she got into a better position for Gaara to start the casting process. Naga started to move in front of her, swaying a little to put her into a trance since she would not feel pain in that state. For a second, she faltered and then shook her head. "I am fine, Naga," she said softly. "Really."

"Naga, save it for about five minutes from now," Gaara chuckled. "You can relax for a moment. I'll be right back." He pulled a bowl and a white sack from the basket then slipped out of the room again. Shira retook his seat from the day before and leaned into Sayumi.

Azumi looked at Naga who hissed a little frantically, obviously worried for her. "Do not worry," she smiled. "It cannot be as bad as it was when it first broke." She looked at Sayumi and Shira, chuckling softly at how both Shira and Ryuga were cuddling Sayumi like they were fighting over her. Ryuga hissed softly to Azumi, telling her to tell Shira to get off of his human.

Shira squinted at Ryuga. "He's talking shit, isn't he?" He squinted harder. "I am nothing but nice to you!" he pouted. He wrapped his arm around Sayumi's waist in a subtle expression of possession.

Ryuga hissed at him again as he slithered around Sayumi's shoulders, making her giggle a little. "Boys, boys, relax," she teased.

Ryuga backed down slightly only because Sayumi said to. "She is not your human," Azumi told him. Ryuga back hissed at her with an attitude. "Do not talk to me like that," she scolded him just as Gaara came back in.

Gaara looked between everyone. Shira was pouting, Ryuga was pouting harder, Sayumi was laughing softly, and he was pretty sure Naga was rolling his eyes. "What did I miss?" he chuckled, setting the bowl he left with down on the end of the bed.

"Ryuga's trying to steal the love of my life. First Mitsuki and now this!" Shira pouted, taking Sayumi's arm and burying his face in her upper arm. "Boys, boys, relax," she teased.

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"Ryuga's trying to steal the love of my life. First Mitsuki and now this!" Shira pouted, taking Sayumi's arm and burying his face in her upper arm.

"No one is going to steal me from you," Sayumi said softly, kissing Shira on the cheek.

"Especially not a snake or my thirteen-year-old brother," Azumi assured him.

"You have nothing to worry about," Gaara chuckled. As soon as he got everything ready, Naga was ready to put Azumi in a trance. "Okay, brace yourself," he told her as he reached for the towel. "I'll work as fast as I can."

"Want to hold my hand?" Sayumi offered.

"I will be fine," Azumi said. She looked at Sayumi and saw the look on her face. As if holding
hands would make Sayumi feel better about the whole situation. “Alright,” she chuckled, holding her hand out for Sayumi to take. With a grin, Sayumi moved closer to held Azumi’s hand.

“I’m starting now,” Gaara said. As soon as he started moving, a pain shot up her leg. She bit back a pained groan but Naga was already moving in front of her. He knew her well enough to know that she could not focus on bearing the pain at the same time as pulling herself out of a trance and she would succumb to the trance easily. Which she did.

Gaara did not pause in his work as he formed the cast around her leg. He made sure the bone was still set and that she would still be able to bend her knee. She would be able to use crutches for a little while but the chair would suit her better with the weight of the baby added.

Sayumi and Shira watched in fascination at the state Azumi was in. It was not every day they watched a human being charmed like a snake. It conflicted Gaara. He glanced at her every once in a while as he worked to make sure she was still okay. The whole thing took him nearly forty minutes to finish.

Once he was done, he gently set her leg down. "You can let her go now, Naga," he told the snake. Naga hissed softly, stopping his movements and immediately nuzzling against Azumi's jaw.

She groaned softly, rubbing her temples. A headache was forming and she tried not to get mad about the fact that she was put into a trance after she said she did not need to be put into one. She leaned back against the pillows and sighed, taking a moment to come back to herself. After a few seconds, she looked down at her leg. "Oh, it is done," she hummed.

"It is.” Gaara was at her side quickly. He ran his fingers through her hair before leaning down to kiss her forehead. “Do you want something for the headache?” he asked her. “It won’t be medication just something to drink,” he told her softly. Sayumi gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

Shira shifted in his chair, ready to get her anything she wanted. “You’ll be able to go to the balcony now,” he chuckled.

"Mm," Azumi hummed. "Just tea, I suppose." She sat up and let go of Sayumi's hand. "I will be fine with just that."

Shira got up to head for the door. "You got it," he winked at her.

"Are you up for moving or do you need a few minutes to rest?” he asked her. "There is no rush. Shira will be able to help you move to your chair."

"I can help her, too," Sayumi smirked at him. "I'm a lot stronger than I look." She lifted her chin.

"I have no doubt about that,” Gaara chuckled.

"I can move," Azumi said, sitting up a little straighter and maneuvering herself to the edge of the bed. Sayumi held the chair in place for her as she moved from the bed to the chair, keeping her legs on the bed until she was sure she was in the chair. Slowly and carefully, she moved her legs off of the bed and onto the footrests.

“Are you ready?” Sayumi asked Azumi once she was settled in. “Time to get you and the baby some fresh air,” she grinned, putting her hands on the handles.

“Do you want a blanket or anything?” Gaara asked.

“Don’t you have patients to see?” Sayumi reminded Gaara with a smirk. “Run along, good doctor. I
can get her blankets and tea and anything else she needs.”

Gaara opened his mouth then sighed, giving them a sheepish smile. “Alright,” he said, raising his hands in surrender then circling the bed and leaning down to kiss Azumi fully. “Like I said, I won’t be gone long today.”

She cupped his face, pushing into another kiss. "Do not forget the churros," she smirked as she pulled away.

"I won't," he promised before he finally and reluctantly grabbed his doctor's bag and set off to work.

Sayumi sighed a soft giggle once he was gone. "He really loves you," she smiled, starting to push the chair out of the room. "It’s adorable."

"I am quite excited to see how he is as a father," Azumi smiled. "I know he will be great but I think it will be even more adorable to see how he interacts with our baby."

"I agree!" Sayumi grinned. "He's clearly going to be very doting." She stopped at the end of the hall. "You'll have to direct me. I've only been to the balcony once and it was from the front door," she laughed, realizing she had no idea where she was going.

Azumi chuckled softly. "I have not been here very long myself," she admitted. "If I recall correctly it is just beyond the sitting room."

"I also don't know where that is," Sayumi laughed.

"Shira!" Azumi called with a grin.

"I'm coming," Shira called back. They could hear the smile in his voice. He shook his head as he rounded the corner and came up the stairs, a tray of tea and snacks in hand. "It's this way," he chuckled, gesturing in a completely different direction then they had thought to go in.

"Well, we were both wrong," Sayumi laughed, following after her boyfriend.

They made their way out to the balcony and Sayumi wheeled the chair up to the table. Shira set the tray down in the middle of the table and he and Sayumi took their seats across from Azumi. "I know I have said this a lot, but thank you," Azumi said to both of them as she poured her tea. "Your help means a lot. And I think...it puts him more at ease which in turn makes me feel better," she chuckled.

"He does worry a lot," Shira said.

"I know," she hummed. "And I feel bad about that."

"It's just proof that he cares," Sayumi smiled. "And how good of a father he will be."

"Gaara is so excited to be a father," Shira chuckled. "He won't stop talking about everything he's got planned," he grinned, taking a piece of fruit from the tray.

"Oh, yes," Utakata said from the doorway. "He has that child's life planned from birth to about five years old. So brace yourself," he chuckled, walking out with a basket on his arm and Kaida wrapped around his shoulders.

"I am sure he does," Azumi chuckled.
Utakata leaned down to hug her as he placed the basket on the table. “I see you are no longer confined to the bed. I am sure you would have gone insane. I hope you do not mind but a little snake decided to tag along with me.” He gestured to the doorway where Mitsuki appeared. Immediately, Shira tensed up.

“Stand your ground,” Azumi told Shira softly. “He is thirteen. He cannot really do anything to you.”

"Good morning, Sister," Mitsuki smiled at Azumi, leaning in to give her a hug. "Shira," he hissed sharply the moment he laid eyes on him at the table. "Lady Goddess," the edge in the boy’s voice was instantly gone replaced by a glowing joy, "I didn't know you were going...wait..." He stopped short, realizing this woman was different. Ryuga suddenly wrapped up Mitsuki's body and hissed sharply that he needed to back off. That was his human.

“I think you both need to relax,” Azumi said, holding Mitsuki by the back of his shirt so he could not get closer to Sayumi and Shira.

“Who is this cutie?” Sayumi grinned.

“This is my younger brother,” Azumi answered.

Mitsuki grinned wide. “I am Mitsuki,” he said.

“He has a crush on Lady Sachiko.”

“We are in love.”

“And he thinks he can fight Shira.” Mitsuki shot Shira a half-glare which caused the older man to tense up again. “Relax, Shira. I will not let him do anything to you.” She tugged Mitsuki’s shirt, forcing him into a chair.

"You have a crush on her, too!" Sayumi gushed, discreetly holding Shira's hand under the table. "I have a crush on her, too," she giggled. "You have very refined taste," she nodded. Ryuga hissed a small pouty sound as he wound his way back up Sayumi's body. She was prettier than Lady Sachiko.

"I brought you everything Gaara asked for and a few extra things," Utakata said lowly to Azumi while the other three went on about the Lady Goddess Sachiko.

“Thank you,” she grinned, sorting through everything that was in the basket. “This will be perfect.” She looked up at him, keeping her voice just as low. “Other than Mitsuki, no one followed you, right?” She was sure there was nothing to worry about but it did not hurt to ask just to be safe.

Utakata shook his head. "No one but him," he assured her. "He sort of insisted on coming to see you. But now your father might find out about..." He looked down at the table to indicate her leg.

She shook her head. “No. Not yet. I will make sure of that. And when he does find out, I will make sure he does not find out how it happened.”

Utakata nodded and opened his mouth to respond when they heard a low hiss at the other end of the table. Mitsuki was glaring harshly as Shira again, little fangs poking out of his mouth.

"Oh, those are cute," Sayumi tried not to laugh, feeling Shira tense up next to her.

"She is the girlfriend I was talking about, Mitsuki!"
Azumi looked over at her brother and rolled her eyes. "Put those away," she said, flicking his mouth. Naga moved from her to Mitsuki, ready to put him in a trance as well.

Mitsuki pouted, rubbing his lip. "I am fine, Naga," he said as he gently pet the snake to get him to back down.

“So you all have fangs?” Sayumi asked, shifting Ryuga gently on her shoulders.

“We do,” Azumi nodded. “It is a genetic mutation. Much like our eyes. We produce venom, too.”

Sayumi breathed a soft wow. “So your little one will have them, too?” she asked. “Oh, wait, sorry I don’t mean to probe.”

“We do not mind,” Mitsuki grinned.

“There are not many of us so we expect questions,” Azumi chuckled. “And yes, the baby will also have fangs. And most likely eyes like ours.”

“This might sound like a dumb question,” Shira laughed, “but do you lose the fangs like other teeth?”

“It is not a dumb question,” Azumi assured him. “We do not. They grow in with our baby teeth and continue to grow until we have all of our adult teeth. We never lose our fangs because they are attached to a venom sac in the back of the mouth.”

“It would hurt a lot if the tube that connects them was detached,” Mitsuki chimed in.

“If you lose your fang,” Utakata chuckled, “then you only have one fang from then on.”

“Oh! That sounds painful,” Sayumi grimaced a little. “But imagining a baby with fangs is adorable. Will they know how to naturally use them or were you all taught?”

“We know how to use them naturally but we were taught maintenance and care,” Azumi said.

“I used to get mine stuck a lot because I produced too much venom,” Utakata sighed. “It would build up and dry up around the gums and the fang would never come out.”

“Oooh, that sounds like it can get irritating,” Shira rubbed his jaw. “I wish I could be around to see this little one grow up.”

“Who says you won’t be?” Sayumi raised her eyebrow.

“Ah, well, I could leave the restaurant but I’d have to find someone I really trust. You’d have to come with me,” he said, putting his hand on her waist. Ryuga’s tailed flicked down to snap at Shira’s hand. He gave him a side glare.

“Ryuga,” Azumi hissed at the snake. She looked at Shira. “I am sorry about him. But I do promise that Gaara and I will visit. His whole family is here. I cannot just take him from everyone forever.”

“I’ll miss him,” Shira pouted, shaking the sting from his hand. He chuckled uneasily. “How can I win your affection back?” He pouted a little at Ryuga.

Ryuga hissed at him, telling him to stop being with Sayumi. "Ryuga!" Azumi scolded. He flinched a little and sighed, moving closer to Shira to rub his head against his jaw.

Mitsuki giggled behind his hand then reached for a snack from the plate.
"You are easy to bully," Utakata chuckled at Shira.

"Do not let people take advantage of your golden heart," Azumi told him. "You are also very built. You could hold Mitsuki down if he ever attacked you."

"No, he couldn't," Mitsuki scoffed.

Sayumi giggled, squeezing Shira's bicep. "You totally could, babe," she kissed his cheek. "I'll root for you."

"I will root for you, too," Azumi said.

Mitsuki gasped hard, pressing a hand to his chest. "But you are my sister!" he said. "You are supposed to root for me!"

"No, I am not," she shook her head. "Now," she looked at him, gripping his jaw and keeping his face in front of hers, "stop trying to intimidate Shira. You have no real reason to be attacking him."

"But I do have a reason," he pouted through the squishing of his cheeks.

"How about this, Mitsuki," Shira started, "I'll make you horchata and your favorite food, and you don't kick my ass."

Azumi looked at Mitsuki pointedly as she let his face go, telling him he better be nice. Mitsuki took a moment to truly consider it and then sighed. "Fine," he said. "I like scrambled eggs."

"I can do that," Shira smiled. "And I can dress it up really well."

Mitsuki nodded and then Azumi nudged him gently. "Thank you," he finally said.

"Sounds like a deal," Shira grinned. "Want to help me?" he asked.

Mitsuki looked at him hard for a moment then sighed. "Alright," his cheeks puffed out. "Can you add extra cinnamon to the horchata?"

"I sure can," Shira said as he stood up. "Let's go," Azumi patted Mitsuki on the back as he got up and followed Shira back inside. She looked at Sayumi. "I am sorry about him."

"It's fine," she smiled fondly. "Boys his age usually have a lot of energy. His crush is adorable." She rested her chin on the back of her hand. "And Shira is a big softy."

"Which is so funny," Utakata chuckled. "Considering I have seen him actually pick someone up and throw them out of his restaurant on more than one occasion."

"I believe it," Azumi smirked, setting up all of the oils with the small portable burner that Utakata brought. "Ready to learn how to make these products?" she smiled at Sayumi.

"Oh, we're doing this right here!" Sayumi sat up straighter, scooting her chair in closer.

"It is too beautiful of a day to not do this outside," Azumi chuckled.

"Teach me your ways."
Hey, this story was super fun to write and from the both of us, we wanna say thanks for reading and loving it. We're super happy about how much love this story received.

The feeling of a wine jug falling out of his hand and the sound of it hitting the ground scared Komushi awake. His eyes snapped open and he sat up quick, breathing a little heavily as he clutched his chest from the sudden spook. The quick movement made him nauseous and a headache started to form. He had no idea what time it was but he was pretty sure he slept the whole day away. “Ugh,” he groaned, feeling a wave of nausea hit him hard. It made him gag and he was sure he was about to vomit.

"Did you drink yourself to sleep last night?” Sasori asked from the doorway, spooking Komushi a little more.

"Hmm," Komushi grunted. He pressed the balls of his palms into his temples. "Of course," he snapped.

Sasori sighed, setting a mug of coffee down next to his best friend as he took a seat on the bed. "Take this." He pressed a cold glass of water into Komushi’s hand and some pills.

Komushi looked at the glass for a moment before taking the pills and downing the water quickly. "Thanks," he gasped when he pulled the glass from his lips. He did not look at Sasori for a bit but when he finally did, he saw that Sasori was watching him. "So..."

"You left me," Sasori said.

"I wasn't going to help you kill that baby."

"We've done it so many times before. What made this time different?” Sasori fought hard to keep the growl out of his voice but it came through a little bit.

Komushi glared hard at Sasori. His tongue ran the full row of his lower teeth. "What made her different," he snorted. His lip curled into a snarl as he looked at him. "We know her!” He took a deep breath, downing the rest of his water. "I...care about her!” he sighed, putting the cup down a little too hard.

Sasori's head snapped up to him. "I care about her, too," he snapped, almost immediately regretting the confession.

"You have a shitty way of showing it," Komushi scoffed.

"I was trying to keep her!” Sasori growled. "That baby will...would have ruined everything!”

"I would have taken it! You could have given it away to literally anyone! You're just a selfish piece of shit!” Komushi's voice started to rise. He shook his head, grabbing the cup of coffee. His throat felt tight as he downed the hot liquid.
"You probably can't get it through your rock of a skull but the baby being born and alive in general would have caused too many problems!" Sasori said. "Problems within my family that I don't need to deal with."

"If you paid better attention to her she wouldn't have gotten pregnant in the first place!" Komushi sucked his teeth hard. "And even if she still had the baby, you could have told your mother it was stillborn!"

"Oh, yeah, you really think that would have worked?" Sasori asked, feigning a small voice of hope. He smacked Komushi on the back of the head. "With Gaara being the father, just saying it was stillborn would have gotten me in even more trouble than killing it," he said. "He would have tried to keep it or do something to keep it around often. It would have been too obvious to everyone who the child's parents are."

Komushi rolled his eyes, clicking his teeth again. "Whatever." He sipped his coffee again. "It's going to live and you lose. So what are you going to do now?"

Sasori stayed quiet for a moment, looking down. "Actually...that's why I came over here," he started. "I figured since you're my best friend I should tell only you..." He looked up at him. "I'm leaving the city."

The shatter of the coffee mug on the ground echoed but Komushi could not hear it over the buzz in his ears. His mouth clicked shut. He took a moment to collect himself and then nodded. He flicked his foot, feeling coffee on his skin. "I...yeah, that makes sense," he sighed. "What are you going to tell your parents?"

"Nothing," Sasori sighed, looking down again. "I'm going to disappear..."

"Are you sure that's wise? Just leaving on your own?"

"I'm leaving with Kenzou and his...whatever they are," he shook his head.

"Yeah, what are they?" Komushi muttered.

"Who knows? But I guess I'll find out when I spend time with them." Komushi nodded again. He bit his lip and the tears started to well. "Don't," Sasori shook his head. "Don't do this."

Komushi sniffled, wiping his nose. "I'm not," he waved his hand, turning his head away. "I...damn...this will be good for you," he nodded. "This will be good for you." He leaned in and pulled Sasori into a tight hug. Sasori returned the hug. They stayed like that for a long moment before pulling apart. "When are you leaving?"

"Tonight...Kenzou wasn't going to leave for another week apparently but after he let her go...I had a long, long time to think about it...and then we had a long conversation and he said it would be best to leave tonight."

Komushi nodded again. "I suppose he is wise enough to trust for a decision like this..."

"I don't know when or if I'll be back," he said to Komushi.

"What do you want me to do with your shop?"

"Give it to my father. Tell him he can keep it or sell it." He ran a hand through his hair. "And...you know the birds can always find me," he smirked a little.
"I obviously won't tell anyone where you went off to," Komushi started, "but...what do you want me to say? Because it's going to come up."

"Use your imagination," Sasori told him. "I don't care what you say as long as no one can find me."

"I understand," he nodded. He leaned back and laid down on the bed, letting out a long, loud groan. "My best friend is leaving, Kankuro's got a girl now, Shira hates me!" He moaned dramatically. "This is going to be rough." He covered his eyes with his arm for added effect then relaxed. "But I guess personal growth for your best friend is good." He cracked a smirk.

"Yeah..." Sasori said, a small smile appearing on his lips. "I suppose it is."

"You're not going to try and go see her before you leave, are you?" Komushi asked with genuine curiosity. "Let her know that she doesn't need to live in fear of being taken again? Give her some closure?"

"I don't think going to see her would be the best idea when I'm doing this to try and forget about her."

"Talk about a bad break up," Komushi snorted. "Want me to tell her if I see her?"

"No," Sasori shook his head. "Only you need to know."

Komushi nodded and sighed again. "Want to get a drink or...churros before you go?"

Sasori paused for a moment. "Why not both?" he shrugged. "I'm not leaving until tonight. I think we have time to get churros and then a drink."

Komushi curled up, grinning widely. "Let's go then!"

Together, they stood up. Sasori let Komushi deal with his small hangover before they left for the coffee shop. There was a normal late-afternoon crowd in the streets and as they walked, Sasori thought about whether or not he was going to miss the busyness of the city. He was never one for crowds despite living in the city his entire life. Maybe being with a small group of people out in the middle of nowhere was exactly what he needed.

Komushi looked over at him, noticing the lost-in-space look on his face. "Think you're going to miss this place?" he asked as if reading Sasori's mind.

"Not sure," Sasori hummed. "Maybe I'll miss the coffee shop. The Night Market. Can't say there's much else about this place I would really miss."

"What about me?" Komushi pouted.

"Let's not ask stupid questions," Sasori smirked at him.

The 'of course' hung silently in the air and Komushi rolled his eyes, returning the smirk. "It's nice to hear once in a while, you know," he teased as they walked up to the coffee shop. It was strange to think this would be the last time he and his best friend would do this for...possibly forever. His heart sank a little as they ordered their usual and found their favorite spot. "Damn, even doing this is going to be dull alone," he mused out loud with a laugh.

"Well, maybe you'll finally find a woman who will do this with you," Sasori hummed. "Or a man," he added with a shrug. "Can't rule that out."
"You're the only man for me," Komushi grinned.

"Ugh," Sasori groaned, rolling his eyes.

"Mm, but maybe you are right," Komushi sighed. "Who knows, maybe you could be coming back here for a wedding," he winked.

"Now that would be interesting," Sasori smirked as their order was called out. He stood up to go get it and was taking in everyone's face as he passed them. Faces he was used to seeing along with some new ones. He thought about people who ran to this city to escape their past. How interesting this all would be. He grabbed the order and made his way back to the table, once again getting lost in thought as he sat down.

Komushi let him reflect for a few minutes as he took the first churro. "Maybe you'll meet someone, too," he finally said after a while.

Sasori came back, blinking away his own trance and shaking his head a little. "What?" he asked.

"Maybe you'll meet someone, too," Komushi repeated.

"I thought that's what you said. I was giving you a chance to change it."

"I'm serious."

"Komushi," Sasori sighed. "I'm not looking—"

"Just because you aren't looking doesn't mean it can't happen," Komushi cut him off. "I know this is a poor example to give you but Azumi came here as a slave and ended up with Gaara. She wasn't looking and it happened." Sasori rolled his eyes hard at the example. "What I'm saying is that it can happen. And, honestly, as your best friend, I hope it does."

Sasori stared down at his coffee, stirring his churro around in it. He did not know what to say to that. He was pretty certain with what he had done in life, he was never going to be allowed that kind of happiness. And he was not sure he needed it. However, he knew Komushi only meant the best for him. "Thanks," he said with a soft fond smile. "You'll be the first to know if I do."

"Um, I better be," Komushi scoffed. "And I better be your best man."

"Well, considering I only have one best friend, it would have to be you."

"Good. Don't come back here with another best friend or I'll have to do something about it."

Sasori stared at him for a few seconds. "Alright," he chuckled. "I won't." On top of not looking for a relationship, he was also not looking for friends. Komushi had nothing to worry about.

They fell into a short comfortable silence before Komushi started again. "So...you're going to travel with Kenzou..." He sipped his coffee. "That's going to be a wile ride."

"Or very boring. Kenzou's an old man and so is his...band?"

"Gang?"

"Whatever they are, they're old. And I'm pretty grateful that he doesn't...perspire as much anymore."

"You think he has enough of that stuff Azumi made for him to last?" Komushi chuckled.
"I'm sure I could recreate it if I really needed to. But...she really nailed that one." He grimaced just thinking of how Kenzou used to smell.

"I know you can," Komushi chuckled. "It just won't be as good."

"Yeah, yeah," Sasori rolled his eyes. "Quit hyping her up. She's not even here," he smirked.

"Admittedly, I will miss her," Komushi hummed. "I would ask her if she could make me one more cologne before she leaves but—"

"Best not to risk it," Sasori shook his head. "Her family will probably kill you."

"Yeah, I don't want to go anywhere near them. Is there any of her stuff left at the shop?" Komushi asked.

"Uh, actually there might be," he said, thinking about it some more. "We could always stop by there before we head to the bar."

"Ooh, yes," he grinned. "I know she didn’t make more than one of my personal one but she did teach me how to make it so maybe I can recreate it myself."

"Did you just pick up a new hobby?" Sasori teased.

"I might have," Komushi chuckled. "You know what, I'm going to raid your stores, too," he smirked. "This could be fun."

"You could open a shop," Sasori half-joked. "Get my father to let you keep the shop."

"Just give me your shop," Komushi pouted teasingly.

"You’re going to ruin the image of the shop," Sasori sighed.

"I’m not going to ruin the shop’s image or your image," Komushi rolled his eyes. "I’ve worked in there with you before. I can figure out how to do everything. I’m not an idiot." Sasori sipped his coffee, having no comments. "Just give me the shop. I’ll run it the same way you always have. We’re best friends and everyone knows we are so they’d trust me."

"Who are you going to get to run it with you?"

"Don’t worry about that. I can find someone if I can’t handle it alone."

Sasori stared hard at him for a long while before sighing heavily. "Fine," he said. "You can have the shop." He sipped his coffee again. "It might be easier anyway," he muttered. "You wouldn’t have to explain anything to my parents about where I am and why I’ve given it up."


"We still have to stop by. I'll show you my books I guess and—"

Komushi held his hand up to stop him then flipped it over. "Just give me the keys. I've literally done everything."

Sasori chuckled softly, nodding. He reached into his pocket and fished out his ring of keys. He took one set off and handed him the rest. "Here." He dropped the keys into Komushi's waiting hand.
“I promise I’ll take good care of it,” Komushi grinned. “Like I said, I’ll do everything the same.”

“I’m trusting you,” Sasori told him, eating another churro.

“As you should.”

They finished their churros and coffee and stood up to exit the shop. “I suppose there are a few things from there I should take with me,” Sasori hummed as they made their way to his shop.

It sat just the way it had been the last time he had seen it when they entered. It still smelled like his second home. He made his way to the backroom, his eyes quickly fell on the tank where the snakes had lived. He nodded slightly, noting that Azumi must have let them go. That was good. He turned to bound up the ladder to the second floor and heard Komushi follow after him as he grabbed a leather bag to fill with what he was going to take.

“This is going to be tough,” Komushi hummed, looking around.

“Are you sure you can handle it?” Sasori asked as he started to fill the bag.

“I meant being in this place without you,” Komushi smirked.

Sasori rolled his eyes, grabbing a few papers from his desk that would be beneficial to him while he was gone. As he scanned the desk for more things, he found the ledger he wrote everything down in. For a moment, he debated on taking it but he figured that if he was to truly let everything go then he would have to leave the ledger. He could always get a new one. And probably would. Writing was still therapeutic no matter what he was doing in life. He pulled a few more jars and place them in the bag.

“You’ll make this place your own,” he finally said, feeling a wave of something unfamiliar in his chest. “Just try not to stink it up too much,” he teased, turning to look at his friend. This place had been his baby. His second home for so long. It was all his. And he was giving it all up. Part of him was okay with giving it to Komushi. He knew if he ever came back, he could just have the shop back. Yet, the other part was starting to second-guess the decision to leave the city and leave all of what he worked for behind. He shook his head. He needed to leave. It was the best decision of all the ones he had been dealt with. He finished packing the bag and slung it over his shoulder, taking another look around before heading down the ladder and to the front of the shop. They stopped by the display of products that Azumi made. “She might have left the recipes somewhere in the back,” Sasori said. “If you want to recreate them.”

“She does seem like the kind of person who would purposefully leave things like that for people,” Komushi hummed. He picked up a few oils to smell them and decide which ones he wanted for himself.

“I don’t think she made any extras for Kenzou,” Sasori muttered. “I’ll just take a few of these and hope for the best.”

They lingered in the shop a little while longer until there was really no justifiable reason to be there anymore. Leaving the shop took a lot more out of him than he thought it would. When he finally did, he sighed softly as they made their way down the street. The sun was starting to go down.

“Wanna head over to the bar?” Komushi asked him, tucking his arms behind his head.

"I've got nowhere else to go right now," Sasori nodded. They weaved through the evening crowds toward the bar. The bar was not as crowded as they expected but there were still quite a few people there. "Definitely not going to miss this place," Sasori muttered as they found their seats.
“What!” Komushi gasped. “But we’ve had so many great brawls here!” He laughed as the bartender walked over to them.

“We’ve almost died here too many times to count. I’m pretty sure that bloodstain over there is yours.” Sasori jerked his chin towards a dark mark next to Komushi’s chair.

“Oh, yeah, probably,” Komushi laughed. “Wouldn’t change it for the world, though.” He ordered them a whole bottle of the best stuff.

Sasori thought for a second. "Neither would I," he mumbled softly. The bottle arrived at their table along with two chilled glasses. Komushi wasted no time in opening the bottle up and pouring the first round. He lifted his glass to Sasori. "What are we toasting to?" Sasori asked as he lifted his glass as well.


Sasori smiled fondly and chuckled softly. "Sounds good," he said, clinking his glass with Komushi’s.

“I thought I’d find you here,” Kenzou’s voice came up from behind them as Sasori set his glass down. Komushi refilled their glasses and felt his heart drop a little.

“It’s not time to go yet, is it?” Sasori frowned.

“No, no,” Kenzou shook his head with a smile. “I came to settle my tab but it’s good to let you know to meet us by the west gates of the city.”

“Have a drink with us, Kenzou,” Komushi said.

“Well, alright,” Kenzou grinned, sitting down. “Just one won’t hurt.” He grabbed a glass and poured himself his drink.

“That didn’t take much convincing,” Sasori smirked.

“Well, Sasori,” he sighed, “you will soon find out that with the life I live, you cannot turn down a drink. Get them when you can for they are rare.”

“I’ll toast again to that,” Komushi grinned, raising his glass just enough to clink it against Kenzou’s and Sasori’s.

Sasori nodded, sighing softly as he downed his drink. “I’ve got to get used to that, I suppose,” he smiled fondly into his glass.

“Ah, don’t worry,” Kenzou smiled. “You’ll get used to it quickly. It’s not so bad. The life we live is very freeing.”

“What exactly is it that you do?” Komushi grinned, ready to hear what he had been wondering for a while.

“Why my men and I are just nomads,” Kenzou boomed. Komushi was just about to deflate in disappointment from the answer when Kenzou began to speak again. “Every so often, we come across other travelers in need of help and we always offer assistance.”

“What kind of help?” Sasori asked.

“Well, they are usually under attack by bandits and by ‘offer assistance’ I mean we intimidate the
“Just intimidate?” Komushi hummed.

“Sometimes it comes down to actually having to get rid of them if you know what I mean.”

“You ready for that, Sasori?” Komushi teased.

“Please,” Sasori rolled his eyes. “I can handle myself.”

“We do favors for anyone in need for coin sometimes, too,” Kenzou added. “You’ll have fun learning to shepherd and to ride a horse.”

"I know how to ride a horse," Sasori said.

"Then you're already off to a good start," Kenzou grinned, clapping him on the back. "You'll be fine. You have nothing to worry about with us."

"Feeling excited yet?" Komushi smirked.

"I'm just quaking," Sasori laughed. Although, in all honesty, he was starting to feel the thrum of excitement. The closer the time to leave approached, the surer he was of his choice.

"I'm glad to hear that," Kenzou grinned. He downed his whole glass quickly and placed it down on the table with two taps. "Now I must pay what I owe to the nice bartender." He stood up. "I'll see you at the gates." With that said, Kenzou disappeared into the growing crowd of the bar toward the counter.

Komushi turned around in his seat so he faced the room. He noticed the smile on Sasori's face and could not help one of his own. He looked surer than ever about the choices to leave. And that smile was what solidified it. "Anything else you want to do before you leave?" he asked.

Sasori shook his head, grabbing the bottle and refilling their glasses. "I have nothing else I can think of that would be better than this," he said. Komushi grinned and they raised their glasses to each other once more.

Once the bottle was empty, Sasori settled the last of his tab and secretly Komushi’s. "Alright...I think it's time to go," he said as he started for the door. Komushi nodded, following after his best friend. He felt his chest tighten up again as they slipped out of the fully packed bar and into the cool night air. It was refreshing on the skin. They walked in silence for a few minutes on their way to the west gate. "You don't think I'm never going to see you again, do you?" Sasori smirked, catching the saddened look on Komushi's face.

"No," Komushi's voice cracked. "I know. You can't get rid of me that easily."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Sasori smirked. As they approached the gate, they saw Kenzou's men with their horses, preparing to depart. Komushi wiped his nose, his shoulders shaking a little. "Don't," Sasori hissed but there was no malice behind it. "Don't cry."

"I'm not," Komushi's voice was already thick. "Just some sand in my eye, you jerk." He started to wipe his eyes.

"You've always been a crier," Sasori muttered.

"One of us has to have emotions," Komushi sniffled.
"Ready to go, Sasori?" Kenzou asked, holding out the reins of one of the horses for him.

Sasori took a second or two to answer. "I'm ready," he nodded. Komushi let out another sniffle and Sasori turned toward him, rolling his eyes. "Come here," he grumbled with a smile as he opened his arms for a hug.

Komushi held on tight to his best friend for the last time in neither of them knew how long. They did not say anything else when they finally pulled apart. Komushi pulled himself together long enough to watch his best friend swing his leg over his horse. Kenzou called his men to order and all of them turned to file out of the village.

"Oi! Don't burn my shop down," Sasori called over his shoulder to Komushi who let out a wail the moment Sasori was through the gates.

"I won't," he hollered back through his tears. "Feel better, you big asshole," he whispered, waving goodbye until Sasori hard to turn around to steer his horse. "And good luck," he mumbled softly as he watched until their silhouettes disappeared into the desert.

Chapter End Notes

Now, look out for the sequel. Because we have plans.

I'm not joking.

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