# The Makeweight

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## The Makeweight

by [extremelybadjuju](http://archiveofourown.org/users/extremelybadjuju)

### Summary

After the War, Sasuke escapes incarceration by the Leaf only to become prisoner to another vicious faction who seek to acquire his clan's bloodline limit through the most unorthodox methods. Finally free, he must find his own safe haven in a world that hates him. What happens when he returns to Konoha? How can an avenger concede to parenthood? SNS, SasuNaruSasu, BL, Mpreg, angst, whump.

### Notes

Warning: This story is mpreg. Not in the most traditional sense (if mpreg could be considered traditional, seems like an oxymoron, but really I just wanted to type that word) in fact it's more a twisted sort of transsexual story. But still. Warning. Here. If you do not like the idea of man-babies, please navigate back to the main page and find more cool stuff to read. There's heaps. Really. We're also in AU territory, which means that just after the war, all the things that happened didn't.

One last thing: This story is written in a non-linear format. Dates and years (I've used the Chinese Zodiac system because the Naruto world doesn't have specified years as far as I could find and it seems more in the style of the world) are added to help get a sense of when and where the events happen, but be aware that we're going to go back and forward in the story line like a DeLorean outta time. Ha, references. All good? Right-o.
After the fourth ninja war, after Kaguya's destruction and Sasuke's proclamation to destroy the existing Shinobi regimen, thus creating a new world order, Uzumaki and Uchiha clash again in a battle to end their eternal sibling rivalry. In an unexpected twist of fate, Naruto defeats Sasuke, stealing back the majority of his borrowed power and sparing his life in return for his surrender. Though wounded, weakened and close to death, Sasuke is able to use Naruto's mercy as a means to escape and flee, finding shelter in the mountains beyond Iwagakure. With the Earth country being desolate and vastly uncharted, Sasuke considers his hiding place completely safe from any pursuers - the perfect place to recuperate and plan his next course of action. What he doesn't realize is the possibility of worse things hiding away in the mountain caves. Things that would have made incarceration by the Leaf little more than a nice holiday by comparison.

Uchiha Sasuke's war against the world has ended. And the world is not an elegant winner.

He named her Mikoto because it was her Grandmother's name and it was Right. Whether someone had mentioned the tradition to him once, or he'd read about it in a book somewhere, he couldn't remember, but at some point Sasuke had decided that his first child should venture into the world with a gift from the past. It would be something to treasure, to remind her of her ancestors; a gift of protection and of remembrance. He had nothing on him at the time when she was born, nor even for many months thereafter - none of the inmates were able to keep any personal items, let alone gift them to their output. But he did have his name. And he had her name. Which, he decided, was probably one of the most precious contributions he could offer.

Mikoto. Uchiha Mikoto. A new version that was small and soft and filled with infectious delight that seemed to bloom from her like perfume from a flower. She didn't know how she was conceived or who her father was or even where she was born and he would never let her. She was his now, she carried his name only, not his burdens. If it were up to him, and it was, she would never know that weight.

At six months old, she was almost crawling (staggering near-steps that ended with an "uh-oh" and a face-plant into the dirt/grass/carpet, closely followed by an enormous shit-eating grin of triumphant pleasure) and talking (a language of pigeon-speak, squawks and coos along with the occasional monosyllabic exclamation). She boasted a crown of thick, unruly dark hair that had already championed a vast number of brushes and combs and she had a smile of gaps and gums that was wide and friendly. Dark eyes, fringed by long, dewy lashes, were often found fixated upon shiny objects, or following the movement of someone's lips as they spoke. She had baffling
attraction to most things that were rooted in the ground; flowers, weeds, grass, there was no need for further differentiation, and for almost anything four legged and furry. Cats were an unparalleled delight.

If his mother had still been alive - if she'd become her Grandmother - she would have been able to tell Sasuke how much Mikoto was like himself as a child. How her development mirrored his own - perhaps a little of Itachi's as well. They proved their intelligence at a young age, being fast to imitate and quick to learn. And despite addled and uncertain beginnings, Mikoto had swiftly become a keen observer, paying close attention to the world around her as she began to find her place within it. She didn't speak as much as Sasuke had, didn't seem particularly interested in calling attention to herself as most babies were. But she was deeply attached to her mother - a bond that ran so instinctive and so strong that at times Sasuke found it almost frightening.

He had never thought he would be able to form bonds like that again, not after the war, not after Naruto. Not after Team 7, or Taka, or the loss of his brother. He had tried so hard to weed out the ability to form those unseen attachments, but she had drawn them through him again, like tiny webs of need and succor. A push and pull he'd long forgotten. He still didn't know if he could live with it, with her. She'd formed the threads of attachment inside of him as she grew and once she was out and she was there, he didn't understand what to do with them. It wasn't her fault. His situation wasn't orchestrated by her, his humiliation, his pain - no part of her forced conception was her fault. But that nagging, that bottomed-out fear, it was growing. It sat, cold, on those threads, promising a clean, painless severance, if that was what he wanted.

But Mikoto also looked like his mother. She laughed like her, she was full of joy and promise just as his mother had always been. And he knew that if he named her after someone he'd loved so unconditionally, then he could never find it in his heart give in to that soft, sinuous voice and that promise of calm. He knew he could never hate her, although some days his therapist told him it was all right. The woman - bespectacled, stodgy and plain, but with a sharp wit like a terrier on scent - encouraged him to speak out. To be honest. He could say it sometimes; just in that room, just to her. Not because it was a good idea or because it should be, but so that he could feel the words on his tongue and know their bitterness. Know that it was normal to be confused and that hurt was better voiced than kept inside.

Ha. Sasuke would nod, biting hard on his tongue until blood tainted his mouth and he would agree with the woman, even though his entire life proved otherwise. Sasuke had wanted revenge: first for his family, then for his brother. Sasuke had sought power and thirsted for death, pain, suffering in others that would mask and sate his own. He did not want a toddler. He did not want breasts that leaked or his near limitless abilities reduced to absolute zero. But it had happened. He didn't want to be back in Konoha, relying on a system that exploited him, surrounded by people who distrusted him and a team that couldn't even look him in the eye, let alone consider forgiveness. But that happened too. He'd wanted everything to change, and yet despite his grandiose efforts, the only thing that had changed was him. Mikoto didn't deserve him. She deserved someone better to be a mother to her; someone who desired children. Someone who was born a woman, or even wanted to become a woman would have been a good start.

He wanted to hate it all. Leave it all. Fill his bag full of sharp objects and run just like he had when he was younger and cloaked in moonlight. He wanted to scream his rage out into hurtful words with few letters and become that shell again, feeling nothing, wanting nothing save destruction. He didn't want therapy sessions. He didn't want check ups and sterile paper benches; play dates and check boxes and toys that hummed and sang when he trod on them in the dark hours. The ticking clock in the room only emphasized the time bomb of anger that lay so thinly checked beneath his skin, its composition a grave mixture of hurt, fear, frustration and pain. Hate her. Hate it all. He knew he couldn't tell anyone how sweet those words almost sounded and how guilty he felt.
acknowledging that.

But as he lay back on the grass outside the psychiatrist's office and the wind tossed his hair and his thoughts around in his head, the sound of that ticking grew fainter. Mikoto, singing sweetly to herself, dug another flower out of a clump of squat, white daisies and handed it to him as though it was her most precious possession in the world. And when she lay her head on the bump in his middle where her brother slowly grew and he knew that the rage and the screaming could go away for a while. He could ignore it. One day it might consume him, perhaps. One day, he could be in danger of losing his mind. But for now, he had to stay strong for them. For now, he stroked her hair and thanked her for the daisy, looking up to the sky to count the passing of clouds as she curled up beside him.

And if he really wanted to lie to himself, he could almost have called it happiness.

But that was now. Beforehand, before this, the sky, the therapist, the rules; things had been much easier. Worse, horrific, violent. But easier.
The Metamorphosis

Tsuchi no Kuni, 27th October
Year of the Ox

When Sasuke was first confronted with his female body, he vomited. It wasn't a matter of the execution or because he considered a woman's figure unattractive. He certainly wasn't of the opinion that a kunoichi could be any less important or capable than a male ninja - quite the contrary, he respected his female superiors as much as he did anyone else (the gaggle of giggling girls that followed him around for most of his academy days, however, inspired less confidence). It was really the shock of having everything in order one day, then having a complete physical transformation the next. Sasuke had been on the receiving end of this shock treatment far too many times in his short life; he might have thought he should have been used to it. But that was the problem with shock, it rather lost its sting when it became anticipated.

The other reason for his reaction could easily have been the fact that he had spent the last four days in a drug-induced trance, rolling about on a thin padded examination table covered in runes and ritual stones, moaning and drooling as the ninja surrounding him painted jutsu on his skin in ink and blood and chanted in low, droning voices. Their hands were animated with countless combinations of seals and their bodies, cloaked in long, black robes, undulated with their movements like black ocean waves. Ceremonial incense was thick in the air and the room was filled with a coarse smoke that filtered the light into strange dappled patterns. Occasionally he felt pain, but it seemed so far away, a voice calling in the dream distance and it was easy to ignore. Sometimes he thought he saw flashes of orange and blond; teeth and fur, but he blinked and it was gone, chasing back into the dream it entered through.

He awoke much later to the sensation of a sheet over his body and the smell of fresh ink and blood in the air. The robed men, pulled him upright and pushed him to his feet, nudging him over to what appeared to be a large mirror so that he might view himself, their handiwork. Perhaps it was part of the ceremony, perhaps they were just being proper sadists, Sasuke didn't know. All he had to worry about at that moment was the ugly sensation of his stomach turning inside out and ejecting what little nourishment they'd managed to force inside of him to the scrupulously clean tiles beneath his feet. Seconds later found his entire body heading in the same direction. After that, it was dark and remained that way for almost two full days.

When he awoke the second time, there were fingers in his short hair and his cellmate - a girl named Nuja as far as he remembered - was speaking to him softly. He'd told her his name on their first encounter (he had no idea why, it wasn't as though he expected to remain in her company for very long) and she had expressed great interest in his welfare - going as far as to tear her shift in order to tie a support around the insufficient bandage on his damaged leg. She'd begun to try to tell him things, and he pretended to listen, but he was injured severely and high on painkillers. Most things, at that point, simply became odd, soft-edged blurs in his periphery. Any noise became a hum of white sound that sat heavily in his ears. Nuja was merely a smudge of freckled skin, dark hair and luminous, solemn eyes and he paid little attention to her, concerned mostly with his drunken stagger-hopping around their cell, testing bars, digging at the dirt floor, swearing. Later, she would be the one to help him through the difficult early stages of his first carry, but for now, she was just the girl who held his head and mopped his brow, explaining, for the second time, the graveness of his predicament.

Or perhaps "her" new predicament? He wasn't sure how to refer to himself: he was female only in the parts that mattered, the rest had been left almost precisely as he remembered it. Still a boyish
figure - all angles, no curves, still muscular, still taller than his prison mate when she finally managed to stand him up. Yet now he also sported small, high breasts that broke the flat planes of his chest and a lack of the familiar between his legs that left him feeling unbalanced and top-heavy. He was still himself, just with added extras and a complete change of plumbing. The software said boy, the hardware didn't know what was going on.

Miserably, Sasuke had patted at his groin in the hope that his other parts might have somehow been stowed away for a rainy day or for the possibility that they might wish to change him back (the latter being slightly more accurate), and found himself dry retching as his fingers came away bloodied. Nuja shook first her head, then him, once, twice sharply before explaining that the blood was normal, expected. It proved that their changes were successful and that he was ready for the next stage.

He would bleed. It would last a little less than a week, perhaps a little more. She could help him with that, show him how to stem it, keep himself clean, deal with the discomfort. They'd let him bleed once to test the machine before they would put him to use. It didn't always work quite that cleanly in the traditional sense of things, but their work was thorough. Unparallelled. They didn't like wasting time, and no matter how special he thought he was, he was running through the same procedures she'd witnessed several times, both for women and for the men they had altered to use. Blinking, head spinning, Sasuke had asked, with slow, syrupy comprehension what "use" meant in this context and she'd rested her fingers on his jaw and turned his face toward her, granting her his full attention.

Children. They wanted children from him. Specifically children with Kekkei Genkai, the rarer the better. Bloodline limits had become a lucrative black market trade, and these men, these "Kakkou" as they called themselves, they were at the pinnacle of the industry. Sasuke digested the information for mere moments before he laughed in her face. It was a sharp, cynical bark of disbelief as he considered the notion of these perverts turning men into breeding stock. It was ludicrous… why not just collect sperm? Set up a bank? Use surrogates? What the hell was with all the transformation crap, it was like something out of a horror movie!

Don't you get it? She hissed, slapping him. Don't you know anything? They're after bloodline limits: the mother's blood has the strongest link to those abilities, that's why they're only interested in women! And if your clan doesn't have any women, what do you think they're going to do? That's why they changed you into something they could use. There are more clans in your position than you think. Or clans that are so secretive they no longer send out female messengers or scouts for fear of their Kekkei Genkai being stolen. So what did Kakkou do? Found a way around it, that's what.

Bullshit.

Bullshit my ass. Why else would they go to all that trouble? Put you through a procedure that could've killed you - has killed others before, guys that were probably less strong than you. You're not the first and you won't be the last. But it means that you're rare. And that means they're not going to be wasting any time.

They'd begin trials almost immediately after the first bleed. If he had any wits still lingering about him, he had better rally them together now, because later on they'd be all he had. She was telling him to pay attention - the more he knew now, the better off he'd be later, but he couldn't focus. He lost her somewhere around "insemination" and "turkey basters" and had sunk slowly to the floor, his arm snaking around the deep, dull ache in his middle. He was no longer himself. The control he'd fought so hard to gain his entire life had vanished like the smoke from a jutsu well executed. He wasn't Uchiha Sasuke, he wasn't Itachi's brother, Mikoto's son, Naruto's spiritual opposite. Just
like the boy who'd defected from his village, who'd become a student of vengeance and a master of confusion and hatred, he'd lost himself again. He was not himself anymore.

He was starting to wonder if he'd ever known what he was in the first place.
"So what were you?"

Sasuke blinked when he was addressed, his long bangs tickling his nose as he raised his chin a little and shrugged. Ume (or as Sasuke dubbed her "Umeboshi" - the stodgy round rice ball with the sour centre) sighed a little and made another note on her clipboard.

"Words, Sasuke-kun. We use words in this room, remember? I can't let you leave until we've had a conversation."

"Do you have a quota or something?" Sasuke muttered, picking at his nails. "I could read a few passages out of a book if it fills in my allocation for the day."

"You don't talk much, do you?" Ume observed, somewhat clumsily. It didn't seem like her, and Sasuke knew a hook when it was dangling in front of him. Still, this could probably go on all day if he didn't bite sometime. Rolling his eyes, he sighed impatiently.

"You obviously don't know anything about me at all."

"No, I do." Ume scribbled something on her notepad, tapping her pen a few times. "You spoke a lot more before."

"Before when?"

"Before as in the first few times I saw you after the hearing? When you were first appointed to me, when you were still coming down off that desperate plea for help? When you needed security. Money." Ume flicked through the pages attached to her board. "You were almost a parrot then, talking at any opportunity. Are you so comfortable now that you thought you might fall back into old habits?"

"I'd never use the word comfortable to describe any part of my life." Sasuke simmered, moving his hands to rest on his middle. The reassurance was unconscious, but Ume didn't let it slide past her needle-like scrutiny. She did soften a little though, it was push and pull with Sasuke. Trauma was never clean-cut.

"It's harder than you think, isn't it?" She began, then shook her head, dismissing the thought. "Well, no. You're far more sensible than that - it's exactly as you thought it would be. You never thought forgiveness was just waiting for you here; that absolution hung like ripe fruit, ready for the plucking. No, you knew it would be work."

"I thought it would be impossible." Sasuke corrected her, quietly. "I thought I'd be separated from her. Them… you know, later. I figured I'd be thrown in prison like all the other missing nin if Kakashi was feeling merciful."

"Which is why you didn't make yourself known until you had to."

He nodded. He remembered. The night he'd pushed into the Hokage's office, barefoot, ragged and
soaked from the rain; mad with pain and fear. Mikoto had been howling in his arms, feverish and hungry while he pleaded and begged for leniency. He hadn't known what else to do. "There was no other choice."

"You could have gone to another village. You could have hidden there, made a life for yourself." Ume's wrinkled brow crumpled a little with a frown. Thick blue eyeshadow, as old as the worn couch he was sitting on, cracked under the pressure. "The ninja world is fractured at the moment. Villages are finally recovering for the turmoil, but it's a long healing process and an easy one to make yourself disappear. Why return when you knew it wasn't in your best interests?"

"Because it was in my best interests." Sasuke replied, dropping his gaze to follow the lines of plaid on the couch. "I needed safety, true protection - invisibility can only last so long and I had a hard enough time vanishing when I was alone. There are only four hidden villages active now; four areas that are the safest places in the world. And three of them have death warrants on me; Konoha just listed me as Wanted. You do the math."

"Suna doesn't have a death warrant on you."

"Gaara is Uzumaki's biggest fanboy," Sasuke grumbled. "If I went to him, Konoha would know by proxy."

"That's a pretty grand assumption."

"Newspapers tell me enough. Gaara's disposition tells me more, historically anyway. The Kazekage has all but built a bridge from the Sand to the Leaf - he practically flies Konoha's banners beneath his own." Sasuke shook his head. "I didn't want to come here before I was ready. He would have forced the issue. He's more interested in Uzumaki's well-being than my own. After a time it was clear that I was probably going to end up in Konoha anyway, but I wanted that to be on my terms, not his."

"Conventionally you were never really that worried about being forced to do anything, issues or no." Ume said and Sasuke looked at his hands, crossing them loosely over his belly. "I suppose you don't have the luxury of being so apathetic these days."

"I lost many of my abilities when they changed me." There was a pause, fingers linked. "I think a lot of my chakra was redirected to support the... uh... differences. They pumped me full of drugs and... and I guess hormones and things. Used a lot of jutsu that I didn't recognise. The girl in the prison told me that chakra changes when... when... you know-"

"During pregnancy."

"Yeah." Sasuke shifted uncomfortably. "That. Anyway, she said that if I tried to use Susano'o or any of my dōjutsu, I'd end up a lot worse off for it. Probably wouldn't even do any damage to anyone except to myself."

"And you believed her?"

"Yes. After all, if she had wanted to use me to escape, she would have. I wouldn't have blamed her."

"How strange you seemed so concerned for your own welfare." Ume flipped through the pages again. Paper scraped and shuffled with hollow noises. "After all, from what others have told me and the reports I've read, hadn't you made it very clear that your didn't care what happened to you, as long as you had your revenge? I have several listed instances, several statements which all
mention you informing Naruto, almost verbatim, of your complete disinterest in self preservation as long as your clan was absolved?"

"I said a lot of things to Naruto."

"One of the few people you said anything to at all." Ume added.

"Someone had to tell him to shut up." Sasuke muttered. "All that talk-no-jutsu got pretty tedious after a while. I suppose he's gladly been running his mouth now that I'm back. Taking the credit for 'dragging me back' and what not?"

"Actually, he's not been so forthcoming about you these days. Seems he's almost as difficult to get to chat as you are. Same goes for the others in your old team; Sakura, Kakashi." Ume leaned back in her chair. "It appears that you're no longer a major point in conversation for them. Does that bother you?"

"No." Sasuke wouldn't let it, even though it made him feel cold. The fingers tightened around each other, and though he could feel Ume's gaze boring into his skull, he refused to acknowledge her.

"Do you think they're trying to put you behind them?"

"That's what I told them to do in the first place." He shrugged again. At least his shoulders were getting a workout. "Took them long enough to listen."

"But you do care what happens to you now." Ume continued, guiding the conversation expertly. "You wouldn't be here otherwise."

"Hn. I'm ordered to come here. If I don't, someone comes and takes Mikoto away from me."

"So you care what happens to your daughter?"

"Are you simple? Of course I do." Sasuke retorted, finally glaring at her. "What kind of idiot question is that?"

"What kind indeed." Ume mused, smiling slightly at Sasuke's ire and she paused momentarily to make another note. "Your daughter, your son."

"I still don't care what happens to me." Sasuke pointed out, irritably. "This was never about me, nothing was."

"That's not true." Ume countered. When Sasuke shot her a confused stare, ringed with anger, she nodded a little. "It isn't. Who benefits from revenge, Sasuke? Who's going to care that you were such an adamant avenger? Your parents? No, they're dead. Your clan? No, they're gone too-"

"The honor of my clan is-"

"Honor? Well, honor doesn't mean anything to the dead now, does it?"

"You dare..." Sasuke snarled, his voice dropping low, dangerous. He narrowed his eyes as the anger bubbled up inside him - effervescent heat and hatred. "You had better shut your mouth."

"Dare? Oh yes. I'll dare. I'm daring you to think about it, Sasuke. I'm not sure you ever have. After all, what does honor mean to people who can't use it any more? Nothing. Honor only means something to the living - to those who can acknowledge and remember it. And further to that, it really only relates to those who understand it. You might proclaim that the honor of the Uchiha
clan has been proved untainted and perhaps those who follow the Shinobi way will identify with that, but what about civilians? What about the progressive villages?"

"I don't care about them."

"Well you were the one who wanted a new world order - destroying the past for a new system of government and law. Why then is something so traditional so important any more? Or does retaining this honor mean that you still had grounds to punish those who wronged you so that you could find relief and peace. So that you could prove your clan's innocence and your brother's sacrifice-" 

"You don't talk about my brother!"

"I'll talk about Itachi as much as I please."

"YOU DON'T HAVE THE RIGHT! YOU HAVEN'T EARNED IT! YOU DON'T EVEN SAY HIS NAME!" Sasuke screamed, digging his nails into the couch. His breath came in deep gulps and his forehead beaded sweat but he stopped after his outburst. He sat. He started at her damned face and let the breadth of silence between them stretch for a moment. Someone knocked at the door and opened it a little, but Ume only waved them away, not wanting to break eye contact. When she spoke again, her voice was quiet, level.

"Are you all right?"

"Shut up."

"Revenge is a song you sing to yourself, Sasuke." She explained. "A twisted lullaby to soothe your own soul, no matter how honorably you dress it. I'm not saying it's your fault. I'm not saying it was wrong to think that way. But I'm telling you the facts that you need to accept so that you can start to pull yourself back up again."

"You're accusing me of being selfish."

"People in pain can be selfish, or self-absorbed, and it's not wrong. It's a disorder and it should be better understood, especially in these militant villages where so many suffer loss and fear so often. Your pain is a defense mechanism, Sasuke; a coping mechanism. You narrowed your world down, made it so small, you only had two people to care about: yourself and your brother. And when he was gone, it was just you. You, amplified, augmented. You against Itachi; you against Konoha; you against the world because you couldn't contain that pain anymore, you needed to snuff it out, to make it go away. You could have taken your own life, but that wouldn't have made a mark, that wouldn't have proved anything; you wanted to make things equal. You wanted to show the world how wrong and small and stupid it was, because that's exactly how you felt."

Ume stopped for a moment, letting this soak in. She'd said similar things before and Sasuke had gone quiet and reflective and pulled away. But it needed to be repeated and he needed to accept. Healing the inside took time and patience and Sasuke had a lot of one and still very little of the other.

"You did wrong because you were wronged. You worked in small circles and even though you had access to help and support, you couldn't involve yourself with others because that took the attention away from your own path. Naruto distracted you. Sakura distracted you. So you removed yourself from them. " She leaned forward, watching him carefully. "But when you were given something that you couldn't push away, things fell apart. Now it's not just you. Now you have things to protect that are real. That speak. That need attention and nourishment. Now you're being made to care and
it reminds you of everything that you gave up for your revenge. It makes you regret.

"She's my clan." Sasuke breathed, his nose prickling. "Mikoto. Both of them. They're Uchiha. I can't not protect them, I'm responsible for them."

"Obito was Uchiha too. So was Madara."

"They were insane."

"They were also hurting." Ume said as Sasuke shook his head. "Mistrusting, hurtful, vengeful all because of their pain. Perhaps no? Perhaps you can correct me on that." She paused again, but he didn't take the bait. He'd started to close in again - she probably had a few minutes left before he'd call it. He wasn't supposed to, but she had decided she was soft that way. "Do you think your brother should have protected you, rather than forcing you on that path?"

"I don't want to talk about my brother." Sasuke replied, tiredly. Which ultimately meant that he still wasn't ready to consider the fact that Itachi could have been wrong. To imagine what life might have been like if he'd stayed, or even if he'd gone with him that night. Run away. Become part of Madara's ultimate plan. What if he'd never met Naruto? What if that bond had never been made? What if they'd bother taken out Madara together before the Moon's Eye plan had even been halfway complete? If Itachi's illness had been properly treated? There were too many ifs, and he had too much time to think about them. He had too much time to think full stop. "I want to finish."

"Tomorrow, then." Ume agreed, slowly easing to her small, wide feet. Her gaze fell to Sasuke's stomach as he maneuvered himself to his feet in a series of awkward shuffling movements. There was a pause as she considered offering to help him, but she knew better than to touch him. He tended to balk at physical contact and she wasn't surprised. "You're looking better these days. How is he doing?"

"Getting stronger." Sasuke relinquished, rubbing his middle through his light yukata. The belt was tied a high than his waist, which was a positive feature, since its position climbed the bigger he became. "I guess. Yeah. Stronger now."

"Does that please you?"

Sasuke just gave her another dark look as he opened the door. She had to admit, she deserved it, but the response was what she'd wanted.

"What the hell do you think?"

The door closed behind him with a pneumatic hush. Ume clicked her tongue and made another note on her pad.

*I think he's pleased.*
The Weight

Tsuchi no Kuni, 6th June
Year of the Ox/Year of the Tiger

It was there in front of him. There when he slept. There when he awoke. He couldn't turn away
from it. He couldn't work it off, couldn't suck it in and as the weeks passed it just grew bigger. It
required larger clothes to cover it and it was uncomfortable, solid and far too real for him to pass
off as a dream. Sasuke had never been anything close to overweight in his life; not even chubbiness
had graced him as a child past the age of two. He'd been a skinny kid and a lanky adolescent with
barely an inch of fat insulating his athletic frame. Into his teens, he'd become a fine instrument of
ability strung with long, wiry muscles which merely emphasized the definition of his many angles.
He'd never been round. He'd never been large. And suddenly, without his knowledge or consent,
he was being inflated from the inside like some sort of humanoid balloon.

To further his growing mortification, the weight wasn't an individual occurrence; it had cousins.
Two of them, sitting directly above it. Twins. Breasts. He had breasts. He could barely fathom how
to react to breasts. As a boy, a man, he'd barely given a second thought to the importance of
bosoms, despite the fact that Naruto, Kiba and their juvenile cohort couldn't seem to stop talking
about them when the girls weren't around. He hadn't been interested in girls; he hadn't been
interested in anyone. He tuned out to most of his peer's lecherous rumblings in favour of training
and trips to the hot springs had simply been for the benefit of his aching, overworked muscles,
rather than an opportunity to spy on nude women.

He felt completely out of control in his own skin; which, as it seemed, was far more skin than he
was used to. And before he'd come to terms with what was inside of him, there was a terrible
period of hurt and of pain. Of waking in the middle of the night, jolted alert by the tail end of a
nightmare. Dreams of smoke and acid plagued him. His guilt and shame drove him into fits of
violent anger, or sometimes dangerous stretches of silence in which he'd claw at his own skin with
his broken fingernails until he bled and stung.

When things began to grow, and the parasite inside him was little more than a few weeks old, he
fell victim to such a high level of nausea and dizziness that Nuja would have to keep him on the
ground, holding him in her arms, singing to keep the silence from spinning in his ears. His internal
battles forgotten, his self-contempt currently displaced, Sasuke became desperately ill - dropping
weight like hot coals to the point where his chest was striped with bones and his spine protruded
from the thin skin of his back like the armored plates of a prehistoric monster. His damaged leg,
feeling a little overlooked since his initial capture, played up with a severe infection attacking
several of the surgical sites and after several confused, swampy weeks of vomiting and fever, he
was confined permanently to the medical bay being fed by tubes and monitored by machines that
announced the beat of his heart and issue of oxygen through his lungs.

Time became a sticky mess. The days and nights seeped together into a lump of grey haze. When
he refused to eat, a drunken, weak resistance as he tried to harness his anger and take advantage of
the situation to get rid of his passenger while it was still weak, the medics retaliated with a silicone
tube and a syringe. A few unpleasant few minutes later, Sasuke realized that he had no choice in
the matter whether he wanted to eat or not. All he had was a mouthful of hatred and an arsenal of
ocular jutsu rendered powerless by his complete lack of chakra. The medics had restraints and
sedatives. He might have been one of the strongest ninja on the planet, but he was nothing against a
unique concoction of wrong place, wrong time, wrong enemy and a well measured dose of
barbiturates.
He wasn't sure how long he was in the infirmary, but by the time he was finally able to stagger on his own two feet, his belly was protruding well past the ridges of his hips and was heavy and full. There was a warmth in there that he didn't like, something that felt strange and alien. When he was returned to Nuja, Sasuke didn't speak, didn't make eye contact. He barely acknowledged she was there, despite her concern and gentle coaxing as she attempted to console him. He was disgusted by his own skin - even more so than when he'd first arrived. Back then, weeks ago, he'd simply been injured and captured, he could understand that. When he'd left the Land of Fire his chakra had been exhausted, depleted, his body broken and pushed well past the limits of endurance. He'd used everything he had against Madara, Kaguya and finally Naruto; his weakness was justified.

When he was altered, it was through instances that he couldn't fight against and while that was hard to accept, he was very aware that similar changes had been applied to him in the past, without causing him too much stress or emotional grief. Orochimaru's curse seal had turned him into a monster, and the Snake Sannin had also implanted his own DNA into his body to secretly spy on him before Itachi had removed it. Juugo had melded his oddly mercurial body with Sasuke's in order to save his life and he had even allowed Obito to transplant his deceased brother's eyes in place of his own to save his dojutsu. Given his rather careless attitude toward his own body, it wasn't as though he was some kind of ingenue when it came to forceful body modification. However, the Heaven Curse could be calmed, could fade. It was something he could ultimately control if he had to and it had been removed. Orochimaru had been dissolved (as far as he knew), Juugo's additions simply became part of his own skin, as did Itachi's eyes.

This? This parasite inside him? It did nothing but feed off him and change his body. Make him ill, weak and helpless. It made him alter everything from the way that he walked to the way that he slept and all that lay in between. And it was all for the benefit of some asshat, perverse clan who would sell away his fine, pedigree blood to the highest bidder. Men who bastardized his blood, his birthright - took his precious history from him, using his clan for their own gain. He hated that. He hated it the most. And he would have tried to stop them, tried to destroy it again, only Nuja was quick to warn him of the consequences. He had far worse things to face than being pregnant if he decided to mess with their "crop". Sure, they hadn't touched him this time; they hadn't needed to. Artificial insemination was swift and painless and if he quickened easily, there was little more they had to do. But if they wanted to enjoy themselves, they were more than happy to take advantage of the hidden benefits sidelining their trade. If he made himself lose it, they'd make him regret his actions. If he had any idea how humans usually conceived (He did. Kakashi never did find that missing volume of his favourite series thanks to Naruto's quick fingers and a boring evening spent rehabilitating in the Land of Waves), then he would know that his child was administered unconventionally. When the Kakkou's test subjects started interfering with their work, that was when the traditional methods kicked in.

Do you think it's embarrassing now? Nuja hissed at him. Don't look away, look at me. Do you think that you look stupid? You don't. You're far better off like this than the alternative. You don't want them trying the "natural" methods on you, trust me. You don't ever want that. You'll have nightmares forever.

He already had nightmares. They never stopped. His life was a nightmare.

Then take that nightmare and make it worse. Whatever wakes you in the middle of the night now? Add their stinking breath in your ear and on your cheek. Add their junk in your face and their hands on your throat. Add their groping and their probing. Add them screaming at you, telling you how weak and useless you are and that you're only good to breed from. They'll fuck you until you're in agony and they'll keep going past the point you fall unconscious.

So what.
So what? That's not where they stop. They know we're tough, they know we've had training to survive torture; we're ninja. So they try other methods. They give you the ultimatum. Ever killed a kid before? Like, a little kid, not another ninja kid trying to kill you, that's different. A helpless child. A baby.

That's stupid. Why would they go to all the effort of making their captives have children for them to sell if they're going to damage them?

There are duds, so to speak. Kids born as civilians without a useable level of chakra. Kids born with disabilities. They call them fodder. They use them to teach us "lessons". They take you to this open cell at the top of one of the mountains - one that stretches over a great ravine. They lay the little one down in front of you and they tell you that you have to kill it. Neither of you can come back in until you agree to work with them or the little one is dead. Have you ever heard a little baby cry when it's starting to starve? When it's dying? That little weak, wobbly sound, kinda like a lamb bleating? Only the kid's more helpless than a lamb. It can't see, can't hold things, can't even hold up its head. Could you just sit back and watch that for days?

Sasuke was silent then, not considering, remembering. Itachi had, with Obito's help, massacred his entire clan. Men, women, children. Young and old. Had he been the youngest then? Or were there babies too? Had Itachi killed babies to save him? Had he heard the children crying like that? He didn't remember, couldn't bring himself to relive the past again, not now. But others had died to save him that much he knew. Others had died to prove a point.

Sasuke didn't speak for some time, several days. And when he finally relented, he asked Nuja what she had done to abort her own. She knew from experience, the haunted look in her eyes - one that had seen death and failed to prevent it - was something he immediately recognized. She answered soft but pragmatic:


A moment later she looked up and smiled, sadly, brushing the dirt off her knees.

Most of us here, Sasuke? We're good people. Some of us might have turned the wrong way sometimes, but deep down, we're kind and we're sane. I held out for as long I could with that poor little boy crying on the ledge next to me. The mountain is cold and there's no cover. I tried to keep him warm against my body - hell I even held him to my titties to try and see if he could take anything from me. But there was nothing I could do. And he was crying, and crying and finally I had to give in. They opened the door and took him away, and that was that.

Sasuke swallowed hard before asking if she'd seen him since then? Did he survive? Did she know if he was all right?

Sure he is. He's living in a little Goat farming village just North of here with a friendly couple who couldn't have children of their own. All the kids are. Every single one.

And at that, Nuja pushed up, crawling over to her sleeping mat before curling up on the thin, worn mattress, feigning sleep. In her mind, she constructed a lovely image of all the unwanted children riding goats and playing on the flowering hillside; their laughter painting the breeze. She didn't tell Sasuke that the unluckiest prisoners were the ones housed in the lowest cells near the bottom of the ravine. The ones who heard the final tiny, bleating cries as they carried through the air, only to be cut short by the rocks. They were the ones who heard the music of hundreds of tiny shattered bones being shifted in the mountain winds. They were the ones the Kakkou had broken past any point of salvation. Silently, she prayed that he would never learn about them; they were better off disappearing into the darkness below the earth.
The Exam

Konoha, 10th March.
Year of the Hare.

He'd never seen her look quite so scary.

He wanted to say it was all in the coat, the long white medical jacket that draped about her like a robe of state, or the stethoscope slung about her shoulders as though it were a livery collar. There was something very regal about her, something elevated, powerful. Even the byakugō no in which rested above her brows seemed to sit upon her like a crown. He wanted to say it was these things, these changes to the girl he'd once shunned and eschewed in favour of his own self-interests. After all, he had seen her punch holes through rocks the size of Konoha's Hokage Offices and turn multi-level apartment buildings into bungalows with the flick of her wrist. He certainly had plenty to be nervous about when finding himself on the wrong side of Haruno Sakura's good graces. But really, more than the menace of her physical strength, more than her famously short fuse, the thing that bothered him the most was the way she was looking at him, or more correctly not looking at him as he waddled into the examination room, almost tripping over his own surprise as he found himself face to face with his old team mate, rather than his usual obstetrician. Panic and instinct rallied his senses and suggested fleeing, but his Better Judgement rooted him in place, knowing well from experience that running from her could have subsequent effects that might fare even worse for him that what she had in store today. He swallowed audibly.

"Er… Good mo-"

"Get on the bench."

"-ning Sakura."

"It's Haruno Sensei, thanks. Bench please, get yourself up there. Feet in the stirrups." Short sentences. Blunt. Forcibly civil. Sakura simply took great interest in the chart attached to her clipboard - the story of Uchiha Sasuke's very unusual medical history - and only moved when she heard the tissue on the examination table crumpling under his weight. Swiftly, she dropped the chart on the table beside her before donning a pair of latex gloves. Yes, she snapped them over her wrists. No, she did not care that they only did this in the movies. Let it make him nervous, she had no investment in his personal comfort.

"Wider please, I need your legs open."

"S-sakura," Sasuke lay on the bench, resting on his elbows, a rather pitiful image with his knees squashed together so tightly he could have melded his kneecaps together through the pressure alone. A blush of the prettiest salmon hue painted his pale cheeks and his eyes were wide with disconcertion. "I...uh…"

"Wider please, Uchiha-san. I don't have all day." She looked at the ceiling. She hadn't quite reached the point of exasperation where she would cross her hands over her chest, but she was sorely tempted. This was mortifying. This was cruel. Someone was behind this, and when she found out who, she would ensure they’d spend a week passing fragments of their own teeth. As it was Sasuke appeared to feel the same way, but she couldn't have cared less. "Hurry up."
"It's just… I don't usually have you." Sasuke muttered, awkwardly.

"Oh, I apologize Uchiha-san." Sakura flared. "Is the Chief Surgeon of Konoha Hospital not good enough for you? Should I run upstairs and see if the Dean is available? I'm sure Tsunade-sama has so little to do, what with all the inbound and outbound patients from the war and the overflow filtering in from other countries whose own medical systems are completely overtaxed. I wonder how many you added to that number, mm? Oh wait, you wouldn't have. Yours went straight to the morgue."

"It's… It's not that," Sasuke ignored the jibe in favor of letting his fingers tap hesitantly on the paper. "I mean… I thought something like this would be… you know, beneath you… Kind of thing." He cleared his throat, hoping adulation of a kind might please her. He wasn't good with compliments, but he certainly knew how to acknowledge respect for another's abilities and that seemed satisfy most. As it was, she let out a derisive snort and grabbed his knees, pushing them apart herself.

"I don't look at others that way, Uchiha-san. People matter to me." The fingers went inside after that, probing, testing. Normally a pelvic exam was a little less of an ordeal - she'd even managed to charm some of her patients into a light conversation to take their minds off the situation as it was never really pleasant - but with Sasuke she found some perverse delight in a little clandestine sadism. There was a sharp intake of breath and he groaned lightly, sucking the sound back through his teeth. Those gloves were meant to be lubricated and usually she would warm her fingers on the radiator, but not today. That courtesy was for someone else. "But I can assure you, you'll be assigned your regular obstetrician next time."

"I'm surprised you took me this time." Sasuke admitted. The way she'd looked at him during his hearing? He should have still been thawing out. "I didn't mind waiting. O-ow...

"We don't have the time or facilities to start reassigning simple services when it's difficult for someone." Sakura retorted, removing her fingers. Alright, so she was distracted enough that she'd performed the bimanual exam first, but what the hell. He wouldn't notice. Irked, she dragged her medical trolley closer to her and snatched up a disposable speculum, shredding the plastic wrapper, angrily. "I'm sorry I make you uncomfortable, Sasuke." No 'kun'. Nope. That honorific was long gone. "But no one has the time to pander to you."

Inwardly, she took a smidgeon of pride in the fact that he was obviously a little tousled in the nerves department and she had to admit that although she'd later admonish herself for feeling anything toward him at all during this exam, she was thoroughly enjoying the look on his face. Let him be uneasy for once, let him feel like the flagging party. She deserved to have a little payback. True, it was admittedly awkward that she was getting even with the female version of the man who spurned and threatened to kill her, but she would take what she could get.

She did, however, lube the equipment this time. Once made a point. Twice made a bitch.

"The bleeding's coming from internal swelling and a little chafing." She told him after they had both experienced the uncomfortable insertion of the speculum. There was a tense moment where Sasuke's blush had turned into something a little less humorous, something that revealed a glimpse of old wounds and the thinly shrouded fear that sat just under the surface. He'd had this done before, she realised, by someone with an even less congenial bedside manner than hers. And by the state of the area … beneath him… the term "rough treatment" didn't even touch the description of what he'd been through. Pressing her lips into a thin line, she began to work a little gentler. "If that's been worrying you, forget it. It's normal."

"Mm," Sasuke added, squeezing his eyes shut as she removed the equipment. This... hurt. It still
hurt. And it was was so shameful, so embarrassing. And to make matters worse, he still wanted to try to talk to her again afterward. Try to approach her as the girl he'd once known. A year earlier he couldn't have been forced to care, but now he was starting to understand why Naruto had put such stock in those bonds he formed with his comrades. Friends mattered. Company mattered. Sasuke had little of either.

He lay silently as she felt his belly, prodding the baby mound with practiced fingers, then eased himself up following her meekly over to the scales.

"Hn," Sakura said as the weights settled with a satisfying clack. She slid them over, tapping them as she scrutinized the measure. "You've put on some."

"That's good?" Sasuke asked, remaining as still as possible. He hated the paper gown he'd been given to wear, its constant crackling made it seem as though it was trying to have a conversation with itself and it was incredibly diverting. It also bloused out in all the wrong ways, making him feel more enormous than he already was. It was like a house wearing a tent the size of a house. He'd been fretting over the blood however, and the fact that he was still much thinner than he'd been when he'd been carrying Mikoto so Sakura's straightforward tone was encouraging. "I guess I'm supposed to?"

"Don't put on too much," she replied, drily. "It'll take forever to come off. You don't want to get fat, even though it tends to be pretty easy when you're pregnant." Lies, Sakura's conscience told her. Sue me, Sakura's ego shot back. "And you'll be wanting to get some exercise, you're completely out of shape. Sitting around all day writing reports isn't good for you. You don't want to get lazy."

Barb after barb, she could feel his self-confidence dying. And it was malicious and cruel, but at least one of them felt better. She would have eventually found a way to take the same puns, no matter what condition in which he'd come to her. But they were done for now, and she waved toward the exit, letting him go without another word. He could pick up his results after he'd changed in the dressing room and collected his wits at the door. Waiting for several heavy minutes after he'd left, she tossed his charts aside, exhaled shortly, then put her fist through the examination table.

She hadn't been ready for this. She hadn't been ready to face him. It had been less than a week since the hearing and before that, he was just another ghost story. Just one of Ino's crazy theories. Another sad, disappointing memory - one that still, more than a year later, stung as acridly as it had when he'd first left. Sasuke was a bruise that never faded, a wound that left an aching scar and to suddenly have him dropped back into her life was just as upsetting as having him leave it. The hearing was hard enough: seeing him again after he'd put her through that vicious genjutsu at the end of the war? It was torture. So was listening to his stupid story; watching his ridiculous face solemnly accept the charges against him, nodding obediently like a well-trained ninken. Watching the way his entire body, his soul, seemed to falter a little when he caught sight it her and Naruto. When he seemed to register that they were going to be witnessing the whole thing. She wasn't ready, not now, not a year from now - maybe not even a decade - and yet there he was and she'd had to deal with him without letting him know how much he affected her. This felt like a set up, a damn sneaky, bastard set up. And whoever was responsible was going to pay.

"You did that on purpose."
Kakashi glared at Tsunade over her desk, his hands pushed into his pockets feigning his usual aloof air which did not, in this case, arrive so naturally. Tsunade signed another document, then looked up at her Rokudaime with practiced complacency.

"I did." She wasn't going to bother to lie, that would just be insulting for the both of them. "Your problem with it was?"

"Sakura didn't need that right now." Kakashi admonished her. "She needs time. She wanted time."

"Is that what she told you? Since when does a sixteen year old girl know what's best for her? Especially when dealing with the boy she'd been in love with for years." Tsunade shook her head as Kakashi made to speak. "You've listened to her carrying on and on about him both before he defected and after. It's been enough, she needs to take that step. It's like ripping off a bandaid. Sakura knows that works better than anything else, but with this situation she's too fearful of her own feelings to take the first tug."

"And you thought you should."

"No one heals in stagnation, Kakashi. Sakura needed to see him, Sasuke needed to see her." The Dean of Medicine shrugged, taking a sip of the water beside her. "Alright, so Sakura saw a lot more of him than she bargained for, but what the hell? It's not like she hasn't those parts before."

"Not on the boy she'd been in love with for years." Kakashi countered. "Don't be so cavalier, Tsunade-sama. Sakura deserves to be treated with more respect than that. She's your prodigy after all."

"And Sasuke doesn't?" Tsunade quirked a blonde brow. "Yes, she's my prodigy, but she's also a lot like a little sister. I care about her enough to push her, but that doesn't mean I won't support her if she begins to fall. I think you can understand that concept, can't you? After all, you were close to Sasuke."

"As close as he allowed me."

"As close as any Uchiha would allow an outsider, their prudence is hereditary, you know. Besides, don't you think he was a little resentful of you? You did have the eye of one of his clan. You were able to manipulate the bloodline ability that was historically only for Uchiha; that was precious to him. After having witnessing his clan's massacre first hand for the possession of such powerful dōjutsu, don't you think it was a bit of a slap in the face?"

"It was precious to me, too." Kakashi pointed out. He slid his hand out of his pockets to pick at a few invisible stains on his flak jacket. "You've been talking to that shrink too much."

"We're supposed to read Ume's reports weekly. Are you telling me you haven't?"

"I'll take a look when I have time."

"You'll read them now!" Tsunade exclaimed, exasperated. "This is important Hokage-sama - not just to understand what your ex-pupil is going through, but to gain intelligence on an enemy who is very, very real. One that has a vast collection of Kekkei Genkai at their disposal. Sasuke's information is scattered and vague, but it's still valuable. And after the trial it's very likely that we'll attain more, but it can't be guaranteed, especially with the Raikage and Tsuchikage attending. Knowing them, they could easily force Konoha to instigate the maximum penalty for treason and Sasuke could be executed within a few months! Do you think he'd be likely to talk with that..."
over his head?"

Kakashi clicked his tongue and exhaled impatiently. It was all true, of course - a viable prediction - but that wasn't the only thing that inspired Tsunade to start throwing her weight at the issue. "You believe the whole Post Traumatic Stress thing, don't you? This Survivor's Guilt complex that Ume Takaro's thrown into the mix."

"You don't?" Tsunade blinked. "Kakashi, you were basically the poster child for both conditions far ahead of Sasuke. You might have moved into remission, but he's nowhere near it. And now you have a problem with using perfectly legitimate arguments like that as part of Sasuke's defense!"

"It's defamation. It's slandering the Shinobi Way."

"I'm not going to have a conversation with you on the holes in our system, Rokudaime-sama." Tsunade said, carefully. "Not out of court. But I'm damned if I'm going to stand up for this country if it continues this way. Consider honor, Kakashi. Then consider how honorable it is to send children to their deaths."

"Don't let Dan and Nawaki colour your resolve," Kakashi said, darkly. Tsunade glowered at him. "And don't let the door hit your arse on the way out."

"I could have you demoted for that," Kakashi replied, evenly. "This is not a game, Tsunade. You can't bet against the entire history of the ninja world, the way in which we understand and acknowledge everything."

"Oh stop being so grandiose. Things can change. They always have and always will. We all understand this. A world that stays the same isn't a world for the living. Sasuke was right in some ways." She sighed heavily. "It's just his methods that were… unnecessary. I think he's learned a great deal since then. Having his daughter helped. He's growing more since he was changed than he ever had following that same goal of his."

"He's not even a 'he' anymore."

"What?" Tsunade blinked. "What on earth are you talking about, of course he is! Just because he's wearing a woman's body, it doesn't mean he identifies as one!"

Kakashi seemed lost. Confusion was writ all over his face - including the parts under his mask. "He's... pregnant. Women get pregnant. Women have…" He gestured about his body dubiously. "You know…"

"You're positively archaic, Hokage-sama. Honestly." Easing to her feet, Tsunade padded over to a lacquered wood cabinet and pulled out a large bottle of considerably expensive sake, a gift from the Mizukage, and heft it back to her desk. Kakashi offered her a disapproving look to which she waved her hand, dismissively. "Yeah, I know it's eleven in the morning, you're making me feel as though it were five o'clock already. It'd drive a girl to drink."

"Evidently." Kakashi said at length, watching as she withdrew a single ochoko and poured herself a healthy measure. "And after that pernicious debate you're not even going to offer me a glass?"

"No," Tsunade replied, raising the cup to her lips. "You're our Hokage. Go be responsible and influential and stuff, I have other teenage relationships to meddle with."

She grinned to herself as he disappeared with a low curse and a puff of smoke, and sipped a little of
the bracing liquid, let out a hiss of contentment. Slowly, methodically, Tsunade rested her chin on her hand, staring at the medical poster on her wall. "Hn. That and figure out a defense strategy for that stupid kid. Though I'll be damned if I can think of anything that would soften Onoki, or A for that matter."

The gambler in Tsunade fizzed with excitement at the challenge, but she cooled her heels, settling to turn away from the wall and stare out into the friendly sunlight that washed over Konoha's houses, bathing them in afternoon. Licking her lips, she took another sip and shook her head.

"Sasuke had better have some trump cards up his sleeve. Because from what I gather, we're very low on Aces..."
The Flight

Tsuchi no Kuni, 8th November
Year of the Tiger.

At first it was confusion. Rocks falling. Earth shaking. The ground an unstable mess beneath his feet. Then there came the clouds of dust that blinded his eyes and filled his lungs so thickly he may as well have inhaled sandpaper. Debris flew in all directions, fire began to erupt where machinery had been crushed and gas lines exploded with long, rumbling tremors. His ears, when he wasn't deafened by the blasts, were full of screaming - prisoners and Kakkou alike - and his mouth was full of blood and dirt. For several shocked minutes he was just like the majority of the subjects packed into ward B: a frightened, panicked rabbit suddenly crippled by a severe affliction of tonic immobility as the surrounding tunnels began to collapse around him. The room stilled; shook; stilled, then with a crack like gunshot, the cage hinges burst and the bars yawned open. His freedom was sudden, apparent and far too irresistible to ignore.

After that, Uchiha Sasuke was a ninja again, remembered his training again. After peeling his instincts back up from the bottom of his mind, he shook them out and bathed his splintered nerves in twelve years of well-practiced intuition and sixteen of inherited genius. Once the aftershocks had begun to massage the ground a fifth time, sending it creeping, rolling in all directions, he was bolting sure-footed down corridors he didn't know he'd memorised, down passages he swore he'd never seen before and through doorways he seemed to know would lead him exactly where he wanted to go. The thick broken shard of glass, wrapped haphazardly with one of the Kakkou's hitae ate, buried itself in any of his captors' back, face, chest or necks lest they dare approach or detain him. Scrambling blind on a GPS that only his instincts seemed to recognise, he found himself tumbling into what could only have been one of the nurseries, he searched the bassinettes one by one, his heart aching in his chest as he found and secured one - just one - of the wailing infants. Her. His. His Mikoto. Without pausing to think as the earth belched again, he charged toward the exit and up the stairs. Seconds later, the ceiling came down and the cries ceased. Then it was darkness, tears, dust and desperate clawing through rock-drowned tunnels before Uchiha Sasuke finally broke surface and tumbled out onto the gully track, his daughter in his arms.

Then he drew in a deep breath and let out a howl not unlike that of a wolf or wild animal vocally marking its govern over an expanse of territory. The pent up rage, the fear, the endorphins surged out of his body in that cry, and it was joined by Mikoto, who made sure the world also knew that she was freaked out, cold and certainly a little bit soiled by now. Sasuke just held her, letting the hammer of his heart fade down to a steady beat in his chest and his breath finally fall into even, calming draughts. The first shock of air he experienced on the side of the mountain was cold and bracing, but it steadied him all the same. For a moment, he couldn't quite believe what had just happened. He was free. Free. Over a year of imprisonment, pain, suffering, he was finally sitting outside, unshackled and holding tightly what was his, perhaps not by choice, but by right. He paused, squinting against the light, surveying the jagged peaks that stretched out around him in frozen waves, and wondered if he was simply dreaming. His freedom had come to him many times in his sleep, a beautiful, wondrous thing until he found himself bucking unright on the bed in his cell; lamplight painting the walls in uneven stripes and the smell of fear and disappointment clouding around him. For a moment his heart sank and he waited for the sudden, abrupt spasm of nerves that would force him into true wakefulness back in his prison, back in the real nightmare. But slowly, surely, reality set in: the cold wind found him. The sun hammered on his skin. Mikoto let out a string of uncertain whines and his stomach twisted and he knew then that fortune had chalked up a favor in his honour. He was free. They were free. And now he had to shelve all physical and emotional torment in favor of getting them the hell out of there.
He hadn't known how far he'd been dragged into the mountains at the time of his capture, and his prison offered little information of the world outside; save for the occasional cry of a wheeling hawk or the bleat of a goat long separated from its herd which he could sometimes pick out depending on which holding cell he'd been placed in. His immediate thought was to flee in any direction possible in order to put as much distance between himself and his captors as he could. His leg would only hold out for so long, but he could ignore it enough to be able to sprint a fair distance before he'd need to rest. However slowly, surely, his internal knowledge - now happily freed after months of suppression under layers of mood controlling substances - woke up the veteran traveller in him. He knew these mountains. He hadn't been through them personally, but he remembered seeing them on one of the Snake Bastard's maps.

They roughly placed him in the middle of the Earth Country, a band of connecting ranges that stopped just short of several higher peaks which pierced the clouds. Looking south, down the mountains, he could see the Fire Country stretching out in a sprawling mass of fertile forest, plain and farmland. To the west, Suna's massive deserts rolled and yawned in the sun. Iwagakure was the closest major Hidden Village - around fifteen miles east of him - not far had he been able to summon a hawk, but several days on foot by the goat tracks; the only roads available this far up.

Depressingly, he still had quite a way to go before he could consider himself truly free, and he could not let his guard down at least until he was able to find refuge in a busier place. It was highly likely that his captors used some sort of aerial transport for food, supplies and recent captives, as carrying anything larger than one's own pack over these narrow paths would have been near-impossible. He could only hope that no one from the organisation had managed to escape via the air, or had been on a mission at the time; he didn't have the strength to fight, and he had Mikoto to worry about as well. Help was still miles away, and even then he would be turning to the likes of Ishigakure, Amegakure, or Kusagakure - none of which were well known for their hospitality. He wouldn't have touched Kusa with a ten foot pole lest he find Orochimaru hiding there, curled away in his secret laboratory - literally a snake in the grass. Ōnoki would have his head if he set foot anywhere near the gates of Iwa.

Similarly, Ishigakure would have seen him robbed, possibly raped, probably both; it was a bandit haven after all, and the ninja world certainly hadn't been purged of its darker elements, great war or no. The Hidden Village in the Rain was probably his best bet. Pain was gone - so was Konan, if he'd heard correctly and that meant the town was probably trying to reinvigorate itself, having recently been freed from civil warfare. He remembered Obito mentioning something about the village elders trying to clean the place up and how nice a place it actually was now that the orange-haired bastard wasn't throwing his weights around anymore. There was, sadly, still quite a class segregation problem, but it seemed that the bourgeoisie were trying their hardest to aid the lower classes out of both a strong sense of charity and humanism, and the fear that the poor might create and uprising and cause further setbacks from peace. Well, if that was the case - and really, Sasuke had no reason not to trust offhand intel from Obito, at the time the man had thought that Sasuke was his little wind-up soldier - then Ame it was.

For most of his teenaged life, Sasuke had been a traveller. Walking long distances on foot, sleeping outdoors around campfires or in shelters of stone - eating light and little were all aspects of wayfaring he'd become well-acustomed to and despite his shock, panic and fear in the brief hours after the collapse of the prison, he began to feel almost glad that he was on the road again. The mountain air had rejuvenated him a little. The freedom and escape had born hope back into his soul. He felt grass and granite beneath his feet rather than packed earth and tile. Mikoto seemed to enjoy it too, making happy noises at the feel of the wind gusts in her hair and the whirl of the birds flying overhead. He'd secured her to his body with a blanket that he'd found in her bed, managing to snatch that and some extra cloth from one of the chambers that had turned itself inside out on the mountain path, ejecting its contents onto the track. Hands free, he could climb and navigate with
more ease than if he were carrying her, though his body was still awkward and difficult and he was still coming down from the adrenalin rush that had taken control of his senses and saved his life and his daughter's.

He made his way as swiftly as he could, taking care to keep his tracks as light as possible and doubling back on occasion to confuse any unwanted followers. He was never entirely confident that he wasn't being chased, but although his body was no longer that of a ninja's, though his chakra was corrupted and faint and his instincts were dulled, he still knew what to look for and how to listen. He knew the mistakes a tail could make and he knew how to hide himself and trick a pursuer into revealing themselves.

Several hours of running, climbing and cantering later, the glow had begun to wear off. Mikoto had needed several feeds and diaper changes - both of which took time and meant that he had to carry her soiled nappies until he could find somewhere to wash them. Sasuke had scraped off as much as he could and tried to bury the mess in the dry dirt on the track, but it still left a mark, an imprint on the terrain that proved he'd been there. He'd also eaten very little himself and was dangerously low on water, losing most to sweat and to his milk, which he had briefly considered sampling himself out of necessity, but eventually refrained, knowing that if he ran out, Mikoto would suffer. But he was dizzy, weak. They were both at their limit and they needed rest.

Relief came in the form of a lone goat he found wandering close to the markers that separated the tiny herding tracks from the wider trade routes. It was tame, therefore it was close to home and used to humans. It was easily coaxed within reach and calmly let Sasuke milk it while it chewed on a clump of dandelions. If he hadn't been so close to the trade routes, he would have killed it for its meat and hide, but there were small farmlets and houses close by now, there was no need to take what wasn't his. He might have been frantic, hungry and exhausted, but he was starting to think that Karma might have a stronger place in his life than he'd initially imagined.

And rightly so, for once the goat had been milked and had rested briefly with them, she staggered back down the track and rounded a hidden bend that led Sasuke and Mikoto through a narrow gorge to a small settlement of houses boasting plentiful gardens, herds of goat, alpaca and scatterings of squat, fluffy bantams. Weirs turned in small creeks that cascaded down from the mountains and barns painted in bright colours nestled sleepily against their rock walls. It was growing dark by the time he'd stepped through the pass and silently he stole toward one of the closest buildings, stealing himself a few eggs from the hen house on the way. It was a short climb to the barn loft and he pulled up the ladder just in case, before he settled down into a pile of soft hay, letting Mikoto relax on his chest.

He was free. He really was. But he was also free in a world that hated him and he was burdened by not only an infant daughter, but another growing in his belly as well. If he kept them, he'd need to care for them. Feed them, clothe and house them. He'd need to figure out what he was to them: mother? Father? Something else? He'd need to consider whether he could live with the children that were, ultimately, products of his rape. That would remind him of the Kakkou, his torture, his weakness; that would only add to the ongoing menu of traumas that put such strain on his mind and his soul.

He would soon have to start making choices - ones that would affect all three of their lives. Choices that would make him a parent or an abandoner, his children Uchiha or adoptees. And finally, if they remained together, where would they go from here? Could he become a ninja again? Would his chakra heal; would his leg mend enough to be usable? Would he be able to return to a male form or would he become a kunoichi? And if he couldn't fight, then what? What the hell was Uchiha Sasuke good at besides fighting things and making vengeance pacts? And what of Konoha? Naruto and Sakura? In what state was the Shinobi regime now, a year after the Fourth Shinobi
War? He had decisions to make, paths to carve. He had intel to gather and overheads to consider. And he would work it out, all of it, eventually. But now there was just the soft hay, the eggs filling his stomach and the coo of his sleeping daughter next to him. Sasuke found himself falling into a light doze, resting, but ever watchful, waiting for the light of a new day.
The Crossroads

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Outskirts of Boulder City, Tsuchi no Kuni
22nd November
Year of the Tiger

"Hey Mama, what you doing over there by yourself? You want some company?"

First it was whistles. Then cartoonish yawps. After a while the men started paying a little more attention and now he was being sent cat-calls, compliment after clumsy compliment in strings of loping, slurred vernacular. He hadn't wanted to take the main road, he'd much preferred the forest tracks and the quiet of the woods as opposed to the bustling highways that stretched between Cocoa City and Boulder City, but he had little choice until he reached the border of Stone Country and he was still miles away. The areas surrounding him were mostly military barracks and bases, and their training grounds included most of the surrounding forest. Signs on the road warned travellers from drifting too far off the main highway, lest they find themselves accidental targets in a drill or training exercise or have the even fouler luck of happening across a patch of hidden explosive tags.

Sasuke the ninja, the avenger, would have found travelling through such dangerous country a mere walk in the park (naturally, his idea of a park was very different to anyone else) and he wouldn't have bat an eye at the warning signs. Sasuke the fugitive, the victim, the babysitter? He didn't have the benefit of sharingan to help him seek out traps. Nor did he have the energy to help fuel his usually unparalleled responses, which left him vulnerable to anything the soldiers had set up. He'd been travelling for hours on sore, aching legs, his borrowed sandals rubbing fat blisters into the sensitive skin between his toes. He was tired, his back was killing him and he was so damned hungry.

"C'mon honey, give us a kiss!"

"Turn around, baby, let's see your face. Bet you're darn pretty!"

They were soldiers. Drunk, idiot recruits, most likely. As there wasn't much to do in the military occupied lands between the Earth Country and the Stone, most soldiers travelled to the nearest cities on their free days to drink, gamble and find women to pass the time. Sasuke was taking a calculated risk by travelling on such a frequented highway, but he had little choice given the unwelcoming terrain around him. Unless he wanted to walk directly into the military camps themselves, or take a sojourn through Iwa, the main road was really the only option. He kept himself as invisible as possible travelling mostly at night, when traffic was sparse and usually fairly fixated on their final destination to bother giving him any attention. Apart from the odd glance by an expedient dispatch messenger, or the occasional greeting from a fellow traveller, most who were following the road were either too busy or too tired to care about a rather scruffy-looking vagabond loping down the road, keeping to themselves. He kept Mikoto out of view, ducking into small shrines he found along the way to feed her, and hiding her out of sight beneath the many layers of his makeshift kimono. Secured close to his body with a length of muslin he'd been gifted, she travelled well, rarely making noise at all. A true Uchiha, no doubt.

Not that she would have been heard. These two were making enough noise for ten Mikotos on a particularly bad day. Sasuke groaned audibly as they started up again.
"Baby–y, do your feet hurt? 'Cos you bin' running through the stars all day."

"Eh?"

There was a pause. He heard a string of incomprehensible mutterings, then the other one piped up:

"No, it's not, it's running through my mind all day. Ass."

"Dude, it's stars. Dun…..dun…. tell me what t'do. I got this. Stars. It's stars. Running--." They were miming now. The shorter one gesticulated belaboredly. "Day."

"Stars don't come out in the day."

"... what?"

"No… Y'see you're thinking of: Baby, your feet must be tired, 'cos you been running through my mind all day. But you're amal-... amalga-... jammin' it in with: Was your Dad a thief? Cos someone stole the stars and put them in your eyes. See?"

"...wha's the thing?"

"Stars! Stars in their eyes! No running-ness."

"... I don't get it."

Great, now they weren't just loud, cat-calling idiots, they were loud, squabbling, cat-calling idiots. Perfect. Sasuke slowed a little, taking the time to map his surroundings - listening for the footsteps of a third party or more, perhaps soldiers conducting a training exercise nearby. Fortunately, it seemed that there was no one else around; no sounds in the trees gave away the hiding positions of a training group, no crunching gravel indicated more people on the highway. It was a quiet night, but the wind was enough to pick up voices and scatter them and the moon was partially obscured by clouds, causing dappling shadows and creating an inconsistency in the light. Perfect. That made things, details, a little more difficult to see, to remember and hard for anyone to hear what he was about to say.

He slowed to a halt and turned, his expression granite as the two approached him, their smiles growing wider; compliments growing more vulgar as they drew close. Ah, as he thought, they were soldiers. In fact, no, those uniforms weren't meant for travelling, they were heavier and brightly coloured - Tsuchi no Kuni's icon emblazoned over them so garishly, they could have been mistaken for walking billboards. These were border guards, not soldiers; that a stroke of luck. Border guards were either military lackeys, or the rare few who couldn't quite make rank but showed a lot of promise. Often, they were simply hired muscle, older, bulkier men who liked to throw their weight around, yet these two were on the slighter side and much younger - perhaps only nineteen, or twenty - which made him wonder if Tsuchi was really down to scraping the bottom of the barrel.

By the way they were peering at him, occasionally squinting, it was obvious they couldn't see so well in the gloom, but the smile that Sasuke was aiming toward them was true malevolence personified.

"Are you addressing me?" He asked, finally. The boys snickered to each other, nodded, then promptly dissolved into fits of laughter. Smooth. Sasuke rolled his eyes. "Well, you have my attention. Now what?"

"We...We," one of them - the blond one managed to choke out. "We gonna...."
showyouagoodtime!" He burst into tearful laughter once again as, for some reason, a 'good time' by their standards must have included hilarity beyond measure.

"Which showcases… what? Belching?" Sasuke prompted, sweetly. "You're not really selling it, you know."

"We gonna rock your world!" The other (taller, darker) bellowed, chortling like an academy child who'd just scored one up on the teacher. Blondie yukked, slapping his friend on the shoulder.

"GEDDIT? EARTH COUNTRY? ROCKS?!"

"Ingenious." Sasuke stepped closer to them, which made them simmer down a little. "So what's the cause for all this frivolity? Got nothing to do after the war?"

"What? No Ma'am, it's real busy up here."

"Got bandits to bring in and stuff."

"S' the quake that messed everythin' up."

"Real mess."

Ah, the earthquake. So it wasn't just a localized catastrophe, the aftershocks had eked down into the countries below. He wondered how many had been affected. There was only sporadic evidence that he'd seen on his travels so far; it might have been worse than he'd thought. Perhaps even Konoha… Perhaps-

"Bandits? What kind of bandits?" He asked instead. "You're telling me Iwa doesn't have this under control?"

"Well they're a little light on shinobi at the moment 'cos so many defected and there's still all those Akatsuki wannab-"

"Shh! Shut up! We're not s'posed to tell people stuff! Shh!" Tall Dark and Stupid smacked Blondie upside the head. "'S top secret, Ma'am. We can't tell you nothin'."

"Yeah, nuthin."

Blondie parroted.

"Anyway… weren't we doin' something else?"

"We partyin'." Sagely.

"Oh yeah, we partyin'." TDS grinned, triumphantly. "So you wanna party with us, lady?"

"Yeah, we can show you the best time in Tsuchi." The blond snorted. "You don't even have to get off your back!"

"Ohhhh snap!"

They high-fived. Yes, they did. Sasuke drew in a patient breath.

"Hn. My back? I bet I can have you on your back faster than you can get me on mine," he challenged. The boys whooped. "What, you don't think so?"

"That a bet, honey?"
"Hell yeah, we'll take ya on that, sugar! If we win, you gotta pour us Sake an- an…"

"SUCK MA DIIIICK."

"An' that. Yeah give us some lovin' baby."

Sasuke had to swallow hard to stop the sneer of disgust twisting his face. These fucking louts.

"Whatever. And if I win?"

"Uh… dunno," the boys quietened a moment, contemplating. Blondie shrugged. "What you want, honey?"

"What do I want?" Sasuke began, purring low, and dangerous. Sliding close, he took advantage of their intoxicated haze as he positioned himself so that he was standing almost underneath the tall one's chin. A second later, he'd slammed his heel down on the man's toes, kneed him in the groin, kicked his feet out from under him and had him on his back faster than the other could rest his hand on his standard-issue baton.

Spinning on his heel, holding Mikoto safe (and amazingly silent) with one hand, Sasuke planted his elbow in Blondie's solar plexus, then kicked the side of his knee, sending him crashing to the ground. It wasn't hard enough to tear ligaments - he needed the asshole to move, after all - but it would have hurt like hell. He barely had to make an effort, he might have been weak, but he could still hold his own - and with a great deal of finesse, if he did say so himself. Mikoto barely shifted in her sleep. He might have been in trouble had they decided to pick a fight, but he'd won the element of surprise, and they had no idea he was beladen with a child and an injury.

As Blondie howled in pain, Sasuke returned to the other one, sliding his foot between TDS's legs and resting his heel on his groin. There was a confused, slightly horrified pause, then that man became very quiet.

"Lady?"

"What I want," Sasuke hissed. "Is a few very simple things. Now from the looks of you, you're border guards and you're heading back to your station after a few drinks in town. Since border guards are usually assigned in units of three, I'm guessing your buddy is the one holding fort in the station box. Am I right?"

"Help me," TDS squeaked at his companion. Blondie just shook his head, mesmerized.

"Dude... she's on your balls, dude."

"Am I right?" Sasuke pressed down. TDS made a noise akin to a very small rodent exploding.

"Yup. Yup. It's Hōsei! Hōsei's there…C-can you ease up a little? Ow….ow."

"No." Sasuke continued, unaffected. "Alright, this is what I want. Number one, Give me whatever cash you have on you. I don't need much, pocket change is fine. Number two, you'll both escort me to the station box silently. No more pick up lines, no more laughing or singing. It's us and the sound of the wind from now. Got it?"

"Oh god, my scrote."

"Yes Ma'am."
"Number three, food and water. Whatever you have in the station box. Tell Hōsei that my house is not far from the border, I just got carried away having such a fun time with you boys in Boulder City and I lost track of time. You're giving me snacks for the road."

"I'm not having fun. This is not fun."

"Ok lady," Blondie nodded, starting to rise. "We can do that. We c-"

"I'm not finished." Sasuke snapped. "Number four, you let me through the border. You will not ask for identification, you'll tell Hōsei that my wallet was stolen in town, which is why you agreed to buy me dinner and escort me as far as you can."

"M-ma'am we can't do that! We'll get in trouble!"

"You think you're not in enough trouble now?" Sasuke raised a brow, an action that was entirely wasted on the boys since they could barely see his expression, but he felt that it added to the flavor of the conversation. "I understand, but I'm not a criminal. I'm one per- w- woman travelling alone. I've been through plenty thanks to the war and I just want to get home. You have my word on that. So everything's fine, isn't it? Is everything fine?"

"Everything's fine. It's fine. Yes ma'am."

"Fine, fine, fine, a-ok!"

"Number five, you don't speak of this again. Not to Hōsei, not to your superiors. You forget me, and you forget this conversation. If you don't, I will hunt you down and remove your ability to make children, which I'm sure won't please you or your wives and will make shower time extra interesting at the barracks. Do we have a deal?"

"Y-yes." TDS winced. "Yes ma'am. We do."

"Oh boy… Think I'm sober already," Blondie mused, astonished, before adding. "Oh, yes Ma'am. Hell yes. Please leave my nuts alone, Ma'am."

"Good." Sasuke removed his foot from the other man's groin and held out his hand as Blondie scrambled to his feet, fishing coins from his pockets. TDS took a little longer to start moving, but when he did, he was also very swift to empty his money bag and meekly offer his arm for Sasuke to take, which he waved off, irritably, already making his exit. The two goons jerked into action and jogged up beside him, pale, and subdued.

"Ma'am?"

"I told you to shut up."

"How'd you know we were married?" Blondie pressed, somewhat dumbfounded. "We never said nothing about our ladies."

"You think I didn't notice your nuptial tattoos?" Sasuke replied. Rings weren't typical jewellery for Shinobi, being that they could easily be stolen or caught in wires. Many forwent the usual spousal tradition by opting for skin art instead - something permanent and safer. "I'm not blind."

"You saw those?" Blondie was gobsmacked. "In this light?"

"Like I said, I'm not blind. Also, you might want to reconsider asking a strange woman walking down the highway alone at night if she wants to suck your dick." Sasuke added, sharply. "Not only
is it fucking insulting to your wives who obviously deserve far better than your sad asses, but your target might end up being another one like me."

"God forbid." Blondie breathed.

"Damn straight." Sasuke grumbled, carrying on in silence. He was able to enjoy the lack of conversation and the soothing sound of their footsteps on the dirt road for nearly ten minutes until one of them coughed and cleared their throat.

"Hey Ma'am?" TDS murmured, weakly, his hand down his pants as he tried to massage his genitals back into shape. "You got real big feet for a lady."

"Mm, don't I? Shut the fuck up."

By the time he'd reached Stone Country, the early tongues of light were beginning to fork lazily over the landscape, brightening what was going to be a beautiful, clear day in the Stone Country. It was cold, but not chilly enough for frost yet, and if he kept going at this pace, he would reach Amegakure by late afternoon. The road from the Border Control station verged east to continue down between Ame and Kusa, eventuating within the Fire Country, a busy, fast route that was populated by many small sleeper towns along the way. Sasuke had travelled on the highway occasionally and knew the route was pretty straightforward, but he still found it preferable take something a little less conspicuous.

The boys at the Border Control, after much pantomime and frantic rifling, had gifted him a mere 600 yen between them, hurriedly seizing a bag of pears, half a packet of potato chips and a semi-eaten takeaway bento belonging to Hōsei, the latter of which Sasuke pulled out of its plastic shopping bag and set down on the floorboards beside him. He'd found a safe, quiet spot in what appeared to be an old quarter of Amegakure that overlooked the village itself from high up in the surrounding hills. Half destroyed, Sasuke could only wonder what had happened to it, but from the state of the overgrowth that covered most of the small buildings and the rust that had bloomed on the permanent exterior scaffolding it was likely to have been abandoned long before Pain's regime. He'd slipped into one of the most comfortable-looking residences - one of the few which appeared to still have a working door - and had made that his home for the morning. A rest, some food and a little cleaning up and he'd be ready to move again.

Sasuke stared out the window thoughtfully as he chewed on a ball of rice, making a face at the sour plum filling as he bit into the centre. He had several options from here: stay awhile in Ame - it was big enough to hide in. He'd rarely visited before so he wasn't particularly well known to anyone without a bingo book. And since it wasn't exactly a hidden village nowadays, it may be less likely that he'd run into shinobi from other villages who were on missions in and around the city, nor would he probably have to worry about too many heads of state causing upset as Ame did not have a Daimyō. Or he could travel further south and try the Land of Rivers? Perhaps even catch a ferry to the Tea Country? He'd still be close to the Leaf, but not so close that he'd be in danger of being recognized - not immediately anyway.

Sasuke finished the bento, then eased up to wash his hands in a puddle of rainwater collected in the house's broken spouting. He checked on Mikoto, briefly, before he proceeded to undress and wash himself properly, taking away the dirt and debris from the road. The water was cold, and caused a slight speckling of goosepimples to prickle his skin, but it was heaven on his aching breasts and he cupped water over them, pleased at the relief. He still didn't like them, still couldn't quite get used to the look of them on his body and he hated the weight of them, but it was better than the changes
that had occurred underneath. Those parts he washed as thoroughly as he could without trying to think about them too much (their aching, their leaking - all of the frightening bodily occurrences that had, more often than not, made him wonder how women didn't go insane with worry over their own persons), then ran some of the water through his hair.

Easing back down to the floor, he dressed himself in his yukata and gently woke Mikoto enough that she would nurse for a while, before he bundled some of her clean diapers under his head, and tugged his threadbare kimono over them both. Sure, his pillow stank a little, but sleep was sleep and it was better with than without something to put under his head. And really it was no worse than sharing a room with Juugo after he'd eaten curry. On more than one occasion both he and Suigetsu had ordered him out of the room citing air pollution. After that, it was either a diet of Soba and Miso, or he slept outside. His choice.

By early afternoon Sasuke was roused by Mikoto's cooing and he sat up a little, slipping her into his arms while he blinked himself awake. Breakfast was short and sweet - she never ate too much when she woke from a longer nap - and he spent a good while rocking back and forth, letting her rest over his shoulder as Nuja had taught him to do in order to burp her. He had to admit, he missed his cell mate quite a lot; the woman had been kind, helpful and ultimately his saviour. He owed her a great deal and if she had made it out alive, he hoped that she was free and well. But if she had died in the cave in, she would need to be paid remembrance, respects, until he was able to offer her a proper memorial. She'd said she was from the islands to the south, so as far as he went in that direction, he'd offer a blessing at every shrine he passed. It was almost like guiding her soul home. It was the least he could do.

Using the water in the broken pipe, now pleasantly warmed by the sun, he gave Mikoto a makeshift bath, then dressed them both. Dirty diapers were cleaned, wrung, and hung over the windowsill to dry. In the meantime he stepped outside to stretch his legs and take a better look at the path down into the city below. It was then, wandering about the shattered houses, looking for trails, tracks that would take him down the hills that he noticed the posters. Obviously he wasn't the first consider squatting in the abandoned premises, but it appeared that the old city sector had now become a haven for artists and wannabe revolutionaries as graffiti spread across brick walls and buildings like rainbows of uprising. Cries for peace, howls for justice coated the surrounding buildings. Ripped posters, shredded bills and old fliers nodded drowsily in the wind from their showcase on the buildings. Despite Ame's typical humid, muggy temperature, the glue which adhered them to the wall had hardened indubitably and Sasuke raised as he tugged a one experimentally. The little upstart who'd posted them sure knew what he was doing.

The farther down the hill he walked, the more current the posters became until suddenly he found himself face to face with Uzumaki Naruto. That is, a life-sized poster of the idiot, standing tall with his arms crossed over his chest, feet apart, smile wide as a freaking cantaloupe. There was another next to it. And another, and another. There were also several posted along a wall; a mid-shot this time, showing his smiling face and the words "Konoha Shinobi Union!" in large, bold kana. "Join hero Uzumaki Naruto in a quest to create a safer, stronger world!" hailed another. "This is the Golden Form of Revolution!" one chimed in, while another, more of a handmade job boasted what appeared to be a candid shot of Uzumaki, topless and grinning as he pulled a peace sign. Sakura had been removed from the image, but Sasuke could see part of her hair and her hands frozen in their path toward Naruto's throat, so clearly he'd been doing something he shouldn't. The text read "Konoha: Land of Fucking Hotties!" Sasuke made a face.

Yet as silly and as hopelessly optimistic as this little expression of unity seemed, Sasuke couldn't help feeling something twist in his chest and his breath catch a little in his throat when he found himself staring into those bright blue eyes, wide and shining like sunshine dancing on the sea.
He remembered losing himself in them before and he wondered that if he returned, would he lose himself again? Could he forget everything that had happened, just as he'd nearly forgotten about his revenge quest while in the company and kinship of team 7? Was Konoha more of a home than he thought it was? Could the village that had watched his clan topple and plummet into oblivion ever be a place for him again? He wasn't sure if his pride would allow it.

But as he slowly turned in a circle, somewhat mesmerized by the torrent of smiling, whiskered faces engulfing him, Mikoto let out a soft coo, then laughed - a reaction Sasuke had only heard a handful of times and only ever directed at himself. He eased her off his shoulder, bounced her a little, then held her close to one of the profile posters, letting her eyes wander over the face of his team mate, his soul's twin, his brother in all but blood and smiled gently when she laughed again.

"Yeah, he is funny looking, isn't he?" Sasuke mused, before he buried his nose in the thick tuft of black hair at the top of her head. He didn't believe in signs, not after working with someone like Orochimaru for so long. But something told him not to ignore this moment and he nodded to himself slowly. Konoha could be disastrous for him, but it was one of the strongest hidden villages out of all that remained. He was regarded as a criminal by the Leaf, he might even be executed if he was discovered - who knows what laws were in place now? Or what Kakashi, Sakura and Naruto might have reported about his final moments with them? Konoha was dangerous. And yet there was something inside him that warmed a little when he thought of it.

He kissed Mikoto's crown again, turning her around to cradle against his chest as he retraced his steps back to their hiding place. Konoha might be one of the last places he really should consider, but Naruto had always made such a big deal about forgiveness and making amends. After everything, after all this time, this pain and hatred - after the way he left him at the Valley of the End - could he really count on his old rival holding true to that promise? Or would it be safe to start life anew somewhere else, somewhere far from the world that had ever known a Ninja called Uchiha Sasuke.

Chapter End Notes

AN: I wrote this really fast, sorry if it's poopy. Also, Naruto isn't funny looking; Sasuke's a jerk.
The Hero

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sunagakure, 13th November
Year of the Tiger.

How sand didn't get everywhere in Suna, Naruto didn't know. It was everywhere, of course, that tended to be the norm when it came to deserts, but there were places that sand wasn't meant to be, such as inside houses and on toilet seats or in refrigerators and somehow the denizens of Suna had all become wizards when it came to clearing the sand from their personal spaces. For example, despite trekking through the stuff all day long, despite finding it in his sandals, his pants, his hair, his belly-button, Naruto was surprised the Gaara's bed didn't appear to harbor a single stray grain to speak of. Not one. Perhaps he was able to use his command over the element to pull it all out of his sheets before he tucked himself in, kind of like the jutsu version of shaking out a blanket; perhaps he just managed to slough it all off before he entered his chambers and the bedroom became some sort of sand-free oasis (which, to Naruto, seemed like an oxymoron of sorts). Whatever he did, Naruto would have to ask him what the secret was, because camping in the sand sucked. He'd never known so many things to chafe before; he kind of wanted to forget.

But as tempting as it was to ask immediately, as he did with almost any question on his mind, Naruto preferred to wait in silence, watching the dawn peek through the drifting layers of muslin draped over the windows, listening to the sounds of the birds outside as they greeted the morning with a cheerful, rousing chorus. Gaara lay asleep next to him, dark-rimmed eyes closed, face relaxed; his brow having currently forgotten the set of his usual austerity. He seemed a lot younger when he slept, rounder, smoother. That solemn, almost humorless facade that he wore as Kazekage had been abandoned at the door: when he was in this room, he was himself. When he was with Naruto, he wasn't Sabaku no Gaara, nor Kazekage of the Sand, he was just Gaara.

Which, Naruto found to be unsurprisingly similar to way he acted in most situations. Honest. Pragmatic. Serious. Sometimes a little light humor slid through, sometimes a little adolescent ignorance (artfully repurposed as nubile wonder, Gaara had the kind of grace to pull that off far more seamlessly that Naruto did), but ultimately Gaara was Gaara, no matter what form he was in. That's what Naruto liked about him; no hidden surprises, no unforeseen extras. He smiled a little as he wiggled down into the sheets, gazing at his lover's face in the brewing light. After a few silent moments, Gaara's brow twitched.

"You're watching me."

"I'm not."

"Yes you are." Gaara opened one green eye like a cat. "I can feel it. I know when those fox-eyes are on me."

"Fox eyes? I don't think he's looking at you," Naruto said at length, scratching his chin. "Dunno where he's looking, actually."

"Shukaku used to look at the world through me from time to time," Gaara reflected. "I would think Kurama might be inclined to do the same."

"What, look outta my eyes? Like… binoculars or something?" Naruto blinked, then started to pale.
"Wait… do you think he saw us last night? Do you think… every ti-"

"Naruto-

"And then, when we… God, I dunno if that's even legal. I mean… it is, but still, it shouldn't be because whoa, I'm gonna be walking weird for days. But still… Do you think he'd know that? Do you think he'd care?"

"I think you have no idea when I'm messing with you," Gaara smirked. Naruto let out a growl and swiped at him, blushing heavily. "And no, I don't think Kurama has the slightest interest in what we were doing last night. He was probably asleep, dreaming about rabbits or something."

"He prefers stoats; he thinks rabbits are cute." Naruto chuckled, then laughed harder at the look of consternation on his bedmate's face. "I know. What a softie, right?"

"I think it's nice, the relationship you have with him. I wish I'd had the same with the Ichibi."

"It took time. A lotta time." Naruto yawned. "Besides, those two aren't so super different, you probably would have if you'd been able to talk to him a little more. Have you seen him since he was freed?"

"Once. Far out in the Deserts of Solitude. I brought him fruit." Gaara said, seemingly perplexed. "Fruit. After all those years clamoring for blood, turns out he likes fruit."

"What fruit?"

"Watermelon, pomegranate." Gaara thought for a moment. "Mm, definitely pomegranate. He almost begged for it, but he was a little too self-conscious. He loves figs, but he said he was to watch the amount he eats of them or he'll be spending all day digging holes."

"What?"

"Holes. Where else are you going to go in the desert?" Gaara smiled as Naruto made a face. "Heh, you really think that's strange? It isn't as though we could install public facilities out there."

"Nope, I've pooped everywhere. Don't care about that. I was just thinking about all the sand and… nevermind." Naruto propped himself up on his elbow. "I think it's cool you visit him. I should take a detour out there, see if he wants to say hello to Kurama."

"Didn't they tend to argue?" Gaara said. "Besides, I hear your Great Peace Campaign for the Shinobi Union is keeping you busy. You might not have the time."

"Ugh, can it stop now?" Naruto moaned. "Three months of constant smiling and posing and I think my face has frozen. I thought I worked out enough to ensure my entire body is totally fit and ready for anything, but my god, my mouth… I feel like my jaw is trying to wrap itself around my nose."

"Well, it wouldn't be too much of a stretch."

"Thanks." Naruto muttered, darkly. "Anyway, it'll all be over soon and I can go back to doing what I do best. Ninja-ing and stuff. Kakashi says he's already got a few missions lined up for Team 7 when I get back."

"You're going on the road, immediately after the campaign?" Gaara offered him a sympathetic look, but Naruto waved it away.
"Nah, I don't mind - it's not far. Several of them are in Yu no Kuni - helping the Allied do some surveying around the geysers. There've been a few explosions since the earthquake and they just wanna get things settling back down. I'm not really the best at water-style, but you know… Land of Hot Springs? I'm not complaining."

"Well, you put in a lot of work, advertising the success of the Shinobi Union," Gaara nodded. "Visiting the remaining hidden villages, extending gratitude to the Kages-"

"And a little extra gratitude to my favourite Kages." Naruto grinned. "By that, I mean you. And you know… all the shag-"

"Your ability to euphemize does work; you don't need to elaborate." Gaara told him. He rolled up, letting the blankets cascade down his body as he stretched. The fox watched hungrily, moving closer, but Gaara shook his head. "And I enjoy our trysts. But you must understand, that's all they are."

"What, you mean like… we're not boyfriends?" Naruto frowned a little. "Yeah, I know that. It's ok, right?"

"Of course. And I hope to see you again. Many times until we find that this arrangement either goes further, or we drift towards someone else, exclusively. I hope you have other partners. There's a lot you have to give, Naruto. I don't think it's fair to claim all of it myself."

"I might be wrong, but isn't that what a relationship kinda….is?"

"Naruto, we're not in a relationship. Not the way that you think." Gaara added quickly, as Naruto balked. "We talked about this many times, remember; we agreed that it was best to keep things open, see other people, experiment. But that we also had each other to come back to as well."

"Yeah I know." Naruto mumbled. He watched as Gaara slid out of bed, padding toward the window - his pale, creamy skin tinted gold by the morning light. He was as he always was: still much shorter than his lover, slight, his red hair curling a little, mussed by sleep. A new feature of the seemingly unchanging Kazekage, apart from a rather unnoteworthy growth spurt which added a mere inch and a half to his stature, was the addition of a large, intricate tattoo which began at the base of his spine and curled up his back - a beautiful illustration of the nine tailed beasts leaping animatedly within an incredibly detailed artist's' depiction of the countries of the world. Gaara had wanted to balance his learning of physical pleasure, with a new respect for physical pain, and had enlisted the best tattoo artist in Suna to create "something which celebrates the unique foundation by which peace was attained in the ninja world." Temari told him he ought to have gotten a unicorn.

The body art was well received, however, first by Gaara, who gave himself entirely to the skillful artisan and used the time and the pain to grow accustomed and respectful to the feeling of it. Suna just seemed to appreciate the fact that it made their Kazekage even cooler. Killer Bee began calling Gaara "One Bad Ass Lookin' Sunnavabitch", and A rather grudgingly approved. Onoki thought it was audacious, yet impressive, though he was quick to point out that Deidara would have done a better job. Gaara agreed, though he also noted that he probably wouldn't have wanted to explode once the piece was finished.

"And you know as well as I," Gaara continued, quietly. "That I am not the one you really want."

Naruto was quiet then, and his good humour dropped almost as fast as the words left Gaara's mouth. Blue eyes glanced over the pillow, the empty sheets, suddenly cold.
"We don't talk about that one," he replied, sullenly. Gaara smiled, turning back to face his lover, regarding him for a few moments before he made his way back to the bed.

"We don't have to talk at all."

Sasuke sneezed once, loudly as he perched on the river's edge, one foot dangling in the water while he scrubbed his kimono clean, using the sap from the wild gourd fruit as a natural soap. It wasn't as good as laundry detergent, but it was easy to find and had a sharp, earthy smell that tended to detract from the nose of his own sweat and Mikoto's many outgoings.

He cast a glance at the fishing lines by his knee, ensuring to give each one an experimental tug for the benefit of his riverside companion, who had promised a fish from his catch if Sasuke minded the lines while he rushed into the trees to "give nature a call". It was a generous offer - enough that Sasuke felt a little wary - but his worries were put to rest when the man shot away, barely glancing at him before dashing into the bushes. He wondered if perhaps he shouldn't accept the fish after all.

But the cleaning was done now, and all he had to do was wait until his clothes and the nappies dried and he could be on his way again. The couple at his last residence - an elderly cheesemaker and his wife who lived on a small farm at the base of the mountains - had been kind enough to gift him a good wad of absorbent muslin for Mikoto's diapers, and a warm, heavy kimono that would help keep the chill off both of them. It was old, worn, but still as beautiful as must have been the day it had been bought. Sasuke had been taught by Fugaku on how to appreciate a quality kimono, and he'd been sure to turn the collar over when he was presented with the outfit, expressing his gratitude and awe at the quality of the dye, which could still be seen close to the stitching where the lining joined the fabric. It was a respectful thing to do, but Sasuke was a little surprised when the woman smiled at him, tearfully, and explained that it was her late daughter's work. She was happy it was going with him.

The cheesecloth was far superior to the rags Sasuke had been using to clothe his daughter, and when washed, would dry within half an hour in the sun. This expedience bought him the advantage of time and he found himself worrying less about Mikoto when he knew she was dry and comfortable. There was still a great deal of things to worry about, of course, but a damp, unhappy baby wasn't one of them.

The line at his knee twitched, but there were no bites yet. Sasuke sighed as he remembered the way he'd been able to fish in the past: one quick katon, and the river simply offered up handfuls of trout, no question. But now, with no katon, no Chidori, nothing, he was back to lines and patience. It made him wonder what kind of job he might have to acquire later on when he would need more to support himself and his daughter than just milk and muslin. It would have to be something solitary; something he was able to perform without too many people watching him. If possible, something that allowed him to bring Mikoto with him as well as there was no leaving her behind, not with strangers.

Sasuke ran his fingers through his hair as he pondered, letting Mikoto grip his finger and pull it toward her mouth, gurgling. He wouldn't have to worry about it yet, but it would be something to consider along the way. A job. A real job, not just the occasional domestic slave labor he used to perform as a genin. Real work. Real paychecks. And a real problem, because apart from being a top-class ninja, what on earth could he do?
Naruto says he isn't funny looking, but he will settle for "interestingly rougish". Sasuke says he's asking enough already with "interesting".
"It doesn't pay much, but it's something," she said as she fingered the pencil behind her ear, looked over his application with genuine interest. Her name was Naoko - she'd told him as much when he'd sat down in the chair across the desk from her. No "Ms" or "Ma'am" or "San", just Naoko. Honorifics got in the way; she preferred good, honest first name relationships with her team. She made a slight "hm" noise, and her red brows, filled in with a soft ochre pencil to match her hair, bounced. "It's like I said, if you're not a registered ninja, there's very little available here in Konoha. Most businesses have been handed down, generation by generation, so they're really more of a family affair. And if you don't want to work in hospitality, then you're really narrowing your options."

"I really... I'm not a cook." Sasuke explained, clumsily. "I'm not much in the kitchen. I guess I could wash dishes, but-" He motioned to Mikoto who he held against his chest, swaddled in her wrap. She was fast asleep, drooling on him, and the wet patch on his shirt was growing ever wider. Hopefully he could get through the interview without becoming completely soaked, but he didn't like his odds thus far.

"Well honey, not many jobs are going to let you take your little one to work with you. You're better off getting childcare."

"I want to get myself established first," Sasuke smoothed Mikoto's cowlick, absently. He didn't know why he felt nervous all of a sudden, but he was. Naoko seemed likeable enough, she was fairly young for a newspaper editor and had retained the annoying verbal trait she'd probably picked up at middle school - one that caused most of her sentences to end in a high rising terminal, making it seem as though she was asking an endless barrage of questions. Other than that, Sasuke didn't dislike her. But perhaps it was less to do with the interview and more about avoiding accidental recognition - a continuing fear that had been plaguing him since he first set foot inside the gates of his old hometown. He'd been in Konoha a little over a week and this was one of his first times outside the rental apartment when the business sector was in full swing. Beforehand, he'd simply made a dash to the 24/7 mart at the crack of dawn or late in the evening, which kept him as safe as possible from prying eyes, but today he'd had to navigate the main street, had to walk outside in daylight. His disguise was still fairly good, but for those who knew his face well? He'd be screwed if he ran into any of them, he was sure of it. "You know, get a little money squared away before I can start to think about daycare and school and suchlike. I've... really only just arrived."

"From where, hon?" Naoko pushed her glasses up her nose and smoothed the paper with her fingers. Sasuke fidgeted. He'd been interrogated by experts before and hadn't ever suffered a single nerve fibre shifting out of position, but for some reason posing as a civilian and indulging in regular chit-chat was much, much harder. He might as well have been twelve years old and frozen by the killing intent of his former teacher, at least he knew where he stood with Orochimaru.

"Uh... The... uh... The Land of Rivers?"

"I see. Uh huh. So did the flooding send you up? That was quite a shake, wasn't it?" Naoko shook her head, awestruck at the memory. "We didn't feel much here, but apparently it was a catastrophe everywhere else. My sister lives on the border of Shimo and Kumogakure? Her house just fell apart! Just like that: boom! Unbelievable!"
"Unbelievable," Sasuke echoed in concession.

"Mm. Anyway, like I said, the job? It's not your regular nine-to-five, not even close, but I'm sure if you pick up something else you'll be fine. You can come here either in the morning before your shift or in the evening and pick up your route, and, depending on how fast you go, you can get them all done by the time the grocery stores are opening. It's a flat rate - we'll pay you for three hours, seven days a week. You just need to let us know as early as you can if you can't make it for a round - give us time to call up the academy and get one of the genin to take it for you. It's usually a job for the kids, you know."

"I know. It's fine. I've done something similar before."

It was a route. A paper route. One of the simplest, easiest and yet most solitary jobs he could think of, apart from working in a factory or bakery. Sasuke had taken over a similar position many times as an academy student, and had, as part of Team 7 delivered fliers for several months during their training days. It was why he'd had the idea of approaching the newspaper in the first place, that and the fact that he could take Mikoto on the route with him, patrol the area and look for any sign of a tail. Also, a job like this allowed him to experience Konoha again, his village, his home. Make himself part of it again; remember it for what it was, back before tragedy struck. He could wander the streets without having to make up some sort of front for his loitering. It really was a job that made him invisible in plain sight; it was perfect.

Only it paid peanuts. And Sasuke would have three to feed. "Are you certain there isn't anything else?" He continued gingerly, adjusting Mikoto's shirt. The woman shrugged.

"Not really in the area you're looking for, hon. Doesn't your husband send money or something?"

"My h-" Sasuke croaked. "My husband? My uh... No. No he doesn't. Can't. Died in the war, got... uh... crushed. By a... um... rock." He fought for words, something to dress the story. He was starting to wonder whether he should try and encourage a few fake tears (not that he'd ever been good at faking his emotions, the real ones were dramatic enough) but Naoko simply reached over the table and patted him on the hand, offering him a consoling look.

"Oh, I'm sorry dear. That must be hard with the little one and all."

"Not really," Sasuke found himself persevering, much to his amazement. "He was a drunk. A hopeless, useless drunk. He'd stagger home at all hours and yell at my window to let him up. Used to... uh-" God, what was he saying? He should just leave it as it was, he already had the job, shut up Sasuke. Shut up! "Uh... gorge himself on Ramen - you know, the expensive stuff? Then drink himself into a stupor and go staggering down the street, singing and hitting on anything in a skirt that happened to be outside at the time."

"You don't say?" Naoko grinned. Now her attention was all his, wonderful. What else could this fool of a husband do? Sasuke swallowed apprehensively, trying to picture his imaginary spouse hobbling down the street in a mess of garbled pick-up lines and stinking of sake. Come to think of it, he had witnessed that before, however the husband just happened to belong to someone else. But he could elaborate from there.

"Yeah, even brought home a washing line once, trying to tell me it was his new girlfriend."

"No!"

"I'm serious." Sasuke smiled. He didn't know it - never had caught on to the notion - but his smile was really one of his best weapons. Slow-burning, elegant and charming; sometimes if he pushed...
it, he'd even reveal the slightest shadow of a dimple on his left cheek. It was sharper than his chokuto and more effective at disarming an opponent than any of his ocular jutsu and Naoko was powerless in its presence. She giggled a little, even blushed, as he carried on with greater confidence. "Anything in a skirt. Anything remotely skirt-like; even monks weren't safe. The guy was flirtatious as all hell, but to tell you the truth, he really ended up being a dud."

These were now Karin's words, not his. He didn't feel too guilty borrowing anecdotes from her, after all, he was the one who was usually forced to listen to her tirades as they travelled. Suigetsu could use his amorphous ability to become part of a nearby stream, whereas Juugo had somehow managed to find the magical frequency by which he could tune her out. Sasuke had to admit, he'd been incredibly jealous; then again, the guy spent most of his time talking to birds. Finally, it seemed all that patience paid off, however; he could filch some material from her many, many stories to use to his advantage.

"He didn't hurt you though, did he? With all that drinking?" Naoko frowned. "Is that why you're really running?"

"God no." Sasuke raised his brows. That was a bold question; was that how civilians really spoke? With their noses buried in other people's private business? He hated to quote Nara, but how damn troublesome. "No, not at all. I was a better ninja than he ever was. Trained as a Kunoichi, only..." He trailed off as he glanced down at Mikoto again and offered a wan smile. "I could best him in every exercise, from ninjutsu to taijutsu. But Mik- Mikara changed everything, so..." Another shrug. "And then he was gone. Family too." That was for good measure. "Didn't have any. Ninjas... you know how it is."

"Oh you poor thing."

"No, it's fine. It's good to be h- to be somewhere new. I always liked the Leaf." He threw in another of his best, most ingratiating smiles, and she tittered, cocking her head to one side, finger to her lips.

"You know, you're actually pretty funny. You didn't have that air about you when you walked in here, you seemed kind of shy, a bit... well... awkward I guess. No offence."

"None taken," Sasuke waved it off, good naturedly. Or at least, a very convincing act of congeniality.

"But I like your sense of humor. And you've got a good sense of storytelling. I know, I know, we've only spoken a little, but I can pick a good yarn-spinner when I see one."

Sasuke blinked. She did? No wonder she had the glasses. "Oh?" He encouraged, weakly.

"I sure do. Now have you ever tried writing before?"

"Writing?" Sasuke gaped at her in surprise. "Only mission reports. Summaries. Er... objectives? I mean... nothing creative."

"I'd like you to try. I've got space in the tuesday/thursday editions that used to be for freelance ninja advertisments, but now they've got a whole section for themselves and I just can't bear giving old Homura another five hundred words on joys of fertilizer and plum cakes. Send me in a few of your stories by tomorrow morning; I want to see what you can do."

"Oh, well I-" Sasuke wracked his brain, trying to mentally capture his inventory at his temporary residence. Did he even have a pencil? "I-I'm not sure I-"
"Use the hot desk here if you haven't anywhere to work, no one usually sits there." Naoko waved vaguely toward the door. "Make me laugh and I'll see about getting you some column space. I don't think you're gossip material, but humor, definitely."

Sasuke blinked. Humor? Him? Besides giving orders, threatening to disembowel his enemies and shouting at his team, he'd never in his adult life said more than a handful of words to anyone ever, let alone been funny about it. And he was going to try and make a living out of light humor? He didn't know how to be funny - he hadn't a clue where to start. What the hell could he write about that would not only make people laugh, but have them coming back for more?

There was a nod though, an accord made, hands shook and Sasuke followed the Naoko to his new work space, clearing a space for himself to sit. He slid a few pieces of lined parchment in front of him and smiled helplessly as Naoko clapped him on the shoulder.

"Start with that clownish husband of yours. That was a good one," she said, before disappearing into the sea of desks and filing cabinets surrounding him. The smell of paper and parchment filled the air, teemed with the mutterings of people around him. Sasuke sighed, chewing on the end of a pencil. That clownish husband. That clown... He needed to give her a clown. He needed to give her...

Sasuke frowned a little, then slowly drew the pencil out of his mouth and placed it on the parchment, his smile blooming as he began to write:

*My husband, in all his vast knowledge of the ninja arts, chose to gorge himself on expired raw dairy before his very first shinobi grading assignment and for most of the lesson suffered crippling diarrhea which caused him to fail every single level of the initial espionage-based missions. He then decided that, to show his prowess in the final round, he would use a cloning technique and confuse the opposing team with a great number of bunshin, hiding his real self in the teacher's lounge.*

*Consequently, all the male toilets in that wing of the academy were blocked for several days as a result of his clone's discomfort and the poor teacher's lounge required new carpet immediately. To this day, that teacher's lounge has never smelled quite the same, and I believe I'm the only kunoichi in the world who can say she met her partner on the runs.*
"Ha! What idiot does that?" Naruto crowed, chortling as he folded his newspaper into a smaller square and grasped it in one hand, shovelling a mound of rice, chicken and egg sauce into his mouth with the other. Seconds later he laughed again, spraying a few grains here are there; mostly on the table, partially on his lunch companions. Sakura shot him a disgusted look.

"Can you not shower me with your food?" She sighed, clicking her tongue. "I've got three interviews today, I'd rather not meet my candidates with don fragments in my hair."

"Sorry, sorry." Naruto gulped, passing her his serviette. "This is just so funny! Have you read it?"

"Have I read what?" Sakura combed her fingers through her long fringe and flicked some of the jetsam off the table with her fingernail. "The cartoons?"

"No, this new feature that took over from the old Ninja Wanted section in the Tribune." He passed her the page and pointed out the column. "You know how it got its own section after all the jobs started popping up and Kakashi-sensei thought it was better to start separating the domestic work with the war recovery effort? Looks like this took over to replace it. It's been going a few weeks now and I thought it'd be boring, cos it's all relationship stuff, and all the lady writes about her husband and her when they were genin, but it's actually really funny. He's a total idiot!"

"Oh, do tell," a pink brow quirked, deadpan. Naruto just waved toward the column, cheerily.

"He does things like take up a dog walking mission, and he has like... eight dogs and he accidentally walks them past a graveyard to try and slack off and get home faster, but the dogs all run off and start digging up the bones." Naruto took a moment to chuckle at that, before he continued. "Then there's this other time where he's learning chakra molding by climbing trees and he runs up too fast and puts his foot through a beehive and all his toes swell up and he can't get his sandal off?"

"Or he tries to do a replacement technique." Kiba chimed in, grinning as he leaned over Naruto's shoulder, hot sauce in hand. "And thinks he's clever by turning himself into a hydrant. But there's a fire in the building by him and all the firemen come along and he can't turn back and they're trying to stick a hose in the hydrant when really they're shoving the end of it up his -"

"I get it, thanks Kiba," Sakura rolled her eyes as the boys dissolved in laughter. "I think I can fill myself in on the details. Honestly, though, don't you think those stories sound awfully familiar? Like something very similar happened to someone we know?" Those last words were directed purely toward Naruto, who shrugged and shifted his concentration back to his half-finished bowl of oyakodon. Not his favourite, but Kiba was buying so he didn't care.

"Nope."

"Well, honestly, I really think it does sound like-" she pressed her finger to her lips as she made a show of considering the point. "Actually, no, I'm pretty sure that sounds almost precisely like you,
"Naruto."

"Nah."

"Uh, yes." Sakura grinned, keenly. "After all, you were the one who caused Mrs Suzumi's prize terriers to run rampant at an archaeological dig near Hokage Rock. Destroyed nearly five weeks of careful excavation work. Then there was all that trouble you had when you turned into a signpost that gave bogus instructions to where the public toilets were don't laugh."

By this point, Naruto was slapping the table, along with Kiba, who was grasping for extra serviettes to stem his nose which was running from the deadly combination of too-hot chilli and too much laughter. Shino sat across from them, quietly observing the pair, while Sai smiled and nodded encouragingly, enjoying the stories.

"Oh, and don't forget all that trouble you had trying to climb trees with Sasuke," he added, cheerfully, not noticing his mistake until the table went deathly quiet and everyone around it suddenly found their chopsticks unmissable objects of interest. "I-I mean... Well, from what I heard about it, that was funny." Sai trailed off, swallowing hard. It was still difficult for the others speak of their lost comrade; still so strange to think that there was such peace for now, but he was still a threat. A real, conceivable threat. Sai wasn't so clued up on what happened, as Naruto did not appear to have supplied any further details - not even to Sakura. But it had been made clear that since the end of the war, the Sasuke Subject was one that should not be breached under any circumstances. Even given the cooling period of a year, Team 7 still felt... punctured.

"I'm just saying." Sai went on, softly. "You've got a lot of funny stories, Uzumaki. That's all."

Naruto paused a moment, possibly drifting on the same train of thought, but gave another light shrug in response and dumped more food into his mouth, his voice thick and muffled as he spoke through it.

"Yeah but no one stuck a hose up my ass."

"That we know of!" Kiba snorted. Akamaru, who was lying half-concealed under the table, belched. Glad the situation diffused, Sai joined in the laughter, elbowing Shino, who only snorted a little before returning to his Soba noodles. Sakura groaned and placed a handful of coins on the table, easing off the stool.

"Here, comedians, go buy yourself some tea - you're going to upset your stomachs, giggling like that. Oh, and if I were you-" She turned, poking her head back under the restaurant noren, tugging Naruto's hitae ate down over his eyes. ",I'd grill Konohamaru for information. That little enterprising empiricist; I bet he's been tipping this columnist off for a buck or two - you know how he likes to have the upper hand and he's got tomes of information on your dumb ass!"

Smiling, Sakura patted him on the back before she left - glad the tension evaporated and that Naruto hadn't regressed into a despondent ball as he'd done in the past at the mention of Sasuke. She was there for him, always - she loved her friend dearly - but it came to a point where she had to let go a little in order to live her own life. Naruto had been quick to bounce back through the slump he'd settled in when he staggered back from the Valley of the End, but there was a coldness underneath. An emptiness that it seemed she couldn't fill, not matter how she tried. The Shinobi Union Campaign helped - that had taken his mind off things - and both she and Hinata had offered him companionship which was shyly accepted or bashfully refused, depending on his mood. Gaara had, apparently, worked wonders - or so Temari had reported through Shikamaru (who simply passed Sakura her letters, trying hard to pretend he didn't know what was going on), and she hoped that the Kazekage continued to make excuses for keeping their Leaf Ambassador in the Wind
Country. But there was little else to do, only let time and distance heal what friendship couldn’t.

Sakura set off down the street, taking her walk back to the hospital a little slower than usual. She had interviews to hold and candy-striper’s to organize - not to mention the vast amount of external patients she had check on to make sure were being cared for by the travelling medics - but for now the sun was warm on her back and it felt so good to be out of her office. They could hold on for half an hour, surely. Ten minutes, at least.

Yawning, stretching in the heady midday air, she drifted toward the Yamanaka's flower shop, contemplating treating herself to a nice bunch of irises or a cheerful posy of marigolds to brighten her desk when she found Ino sitting outside, rapidly scrawling notes on a small violet writing pad, totally lost in her task. Smirking, she let her shadow fall over her friend, wordlessly introducing herself.

"Love letters to Sai?" She grinned, crossing her arms over her chest. That had been a real juicy treat, knowing those two were sneakily dating, but she was glad that Ino had been able to find someone. Sai was a good listener; the kind of person Ino really needed after the war, after losing so much. To her surprise, however, rather than a faux-scathing response as per the norm, Ino's head snapped up and, wide-eyed, she jumped to her feet, nearly clocking her friend in the jaw with her forehead.

"Oh my God!" She hissed. "Where have you been? Did you just get back?"

"Uh, a few days ago." Sakura blinked. "It's been flat out at the hospita-"

"I need to talk to you. Right now!" There wasn't even time to finish a sentence; the blonde had snatched her arm, closing her fingers around it in a death-grip as she began to tug her into the alley behind the her shop.

"Ino!" Sakura gasped, somewhat taken aback. "W-what on earth?"

"Shh! Just come...come here" C'mon!"

"H-hon, I have a whole pile of things I have to do this afternoon, c-can't it wait? How about we get together later and-"

"No! No not later, now! I have to tell you this!" Ino was tugging her around a corner, toward the composting bins that held most of the dead flowers, off-cuts and stalks. Around them, large metal cabinets which served as a storage space for over sized branches, wreath structures and floral foam stretched up to the roof of the florists, blocking the light a little. Ino, cleared her throat, and glanced about a few times, but when she was quite sure they were both alone, she calmed a little. Slowly, she took a few deep breaths as she held Sakura's hands in her own.

"I... I have to tell someone because... because I was so sure. I mean, I thought about telling Sai, but he would have called me crazy and... and he wouldn't have liked it. He might have been... I don't know... annoyed that I brought it up..."

"Ino..." Sakura swallow. "Oh... honey, um... Listen, are you sure? Did you do a test? Remember, those things aren't always accurate first time-"

"What?" Ino blinked. Sakura hesitated.

"Uh... You know... the tests." Tactfully.

"What tests?"
"You're… not telling me you're pregnant, are you." Sakura said slowly. Ino's jaw dropped a little, before she was able to recover and violently shook her head.

"No! No, no… not that! Don't be dumb, I'd tell Sai about that! Geez! It's… something else. I... um... It's just. I-I was so sure. I mean, I wasn't... but I was?"

"Well, which is it? You were or you weren't?" What, were they genin again? Sakura took a long breath and smiled a little, patiently. Her friend seemed distraught, and that concerned her. Ino was usually tough as nails, but right now, she seemed very upset; almost scared. "C'mon, Ino, you're freaking me out a bit here."

"I really was sure, Sakura. And if anyone ought to know first, it should be you."

"Ino, what are you talking about? What were you sure of?"

"He's... he's good right? I mean. He came to fight for us, didn't he? In the end. Before everything went blank, you know, before that giant tree forced us into cocoons, he was with you, wasn't he? He was good." Ino licked her lips, worriedly. "You didn't say anything about him when you came back and he wasn't with you so I thought he'd... maybe he'd just gone like you said. Gone travelling. Y-know, even though he's still in the bingo book… But he was here, I swear."

"Who was here?" Sakura breathed, not letting the coldness forming in the pit of her stomach detract from anything that Ino said. She had to hear it first. She had to hear it out loud. "Who did you see?"

"Who do you think?" Ino gasped, her cheeks pink, eyes bright and wide with alarm. "Uchiha Sasuke. Right here, this morning. Right in front of the shop. I saw Sasuke-kun."

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: How to fool a super sleuth; Sasuke discovers his second best weapon.

Thanks for the reviews! They make me write faster :)
The Disguise: Part 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Amegakure, 23rd November
Year of the Tiger

"I'm going to kill you!"

"Ha! You can't even get close, fat chance!"

"Don't underestimate me! I'm better than you think; I'm just warming up!"

"If 'better' means you actually get near me then that's already an achievement for you! You know, your mom is totally wasting time on these lessons of yours. You suck!"

"I do not!" The girl - a tall, lanky brunette around the age of ten or so - huffed and tossed her wooden practice sword on the floor of the dojo, padding over to the doors to slide one open and let in a little fresh air. It was raining, which wasn't particularly novel for Amegakure, but it was a light, misty rain - the rains of fall, which tended to keep the temperature a lot warmer than many of the surrounding villages. Ame had its own microclimate and as a result, rarely knew the inconsistencies of traditional season structures beyond warm, wet and humid. Shinza breathed in a deep, satisfying lungful of the tepid air and stuck her hand out past the guttering, testing the heaviness of the drops.

"Shinza, are we going to keep sparring, or are you going to sulk? Cos if you're sulking I'm going to go home," the other girl called. Shinza huffed.

"I'm not sulking, just give me a second, Yuhi, geez!"

Yuhi snorted in response and to which Shinza grumbled darkly under her breath, but after a moment she relaxed, stretching and leaning against the shōji as she stared out into the rain. The sounds of Yuhi's practice complimented the peacefulness as her bokutō swished through the air and her feet danced across the floorboards, and Shinza was lulled her into a brief daze. Suddenly something moving in her peripheral vision caught her attention and, turning to look down the street, she was surprised to find a woman sitting on the engawa that ran around the outside of her dojo, a little more than a few feet from the open door. She seemed distracted, ultimately a little guilty that she'd been caught, and was hurriedly tugging closed her dirtied kimono which was fastened haphazardly around her. Shinza's lip curled. A slut. Gross. What was she doing in an area like this, and on her family's property no less!

"This is a private dojo," she told the intruder, curtly. "You'll find the inns and taverns about ten blocks south. I suggest you take your business there."

"Sorry," the woman muttered, somewhat blushing as she dipped her head, letting her dark hair fall over her face. "I don't know the village. I just wanted to rest a moment." There came from the depths of her kimono, a weak, croaky noise - meagre, but insistent - and the woman bent over a little, hugging one hand close to her chest. "I'll be going in a second."

"You don't know Ame? Wait, you're a traveller?" Shinza blinked. "How come you're all the way up here in District Three? The main route's down on Eleven. Surely you came by the highway?"
"No."

"You didn't take the bypass? But you can't have not seen it, there are signs everywhere! You must have walked two miles out of your way to get all the way up here!"

"I came from the mountains," the woman explained, quietly. "The tracks behind those mansions up there." She pointed further up the hill to Districts One and Two. From there it was almost sheer wall until the mountain opened out and small glimpses of old Ame could be seen. The girl whistled, impressed.

"Wow… I didn't even know there was a way down through the upper districts. Seems like an awfully tough climb." Shinza said, thoughtfully, not noticing as Yuhi joined her in the doorway.

"What's in your kimono?" Yuhi asked the woman, chewing on an edamame stalk with her practice sword slung over her shoulder. She was obviously trying to be tough but the effect was effortlessly sabotaged by the strawberry pink bows in her hair and her sunny yellow shirt with a cuddly-looking panda on it.

"I am," the woman replied, deadpan. When Shinza chuckled, she added. "It's my daughter. I'm just trying to keep her dry."

"You took her all the way over the mountains?"

"She was born there. I… lived there for a time." the woman seemed distracted, but she didn't miss the soft mewl of her baby from inside her clothes and she patted her front, quietly soothing her as she glanced out at the rain, unenthused.

"She doesn't sound happy." Shinza grimaced at the noise. The woman shook her head.

"She's hungry. I couldn't find a good place to stop in this weather so she's been waiting a while," she coughed a little, lightly, before motioning down the road with a long, white finger. "Ten blocks that way, you say?"

"No. No don't… Don't… um…" Shinza waved her over, pushing the door open a little wider as Yuhi took a few steps back, looking gobsmacked. "It's starting to rain harder and you're already soaked."

"Shinza~a! She's a stranger!"

"Your friend is right, I am a stranger," the woman seemed to smile slightly, nodding to Yuhi, who blushed. "Don't you think that's a little unwise? This could be a sham - the kid could just be a bunshin I'm using to trick you."

"A bun- bunshin?! H-hey, are you a ninja?" Shinza blurted out, excitedly. "A real ninja? Are you? Do you know how to make bunshin? Can you show me? I've been wanting to learn for ages! Can you?" Her hand grabbed at the woman's sleeve and before the lady could manage to mumble uh, well- Shinza had pulled her over to the door. Jabbing her finger inside, the girl motioned to a mat in the corner of the dojo where the girl's bento boxes lay open, half eaten and a hot tankard of tea steamed lazily next to a few stacked teacups. "Go sit down. Do you need towels? Yuhi, go grab towels. And mom's spare yukata - she won't mind."

"Shinzaaaaa!"

"What?"
"... you're nuts."

"And you're a chicken! Hush! Just go get it. Go!" Shinza growled, squatting near the woman as she gingerly tapped off her worn, broken sandals and tiptoed inside. She was silent, rather graceful and almost apologetic in the way she moved, which only further proved to Shinza that she must have been a kunoichi of some level. They moved like that, didn't they? Purposeful, and yet as elegant as ever?

Still, to confirm, she waited for Yuhi to come trotting back into the room, handing the woman the pile of towels and the robe warily, before she asked:

"You are a ninja, right?"

"Yes," the woman replied, quietly. "But-"

"I knew it!"

"But I haven't been in action for a while."

"No kidding. But you can still teach us bunshin, right?"

"Uh," the woman deflated a little. "I can try, but I-"

"Oh that's right, your baby! You wanna use the bathroom to change?" Shinza offered, eagerly. "You can rest in there too, if you want, there's a bench and stuff. It's really private."

"It's a bathroom," Yuhi pointed out. "Of course it's private."

Shinza scowled at her. The woman only nodded a little, dreamily before letting herself into the restroom, and closing the door quietly behind her with a breathy thanks. "We'll just… continue. Don't let us bother you!"

"You're an idiot," Yuhi offered. Shinza stuck her tongue out at her.

In the bathroom, Sasuke, peeled off his wet layers, grateful to be free of his heavy, filthy travelling clothes and breathed a sigh. It was quiet in here. Dry. He could use the shower to bathe and he could get both he and his daughter warm and clean. If the girls were being this hospitable, surely they wouldn't mind if he took the liberty of taking a shower - it was fairly obvious he needed one. He turned on the water, made sure the soap and towels were well in reach before he climbed into the cubicle and sat down, using the shower hose to slowly wash the dirt from himself and Mikoto. After they were clean and dry, he dressed in the yukata and arranged the rolled up towels in his lap to help him prop up Mikoto while she nursed. She was terribly hungry from the trip and drank deeply with little fuss. Within an easy half an hour, the pair emerged from the restroom, rejuvenated; one with a full stomach and a fresh diaper, the other wearing comfortable clothes and a sense of great relief.

The girls were busy sparring again; the sounds of their swords pelted the air with the hollow percussion of their connecting blades. Sasuke watched them for awhile, noting their stance; their follow through. The tall one had some training - a lot of training -by a master, no doubt. Her technique was calculated, precise. Perfect, really - which was what money would buy. It certainly wasn't the practical swordplay, the loose, faster, less-showy style he'd taught himself over the years under the scrutiny of Orochimaru, but it was still very promising.

The Yuhi girl was more accurate; she had better aim and did not seem to overthink her moves. But there was something in the other girl's motions that interested him. Something she wasn't quite
understanding - as though she didn't trust her own body to rely on instinct. It took him a moment to figure it out, but when he did, he smiled a little, easing Mikoto onto his shoulder to pat her back.

Shinza and Yuhi's fight slowly drew to a standstill as they noticed their guest was back in the room, and Shinza lowered her sword, her mouth falling open. She hadn't thought the lady was so... pretty. Well, not even that, she was sort of between pretty and handsome and that made her looks even more exotic. The paleness of the yukata only emphasized her pearly skin and the contrasting darkness of her eyes. Her little daughter was very much the same.

"So," Shinza began, bouncing on her toes a little as she engaged her most ingratiating smile. "Bunshin technique?"

"Show me your stance first. Then run through your basic kata."

"You want me to show you my swordsmanship?" Shinza frowned as Sasuke moved over to the mat and fashioned a bed out of the remaining dry towels, making sure to shift the hot teapot and the bento boxes well out of the way. When he'd laid Mikoto back down and made sure she was safe, he looked up again toward both the girls who were regarding him curiously.

"What?" He tightened his yukata and crossed his arms over his chest. "Go ahead."

"Lady, Shinza's trained by the best Kenjutsu Master in Tsuchi no Kuni."

"So?" Sasuke raised a brow.

"So he's the best in Amegakure." Yuhi pointed out, snobbishly, as she swung her bokutō back and forth. "What's the point in Shinza showing you his moves? You can't get better than him."

"Are you trained by this Master?"

"No."

"But you're beating her."

"Yeah," Yuhi giggled at that. Shinza looked crestfallen, but before she could speak, Sasuke shook his head motioning to the sword.

"Just run through your basic positions. Go."

"Sure." Shinza stammered, shuffling into her first stance. It was awkward, gawky, but she wasn't lacking in concentration.

"You didn't bow!" Yuhi called, but Sasuke waved her off and signalled for Shinza to continue with a nod. Unabashed, the girl belted her kata out a little too quickly and roughly - all nerves and no elegance, but a fair amount of energy. After she finished, Sasuke took a slow walk around her, considering her stance, her flow, before he simply plucked her bokutō out of her right hand and placed it in her left.

"You're left-handed," he told her. "Start training your reverse side as well."

"W-we're not allowed to." Shinza told him, awed. "W-we get in trouble. Shisou says-"

"He can say anything he likes, I'm telling you to switch if you want to be skillful." Sasuke replied. "You can do as your teacher says for demonstration or ceremonial occasions, but you'll have more speed and accuracy if you use your dominant hand in combat."
"Are you left handed as well?" Shinza asked after a moment, confused. Sasuke simply took the sword off her again and moved through her stances, from the right, then the left side. Both sets were identical and so perfect, Yuhi and Shinza were left gaping at his execution, floored.

"I'm neither." Sasuke explained, once he'd finished. "I trained myself to use both hands after I heard the story of a ninja who lost the use of his dominant arm and consequently much of his ability to fight at the level he was used to. I didn't want that to happen to me, so I prepared for it."

The girls glanced at each other, highly impressed.

"I'm going to do that too!" Shinza murmured, taking the practice sword back as Sasuke handed it to her. She bowed respectfully, then went through her moves again, first left, then right - repeating the pattern until she added. "Hey, why don't you stay a little longer, Ma'am? Maybe I could ask mom if she can give you some food to take with you?"

"I should really get going," Sasuke mumbled, half-heartedly. In the past he'd been much quicker to make an impression then leave before too many questions were asked but it was growing dark and the rain wasn't easing. His clothes needed drying and Mikoto's cloth diapers were quickly running out again - travelling with an infant and very little by way of basic possessions was far harder than he'd imagined. Even soap was a luxury. So he nodded, and sat down beside his daughter, fishing up a rice ball from one of the bento boxes; occasionally throwing the odd tip or correction when the girls' form dropped.

Two hours and two very tired kunoichi wannabees later, Sasuke had perfected both their basic kata to an expert polish and had even thrown in a few intermediate stances for them to practice. Though they couldn't mould chakra (and nor could he in his current state), he walked them through the bunshin no jutsu, ensuring that by the time they were able to enter the genin tryouts and had practiced their preliminary chakra manipulation exercises, they could confidently produce several clones. Exhausted, the girls collapsed on the ground, happily falling into a post training buzz, when Sasuke heard the sound of clapping from across the room. His head snapped up, jerking to attention toward the interruption; his body already poised to grab Mikoto and flee, but before he could move, Shinza rolled over onto her stomach and offered the newcomer a lazy wave.

"Hi Dad! Did you see me? I can do bunshin now! I mean, I'll be able to when I learn to mould chakra."

"I saw," Dad said, stepping into the dojo. Sasuke blinked, finally the one to be surprised. Dad was tall, broad shouldered and handsome; a redhead with darker skin, characteristic of Kumo, but with a scattering of freckles across his nose. Dad was also wearing a pinstripe suit, expertly tailored, with a crisp white shirt and elegant pencil skirt that clipped in smartly at the knees. Dad quirked an immaculately manicured brow, and aimed a coral painted smile at his guest. "And this is?"

"She is the cat's mother, Shin-shin. Does the lady have a name?"

"Oh yeah, I forgot to ask!" Shinza whirled around, giving Sasuke an apologetic look. "Sorry. What's your name?"

"Sarada." Sasuke replied immediately, citing the pseudonym he'd been using in various social situations since Boulder City. "Tsutsui Sarada." The sibilance made it easy to remember. "I was just passing through, Si-ma… Ma'am? ..Uh… Just keeping myself and my daughter out of the rain for a few moments. I didn't mean to intrude."
"Seems it's fate that you did." Dad appeared to be sizing him up, noting the fact that he was wearing one of the family's yukata. But he did look tired and travel worn and he was holding a very young baby. With the wet hair and the clothes hanging tidily on the coat hooks at the far end of the dojo, dripping dry, it didn't appear as though anything suspicious was going on. He was travelling, soaked and two good samaritans took him in. "Are you a Kunoichi?" Dad continued. "I'm must say, I'm very impressed if this is your handiwork. I don't think I've ever seen Shin-shin perform her kata so well."

"She um..." Sasuke's mind ground to a halt a little as he realized he'd been staring. He'd seen men cross dressing before, just never quite this... successful. Sure, "Dad" might have still had a more masculine stature, but the overall image was something very much in between. He'd done an excellent job of teasing curves into a shape that, judging by his height, naturally harboured very few. His makeup was applied in such a way that it appeared natural - nothing like the pantomime players who would slather the stuff on by the shovelful - and his hair fell in a cascade of loose curls that bounced in a playful manner as he approached them. It was gender crafting at its finest and Sasuke always appreciated the work of a master. "She's been taught well."

"No kidding," Dad agreed. "You pay through the nose; you should get optimum results. So how come you were able to make her look as though she should be instructing Ueno-sensei?"

"I'm left-handed, Dad!" Shinza exclaimed, grinning. "That's why it was wrong."

"Yes, I know, Shin-shin, but remember your calligraphy teacher told us that training your right is better. Same goes for everything. Didn't Ueno instruct you to use your right?"

"Um, yeah. But Dad, it looks good when I do it this way! I can get each move first time. And I'm fast!"

"Sensei knows best, dear," Dad said, sending his daughter a firm look. "He's been teaching kendo for decades - he was a samurai from the Land of Iron; he knows what he's talking about."

"He doesn't if you expect Shinza to move on to shinobi training." Sasuke interjected, quietly. That earned him some attention and he cleared his throat, motioning to the bokutō. "Ueno is training her using methods commonly reserved for non-combat practice. It's why he favors the right side, that's the ceremonial model. If she's in the field, she'll want to use the side she trusts, and that's the side she would navigate to by instinct, unless she's training constantly and has combat experience which helps her understand her reactions and predetermine her body's impulses."

"So you're saying," Dad began, slowly. "If we sent her to the academy as she was, she might look good, but ultimately Ueno's training is useless?"

"Not at all. If she spent eight of nine hours a day practicing, she would probably be as capable with her right as she would be her left. But if I were her, or you, I'd learn with my dominant hand first." Sasuke shrugged. "Your life is more important than your looks."

"See Dad?" Shinza said, easing up to a sitting position. "I even beat Yuhi in a spar. I never beat Yuhi."

"She doesn't." Yuni chimed in.

"And I promise I'll train with my right too! I'll put in the eight hours - I'll do ten!" Shinza added, earnestly. "Please let me continue Tsutsui shishou's method."

"Well, I'm not going to stop you if it's going to keep you safe." Dad retorted. "Seems to contradict
the whole point of your learning kenjutsu in the first place. Wish I'd known this beforehand though! That's four years of lessons down the drain."

"Shinza has excellent form and a very strong respect for the sword." Sasuke said. "She'd just being trained in a method that favours a particular style. Everything else is there; the footwork, the concentration, the breathing - she's just on the wrong side." If there was one thing Sasuke hated, it was the idea of years worth of training going to waste. "Don't belittle her efforts, she's done very well."

Shinza blushed furiously. If her eyes could have become any wider, they would have fallen out of her head.

"See Dad? Tsutsui-shisou appreciates me! This is the kind of teacher I need, not ol' fuddy-duddies!"

"And would Tsutsui-sensei want to teach a little brat like you?" Dad laughed as Shinza made a face. "She might have other things she's doing, you know."

"With respect," Sasuke looked back toward his daughter. "I do. And I'm afraid I do have to go. But thank you for the use of your dojo. It… brings back memories. And it was good to rest and make myself a little more presentable."

"With equal respect, Tsutsui-sensei," Dad smiled, widely. "You're not presentable yet. That kimono is dead, my dear. Please don't tell me that's all you have?"

"Alright," Sasuke found his cheeks reddening a little. "I won't."

"Hn! Unacceptable!" Dad shook his elegant curls and gestured to the door behind him. "I won't have it! Not as a guest from my house! I spend my days making beautiful things to bring out the beauty in everyone; I'm not about to let a young lady with a face like yours leave without at least one of my pieces to wear. Please, come this way my dear. I think I have a few things out back that I can give you."

"Dad!" Shinza whined. "Shishou needs food and money! Don't go dragging her to the shop! She doesn't want to be your clothes horse!"

"Shin-shin, that kimono is about to die! Not only will it leave our guest without a proper outer jacket, but it also presents the opportunity for my fashions to be worn on a very, very beautiful person! I won't miss the chance! I have the perfect jacket for her!"

"Daaaaad!"

"Shinzzzzaaa!"

"I-it's fine." Sasuke told him, shaking his head a little as he navigated slowly backward toward Mikoto, picking her up. The man was coming closer and he was smiling and it should have been fine, it should have been fine, he was carrying a weapon, but something about him put Sasuke on edge - not the clothes or the wig or the makeup, but the size of him, the silhouette. The way he wouldn't stop approaching. "I have to go now. I'm going."

"Don't be silly!" Dad chuckled, good naturedly, reaching over to pull Sasuke's dilapidated kimono from the hook. "Really, it would be a favour to me!"

"N-no… it's fine. What I have is fine. I don't need… anything." Sasuke tried to swallow as his throat began to dry out. "Thankyou… for… ho-hospitality…"
"Well it's fine, I don't mean to push." Dad told him, gently holding out the kimono for Sasuke to take. His smile dropped very quickly when the woman suddenly jerked backwards, pale and wide-eyed as a cornered animal."Tsutsui-san? Are you all right?"

"S-stay away from me." Sasuke found himself whispering through numb lips. His vision started to pull in and out of focus and he found himself gasping a little for breath. Some part of him was trying to convince him to calm down, to take it easy; this was just a stress reaction. He'd been around men before; even kicked the shit out of a couple of them. He was fine, he was capable. He was fine. But the rest of him had been submerged by his fear, engulfed by the fuzzing in his ears and the cold sweat forming on his skin. His senses dulled; his actions became strangely disjointed. It was as though he thought slow, but moved fast and before he knew it, he had Mikoto in one arm and the bokutō in another and was waving the weapon about ineffectually. He struck, and someone yelped, but the sound was muffled in his ears. All he could remember was darkness and smoke. Hands upon him. Hands hurting him.

He was barely aware of the girls crowding around, speaking in high-pitched, worried voices. Of Dad, gently reaching out again, of firm hands holding him. But there were black spots creeping in on his vision and he couldn't seem to draw enough breath.

"Get away," he croaked, dropping to one knee. "Guh-get… get away…"

And then the edges darkened and fingers were on him, holding him carefully, warily, before he began-

Tsutsui-san?

Shishou!

-to

Shinza, go fetch your mother from the clinic. Go! Yuhi, help me lower her to the ground. Take the baby…

-fade

there… It's alright… Tsu… We... help... Be... alright... Tsutsui? Tsutsui!

Chapter End Notes

Any lefties here that had to be taught something right handed? When I was a kid, the only left-handed things you could get was pretty much just scissors, apart from that, you did your best.

For those wondering about Naruto's inability to spot a story written about his experiences; he's really just happy there is, apparently, another dopey ninja out there pulling the same dumb shit he did ;) Also, he would never have believed that Sasuke would write for a newspaper. He'd probably make some snappy retort like: "Sasuke can write?"
"I'm taking your last exam didn't go too well, did it?"

"I want to hand in my notice," the reply was as quiet as it was tearful and Tsunade felt something punch in the bottom of her stomach. Oh, she'd been afraid of this.

"Sakura, you don't have to-"

"Tsunade-sama." Sakura raised her chin at that point, her melting, sea-green gaze fixed upon the curtain rail. "I have acted inappropriately. Highly inappropriately. D-disgus- I… I was unnecessarily cruel and severe to one of my patients and I have let my feelings get in the way of my purpose and my work. I'm not fit to act as Chief Surgeon at this hospital, nor as your protege."

"What did you do?" Tsunade asked, slowly, feeling the colour drain out of her face. "Sakura… Is this about Sasuke?"

"Sa-" Sakura stalled. "H-how did you know? He was on my list, I… I didn't know it was him until I walked into the room." Sakura admitted in a small voice. "It felt like a set up. I got angry."

"It… sort of was a set up," Tsunade replied, sheepishly. "I really wanted to try and get you two talking."

Sakura blinked, finally looking down at her teacher. Her lips parted a little in surprise. "Tsunade-sama, you're the one who swapped my list?"

"Well you reacted so… uncharacteristically at the hearing," the Dean explained, clumsily. "And you've been in such a slump after you and Ino had thought you'd found him wandering the streets that time-"

"And I was angry." Sakura shook her head a little, flabberghasted. "Sensei, I was really, really angry."

"At him?"

"At… everything. Yes at him.. Yes at the war, the way he treated us all." Sakura bit her lip, taking a breath. Those hands closed into fists at her sides. Tsunade watched them carefully. "But mostly because we lost him. Four times, we lost him, Tsunade. Four times we proved that nothing we did could bring him back and that we were powerless against his will."

"Sakura, that wasn't your fault." Tsunade told her, evenly. "Firstly your were just kids, secondly, he had fallen into the hands of people who would stop at nothing to abuse his power. Thirdly, he
didn't want to be saved."

"I know, but... but don't you see? Can't you understand how..." Sakura fought for words. "Heart-breaking it is? As genin we're hand fed the inspiration, the mantra that we can do anything. We're super-powered, we're unstoppable. We can shoot fire from our hands, blow enemies away with giant gusts of wind. We can harness lightning, we can control minds. But we... when there's someone like Sasuke... there's. We-" She stopped. Broken. Her throat swollen against the words. Tsunade just nodded, slowly.

"You can't control your heart. Sakura, I understand this very well and that's why I wanted to give you the opportunity to speak to him before things began to escalate. Before the trial begins to shape and manipulate our opinions."

"I hurt him, sensei," Sakura whispered. "I was... deplorable. I don't know why, but as soon as I saw him I just..." She shook her head, pastel strands swayed. "I should have walked out. I should have asked someone else, but I just couldn't help myself. He was right there and he... He was... weak." Her voice shook, snapped, and she took a moment - thrusting the heels of her hands against her eyes to wipe away the stinging tears. "A-and he had to listen to what I said. I had him in one place where I was in charge, I wasn't the one getting knocked unconscious, or being strangled. I wasn't the one thrown into a horrific genjutsu where I die - I was the one calling the shots. And instead of being... better than that, instead of doing my job I was just... a bitch."

"Why?"

"What?" Sakura blinked, wiping her nose. Tsunade tugged a tissue out from the box beside her and handed it to her.

"Why were you a bitch?"

"I... I don't know. I was... selfish? I used to be so rude and mean to Naruto because I thought he was getting in my way to win Sasuke over. A-and Ino and I have fought for years about the same thing, but... I don't know. I-I just... Something snapped."

"You wanted him to know how hurt you were." Tsunade filled in, levelly. "You wanted him to know exactly how much you suffered because of him."

"And Naruto." Sakura whispered. "Naruto who... Who only ever wanted him back because he... he loves him, sensei. I don't know what happened at the valley, I've never known. But I do know that since then, Naruto hasn't been the same. He keeps people at an arm's length - even those he wants close. Sasuke tarnished something in him that can never recover. It's like his light is gone."

The fists released and Sakura drew her hands up to her chest, linking her fingers into a twisting lattice and she looked down at them, tearily. "You know how... hard it is, watching something like that fade out? Trying to console someone who can't be consoled? I know Kakashi tried to take his mind off things by giving him the campaign, but you know that in reality Naruto is using every opportunity to try and search for Sasuke. And that every time he doesn't find him, a little piece inside just rots away."

It was difficult to bring to mind again, but Naruto had been a wreck by the time Team 7 had returned to Konoha. He'd put on a strong front for the war effort; he'd smiled and cheered with the others. He'd attended the processions, the funerals, Kakashi's ceremony, but after that, the machine just... ran down. Naruto disappeared like a rainbow fading into the embers of a storm, and all that was left was a husk. She'd held him as he cried. She'd reminded him to eat, to drink. She'd told him to sleep, to stop standing alone in the rain staring out at the old Uchiha sector. Sakura had bathed him, fed him, done everything in her power to snap him out of his depression but in the end she
knew that she just didn't understand his condition at all. She couldn't heal something when she couldn't see the wound. She didn't know how to help him, or help herself. Tsunade watched her closely, before tugging a manila folder out of the pile at her elbow.

"I only glanced at his records," Sakura went on, numbly. "I didn't really look. I… I guess I didn't want to know? Or I was just too mad to care but wh-when I saw him, I…" There was a sniff, and the tears came again, the shame. "I didn't want to be like that, sensei! He's been hurt and he's… probably freaking out, I don't know. I don't know! That wasn't a Sasuke I recognised, it wasn't a Sasuke I was prepared for! He was so different, but his face was the same and his way of talking when… w-when he knew he was wrong, it was all just the way he'd always been and… and-"

"It's my fault, Sakura," Tsunade conceded, pushing the folder toward her. "It is. I arranged it. I made the decision. I taught you a fair and congenial bedside manner, but I didn't teach you how to deal with your emotions when you were faced with something that pushed you. Like him. Like many of these injuries coming out of the war. I never really told you how vicious the world could be, how men and women might be beaten by their spouses, or assaulted and shamed into producing children. How girls can be forced into marriages they don't want, and can be attacked for the simple reason that they did something or wore something someone else didn't like. Ninja are taught to fight and you know your strength; but for some, things can be very different."

"Do… do people really do that, sensei? A-are women really…" Sakura swallowed, hard. "I mean, I read all the books. I know that… that women can be forced and I read about the etiquette when dealing with it. T-to be honest, I've never really agreed with Konoha's stand on keeping the babies."

"Goes to show how backward we can be here." Tsunade acknowledged. "I've read medical journals from other lands further to the South who have begun allowing the mother to make the choice. Most civilian villages do. But hidden villages value their numbers, especially those of their powerful clans. The rules are outdated and disgusting and to be honest, it was going to be one of the first things I had wanted to change after I entered office, but unfortunately the village elders kept me too busy to start oiling my own agenda."

"A-and Sasuke… He was…"

"Forced. Yes." Tsunade finished, grimly. "He was. The details of it only as clear as what he's stated at the hearing and what he's told his counselor, but it's all here," she tapped the file again. "It's all here. I'm not saying I want you to be his obstetrician, nor do you need to see him again in the clinic if you don't want to. But I think you should at least understand what's going on. It's a hard read, but I think you're ready for it."

"Why didn't you give me this in the first place?" Sakura asked, taking the folder with shaking fingers and hugging it to her chest. She'd begun to calm by now, but her cheeks were still pink and her voice too light. "I might not have…reacted like that… I don't want to throw rocks, sensei - glass house and all; I deserve enough blame - but wasn't that a little irresponsible?"

"It was, but now I know how you really feel." Tsunade pushed out of her chair, moving away from the desk to approach her student. "And I don't believe that you would have left the hospital this evening without coming to see me like this if you didn't still care about him. But now I know. And now you know."

"And now he's going to hate me." Sakura said, bitterly. "Now all he's going to remember is me speaking to him like that. Torturing him. Embarrassing him. Treating him like… like garbage."

"You've admitted your mistake, Sakura. And I appreciate the honesty and the severity in which
you've judged your own actions." Tsunade rested her hands on her pupil's shoulders. "I want you to take some time off. Take a few days to rest and think."

Sakura gaped. "I don't need a holiday! I should be punished! Or… or severely reprimanded! Something! I was completely out of line, I-"

"Then take this as a suspension. I will write it up as serious misconduct and it will be on your file. But Sakura, I'm not letting you turn everything in for that, not when the whole situation was partly my fault and I do take responsibility. I shouldn't have pushed you, I should have known better. We work upwards from here."

"Upwards, how?" Sakura said, swallowing thickly. "Sensei, I don't even know what to think of myself. And if I ever met him again, I… I don't know what I'd say. What I did… It wasn't just wrong. It was ugly."

"'I'm sorry', could be a good start." Tsunade smiled a little. "From there, I think you'll find your grounding. A good person will listen, Sakura. Perhaps you'll find you can also do the same for him?"

"I… I need to take a walk." Sakura said, lowering her head respectfully. "Thank you, Tsunade-sensei. I'll think on it."

That afternoon, Sakura jammed her thirty-fifth, 100-yen piece into the UFO catcher outside the takeaway sukiyaki vendor and hissed when the little plush bunny she'd been trying to acquire slipped out of the grasp of the metal fingers and tumbled back onto the pile. The machine bleated a tinny "uh oh" sound before offering her another try (at the respectable price of a further 100 yen). Sakura pressed her forehead against the glass enclosure and sighed. She'd been playing for three solid hours trying to fish a cheap cotton bunny from an arcade machine, all while trying not to think of what she was going to say to Sasuke. Neither task was going very well.

The first hour had been spent concentrating specifically on how she could admit she was wrong without sounding like the biggest asshat on the planet; emphasizing the fact that she had acted out of both surprise and anger. Something of which she felt should be duly noted. The second hour threw her own problems out the window and focused on the fact that she had, indeed, been the biggest asshat on the planet. Much berating of her own self followed. The third hour, however, she'd simply tried to empty her mind and focus on the good things: why she'd loved Sasuke so much, why she fought so hard for him. How he'd laughed sometimes when he thought no one was looking, how vulnerable he looked sometimes, when he forgot himself. All the things that made him, him. After all, he might have forgotten himself; he may need to be reminded. But it was hard to accept that. And it was hard to be wrong in the light of day.

"Just… one more try, one more," she said, fishing another coin from her wallet. "If I get a toy, I have to go see him. If I don't, I can stay here a little longer. Ok, machine? Toy: go. No toy: stay."

Sakura let the game light up and play its song before she rested her hand onto the joystick, moving the grapple into position. This time, though, she closed her eyes and breathed I'm sorry before slamming her palm down on the start button. Several blips and one loud victory song later, Sakura found herself pulling a small, green fluffy dinosaur from the prize chute. Raising a brow, she held it up to the light and turned it over a few times. It was a big, soft, fluffy dinosaur with green spikes and an odd, knowing smile which seemed less to say I want to eat the things! and more Your move, Pinkie.

"Well played, machine," Sakura murmured. "Well played."
Finally she moved away from the game (much to the vendor's delight) and made her way up the street. As she passed by the stores she stopped in every now and again, picking up a few items on the way. Her bag slowly filled with packages of what she remembered was Sasuke's favourite things: tomatoes, plain onigiri, okaka flavoured potato chips and a few other bits and pieces. By the time she reached the door to his apartment, she felt as though her nerves had turned up their volume and were thrumming through her like swarms of moths, attracted to her unease. But she'd made a decision and she would go through with it. A girl had entered Tsunade's office, hung her head and admitted her shame; a woman stood before the threshold of her wrongdoing, tucked a large toy reptile underneath her arm, and knocked.
The Indecision

Tsuchi no Kuni, 11 November
Year of the Tiger.

Rain drummed on the roof of the tiny sessha shrine hidden deep in the woods at the foot of the mountain range. After three days solid travelling, and only one night spent in the comfort of a barn, the pair were already beginning to feel the effects of the road. Sasuke had almost collapsed under a bush for the evening, but then the rains came and he was forced to find a more suitable shelter. The little shrine he'd finally stumbled across had been part of a much larger set, but many had fallen into ruin over the years; the earthquake being the final straw before most of them gave up and crumpled in on their frail architecture. There was little room to move, and if he'd wanted to lie down, he had to either stick his foot out the entrance and let it get wet, or curl his knees up to his stomach and maneuver himself into an origami of odd angles to fit himself around the saisen. There hadn't been any money in it. He'd checked.

Overnight the rain had fallen continuously - a staccato pattern which drowned out Mikoto's bleating cries, hiding them from the world. But not enough for Sasuke to ignore. When she started up again, he awoke almost immediately from his doze - bleary-eyed and leather-tongued. It was early, perhaps around four in the morning, maybe slightly later. Mikoto, upset by their constant travel since their stay on the goat farm, had begun to sleep far less solidly than she had before and woke every two hours to complain about the cold, her discomfort and her empty belly. Her wails were a sound that grated on his nerves and he swore lightly under his breath as he rubbed his eyes. Rolling onto his side, he reached over and tugged his daughter a little closer to him, pushing up against the constrictive shelter wall. It was hard work; he was weak. He was tired and sore from his travels and exhausted and aching from his own injuries. Every action required support. Every move was glass in his flesh.

But Mikoto was hungry. And Mikoto wouldn't shut up unless she was fed. Carefully (as Nuja had instructed) he lifted his little daughter into his arms and slipped his filthy yukata over his shoulder, positioning Mikoto so that she was comfortable. His breasts were full, heavy and sore and he hated the damn things. Groaning, he winced as he held one, pressing it slowly so that it would allow her to take the nipple. Getting Mikoto to latch had never been something he found easy, even with the practice the Kakkou had forced upon him, and he gritted his teeth with threadbare patience when she fussed.

"Come on," he coaxed in a gravelly, sleep-sanded voice. "Just take it. Take it. It's fuck-knows o'clock in the morning. Just take it."

He hated to admit it, but with the Kakkou the whole nursing situation had been far easier. Nuja had given him the basics - which seemed sound in theory, but near impossible in practice - but the robed figures quickly corrected his technique when he was wrong. Compresses were administered when his milk wouldn't come. Assistants held the baby to his breast when fatigue rendered him entirely unable to operate at all. Naturally, all they wanted was for his immunities and the nutrients his body produced to pass to his daughter, whether he liked it or not, whether he could or not, wasn't up for argument, but their aid made things simpler. He sucked in a breath as she finally found him, took the nipple and began her quick initial suckle. Her little hands opened and closed as she began to relax and he felt his shoulders slowly drop their tension. The small swigs began to
lengthen and she closed her eyes, falling into a steady rhythm of slow, hypnotic draws. It still hurt, but the initial pain was gone and Sasuke finally stretched out his aching left leg, letting the pins and needles dissipate and the burn in his damaged muscles ease slightly.

It felt good, but it was also very worrying. He was lame. Wounded. That made him vulnerable. His chakra was non-existent and even if he did accommodate some, he daren't use it for fear it might damage the child inside of him. He didn't know anything about using jutsu while pregnant and Nuja had only been a carrier, she hadn't been a ninja with an active kekkei genkai. There wasn't too much she could tell him on that subject. He could move at a reasonable speed but not over long distances. His leg, though mended by medical jutsu that had healed the bone and seamed the torn muscle back together, had been set badly. The Kakkou had stopped the immediate danger, ensuring he wouldn't bleed out, but they cared little for any consequential discomfort. His knee and ankle would swell after several hours walking, and since putting further pressure on the joints irritated the inflammation he needed to rest very often.

Morning sickness had blessedly skipped him in his second pregnancy and though he would occasionally experience minor waves of nausea, it seemed more from his empty gut than anything else. But where stomach upset had lessened, fatigue had set in as a proxy and Sasuke would often find himself a walking zombie, half in, half out of consciousness as he feet dragged and his body swayed while he moved along the track. Often, he had to submit to his ailing body and curled up somewhere quiet and dark and tolerably safe to rest. He knew wasn't doing himself any favours, he had to get out of there - get as far away from the mountains as he possibly could. But it wasn't like before. He wasn't like he was before. The faster he could accept that, the faster he could move on. Change. Become the new Uchiha Sasuke. Find happiness in what he had. Count his blessings. And all that crap.

Sasuke's gaze rolled down to focus on his daughter, his liability, and he felt the blankness invade his fingers. A fuzzing, weightless anger that rolled inside him like unanchored baggage on a seafaring vessel and he drew in a staunch breath to try to steady himself. Without her he could move freely. He could worry less. He wouldn't have to stop to feed her or change her diapers; bathe her and make sure she didn't form a rash. He wouldn't have to submit half his clothing to her to keep her warm, to strap her to him, to catch her shit and collect it and later wash away. She was needy. She was helpless. She was everything he couldn't quite handle. Most of all, she was the reminder of his own defeat. She was the physical evidence of his torture and his rape - the nightmare in his waking world. Mikoto was the first thing he saw when he jolted awake from a few scant hours of sleep that was peppered with horrific dreams, and she was the last thing he looked upon before he closed his eyes, ill at ease, but desperate for some respite.

And he didn't know how to feel about her. He didn't know if he loved her. He felt he should, but he simply couldn't bring himself to. It was true the Uchiha clan loved with more fire and more strength than any other. Sasuke may have been stand-offish and rude to the point where some might question his upbringing, but he knew what love was. In his childhood (a strange thing to say, considering he was still a child to many), he'd loved dearly, uninhibited by pain. Even after Itachi had torn his life apart, even through his thirst for revenge, he'd still loved his brother in a somewhat aching, twisted way. He might have loved Naruto, if he'd let himself consider the notion, rather than using him as a crutch for his resolve.

But Mikoto just felt hollow. Bland. A personal item he could do without but never really felt like ditching. Had Sasuke known what postnatal depression entailed and how it affected a new mother, he might have been a trite more sympathetic toward himself. But his complacency and his lack of feelings toward his daughter only further convinced him that perhaps it would be better if he gave her up. It would be simple: he could just leave her at a farmhouse, or on a doorstep of an apartment
in one of the neighboring villages. She needed no name, no bribe - she was a baby, who wouldn't take her? Then, with her gone, he could move. He could run. He could flee for harsher climates and less hospitable locations until he was sure - positively certain - that the Kakkou had not followed him. He could give birth to his second child and do the same for him. An offer for a better, simpler life than that of the descendant of a damned clan; the child of a test subject.

Yet (and everything inside Sasuke seemed to stall when he really thought about it) she was his. His alone. She wasn't borne from a plan fabricated by some beast of history and dreams, she wasn't the product of lies writ in stone or a voice that whispered blood in the dark. Mikoto was a hiccup in the universe's plans for him. Something that could not be foreseen. Something that no one, no one could have ever predicted. A boy had a baby. A boy escaped. A boy threw out all his plans of old and became something new, something he could never have accomplished without the change his daughter had triggered within him. When he really, really thought about it, perhaps Sasuke had become his own revolution.

Yet she was Uchiha. His blood. That was not something he was willing to let go of so readily. When Sasuke looked at her, he saw his mother. Her dark hair, her dark eyes and those long lashes and the shape of her squishy little face - that was his mother; his family. He might have even seen himself in her. She was the first Uchiha born in a decade. Before that, the'd been all that was left and the Uchiha died with him and him alone. Seeing her grow up as part of another clan, as someone else's child, as anyone other than Mikoto somehow infuriated him and the sudden resentment that flashed through him made him smile.

"Trust your parent to laugh," he told her. "When he's angry. I used to be very good at being angry. A pro. A genius, really. Then you came along."

He let her ease off and leaned her on his shoulder, tapping her back, carefully, as he gazed out into the rain. The sun was limning the shape of the forest around him; gold tipped the edges of the leaves and the jagged lines of the undergrowth. Early narcissus bowed their saffron heads near the mouth of the sessha, while camilia and apricot trees blossomed shyly in bursts of pink and red. The smell of earth was refreshing and sharp. The air was cold, but not unpleasant. Sasuke shivered against the temperature and leaned over, dragging his kimono up over himself and his daughter. Beneath the worn fabric, he rested his hand on his belly, feeling the plumper flesh - the little tell-tale bump that acted as the herald before his stomach began to swell. It was more prominent this time; his flat, rock-like abdominal muscles weren't fighting against it and as Nuja had warned him, he would start to show far more quickly than he had with Mikoto.

But while he may have several months to go before his belly became a hindrance, he would still need to put as much distance between himself and the Kakkou as possible. And he would need to have made a decision about his children - their safety was key and his ability to hide was all he had. He was also still a nukenin and would have to pick his routes carefully to ensure that any hidden villages which had sworn fealty to Konoha for fear they may try to detain him. There was much to consider, and it was a long road to safety. But for now it was just him, her and the rain.

Sasuke held the daughter he didn't love close to his chest and hummed tunelessly until they both fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Aww. Introspective chapter is introspective. Things are going to lighten up a little for
the next few chapters, but I was adamant to post this one before I finished part two of The Disguise in order to give us a little context. Sorry if it's a little sloppy in editing, I wrote it last night and there was wine.

Production is going to slow a little over the next week as I have two rush projects running back to back which is going to upset my calendar a bit and I also wanted to spend a little time with Sasuke and the family in Ame. There will be the obligatory "dress Sasuke up" scene as part of that chapter, I'm not going to deny any of us that pleasure, and if you'd like Sasuke to try on a certain style or outfit in particular, let me know. I'll try and pop in a few examples :}
Amegakure, 23rd November

Year of the Tiger

"Ma!"

Mother...

(indeterminate gurgling) "Ma!"

Mom...

(high pitched squeal. The sound of bubbling chuckles) "Ma! Ma!"

Mama? Mother… Mother?

"Mom!" Sasuke woke to his own cry - his body tense, eyes wide; a thin trail of sweat creeping down from his room around him was dim and unfamiliar, and while he'd gotten used to rising in strange surroundings throughout his many years of training and wandering, the Kakkou had managed to instill a very unwanted sense of dread toward this situation. He felt a slimy, uncomfortable coolness settling in his stomach, curdling with his guts and he took a breath to calm himself. In his mind, he calculated the size of the space by sensing the temperature of the air and the sound of his breath as it left his lips. Dark eyes registered a white painted ceiling, cream walls, lemon coloured curtains. He knew this. He knew how to do this. And so far, it seemed, he was safe. Except… where was… Where the hell was-

"Welcome back. How are you feeling?"

His daughter. Mikoto was the thing that was missing. Only she wasn't missing - she was right beside him, watching him with as much concern as a baby could perceive; her large eyes were fixed upon his and her sparse brows pressed together slightly. She was fine. She was right here, sitting in the lap of a woman with short hair and a kind smile (although that was nothing to Sasuke; kind smiles meant shit in the ninja world). But he was on edge. He felt the tension in his muscles and the ache from a shock to the system that might have occurred sometime recently. Apart from the mysteries of his pregnancy, he knew his body well enough to understand that something out of the ordinary had happened. His muscles were knotted like shoelaces, he could feel the tension in his neck like a vice. He swallowed, then narrowed his eyes a little.

"Who are you?" He asked the woman slowly, hoping she didn't hear his heart hammering in his chest. She was holding his daughter. She had his daughter. She had-

"Ri Kodomi. Kaori, generally, but most people call me Kodomi-sensei or Dr Ri, depending on how cheerful they're feeling," Ri bounced Mikoto a little in her lap, laughing as she emitted a penetrating squeal. Sasuke very nearly jumped - he hadn't heard her squeak like that before. For a moment he thought that this 'Ri' woman had hurt her, but she laughed again and wiggled, demonstrating her delight. Sasuke watched her curiously. At length the woman added. "You fainted in my Dojo. You've been out for a couple of hours. We moved you to the spare room when it didn't seem as though you were going to wake up in a hurry."

The Disguise part 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
"I fainted?" Sasuke spat out the word as though it had tasted bad. Historically, he hadn't had many good experiences with fainting. He winced, lifting a hand to feel the back of his head. There didn't seem to be a bump where he would have connected with the floor. Ri cleared her throat.

"Yes. Apparently you went quite slowly though. My husband managed to catch you before you hit the floor and Shinza took the baby. You didn't fall. You're all right, apart from being utterly exhausted and possibly anaemic, by the look of your pallor. Michi had it much worse. You nearly broke his arm."

Sasuke raised his brows slightly in surprise. That he didn't remember at all. It had been a blur, and he'd been mostly worried about Mikoto. "Ah. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry, it wasn't your fault." Ri told him, shifting Mikoto to one hand as Sasuke began to sit up. Her fingers touched the centre of his chest and pressed inward, gently. "Careful. Slowly. You might not have hit your head, but you sure were out. You're not going anywhere tonight. Not for the next couple of days, if I can help it."

"It's fine. I'm fine," Sasuke said, automatically. "Where are my clothes? I need to get moving."

"What you need is food and rest. You can't travel as you are, you wouldn't last a day. And it's pouring out; they're predicting the annual fall storms already. What kind of doctor would I be if I just sent you into such inclement weather as this?"

"I could think of a couple examples," Sasuke muttered as both Orochimaru and Kabuto sprung to mind. He pushed the pillow behind him and sat up, holding his arms out for his daughter. Mikoto cooed happily as she was returned to him and he studied her briefly, making sure she was exactly as he'd left her. Ri leaned over and picked up a jug of water from the nightstand, pouring a glass for her guest. Practiced eyes watched the little family, carefully. Something seemed very off about this traveller; her whole presence screamed runaway or even fugitive, but from what? Her husband? Or...

"You're fatigued. You most likely collapsed from lack of proper food," Ri told him. She watched closely as the draping sleeves of his yukata slipped down and, unbeknownst to him, revealed the faint traces of bruises, scars and marks. Some were old. Shinza had informed her that the woman had been a kunoichi and probably most of her scars had been gained in the field. But some were newer. Some held certain tell-tale signs of their manifestations. And some looked very much like the tracks created by restraints. Sasuke caught her scrutiny and frowned.

"You said you were a doctor? Did you examine me?"

"I am. And I looked over you, yes," she replied. "Checked your vitals, checked for injuries. I wouldn't go further than that without consent unless there was an obvious need. However, if you'd like me to I-"

"Is my daughter alright?" Sasuke interrupted her, still slightly brusque at the fact that he was touched without his say-so. Him and his things. If the past ten years had proven anything at all, it was that he'd become very possessive of his things. "Did you look at her as well?"

"I thought it prudent, considering your… circumstances." Ri admitted, carefully. "Please don't take offence."

Sasuke had little time for offenses. "And?"

"She's fine. A little underweight; a little nappy rash, but she's fine." Ri motioned to the water.
"Drink. You're dehydrated. A strange concept in Ame, to be sure, but please, have a few glasses. You need it. I'll bring up some food a bit later too. Shinza said your name is Tsutsui-san, is that right?"

"Mm," Sasuke nodded, letting Mikoto sprawl on his chest, her little hands grabbing for the ends of his hair. Ri leaned forward slightly.

"Tsutsui-san, have you experienced any blackouts before? Have you recently suffered a head injuries or falls where you may have knocked yourself unconscious? Or taken any new medications?" When Sasuke shook his head no, the doctor began listing off a small barrage of questions - mostly as a place to start looking for evidence or trauma or something that might cause recurring fainting spells. Her ornery patient didn't much enjoy the grilling, but Ri was careful about her inquisition and refrained asking questions that might seem invasive. It was skimming the surface, but that was enough to help; she'd had worse.

"I've worked at the general hospital for many years before I started my clinic," she said when Sasuke had finished, slowly refilling his glass when he handed it back to her. "And a free drop-in office before that. I see a lot of people come and go; I've had experience with wayfarers and explorers and I don't like to let my patients wander away without as cleaner bill of health as I can give them. Especially not when they've been a gracious guest and made my daughter so pleased with herself."

"...She beat Yuhi again, didn't she," Sasuke smiled finally. Well, smirked.

Ri nodded. "Six times. I've never seen the like."

"Then I'm surprised. She had the ability for it. Perhaps you weren't looking hard enough." It was a tactless jab - typical of Sasuke - but he couldn't help thinking of his father and Fugaku's own legitimate surprise when presented with his younger son's abilities. Itachi had been the golden child for so long, it was clear that the Uchiha leader had simply forgotten that Sasuke had talent as well. His mother had said that Fugaku had only spoken of him when they were alone, but what good was that to Sasuke? Why couldn't he have told his son how proud he was of all his hard work when it was clear that his brother was some form of natural shinobi superman? Sasuke was smart, able; a fast learner. But he wasn't the godly force that Itachi had been. He couldn't remain notable against that capacity, not even to his own father. There was a bullshit call in there somewhere and Sasuke knew it. He'd always known.

But Ri pursed her lips amicably, as she studied her charge. "I guess so. I don't know much about her training. I really just go by what her sensei reports. Ame was a fortified village, for sure, but it was built around a strong industrial sector that had more to do with capital and trade. You'll find that many of the families - especially up here in sector 3 – tend to be from that kind of background rather than an established ninja clan. We aren't Konoha; we aren't accustomed to the Shinobi way from an early age. I wouldn't know if Shinza was a master or a disaster unless she made an obvious mistake. But she was quick to tell me how skilled you were. Your little one's in for a treat if you mean to teach her as well."

"I don't know, I hadn't thought of it." Ignoring the loud castigation from his inner self - Yes. Yes absolutely. She was Uchiha. She'd be a genius like him. She was...- who simply couldn't believe Sasuke might consider any other path for Mikoto besides that of a ninja, Sasuke just shrugged. "Life for a kunoichi is rough, I'd rather see what she wants to do."

"I couldn't agree with you more," Ri said. "I've had two decade's worth of patching up ninja from all over the world. In both wars and between. It makes me wonder what is so wrong with their societies that they feel they need to resort to such violence. I've been to some lands in the south that
"I have never heard of shinobi, or hidden villages. They seem a lot happier, I can tell you."

"Then why let your daughter study?" Sasuke said, cocking a brow. "If you're so against what Ninja are, why do you let her train?"

"Well it was just the sword play to start off with. That was her Grandfather's fault. My dad had been an artist and a pacifist all his life. He used to carry a blade fashioned out of bone that he would dance and perform with, trying to distract us from the war. Back then, the upper middle class of Ame had tried to turn the conflict into a historical tale; a fable. Something that made living under Hanzō a little more palatable. We separated ourselves from his regime and instead romanticized the idea of the shinobi warrior, even though we had our own hidden village within our very city walls. But then the war was over and curiosity began to take hold. The collaborative exams became popular and suddenly all the kids were learning kenjutsu. They treat it like a sport and of course Shinza didn't want to be left out. Michi and I held off on the academy for a long time, hoping she'd get it out of her system. But then the Great Shinobi Peace Campaign came along and that was all she could talk about. The Hero of Konoha; Uzuwaki Naruto."

"Uzumaki," Sasuke corrected her, absently.

"Yes, that's the one. That blond boy," Ri sighed. "All the young kids are signing into the group training programs because of him."

"He has that effect on people. So I hear."

"Well he does seem like a nice boy, but I don't know. On one hand he is bringing all the Hidden Villages together as a union, which might help stop some of the squabbling between them. But on the other it's really just swapping one regime for another, isn't it?"

"That's what ninja know best," Sasuke muttered, bitterly. "How to follow suit. Might as well shed wool while they're at it."

"Ultimately, it's up to her," Ri continued pushing her glasses up her nose while she let that comment settle. Tsutsui may have once been a ninja - a good one, apparently - but that didn't mean she'd ever liked it. And she had a point. "Shinza will do what she wants to do. She always has. It's my job to support her, not swaddle her. But I do have it in mind to take her along to the hospital with me when she's a little older. See some of the veterans I've been treating over the years. And, if perhaps you might have a moment, Tsutsui-san...?"

"What?" Sasuke frowned a little. "Talk to her? You want me to talk to Shinza about being a shinobi?"

"She was hanging off every word you said," Ri chuckled. "Michi said she had stars in her eyes like he'd never seen."

"Hn," Sasuke replied, typically. It did make sense, although he wasn't sure he was the best advocate to explain a normal shinobi lifestyle - especially not that of a kunoichi. But perhaps a few words before he left? It wasn't asking much and it would be best to leave on a high note. He might also be able to work in some way to tell them all to forget about him; forge some kind of ninja espionage story, smoke and mirrors and all that fancy shit. "I guess."

Ri grinned widely, revealing a charming crooked smile. "Thanks, I appreciate it. I think it's important that Shinza receives a good first-hand account, one woman to another," she didn't notice Sasuke blanch at that. "I'll let you rest then, Tsutsui-san. Get some sleep."
"No, I've really got to…" Sasuke began, before he petered off. Did he have to leave? Did he? Right this minute? This house was so warm and it had been weeks since he'd slept in an actual bed with sheets and pillows and a comforter. He'd been used to living on the road for a long time during his travels, but there was always something to be said for getting a sound rest every now and then. He also had to stop ignoring the fact that Ri was a doctor. He paused for a moment, fingers splayed over the tie of his yukata before he cleared his throat. "Uh. Kodomi-sensei?"

"Mhm?" Ri said, resting her chin on the heel of her hand.

Sasuke began to motion to his middle, wanting to ask; wanting to know. Then, in the same fluid movement, he slowly moved his hand away. He knew he should let the doctor see him. He needed to make sure his son was healthy, that his development was progressing soundly despite his limited diet and the exorbitant amount of stress feasting on his system. But she would want to examine him. She would want to want to put her hands on him, touch him. That's what doctors did. It was a fact that Sasuke just couldn't stomach, and he wasn't surprised that when she reached toward him, he shuddered slightly.

"Nothing," he said, dusting his fingers lightly over Mikoto's arm. "It's nothing."

"I see," Ri's fingers dropped to the blanket, which she tugged at gently - smoothing it over. She leaned back in her chair and pushed her glasses up her nose. Sasuke was putting up a damn good cover, but that tension was all too real and his impulse to flee was practically tattooed on his face. This was a person in need of help and Ri would never turn down a request - not even if that plea was entirely unspoken. "But if that nothing turns into something, I want you to know that you can talk to me. Please, stay with us as long as you like."

"Just tonight. Then I need to go" Sasuke repeated in a quiet voice. "I'll need to leave as soon as possible. We have to keep moving."

"Well while you rest," Ri continued. "Let's arrange some food and some new clothes for you. You know Michi wouldn't stop talking about you all afternoon. He considers you his new muse."

"Didn't I almost break his arm?"

Ri laughed a little "Oh, that didn't faze him. Granted, he was surprised, but he was more concerned about you and the girls. They've been skittish as young deer; I had to send them on an errand."

"Sorry," Sasuke mumbled. "I didn't mean to cause a fuss."

"Cause a fuss, by all means. Fusses are something we're used to here. You did meet my husband, didn't you?"

"I did meet her, yes," Sasuke answered delicately. "Or-"

"You can use either," Ri cut in, smoothly. "He's my husband and Shinza's father and sometimes he wears a suit and sometimes she wears something more feminine. Michi prefers being free of the formalities of gender; he feels that he's able to be himself this way and he finds that his customers appreciate his integrity."

"Customers?" Sasuke's brow furrowed a little, before he realized. "The store. He sells clothes, then?"

"Sells, makes, designs," Ri said, proudly. "Michi runs a little boutique out the back of our house. It's mostly catalogue orders, but he has customers drop in from time to time. He asked that when you're feeling better, you might come through and have a look. He'd love to give you some new
clothes as a thank you for helping our daughter."

"I… I think your hospitality is enough," Sasuke replied, but Ri held up a hand to stop the excuse before it started. She reached down into a small paper tote on the floor and pulled out what appeared to be a tiny little bodysuit in plush grey material. The edging was piped in a bright yellow and it sported the picture of a little green toad on the front. It was about as cheerful as an item of clothing could be and because of that Sasuke eyed it suspiciously. It reminded him a little too much of someone who liked both bright colours and toads and he wasn't sure if he wanted that constant tang of bitter nostalgia around him.

But it was sort of... cute.

"Michi made these by the boxful when I was pregnant with Shinza." Ri explained. "Said he was so inspired, he couldn't stop sewing them. They're usually blank, but Shinza asked him to sew the toad on the front. She likes toads; she thinks they get a bad rap for their appearance but she thinks it makes them charming."

"Toads are actually pretty powerful. It's good that Shinza shows respect for them." Sasuke murmured, thinking briefly on Gamabunta and Naruto. He'd never shown his own summons too much attention other than asking them to perform their usual tasks, but he did respect them. Garuda and Aoda were both powerful in their own right, and Manda had been strong enough to even keep Orochimaru on his scaly toes. Sasuke reached out with his free hand and took the baby-gro, examining it the craftsmanship closely.

"I'd wanted to dress her in it before you woke," Ri said. "But I didn't have the chance. We'd really like you to have it, Tsutsui-san."

"Sarada," Sasuke corrected her, softly. Clothes. Real clothes for Mikoto. Real ones. Not rags. Not shredded hand me downs. He'd never seen Mikoto wearing anything like this before. He didn't even know how to get her in it, he'd hadn't ever dressed her in anything that had sleeves. Or feet. "Thanks. It'll come in handy."

Watching as Sasuke held the jumpsuit in front of him, somewhat trying to gauge the size of it against his daughter, Ri smiled. "How about we try it on her later, mm? There are other colours too. Clothes for her and clothes for you."

"I'm going to see Michi later, aren't I? It never was an option," Sasuke conceded, with only the slightest air of defeat. To deny now would just be rude. "I suppose the kimono has a few too many holes. It's not really keeping out the cold anymore."

Ri smiled. "Well, unless you wanted to let the rain in, it's probably better to go with something a little less… airy. And old fashioned. It's gorgeous, but a relic."

Sasuke blinked. He hadn't thought that his clothes would make him stand out, but the further he got from the rural villages to the more contemporary flat lands, the more out of touch he seemed. Perhaps a new outfit wasn't such a bad idea.

"Well then," he said, settling down into his bed a little. "Let's see if Michi can help me blend in a little more. Can't go wandering around looking like some goat-farming grandma dressed me."

"You know, strangely enough the pattern is one from the northern villages of Tsuchi." Ri raised her brows as she pointed to the article of clothing in question. It hung on the back of the door, looking somewhat despondent. "Typically goat farming country."
Michi's store was small but expertly structured in order to showcase his collections in the best possible light. Sasuke made his way through the rows of racks toward the workroom at the end, gazing over piece after piece of glorious tailoring - each one different from the last. There were contemporary styles: hooded sweatshirts, casual pants, tees. There were traditional Kimono, suits, long elegant dresses (which to Sasuke seemed to evoke no sense of practical application whatsoever), strange, ribbon-trussed, puffy numbers (once again, even less evidence of usefulness) and an abundance of children's clothing that hung happily on their chromed rails like little compact rainbows. Sasuke reached out, letting his free hand slide over the textures of the items as he walked past them, Mikoto clutched closely to his chest. She seemed mesmerized and he wondered if she liked the colours. When he reached the door, he hesitated a little, hand raised as though to knock on the doorjamb.

"Uh," he attempted.

Michi turned in her chair, now dressed in a long blue tunic, black loose pants and a blonde wig that curled just under her chin. Behind her was a wall completely covered in wigs of every colour and shape imaginable; all on their own sightless, faceless polystyrene heads. Below, there were rows upon rows of small plastic drawers, each marked meticulously with hashtags and numbers - obviously to hold the stock in order. Sasuke had been in costume shops before for disguises (Kakashi's idea. No one quite understood the point, but he insisted), but this was something different. Michi let Sasuke's gaze wander for a moment before he put the fabric he'd been stitching down and folded his hands in his lap.

"Tsutsui-san. I'm sorry if I startled you before. I just got a little carried away. I really hope I didn't.-"

"You didn't," Sasuke cut in. "Your wife was right; I was exhausted. I… blanked out for a second."

"But you seemed-" Michi implored. She seemed paler; shaken. Sasuke had to admit, he had probably scared the shit out of all of them but the reaction seem strange on a person that size. If he'd thought about it, Sasuke might have come to the conclusion that Michi reminded him a little of Juugo: someone who hated being so large and imposing and often counterbalanced their appearance and physical power with a gentle disposition and a soft voice. Perhaps that why Michi was as she was? Sasuke just shook his head.

"There are ghosts in my past. I don't care to talk about them. It wasn't you, Michi-san. Thank you for making sure I wasn't hurt. Sorry about…" He motioned to Michi's arm and Michi just shrugged.

"You hit pretty hard with a wooden sword, I'd hate to see you in a real fight."

"Hn," Sasuke offered, eager to changed the subject. He tipped his head, gesturing to the showroom behind him. "Ri said you had something for me?"

Michi brightened, pushing up to her feet. "Things, actually! I've picked out a few. Some aren't entirely practical, but I'd love to get a photograph." She pointed to the wall by her large, intricate looking sewing machine where the faces of many young pretty girls and boys, and many older, beautiful men and woman smiled back inside a collage of inspiration. Some old, some young, all full of character. Sasuke stared at it for a moment.

"Maybe," he said, uncommitted. He followed Michi to the dressing room where a rack of clothes
had been left out and Michi held the curtain to one side, smiling as Sasuke entered. Inside the room
was bedecked with a large mirror, a seat and several hooks on the wall which already boasted a few
outfits. Sasuke glanced over them without much enthusiasm, then a small table to his right caught
his attention. It was positioned next to the bench and had, artfully arranged on its surface, a number
of white and black satin undergarments - each as alien and utterly petrifying as the last.

Michi didn't seem to notice his hesitance and gestured to the sets of bras and underpants jovially.
"Well if you're getting a whole new outfit, you need a good foundation, don't you?"

Sasuke looked scandalized. "Did you... While I was-"

"What? No!" Michi held up her hands, eyes wide. "I guessed! It's my business to know proportions,
to try and help customers find a comfortable fit! It was an educated guess, that's all."

"Fine," Sasuke consented, marching into the changing room. He let Michi draw the curtain behind
him, before he laid Mikoto down on the floor, arranging some of the cushions from the bench
around her to keep her safe. She cooed up at him as he removed his clothes and he smiled back at
her - trying desperately not to glance in the mirror. He still had a very hard time looking at his own
body. He barely recognized himself any more. That alone was almost as unnerving as the
first and second pregnancy. Grumbling, he tugged up the knickers, feeling perfectly ridiculous
wearing something so flimsy, then grabbed for the bra. And suddenly, the art of dressing became
so much more complex.

It had hooks. It had... what? Round bits? Cuppy... things? He hadn't worn a bra before - the
Kakkou hadn't cared much for providing clothes other than shifts and blankets for their subjects.
He guessed the loops with the adjustable sliders went over his shoulders and obviously his breasts
went in the bits that looked like half a ball glued on a semi-circular wirey thing and it all hooked in
at the back... But how the hell did one get into it? Sasuke may have been a genius at many things;
crossdressing wasn't one of them. After several fights with the straps and an elbow to the eye, he
found that doing the clasps up the front, then twisting it around and sort of hoisting it up seemed to
be the best option. Sighing at the effort, Sasuke shuffled the underwear around until it was
comfortable, then reached for the first item Michi had suggested.

When he pushed back the curtain, he stepped out wearing an oversized tunic - much like the
stylist's own - slacks that ended at his calves and a light windbreaker that covered his arms. Michi
beamed.

"There! Practical, but shapely at the same time. Does it fit alright?"

Sasuke had to admit, he was a little impressed with Michi's ability to measure him. "Uh yeah. It's
fine." He held out his hand, letting Michi pass him the next hangar. "This'll probably be ok."

"And the underwear?"

There was a muttered string of consonants somewhat in the affirmative. The next time Sasuke
emerged, he was wearing a black mini skirt with a fitted white tee-shirt and a cropped, tan coloured
jacket made out of heavy drill. His knees were pressed together and he crossed his arms over his
chest, feeling ridiculous.

"Can't I wear something under the skirt bit?" He muttered, finally. Michi just tapped her lips and
skipped a few of the next selections while she looked Sasuke over.

"That was not a good choice, I admit. I just wanted to see what it looked like on you."
"The jacket's ok." Sasuke added. "But the rest... I don't think I'd get good use out of it."

"Let's try some more pants," Michi agreed, stacking a few the changing room, ignoring the groan that came from inside the cubicle. By the time he'd found the perfect fit and had gathered new items together, Sasuke was just getting unchanged anyway, curtain or no. He might have had a woman's body, but he hadn't the typical self conscious attitude that his peers had been cursed with to go with it. These people were none the wiser to his strange circumstances, and once he'd become accustomed to her presence, he actually found that Michi was a help more than a hindrance and helped quell his nervousness with her chatter. She didn't touch Sasuke more than he wanted; she only helped when she was asked. Otherwise she would sit on the floor by Mikoto, keeping her company.

Sasuke tried on cargo-style pants, denim pants (from the south! Michi had announced. Aren't they neat? They call them jeans), short pants, three-quarter pants. Loose pants that seemed to envelop him, tight pants that just emphasized the skinniness of his knees (My ass falls out when I bend down, Sasuke observed. Everyone's does, Michi explained). There were shirts, tee-shirts, embellished tops, tanks, bandeaus (I supposed you could hide kunai in here, Sasuke said. Michi just carefully agreed). Overall, by the time he'd picked out a few items, Sasuke wasn't quite hating it as much as he had at first. Even when Michi handed him one of the frilly lolita style dresses and begged him to try it on, just for a moment, he only blushed about as pink as the fabric but stepped into it anyway. He had to admit, despite all the lacing and the boning and the yards and yards of fabric, it was excellent for concealing weapons. He could have carried a whole arsenal in there and no one would have been the wiser.

"I need a photograph!" Michi announced, after 'floofing' the skirt for the fiftieth time. Snapped out of his daze where the dress had become some form of wearable death dealer, Sasuke paled a little, glancing down. There was a labyrinth of lace upon him. Little white gloves with pearl beading. Petal-coloured stockings with little hearts on them. He'd really been spacing out - when the hell had he put these on?

"I'd rather you didn't."

"Oh. Of course, I'm sorry." Michi was the one to blush this time. "Let's get you something else... Would you like to try some hakama?"

Sasuke nodded but he couldn't help noticing the way his host seemed so disconsolate. After all, hadn't Ri said something about muses? "If you took one, a photo I mean, what happens with it?"

"I put it on my wall. It's not for the catalogue or any advertising," Michi explained. "It's just to remind me of how inspiring people can be. But it has to be in something you like. I think this looks gorgeous on you, but it's not right, I can see that."

"I'm not inspiring," Sasuke told him, easing out of the dress. "I just-" Do what I want. "-do what suits me best. That's not inspiring."

"Isn't it?" Michi called from the depths of the shop. "I think that's very inspiring. You know, I've met a lot of people over the years; people who do as I do, who are interested in being what they want to be. I think they've all given impetus toward my desire to help others."

"Other people who dress like women?" Sasuke wasn't being intentionally blunt, but really his mother and brother had been the most tactful of the family. Once they were gone, the idea of social etiquette became secondary to communicating an idea. If anything, Sasuke was just overly pragmatic. Michi appeared at the curtain, holding a woman's hakama and kosode.
"Yes. And women who cut their hair short and want to appear more like men. And people who like to become a blend of the two. Do you think that's not right?"

"It doesn't affect me," Sasuke answered, taking the clothes and standing still as Michi helped him dress. "So I don't really have an opinion. People's business is their own."

"That's what my family always told me," Michi said smoothing the back of the garment. She frowned, then pulled out another hanger with a kofurisode draped on it instead. "Let's use this instead of the kosode, the lines are more elegant."

"Your family didn't approve of you dressing this way?" Sasuke raised a brow. He couldn't say he was surprised, he'd never heard of it before outside of a few areas near Konoha's entertainment districts.

"No. But I was one son out of seven," Michi smiled. "I copied my sister, my only sister. She wasn't feminine in the least, but all her friends were. They'd be into their makeup and dresses, and she didn't want to be left out, even though she wasn't interested. She'd buy the products, make the clothes and try them out on me. Then she felt she was up with the trends without having to… succumb, I guess. We're a family of designers, tailors and dressmakers. My parents taught us all the trades, we each learned our separate speciality."

"And yours was for making women's clothes to fit…" Sasuke peered behind him as Michi did up the fastenings on the hakama. "Men?"

"Not at first. My family didn't care that I wore women's clothing, or even that I occasionally asked if they might refer to me as chan, rather than kun. Even Zhe, Zher and Zim - you know, gender non-specific. They felt it was part of my artistic development and they would encourage me. But they did object to my desire to join the medical volunteers in the Third War. My father was not supportive of the hidden villages; he liked the protection, but he felt they were getting too big for themselves. He hoped they would fight themselves into extinction, for all he cared, but I had friends in those ranks and I couldn't let them go without at least trying to help. I didn't know how much a tailor could do on the field - very little, probably - so I decided to join the travelling hospital."

Michi finished securing the ties and turned Sasuke around. "That was where I met them. The ones who'd been left alive. Saved, but they didn't think so. Amputees, traumatized, beaten - these were ninja who had been butchered, tortured. Suffered injuries that would change them forever."

Sasuke felt his breath catch in his throat. He must have said something, as Michi spoke again, but the sound was starting to thicken in his ears.

"Men who… well. What can I say? The enemy had decided to take away their ability to have children, there was nothing left. Women whose organs were damaged for fear they'd reproduce and strengthen their clans; chests were hacked at, scarred, completely wrecked. It was a horrific war; a brutal war. It left so many people feeling as ugly as they'd been treated. I couldn't stand for it. But I was a rich merchant's son, I wasn't a soldier. I would have probably gotten someone killed on the field. So I helped them the only way that I could. I wasn't a doctor, but I had good hands for stitching and I went to work with the recovering division who specialized in secondary care and plastic surgery."

Michi stopped for a moment, smiling a little. "That's where I met Ri. She held the same views I did. It was one thing to mend a ninja and put them back into action, it was another to heal someone. Our patients were traumatized, hurt and lost so we tried to help them find themselves again. For many, it was becoming a different person, sometimes a different gender. Some had operations,
some preferred just to use costume. I started making them clothes to wear after they left the hospital and I found that many would return to me for more. Some wanted to try different things, some decided to go back to the military and needed supportive wear or altered uniforms. I'd never seen my work so accepted and appreciated. But more than anything, I watched them go and I knew, I just knew, they left with a tiny scrap more hope for themselves. Even now I'm still in contact with some of them. After the war, the shop expanded and after Pain was gone, I started getting new customers from all over. Not just people who want to dress differently, but people who like my designs for what they are. Of course, I could still be working out of a little hut near Konoha for all I care, financial success wasn't the point. Isn't. Won't ever be. I feel rewarded because I'd like to think that I help. And that's all I ever wanted to do."

Sasuke swallowed, running his fingers over the silk of the kofurisode's sleeves. "But your daughter? She wants to be a shinobi. You'd be sending her out into a world that could do that to her. Treat her like those people you were caring for. Aren't you concerned about that?"

"It was a very different war," Michi reasoned. "Barbaric. Soulless. Even the fourth war was nothing like the third. Things are changing. Those up top? They're changing. By the time Shinza makes the academy - if she's even still interested in training - I think the whole shinobi regime will be completely rewritten. That Konoha boy's got a lot of work on his plate, but the Leaf have been strong instigators for peace. I think they'll succeed."

"Hn," Sasuke replied, forgetting himself as he turned toward the mirror to see how the pattern on the kofurisode fell. For a moment he was startled at how feminine he looked: his hair was longer and skirted his shoulders, his face was thinner and the outfit was tied in such a way that it seemed as though he had hips. He looked so different. He looked like his mother.

"Comfy?" Michi asked, breaking his thoughts. Sasuke nodded slowly, trying not to think of Mikoto's smile when she used to greet him on his way home from school. The smell of the freesias in her basket, her hair, the rustle of her shift as she walked.

"Mm. Yeah. But isn't this for special occasions?" He waved the sleeves gently, watching as their little wisteria flowers seemed to ripple on the blue-green fabric. "I think this is possibly more attention-grabbing than the old kimono."

"I suppose," Michi said quietly, "and yes, this one in particular was being saved for an occasion. It was meant to be my sister's for her graduation. During the war she had postponed her studies to go and fight on the front lines. She was always better at fighting. Best out of all of us, really. She wanted to prove herself. She didn't have to." Michi trailed off, watching as Sasuke toyed absently with the collar. A moment of silence passed between them, heavy and turgid with unspoken words.

Then Sasuke said to Michi in the mirror.

"If you like, you can have a photo of this one."

Michi blinked, pushing up to her feet, slowly. "Are you… sure? I don't want you to feel obliged or anything. I mean-"

"Let me wear one of those," Sasuke pointed to Michi's wig. "And I'll do it. Perhaps if I look anything like your sister, I don't know. It might be… a remembrance. Or something."

"Rieko was six foot two, with short blonde hair and a freckles like a dappled pony." Michi laughed. "You couldn't look like her if you tried, Tsutsui-sensei. You might be tall, but you're half the size she was. Why else do you think that Hakama is swimming on you?"

Sasuke blushed. "I thought it was meant to."
"That's a very kind thought, though. Very kind. Let me get the camera and a style for you. I think I have an idea of what you'd suit." Michi disappeared for a few moments and returned with a rather modern looking camera and a handful of russet-coloured hair. "Here… let me help. It's not as hard as it looks."

After a slight tussle and a quick lesson on wig application, Sasuke was staring back at himself in the mirror, barely recognizing the shinobi who once was for the woman who appeared in the glass. Though his eyes were dark, the colour of the wig brightened them a little and warmed up the tone of his dull skin. It was a reddish chestnut brown, cut in soft layers and thin bangs which were swept to the side. It was long enough that he could tie it up, but short enough that maintenance would be easy and it added yet another layer of disguise that his changed figure could not. He no longer looked like an Uchiha. Now he could have been anyone. Now he was just another face in the crowd. It was almost comforting.

For the photograph itself Sasuke didn't so much as pose as he did stand and turn in a few directions, but that seemed to please Michi. He undressed again and pulled on a pair of hard wearing black pants that reached to mid-calf, a long sleeveless tunic over a black fitted tee shirt and a draping woolen jacket that could be criss-crossed over his body or left open. They were well-designed, would stretch over his stomach when it grew (not that Michi had any idea about that) and could layer easily for warmth. Lastly he needed an all purpose jacket - something to keep the weather out. While adjusting the wrap of the woolen coat, he reached blindly toward the hooks on the wall, fumbling for what he thought was an anorak. But the surprise came when he pulled it and glanced at his reflection. Sasuke stared.

It was an orange bomber. Paneled in black and with a high ribbed collar it was the exact replica of Naruto's signature look. The ninja tangerine. The Pea-brain in Pumpkin. Sasuke gaped, eyes wide as saucers, his mouth slightly open. He'd never worn Naruto's jacket before, but he'd been close enough to it to know what it felt like. Its texture. Its smell. And to remember the boy who wore it - who almost had to be released from it with a can opener, he was so attached to the damn thing. Sasuke had thrown it in a river once, forcing Naruto to wash it. He'd almost gained a black eye from his efforts, despite Naruto's lack of taijutsu finesse, there was something to be said for pure, senseless rage. This was the jacket of the boy who beat him, who had been the right to Sasuke's wrong; the win to his loss. The familiarity of it, coupled with the raw emotions that that such an article - such a colour - could propagate knocked Sasuke for six. His nose pinked and his stomach bottomed out. The lump that had grown in his throat nearly choked him. Tears welled and dropped without him realizing.

Naruto had been his constant. Constant friend and constant challenge and constant pain in the ass. But Naruto hadn't come for him now. Naruto was exactly where he wanted to be and he'd given up on Sasuke. He didn't need to stop Sasuke because Sasuke no longer posed a threat. He was missing. Gone. No longer someone to chase. And that meant Sasuke was finally exactly where he'd wanted to be.

Alone.

But alone was hard. And he had Mikoto and his new child to think of. He still hadn't decided what he was doing with them, but slowly over the minutes, over the hours, he knew he couldn't part with them. He couldn't part with a lot of things, they were just too hard to let go. Like this vermilion example of pure stupidity, tenacity and goddamn fucking stupid love, Naruto himself, that dobe, that asshole… He still couldn't let go.

Sasuke sobbed loudly, uncaring that Michi would hear him, unaware that Mikoto was cooing, trying to calm him. He'd pushed this damn colour away for so long, he'd blamed so willingly and it
was all for nothing because everything had fucked up in the end. And even through *that* Naruto was still around him. The jacket had been hanging on a hanger, probably never worn by anyone before Michi stashed it in the fitting room. But somehow it was warm.

"I'm…" Michi was there, suddenly, crouching down beside Sasuke, who had crumpled to the floor, his hands crushed into his cheeks, drenched with his tears. "Oh, Tsutsui-san, I'm sorry. Is… Can I do anything? Can I help? I know it's an awful jacket, but they're so popular with the campaign and all. I just-"

"It's not awful," Sasuke said, his voice cracking. "It's just… over the top. Idiotic. Loud. Obnoxious. But it's not awful."

"Somehow I think you still don't like it that much." Michi chuckled lightly. she patted the floor near Sasuke's hands. "Do you want a tissue?"

Sasuke shook his head. "No. And no, I don't mind it. I never minded it." He paused for a second, before he sniffed and turned back to his host, his hand on his middle. Naruto had always been harping on about himself, but he never hesitated when it came to the welfare of others. He gave willingly and inspired charity - even in some of the most self-possessed people anyone could have ever met. He probably didn't know he was doing it because he was a complete moron, but that was the effect he had. Helping others. Helping himself...

Sasuke took a breath. "Michi, can you ask Kodomi-sensei if she can book me in for an appointment tomorrow? I have a few things that… I need to make sure are safe."

Four days later, Uchiha Sasuke, clad in fresh new clothes with a pack full of supplies, left Amegakure for the low, sloping hills of the mainland ahead. After a few days of solid rest and consistent meals, he had more energy than he'd had in months. Mikoto was cured of her rash and had even gained a few pounds. His unborn was eight weeks old, developing well and though Ri hadn't been able to tell the gender, Sasuke still thought it might be a boy. Ri had been eager for Sasuke to stay longer, she had deemed him far too small to carry what could be a large baby - as second children often tended to be - and she had worried for his safety in later months. Sasuke assured her he would be "home" by then. He didn't think a little white lie like that would be too troublesome.

Rejuvenated and liberated by his new disguise, Sasuke flicked a stray piece of auburn hair out of his eyes and pulled the fleece trim of his green parka down over his forehead. The orange replica had remained back in the racks of Michi's store as once again Sasuke left Naruto behind. But he made sure to hang it facing the door as he left, taking a long look before he turned around. He didn't want to see the back of it. He could only move forward from now.

**Chapter End Notes**

A/N: Long chapter is long. Last week was mental in a good way, but look I wrote things. Next we go back to the (almost) present. One day I'll prepare a proper timeline but not on this day. Thank you for your patience, enjoy giant chapter. Smiley face :)
Morning rolled over Konoha like a teenager emerging from their sleep; uncoordinated, loud and entirely without grace. It was the performance from the orchestra of God's will. Or, at least, Her sense of humor. Daylight seared the clouds like chords from an ill-tuned violin. Morning dew dropped over the earth with all the grace of a drunk glockenspiel and bird song crashed into the sky like a third rate cymbal player. On acid. It was a one-world band of pure symphonic pain and was no small wonder that the many denizens of Konoha would rise with a sort of grudging acerbity rather than joy and appreciation at the birth of a new day.

It was cool, but not cold. There was a breeze, but little wind. It was summer, but the season was still caught in its prepubescent capriciousness and hadn't quite got the hang of the temperature; it fluctuated between chilly and balmy on a rolling scale. At this time of year, dawn didn't so much creep over the edge of Hokage Rock as it did catapult itself over the precipice, eyes covered, breath held; balls on tongue. Thus, the village of the leaf was immediately painted in a cannonball of light so bright and so sudden several crows had to make emergency landings, lest the glare from the windows cause them to crash. Sasuke squinted a little, pulling his scarf closer to his chin as he padded through the streets with practiced steps, staying invisible against the scattered clusters of the morning crowd.

No matter the weather or season, Konoha always got up early. It was a Hidden Village, early birds didn't just catch the worm, but set the trap for the next unwitting invertebrate the for the next day. Businesses opened early. Joggers bounced enthusiastically up and down the canal. Ninja, who were the most abundant of all, tugging at hoods and hitae ate; rolling their shoulders and massaging aching muscles they ambled through the streets of Konoha toward their rendezvous points. Luckily, Sasuke had managed to secure the paper route that kept him well away from the Hokage's office, ergo most of the popular meeting places, but he still had a few places to navigate carefully. He passed through the Aburame and close to the Hatake clan; the Nara weren't far either. After the near-incident in the Land of Rivers, he wasn't all that worried about Shikamaru (that bastard wasn't about to get up early anyway), and Shino, for all his many insect spies, hadn't managed to spot him either. Or he had and he just hadn't said. It was hard to tell with Shino. If anything, Sasuke was more concerned with the Inuzuka and the possibility that Kiba might sniff him out. There may be many things different about him, but Akamaru's nose was the best in the business. There was certainly something that the dog might be able to pick up, if given the chance. Luckily, they lived on the far side of the village and tended to take their mutts to the vast fields and training grounds to Konoha's north-east. Considering the rest of the village was downwind from that area, he figured he was about as safe as he could be.

Mikoto cooed at him, her fingers curling in his hair as she looked over his shoulder and he hummed lightly to himself as he folded another paper, pushing into the letterbox of the curio shop. Old man Hisoka waved at him lazily from his balcony above, acrid smoke the color of cinnabar curled from his pipe. His thick glasses caught the light, causing a strange effect on his eyes, but Sasuke simply nodded in response and continued down the street, pre-folding as he walked. His shoes were starting to feel tight today, even in the morning, and his ankles felt heavy. He hadn't experienced this kind of discomfort during his pregnancy with Mikoto, but he figured it was because he was on
his feet more than he had been in his cell. The only exercise he'd gotten with the Kakkou was simply pacing back and forth in his prison, while his belly grew. He was not expected to stay in shape as long as he could conceive. Still, he limped slightly as he walked, and he tried to put the discomfort from his mind - instead giving his belly a quick rub over the heavy t-shirt he was wearing. Honestly, mornings were becoming a complete write off. He was getting consistently tired and run down. Everything hurt and his memory was starting to play tricks on him so much, he had to write himself notes to constantly remind himself of the simplest things. How could he have thought he would be fine with baby number two and no external help? He felt like he'd been run over by one of those train things he'd seen in the Land of Snow. Or flattened by A again. Or both; both was apt.

Sasuke stifled a yawn and nodded genially at the baker, who smiled and handed him a bread roll in exchange for his paper. Sasuke engaged in a few pleasantries, glad for the breakfast and tore a little of the soft centre out for Mikoto to destroy in her hands. Occasionally she'd eat it, but most of the time it ended up tricking down his collar and flecked throughout his wig. He didn't complain. At least he could wash the damn thing at the end of the day and having something for the toddler to play with did keep her satisfied for a time.

Next was the green grocer, who had an apple and a little piece of peach for Mikoto to gnaw on. Sasuke stored the apple in his bag, but handed the stone fruit to his daughter, knowing that he would probably be fishing the silver out of his clothing in a short while. Five minutes later, Sasuke felt it slipping down his back between his bra and his shirt. Ugh. Mikoto was giggling. Sasuke could have sworn she'd done it on purpose. The soba restaurant owner waved good morning while sweeping leaves from her welcome mats; the man at the unagi barbecue stall nodded as he flapped his apron in the air a few times, shaking off the soot before he began to stoke his grill. The streets were active, but the overall atmosphere was peaceful. Quiet. A world within a world and Sasuke began to fall into a daze, enjoying the sun on his face and the light breeze picking up his hair. He had two more streets to go, then he could return to the publishers and park up at the hot desk which had more or less become his own. Mikoto would sleep and he could spend the rest of the day drafting up new stories that paralleled the life of a certain person a little more closely than was probably advisable, but Sasuke's sense of dark comedy simply couldn't resist. Miki cackled, squishing the destroyed bread in her hands. Birds swooped overhead. Someone was singing sweetly as they prepared for a new day's work. All was well. Until a familiar voice announced:

"Finally home-dattebayo!"

That was when Sasuke's whole little harmonious world came crashing down around him. That voice. That verbal tic. That was… That was…

_Naruto._

Freezing on the spot, paper still clutching in his hand, Sasuke turned slightly to his left, watching as two very familiar figures strode into view. Orange. Pink. The storm and the flower. He knew he'd end up catching sight of them one day; he didn't realize fate had decided it would be so soon. Sasuke's throat became a vacuum and his breath escaped him. His mouth felt dry and swallowing seemed like some kind of impossible jutsu, not second nature. It was too soon. It was… It had to be. He wasn't ready for them yet, he needed time.

But Naruto was there and Naruto looked good. Better than good – even Sasuke could admit his old rival cut a silhouette that he probably would have never dreamed of back in their days as genin. He couldn't stop staring. It seemed he'd grown taller since Sasuke saw him last – they might have possibly been the same height by now. His skin was deeply tanned, causing the markings on his face to stand out prominently, like tiger stripes. Like badges of honor. His hair had grown a little
longer, but it was no longer the towheaded bush of his childhood. It seemed styled. He might have styled it, but knowing Naruto, he'd probably just been attacked by someone brandishing a comb. Sakura most likely. He was wearing the standard orange tracksuit, but had tied the jacket around his waist, and through his mesh undershirt, the lines of his muscles were clearly defined. He was carved out of granite. He was as mesmerizing as he was annoying and Sasuke felt a pang of jealousy sting him. Naruto looked amazing. Strong. He was everything he'd ever been, but that childishness was gone. He was confident now. A hero now. Even Sakura appeared fairly put together – not that she'd ever been the human disaster Naruto had, but she seemed intrepid. Happy. That smile was genuine and held nothing of her former uncertainty. They were not his team anymore; they were above Team 7 now. Theirs was a level Sasuke didn't understand.

"Urgh, lucky for some, at least you get to sleep!" Sakura sighed, smiling. "I better go check in at the hospital – see how Shizune's getting on. Sai, can you take the scrolls back to HQ?" She eased her duffel off her shoulder and handing the dark-haired boy trailing behind her. He groaned as he took the weight of it, almost stumbling a little. Mumbling apologies, Sakura quickly reached in to grab the other strap, helping him hoist it onto his back. "Sorry," she said sheepishly. "Forgot it had so much in it."

"No problem," Sai replied, grinning back. Asshole. Sasuke grunted under his breath. Must've been scraping the bottom of the barrel for ninja these days if they thought that grey slip of bone was going to be any kind of substitute for him. According to Obito's information, Sai had been one of Danzo's operatives and that meant Sasuke disliked him on principle. But even if he hadn't been, he doubted he would have liked him anyway. And who was watching the little turncoat? None other than Hashirama's petri dish, Yamato. That weird-eyed creep was another that Obito had warned him about as he'd recovered from his ocular transplant. The elder Uchiha had been hissing, picking splinters out of his skin as he spoke. Sasuke hoped they'd gone in deep. He hated the pair of them equally.

So team 7 was all about replacements now, was it? With Kakashi in the Hokage's office and himself supposedly AWOL… or just simply defected. No. Sasuke was the enemy now, wasn't he? At least, that's still how it would appear on paper. Sasuke pushed back against the wall behind him, folding the paper slowly as the group laughed and horsed around a little before splitting into their own directions: Sakura toward the hospital, Yamato and Sai to the Shinobi HQ and Naruto… Well Naruto should have turned earlier if he was going him, but it looked as though he was taking the long route. A path that meant he'd directly pass where Sasuke was standing.

Sasuke waited, his heart in his mouth, as Naruto yawned and ambled down the street, stretching his arms behind him and throwing the odd smile out at the villagers who greeted him on his way past. He felt light headed, he buzzed with anticipation. He should have been afraid, but for some reason, the fear wasn't there. If Naruto caught him now, if he saw him… How bad could that be? How terrible would that really be? Sasuke shifted his foot and moved forward a little, eyes on the path of his former team mate as the blond made his way down the street. If he took another, say, eighteen steps - eighteen small steps – he'd connect with him. He'd be right there. Right in front of him and Naruto would, if he was paying attention, have to stop. Smile that smile. Look at him with those eyes like blue lightning. He might even speak to him. He might even crack a joke or comment on the weather, the usual small talk that Naruto was good at. Maybe he'd even greet Mikoto (who was, unbeknownst to Sasuke, watching their target closely, transfixed by the bright colours). He might notice Sasuke was pregnant and ask about the baby. He would see everything. Everything. Sasuke wouldn't be able to hide and the truth… It would be in front of him. All that hurt, all that pain. And all that history.

What if he was still angry?
Slowly, Sasuke moved his foot back, feeling his heart trying to jackhammer its way through his rib cage. He'd know. He would know. He might not recognize him immediately, but he would. Naruto wasn't particularly shrewd, but he did tend to notice things after a moment and he was sure he knew his face. Even with the wig, even under the makeup. Naruto would know him. It was instinctive. And Sasuke didn't think he was ready for that yet. It was too much – too hard. That was far too heavy a truth for him right now, and he wasn't strong enough to carry it. Deep down, in a place that Sasuke had only begun to uncover within himself during his journey, he knew he hadn't been strong enough for years. And Naruto hadn't just been angry; he'd been more than angry. He'd been indescribable.

So Sasuke watched with solemn, dark eyes as Naruto slowly padded out of view. His laugh and his voice echoed down the street like the sweet scent of a fading breeze. Within moments, he was gone. Sasuke cleared his throat, giving himself a mental shake before finishing the rest of the street in the opposite direction. He had plenty to think about and Naruto wasn't his only concern. He had to keep in mind that while Konoha had proved a good place for his little family to start their life together, money was still tight and there was the constant fear of being discovered by his peers. What if things went wrong? What if he was incarcerated? Would Mikoto be put into foster care? Would he have to bear his son in prison? And even if his identity wasn't revealed immediately what the hell else was he going to do here once his outgoings became more of a financial burden? He couldn't exactly apply for government assistance; he didn't have any papers. Mikoto wasn't even a resident. And what would he do once Mikoto was older? Or when his son had grown? They'd need to go to school. They'd end up making friends and then what? Meeting other parents? Forming deeper lies, longer stories? How long did he think he could keep this up? How long would he be looking into shadows, searching for any sign of his captors chasing him. Of others like Orochimaru who might have vested interests in him.

His clan was murdered here. His parents slaughtered. His losses were created by a series of bad decisions thanks to a select group of people who made the word inept seem positively adroit. Perhaps he'd been mad to return here. But the world was changing, and while it was, there was still danger in it. He'd had too many close calls. He might be a criminal in Konoha, but if anything he was as safe here as he would be if he shut himself away for good. Even if his children were taken from him, they'd be safe here. They might be the children of a fugitive, but although Konoha had done so many things wrong, they protected their own. Naruto had been seen as a demon child for thirteen years before the Leaf villagers had started to accept him, yet he'd always been fed. He'd had a roof over his head. He might have been lonely, scarred, in pain; but he'd been able to survive. They'd both survived. Perhaps that was the best he could expect - it was certainly better than what the Kakkou might do.

Sasuke sighed as he walked, lost in his own musings. His feet might have known the route and his hands worked on menial repetition (draw fold post, draw fold post) but he wasn't really thinking about where he was going. His mind was other things. Orange things. Blond things. One blond thing in particular, for sure, but not the blonde thing that stood at the entrance of the flower shop, holding out her hand for the paper. Ino rubbed her eyes, trying to clear the sleep from them as she attempted a smile. It was too damn early.

"Mm, thanks very much," she said politely, before the sentence opened up into a wide yawn. "S'cuse me… not usually on the early shift. I-"

She stopped. Stared. Her fingers were closing around the newspaper in her hand, but her eyes? Her eyes were on that face: the set of that jaw, the line of those cheekbones. She knew that face. It was thinner than she'd last seen and somehow it had become impossibly paler. There was make up painting it; bringing out its long eyelashes, exaggerating the shape of the eyes; filling the otherwise sparse brows. But Ino knew Uchiha Sasuke's face. She would never have forgotten his face, having
watched it, studied it, fantasized about it since she was young. For a second, his face was all she saw; he filled her vision, drowned out everything else. He was like sunlight peeking out from behind a cloud. Static in the air...

...but then he was gone. The sun dipped away and the boy disappearing what seemed to be a cloud of auburn hair and a flash of green parka. She managed a dumbfounded Suh? but he didn't hear her, he carried on - vanishing behind the trays of daffodils stacked to the awning from the courier's delivery. For a moment, she thought she'd been dreaming. But she was holding the paper, and the peal of the little bells attached to the noren signaled the departure of a visitor. Someone had been here. And that someone had been Sasuke-kun. She could have sworn it. Why he was wearing makeup didn't seem to concern her – it was obviously a disguise. She'd barely seen the rest of him, but if he'd been in high heels, she wouldn't have batted an eyelid. He was back. Sasuke-kun had returned to Konoha. And if he was in disguise, that obviously meant he was afraid of being apprehended. He hadn't noticed her - perhaps he wasn't thinking clearly? Maybe he meant her to notice him not noticing? Maybe... maybe...

Ino backed away from the exterior display benches slowly, pulling a box of irises with her as she drifted inside. Should she run after him? Seek him out? No, that would draw too much attention. She'd have to find him on her own. Safely. Carefully. Don't scare him away; if he ran again it could be years before she found him. Should she tell Sakura? Naruto? Surely his old team mates would want to know their lost lamb had returned home? No matter what Sakura said about him, she'd want to know, right? It was her responsibility as a friend to tell her. Give her peace of mind, if anything. Sasuke was important, but Sakura was more important to her. They'd become close after the war, she didn't want to damage that link. Sakura first, then Sasuke.

Ino rested the flowers on the workbench and dusted the pollen from her hands before she tugged off her apron, yelled to her mother that she had an errand to run, then dashed down the street toward the Haruno household.

Sasuke sank into the worn pleather of the break room chair, yawning widely as he rubbed Mikoto's back, encouraging her to nurse with a little more energy. She was usually ravenous in the morning, but lately she'd been listless, difficult to latch and unwilling to settle. He'd never known her to be fussy – she'd been a very easy child since day one. But all of a sudden she was starting to complain and fought him, miserably. Perhaps she was beginning to develop that particular standoffish Uchiha attitude? Or maybe she was growing some teeth. Nuja had told Sasuke that she'd begin developing teeth around this age and that was always a fiasco. He wasn't one hundred percent sure how he'd deal with that, but he would pass by the chemist on the way home – the chemist had always been an excellent fount of free knowledge. After all, it wasn't as if he could go to the hospital. Konoha asked for ID on entry, and he'd never be able to afford civilian healthcare. One of the bonuses of putting his life on the line as a ninja; free maintenance.

But he wasn't feeling so well himself. Dizziness hounded his every movement. He was swelling up everywhere, not just his belly; and the extra fluid played havoc on his joints. Most of the time he drifted through his day on a mild headache, tension pressing between his eyes, but every now and again that pain grew stronger and he to collapse in bed for several hours, sleeping it off. Nausea was a tumultuous ocean in his stomach, and at nearly five months, he figured he should probably be over any chance of morning sickness by now. Perhaps it was just delayed, since he'd been so gung-ho earlier in his pregnancy. Yeah, that had to be it. That was it.

"Oh, is she getting her first tooth?" Naoko asked, clapping into the break room in her high heels, coffee cup in hand. She grinned down at the pair, tugging the instant coffee granules closer to her. The sound of the jar was hollow on the counter. "Oh and darl', I'm gonna need a picture? Design
are wanting to put more visual elements into other parts of the paper - make us all more personable, you know? Give your fans a face to put to a name. Keichi will be coming up later with a camera."

"I…" Sasuke gulped, tugging the towel he'd placed over Mikoto to make her feel more secure while she nursed. There was a cold sweat on the back of his neck and it wasn't from the fluctuations in temperature he'd been experiencing lately. This was just pure anxiety. "Don't think I'd be comfortable with that. I don't like photos."

"Well hon, we need something," Naoko added several spoons of coffee to her sugar and held the cup under the water urn. "What's your problem? You're a pretty thing; you'd take a great picture."

"Whether I'm pretty or not shouldn't reflect my ability as a writer," Sasuke parried.

Naoko seemed dismayed. "But your fans," she began, and then sighed and turned back to her coffee, depressing the tap on the urn to fill her cup. "Well, I can't fault you there. You're right, of course, but that's the type of thing you'll hear all the time. We need more personality. or We should be more on the level of our readers and all that crap. Honestly, a paper can't just be a paper anymore."

"You said I had fans who were curious about me," Sasuke said, picking up his pen from the table where a finished article lay in front of him. He began sketching a few lines at the bottom of the ledger. "How many, would you say?"

"A good… fifteen? Twenty?" Naoko watched him carefully, tapping her teaspoon a few times on the rim of her mug before she took a swig. "Fan mail's on the responses desk if you want to read it."

"No, I don't c- I mean, no," Sasuke doodled for a few moments, concentrating her. "I don't mind about that." He didn't want to read them. He didn't want to be known. "But wouldn't it be better to keep my identity a secret? That way, people won't stop me and ask me for clarification, or more stories. They'll have to go through the paper. You want the readers coming back, don't you?"

Sasuke ended with punch, pushing the finished article and his drawing toward his supervisor. Naoko nodded, obviously happy that she might upset the design team a little, but frowned when she looked at the proffered substitute image.

"What the hell is this?"

"It's a tomato," Sasuke told her.

"It is?"

"Yes."

"Why are you a tomato?" Naoko, glanced at him, mystified. "I thought you were making a caricature, or a cartoon or something."

"I like tomatoes," Sasuke said, by way of explanation. "And that's about all I can draw."

There was a pause. "Sarada, dear. Have you ever seen a tomato before? Only-" Naoko back pedaled as Sasuke shot her a withering look. "-only this looks, you know. More like a potato."

"Then I'll be a Pomato. Whatever," Sasuke sighed. "Take it or leave it, I don't want a photograph."

"I'll take it; it's fine. It's fine." Naoko added the submission to her pile of papers and turned away to
clop back out the door, before she added under her breath. "Well, at least you can write".

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I don't like mornings either. And Sasuke totally didn't notice he gave the paper to Ino, he was too wrapped up in thinking about Naruto.
Also, the teenager I'm using in the analogy for morning was me. There may be some teenagers who love mornings and leap out of bed and are all sunshine and brilliance, but I wasn't one of those.

Also, also: Keep an eye out on my profile page - when I get a second I'd like to put up a couple of maps (Sasuke's Journey map and Konoha City map) so you can get a feel for what I'm looking at. I might also upload my chapter list in order of events so you get a feel for how things are unfolding along a linear timeline. I do love writing like this, but I think a little clarification may go a long way :)
The Momentary Lapse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tsuchi no Kuni, 29th July
Year of the Tiger.

"I feel like a balloon."

Nuja looked up as Sasuke waddled back from the far wall of the cell, his expression tense with discomfort. One hand was hooked under his belly, the other trailed the bars for support. It was a slow, arduous journey back and forth; back and forth and he moved with a carefulness that made him seem fragile. He'd never gotten used to his constantly growing, heavy body. He seemed to treat it as though it wasn't his, despite the disdain he voiced about it. Nuja raised a brow.

"I'm not surprised; you look like a balloon. One that's about to pop any second. Get off your feet, you're making me nervous."

Sasuke shook his head. "If I stop, it kicks. I'd rather the walking and the pressure on my legs than the kicking." He winced, pausing to catch his breath. "It's like a lead weight now. Everything inside me feels six times heavier. How much longer do I have to put up with this?"

"They'll probably come and take you within a fortnight, sit down."

Nuja ordered, pushing to her feet in exasperation. "It's not physically possible for you to burst, but you're sure testing my knowledge of human anatomy right now. Save your energy – you're pale as the underbelly of a fish."

"You seen many fish bellies?" Sasuke grumbled as he ambled over, shaking his head stubbornly as she approached him. "No, I don't want to sit. This is helping."

"It's helping tire you out. You still got a little longer of her growing in there." Nuja took his elbow in a strong grip and navigated him back to his sleeping pad. It was like a tug guiding a barge downriver to dock, slow, conscientious. As much as she wanted him off his feet, she wouldn't rush him. Instead, they took many small steps with little rests in between and though he tried to remain upright, she encouraged him to lean on her. "Trust me. I done this before, you haven't. And yeah, I seen a lot of fish bellies. Fishing town, you know. My home."

Sasuke didn't know. He probably should have by now, but the pair hadn't really discussed their past in detail with each other, despite having shared a cell for several months. Feeling a little guilty, and hoping to take his mind off the pain, Sasuke obliged as Nuja helped him sit cross legged – then took her hands as she sat in front of him, aiding him into a gentle forward fold stretch. He barely moved an inch; his belly simply pressed on his thighs and got in the way. But it was enough to send a pleasant stretch down his hamstrings, posterior chain and through his ass.

"You're from a fishing village?" He asked, closing his eyes. "Nn, that's good. That's… yeah."

"Told ya,"

Nuja smiled, pulling a little more. The kid might have been a completely different shape, but he could stretch as well as ever. Ninjas; they were bundles of switchblades joined together with rubber bands, the lot of them. At least that would be a bonus in the weeks ahead when the baby went through her final growth spurt. He'd easily move from the size of a house to the size of a
small apartment building – he'd need all the stretch he could get. "And yeah," she continued. "I'm from an island out in the Yellow Salt Sea. Hibiscus bay - just a little place but there's lots 'a fishing out that way. You like fishing?"

"Never really had the patience for it," Sasuke admitted. He recalled his usual technique and grunted. No sport there, Nuja would have called it cheating. "I wouldn't be any good at it."

"Hen, you'd be surprised. I used to teach the kids in between trawls. Know how hard it is to try and get kids to sit still for a couple of hours?"

Sasuke just nodded. He remembered Iruka trying to teach his class to meditate way back in his days at the academy. He would have only been about five or six years old then – what a joke. He'd never seen such a less than successful operation; the man might as well have been teaching them to fly for all the good it did. It was also one of the first times Naruto had managed to gain the group's attention when he make up the chant *This is so boring, we should be snoring! And several other catchy numbers. The idiot had been so happy when the class continued chanting after the bell had rung and they headed home. It was probably one of the few times anyone actually remembered him after school.

Nuja began to ease him over to one side, gently guiding his arm up over his head. She stopped when Sasuke groaned.

"That hurt?"

"Just stiff," he replied. "It doesn't hurt. Everything's just stiff and heavy. Like my muscles are full of water. Feel like my spleen's put on weight."

"You wait 'til you give birth." Nuja told him, initiating the stretch once again. "That'll wreck you. I'm not going to sugar-coat it. It's basically one of the most painful things you'll ever experience."

"I've been poisoned before," Sasuke offered. "Bitten by a snake; sort of. It was more of a poisonous jutsu, I guess. I've had a few decent injuries, but the poisoning was the worst. You'd be surprised how much pain you can handle when you've only got a few minutes to feel it, but a poison works slowly and hurts the most."

Nuja looked dumbfounded for a moment. But then she snapped herself out of it and shrugged. "Well I haven't been poisoned, so I can't compare that. But it can take a long time. So if being poisoned feels like your whole body's busting apart and you're basically shitting a planet over several hours, then yeah, that's about it."

"No. No planet shitting," Sasuke wrinkled his nose. "Just a lot of pain. Sharp. Burning. Like I set all my nerves on fire. And the world kinda twisted and pivoted away. And it was cold, but hot at the same time."

"Sounds nasty," Nuja commented. "When you're in labor, you can be pretty aware of what's going on, as much as it stings. You generally just follow what your body knows how to do by instinct."

"That's what I'm worried about," Sasuke said. "You know, among other things. My body *shouldn't* have that instinct; it only ever knew what to do at the start, it doesn't know how to finish the job. I don't…" He swallowed heavily. "I'm… I don't know what's going to happen."

"Do you want me to tell you?" Nuja said, gently. "I mean, I'm no doctor, but-"

"How many have you had?" Sasuke interrupted, sitting up. His eyes were on his knees. "Here. How many did they make you have?"
"None," Nuja exhaled slowly. "I was pregnant. Three times. Three pregnancies. But they didn't make it. First got to, I don't know, ten weeks. Second was twenty two. The third I saw on the table. He never took a breath."

"But if… if you're not… If it doesn't go as planned, then how come you're still here?" Sasuke frowned. "If things don't work out-"

Nuja laughed. Short. Mirthless. "You think they'd let me go?" She shook her head. "My bloodline's rare. I'm not a ninja - our family hasn't been for generations. But they believe the kekkei genkai’s still there and they'll try to breed it out of me however they can. They do their research, as you well know. So I guess I'll stay here until I die. Or, Gods willing, some great act of mercy frees me. Us, hopefully."

"Did you…" There was a pause. Sasuke licked his lips. "Did you have kids before you got here?"

"Yeah, four." Nuja smiled and nodded as Sasuke stared at her, incredulous.

"But you can't be more than… twenty?"

"Ha!" Nuja snorted. "Aren't you kind! Twenty. Gods, that was a while ago."

"Well how old are you?"

"Uh-uh. That's my secret to the grave now!" Nuja said, chuffed. "But I've had four boys - they'd be your age I think. A little younger, maybe?"

"My age?!" Sasuke stared at her. "But… Where are they? They haven't come for you? They haven't tried to free you? Didn't you say you'd been here for a long time?"

"Oh, they were grown and gone long before was taken," Nuja told him. "They weren't island folk; they were strong boys with strong dreams. They were like their father. Each one followed him back to the Land of Iron. Little ducks following their destiny, they were. They couldn't have stayed on the island, they were meant for a bigger world. They trained with their dad, then went to go serve under Mifune Taishō."

"Mifune," Sasuke said, slowly. He began to pale. "You mean… They became samurai?"

"Mhmm," Nuja watched him carefully. "The Yellow Sea used to be part of the old Samurai pilgrimages – they had facilities on some of the islands near mine. It wasn't uncommon for them to come visit. I'd say about twenty per cent of our population had Samurai blood." She clicked her tongue, slyly. "You worked with samurai before? Thought they were a bit of a relic for shinobi. Old fashioned and all."

"Not worked with, exactly," Sasuke breathed, feeling his chest tighten. The Kage summit. Mifune's bodyguards. He'd taken them down without a second thought. What if-

"Y-you don't know what position they were in, did you? If they were guards or… or infantry or-"

"I haven't spoken to them in years," Nuja answered. She didn't seem bothered by the fact that she hadn't had contact with her boys. Perhaps, for her people, it was completely normal."The samurai are very secretive. They're not like shinobi, they keep their training and their ranks very close to their chest until they've reached a certain level. I suppose I'll hear from them once they've become what they need to be."

"Yeah. You will," Sasuke felt himself shiver. "You'll get letters and… they'll come for you. They'll
come break you out of here. Those samurai are-" Weak "Skilled." Fell like leaves against my sword. "Some of the best warriors ever, so I hear." I didn't even have to try.

"Are you alright?" Nuja reached up to press her hand to his forehead. "You're shaking."

"Tell me-" Sasuke pulled away a little. "Tell me what happens when it comes. Tell me about the baby. What's the process? I know… I mean… I get the general idea, but..." He petered off, fingers dragging in the blanket beneath him. His whole body felt tense, cold. Nuja rested her hand on his knee.

"Like I said, it's gonna hurt. I only know from my own experience and from the other guy who was in here. It's different for everyone. First time, it was a fiasco. I was completely unaware of what was happening until my water broke-"

"Your what did what?" Sasuke looked horrified. "You… break?"

"No. You know how I told you about the way your body's keeping the baby inside? All the fluid around her is like a bubble inside you. When she's ready to be born, that fluid drains and that's when you know everything's on. The muscles in your belly and your uterus contract and pull the cervix open and the baby comes out."

"The cerv…?"

"Kinda like a tunnel. Well, the bottom part of the vagina. So it's like-" Nuja held up her hands, thumbs almost together, fingers curving on either side as though she was simulating wings. When Sasuke turned a rather exciting shade of chartreuse, she changed tact. "Ok, I'll try to be less graphic. Um… So your muscles help pull that open, kinda like it's yawning. A great big stretch. Only it can take a long time and it's not very pleasant. It's really all hormones and muscles at this point. My first labour was eight hours. My fourth was three. You might feel scared, but it's all very mechanical. You might be a boy, but those doctors have given you what you need for the process. They have to; they don't get their product otherwise."  

"Yeah, well they can go fuck themselves," Sasuke groused, buffing his belly with the heel of his hand in sharp, agitated movements. "Fucking hate them. Hate all this. Hate being-" he motioned to his middle. "-like this. I'm enormous. I look ridiculous. Forget shitting the planet, I'm the planet."

"You're not a planet. You're tiny," Nuja told him, clicking her tongue as he squirmed uncomfortably. "Here, lie down on your side. Let's see if we can't make you more comfortable."

"Tiny." Sasuke almost rolled his eyes as he tipped over slowly, letting Nuja place a pillow under his head. She nodded as she balled up an extra blanket and pushed that under the side of his belly to give him a little more stability. After a moment's pause, she carefully rolled up his shift to the top of his ribs and placed her hand on his side. She'd only seen him unclothed a few times - usually his body was hidden by the oversized shirt-cum-shift and the baggy drawstring pants provided by their generous hosts. His stomach was a perfect sphere, round and firm as a drum. The skin was stretched to the limit and faint veins the colour of cornflowers spidered over the surface. A faint dark line segmented the middle of his bulging belly and his navel popped out like the cap of an acorn. Thanks to the incredible strength of his abdominal muscles, he carried very high, which made him seem even larger and as his belly had grown, swelling him into a strange caricature of himself, she'd forgotten how slender he actually was.

It also didn't help that all his female attributes were literally tacked on top of a body which was still as close to its male form as possible. Internal wizardry aside, without the globe in the centre of him and without the breasts, Sasuke was fundamentally the same construction as he was before he'd
been captured. He was skinnier, he'd lost a great deal of muscle mass, but overall he was simply a renovated package. There was none of the grace a professional surgeon would have exercised for any form of transgender reassignment surgery. He was forced-fed hormones so that his new parts would operate as they were supposed to, but this wasn't a carefully planned, well-considered change. This wasn't his choice; he hadn't spent years inside a body that he didn't connect with. Hadn't found himself playing with traits akin to an opposite gender; hadn't suffered the complications that followed such experimentation. There had been no studying, no weighing of options.

In a way, Sasuke's transformation had almost been easier. He didn't have to make any decisions; there were no sacrifices or hard choices on his part. It really had nothing to do with him at all, as a person; it was simply means to an end. A man's body gutted out and a woman's mechanics thrown inside. How the Kakkou actually performed this feat, Nuja didn't know. It was jutsu-based 'editing' and she wasn't sure how that worked. But she did know that the actual physical process was going to be difficult. The kid's hips were a boy's hips, and a slim boy at that. Labor wasn't going to be a problem; it was going to be a nightmare. Unless the Kakkou had some way of forcibly widening his pelvis, Sasuke would be in terrible trouble. They could cut the baby out, but as far as she knew they didn't like to do that. It made the healing period longer, meant they couldn't have optimum productivity. Meant they needed to wait before they put another baby in him. The Kakkou didn't like waiting.

Nuja just remained silent though, considering this as she started rubbing his hips - massaging the strained and tired muscles into relaxation. Sasuke made an appreciative noise.

"That's… good. Nn… That's… really good."

"Feels better, doesn't it?" Nuja told him, making large circles in the small of his back with the base of her palm. "Just relax, ok? Breathe. Take it slow."

Sasuke nodded mildly, letting Nuja's ministrations lull him into a meditative doze. At length he spoke again. "Hey…"

"Mm?" Nuja pressed her thumb in carefully at the rise of his iliac crest. Sasuke wiggled a little at the sensation.

"You said there was a boy," he continued. "Another boy, like me."

There was a pause. "Yeah?"

"What happened to him?" Sasuke waited for an answer, and when it didn't come, he added. "Did he have the kid? Did everything… work?"

Nuja stopped. The hands that were working in Sasuke's thin flesh halted, her fingers soft on his skin. Silence wandered between them, thick and intrusive; an unwanted third wheel in the conversation. Sasuke heard Nuja breathe in through her nose, felt the set of her jaw through her body and the tension that suddenly weighed itself on her small frame. Finally, she said.

"Promise me something?"

"What?"

"Do what they say. When it comes down to it, when it's at the end and there's nothing you can do but let your body take over, don't fight them. Let them do what they need to."

"Nuja," Sasuke rarely said her name. They weren't that familiar - it was usually omitted for a tag
less personal. Not today. "What happened to that other boy?"

"Just… listen to them. They might be assholes, they might be wrong, but they don't want anything to happen to you. They don't want…" She trailed off, shaking her head. "Don't fight them. Even if you think you're better off dead than here; you're not. Your life is worth more than anything they can do to you. Promise me you won't fight them."

He didn't ask again. By now he'd guessed. The boy didn't make it. The boy chose an easier option. A road some might have called honorable. Sasuke didn't share that view. "I promise."

But the idea had frightened him; he couldn't deny that. The thought that there was now only the repetition of this life, these feelings, this sensation, rattled him and he found himself silently panicking. His body tensed; fingers numb, shaking. A wetness gathered in the corners of his eyes and his cheeks began to heat and pinking with hectic colour at their high points. He'd be trapped here forever. Forced to breed for them forever. Why hadn't he been stronger? Why hadn't he fought them off? He'd been one of the strongest ninja in the world, damnit, and he couldn't stop a bunch of shifty assholes? One slip, and down the hole he fell.

"Why didn't I just stay?"

His lips were trembling. He hated it, but they trembled. He couldn't stop them. There was movement in the room and Nuja shifted, moving her body to lie down behind him. She curled into him like a spoon. Her face was in his hair, lips by his ear and one arm draped over his shoulder, palm against his breastbone. It pulled inward and she held him close. Sasuke didn't like to be touched - he didn't want to be embraced without his permission. Never had. Before, even a pat on the shoulder would earn the offending party a glare full of blades, but with Nuja it was different. She hugged like his mother. Her arms were safe and secure; her embrace was home. Without hearing himself, he let out a sharp bark of anguish - the first in months of dull acceptance - and Nuja hushed him with a quiet whisper, kissing him behind his ear. She spoke again gently, closing her eyes.

"You're from the Leaf, right? The big village in the Land of Fire?"

"Mm," Sasuke's voice was so cracked, he didn't trust it anymore lest it crumble completely and let all his secrets and shame scatter to the floor.

"I heard they had a lot of big clans. Lots of families. Your family there, are they?"

"Mm." It wasn't so much a lie as a fact missing a few details. Yes, the Uchiha were still there. They weren't alive as such but they were there.

"Tell me about them?"


"What do your parents do?"

Sasuke swallowed. "Dad," he began, feeling a his pain rising in his chest. "Dad's… Police officer. Chief of Police. Works at the station. Mom's a…" Mom. She'd always been Mom. But she'd been something before that. Something else… Wait… that's right. She was...

Despite himself, Sasuke began to smile. "Mom writes textbooks for the academy. After she retired as a ninja to have me and my brother, she started putting packages together for ninja schools. She… She used to always tell me off for not doing my homework because she wanted to make sure her lessons were correct. She'd check my work, I'd check hers."
"She musta been a great kunoichi if she writes books about it." Nuja mused. Sasuke nodded.

"I think she was. I never saw her in action, but I think she was."

"What about your brother? Is he older? Younger?"

"Older," Sasuke felt that lump rise again. It was warm in his throat but he smiled wider. "I was so jealous of him when I was little. He's one of the best ninja I've ever known. We didn't get a lot of time to play together but... But he tried where he could. He tried really hard. I didn't know that back then, but now that I think about it, he tried to be with me as much as possible."

"He must be in his twenties now," Nuja said. "Does he still live in Konoha?"

"No, he left. He went-" Sasuke bit his lip. "He went to the new lands across the oceans. The far continents. Always had a bug to travel, he'd never sit still. It was always "another time" this, and "Next time" that."

"He must have been busy. Bet he thinks of you, though. Does he write?"

"Not really. The messages he left were always-" Violent. "-brief. But I think he does. One day we'll be together again. We'll catch up. It'll be like old times. We'll talk. Hunt..."

"Maybe he can teach you to fish?" Nuja suggested, hopefully.

"Yeah, him and my cousin used to go down to the canal and fish a lot," Sasuke sniffed. When had he started crying? He didn't even remember the tears coming. But Nuja's arms were around him and it felt good. The lies were so easy, so smooth because they were the lies he'd told himself for years, over and over each night to ease the pain. After the massacre, the time between waking and sleep left Sasuke as little more than a husk; a hollow shell that would hold only what he needed to operate on the most basic levels. Everything else: joy, sorrow, pain, memory - all those feelings were obliterated in favour of the emptiness that filled and swelled inside him. Later, that emptiness had invited rage to step in and the world became dark and manageable through their guidance. But he'd dreamed once. He'd lied before. Delusion could be comforting in its own way, but now he was beyond his own self-deception.

Now he was simply telling a story.

He felt Nuja moving behind him, placing her hand on his middle and he winced slightly as he was kicked from the inside. They waited again for another, then another and Sasuke glanced down, watching the skin of his stomach ripple when the child moved. He could clearly see where her back pressed against him now, pushing his gravid belly into odd formations. It looked awful. It felt even worse. Most of the time, he couldn't bear to look at it, even out of morbid curiosity. He never thought he'd been sentenced with such a physically impounding reminder of his weakness. Even Orochimaru hadn't been so cruel. Or at least, he hadn't thought of it.

But Nuja's hand was smooth and reassuring. Warm. Real. As much as Sasuke hated his situation and his mandatory passenger that fed off him, siphoned off him and shared his blood, there was something to be said for the unobtrusive presence of an empathetic party. He hadn't trusted someone this closely for years, but suddenly something inside him latched onto her. Needed her. It might have been the hormones. In fact it probably was something alien that the Kakkou plugged into him that was fucking with his system. But he couldn't help wondering what might have happened if Konoha had provided him with a Nuja. If someone had actually bothered to treat him like a person; not like dangerous leftovers. If someone had the decency to take moment, to give some time to a confused, hurting, guilt-ridden little boy and hug him. Listen to him. Tell him that
although things would never be the same that they once were, there would be someone waiting for him. Someone who cared. What would have happened then?

"Sasuke?"

"Mm?" Sasuke blinked, wetly, feeling an encore of warm tears weigh on his eyelashes.

"What about a girlfriend? Did you have a girlfriend?"

Sasuke thought for a moment. He said, at length, "yeah."

"Been together long?"

"Uh huh." Practically forever. "Met in the genin teams."

"What's she like? No, let me guess-" Nuja's whisper was a smile. "Bet she's tall. Bookish. Bet she's an artist. Yeah. I can see you with an artist."

"Hn, she's kind of an artist." Did painting graffiti on the Hokage Rock monuments count? "But she's actually the complete opposite of me. Short. Blonde. Loud. Loves crappy jokes and eats junk food all the time."

"I like the sound of her."

"Well she used to be a complete moron. Didn't listen. Didn't fucking keep her business to herself. But after a long time, she proved herself. She got stronger. She became someone people wanted to follow and she was good. Selfless. Kind. Powerful as all fuck." Sasuke closed his eyes. He was being kind. Once, he might have thought it was too kind – he would have been jealous of those words. But now… "She'll be Hokage one day. She was always going to be."

Nuja was saying something else, but it was so quiet, Sasuke had to strain to hear it and even then it was little more than faint static in his ears. He fell into a comfortable doze, letting the world around him; the chill, the ache of gravity, the baby pummeling on the inside fall away. In its place, there was a breeze. Wind picked up his short, dark hair and tousled it in soft fingers. The air was clean and sweet. Grass bowed at his ankles. Pollen drifted through the air. He stood atop Hashirama's statue at the Valley of the End, looking toward the edge. Across the divide from him, his ancestor, Madara, seemed to beckon to him; malice lying like thin ice in his granite eyes.

Between them, Naruto stood, his back to Sasuke. His orange jacket fluttered in the wind with a flat sound. His tawny hair was wild in the wind; the ends whipped and streamed in time to their own battle dances. Light framed him, pared him into tones of brightness against the grey. The Uzumaki spiral decorated his back and almost seemed to turn on its own, hypnotising Sasuke into silence.

He approached his friend, (but was it just that?) his words a roadblock of messy excuses, proclamations and threats in his mouth. They were useless. Words had never been for him. Sasuke's language was nonverbal. Subtle. When he needed to speak louder, his speech became gestural. Then physical. Words were he accents his body couldn't translate, but the instinctive movements that commanded, and protected – those he had always used as a means to express himself. Sasuke's actions came directly from his heart. Words, he didn't trust. Naruto had the words, Sasuke had the spaces.

He stood close to his target/friend/rival, letting his presence alone herald his approach. He knew that Naruto felt him. That strong, capable body tensed a little, before turning, showing Sasuke his face. Blue eyes, flinty with hurt and abandonment regarded him. Naruto's skin was peaked, his cheeks scuffed by high points of colour. Slowly, he moved closer, closing the distance between
them until they were all but touching. It was then that Sasuke realized he was no longer pregnant in this scenario. The huge stomach had gone; the breasts, the weakness, everything. He was himself here. Even Itachi's death had not provided him with so much relief.

"Sasuke."

There was a hand in his shirt. Naruto's fingers closed in the material and in one possessive tug, he'd pulled them together. They were close enough now that it was more difficult to look at one another, but instead they looked toward their chests as they shared space, heat and breath.

"Dobe," he wouldn't call him by his name. This was better. This meant it was him. Their lips were so close they could have been kissing. A nanosecond later, they were. Naruto was in Sasuke's space as Sasuke was in his and it was so warm; it was so goddamned warm. So many things could have been floating through Sasuke's head – questions, fears, commitments – but this was a dream and he was lucid enough to know when his body had fallen asleep and his mind, less plagued by the regulations of reality, had taken over. It might have been one of the side effects of being such a strong genjutsu user, finding the truth in dreams – never really being truly lost in sleep. Sasuke didn't know. His mind had been a warped prison for so long, he barely remembered what good dreams were.

Only this dream was about Naruto. And he was where they'd been when he'd done that and that meant it couldn't possibly end well. He wanted it too, now. Damn did he want to be able to change it, but it was the same and soon it would all go to hell.

Naruto's mouth tasted like miso and strawberries and while that seemed gross, it really wasn't. His lips were plump, eager. When he pressed against Sasuke, he could feel his cock hard against his hip. Sasuke felt a tingling in his knees and in his groin. He could feel the pulse of their blood between them and he leaned on Naruto a little, hearing the blond practically purr from the attention. Heard that small, almost pained groan in his throat as he lost himself to it.

It was real. It was all real. Didn't you realize?

But then, that happens. That thing that he did. It kind of cut itself out of time as though it took the two loose ends of a memory and jammed them together, pressing out the details. Because his mind knew what happened, it simply sped forward, unwilling or unable to deal with the imminent tragedy a second time. Then time opened up again and the closeness is gone. Naruto stood at an arm's length from him. Those blue eyes became like glaciers, melting in rivulets down his cheeks. He was fucking sobbing, his hands wet and shaking and words tip from his grimacing lips; dead soldiers falling on the field in pickets. Sasuke didn't have to hear the words to know what he was saying. He'd heard them before; he'd never forgotten.

"I thought I was the monster, you fucking self-destructive animal."

It had haunted him since.

Sasuke woke an hour later, still lying in Nuja's arms. She stirred as she felt him move and rubbed his shoulder gently.

"Ok?" she asked. It was a filler question; he wasn't ok. He never would be. But it broke the silence. He shrugged. Nuja squeezed his deltoid a little.

"Hey, she's strong right? Your girlfriend?" she continued. "She'd bound to be looking for you, you know. Don't give up hope. She'll find you. She'll bring you back home."
"No, he won't." Sasuke swallowed hard. His voice flaked. "He never has."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Oops, where did the humor go? Well, it'll probably be back at some point, though things are getting a little desperate for our Sasuke about now. As always, thank you all so much for the reviews and musings and support. As my now very full time career is expanding, I'll probably stick to around two chapters per week, but I'll try to put teasers up on my tumblr - you can find the address in my profile.

This chapter was brought to you by Pink Floyd, a rather nice beer and is dedicated to Gweatherwax, who is just awesome.
Sakura placed her hand on his back, letting her fingers travel over his skin and feel the warmth of it. Naruto ran hot; he always ran hot, even if his mood didn't seem to reflect the same. He sat on the edge of the bed, the mattress dipping under his weight. Elbows balanced on his knees, his whole body was folded forward into a position of self-preservation. He was angled away from her. Ashamed. No, not ashamed. Regretful.

"I'm sorry."

"It's ok," she said.

"I can't. I don't know why, I just can't. I thought I could. Thought I wanted to but-"

"We don't have to do anything if you don't want to."

"I did love you, Sakura. I really did. I do, I mean."

"You had a crush on me," Sakura said, trying not to let disappointment colour her voice. She was seventeen, after all. She had feelings. Despite the necessity to mature quickly, as all ninja were expected to, there were still parts of her that were underdeveloped and her self-esteem had always been the lagging party. Anyone else in this situation might have later discovered a new hole in their wall large enough to drive a lorry after Sakura left, but when it came to Naruto, the rules were always different. "Besides, we're like family - we're supposed to be close. But I guess not the way that you'd envisioned. It's ok. Don't worry about it."

"I don't get it," Naruto replied, bitterly. "Every time this happens. I don't get it. How could I not want you?"

Sakura bit her lip. That was flattering. But she knew why. So did he. It would be sacrilege to say, but they both knew who he wanted. "We don't have to do it to still love each other."

Naruto turned then. His cheek was pillow striped and his hair was mussed by sleep. There was a red sheen to his eyes, not from despair, but from the beast that lurked inside. Kurama protected him while he rested these days. She wasn't sure why; something was making him extra cautious, like he sensed something, but hadn't figured out what it was.

Naruto ran a careless hand through the matted flaxen spikes on his head and leaned backwards, swinging his legs back into bed. Finally, he smiled a little and she kissed him and pressed her forehead to his.

"Thanks," he breathed. "For understanding. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"Nothing's wrong with you."

"I know."
There was a pause. They both listened to the sound of the crickets drone breaking the silence of the night. Moonlight painted their faces in confident swatches of drained colour. Naruto curled his fingers up by his chin, making him seem smaller, younger. He smiled again.

"Say, what's going on with you and Tenten?" he asked. Sakura pursed her lips, cheekily.

"What are you talking about?"

"Kiba said he saw you two coming out of Shukuba Town together pretty early yesterday."

"A couple of girls can go to Shukuba Town if they like. What's so interesting about that?"

"Kiba said you came out of a hotel. At four am."

"Did he now?" Sakura raised a brow. "And what was Kiba doing out in Shukuba Town at that time in the morning, anyway?"

"Probably the same as you," Naruto grinned, wickedly. "Cos he came out of a hotel too."

"Aren't you the little hub of information?" Sakura snorted. "I didn't think Kiba was so inclined to gossip."

"He isn't. I look after Akamaru while he's... In hotels."

Sakura's smile dropped. People only migrated to Shukuba Town and stayed in hotels when they were trying to hide something.

"A boy?"

"A girl."

"A civilian?" Sakura swallowed hard.

"Mm."

"Guess Tsume isn't taking that well."

"His mom isn't taking anything," Naruto drew small circles on the sheet. "She's been busy with the campaign and helping the rescue units out West. I take Akamaru and look after him while Kiba's away. Can't really be that stealthy with a giant dog padding around behind you. And Akamaru likes hanging out with me cos I secretly give him treats."

"And Hana?"

"Well, she's nice to Kiba, so he might have told her. But Tsume is the problem, you know how some of the clan elders are getting now. She doesn't know," Naruto looked up. "She won't know, right?"

"She'll know as much as my mom does about me and Tenten." Sakura said, conspiratorially. Naruto seemed pleased with that.

"Do you like her?"

"Obviously."

"I mean, like-like."
"I don't know." Sakura replied, honestly. "Yes? She's different. I didn't know her that well when we were kids because she was older. I really thought she had a thing for Neji, but it turned out she was just worried about him because their clan... well, you know the Hyuuga."

"No shit," Naruto murmured a little too quietly. Sakura wasn't quite sure why. He lay silent for a moment, before he spoke again. "So... are you... what? Girlfriends?"

"I guess. Or not. Does it matter?" Sakura had the feeling it did. Ninja communities tended to compartmentalize and label things, but it just seemed that whatever she and Tenten were, it wasn't part of the Way Things Were Done. The way her parents were raised and tried to raise her. Small wonder she rebelled against it. Naruto seemed to consider this.

"Do you love her?"

"No. Dope, I love you, remember?" Sakura laughed. "I'd like to think that you and I were close, kinda like me and Ino are, except for different things. When Tenten and I are together, we're not the same as you know us. We're there for each other, not for the outside world. It's a good way to... well, forget what we are for a while."

"I want to forget." Naruto said, out of the blue. Sakura blinked.

"Forget what?"

"Stuff."

That wasn't much to go on, but Sakura knew immediately what Naruto was referring to. The Thing that Won't be Spoken Of. The thing that happened that day; the thing that Sasuke did. She just nodded, sagely. "Then you should find someone who can help with that."

"I already have." Naruto looked down at his hands. Sakura rubbed his arm.

"Well that's good, right?"

"Mm, maybe." Naruto mumbled. He seemed torn. "Sakura?"

"Yeah?"

He cleared his throat and began picking something invisible out from under his nails. "This... someone. Is it... weird... Would it be weird that it's a boy?"

Sakura smiled and reached over, tucking a stray thread of his hair behind his ear. It was getting so long now, he looked so much like his father.

"Not to me."

"Ino-" Sakura said, flatly as she gazed out into the sparsely populated village street, a yawn blossoming in the back of her throat. "- that is a woman."

"It's not! Can't you see?" Ino complained, pointing out at the newspaper delivery girl with a gloved finger, trying hard not to show her dismay. "It's him! I swear! It's Sasuke-kun!"

Sakura shaded her eyes against the light misting of rain that cooled her cheeks and squinted. It was a woman, couldn't have been anything less than a woman. Even from their distance across
the road and the misty rain softening the edges of thing, Sakura was pretty damn sure that the person delivering papers at the ass-crack of dawn was female. It could have been easy to think otherwise, what with that large, shapeless coat she was wearing - an all-encompassing garment that seemed to swallow her into its fleecy gullet leaving only a russet tufted head out the top and spindly legs out the bottom. But she carried herself carefully, mindfully. Just as a woman would walk after they'd had a baby, being now so much more aware of the amazing creation their body was. Also, she had a child strapped to her back. That might not have been foolproof evidence, but it was certainly viable.

This was not Uchiha Sasuke. This was not even close, apart from the fact that they might have been the same height. Maybe. That wasn't really saying much though.

"I'm going home, I can't believe you got me up for this," Sakura groused, pushing up a little. Ino grabbed her collar and yanked her back down.

"No!" She said. "C'mon, we should go up to her. Get a closer look."

"Oh for-" Sakura sighed. "-no! She's busy, Ino! Let's not bother her, ok?"

"It's not bothering! Come on, she'd probably like the company!"

Ino looked crestfallen, and Sakura sighed, resting her hand on her shoulder. Ino had been seeing things and this wasn't the first time. Sakura wanted to support her friend, but sooner or later she'd need to wake up and smell the schism. There'd been such a huge divide between those who knew what happened to Sasuke and those who didn't and Ino had always been in the Redemption camp. On the other side were the likes of Kiba and Konohamaru; both of whom were fast to state their opinion on how little they thought of the Uchiha. Tenten didn't have much faith in him and while Hinata felt bad that he'd left, her opinion was mostly driven by the fact that Naruto would be sad since he'd lost a friend. Sakura didn't blame her; the young Hyuuga had far more pressing matters to worry about than someone else's team dramas.

Then there was the middle camp, where realists like Shikamaru, Sai and Shino tended stay, driven by proof and empirical evidence. Innocent until proven guilty, although Sakura strongly believed the Ninja world favoured the reversal. All in all, the support for Sasuke was mainly centred around his impact on Naruto and since Naruto was keeping pretty close-lipped about the entire situation, people didn't really know what to think.

No one believed the Uchiha had overpowered the Fox. No one believed Naruto could have killed Sasuke. Thus, the only logical step from there was that he'd let him go. And no one quite understood where that had come from either. And to make matters more infuriating, Naruto refused to say a bad word about him – he refused to say anything at all, really, which wasn't like him and that made people uneasy. A few thought Sasuke had brainwashed Naruto with genjutsu, but according to some of the specialists, he wasn't under any kind of influence. Relief was thin, but Kurenai had ensured he was thoroughly examined, so there was little left to say.

Naruto had also been kept busy with the campaign and perhaps keeping him on the road and travelling sated his need to search on his own. He'd covered the entire ninja world with his press conferences and lectures; if he hadn't found any trace of Sasuke through all of that palaver, then there was really only two options:

1) Sasuke really had disappeared entirely or

2) He was dead or perhaps
3) Naruto actually did know where he was, but figured he was stable (dare she think harmless) enough not to hurt anyone any further or pursue his ideas that would see Konoha overthrown.

Naturally, Sakura would have preferred a fourth option, which would have seen Sasuke returned to the village, not so much for her benefit, but for peace of mind. If he was where they could see him, then surely he wouldn't get into any had no idea then, how much the previous generation had conditioned her into thinking in such a way. Had she voiced her preference to anyone who'd fought in the Third War, they would have told her she was just like Tobirama. Or perhaps the elders of whom herded the Uchiha into a corner for good. The wallflowers in a dance for power and their song would never play.

Even now, as she watched the woman take out a newspaper and fold it, placing it inside the bookstore's mail slot, she was almost glad Ino had been disappointed. If it had been Sasuke, then a whole chapter on her life that they'd been trying to forget would open up again and she'd remember what it felt like to be hopelessly in love with someone who couldn't possibly care whether you existed or not. She didn't need that. They didn't need that. Her, Ino, Naruto - all of them. It was better this way.

"Ino, that is a woman. I told you."

"He could be wearing a disguise!" Ino insisted, pressing her brows together anxiously.

Sakura sighed. "She has a child."

"Protégé."

"And she's delivering papers," Sakura made an exasperated gesture. "Why would Sasuke ever bother to come back to Konoha if he was just going to be delivering papers?"

"I don't know, perhaps he's doing some recon?" Ino suggested. "Having a look around before he makes his move? Checking us out?"

"Not really his style," Sakura said, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "Bar Naruto, he's one of the most powerful ninja in the world. He's not really into skulking around with those kinds of abilities. But hadn't Naruto said that he'd taken Sasuke's abilities from him? Didn't he say that the Rinnegan had been stopped, that Sasuke wasn't as strong as he had been at the climax of the battle. Sakura's mind threw in those weaselly thoughts that whispered in her head and kept her up at night. That strange insecurity. The "what ifs". Naruto had... stopped him, somehow. Not just sealed, he'd...he'd done. Something. Something else. He almost said it like he'd drawn the power out of him and let it back into the world like someone would set a wild animal free. Like it was alive.

Sakura cleared her throat, rubbing her bare arms. Why the hell didn't she bring her jacket? "Besides, if Sasuke were here, Naruto would sense him. You know how perceptive he is thanks to Kurama. That fox would be baying if Sasuke set foot in the country let alone Konoha itself, surely."

"She just... looked so much like him." Ino responded, unhappily. She watched as the woman kept moving down the street, greeting the odd passer-by and smiling at one as she walked. Sasuke didn't smile; not unless he'd done something he considered noteworthy. Ino doubted that delivering the Konoha Tribune really registered as rewarding to someone like him. It couldn't be. But... That feeling she had. She just couldn't shake it. She frowned again, squinting at the back of the woman's head for a moment when she felt Sakura's fingers tug her ponytail, gently.
"Ino don't you dare use shindenshin no jutsu on her, I know what you're thinking and I'm not a genjutsu user," Sakura warned, watching as Ino seemed to consider the possibility, then mentally swatted it down with a dejected sigh. Sakura exhaled, slowly. It was depressing; Ino didn't deserve this kind of limbo. No one did. She was about to suggest they go for a hot chocolate or something to warm them up when her signal charm activated, a small silver bells that glowed and set off a quiet but insistent chime that warned her of trouble back at the hospital. She clicked her tongue. "Shit. I'm being summoned. Sorry Ino. How about we meet up later tonight for a drink?" Sakura smiled as she pushed herself to her feet. "Sweet tea at that new place in town? I've wanted to try it since I got back."

Ino nodded, her eyes still on the woman, watching her with a strange eagerness that was starting to worry her friend. Sakura placed her charm back into her pocket and squeezed Ino's shoulder. "Please. Just leave her alone, ok? She's only trying to do her job. If you like, maybe we can talk about Sasuke a little bit tonight?" Sakura rarely made an offer like this. When it came to her ex-teammate, she found that the less she thought about him, the more she could get on with things. Without him, the world seemed so much less painful and complicated. Deep down, she wondered if that was just selfish, but her sense of self-preservation only shook its metaphysical head and reminded her that there were people that she could see, touch and speak to who needed her time far more than that of the amazing disappearing Uchiha. "Bring that map of yours, maybe we could figure out where his movements might have taken him, mm?"

"Yeah. Sure," Ino flashed Sakura a smile and waved a little as her friend disappeared in a flash of movement - a pink ribbon of dexterity that zipped through the air on its way back to the hospital. Ino sank down onto her hindquarters, watching closely as the woman padded out of view. She counted to thirty, then eased to her feet, pulling up the hood of her windbreaker as she set off into the rain, keeping her distance from her target.

And Sasuke knew well when someone was following him. His senses might have dulled, his chakra might be non-existent but he knew when he had a tail. He tried to lose it, ducking in and out of alleyways, retracing steps, waiting it out. But the pursuer was a ninja - obvious by their movements - and he had little chance of escaping, no matter how elusive he used to be.

After a short while and many twists and turns he thought he might have evaded it. The shadow in his periphery was gone, the sound of footsteps behind him that were so even, so full of intent, had vanished. Either he was feigning premature relief or the stalker had given up, he wasn't sure, but that heaviness in the back of his mind was gone. Home was close now, and he made his way back without incident. Shoving his key in the latch Sasuke sighed and leaned forward, resting his head against the painted wood. Safe, he was safe.

But then Mikoto cooed a greeting, and his hackles flew up with lightning efficiency. The presence was there again, right behind him this time. And it spoke.

"I uh… I saw you the other day." A strange way to open a conversation. But Sasuke recognised that voice and he could only guess why Ino was there. He hadn't been careful enough. Idiot. Idiot.

"In… In the flower shop?" Ino clarified, tentatively. "You handed me my paper. I guess you weren't really looking through. I said hi."

Sasuke blinked, his eyes still on the door. She was right. He hadn't noticed. How hadn't he noticed?
He was slipping. Just like his mind had started to wander when he was pregnant with Mikoto, he was experiencing that cloudiness all over again.

"Um," she was continuing, her voice low. Mikoto cooed, then giggled and he could imagine Ino making faces at her. Half of him wanted to let her, let his daughter have the opportunity to interact with someone other than him; to make a friend. The rest of him wanted to turn, put himself between her and Mikoto and keep her safe. He swayed slightly, palms against the wood. "Listen, I… I won't say anything. I promise. I won't. I don't know why you're here, I don't know what your plan is, but… But I want to help you. If you need help, just ask."

She was so honest, so genuine he was almost afraid for her. She didn't know what he'd done, it seemed - otherwise she probably wouldn't have been so welcoming, even if she might have preferred him over Naruto. She didn't know. He wondered how many did.

Still, there was an air of earnestness behind him so cloying Sasuke could have choked on it. It unnerved him. He felt his heart pounding so hard in his chest that he swore she could hear it and he turned a little, revealing a familiar face, but an expression that was so surprised, so utterly confused it was enough to make even the most convinced think twice. Ino blinked back at him, gazing at a face that was Sasuke's, and yet wasn't. His eyes, his nose, but not his face, not the way he was looking at her. There was no spark of recognition, not even that familiar flash of surliness that usually hid in the corner of his eyes. It was Sasuke's face, but it wasn't. The body certainly wasn't. Up close she could see the slant of his… no, her chest and then there was the baby strapped to her back who just regarded their guest inquisitively from her perch.

Maybe Sakura was right. Maybe she was just going crazy. Ino swallowed, curling her hands inward to her chest. Ninja were meant to be masters of disguise, but this? This was something else. The woman just blinked at her and Ino felt her cheeks reddening. There was no graceful conclusion here, it was step away or run away. Well, the woman probably thought she was deranged already. No sense in trying to backpedal.

"If you need anything, you know where I am," she continued, awkwardly. Her smile was well-meaning and kind but her eyes were filling with tears only just held back by those long blonde lashes. "Just come by anytime. I won't tell Naruto or Sakura. I won't tell anyone if you don't want me to."

Sasuke rewarded her with a perturbed frown, then opened the door and pushed inside, closing it quietly behind him. He listened to her go; small, disappointed footsteps ground the gravel outside, fading away into the general atmosphere of the street. The little garden gate creaked and that was it. For now.

Because Ino would second guess. Ino would think it over, mull it, chew it until she had to see him again. She'd have to know. She'd ask the opinion of others. She'd try to be discreet, but Ino had never, ever managed to master that particular trait. Ino Yamanaka was, and always had been, a gossip. And that meant he was fucked.

His chest felt hollow, resonant. The sound of his heart seemed to fill the room. There was a pressing, on his ribs; pressure. And for a moment all Sasuke could do was slowly sink to his knees as spots danced in front of his eyes and time seemed to thicken in his ears. Before he knew it, he was acting without thinking, packing bags, gutting the small sleep out as he collected his meager possessions and started shoving them into his travelling bags. There was a glaze to his eyes and a fluidness that only fear and adrenaline could fuel. His mind wandered, trying to find reason, trying to stall him, to encourage him to consider the ramifications of his actions.

*You're fleeing. Don't flee.* It begged. *Mrs Mori was kind to us. She gave us this place for*
practically no rent - all we have to do is feed her cat and read her the news every afternoon. Remember the housing prices in Konoha? Remember the cost of living? And that was when you had government assistance. You have nothing now; you have one toddler, who's probably going to be eating solid food soon and what's the price of that? You have no idea? What about the new baby? You'll need to give birth somewhere: you'll need help, medication. You can't just up and run like you could before unless you abandon everything. The babies. The Uchiha. Everything.

"No," Sasuke said out loud, crushing his reserves of cheap instant miso into his bag. "No. No abandonment. No loss. There'll be no more loss. I'm going to make this work. This will work."

Why the hell did you come back to Konoha then, if you're going to bolt at every familiar face you see?

"Had to. Had to be here." Sasuke's voice was rough, gravelly. He knew that what he was doing was dangerous, but his body moved on its own like it had once before, so long ago. He had to protect them, his precious things. His precious people. And just as he'd decided earlier on that fateful evening, in that tiny little izakaya just south of Takumi on his long journey toward somewhere that could be home; Konoha was his goal. While he couldn't count on the support of anyone (he'd no idea what kind of propaganda had been spread about him while he was away and frankly, he was expecting it) he could count on Konoha wanting to keep their own to themselves. Villages were fiercely protective of their clans; their power. Despite the kind of feel-good amalgamation tactical project Naruto was spearheading, Sasuke was Uchiha. There were no more Uchiha left in the world besides him Mikoto and the little one growing inside him. Without Danzo pulling strings, the council would most likely be more inclined to sustain and manage, rather than eliminate. He didn't want to be a prisoner, but he had little choice. He was a prisoner anywhere he went; a fugitive. Running scared.

And he was so damn tired of being scared. It wasn't like him. Neither was running. He'd never really run away, so to speak. He'd always had a finish line. It was just that his particular goals had nothing to do with his village and immediately branded him as a deserter. Which he wasn't. Konoha was his village. It was his brother's village. His clan died there and the blood of his kinsmen ran deep and rich into the earth. He'd not salt that with his own cowardice; he wouldn't be the boy who couldn't save his family. The Uchiha were meant to have a place in Konoha. He hadn't deserted the Leaf, the Leaf had let him down.

Only it was too soon and he wasn't ready. He just didn't want to be found yet. He needed time to think, he needed to be strong. Right now, he was hanging by a thread.

Later, after penning a goodbye note to Mrs Mori, and a long, nerve-shaving walk through town in the long dark shadows of gloaming, Sasuke check into a cheap hotel in Shukuba town. It was busy here, full of civilians and Ninja minding their own business. It was a gambling town; a town where people came to forget themselves. The hotel was grungy and ill-lit. The room was cold and damp. The bed was little more than a frame with a thin wad of mattress that made his travel mats he carried as part of Team 7 seem like nirvana. There was a winking neon light outside his window and the sound of the casinos down the road littered the air with a nonstop buzz of human noise pollution.

Laying Mikoto down on the bed, he surrounded her with mounds of his clothing to keep her off the dank bedding. She fussed, vocally distressed by their new quarters and he had to agree as he curled up beside her, trying to stay warm; this was a stupid plan. But he was dedicated now; in for a yen and that was all he could do to sate himself. After a long time he drifted into a dreamless sleep, punctured here and there by Mikoto's complaints and a terrible nausea that washed over him in queasy, sinking waves.
It was seventeen hours later when he came to out of the fog. His head was thick and there was an ache throughout his body that felt deep and old, like a bruised bone. When he moved, he found blood on the sheets beneath him, a light yet worrisome dappling of dark red. The chemist had informed him that some spotting was normal, but considering there was nothing normal about his pregnancy in the first place, Sasuke felt he had grounds for concern. Mikoto grizzled and refused to be fed, so he eased back taking a few deep breaths. He couldn't keep this up He had to have a better plan than this; he needed a better plan. But it was hard to think with all the noise and the heat and humidity in the room was oppressive. He'd made a bad choice, he knew it. But he needed time to regroup. He wouldn't be here long. This wouldn't be long.

Sasuke fell into another deep, blank sleep, unaware of the rasping moisture in his lungs or the strain of his patch worked body as another seam in the jutsu holding him together started to weave its way loose.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Sasuke has made a very, very, very bad decision.

Next chapter: Sasuke makes a better decision. But not after the shit hits the Uchiha fan.

Thanks for the kind words, you guys rock and roll!
The Emergency

Chapter Summary

A/N: Just a note before we start, I did not write the first section drunk (promise), it's meant to be shattered - a collection of broken memories. Sorry for the wait on this one, and sorry for the shitty editing - it's been crazy busy over here :o
Thank you again for all the kind words! I'm glad you're enjoying the story - you guys rock!

Konoha, 28th February

Year of the Hare

Time went funny.

Not funny *haha* - not even an interesting kind of funny - but the funny that makes the world tip over the wrong way and just *itch* and it was really hurting and Sasuke couldn't figure out what was-

-he woke. She was crying. No, she was crying and he woke. The lights were in his eyes and he fumbled for her, blindly, trying to touch her, calm her and when his fingers found her pudgy, waving arms he eased over a little in order to curl around her. She'd been crying; she was crying. So much that her voice was cracking and weak. Her mouth was a little dark hole in the light and she wailed and wailed and the storm crashed in his head and he-

-had her close now. He tried to give her food but she shook her head, turning away, unwilling to take his nipple. Her whole body shook and she groaned, coughing. But she was hungry, he could hear it in her cry. She didn't want to eat. She'd never not wanted to eat before. And how many times had she refused food? How many times had he fed her? Surely he needed to keep track of this - he must have written it down somewhere. Didn't he write it somewhere? Didn't he make marks or notches or something? She was hot. Was that bad? He was hot too; everything was hot. Even the tungsten light in the room burned him like a secondary sun and the afterglow was something sickly, muggy and steamy and it make his guts churn and his head spike with pain. He staggered up, leaving the baby on the bed as he limped toward the bathroom where the fluorescent was blinking, cooler, whiter and-

-somewhere along the line, somewhere in time he'd filled the bath with cold water. He tipped himself into it, letting it seep over him like a tide of relief. It wasn't until he hit the smooth enamel at the bottom of the tub that he realized how warm he'd been and the shock on his skin was so electric he thought he'd summoned a chidori and for a moment the dream was broken and he was safe and away from here and-

-fever. There was fever. In him and in her. He staggered drunkenly to the vanity dripping water - a kappa emerging from the depths all bloodless and pale like the underbelly of a fish. *Is that what she meant? That time; that woman? With the fish? What was it about fish again?* His eyes were bloodshot, ringed in black and yellow like a smeared bumblebee and his vision faded in and out: snapshots laid over one another as though he'd taken his immediate memories and just scattered them carelessly on the bed to sort later. He was leaning against the sink then he was-
-on the bed next to his daughter again and she was crying and what time was it-

-"Four in the fucking morning, can't you keep her quiet?" The night manager was saying and Sasuke was nodding blandly, staring at the vomit pattern on the carpet, feeling like if he had anything in his stomach he could easily paint the guys shoes in the same colour only-

-food was far away and the miso was gone now. He'd eaten it maybe? He didn't know. How long had he been here? He didn't know. His gut felt like a balloon full of lead that was leaking and Mikoto had started making small and worrisome sounds in between her howling fits and the hotel owner was giving him notice then there was this box on the street that seemed comfortable enough because he'd stayed in worse, right? He'd been in worse.

But he was so cold.

But he was so hot.

But he felt himself falling apart at the seams and Mikoto wasn't good and the other one hadn't moved much in days (days?) and he just couldn't think. He'd come to think, but he couldn't. He'd left his thoughts back somewhere in the village and how he was paying for his haste. Everything cost. Everything. Sasuke sunk back into the interior of the box, holding his too-silent baby and breathed in breathed out breathed in breathed out a few times, trying to calm. Trying to find answers. All the answers were rolling away from him, hiding just out of reach. There had to be a solution. There had to be a way out.

They needed medical attention. They couldn't go to the hospital; they didn't have any form of identification. Questions would be asked. He'd be detained. People would find out. Questions: Why was his daughter in such a shape? Where was the father? Why are you running? He couldn't do that. He couldn't handle that. He wasn't ready to be himself again yet. So a private clinic was all he could do. A private didn't ask questions, a private clinic just fixed the problem. Trouble was, private clinics cost money and money was something Sasuke didn't have much of. Nor had he anything to barter, nor any time to trade any skills. He was stuck. He couldn't get money for nothing.

Dejected, Sasuke scratched at his overheated crown and tore his wig off his head, tossing it into the corner of the box. His hair beneath was matted and sweat-greased but he combed it out with his fingers, feeling the slight relief of the coolness against his scalp. He tugged at his collar trying to encourage more air to cool his skin. Then he looked down. He looked down to his half-covered chest. He looked down to his breasts.

Ah.

He has skills. Well, he had assets that would help define said skills. Honestly, when it all boiled down, there wasn't so much a prowess as there was experience – or an experience, and not one he found that he was particularly pleased to recall. But there was only so much Sasuke could take and there was only so far he could push himself before things started to blur and melt together. He'd been hurt. He'd been hurt so badly when they forced his legs open and – held a hand over his mouth and knuckles forcing his teeth apart when he clenched them and – pain like pegs driving into his skin, only not his skin, deeper, deep he swallowed blood and-

"No!" Sasuke said, suddenly, the volume of his voice disturbing the few cockroaches crawling in
his presence. Snap out of that thought, catapult out of that headspace. He was sick. His daughter was sick. He didn't know how bad it was, he had no idea how to gauge her symptoms. She could be dying for all he knew and he didn't have time for his own trauma. His time was her time too. He needed money. He needed money. And he could get money. Because fuck, even if he didn't know what he doing, he could appear vaguely competent. Confidence was ninety per cent of the gamble, wasn't it?

Sasuke laughed to himself somewhat brokenly and bounced Mikoto on his knee. It caused her to wail, but he took it as a cry of triumph. And with that discordant caterwaul both rallying and fraying his nerves, Sasuke stood up abruptly, tearing the roof of his damp cardboard lodgings and set off down the street, his watering eyes on the blinding bright lights ahead. The lights were where they spent the money. And where they spent the money where he needed to be.

Jo Eichiro opened his fly in the alleyway behind Great Karma's Bosom Casino and Bar and pissed with the kind of relish that a person feels when all was just so damn right with the world as far as they knew it. And Jo knew the world right now about as well as he knew his own arse. Jo's world was currently fogged in a nirvana of heady fumes caused by a blood alcohol level that was the stuff of prohibition nightmares and a slight dusting of the kind of greed encouraged by small yet consistent wins on the pachinko machines. It was a good night, a Good Night by all accounts. He was young(er than most of the players in the joint), he was single (well, that's what he was telling all the breasts-er-women) and he was (comparatively) wealthy, given that his disposable income for the night had doubled a few thousand yen more than he'd ventured out with. He was rich, good looking and fuckable and if that wasn't a trinity to worship, then Jo didn't know what was. Jo leaned backwards a little, lengthening his flow with the kind of precision only bestowed upon the inebriated and tipped his head back up to look at the stars, his face writ in bliss.

And just when he thought the night couldn't get any better, she came along.

There was a cough behind him. A polite chafing of the tonsils. Jo cocked an eyebrow drunkenly and turned to look over his shoulder – an act that should have just required the movement of his head, but his body decided it wanted to participate also and for a few seconds there was a flurry of uncertain shuffling before he was able to right himself and get a good look at his company. A woman was there. Stood there. Alone. She was dark haired, dark- Jo squinted – eyed. Pale skin, red cheeks and lips – she was just like something out of of a painting. Living Ukiyo-e. She wore a loose yukata, frayed and dirtied around the edges, and a heavier, dark coat was slung over one shoulder, hiding nearly half her body and making her seem even smaller. Fragile, like a butterfly. There was a haze about her; she was limned in light and breathless in the way that most women in his pornos were and Jo felt his pants squeeze as she eyed him up and down in return. She took a few steps closer, running a hand through her long, raven bangs, her lips a red pursed rosebud. There was a brief smile, then:

"Twenty-thousand yen," she greeted him, "and I'll fuck your brains out."

Jo pissed on his shoes.

"Um?" He said.

"Twenty-thousand," she repeated, fingers toying in her collar. Opening it slightly, teasing. "You want it or not?"

Well, to want or not to want, wasn't that a question? No doubt he wanted – sex after a night of booze and winnings would have been perfect. A night to top them all. However…
Jo licked his dry lips, suddenly feeling much, much poorer than he had before. Maybe, if he'd stayed for that last game, but he'd needed a slash like nothing before; any longer and he would have drowned his fly.

"D-don't have that much," he whimpered, a picture of pathetic despair. The woman sighed sharply.

"How much you got?"

"Nine thousand?" He couldn't have even taken her out to dinner let alone pay for "dessert". He tucked himself back in, haphazardly, zipping his shirt tails in his fly. "I-if I go back, I could--"

"For nine thousand you can have my hand," she offered and when he seemed to waver, she renegotiated. "Mouth, then."

"Mouth? Nine thousand?" He wouldn't have anything left, but whatever. A good night was a good night after all. Jo grinned a crescent moon. "Yes m'!

The woman seemed to consider something for a moment, as if she'd suddenly thought of a third option or some better offer had sprung to mind. She bounced on her toes a little, fingers brushing her long fringe out of her eyes before she nodded and pointed to a small dark alcove four or five feet away. Jo let out the kind of giggle that might frighten those of a nervous disposition and made to take a step before his demeanour changed and everything ground to a halt. He wanted to go ahead, certainly, but his body seemed to have different ideas. Flushing awkwardly, he gestured at his groin and blinked heavily before he swallowed a belch.

"Hang on a sec? Gotta finish… y'know. 'N… N’ do a … Thing. Do the thing. One sec. One. Don't…. Go no wh-"

Jo was interrupted by a sudden surge of vomit that snaked its way up his trachea and threw acid at his uvula, giggling as he tried to swallow the burn. His only option was to flee around the corner where he could discreetly empty the macerating contents of his stomach and take the massive dump that he hadn't realized he'd needed until it suddenly knocked on his sphincter.

And as Jo squatted in the alleyway around the corner, excreting forcibly from two major orifices before what was bound to be a fumbling, wreck of a pleasurable experience, he thought to himself:

This is the best night ever.

Sasuke was in a bad way.

Dizzy, pale and almost as close to puking as his pickled prospect, he knew that he did not have long before karma would veer sharply south and sour his situation even more unpleasantly. He'd never trained as a med-nin, but it was common knowledge that numbness in the fingers and toes meant his blood circulation was low and his body was shutting down in order to protect his organs. He was well aware that seeing spots in front of his eyes was one thing, but having his vision dim at the edges like an old, curled photograph was something else entirely. He ached and the ache was deep in his bones as if someone had torn him apart and laid each join out separately - splitting them down the middle and sucking out the marrow before they were filled with fire and placed back inside his body. Though it had rarely bothered him in months, his bad leg stung in the places where the kunai had shattered and it hurt so much he could barely put weight on it. He felt the swelling in his knee return like a watery cushion around the tissue, sifting pain in and out like a tide. It might have been the temperature that had irritated it, or Sasuke's poor condition, but reason aside it was making him lame. It would be hard to move – with the extra weight he was gaining, nigh
impossible.

And it would be yet another thing he'd have to pay for.

*Pay. That's right, the money.*

Sasuke's head swam. His skin prickled with fever and he looked blindly around the alleyway, suddenly feeling robbed of air. Mikoto, who was strapped to his chest, her little face buried in his bosom, was unnervingly quiet but he wondered if he'd even hear her over the buzz in his ears – a tinitic whine that hummed around him, louder than the forest cicadas in the height of summer.

What the hell was he doing? What the hell was he doing out here in the rain, in the late, dismal hours prostituting himself with his daughter on his hip? What was he going to do: hold her with one hand and tickle the guy's balls with the other?

Sure, at face value, at full power, this could have been a good idea. A little con artistry, a little light robbery. Nothing he couldn't handle. The guy was drunk, loping, stupid. It would have been easy – should have been. But Sasuke was inebriated by sickness. He was weak and his pride, oh, his wounded, wounded pride couldn't stand for it any longer. The cut could only go so deep. He had nothing against professionals – a job was a job. But this was too much even for him. Something shattered and dissolved and in that moment Sasuke realized what his own stubborn pride and his fear had encouraged him to do.

What Mikoto might see him do.

Sasuke backed up, clutching his daughter tightly to his chest as he began to move, slow at first, then faster, faster down the alleyway, tears streaming down his face. His sobs a solid mass in his throat, restricting his breath as he ran, but he didn't notice. He didn't care. He *did* however, thrust his knee into his client's groin as he rounded the corner, barrelling past the man. There was a soft deflating noise as the Jo went down. Once upon a time, Sasuke might have hissed in contempt at such a defeat, but not this time. Not now. Now was for running and so Sasuke ran. Bad leg forgotten, pain pushed aside, he ran. He ran without knowing; heran without thinking. He ran into the rain, letting the fresh water mingle with his tears and sweat as he pushed and pushed, forcing his feet to carry him faster into the gloom as the bright lights of the town slipped away behind him. He ran in darkness. He ran without seeing.

He ran home.

When he saw the light he barely registered what it was or where, only that place was a place he knew so well it was tattooed into his memory as instinct. That place was one he remembered deep inside him, somewhere in his heart where the memories were still sweet and the bitter residue hadn't yet begun to corrode.

He remembered standing in that line up, scowling at the wall behind the Hokage's head while the pink one tittered and grinned at him, his sensei mumbled excuses and the blond one cracked jokes and bounced around like only the most stupid, idiotic, shiny wonderful creatures could. That place shone like a beacon in the dark and he flew toward it; the ragged moth caught in the storm. There were others in the way, but he didn't notice them and they didn't bother him. It was late. It was dark. He was a shadow. He was alone.

And when he landed on that familiar tatami, wings broken and bent, head pounding and heart aching he realized in that moment that he was more alone than he'd ever been. And that he couldn't be alone any more. He wasn't giving up for him, or for Konoha. He was doing it for her. He was doing it for *them.*
Sasuke looked up at the man behind the desk and found his eyes, those familiar scarred eyes lined with silver. He didn't register the man's complete and utter surprise, nor the fact that he'd shot out of his chair like a bullet, already rounding the desk as Sasuke began to collapse. All he could think was to hold out his daughter and gasp:

"I surrender."
The Damsel in Distress

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Konoha, 28th February.
Year of the Hare

The woman charged into his office like a storm front, the living semblance of calamity and unpredictability in a cloud of filthy yukata and stray raindrops. Kakashi had been working late, and when he said working, he really meant procrastinating. The papers he'd meant to sign were sitting in the same place since Shikamaru had left them there at two o'clock in the afternoon; the documents he'd been given to read hadn't been removed from their envelopes in a matter of days. It wasn't that he didn't want to attend to his paperwork – he had responsibilities after all. He knew what his position entailed - he just didn't want to right now. And right now had managed to stretch itself into this week.

He was going to start this evening, though. Really. Seriously. After all, he'd decided to stay late, as he'd asked all the Jounin and Chuunin to deliver their mission reports to him by hand and he was still waiting on one or two from the B rank assignments. And the weather had turned in on itself and he had a beer, so he wasn't exactly itching to get home immediately. The office environment might have sparked a little guilt into his conscience and he bit his lip as he glanced at the reports from Kusagakure he was supposed to be checking and the correspondence that Gaara sent fortnightly to each of the major shinobi villages that he was supposed to be keeping up to date with and sighed. It wasn't that he minded being Hokage; he just wasn't very good at not being in the field. He used to spend the afternoon preparing himself for night drills - prepping his kit, stretching, studying the course. Now he spent the latter hours of the day readying himself for what was likely to be yet another brain-pulverizing evening of boredom. And this was what it had been like for weeks, months. Kakashi had found great purpose in helping Naruto spearhead his peace campaign and was pleased at his student's success and popularity. But once the expedition had left Konoha, he found himself settling into the everyday duties of the Rokudaime. Which should have been colourful and interesting and poignant considering the amount of damage the fourth war had caused and the clean up necessary in the Leaf Village and throughout the Land of Fire.

But everyone had been so organized. And everyone had been so helpful. Enough that Kakashi's position had allowed him to delegate so greatly, he was left back in his office twiddling his thumbs while separate factions of both ninja and civilians alike took up the responsibility of reviving the village. The Hokage oversaw operations, which was, in itself, an undeniably crucial position, but to someone practical like Kakashi, it was the last straw in a world made of wheat. So he took up a hobby. He took up creative writing. An odd past-time at face value, but Kakashi did have an aptitude for storytelling (alright: lying) and his personality was fringed by a whimsicality that suited the flow and style of prose very well. Of course, his central reasoning for embarking in such an activity was the fact that, with the great Jiraiya's tragic death (which he mourned, terribly), the production of the Icha Icha novels would grind to a halt. He had to admit, and with a great deal of contrition, he might have mourned that fact a tad more.

Jiraiya was a man who could weave obscenity in a way no one else could; a man who had famously boasted he could name over one hundred euphemisms for breasts and nearly the same for the pleasure that lay further south. Dicks, on the other hand, broke no records at a mere fifty-five malapropisms. Jiraiya had been quick to point out he didn't find those all that interesting. Jiraiya was a man Kakashi looked up to. A story teller. A leader of smut. Kakashi looked forward to the
release of the dirty books more than he did Christmas; more than his birthday. The books meant that much to him, they were his obsession; his crutch. And now, there wouldn't be any more. For a few terrible months after the conclusion of the war, after everything had settled down and those who had lost were beginning to come to terms with their grief, Kakashi was beside himself with worry. What could he do? What could possibly get him through the day as the books had? How else could he get through the day without that familiar volume in his hand, pages curling around themselves, spine stretching like an acrobat in a well-rehearsed back bend. The books fit in his hand like a fond memory; he couldn't imagine working without them and there was only so many times he could re-read them.

Then he came up with the perfect solution. He'd write his own. The problem with that, however, was that Kakashi didn't happen to be the most eloquent of wordsmiths. No, it was worse than that. Kakashi sucked at writing. Hands down, no holds barred. Grammar evaded him. Original ideas fled like magnets of opposite polarities. Kakashi didn't just put words to paper, he hammered out prose as though he were delivering it via a mallet into a stiff wedge of 2x4. He was familiar with the tone; he knew the right words to use and he scattered them in desperately between clunky phrasing - hoping to hell that the overall effect might distract from the inadequate foundations.

It didn't.

Jiyū Honpō, he wrote. Jiyū was his protagonist. He'd taken the character from the third book in Jiraiya's series – something of a homage, yet the way he'd began butchering the character he was in danger of him turning into a complete parody. A parody of a parody - which was a paradox, to say the least.

Jiyū Honpō sat at his desk. He was bored. There had been no jobs come in this week and the ones that were left on his desk did not inspire any minute significant amount of confidence in his breast-breast? -heart. He sat there and looked over the papers in front of him, hoping that somewhere in their pages he might find some kind of job that would fulfill him again – something that would get him back in the field, back on the wagon and into the place where they have wagons and oh fucking hell-

Kakashi stopped, sat back and sighed. He took his beer in hand and nursed it pathetically, glaring down at the page of absolute redundancies in front of him. Someone once offered him the golden advice that a good place for a budding wordsmith to start was to just write what he knew. Recount stories close to him. Well, that didn't really help with his goal, and while Jiraiya's stories included relationships, comedy and lecherous characters, Kakashi found that being light-hearted and witty was actually a lot harder to deliver in text format than it was to just be that way. Kakashi liked women, but he wasn't particularly seedy about them. He was heroic, but he wasn't salacious. He was poetic, but he wasn't good at being poetic; it was actually damn hard to craft romantic prose without it sounding like the kind of phrases cosmetics companies would print on their toilet paper packaging: "In the sea of fragility, happiness comes everlasting. Use Pleasant Toilet Velvet - triple layered for your dreams." or something of the like.

Kakashi was many things, but he wasn't Jiraiya. His Icha Icha couldn't be his sempai's vision. And if he intended to write what he knew, then he needed a very particular muse to swing him in the right direction. He needed a damsel in distress. When it came to the time-honored tradition of assisting the decidedly twee parable of the maiden in need, Hatake Kakashi was certainly no virgin. Be it a Daimyo's daughter, the noodle-maker's cousin or ever the Village Elder's second prettiest Granddaughter, Kakashi had saved them all in one form or another. Kidnapping, runaways, prey to
dangerous beasts, wrongful marriages, persistent suitors you name it, Kakashi had saved some woman from it. He'd assisted enough unlucky lasses to have earned himself a year's worth of dates, so why couldn't he bring any to mind right now?

Almost on cue, the door burst open, and then suddenly *she* was there. Then Kakashi’s mind clicked into gear, and all of a sudden, everything he knew, had written or intended to write just fell in place, mirroring his own movements and thoughts as though he were writing as he went.

*Hatake Kakashi* he began, *Copy-ninja extraordinaire; The Silver Fang of Konoha, Rokudaime to the strongest ninja village in the world* rose to his feet as the mysterious traveller entered his chambers. *Her hair was damp and curling from the rain-

(it was actually a matted mess, spiked here and there with pine needles, but hell, this was fiction)

* -her bosom -wait- her vast, soft mounds of pleasure rising and falling with her deep-drawn gasps. *Her lips trembled as she called for help, for him-

("Hhhh.." said the woman. *Close enough, thought Kakashi*).

* - her fingers laced in plea as she begged. In two long, easy strides he was at her knee, his arms -strong arms - wrapping around her, holding her close. She was light and warm in his embrace. *She smelled like-

(vomit and urine)

-wisteria. And carnation. And a little rose in there for good measure. Yes, those things. *Anyway our hero, in a voice low and velvetine, gently calms her and asks what ails her-

("Hey! Hang in there. Are you alright?" Kakashi said, patting the woman's cheek, gently. She had a baby curled against her chest which she was trying to push into his arms and the kid had started wailing and that unnerved him even more. Weeping women, he could handle. Crying babies? That was the same as having an incendiary tag stuck down one's trousers: nerve-wracking, panic inducing and bound to be three times as loud and painful if it wasn't sorted out quickly. Kakashi just attempted to ease the baby back down to her chest - probably the safest place for it until he could call for help - only the effort caused her threadbare yukata to fall open further, partially revealing her breasts.

"Er."

He did his best not to look, but it *was* rather hard, considering they were *right there*. Instead he attempted talking to her face, to wake her up a little - try to make some sense out of all of this. He brushed back her haggard fringe to reveal the pale skin beneath, her face, her eyes. And that was when the world sort of... fell over...

*His fingers in her silken hair, he brushes tendrils back from her face, allowing him to look deep into her fathomless dark eyes. And when he does he...*

*he...*

He. That was the operative word, wasn't it? That wasn't a maiden's face; that wasn't a woman. Wasn't a... girl. Wasn't. Kakashi stared, dumbfounded. That *her* was a *him* and that him was Sasuke. At least, Sasuke's *face*. It wasn't Sasuke's body by any stretch of the imagination; Sasuke didn't have breasts. He'd had *wings* once, but no breasts. Ever. Kakashi's mind bounced like a blunt needle on a broken record, his mouth falling open slightly behind his mask. It wasn't. It looked like him, but it wasn't. Couldn't be. Wasn't. Then the woman said:
"I surrender."

And Kakashi said, "Eh?" To which the woman(suke) replied in a voice like a cold wind over bare flesh.

"Please… Sensei. Help… Please..."

Nope. No. Nope. That wasn't a thing. That wasn't a thing that was happening now. Kakashi glanced at the child that the woman (nope, not a him, notahim) was trying to hand him, and blinked at her – barely noting her unhealthy pallor, and the strange, broken noises she was making. Sasuke had a kid. Why did Sasuke (it wasn't Sasuke, wasn't. Wasn't. Shh!) have a kid? Where'd he get a kid from? Then the woman was falling back on the mat and Kakashi was dropping down to one knee to help her, support her and that yukata just kind of sighed open and then-

-someone coughed at the door. Kakashi looked up.

"Hokage-sama?"

Shino was staring at him, his mission reports in hand, the rain slick on his flak jacket. His dark glasses hid his eyes, but Shino had always retained the ability to make his opinions very clear through his blunt and overly literal responses.

"Shino?"

"I came to hand in my mission reports as requested, Hokage-sama." Shino replied. There was another stretch of silence that yawned between them. Sasuke groaned. Despite the debauchery implied in the tableau before him, Shino's face didn't change a bit. "However it seems you are engaged in an activity that does not require an audience. Thus I will return at a time when you are not indisposed."

"Shino, I'm not-"

"I would like to point out, however, that remaining in damp clothing may be disadvantageous for one's well being. Why? Because the temperature has dropped 2.34 degrees in the last forty minutes and your companion is wet clothing that is unsuitable for the current weather conditions."

"Ah, what? No! Shino, this isn't a… tryst! Give me a hand!"

Shino nodded, suddenly jerking into action as though someone shook him and strode over to Kakashi, squatting down to scrutinize the situation before him and nodded again, somewhat satisfied with his unspoken conclusion.

"This woman does not appear to be well."

"I know," Kakashi wrapped his hands further around his charge, attempting to lift her. Thankfully, as he did so, the yukata closed again. "Can you hold the kid?"


"Will you hold the kid?"

"Yes, certainly, Hokage-Sama." Shino plucked Mikoto out of Sasuke's weak grasp and held her against his chest, supporting her expertly. "I know how to hold an infant. Why you ask? Because I have many young cousins who-"
"That's nice," Kakashi interrupted him. He lifted the woman with ease and stood up, holding her in his arms. For a second, he paused, unsure of his next move. Shino regarded him curiously.

"Surely we will take them to the hospital?" He prompted. "They are in need of medical attention. I would say their conditions are acute."

"I know," Kakashi replied. He bit his lip. "But I don't think it's a good idea. We'll take them to Tsunade instead." That way he could keep a lid on things until he could figure out what to do. There'd be no danger of stray eyes seeing things they shouldn't. "Keep this on the down low for now, Aburame." He looked at Shino, who was gazing at him questioningly. "I don't want people knowing about this woman just yet."

"Is that because this woman appears to be Uchiha Sasuke and for some reason Sasuke has returned to the city with a child and has sought for your help which you would like to offer, but cannot digest the fact that a) Sasuke appears to be woman and b) Sasuke was once your protégé and you have an emotional connection to him, but as Hokage you must decide what is right for the city and thus turn him in to the authorities where you are sure you would lose possession of him?"

"Perceptive, much?" Kakashi swallowed hard. He didn't look away.

"If so," Shino continued. "I will agree to remain silent about this issue until such time as you decide it ought to be made public. Why? Because despite my personal opinions toward Uchiha Sasuke, you are Hokage and I will do as you order. Sir."

Kakashi coughed a little. "Yes. Good. Alright then, we should go. Uh... And thanks, Shino."

"It is not a thing that you need to concern yourself with again at this current time." Shino replied. Kakashi mentally abbreviated that to: Don't mention it.

They traveled to the presidential apartments behind the Hokage offices expecting to find the Legendary Sannin Tsunade. What greeted them at the door was the terrifying visage of a woman woken too early after consuming enough drinks to put a grown man to sleep. Strands of dirty blonde hair framed her face like spider webs. One mascara smudged, red ringed eye scrutinized them curtly.

"Do you know what goddamn time it is?"

"We need to come in." Kakashi replied, flatly.

Tsunade bristled for a second, before she noticed the young woman in Kakashi's arms and Shino, who was waiting patiently behind him, holding a small bundle of blankets. She pushed the door open.

"And what's wrong with the hospital?" She asked, throwing on her robe as she led them through the lounge and down the hall, walking quickly to keep ahead of them. The answer was obvious of course: their charge couldn't be taken to the general hospital, nor to a private clinic. Kakashi only came to her like this when he needed something to be kept under wraps in order to save Konoha the trouble of some kind of political incident. So this was probably some runaway from a royal family or the heir to some other kind of dynasty. Great. Scraping her hair into a careless ponytail, she stopped at the spare room and motioned to the bed. "Lay her down here, let me see her. Who is she, mm? A princess? Some noble's cousin? Don't tell me it's a priestess, I can't have Konoha being cursed with marmots again--"

"It's Uchiha Sasuke." Kakashi said. "Sort of."
"...What?"

Tsunade paused in mid sentence, her mouth hanging open. She'd been about to order Kakashi and Shino away as she made to examine the girl, but with that sudden bombshell revelation dumping a payload of confusion into the mix, she wasn't sure what to do. Except balk. "You're joking."

"I'm not. I wish I were, but I'm not." Kakashi continued in a small voice. "It's Sasuke. I think. At least, it looks like him. Very much like him." The words were dry in his mouth. He still couldn't believe it. A little more hopefully, he added, "what's more likely is that it's someone trying to be him. It might be a clone of, perhaps. Kage Bunshin…"

"No," Tsunade murmured, fingers typing over the woman/boy's head, testing for genjutsu. She was no expert, but she would have been able to tell at a basic level if this was a ruse. There was nothing present - no aura of power surrounding him. No power at all, really, which was odd, considering how stacked Sasuke had been, chakra-wise, the last time she'd seen him. "No, the chakra's too low. Way too low for Kage-bunshin. And way too low for Sasuke - this is almost civilian-level. It can't be him. But." She bit her lip.

As she brushed the dark fringe away, she could almost feel the blood draining from her face. It was him. Or at least, it was someone who looked very much like him. The face was the same - a little slimmer, but still that finely shaped, almost feminine jaw she'd looked at so many times over as his image was passed through the corrections system, finally to be published in the bingo book as a nukenin. Those almond-shaped eyes, those long dark lashes. He was the same height, same build, only the foundations now boasted a female facade, not that of a male ninja who was all long muscles and flesh carved out of marble. The body was female; whether the person inside was, remained debatable. But s/he was sick. Very, very sick. No matter who they were, they needed help. Fast.

"I also don't think it's a clone," she announced, examining what appeared to be Sasuke's summoning tattoos as she tested his pulse. Weak, slow. She wasn't surprised, not with the way he was breathing. Shaking her head as as Kakashi made to speak, she continued. "I don't. Call it a hunch but there's something about all this that convinces me otherwise. Something very strange is going on here and I need to run some tests before we can get some solid answers. Hokage-sama, please go and fetch Shizune, she'll be studying out in the library. Get her to bring my bag. After that I'll need hot water. Towels."

Kakashi was already on his feet, marching over to the door. He paused. "Tsunade-sama…Sasuke…It… isn't him, is it? It can't be…"

"We can find out when you get my assistant." Tsunade replied, drily. After the Hokage had disappeared down the hall, she motioned to Shino. She could hear the labored breathing of young lungs plagued by a severe case of congestion. It played on her ear like the flap of a flat tyre. "That a child?"

"Yes, Tsunade-sama." Shino said. "She appears to be ailing as well."

"Go into the bathroom, turn the hot taps on and undo her wrappings a little. The steam will help her lungs. Shizune will be with you shortly." Tsunade said, her hand splayed on the Sasuke look-alike's breastbone, feeling the beat of her heart, the rise and fall of her lungs. She barely nodded as Shizune rushed into the room, placing her bag beside her. She only informed her protege of the sick child in the bathroom and that once it had been attended, she would need help with this woman.

Woman…
Tsunade barely believed it herself, but the face, the face. She would have read the girl's chakra flow which resided in each ninja like DNA and could determine one from another with ease - would have immediately told her if this was the Uchiha or not - but... the girl didn't have any chakra. Her level was almost nil. There was chakra inside her, Tsunade could feel it - like the pressure of air on the inside of a balloon - but it wasn't circulating through her as chakra should, which only added to the conclusion that this couldn't be Sasuke. Perhaps Kakashi had been right? Perhaps it was a clone; or even a copy. A ninja trying to pass themselves off as an Uchiha for some strange reason or another - the ninja world wasn't lacking in fanboys.

But why the kid? That made no sense. That was, until Tsunade re-positioned her hand to test the girl's internal organs, pressing her palm inward just below his ribs. That was when she felt it. That was when everything became clear. Tsunade's eyes widened in disbelief. She'd been right. She'd been fucking right.

*My Gods, Sasuke. Who the hell did this to you?*

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Next ep - FEELS. So many of them.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Konoha, 29th February
Year of the Hare

She felt the baby. She felt it inside of him. Two arms, two legs; the head, the torso. Lungs growing and developing, limbs lengthening, strengthening - getting ready for the time when they would start pressing against him, amorphous shapes through his skin. The heartbeat was strong, resilient. The presence of life was so strong, it practically shouted at her. Tsunade felt her breath catch in her throat as her stomach twisted.

Sasuke was with child. Pregnant. Up the fucking duff, bun in the oven, expecting. However anyone wished to flavor it; however insane it sounded, it was true. There was a child inside of him and that was that. It grew in his belly, it would swell him big. It was there and it was his. Of course whether this was a product of Sasuke's own machinations or not Tsunade couldn't know, but she had a strong suspicion the situation had called for very little of his input, if any at all. Running away from a war to undergo some kind of gender reassignment and fall pregnant wasn't really something she would have thought an eighteen year old boy might have as high on his list of priorities. Certainly not a boy like Sasuke, anyway.

And those injuries. Those scars; those marks. The evidence was there in the indentations from pressure wounds on his wrists. Needle punctures in common draw sites. Discolorations from old bruises – it was all there. He'd been engineered to carry this child. Tricked into it, coerced - probably even physically forced into conceiving; that she would have bet her life on. After all, he was, at the conclusion of the war, the last of his kind. The only Uchiha. The only bearer of the Sharingan – a particularly unique dojutsu - and rarity tended to garner interest in all the wrong places. No, he'd been taken. He'd been remade. And he'd returned to Konoha for help; because he needed help, because he had nowhere else to go.

Sasuke gasped suddenly, his eyelids flickering as pain surged through him. His fever was high, heavy and dangerous and it caused him to shake, muttering incomprehensibly under his breath. His fingers tugged in the sheets and he strained, his teeth clenched against the spasm. Tsunade wiped his sopping brow, stroking his forehead with her fingernails. They needed to cool him down, she mused and let a little icy chakra build in her hands before laying them on the pulse points in his wrist and under his armpit. He seemed to calm a little after that, and Tsunade relaxed a little, breathing a sigh of relief as Shizune entered the room. She was armed with a large bowl of warm water, several hand towels and a particularly monstrous medical kit which she hefted onto the nightstand with a weighty thump.

"The baby's fine," she reported before Tsunade could even ask. Pressure marks from the heel of her hand coloured her face. Some studying she must have been doing before she was interrupted. "I gave her a little Benadryl and Shino's keeping her warm in the bathroom. We sort of set up a little bed in there with some towels. She'll be fine for a awhile, but she'll need observation overnight and the hospital's eas-" Shizune's voice dropped away as she glanced down at their second patient, her eyes widening. "I-is that-"

"Yes," Tsunade replied. "Uchiha Sasuke."

"B-but he's a-"
"Yes, I know."

"B-but-"

"He's also pregnant." Tsunade continued. "I'm pretty sure the other baby is his too. Pretty crazy, right? Oh, and he's sick - as in, seriously sick. So we have a debilitated female Sasuke on our hands. One who is with child – something that ought to be entirely impossible – and one who is still regarded as an international criminal. Happy Friday."

Shizune blinked. She opened and closed her mouth a few times before she said. "I don't think I can wrap my head around this."

"Neither could I," Tsunade wrung out a towel and used it to mop Sasuke's forehead. He moaned slightly under her touch and she pressed a hand to his cheek, kindly. "He's delirious. I haven't been able to get a word out of him, the fever's made him too weak. I've brought his temperature down some, but his… everything's kind of… falling apart inside him. The usual chakra therapy seems to be inadequate: I've given him a few big doses of healing energy and it's seemed to help a little, but not the way it should."

"He's jaundiced. A little, anyway. It's not helping that he'd so pale but there's a sickly tinge to him – look at his colouring." Shizune mused, reaching out to feel about his side. "Yeah. Liver's swollen up pretty bad and- what… what on earth is-"

"That's the problem. Feel it?" Tsunade reached into her bag and pulled out a kit of syringes and a small zipper pouch of medicines. Her home kit was extensive – more than enough to treat a fever; or even a mild case of an inflamed liver. But there was more to Sasuke's ailments than that, and Tsunade wasn't sure that her own personal lab could quite handle the challenges he'd presented them. She filled the syringe with a mild analgesic. "That's what's stumping me."

"Stumping? This is insane! Did he do this to himself? What woman is set up this way?" Shizune gaped, pressing her hands about his belly, feeling the swell of the womb, the fluid and tissue, the child. "This is… he couldn't possibly sustain this any further – he'd die!"

"So why on earth would you assume he'd do it to himself?" Tsunade snapped, bitterly. She sterilized a spot in the dip of his elbow and sunk the needle slowly into his flesh, calming him when he protested. "Hush, it's alright, Sasuke. This'll make you feel better. Just relax."

She watched as the boy's eyelashes trembled, but he didn't wake. He was far too sick to wake at this point. He needed rest. And he needed someone who could understand what was going on because Tsunade was fucked if she could figure it out.

"I… I don't even know what to think at this point." Shizune replied, honestly. "It's…What is this?"

"Some kind of breeding, maybe? That's the most obvious. Eugenics isn't uncommon in high level clans." Tsunade explained. "Weeding out the weak and encouraging procreation between members with better genes, stronger powers is how many clans develop their strongest jutsu users. Shit, you research any of the Hyuuga, the Hozuki - any of them, you'll find a rather interesting tale of… how should I put it? Baby crafting. It comes with the territory. But this? This is taking it one step further. I'm no expert in these types of body modifications, but you can feel it, can't you? The way the chakra center had been forced toward the foetus, the way that the womb is protecting itself, even though the body around it is falling apart…"

"It's almost self-contained," Shizune remarked, slowly. "Like a parasite. It protects itself. I mean, there's always a symbiotic nature between the mother and child during pregnancy, but-"
"But this gives you the impression that even if the mother died, the child would still be able to live for a time until it was retrieved."

"Retrieved?" Shizune looked up, sharply. "Don't you mean saved?"

"Growing a baby inside a body that is, predominantly, male? A male member of a clan who is all but extinct? Ensuring that, no matter what, he will produce something, no matter his condition? No, I do mean retrieved. I do think that Sasuke is being used – a broodmare for someone who wants Uchiha babies. They've made him the mother to ensure that his bloodline and kekkei genkai abilities aren't tarnished. They've set up the pregnancy in such a way that he remains weak and compliant while they secure as much chakra as they like."

"And it's Sasuke's chakra?"

"It is. Well hidden. Rerouted. It took me a moment to read the stream, it's so entwined with the baby's. Do a DNA test anyway – we can secure one pretty quickly. But I think we're going to need help, Shizune." Tsunade swallowed hard. "There's... the jutsu they've used on him, it's part of a physical surgery that is so.... It's flawless. Perfect. I'm worried that I don't understand enough about the procedure that any kind of treatment I might prescribe could possibly hurt them both. I can't read how they've managed this... I work better with chakra based techniques – we need someone who can understand this and break it down to a cellular level. If we don't..."

"He won't survive," Shizune breathed, her fingers pressing in near Sasuke's kidneys. "The jutsu is taking precedence – siphoning off his body. He can't recuperate; it's taking all his energy." She looked up, her cheeks pale. "But... who on earth can help us with this? If you can't, Tsunade-sama, then-"

"I've already thought of someone." Tsunade replied, her expression grave. "I need you to go and fetch them for me while I stay here with Sasuke. Take Shino with you and drop him off on the way – he doesn't need to know anything more. Say you're going to the hospital to get some supplies."

"Alright..." Shizune frowned. "But who am I getting? Someone from the night unit? Sakura-san? One of the Naras?"

"We don't need a doctor, nor a surgeon. Sasuke's condition is well above that," Tsunade shook her head. "We need a scientist."

Kakashi simply stood back as Shizune rushed past him, her sensei's medical bag in hand, her hair secured into a bun and jabbed with pencils like a pincushion. He heard Shino tiptoe into the bathroom and turn on the taps and the shower head for some unknown reason. He heard the two med-nins muttering to each other; their conversation punctuated by the occasional gasp of horror. He let the small apartment buzz into life around him as he sank down into Shizune's office chair slowly leaning forward to place his elbows on the table. Slowly, slowly he rested his head in the cradle of his hands, and breathed out, trying to find sense in everything that had just happened.

He'd come back. His student had come back. His cruel, vicious, heartless, brilliant student had returned. Although, it appeared, not of his own accord. It almost looked as though he'd come for help; he wouldn't have run into the Hokage's office begging otherwise. But Sasuke didn't beg. Sasuke didn't ask for help. So this couldn't be Sasuke.

Sasuke wasn't a woman; didn't have a child. It couldn't be, couldn't be.

Because... if it was... then Shino was right. He'd have to turn him in. He'd have to hand him over...
to higher judgement – put him on trial in front of the entire village. Perhaps the entire world. At the very least, he'd have to notify the other Shinobi states, since his actions had affected them as well. He'd trodden on a lot of toes and hard enough that there would be quite a big deal made out of the whole thing. And that could only result in one of two effects: Negate the campaign for peace by putting the war hero's close friend on trial and sentencing him. Or it would cement the end of the tyranny the ninja world had faced, putting the last of the most dangerous clan into isolation. Where he belonged. Or so the elders led him to believe.

Obito had told him the truth when he spoke of Sasuke's history. Kakashi had done his own research in secret and though much of the Uchiha's history had been buried, he'd discovered enough that Obito's and Black Zetsu's story held up. But no one else knew; no one besides Naruto and Yamato. And they hadn't come forth to sing for Sasuke's acquittal. Not one note. Perhaps it was better to let sleeping dogs lie at this point. Perhaps it was better to let the sins of the past rest, rather than stir things up again.

It would be better.

It would be easier.

Kakashi blinked, rubbing at his nose. But it wasn't Sasuke, so that was redundant. It wasn't Sasuke. It wasn't. It wasn't his student; his soldier. The boy he'd moulded, the boy he'd tried to turn from that ever present, ever tempting path to self-destruction. The boy he'd given up on. The criminal he'd fought with the intent to kill. The revolutionary who sought to destroy them all; it wasn't him. So it was alright, wasn't it. He could shelve that memory again. Carry on, just as he'd always done. Just as Shinobi Law instructed. Kakashi lowered his arms to the desktop and laid his head on the meat of his forearm. It wasn't him. It couldn't be him. Everything would be rectified within the evening and then the girl would be gone. Everything would be ok.

"Hokage-sama?"

Shizune was talking to him. Kakashi blinked, looking up, groggily. "Mm?"

"Hokage-sama. A prognosis has been attained. Tsunade-sama wishes for your presence." Shizune stepped back a little. She was wearing a heavier jacket and there was rain in her hair. She'd been outside? When? "Are you alright, sir?"

"Yeah. How long's it been?"

"Two hours. I believe you may have fallen asleep." Shizune. "Probably a good thing at this hour."

Kakashi just shrugged, then pushed himself to his feet, following the jounin down the corridor back to the lounge. Tsunade was sitting near Sasuke's side in a wooden chair, smoothing down the blanket over their patient's torso. She cleared her throat when Kakashi entered, motioning down toward Sasuke's shoulder.

"It is him," she said. "He's been altered, obviously, but it is him."

Kakashi blinked. "No it's not. Can't be."

"It is," Tsunade nodded at Shizune, who reached over to the small nightstand, retrieving a small, handheld device which Kakashi recognized from the standard issue field medic's inventory. She held up it up to the light, indicated toward the small screen with her finger, then turned the little gadget around to show a glass vial inserted into the back of it.

"DNA testing," she explained. "We've recently upgraded to a more expedient method which we can
use in the field. It can help determine the origin of the enemy. It's not as accurate as a full lab test
but—"

"If it's not as accurate, then it's wrong." Kakashi cut in, stubbornly. "This isn't Sasuke. This is not
Sasuke."

"I'm sorry to disagree with you, Hokage-sama, but you'll find it is."

The words came from the bathroom and slowly, somewhat sinuously a fifth figure emerged, drying
their hands as they met Kakashi's eyes a with steady, serpentine gaze. The figure smiled a little,
revealing slightly elongated incisors. It looked positively ghoulish.

"-the hell?!" Kakashi couldn't hide his surprise. "You? Why're you here?"

There were few things nowadays that could rattle Konoha's Hokage. He'd come across two of them
tonight and that was already more than enough for a couple of years. Kabuto Yakushi might have
been on their side now, might had fought with them in the war, might have sworn his allegiance to
the leaf. It didn't make him any less fucking scary when you didn't expect him to be there. Kakashi
took a second to catch his breath. He already had grey hair, he didn't need it paler. Not prematurely,
anyway.

"Tsunade sent for me." Kabuto answered, as though it made the plainest sense in the world. "She
required a genetics specialist. I obliged."

"At three in the morning. And that was fine with you?"

"I require little sleep. A blessing, really, when you consider how much work there is to be done in a
day." Kabuto nodded at the figure on the bed. "Now, I believe Sasuke requires my assistance?"

"That's not Sasuke," Kakashi said, stubbornly. "And no, we will be fine, thank you, Kabut-"

"No, we won't." Tsunade cut in. "I can't help him, Kakashi. I don't know how.

"What? You can't be serious!" The Hokage shook his head in disbelief. "Tsunade, you're one of the
most talented medical ninjas in the world. I just cannot fathom any of this being out of your
skillset."

"I'm very flattered. But unfortunately, my skills don't stretch this far. The world of medicine I'm
familiar with but," Tsunade popped her knuckles irritably, "this is bordering experimental practices
– the stuff of science. Genetics. This is not my area. We needed someone who might be familiar
with these sort of procedures. Or at least the something in the same ball park. We can't determine a
course of treatment otherwise."

"But we have a medical sciences team."

"And we have the best in the business."

Kabuto, eyes flicked over to Tsunade as she jerked a thumb toward him, and he gave an odd little
smil, ducking his head in a sort of bow as the Chief of Medicine continued. "This is a critical
moment, Kakashi. We can't afford to wait and we can't afford for this to reach the wrong ears
without preparation. Kabuto has promised us his silence in return for a favor. And he has a history
with Sasuke. It makes sense."

"This," Kakashi closed his eyes, tiredly. "This isn't Sasuke. It's a faulty DNA test; it isn't right."
"Well, the field version might be swift, but I assure you it's accurate. I've made modifications on it myself – at your behest, I might add." Kabuto tapped at the glass in Shizune's hand with a pale finger. "That is Uchiha Sasuke. Every single lovely little chain of him. And now, if you don't mind, I'd like to take a proper look at him."

"S-should we leave the room?" Shizune looked about, nervously. Tsunade sat by Sasuke's shoulder, one hand on his collarbone, measuring his chakra as she watched. She shook her head. "I'd rather you were both here to witness this. Shizune, I'll need records, note down what you hear."

There was an affirmation, then a scramble as the young woman dashed out of the room for pencil and paper. Tsunade turned her attention to her successor. "And you're looking for proof. Well, this is where you get it. If it makes you uncomfortable, you can turn around."

"You're suggesting I sit and watch a woman receive a full exam – a personal exam - without her consent?" Kakashi said, drily. "And you think that's ethical?"

"A Hokage oversees the treatment of a criminal, be it torture, interrogation or medical procedures. This is nothing out of the ordinary. Considering Sasuke is still deemed a wanted felon, you have every right to be here. I want you here because I feel it is important that you have the truth for yourself, not through secondhand means." She shifted as Sasuke groaned, and smoothed the hair off his damp forehead. Kabuto's hand shot out to rest by his throat, measuring his pulse.

"Please make your decision soon," he said. "I'd like to start immediately, if I may. This is not easy on Sasuke. But-" Kabuto reached over and pulled one of the towels across Sasuke's lap, hiding his pelvic region from view. He was still wearing the yukata, but the towel added a little extra decency. "Does that help, perhaps?"

Kakashi just sighed, but he nodded, moving to the wall behind Tsunade in order to keep out of the way. He was joined by Shizune, who gasped a breathy ok before starting to scribble in her notebook. Kabuto donned a pair of latex gloves and slowly rested his hand on Sasuke's stomach, lightly at first, before he pushed the yukata aside and pressed in a little. Sasuke jerked and cried out.

"Mm, sorry," Kabuto murmured, not letting up as he moved his hand slowly across his patient's ribs and down a little, reading the health of his organs with expert precision. "I know that hurts. I'll try to be fast, Sasuke-kun."

"Swollen?" Tsunade asked. "He seemed to be inflamed all over the place. His liver is-"

"Mm, enlarged. Quite severely. Seems it has not been functioning properly. I would say to balance out the energy going to the little one."

"Little what?" Kakashi said from the back of the room. He was trying not to look; he really was. But that caught his attention. "You mean the little girl?"

"No, I mean the little… mm, boy." Kabuto actually smiled at that, just a tad. He looked up. "Around four months old I would say. Healthy as a horse; if you'll pardon the expression.

Kakashi didn't notice the expression. He was stuck on the face that not only did Sasuke have female parts, he was using them. Effectively, by the looks of it. So he said: "Horse?"

"No, a boy. A little powerhouse too. So this is where all Sasuke's natural chakra is going. How clever."

"Huh?"
"Well, he's been feeding off Sasuke's chakra specifically. It's basically become his own, which makes Sasuke's look as though he has nil. It's even systematically recoded so that he can't use it, only the child can."

"I could read Sasuke's in there, though. It's similar enough." Tsunade mentioned taking Sasuke's hand to hold. That seemed to calm him some.

"I'd say there'd have to be enough similarity for it to remain useable by an Uchiha. Power is power, but there are some base chakras that just work better with the kekkei genkai." Kabuto smoothed his hand over the bump, nodding. "Which is what you could read. The rest? That's kept specifically for the baby. It really is a marvelous, marvelous machine."

"That's what worries me," Tsunade said in a low voice. "The machine part. He's being used to breed like this, isn't he?"

"No doubt." Kabuto let his hands slide down carefully, gently, keeping contact with the skin the whole time. "This is a product, the child he's carrying. Breeding for gain isn't an uncommon practice. Many clans with lesser powers will try to up their stakes by kidnapping women from a rival clan – using her to inject greater abilities into their bloodlines. It's rather like a cuckoo bird, who will place their own eggs within another bird's nest, taking advantage of the housing and food source to allow them to produce at an advantage without having to care for their offspring. This is pushing it a step farther though. This is a control that has been well researched, and, I'd wager, long established."

Kakashi frowned. "Long established, huh? And your boss? Did he try anything like this? God knows he was cutting people up at a whim, this couldn't have missed his attention."

"Orochimaru has… How should I put it?" Kabuto paused, thoughtfully. "A thing about pregnancy. He's always been interested in genetics and strategic breeding but any tie I had mentioned the possibility of growing his own bodies from his own… Reserves… he didn't seem so enthused. Said he hadn't found a viable option there. But I believe there was more to it than that."

"I don't think I want to ask," Tsunade winced.

"Mm, I've always hypothesized that he might harbour a strong fetish-

"That's why I didn't want to ask."

"There's nothing wrong with fetishes. They're quite fascinating, really – what appeases someone in a certain way. I would have loved to have studied some, if I'd had the time. Find out whether it was a genetic predisposition or… ah… Sasuke, I'm going to have a feel inside now." Kabuto broke off to address his half-conscious patient, waiting for a moment as he moved his hands slowly and intentionally, with a pressure that was between soft enough not to hurt and firm enough not to be misconstrued. "I will take it slow, just breathe. There we go… Slowly now. Mm, you're inflamed, aren't you? Tsunade-sama, he'll need a course of antibiotics for this – it should clear up quite quickly."

Tsunade nodded as Kabuto began to pull back, removing his gloves when he was clear.
"Antibiotics? What about the damage to his organs?"

"It seems worse than it is," Kabuto clicked his tongue. "Let's get him on some fluids, Some painkillers. As for this unravelling jutsu that holds his body together, I think that could be rectified with a few hormones. After all, he would have been supplied with some fairly heavy-duty estrogen to help his female parts develop, but it seems he's had a full course of a kind of filler. Something
that compliments the hormones being produced by his implemented parts and helps them bond. Simply female hormones would have sufficed, but these have been specifically crafted. I can get you a break down by morning, if you'll allow me use of your lab and some blood?"

"Do what you have to." Tsunade nodded. "Whatever he needs, just let me know."

"Very generous, thank you." Kabuto nodded. "Shizune-san… is that second test ready at all?"

"I can get it." Shizune replied, pushing up to her feet. "I left it in the lab. I can get some preliminary medication on the way."

"Isotonics," Kabuto pursed his lips. "Mm. If we get some fluids started, he'll be in far better shape by the time we can move him safely. He needs to be warmed up and settled a while. Some good old-fashioned colloids for the liver. Anti-inflammatories and something to balance out the pain. If you have some Progynon, I think that'll be perfectly fine until I can find a tailored replacement therapy. Er-" He trailed off at the look on Tsunade's face when he mentioned the very common brand of hormones taken by women of age. "Well, you know. Considering you're-"

"It's in the cupboard in the bathroom," Tsunade grumbled, eyeing Shizune smartly as the younger woman sped from the room. "And what's this about a second test? A second what test?"

"I had your protégé test a little sample from the child while I washed up." Kabuto explained. "Just a cheek swab, nothing invasive. I thought we might as well test the parentage. At least we will be able to tell if the father is on your Bingo Database."

"I suppose that makes sense," Tsunade nodded. She pulled a second blanket out of the cupboard by the door and began spreading it over Sasuke. "And you think he'll be alright?"

"It's a fever. It's not good, but the baby's safe, so it seems. The most we can do is simply let it burn out. Treat the swelling with a little chakra therapy and some anti-inflammatories — once we have his estrogen balanced out and his body isn't sacrificing itself for the survival of the infant, you'll find he'll improve quickly. Oh, and place a pillow under his leg. He's aggravated that injury."

"Injury?" Kakashi frowned. "I didn't notice any injured limbs."

"It's old but it's healed very poorly. A rather unpleasant fracture of the kneecap. It was swollen, forcing the leg to bend at an unnatural angle and it puts stress on the lower calf muscle. I would have thought you might have picked it up." Kabuto raised a brow. "It is, after all, a very common injury for ninja. The knee is a very good target when one needs to take down a target without killing them. The knee to stop them running and, if necessary, the shoulder - to stop them fighting. I thought it was base knowledge."

"Still think it's impossible?" Tsunade looked pointedly at Kakashi. "The last of a rare clan? Modified to make him a breeding engine? Injured enough to be immobile without putting his life at risk? Mm?"

"W-what's the test say?" Kakashi ignored her as Shizune entered the room, pushing a small trolley of equipment: an IV stand, tubes, plastic wrapped ports and needles and an array of fluid therapies in their turgid little clear sacs. She passed the test container to Kabuto, who began reading the stripped code through the unit's processing screen himself, rather than waiting for the calculated answer.

"Baby's asleep, she's much, much better. I've put her in my bed for the time being," Shizune explained. "Er… that still needs a few more minutes, Kabuto-san."
Kabuto just chuckled a little to himself, but he sobered after a moment. "Interesting." He commented, turning the unit this way, then that, frowning at it. "How very, very interesting…"

"Don't be like that, Yakushi." Tsunade warned, setting up the IV hook, her gaze locked on the med-nin's pale, serpentine face. He looked up abruptly, somewhat scandalized."

"Like what, Tsunade-sama? It really is very interesting. In fact, I must say, I'm close to shocked."

"Close to?" Kakashi narrowed his eyes. "How's that better than regular shocked?"

"Well considering the lengths these people have gone to in order to create themselves a perfect incubator for their product, I'm not that surprised. But quite frankly, they seem to have done the impossible. They've either obtained a frozen sample long ago – which would mean there had been a captured member before Sasuke, or another defector who didn't care much for the integrity of the clan. Or they've somehow managed to find themselves another living Uchiha with a pattern similar enough to Sasuke's to ensure the children carry the best genes possible. This little girl," Kabuto shook his head, impressed. "Has the potential to be as strong as her mother. Stronger, even – maybe more like her late Uncle."

"You mean," Tsunade licked her lips, worriedly. "The father was an… Uchiha?"

"One hundred percent." Kabuto nodded. "Though no one from the bingo book, it seems, or the little alarms would have gone off. The funny thing is, I can't see them using frozen samples, considering the storage process will often damage the chakra-retention capabilities. In this instance, the fresher the better. Whomever donated their sperm - or whomever these people managed to harvest from in order to impregnate Sasuke – harvested from a donor who is..." He squinted. "Very much alive. Mid-twenties, I'd say. Very healthy and with a very strong chakra signature. Mm."

"Could uh… " There was a pause as Tsunade sought for better phrasing. Unsatisfied, she gave up. "Could they have used Sasuke to impregnate himself?"

Kakashi made a small, strangled noise. All three medics in the room ignored him.

"No, the genes are far too close. Even with careful modification," Kabuto tapped the glass, "that wouldn't be wise. Same goes for parent to child. Or siblings. Or clones, if they had that capability, which I doubt, or they would be selling those instead – far, far easier to create."

Kakashi cleared his throat. "Then what? If it's not himself or from a stored sample, who else would be close enough to deliver that kind of genetic match?"

"A relative of some kind? Yes. Definitely. Close enough in blood, but not too similar that it would cause disparate side effects. A cousin? Yes, a cousin." Kabuto smiled then, staring into the depths of the sample in his hand. "And didn't Sasuke have some marvelously talented cousins?"

Kakashi's jaw tightened. "Didn't he indeed..."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Didn't he indeed... mmm... Please excuse my medical slap-dashery - back when I was at University, I had the time to research all sorts of interesting ailments and their
treatements, but now I'm reduced to Star Trek Science (TM), as one of my dear friends called it. Between busting out a chapter before work and at lunch times (and now, in the evening when I shooooould be doing other things), I have far less time for researching fics. I'll just do my best orz.

In a couple of weeks time, the fic will be on hiatus as my muse, soul-sister, constant rp partner and the darling to whom I dedicate this fic of weirdness is coming to visit me and we're going to go road tripping. So there'll be plenty of fic discussion, but not a lot coming your way until I get back in a few weeks time, I'm afraid! I will try and upload dirty little snippets to my tumblr instead, if you want a little SNS naughtiness :3

When are we getting Naruto and Sasuke's meeting? Hahah chapter 699! No, I joke - you'll have a little soon. Sort of. Maybe... Remember, he's in a Bad Mood with our little Uchiha... Prepare for Angst and Wangst and all of the feelses. As for Orochimaru, he'll come along sometime. I can't not write him into this, he's waaaaay too juicy a character to leave out.

Enjoy! And I'll see you next chapter as I compile it in a small cafe while the early morning light and the coffee wake me up :)
"Uchiha?" Tsunade parroted. "Cousin? No. Can't be. There aren't any other Uchiha. Madara… That guy's definitely expired… and-" she glanced to her side where Kakashi stood – a thin, pale shadow of displeasure next to her. She shook her head again. "Uh-uh. Can't be."

"Well as I said, the DNA is new. Relatively fresh. It's not from a stored source – there's no fringe damage, no spikes in the chakra code that occurs in samples that have been kept for over a decade." Kabuto shrugged. "It's right there, the code cannot lie."

"What if… it's… a genjutsu?" Shizune contributed. Six pairs of eyes turned toward her and she blushed, twisting her fingers around her pencil. "I mean, well, it could be a trick. O-or something."

"If it is, then allow me to tip my hat to the magician."

"What's a magician?"

"Never mind." Kabuto tapped at the little vial with his finger. He set the little device back down on the nightstand but kept peering at it as though he didn't trust it. "Besides, it would have to be an awfully good trick. As I said, the code cannot-"

"Yeah, we know. We know," Kakashi pinched the bridge of his nose tiredly. "So, what? So there's another Uchiha out there?"

"One who allowed this to happen to them?" Tsunade added. "Or… gave his contribution unknowingly – or was forced? I don't know. How deep could this go?"

"How long have you got?" Kakashi grumbled, bitterly. "Seems people can't just let a clan die in peace. Internally or otherwise."

"I'd think Sasuke might have something to add to that," Tsunade parried, sourly. Kakashi sighed and crossed his arms over his chest.

"This will have to be investigated," he said at length. "The Uchiha are still Konoha's responsibility – even though Sasuke has defected, they have always been a clan of the Fire Country. It's our job to deal with him as a criminal and deal with his family as a part of our village. After all, that's why we have rules against deserters, don't we? We keep our own to our own."

"His children can't be deserters, they're not ninja," Tsunade pointed out. Kakashi shook his head.

"They're the family of a nukenin. A famous nukenin, I might add. Sasuke is on everyone's radar, we can't just squirrel him away. Kumo and Mizu will want to know our proposals. Tsuchi and Suna too, I imagine, though Gaara tends to be a little more lenient than the rest and I'm not sure Ohnoki cares that much. But we can't keep secrets. We promised we wouldn't. Reacting in the contrary will destroy every connection we've built. It'll make us a laughing stock."

"But what of the Council? Surely they'll want to bury this." Tsunade frowned. "Are you sure going
They could use the confusion to oust you; stating that you have an emotional connection to the prisoner. Naruto will-

"-will deal with it. As will the Council. We need to make good on the promises we've outlined toward the other villages. There's no point singing praises into the dark, we need to do the hard work as well. We can't change everything at once and clemency toward nukenin is a sore subject for most."

"A trial then?" Kabuto pursed his lips. "You'll put him on trial for his crimes?"

"It worked out alright for you didn't it?" Kakashi raised a brow. "Apart from a couple of things."

"You mean the fact that I cannot apply my skills where they are needed, even if I volunteer?" Kabuto said, curtly. "I am very capable of such a profession, you know. I did grow up there."

"And in many places, it seems," Kakashi said. "Kabuto, no one is going to accept you as a caregiver at Konoha Orphanage. It's not going to work, even if you can do the job just fine. We've been over this; the backlash from the public alone would be enough to get you thrown back in prison. You're on tenterhooks, Yakushi. Only time is going to strengthen them."

"Then you are you referring to my eternal probation? Well yes, I suppose I am fortunate Konoha was so merciful," Kabuto sighed. "Not that I'd planned on going anywhere anyway. And now that we've come to an arrangement over this little…situation, I really have nothing else to ask for right now. Perhaps Sasuke will be as easily sated?" He chuckled to himself. "Oh, but that is wishful thinking, isn't it?"

"Damn straight." Tsunade sighed. "'sated' isn't really a word that describes Sasuke at all. You may as well call him a playboy, dress him in khakis and have him run around konoha, hitting on all the girls like some sort of serial Casanova, before you'll have a 'sated' Sasuke."

"That's quite the vision," Kakashi made a face. Tsunade nodded.

"So you're going to make an official statement once he's well and-

"This morning." Kakashi interrupted, bluntly. "As soon as he's stable, we will move him to the Prison infirmary. The girl will go to Konoha General-

"You're splitting them up?" Tsunade looked horrified. "You can't split them up! Kakashi that's-

"Sasuke will go to the infirmary, the girl will go to Konoha General," he repeated. "That's how it is, Tsunade-sama. That is my decision."

"Then I don't agree with it. It's not good for him. They shouldn't be separated, not now. Not while we're in the dark about everything. We need him to be comfortable – he's the type of person who'll be more pliant if he has what he needs-

"You don't know anything about Sasuke." Kakashi shot back. "Anything. You've met him only a few times, Tsunade-sama. You know him through Naruto's vision of him, which is, suffice to say, romanticized greatly. No. They will be separated. That's final."

"I don't agree," Tsunade repeated, acidly. "I think you're making a terrible decision. Sasuke might be a criminal, but he doesn't deserve that. Not after what he's been through. Not after this. She's his link, Kakashi. I get the feeling he brought her here for her more than himself. That's got to mean something."
"Good. Then he'll work harder with us to get her back."

"It's not right." Tsunade looked at the others, who simply exchanged worried glances. Kabuto's hand was on Sasuke's forehead, resting on the warm skin lightly while his other pinched his wrist, measuring his pulse.

"He's very weak," he offered. "It might be better to wait than allow him to wake to that kind of shock."

"Hokage-sama?" Shizune breathed. "Surely he's been through enough."

"Haven't we all," Kakashi replied, turning toward the door. "Let me know when he wakes, I will return with an escort." And then he was gone. Tsunade slowly eased down on the edge of the bed, perching there tentatively while the others grouped around their patient, watching him with nervous eyes.

"Haven't we all?" Tsunade whispered. "That's all he had to say? Really? Sasuke was his student. How could you do that to someone you've known for so long. Someone who's shared that much of their life with you?"

"Well, Orochimaru wanted to steal his body and use it for his own rebirth." Kabuto offered.

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"In a way." Kabuto pushed his glasses up his nose. "It's funny when you think about it, you know, Orochimaru and Sasuke sharing a body--"

"That's not funny."

"No, I guess it isn't," Kabuto said, apologetically. "I suppose my old Master's humor doesn't really suit me so well."

"It didn't suit him well," Tsunade pointed out. "I don't think he ever got out of the creepy zone, even if he meant to be light-hearted." She sighed. "Orochimaru would definitely be someone to testify in Sasuke's favour. I he'd agree to do it. After all, he was mostly responsible for his defection in the first place, wasn't he?"

"Without a doubt," Kabuto said, honestly. "The Heaven seal that Orochimaru branded Sasuke with forced him to seek out his guidance for power alone. It was the perfect drug for the perfect addict – beautifully orchestrated. S-sorry."

He added the last part when Tsunade glared at him darkly, but the look dissolved into one of unhappy surrender. "Guess I can't blame him in that respect, we are all searching for something, aren't we?"

"Mm. And I would wager that, in proving Sasuke is questing for peace we might be able to relieve his sentencing a little. Maybe even allow him the opportunity to visit his daughter. Orochimaru had told me he had changed. This was before the conclusion of the war, of course, and there was that occasion of broken time where no one knows what happened. The Infinite Tsukiyomi. The dream we'd all fallen into. But my old master was adamant that Sasuke had changed his tune for something… more interesting."

"Something that Kakashi seems to know more about than anyone." Tsunade mused. "Other than Naruto. And he hasn't said a word."
"I could make him talk if you-"

"No. No. No thank you." Tsunade said, quickly. "I'm sure your methods are… well… successful, but I don't think it's necessary." She licked her lips. "Take your samples, Kabuto. We'll need them tested. If you can come up with that treatment by morning, that would be extremely beneficial. The lab is down the hall. Shizune can help you."

"I'm sure I can find it." Kabuto said, flipping through his own personal supplies for a couple of plastic-wrapped syringes, and began taking his samples. Tsunade returned to his injuries, checking more intimate areas once the Dragon Sage had left. The damage, the bruising, she noted it all down with cold fingers. She hadn't seen these kinds of wounds in a long, long time – she hadn't been privy to this kind of evidence of abuse since the third ninja war. Since the riots. The battles themselves were terrible, but no one ever glamorized the aftermath; no one ever remembered how long the fighting went beyond the war. There had been no pride in the pillaging; no honor in the savagery that occurred in the smaller, weaker villages once the war had ended. It was virus that infected a dying body and it was shelved, just like anything else History didn't want to remember.

The edge of her vision started to blur after a while, though she wasn't sure if it from fatigue or from her own inflamed sense of justice that had ignited the moment Sasuke and his child had entered her home. No matter what he'd done, no matter what he'd said he'd do, no one deserved this.

No one.

He awoke, blinking in the sunlight lazily. He felt the warmth spread through his body; the kind of bliss one only feels with the advancement of age and old bones. He staggered to his feet and tested the scent of the earth, the fresh pique of grass and the coolness of the dew before he ambled over to the nearest tree, cocking one leg arthritically. With an appreciative sigh, he let out a long, hot stream of urine, and when he was finished, he scratched a little earth against it, letting others know exactly where he'd been and when. Then he stretched, slowly, submitting to a long, open mouthed yawn before making his way back to his master. Akamaru was getting worse with mornings the older he became and those damn early starts that Kiba somehow kept landing wasn't helping any. He snorted and rolled in the grass a few times while his companion checked his mission notes and emitted a long yawn himself, heralding the chilly winter sunrise.

"NGGGGARGH," said Kiba, wiggling his shoulders a little as he shivered. "Fuck it's cold."

"It's not that cold," Hinata rolled her eyes, smiling to herself as she appeared behind him, doing up the top buttons of her jacket. "Just a little nippy. Hi Akamaru."

Akamaru nodded at her, genially, walking over for a scratch behind the ears, to which she complied without hesitation. He liked Hinata, she was always very thoughtful of him. Always snuck him a treat or two when Kiba wasn't looking. He sniffed at the air, raising his nose above the wet grass. Shino wasn't far away either. And… wait a minute. What was that scent? Something sweet. Dark. Something different. It was faint and it blended into the wind almost seamlessly, but it was there. Tantalising, unique and yet maddeningly familiar. The old dog pushed to his feet, sniffing again – harder this time, as Shino approached. The young man stepped to one side as Akamaru sniffed around him and he scratched as his unshaven chin, feeling the stubble catch on his fingernails.

"Salutations," said Shino in his usual subdued tenor. "A fine day."

"Hi Shino."
"Whoa, you look like shit," Kiba frowned. "You stay up studying all night again or something?"

"I don't understand, how is it that I appear to resemble feces after little more than a late night?"
Shino frowned. Kiba just shook his head. "And anyway n-.... Uh yes. Yes. That is correct. I have
not had an adequate amount of sleep due to... educational priorities."

"Oh that's too bad," Hinata said, sympathetically. "But good on you for really knuckling down,
Shino. I know a few people who probably benefit from taking the exam a little more seriously."
That was directed at Kiba, who pretended to ignore it. "Hey, why don't we get you a coffee on the
way out. There're a couple of vendors open this early. Might be able to pick one for our client too –
heard he had a bit of a temper. We should really start out on the right foot if we want a pleasant
journey."

"That's not a bad idea, the last one was a complete git." Kiba growled. He made a face at Akamaru,
who let out a small whine as he sniffed at Shino's feet, tail dancing in perturbation. That scent
again. His master hadn't caught it, but Akamaru couldn't seem to get it out of his nose. He knew
that strain. He knew it. From long ago, and from recently too. It was different, changed, but the
base notes were the same. He knew that scent. Shino seemed to look down at him, somewhat
nervously.

"Y-yes. That would be beneficial," he cleared his throat. "Uh, perhaps we should start moving?"

Kiba yawned again, loudly. "Mm, yeah. Guess so," he stretched and patted Akamaru absently on
the head. "C'mon, old man. We gotta get those old joints moving or you'll freeze up again."

Akamaru gave him a derisive snort, but calmed a little as Shino shot him a knowing glance.

"Well, you should be more attentive to his needs, rather than those new puppies of yours, Kiba," he
said, shoving his hands in his pockets. "Akamaru has the best nose in the village. You shouldn't
tease him like that."

"Aw, he can take it."

Kiba grinned, giving Akamaru a hearty scratch around the ruff. Shino was sure he heard a
whispered I didn't mean it before the Inuzuka ran on ahead. Hinata followed, pulling a map out of
her travelling bag. Shino walked deliberately slower, eyeing the expert tracker as they trailed after
their team.

"I know you know," he whispered, conspiratorially. "I know you can smell him. I have showered
twice, but I was prepared for this. We must keep this between us, you know. The mission is top
secret. Do you concur?"

Akamaru sniffed him again, wracking his brain for the origin of the scent. Shino was being kind,
he wasn't quite as adept in the olfactory department as he used to be. But it was nice to be paid his
dues, and he gave a little doggy smile, nodding like humans did to signify yes, I understand. He'd
catch that scent later; he'd remember. But for now he simply trotted beside Shino, glad to be part of
something that just might be a little bigger than a mission to take a young Lord to his Grandfather's
Summer Palace.

This is a dream, isn't it?

Sasuke looked at his brother who lay beside him, his long dark hair spilling over his shoulders and
pooling on the blanket in ribbons of silky black tendrils. A sheet covered them both – or at least,
something like a sheet. It blocked day, blocked night. It blocked everything that wasn't the two of
them. They lay facing each other, both dressed in deep gray kimono. Sasuke caught the flash of a lilac pattern on Itachi's, while his own seemed to boast chrysanthemums. Diffuse light surrounded them, warm, comforting. There were no edges, no details. There was only the two; only the brothers. Itachi smiled.

"Of course, Otouto. You know I am not part of your world anymore."

Sasuke nodded slowly, painfully. The truth might hurt, but that didn't make it any less finite. Itachi was gone, and all that remained was an absence of him. Sasuke wedged his hand under his chin.

"Then how come I can see you now? I haven't dreamed about you before, so why now?"

"I can't speak for your dreams, Sasuke. I don't control them. Perhaps there is something you need to tell yourself and you can only do so through your interpretation of me."

"Interpretation?"

"Well, I can't physically be in front of you, can I?" Itachi reasoned. "So whatever you're seeing now, is your own projection of me."

"My own… Hn. So, you know what I know?"

"Yes."

"And… you know what happened to me?" Sasuke swallowed, slowly. His fingers curled against the pillow. Somehow, rather distantly, he felt strangely guilty. Itachi had always been able to see right through him, but now it seemed even worse than that. Now he looked through Sasuke straight to his soul. It felt… odd. "You know what I've done…"

"That, and what has been done to you, otouto."

"Oh," Sasuke looked away. At length, he added. "Are you angry?"

"For your decisions or for your suffering at the hands of others?" Itachi frowned. "I'm not that sort of spirit, I'm afraid. Your memory of me doesn't allow me to be angry like that. It feels pain, but it seems far away. Forgotten; just bitter residue now. I'm sorry, I can't give you a better answer."

"It's ok." Sasuke said, flexing his fingers a little. "Probably better like this anyway. I think enough people are mad at me. Or they will be, at least. When they find out."

"Find out what?"

"Lots of things," Sasuke was noncommittal. "All the things that I did: threatening the village. Seeing the truth and hating it; wanting to force people to open their damn eyes."

"Why?" The question was forced. Flat. It didn't sound so much like Itachi any more. Sasuke wondered if he'd ever thought this far. Back then. Back when he had to. Did he have time? It didn't seem like it. Then he sighed, closing his eyes. He couldn't tell him, even a memory of him. It wasn't fair. It wasn't right. Itachi deserved peace and Sasuke was the only person who could deliver that comfort in the sacred temple of his own mind. He shook his head.

"Never mind. It doesn't matter now. I have to just… take it now. Whatever they throw at me, I'll just… yeah. I moved out of line. You don't move out of line."

"Sasuke… Surely you cannot blame yourself for what happened. You're not responsible for you own kidnapping. You aren't the same as the clan who captured you – you cannot feel guilt for your
imprisonment. You'll drive yourself mad."

"I don't feel guilty."

"Then why is everything you say ridden with self-loathing?" Itachi asked, gently. "Otouto, trust me. I now what it's like to be consumed by guilt. It warps one's reasoning. Bends the truth and one's perception. The mind always reaches for the clearest path when presented with a problem, and the presence of guilt, anger or sadness, that can disturb things."

"My anger sharpened my focus," Sasuke narrowed his eyes. "Without it-"

"You would have found a different solution. You wouldn't have given up, but you'd have turned down a different path. Sasuke, you do understand that what I did was wrong. You understand that my reasoning wasn't as clear-cut as I had believed."

"I know the village forced you to-"

"I had Shisui's power. I had other options. My quest for peace was a failed one, Sasuke. I prevented a war at one time, only to have it occur later on."

"You couldn't have known about Kagura Oostsutsuki. You couldn't have known how you were manipulated." Sasuke choked back the words. No. Itachi wasn't wrong. He couldn't have been wrong. He couldn't be. "It wasn't your fault."

"No. And it wasn't the village's either, was it? They were running under the same disillusion. They were as duped as I was. Even Danzo. Even the elders. We all made bad decisions. We have all paid for it in one way or another."

"You paid the most Nii-san. You became an outlaw. You became hated, chased. You were despised and feared by everyone. Even me. Especially me." Sasuke swallowed hard, trying not to let his voice crack. "Something that I… I… I couldn't do. It was unthinkable… Until I visited the compound again, I couldn't… I didn't want to believe."

"And that is what I regret the most. Not only did I destroy the clan at a point of turmoil, where it was seen that peace between Uchiha and Senju may have never been an option, but I left you alone. In pain. A loose end, a stranger. I've done you such wrong and I can never take it back. I thought I had spared you out of love and out of regret, but Sasuke, something in me spared you because of weakness. Because if I had destroyed everyone, including you, there'd be no one else to kill me. There'd be no vengeance wrought. I'd be a true criminal. And I couldn't continue like that. I needed you to keep me going, and yet I hurt you by keeping you alive, taunting you. I hurt you more deeply in saving you than I ever would have if you'd died."

"No." Sasuke shook his head, lightly, feeling the hot tears running down his cheeks. "No. I'm the reincarnation of Indra. I'm meant to exist alongside Ashura's vessel. I'm meant to be here. You weren't weak, you were working to a plan forged by someone else. Someone with a greater view – someone with a view of everything. You didn't know. You couldn't. You did what you could. I…" Forgive you, "I… don't blame you."

"Then don't blame the village either," Itachi said reaching out to wipe Sasuke's cheeks with a cool finger. "If I'm exempt, surely they are too."

"I don't know…"

"You do, Sasuke. I have faith in you. I always have. You know what to do. You know how to make it right." Itachi leaned forward, pressing their foreheads together, holding him close. He closed his
eyes, breathing in, sharing his brother's breath; his life. "Remember, we Uchiha love strongly. And there's enough hate in the world as it is, even as it mends. Show them what you really are, Sasuke. Show them how much I loved the village that I would kill to protect it. Show them how you too can love. Make amends; make your peace. Help them. You've already seen the problems; you need to show them how to find the solutions. I'm proud of you, otouto. I love you, you know that."

"Nii-san," Sasuke murmured, closing his eyes at the touch of his brother's skin. Several moments passed though it felt like a lifetime. He didn't move. He was afraid to even breathe, lest he disturb this sanctuary. At length, he heard birdsong filtering into his dream state and the touch of warm sunlight on the back of his eyelids. Streaks from the shadows of the louvered blinds created a pattern like fingers over his face and he frowned a little as he breathed in, smelling disinfectant, plastic and the chalky scent of fresh bandages. He felt worn, warm sheets beneath him and the strange pull of plastic on his skin in places. He took in a slow breath, increments which seemed to help protect him against the pain that sat like a heavy weight on his chest, pressing him down into the bed.

Slowly, he opened his eyes again and glanced about, immediately noticing the lack of Mikoto. Her ever-present sounds: her coos and gurgles, the smell of her, it was all missing and he drew in a sharp breath, remembering the condition in which he last remembered being conscious. Then he relaxed a little. He'd taken them to safety, hadn't he? He'd brought them both before Kakashi. Yes. Yes, that's right. And Kakashi had taken them to Tsunade – he remembered hearing her voice and seeing those giant boobs in his face. There'd been other people too, but he could barely recall. He could only come to a few shaky conclusions: he obviously wasn't in jail – this was a private home (from what he could see of it), and Mikoto must have been safe if they'd gone to Tsunade. He hadn't known the Gokage particularly well, but he remembered being told of her leniency. Perhaps his child was just in another room. But what if she'd been sicker than he'd thought? What if she'd gone to… to… wherever it was they took really sick people? Hospital? More... hospital... things? What if she was alone, crying for him. Frightened, confused and-

There was a light cough to his left. It was polite, unobtrusive - the sound someone makes when they want to make themselves known, but without too much interruption. Sasuke moved – eyes first, then he let his head tip sideways, bringing his old sensei into view. Kakashi sat on a chair at his bedside, his expression unreadable even though more of his face was in view now that he didn't have to cover his sharingan anymore. He looked older, somewhat. There were more lines under his eyes and his usually sun-browned skin was pale and wan. Too many hours inside, it seemed - paperwork and whatnot. The Hokage look did not suit him. He linked his hands in front of him eyeing over his student. For a long time neither spoke.

Kakashi watched Sasuke as Sasuke watched Kakashi. The Jounin pressed his lips into a thin line as he contemplated his next course of action. This was the boy he'd cared for, the boy he'd moulded, crafted. That he'd worried for. That he'd treated almost like a son of his own for a time until Sasuke decided to tear away from everything they'd built. Every bond and every hope, grinding them beneath his feet as he stormed forward to achieve his goal. And now that time had passed and he was back. Not dragged back, not forced back - he'd returned of his own accord. Perhaps now they had a chance? Maybe they could make amends. Maybe.

If they both weren't so goddamned stubborn.

Sasuke watched as his former Sensei turned the words over in his head a few times, searching for the perfect greeting at their reunion, before he came out with:

"You're under arrest."
A/N: One more chapter, then we're off on hiatus! Don't forget to watch for updates on my tumblr. Will Kakashi be less of a dick? Will Sasuke get his daughter back? Will Akamaru find out where the scent comes from? Will coffee actually wake Shino up? Only I know... because I'm the one...writing... it. Yeah... WOHOO!

Thanks for all the kind messages! I savor every single one like a sip of fine wine on a hot summer's afternoon. You guys are awesome and I'm glad you're enjoying the fic. Until next time (soon), ciao!
"You're under arrest," Kakashi said.

"No shit." Sasuke was weak. Tired. There were such large dark circles under his eyes they could have been chiseled in, given their degree of darkness. His pale skin still bore a slight yellowish hue from his illness and his hair was lank and stuck to his forehead with dried sweat. Aside from the flaxen tinge, and the bruising under his eyes, his skin held very little colour at all. But his eyes were dark and already filled with a tenacity that spoke volumes for his level of improvement. Obviously, he was feeling a lot better. At face value, anyway.

Kakashi waited for a moment, watching closely, then he crossed his arms over his chest. "Why did you come back?"

"Why do you think?" Sasuke replied with a dryness that could have been easily mistaken for barely-veiled contempt had Kakashi not known him better. Obviously, Sasuke had come back for help, anyone with half a brain could have figured that out. But now they had him and while he was safe (to a degree, he didn't know what 'safe' had cost him yet), it was clear he'd decided that his surrender did not require him to be accommodating. Some things hadn't changed.

"I don't know. You seemed pretty certain you could take care of yourself in any shape or form the last time I saw you. In fact, when was that? At the climax of the war? After we'd sealed Kaguya, yes that's right. And then you turned a complete one-eighty and started spouting some kind revolution nonsense. You were preparing to take over the world or something of the like, as I recall. How'd that work out for you?"

"You weren't listening. Figures," Sasuke rolled his shoulders a little, experimentally. "It turned out great. Can't you tell?"

"I see you've been working on your sarcasm."

"I see you've been working on your powers of observation," Sasuke shot back. "So what am I getting charged with, huh? World domination? Deserting a fucking shattered system? Exacting vengeance for a wronged clan? Making noise when the elders just want silence?"

"Oh six of one, half a dozen of the other," Kakashi replied, cryptically. "Who says you're getting charged?"

"I'm under arrest, aren't I?"

"I'm detaining you. The rest? Well, we'll see when we get to the hearing, won't we?"

"Can't wait," Sasuke snorted. He turned his head to look in the other direction, crossing his arms over his chest. It took a moment – he didn't realize how many wires were connected to him, threading out of his arms like clear plastic vines, but he managed to sort them out eventually. There came a pertinent grunt, then he added: "Where's the girl?"
Kakashi eyed him nonchalantly. "Safe."

"Where," it wasn't a question anymore. Sasuke hadn't moved much, but his tone said it all.

"I told you. Safe," Kakashi was patient. He'd play this out just as much as Sasuke would; they were far too similar and that meant that the standoff could last indefinitely if they wanted.

"Safe from who?"

Kakashi shrugged, submitting nothing. That didn't go down well.

"Me?" Sasuke continued, angrily. "Is that what you think? That I've-"

"Calm down, you don't have the strength to throw a tantrum like you used to and God knows I'm too damn old for it now. I don't know who we're keeping her safe from. Who we're keeping you safe from. That's for you to tell me." Kakashi replied, fairly. "I'm not making any assumptions. I know better than that, Sasuke – you could at least give me some credit."

"Could I now?" Then response was bitter, muttered. But Sasuke seemed to have accepted that: Kakashi was blessed with the benefit of the doubt at least. "I want to see her."

"You might just get your wish," Kakashi said. "If you cooperate."

"Hn," Sasuke narrowed his eyes. So that was how it was going to be. He wasn't surprised - he'd had a feeling the old guard wasn't going to make it easy on him.

"There'll be a hearing, then you'll need to stand trial." Kakashi went on to explain. "You're still a criminal, Sasuke. No matter what you've done to yourself or who you're now responsible for."

"Your… methods and… modifications… They don't exempt you from your crimes."

"My mod- You...You think I did this to myself?" Sasuke fell into it. He wasn't thinking. Anger got the better of him faster than he could stop it. He jerked a little, then groaned, feeling the pinch of his swollen insides. "Gotta be… Fucking joking."

"Oh, then who did it to you?" Kakashi pounced like courser. Fast, exact. He'd been waiting for it and there it was: just the prompt he'd needed. "Who's responsible for this. Who is the father of your children?"

But Sasuke fell silent again and looked away, focusing his gaze on the blue sky out the window. It was bright. It made his eyes sting. He didn't want to answer, not to Kakashi. Not to anyone just yet. He still had it all hidden away. repressed. Once he let it out, he wasn't sure what would happen. He wasn't sure how he'd feel about her; about anyone. Eventually he just shrugged. Kakashi exhaled, patiently.

"She's your daughter, isn't she?" He pressed. "Isn't she? You carried her, just as you're carrying another now."

"Dunno. You tell me." Sasuke replied, waspishly. The old man was playing dumb; Kakashi had to know, he wasn't that stupid. Sure, it was an insane revelation, sure he'd have had a hard time believing, but anyone who had even a minor semblance of medical ability would have put two and two once they'd found out he was pregnant. And they would have found out - he'd been ill enough to warrant a fairly substantial examination.

"I can tell you that you won't see her unless you cooperate." Kakashi said, rocking back a little in
his chair. "You took such lengths to keep her safe, surely you'd want to make sure she's alright."

Sasuke paused, his fingers digging into his ribs. "You won't keep me from her," he replied, quietly. "You won't. You can't. After all, you didn't keep me from my brother."

"Yes, but your brother was a little harder to keep in one place. A little baby? The one you brought in? We could let her rest anywhere. We could give her to any one of our allies and they'd look after her as though she was their own. It's all on you, Sasuke. How much does she matter to you? Or should we let her grow up as someone else, never knowing you, never remembering. It's easy when they're this young, you know."

"You wouldn't dare." Sasuke whispered, glancing back at his sensei. There was, though it was almost imperceptible, the tiniest shade of surprise hidden in the mask of his expression. "You wouldn't do that. You're not-" cruel. "You're not like that."

"Aren't I? It's funny how having to consider the entire village over one person changes you a little. I have responsibilities, Sasuke. And so do you."

Sasuke closed his eyes, ignoring his tutor as he tried to swallow his fear.

"Think about how you'll act from now on, Sasuke. You have her to consider as well. You may not have cared how your actions affected your friends, once, but it's different when it's blood, isn't it? It's different when it's your own." Or someone you thought was yours. Kakashi shook the thought away and pushed up out of his chair, moving slowly toward the door. No, he couldn't think like that now, not now. "You can't get away with caring only for yourself, you're not a child any more."

"You never knew me as a child." Sasuke muttered. It was Kakashi's turn to shrug.

"I guess not, all things considered," he replied as he let himself out of the room. "But you're a parent now, aren't you?"

Sasuke scowled as the door closed and he was left alone in silence. The parent now, huh? Didn't parents do all kinds of things to protect their children? Didn't parents die so that their children would live, thrive? He wasn't sure he was prepared for that; he wasn't sure he felt that way about Mikoto. But he did know that there was no way she'd be separated from him without his permission. Not after all they'd been through together. He knew that there would be some rules; that he'd have to give up certain rights if he was ever discovered by Konoha. But this was his daughter, his. Like hell that bastard could just take her away.

Like hell.

Tsunade visited the little girl later that afternoon, armed with a clean nappy and a nice, freshly washed Babygro for her to wear. She grinned as she walked into Shizune's room, greeted by the sounds of Sasuke's daughter as she chirping to herself in baby talk, her bright little eyes scanning the room. She didn't seem concerned that she was in a different place than when she'd fallen asleep; rather, she seemed to be in a very good mood. A shy little smile greeted Tsunade as she picked her up, testing her nappy and her temperature, as she held her against a bosom far more ample than her mother's. She chuckled lightly when the baby seemed somewhat confused.

"A first for you, huh kid? Guess it almost is for me too," Tsunade grinned. "Med-nin don't get to hold that many babies in the field, it's not really part n' parcel of the job. And I'll bet you haven't been cuddled over a H-cup, mmm? Don't tell anyone I said that."

She laid the girl on the floor and changed her, wiping her down with fresh-scented napkins and
powdered the baby's soft pink skin. She hadn't done it many times, but she'd stayed up most of the morning reading a dog-eared baby manual from her personal library. It was nice; the work and attention that looking after a baby required. It reminded her of the times she used to watch her little brother while her parents were busy. It made her feel settled. The baby herself was well-behaved and charming, smiling every time she caught Tsunade's eye (which made her wonder if she really was Sasuke's daughter), and cooing when she was spoken to. Her temperature was almost back to normal and although she had a bit of a runny nose, she seemed absolutely fine. Typical for Uchiha Sasuke's baby to be as robust as ever. Tsunade didn't doubt that he was exactly the same when he was young. After dressing her, she held the little girl in her arms, letting her grab at her pigtails as she padded down the hall, pushing quietly into the spare room.

And gaped.

"S-sasuke?" Tsunade exclaimed. "What the shi- uhh..." She caught herself quickly as she remembered the child in her arms, but her focus was on the baby's mother. Sasuke lay sprawled on the ground, tangled in his IV wires and the blankets, not moving. He hadn't fallen out of bed, he was in the center of the room. He'd obviously been trying to leave, but his strength had given out half way. "Are you alright?"

To her relief Sasuke looked up at her, dazed. For a moment, he wasn't even that sure himself. Then he saw Mikoto in Tsunade's arms and he tried to push up, his movements desperate, frantic. He didn't seem quite awake.

"Give... Give me... Gimme her..."

"Yeah, I was going to. What on earth were you trying to do?" Tsunade gently placed Mikoto on the floor for a moment, before she picked Sasuke up, cables and all and slid him back into his bed, untwisting the leads from around his limbs and straightening his sheets as she did so. He was a little out of sorts, but, thankfully, he seemed fine. "You need to use the bell if you want anything, didn't Kakashi tell you? He said he'd visited you this morning."

"Kakashi?"

"Mm." Tsunade nodded, lifting Mikoto back into her arms. "Lean back. That's better. You know you're not strong enough to be up yet – give it another day or two. Then maybe you can sit up with your daughter in the lounge or something."

Sasuke completely missed Tsunade's (accurate) assumption. He simply stared at her, completely stumped. "What?"

"The... lounge?" Tsunade raised a brow. "You can sit with your little girl out there. It opens onto the garden why are you staring at me?"

"Wait... I'm... I'm allowed to have her?"

"The girl?" Tsunade blinked. "Yes, of course, why wouldn't you be? She's yours, isn't she?"

"But..." Sasuke swallowed, watching with hawk-like scrutiny as Tsunade rocked Mikoto gently in her arms. "He said..."

"Who? Kakashi?"

"Yeah," Sasuke licked his lips. "Said I'd only be able to see her if I cooperated. I thought... I thought he might have had her in foster care or something."
"Hmph, perhaps he did say that," Tsunade scowled. "He'd have a hard time acting on it if he wants to take that little girl from this house. Hokage or no. I told him it wasn't a good idea. Obviously I was right."

Sasuke just nodded, his focus entirely on the child. Not wanting him to wait any longer, Tsunade handed her over, slowly. Sasuke brightened the moment the girl was in his arms, and the little one squeaked happily when she saw her mother, burbling at him in a language all of her own. Tsunade had never seen Sasuke so completely smitten, so gentle. He held the girl against his chest and buried his nose in her thick spikey hair, taking in the scent of her. There was a softness about him, suddenly, though strangely it didn't seem out of place. Tsunade found herself entranced in just watching them.

"-she fed?"

"Hm?" Tsunade blinked, boosted suddenly out of her reverie. "What?"

Sasuke pressed his finger to Mikoto's pudgy little lips and frowned a little as she made sucking motions around it. "I said when was she fed?"

"Uh… About eight this morning. Formula. She wasn't so keen on it."

"She wouldn't be."

"Why's that?" It wasn't the brightest of questions, but Tsunade wasn't really thinking. She moved over to the window and opened it a little, letting some fresh air in as she gazed out at the clear, blue sky. When she turned back, Sasuke was sitting up straight against the headboard and had the baby clutched close to his chest. His eyes were half lidded, lost in thought, and he was stroking her back, absently. It took her a second to compute, but when she figured out he was feeding the child, Tsunade actually blushed and looked away. Not only was there something terribly personal about the moment; she hadn't even thought Sasuke could realize what his body could do. That he'd put two and two together. Of course, it was obvious, but he was a boy. She had a hard time believing a boy could imagine breasts as anything other than decoration. Then again, he was also Uchiha Sasuke. It was likely he hadn't ever thought of breasts as anything at all apart from bits that girls had and boys didn't.

"Um," Tsunade said after a moment, addressing the floor. "You want me to leave for a bit?"

"Why?" Sasuke seemed perturbed. Tsunade motioned to the baby at his breast.

"Uh… some woman don't like… company. When they nurse. You know."

"No?"

"Well, I guess," Tsunade made a few awkward gestures. "Because you're, uh… exposed. And… uh-"

"Aren't I supposed to do this?" Sasuke said, motioning toward his daughter. He almost seemed confused, as though he found it weird that Tsunade didn't understand the most basic functions of her own body. That made Tsunade smile. Sasuke mustn't have either understood, or just completely ignored the social conditioning on the subject and stigma surrounding the female form and that was just so him. It was refreshing. "That's what these are for, isn't it?"

"Yeah. That's right. That's absolutely right. Sorry." Tsunade stifled a laugh. It would have been far weirder to have seen Sasuke using his breasts as an aesthetic feature, rather than simply a form that followed function. He was so pragmatic about the whole thing. "There's always been a certain…"
mmm… situation around a girl's… assets. You know. I supposed it's hard to understand if you…

"Didn't grow up as a girl?" Sasuke finished, flatly. "Yeah. Sure. I get it. I know girls are always worrying about these things: how big they are, how much to show them off, how to stop them moving around that kind of thing. I just… don't care about that. It's not relevant to me. I never cared – their bodies are theirs, they can do what they like with them. It's none of my business."

Tsunade couldn't help herself. "Oh? And what if… say… the female member of your team decided to turn up to a mission wearing a bathing suit, mm? What would you think then? Hypothetically."

"What kind of question is that?" Sasuke frowned. "I'd think either our mission involved swimming of some sort, or that she'd was severely under-dressed."

"That's what I thought you'd say."

"Even a lightweight shirt helps against minor injuries-" he went on, considering the scenario. "-kunai gashes, scrapes from small branches, that kind of thing. And if we're in the ocean, there's the coral to worry about. Debris. Is it a river mission or are we travelling across the sea? Did she wear shoes? She'd need shoes no matter what and-"

"I think..." Tsunade was chuckling quietly. "I think we're done on the example. It's ok. You've proved your point. Or you've proved something, at least. I guess-" she scratched her chin, thoughtfully. "-I guess I didn't expect you to be so… consenting of the situation. Of your, uh… female body."

"This body creates children. It creates food to feed the children. It's all one convenient package. I don't see that as something to be shamefaced about. If Mikoto had needed real food and ate as I did, I'd be screwed. We would have arrived in even worse condition than we did."

Tsunade doubted he was so readily accepting; especially at the point where he'd first been changed, but she felt her focus derail the moment he referred to his daughter.

"Mikoto." Tsunade stopped laughing and smiled a little more softly. "Is that her name?"

"Yeah," Sasuke looked down at his child's fluffy little head, confirming with a nod.

"That was your mother's name."

"Yeah, it was." Sasuke wet his lips. "I felt…" she deserved it. It makes me feel less alone. "It's just a good name, I guess. Suits her."

"It's a beautiful name. It's a strong name." Tsunade threaded her fingers together in his lap. "Like yours. Strong."

"s just a name." Was that Sasuke bashful? Tsunade wasn't sure. Uchiha didn't do bashful as far as she knew, but it was obvious he didn't seem to like to talk about himself much. She picked at her nailbed, absently.

"Sasuke, you know that… That Kakashi isn't going to give you an easy time with this. He's following the law to the letter. He's pretty much underlining each step as he goes, just like the Council instructs. He's not going to go easy with this. There'll be a trial-"

"He said," there was a sneer. Tsunade didn't blame him. "Doesn't mean anything. They're going to
throw the book at me regardless."

Tsunade paused, watching as he stroked Mikoto's dark head with his fingers. It seemed he was only just starting to realize that soon he might be without her. As a nukenin, the Council and the extended council, once the other villages got involved, might even consider the death penalty. At the very least he was looking at life imprisonment.

"Sasuke, we can build you a defense. You just have to work with us." Tsunade said, carefully. "I know it's not… your way… But you have to talk. You have to communicate. People… people don't see you the way you see yourself – people don't understand."

"The way I see myself?" Sasuke snorted. "I don't even know what I am anymore."

"You're a mother." Tsunade offered. "Technically. Well, ok, a parent, but still. There's strength in that. There's empathy. You have a case to argue."

"-and I didn't before?" Sasuke replied, sharply. "My clan was murdered. My brother was framed. One of my own cousins and my clan's founder were responsible for the Fourth War. If there was any empathy for me, I would have felt it long ago. People would have listened. But they didn't, did they? They carried on as ever. They carried on because it was easier to forget."

"I never gave permission for a death warrant." Tsunade retaliated. "Even when you came of age, I never issued one. I'm not saying that makes me exempt, but it does raise the point that you still have people one your side. You still have supporters. Let us take some of the weight, Sasuke. Let us help."

"Naruto said that to me once," Sasuke said, bitterly. "Said he could take it. My hatred. My pain. So I let him feel it." He looked up, his eyes dark, tired. "I gave him exactly what he was asking for and I paid for it with everything. If that's what I get for giving people what they want, why should I even bother to ask for help?"

"Out of context, I can't say." Tsunade replied, carefully. "I don't know what you did. I don't know what went down between you two. Whatever it was, he's never spoken of it. He was changed, after the war. He's different, but he never mentioned anything about you."

"Hn." Sasuke fell silent for a moment. Eventually he said. "How's he different?"

"Mm, maybe you ought to talk to him? See for yourself?"

"I don't think so." Sasuke mumbled, easing Mikoto back as she finished. He lifted her up to his shoulder and pressed the flat of his palm against her back, rubbing slowly. "I don't think that's going to help any."

"Sasuke what happened? What did you do?" Tsunade leaned in, her breath in her throat; heart in her mouth. It wasn't like Sasuke to want to go and have a deep heart to heart with Naruto anyway, but there was something else going on here. Something deeper. Shame. Guilt. Sasuke didn't do guilt. "Naruto is all about talking – it's his second favourite thing to do besides eating ramen."

"I told you," Sasuke breathed. "I gave him what he asked for."

Well that was just cryptic. Tsunade sat back again, contemplating the situation. Sasuke was still as stubborn as ever and that didn't surprise her one bit. He was clamping up, unwilling to talk without a bargain, most likely. Rather than annoying her, if anything it made her feel a little better – at least he hadn't changed so much that his stalwart attitude hadn't crumbled. There was strength there, she just needed to redirect it.
"There's a hearing first," she explained. "It'll be a smaller crowd: the Council, the Rokudaime, me. Possibly Sakura and Naruto – the people involved at a local degree, whereas the real trial will most likely involve the other villages. The hearing is designed to sort of put everything in order - create a kind of run list of events or bullet points, so to speak. You'll have your charges laid out, and you'll be able to state your case initially. There isn't really a place for defense, but you may be allowed a counsel. Konoha does things a little differently from everywhere else though... It's up to the Elders and Kakashi."

"Great."

"Don't sniff at the opportunity, Sasuke. Like I said, there are people who you can count on to help."

"Don't make me laugh," Sasuke said, bluntly. "Honestly, think about it. Who the hell would help me? I was dead set on destroying you all, if you remember."

"You said a lot of things like that. Then you came and assisted us out at the end of the war." Tsunade shrugged. "Whether that was for your own gain, or if it was out of the goodness of your heart, I don't know. I don't care. That's one thread in a very complex tapestry, Sasuke. And while the needle is sharp, many people know it has been broken. Stop taking the world on your shoulders."

"I don't know," Sasuke muttered, his finger tracing the shell of Mikoto's ear. "It's not a clean cut as you think."

"I'm not stupid enough to think that it is," Tsunade replied, resting her hand on Sasuke's arm. "But I'm a gambling woman, you know. And the higher the stakes go, the more worthy the bet becomes. Let us help you. Please. Give people a chance to make up their own minds. And if you really won't do it for yourself, do it for your daughter. She wouldn't want to be without you any more than you'd want to be without her."

It was clear those were the magic words. Sasuke glanced down at his girl again, sighing, before he finally caved.

"Fine."

"Thanks."

"But you're not going to like what you hear."

"It's alright," Tsunade said. "With the kind of shit I've seen, I don't think you're going to surprise me."

"I said that before, once," Sasuke replied in a tight voice. "Then I found out I was wrong."

It was a few hours later that Tsunade found the Rokudaime at her doorstep, his arm raised to knock as she opened the front door to sweep out a little dust from her hallway. Her eyes narrowed the moment she saw him and she caught his arm, her nails digging into the flesh of his bicep with a fierceness that was only ever reserved for those on the wrong end of her temper.

"Are you simple?" she snarled. "What were you thinking?"

"Good afternoon, Tsunade. Ouch. What was I thinking, what?" Kakashi replied, deadpan. He winced behind his mask. "Did I say ouch already?"
"I don't care. I really don't. He's still just a kid, how could you do that to him? Where was your head, Kakashi? Where was your brain!"

"You shouldn't talk to me like that, Tsunade. I am Hokage, remember." Kakashi countered, weakly. "God, how on earth are your nails this strong?"

"Fine, where was your brain Hokage-sama?" Tsunade just dug her claws in harder. "You're an idiot, how could you say that to him? How could you threaten to hold his daughter hostage like that?"

"He's a criminal and--"

"Oh for fuck's sake."

"We've been through this, Tsunade. You know why I have to take these measures." Kakashi's voice didn't change. But he stopped trying to pull her hand away. His voice lowered. "Sasuke is a criminal and I must adhere to the law."

"You are the law."

"I'd like to think that, but you and I both know it's not that easy."

"You're just trying to find a simple solution," Tsunade spat, but she backed off, folding her arms under her ample chest. "You want to punish him."

"Now who's making assumptions," Kakashi rubbed his arm. "This is not personal; this is my job. You know that as well as I. And all eyes will be on me once this starts. I have to act according to the law."

"How nice for you. Perhaps you could try being less of an ass about it then." Tsunade calmed to a simmer but it was clear she was still furious. She narrowed her eyes and lowered her voice. "You know, I can challenge you for the Hokage title if I think your performance is less than adequate. The predecessors have the ability to do that; it's law."

There was a scuffle of movement. Kakashi’s hand shot out and seized her shoulder – not hard, but fast enough, firm enough to underline the weight of his words. He said:

"Don't."

Simple. Clear. When Tsunade made to retort, he added in a voice so quiet she had to strain to hear it. "If there's anything you'll ever do for me, Tsunade-sama, don't take this away from me. Not now."

His eyes were darker than usual, his expression strangely tense. Tsunade stared at him for a long moment before she jerked away, smoothing at her hair.

"I'll think about it," she sniffed, before moving around him to walk back in the house. She stopped before the entrance, however, her hand on the doorjamb. "He does love her, though. He has every reason in the world not to, but he does."

"You don't know that yet."

"No," Tsunade shook her head. "I know it when I see it. Love. It's right there when you look at him. It's in the room when he's with her. He's not here to give her up, Kakashi. He's here to give her a life."
And with that, Tsunade closed the door behind her, leaving Kakashi alone in the street, the sun beaming down on his back, warming his shoulders. He sighed and turned, leaning against the gate. A moment later there came a doggish yawn from underneath the flowerpots, and Pakkun's voice could be heard from the shadows between the nasturtiums.

"That was fun."

"You'd better believe it," Kakashi mumbled. "Every second with her is one of unimaginable joy. Or was that pain? Anyway I'd better get back to the office. That paperwork isn't going to do itself."

"Hm…" Pakkun sniffed the ground a few times before he poked his nose out from under the planters, keeping the rest of his body hidden. "She'd right, you know," he said. "About all the law stuff. Sure, you're doin' your job; you don't have to be such an ass about it. Sasuke'll understand, he ain't stupid."

Kakashi shoved his hands in his pockets. "That's the problem. It's better if he doesn't."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Pakkun eyeballed his master, critically. "But if you think treating the kid like trash is better for him, then I'm not sure I really wanna be part of your pack anymore, Hatake. Your dad would be turning in his grave."

Kakashi didn't speak for a moment. At length, he cleared his throat and said. "I thought ninjō were meant to be loyal. I've already said it to Sasuke, but give me some credit. This isn't as easy as it looks."

"Ho? And what about your hurt feelings?" Pakkun snorted. "The kid tried to kill you and his team. On more than one occasion. Don't you think you're a bit close to this? Everyone's gonna assume you have a vendetta."

"They are," Kakashi said. "I wouldn't blame them." He pushed away from the wall. "Keep watch on him, won't you? I want to know everything that happens."

Pakkun frowned. "That it?"

"That's it." Kakashi nodded and, though his partner couldn't see it, smiled. "You give problem a face, my friend, and you'll find it's much easier to deal with. Now don't nap for too long — you snore."

And with that, he was gone. Pakkun wiped his nose and yawned, easing back to stretch his front paws before he muttered:

"Yeah, so do you."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Welp that's it. See you guys in a few! Take care, don't drive angry and always check your shoes for socks because if they're lost, that's where they are. Oh, and look, I didn't end on a cliffhanger! How about that? Well, let's amp things up a little, shall we? Here's a little (unedited) taster from one of the chapters you'll get when I return. Because I'm a dick :(
Sasuke breathed slowly as he stood in front of them all: the eyes upon him were a weight he couldn't shrug, but they were no less than Orochimaru's stare and he was well attuned to that by now. He could deal with it. He could deal with them all, Sakura, Kakashi - all of them. Until he heard:

"Sorry I'm late. Where do I sit?"

Naruto had whispered, but the room was so quiet it came out like a bellow. The court assistant pointed to his seat, and the chuunin made his way toward it, blushing a little. He hadn't looked up yet. Sasuke wasn't sure he knew what was going on, but he didn't think so. He would have beat his best shuriken Naruto had no idea he was here. And when the blond finally glanced at him, he was sure of it.

Surprise couldn't even begin to describe Naruto's expression. Shocked wasn't even close. The look on the blond's face was every synonym, every instance of complete and utter flabbergast that could be found in every thesaurus on every shelf in every country of the world. Sasuke's sudden, unexpected presence hit Naruto in the face harder than if he'd been punched and his mouth fell open and stayed open until his anger caught up with him.

Then everything closed. Everything became firm, pressed. His face seemed to darken in anger like a storm cloud brewing meteorological misery. His fingers pressed together and his shoulders hunched. The lip curled into a shadow of a sneer and finally, those bright, friendly eyes narrowed; their hue, affected somewhat by his anger and the beast inside, turning a deep shade of purple. He wasn't in danger of metamorphosis, but it did go to show how utterly incensed he was.

And Sasuke knew his anger all too well. He'd known it in the past and it had been the last emotion he'd seen on his soul's brother before he left him. Before he ran. He thought he'd be able to deal with it, but instead stomach dropped and his fingers went numb. His breath became caught in his throat; his heartbeat accelerating to a hammering pace. Suddenly he was locked in place, petrified. He'd seen Naruto after his escape. He'd seen all those cheery cut-outs of him in Amegakure; he'd almost made a move to approach him a few weeks prior in the village streets. He had known this moment would come and he thought he was ready for it. But that face halted everything. That anger, that contempt froze Sasuke's words on his tongue and all reason to the back of his mind where it cowered beneath layers of his shattered defenses, trying to shut itself out; trying to forget.

Because Sasuke had seen Naruto angry before. But not the kind of angry he'd mocked as Naruto's rival, no. That face... That face was the one HE was wearing when he hunted him down. When he trapped him beneath his body. When he laughed and told the others to restrain him. His hands were rough and brutal, and he drew blood when he sank his teeth into Sasuke's skin and his length in deep, deep. Those eyes were like lightening and they amplified the pain. His teeth were needles, the stripes on his face were like dark brands of malice and his voice was grating when he laughed. When he broke Sasuke apart. When he drove in the final nail:

"I win."
The Hearing: Introducing the Wall

Chapter Notes

Tell me is something eluding you, sunshine?
Is this not what you expected to see?
If you wanna find out what's behind these cold eyes
You'll just have to claw your way through this disguise.

Konoha, 6th March
Year of the Hare

They picked him up at exactly twenty past nine in the morning. That is, they tried to. It was a well-mannered intention - Kakashi's chose his escorting party carefully from a small selection of his closest (and, appropriately, most close-mouthed) guard circle, and made sure they were groomed and tailored in order to look the part, but concurrently draw as little speculation as possible. The Rokudaime ensured that the three guards were polite, even-tempered individuals, who would simply absorb the verbal thrashing Tsunade gave them (while mostly directed at Kakashi himself) as they waited patiently by her garden gate for their charge to emerge. Hands folded behind their backs, their chins high, they listened as the retired Godaime rattled off an alphabet of excuses: It's too early. She said. He isn't ready. She said. The baby hasn't woken yet. She said. Kazuko, Aiko and Rikai simply nodded at each and every bluff. They had all day and they were well aware that their presence alone was enough to remind Tsunade that the system knew how to make things move. The system wanted answers. And, at her very core, so did she.

In truth, Sasuke had been ready for hours. Despite his meds, he'd slept terribly, suffering pain and nausea. At around 3 am anxiety kicked in, and loitered - gnawing on his confidence enough to bleed it dry. Five am found him sitting on the edge of his bed with his head in his hands, eyes full of sleep grit and his tongue like swollen leather. He'd fed Mikoto and held her for a long time in silence, letting her tug restlessly on his long bangs with her damp, pudgy fists. There had come a sudden, arresting sense of attachment that coursed through him. It felt as as though the moment he let her go, she would be torn from him for good. That there was loss in every millimetre of distance between them. It pained him. He didn't think that it would, but as the morning wore on and his appointment grew near, he found it hard to concentrate on anything else.

Tsunade had told him that he wasn't to go. She was adamant she could put it off; find some way to postpone. A drug to make him vomit; an elixir to render him unconscious. He didn't have to do this right now. Not so soon; not today. He could rest. He should rest. Keeping him inside, out of sight - that wouldn't be a problem. But Sasuke wasn't keen on waiting. He'd already lived through the unnerving and frustration reality of prolonged apprehension and he was done with it. He didn't have the patience any more. Rip it off, like a plastic dressing; let the wound air. He might not enjoy the sting, but it was better than the suppression, the numbness. It was better than skirting about on tiptoes around the hem of his fate. He had to go. Now it was time to face them. Now it was time for the truth.
The three guards stood to attention as Sasuke stepped out of the house and paused, sullen, on the doorstep. They were Jounin, not the regular ANBU. Though he should have known better, Sasuke found himself slightly disappointed and he offered them a mere incline of the jaw in response to their greeting. That was Uchiha civility. Sasuke wasn't known for his manners, but he had the ability to appear conceding when a charade was required. He was showered, clean - his hair hung thick and heavy around his thin face like elaborate curtains over a poor view. He was dressed in loose, grey knit pants that reached to mid-calf, and a plain white tee-shirt with a fawn coloured hooded sweatshirt over top. Nothing navy, nothing black. Sasuke was dressed as un-Sasuke-like as possible in order to necessitate nonappearance since he already looked very much the same from the neck up. He let his chin sink low as he started walking, his bangs in his face; eyes to the ground. His head hurt; his bones ached. He'd no idea how long he'd last under pressure, but if his stubbornness had anything to add to his physical tenacity, then a whole morning wouldn't be a problem. Even as sick as he still was, Sasuke was a stalwart bastard. He'd made up his mind to carry on through it and he would - even if he keeled over in his prison cell at the end of it all. Tsunade followed behind, his daughter clutched in her arms. He could hear Mikoto cooing, talking to passersby, marveling at colours and movement, but he didn't turn to look at her. He looked at noone and no one looked at him. He remained silent the entire way, though even if he spoke, neither of the harmonious three would have responded with much. Albeit awkward enough, the temptation to talk might have garnered attention and the less that Konoha knew for now, the better.

Aside from those in his presence, the Rokudaime, Shino and Kabuto, no one else was privy to the expedient meeting Kakashi had called - to most, it was a day like any other. But it was obvious Kakashi was saving him (well, all of them, really), a few hours peace before the press got a hold of the story and chewed it over to the marrow of its bones. Tabloid culture had grown tremendously since Sasuke's defection from Konoha and had now become a living, breathing beast in itself. A terrible beast armed with one of the most vicious weapons of all: persuasion. Appearing before the Hokage and Council was one thing, a hammering by reporters, chat show hosts, truth-seekers, justice junkies and opinion pioneers was quite another. Sasuke was a true ninja at heart; true ninja didn't partake in popularity contests. Naruto, might have argued otherwise, but for completely different reasons.

After a brief march that threaded the small procession through the topmost streets near the Hokage Offices, Sasuke found himself led down a small alleyway which opened out near one of the smaller halls behind the main courthouse. It was a museum, really, a tiny council chamber, far more intimate and homely than the mahogany and leather of the civil justice building. It seemed to make the whole situation a little less foreboding, yet all the more mysterious. Kakashi really had been thinking ahead in terms of narrowing the initial damage as much as possible. Sasuke had been certain he was more than happy to lug the gavel at him. He didn't want to say he was surprised, but…

Chairs were set up inside almost like a small recital: one line in front for the most important attendees, then to both sides were three sets parallel to each other. Sasuke had his own chair in the centre, but he chose to stand as he waited, his eyes locked on Mikoto as Tsunade passed the girl to an official. She sent him an apologetic look, but he ignored it, focusing instead on the woman who shuffled to her seat at the end near the secretary's desk. He recognized her as one of the Hokage's aides or something of the like, he'd definitely seen her before but her exactly role momentarily escaped him. However what did surprise him was the fact that she'd brought along a little toy – a set of rings painted in bright colours – to entertain the baby. Sasuke didn't doubt that Kakashi would have let some of the court officials know what was going on; he just hadn't expected them to be so… prepared. As if reading his mind, the woman's pale, watery eyes - lined a little too heavily in turquoise makeup regarded him with something of a bovine serenity and gnarled hands smoothed the small quilted blanket on her knees as Mikoto leaned on her, drooling as she chewed
on the plastic toy. Was this Tsunade's idea? Having this aged babysitter take his daughter while he was grilled? She hadn't seemed to acknowledge the woman apart from a slight nod when she handed Mikoto over. She barely seemed to recognise her.

Slightly thrown, Sasuke watched as his caregiver took a seat in the middle row, flicking her tawny pigtails behind her shoulder. Then the guards who stood by the entrance stepped quickly to one side to let the officials through; their weapons (hah) and armour shifting noisily as they rearranged themselves. The first to appear were two of the newer members of the council: middle-aged men that Sasuke had never seen before (and didn't care to recall) and the court secretary (a Yamanaka, from memory. The fresh flowers she placed on her table before she set her stenotype down were a bit of a giveaway).

Next was a handful of clan representatives: Hyuuga, Akimichi, Nara and Inuzuka. The parents of his classmates who had originally travelled to retrieve him. Sasuke could see where this was going. After the clan leaders had settled, the Konoha Go-Ikenban hobbled in and took their places aside the Hokage's middle-most seat. Homura and Koharu looked about as old as they had when Sasuke had first met them on the day of his induction into the Konoha Academy. They looked just as old and just as sour, prompting Sasuke to ponder an old curiosity he'd shared with his brother on whether they slept in pickle juice and powdered with salt. The memory warmed him, though he didn't show it. Finally the Rokudaime loped into the small room - a grey shadow who seemed to take the even casually enough to stifle a yawn as he eased into his seat. Kakashi looked like he hadn't slept for days, an observation Sasuke found slightly amusing. At least he could still cause that much of a fuss to keep his old teacher up at night.

Yet while the little room was nearly full, there was still two lines of seat empty to his left. They'd been placed there on purpose, indefinitely, but who else was coming?

The door opened again, answered Sasuke's question before he'd even finished thinking of it and despite the somewhat vague forewarning of attendance, Sasuke's stomach dropped when the final wave of attendees began to filter in. For the first time, he began to feel something of a sensation of nervousness. It could have been anger; it could have been frustration. But one thing was for sure: leaders of the clans, dissociative elders? They weren't close enough to him to illicit an emotional response. His peers, however, his so-called comrades? Those of his age whom he'd fought with and against, whom he was been better than…

With the inside of his lip caught between his front teeth so sharply he could taste blood, Sasuke watched as Chouji, Hinata, Shikamaru, Rock Lee and Kiba sat down in line, closely followed by Sakura and Ino. As they sat in percussion of scraping chairs and muttered pardons, they all threw looks of varying comprehension at him - though most did not seem to recognise him at all. Chouji was glancing at the walls, his small, bright eyes scanning the paintings as he slipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out a salty plum to chew on. Kiba was coaxing Akamaru over to his chair and was stroking his ears, preoccupied with a splinter that he was pulling from under a fingernail with his teeth. Lee and Hinata were the picture of silent diligence as they sat attentively, looking over the council, then Sasuke with polite interest. Ino seemed to be choking on her own excitement. Shikamaru seemed grudgingly perplexed.

And Sakura… Sakura was also staring at him. But it wasn't the kind of stare he'd been subjected to in his youth - that doe-eyed, whimsical beaming that had made him feel suffocated and somewhat nauseous. This was the scrutiny of someone who had the answer on the tip of her tongue, only she hadn't quite developed the taste of the question yet. Those pink eyebrows drew together, and there was a flintiness to her eyes. She looked like some version of Sakura he'd never seen before and to
be honest, he was almost impressed. Almost. But all the attention was quickly withdrawn from him, when Kakashi opened his mouth.

"Er. Hello," he said. Silence answered him. Someone coughed, politely. Kakashi glanced about the room, looking as comfortable as someone's dad at a highschool mixer. It was clear he'd only very roughly completed his homework on the lay of the law from the other side of the bench and Sasuke had to admit, he felt very much the same. Unlike smaller villages, Konoha's Field Ninja tended to have little hands-on experience with the justice system. They brought in the criminals, handed them over and spent the rest of the day filling out the paperwork for the office. Jounin were rarely seen in trials unless they were specifically involved and most genin had never even seen the interior of the courthouse. A simple brief statement was all the adjudicator ever needed from a kid who would probably only make a menace of themselves, were they ever in attendance.

Tsunade had given him a few slim books and pamphlets that she had picked up on her travels prior to her return home, though she warned him that no matter how much he read into the proceedings of the court, Konoha - and in fact, most of the Hidden Villages - had its own ways which differed greatly from any civilian settlements. Guilty until proven innocent. Held until evidence was found. The phrase "turning a blind eye" was one that had been well-practiced in Shinobi history. Most court cases were merely a statement of facts and a sentence - there was very little back and forth between parties. Any investigation was usually carried out beforehand by the ninja themselves, or the Intelligence and Interrogation Departments respectfully. Lawyers weren't much use at all, and were generally looked down on.

Sasuke recalled his father's attempts to explain the legal process to him once or twice when he'd asked; a rare treat as Fugaku rarely had time to explain anything at all to his youngest son. Unfortunately, Sasuke had been too young at the time to hold his attention on such a dry subject and he'd zoned out halfway through the explanation. Even after the massacre, Konoha had been so entirely useless in dealing with him as a ward of state that they merely ushered him into the Hokage's office, told him that he'd receive a weekly benefit and something about how sorry they were and that was that. Granted, he'd lost several months of memories following the death of his family and clan; what he could remember of anything that wasn't innately involved with his loss, Itachi or his sudden voracious need to train and better himself was spotty at best. Naruto had been there, somewhere, in sulky bright pieces and he distinctly remembered being painfully unable to cry when the Uchiha sector was razed to the ground, but apart from that there was only haze and uncertainty. Nothing to help him in his current situation.

" I mean, uh... Good morning," Kakashi amended, shuffling a few papers in front of him. He couldn't shake the awkwardness, but he didn't seem particularly worried about it. "Uh. I'd like to start by thanking you all for your attendance on such short notice. I understand that many of you have appointments or missions to begin today, but I have been able to reschedule most of them, or find replacements in your absence. We have a pressing matter to deal with and it is of the utmost importance that we come to an understanding before-" he looked about, noting the bemusement on most of the faces in front of him, sans Tsunade and Sasuke. "Well I suppose, before any of this gets out."

"Rokudaime-sama," said Koharu, folding her hands on her lap. "I am a little concerned. You do understand that this isn't standard practice. There should be an order of events. A written schedule. Letters to th-"

"Well yes, there should be," Kakashi interrupted, which caused the older woman to harrumph, disapprovingly. "Er... all of that. I know that you, the council, have certain - um - formats you tend to stick to. But today we are keeping this pre-trial hearing a little more under wraps than usual."
"And why is that?" Homura asked, his snowy brow forming a series of steppes deep enough to hide marbles. "Secrecy is not something we take lightly, Rokudaime." Wasn't it? Sasuke could have laughed out loud if he wasn't so fixated on the conversation. Homura adjusted his glasses as he continued. "You know that our regulations are put in place for a reason. This is not an international incident, therefore-

"Actually, it rather is," Kakashi cleared his throat. "Considering this... person-" there was a gesture made toward Sasuke. The glare in response could have levelled buildings. "-has, up until the final hours of the Fourth Ninja War been regarded as an international criminal."

It was then that Sasuke was bombarded with scrutiny enough to make even the most innocent of defendants question their rectitude. Sasuke simply kept his eyes locked on Kakashi's face. He wondered whether he might, with the power of his mind, drill a hole through the centre of his head. Hell, it wouldn't be hard once he got to the middle; air wouldn't offer much resistance. Kakashi just matched him. It seemed he'd become immune to Sasuke's mute arsenal of ocular ripostes, which only served to peeve his ex-student even more.

"This woman is an international criminal?" Homura blinked, leaning forward a little for a better look. "I don't remember seeing any intel on someone this young. In fact, I don't think we've been beleaguered by any such villains for a long time, considering Uzumaki and the Raikage's brother have been doing so well against the southern raids."

"Well, you might not recognize hi-them at first, considering there has been, uh-" The Rokudaime drew in a breath and glanced heavenward, almost theatrically, before completing a few vague gestures that accomplished little save to draw a little more attention and suspense, "-several changes to their person as of late. Or... a while ago. I don't know. That's what we're here to find out, I suppose. Anyway-"

"Hatake-sama," Koharu's patience was thinning in her old age. She knew a stall when she saw one, Tsunade was famous for them and far more convincing. She wasn't sure why Kakashi was being so light on his feet around the truth, but there was something certainly off about the whole situation. Hiruzen wouldn't have hesitated in seeking advice from his council. These new Hokage had a thing or two to learn. "If you don't mind, time is of the essence. Who is this woman?"

"Well," Kakashi fumbled for an elegant response of which none could be found. Instead he settled on simply: "It's Uchiha Sasuke."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I'm back! Hooray! I wrote a big long author's note before, but google ate it and I forgot what it said. But thank you for your patience over my little break and I hope to get back to posting at least once a week :)  
I also apologize for my upcoming legalese in the Hearing chapters. My knowledge of judicial systems is basically Saturday morning cartoon level, so I'll try to make it as... fabricated as possible orz

Lyrics credit: Pink Floyd.
The Hearing: In the Flesh

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Since, my friend, you have revealed your deepest fear,
I sentence you to be exposed before your peers.

Konoha, 6th March
Year of the Hare

Tsunade:

"It's Uchiha Sasuke."

The small courtroom seemed to hum with perturbation. It sank in the gaps, sat heavily on the skin and incensed a sudden feeling of restlessness that divided the attendance into sanctions that were either:

the most readily convinced,

those of extreme incredulity,

and the spectrum in between.

A flurry of whispers and hushed exchanged followed. Heads turned. Chins dropped. Shikamaru sat up a little more in his seat while Chouji stopped chewing for all of forty-two seconds. Kiba's mouth fell open and stayed open and Hinata leaned over to peer through her bangs, first at Sakura, then at her father who seemed to be greatly unimpressed with Kakashi's revelation. So much, in fact, he said:

"With all due respect, Hokage-sama… is this meant to be a joke?"

"A joke?" Kakashi replied, not missing a beat. "Strange situation to joke about, don't you think? Hiashi frowned, his arms folded within his neat kimono sleeves. "But… that is a young woman."

"What makes you so sure of that, Hyuga-san?"

"Well…" Akimichi Chōza added, gesturing toward Sasuke in a rather abstract way intended to describe the stereotypical curvature of a female form. "I mean… Well, she looks like a girl…"

Nara Yoshino tipped her head to one side, studying the fall of Sasuke's tee shirt. "How can you tell?"

"Seriously? You're staring?"

"Well, Chōza was…" Yoshino blushed. "I mean I didn't-"

"Honestly? If we were to base all our assumptions on looks, then we'd be pretty lacking in sense for shinobi," Tsunade said, curtly and she folded her under her chest for a stern effect while the
representatives exchanged guilty looks among themselves. What the hell was Kakashi thinking with this lot? The elders had probably already formed their opinions and they were well-rehearsed in persuading the clans to follow suit. Dragging things would only serve to create a greater mess and Sasuke didn't have the time or strength to stand in court all day. He still hadn't taken his chair; in fact he stood up straight - almost proud - when his name was revealed. But that stance would soon tire and she could see the fatigue gathering under his eyes. It was only so long before he'd need to rest. "Hokage-sama, is this necessary? A smaller group would have-

"Do not badger the Rokudaime, Tsunade-sama!" Koharu interjected sharply. Her tone clearly indicated a rather bloated sense of superiority, intended to put the retired leader in her place. They had never liked one another and now that Tsunade was no longer Godaime, the council elder didn't have to skirt around her distaste and further. Thoroughly aware of this, Tsunade simmered.

"I was only suggesting-"

"Then suggest in writing."

"I don't think we really have time for bureaucratic futility."

"Fut-" Koharu spluttered. "We have systems for a reason Tsunade! As I've clearly stated I-"

"Well, perhaps a little leniency could be permitted, considering this is just a hearing," Homura said, broaching some semblance of an accord. "After all, we're all here now, aren't we? And the young l-lady… Lady? Er… person… Well, they have a right to state their case, don't they."

His hand drifted in a slow, purposeful wave toward Sasuke, who had been watching the brief proceedings up until his second reception with the same intense, dark gaze that was exemplary of the Uchiha clan. He knew he looked different. Not different enough that much imagination was needed to see the boy behind the guise of a young woman, but enough that for those who couldn't wrap their head around the idea, a little coercion might be required. They looked, but they didn't see. And even if they did, they didn't believe. Not yet. Not until he spoke:

"My name is Uchiha Sasuke, if that clears anything up for you."

Ino:

She knew it. She knew it. She knew it!

It was Sasuke-kun! She had seen him; she hadn't been crazy! The lady with the papers, that was him! He wasn't wearing the wig anymore and he was dressed differently - less feminine, which might have been a tactical move on his part if he'd meant to be recognized. But those eyes. She could never forget those eyes. And despite the obvious padding (well, obvious when you were looking), he was still himself. Thinner, paler, but himself. His voice had never changed. That mid-level, somewhat bored tone inflected here and there a crust of mild arrogance - that was an Uchiha's voice. Ino watched as Sasuke glared up at his former teacher, his hands resting on the curve of his sweatshirt pockets - almost comfortable, yet not quite relaxed enough to seem off-guard.

"What else?"

"You'd swear to that identity?" Kakashi followed on, smoothly.

"Yeah," Sasuke didn't even blink. The elders followed the conversation intently, their attention bouncing back and forth like spectators at a tennis match.
"And you swear to this with a full understanding of who Sasuke Uchiha is, and where he stands in regards to the Village Hidden in the Leaves?"

"Yeah."

"Knowing that Sasuke also is an international criminal? An S-class in the bingo book? And that, were he to return to Konoha, he would be tried for his crimes?"

"Crimes?" Sasuke seemed to bristle slightly. "Hn. If that's what you want to think."

"Well that's all we have so far. Perhaps you'd like to enlighten us?"

Ino frowned. There was more. Of course there was more – there'd always been more. Anyone who'd call themselves a Konoha citizen knew there was more to Sasuke's story than that. What wasn't Kakashi seeing? How couldn't he see, considering he'd been Sasuke's teacher for so long? There was a glance toward Sakura, a search for further elucidation. But her friend was silent, staring down at her hands. Fingers locked into a grid, her shoulders hunched. Perhaps this was too much, too soon? After all, he had tried to kill her – isn't that what she said? He turned good in the end, last she saw anyway. But for a while there he was… frightening. Unreal. He was someone they didn't even recognize.

Ino reached out and curled her fingers around Sakura's, gripping them lightly. Her hands were hot - she must have been pressing them together for awhile - and trembled with the tension. She was rewarded by a small nod and she smiled a little, silently pledging her support. Sasuke was important, but Sakura came first. Here and now, anyway.

"My stance on my business is the same as always," Sasuke said, typically ambiguous. "I left Konoha for my own reasons. It wasn't any of your concern. Still isn't."

"You defected." Homura answered. "That is grounds for arrest."

"I should be allowed to leave the village if I want."

"Unregistered leave is seen as an offence. You need to let us know where you are going, how long you intend to be away and whom you are staying with." Kakashi explained. "You know this. Every academy student is told this; every genin. You have to register your leave with the Hokage."

"You knew where I was going. And you knew I didn't intend to come back." Sasuke replied, coolly. "There was nothing after that. I didn't see any formalities as necessary procedure."

Ino suddenly found swallowing difficult, her body seemed to freeze the moment he uttered those words. Had his time with… with them, his friends, meant so little to him? It was so unimportant that he'd just given everything up? Just like that? He'd turn his back on everything for… what had Sakura said? Something to do with his brother? And even that little bit of information took her six months to finally pull to light. She hated that Sakura had to suffer through that kind of knowledge alone. And Naruto… what kind of information was he burdened with? And why were they choosing to suffer alone? Why was Sasuke doing the same?

_And why the hell is Shikamaru making that face?_ Ino turned to her teammate and frowned in bemusement as he appeared to be caught between a reaction of sheer shock and one of slowly pooling dread.

"Hey," she whispered. "What the hell?"
Shikamaru:

*Oh shit. Oh fuck, oh shit, oh fuck. It was him. It was him. Well, it had been...*

Though it was very unlike the tactical genius to be so arrestingly stumped, it had taken him a few minutes to get beyond the bombshell of comprehension to register the fact that *he had seen this person before*. Yes. It was blurry, coated in wavering uncertainty, but the more he thought about it, the more he was sure. Christmas day. The izakaya near Takumi. He'd thought he'd been hallucinating - that the drug the rogue nin had administered to his system was warping reality as it faded from his body, making him see things - but he could have sworn he saw Uchiha Sasuke in one of the booths. In a wig. And a dress. He'd thought it far too surreal to ever be, but that's what it was. And they were singing, and the whole bar was swaying and wishing a happy holiday to everyone else and...

*And didn't he have a kid? A kid, of all things! Why'd he have a kid? Where the hell had it come from? Obviously he had some connection to it, because there it was again in the courtroom with the official. And he hadn't put it down at all that evening, so.*

The baby. Yes. He'd been holding it close to his chest back then, trying very hard to quietly blend in with the furniture, but everyone wanted a kiss from him... er... her... as a blessing or something. It made sense at the time, but then it was the sake making the decisions with a rather potent hallucinogenic backing it up. Shikamaru looked over toward the official who held Mikoto and rubbed his chin. Why was Uchiha Sasuke bothering with a kid? Those things were just collateral if you were trying to get a mission completed. She had to mean something if he'd lugged her all the way here from the Wave Country. In drag...

*Wait, didn't she kiss me? Fuck!*

The jounin blinked a few times, feeling his face grow hot as a nasty, roiling sensation began to brew in his stomach. He'd kissed somebody that night and he was pretty sure it was a redhead. Sasuke had been a redhead then. Oh God... he'd kissed Sasuke hadn't he? Oh fuck everything.

Suddenly all too conscious of his inner conflicts, Shikamaru glanced about instead as he attempted to put on a casual front. His eyes rested on the stormy face of his mother, who was in turn glaring the defendant and he shivered. Even the worst of criminals didn't deserve that. Yoshino's ire was legendary. Anyway, what had she to be angry about? As much as he disliked the Uchiha for treating the ninja code as something that he could effectively bend for his own personal vendettas without reprimand, hadn't Sasuke helped at the end of the war? Hadn't he come to their side? What was so incriminating about that? Wouldn't his latter actions have cancelled out his earlier mistakes, or had something else happened? There had to be something else. After all, Naruto had been acting strangely since Kakashi and Sakura brought him back from the battlefield.

A quick glance toward the second member of team seven present told him all he needed know. That body language, that strange, almost guilty expression. There was something else, something Sasuke had been hiding. Sakura knew it; he bet Naruto was the same. It was clear that he correct in assuming no one should trust the guy farther than they could throw him, farther than they could throw Chouji, to be more accurate. But how was this really Sasuke? Why was he posing as a woman? That didn't make any sense at all. And currently the entire courtroom seemed to have forgotten that little fact as they grilled Sasuke over the legitimacy of his defection. He didn't seem to think he'd done anything wrong by illegally leaving the village (which was bullshit; he knew exactly what he'd been doing. He just didn't care) and yet the Council were adamant that he should have automatically been branded a nukenin, rather than allowing a rescue attempt as per the norm for underage soldiers. So what the hell was going on?
"…that right, Shikamaru-kun?"

Crap. They were talking to him now? Shikamaru blinked, trying to hide the fact that he'd been so distracted he hadn't heard the question.

"Er.."

"Oi! Pay attention, boy! Don't be so rude!" Yoshino growled from her seat. Shikamaru glanced helplessly at Chouji, then back at Kakashi, who appeared to be waiting for a response.

"Sorry, what?"

"Oh for-"

"I said, despite how you felt about the Sasuke, you readily accepted the Hokage's order to engage a rescue attempt via Uzumaki Naruto's invitation," Kakashi repeated, kindly. He gestured to Shikamaru's peers surrounding him. "Along with Akimichi Chouji and Inuzuka Kiba. And Hyuga Neji. You all agreed to help retrieve Sasuke from Orochimaru."

"Well, I didn't really care," Shikamaru replied. "I mean, I never really like the guy. But I guess Naruto was a pretty good friend, even then. And it meant we got to run a tactical mission on our own. I wasn't going to turn that down, even if it was kind of annoying."

"It was a good mission." Rock Lee piped up. He made to stand, raising his hand a little, then thought the better of it and sat back down again. "Everyone fighting for Konoha. To return Sasuke-kun to his rightful place in the villa--"

"I've never had a rightful place here. The Uchiha have never had a rightful place here," Sasuke hissed in response. Rock Lee's mouth snapped shut abruptly and Shikamaru raised a brow. Hadn't the Uchiha always been the Law in Konoha? The Police? How could Sasuke have thought they didn't belong when they were given such an important placement by the second? Surely that was a decision based on ability and trust; a proof of worth?

Then again, he remembered his older cousin bitching about the strict curfew laws for chuunin that Fugaku had applied when the drinking age was regulated between the clans. And the fact that his father always used to mutter under his breath when a new degree from the Hokage was actioned by the Uchiha which became a no-nonsense debacle and often caused more friction than it would if nothing ever happened. Shikaku would complain about the paperwork. Yoshino would complain about her husband's complaining. Shikamaru would complain to Chouji about his annoying family, but it wasn't ever really against the Uchiha… Was it?

"Then what are you doing here?" Kakashi asked. Sasuke seemed to blanch somewhat at that. Almost grumpily, he knotted his arms over his chest and glared at the floor. Kakashi persevered, however. "Was your unwilling return because of the girl?"

"Girl? What girl?" Koharu leaned forward a little then glanced at Homura. "Does he mean Haruno?"

"What?" Sakura jolted to attention. She seemed to pale immensely – although that was usually her pallor whenever anyone mentioned Sasuke. That, Shikamaru had gotten used to a long time ago. "No! No way," she shook her head vehemently, "he wouldn't have-"

"No, not that girl," Kakashi shook his head, then pointed toward the court official who seemed to take no interest at all that the entire room was staring at her. "That girl."
All eyes settled on the dumpy-looking official and the little girl she held in her lap. Mikoto responded beautifully by returning the most wide-eyed, innocent stare, an orange plastic ring was wedged firmly in her mouth, slicked lightly with a veneer of drool. When she spotted Sasuke, she laughed and bounced on her caregiver's lap. And slowly, as the audience turned back to the Uchiha in question, watching with punch drunk incredulity, his expression softened and he raised his chin in greeting at her. Then he closed up again and glared.

"What of her?"

"Why did you bring your daughter back to Konoha, if you feel no sense of connection to this place? There has to be a reason."

"Closest city." Sasuke shrugged, noncommittally.

"Was it?" Kakashi rubbed his chin, disturbing the cloth that covered the lower half of his face. "Where was your daughter born?"

"Somewhere around here."

"Did he just say daughter?" Koharu gaped, leaning impossibly further over in her seat toward the baby. Any more and she would have ended up on the floor. Her headpiece chimed as though in warning. "That is Sasuke's daughter?"

"Sasuke had a kid?"

"Well, she looks like him."

"Never!"

"Who's the mother?"

"Where is the mother?"

"Can't be… that's impossible. The brat wouldn't have it in him"

"Surely a test would-"

"Tests are done," Tsunade cut in dryly, stopping the arguments before they started. "The tests are done. Blood, DNA, paternal, maternal. You name it. She's his, through and through. There was a pause, then she cleared her throat. "The material was provided by Kabuto Yakushi over a period of days as Sasuke recovered from illness. I can guarantee it is one-hundred percent accurate."

"Kabuto did?" Homura blinked. "You let Yakushi Kabuto practice medicine again?"

"Well I-"

"Wait, what does 'over a period' mean?" Inuzuka Tsume almost choked on her own incredulity. "Just how long's the bastard been hiding here?"

Tsunade looked at Sasuke who, unsurprisingly, seemed to be aiming a death glare toward her. "As far as I know, at least a week."

"Well, that's not-"

"Three weeks?" Kiba yelped, suddenly, sending the room crashing into silence for yet another whammy. He appeared to be in discussion with Akamaru, who noted the silence and whined a
little, then sniffed twice and nodded. Kiba stared at him for a moment, then blinked and looked up at his mother. "Old man here says he picked up Sasuke's scent over three weeks ago why didn't you tell me?"

Akamaru just huffed a little and growled.

"I'll damn well call you Old Man if you're gonna sit on information like that and think it's nothing!"

"Is that true?" Kakashi said to Tsume, who nodded.

"That's what Akamaru said. He's gettin' on, but his nose is still as good as ever. Trust me."

Shikamaru sighed and scratched under his topknot. Poor Akamaru. Having to deal with Kiba's new puppies, losing his nose as he grew older and now Kiba was blaming him for being unsure? That wasn't fair. Besides, if the kid was Sasuke's and he'd been looking after her, that would change his scent indefinitely. Babies poned. And those were words straight from Kurenai's mouth. He had to admit, after babysitting Mirai for half an hour, he agreed.

"Five weeks, actually," Sasuke interrupted his thoughts. "I've been here five weeks. I arrived just after the Northern New Year."

"Five weeks?" Homura almost seemed impressed. "Here? Alone? How on earth did you survive?"

"Squatting in the old Uchiha ruins and stealing food, most likely," Tsume spat. Tsunade looked like she wanted to throttle her.

"Sasuke's lived by himself for years, you really think he'd resort to that?"

"Where'd he get food for the kid then?" The Inuzuka jounin backed down a little, remembering herself. But her temper still simmered. "Can't feed a pup that young on scraps. He'd be ripping off drugstores for baby formula, surely."

"And how'd he even know to get formula?" Shikamaru muttered to himself.

"Yeah, it's not something that's sold all over. Kinda hard to get hold of outside of big cities. And then, of course, you have to make sure you get the one that's best for the kid." Chouji, sucked the pip, noisily. "Or it'll get sick. It's actually pretty hard to do if you don't know what to look for."

"How the hell do you know that?" Shikamaru blinked, admittedly surprised.


"Yeah I guess you did."

"I had a job. I had an apartment." Sasuke spoke up, casually. "I can hunt, fight… I made my way. I don't resort to stealing."

"Where did you work?"

"I delivered newspapers," Sasuke replied. "And I wrote for one."

"Contract work. Early morning shifts and casual hours. Easy to make work around the needs of a baby." Yoshino seemed impressed. "That's… responsible."
"Isn't it?" Kakashi agreed. "What paper?"

"Kohona Tribune."

"What column?"

"Sarada's corner."

"What, you're Pomato-chan?"

There was a long, groan from Kiba. Shikamaru almost had to mask a smirk. That was one of his favourites, wasn't it? And to find out Sasuke had been writing it? Ouch. He was interested in finding out more, but Santa Yamanaka, who'd taken responsibility for Inoichi's position and sat as a representative for his clan, spoke instead.

"Can we backtrack a second, sorry." He cleared his throat. "Did you say Yakushi treated Sasuke?"

"Yes."

"Why?" Santa seemed baffled. "Surely Tsunade's prowess as a medic would have been substantial in almost any case?"

"Tsunade had to call in a specialist," Kakashi answered. "Given Sasuke's unique… physical situation."

"Eh?"

"Define 'unique'," Koharu was treading carefully now, and had moved to rest her hands on her knees as though supporting herself. "You're telling us he's a woman, then I'm assuming there is visible change in the aspects of his body. Despite this abomination, one would think, traditionally, the... new facilities shouldn't be so unusual. There's something you aren't telling us, Hatake-sama, and I've been council long enough to know when information is being suppressed. What is it?"

"Information is not being suppressed," Kakashi explained. "So much as... mmm... postponed. To give us time to absorb the facts."

"The facts are simple," Homura said. "Whether he has a child or not. The Uchiha has returned and must be tried for his pre-war crimes, including defection and the murder of Shimura Danzo."

"Bastard had it coming," Sasuke snarled.

"Well there we have it," Koharu pounced. "He hasn't even the grace to attempt denial. I move to detain Uchiha Sasuke immediately and upon these charges sentence him to-"

"Hold on, hold on, that's not everything." Tsunade raised her hands. "We can't give the nukenin sentence to Sasuke: he has a child."

"Certainly we can," Koharu bristled. "The girl can be fostered. Her welfare will be attended to."

"Oh, you mean like I was?" Sasuke snapped. "By a retainer check?"

"How dare-"

"No, not that child," Kakashi slid in, deftly. "The other one."

Koharu looked mystified. "There's another one?"
"Yes."

"And where is that, hiding beneath his shirt?"

"No. Ah well-"

"Sitting outside, reading the tapestries?" Koharu sniffed. "Or perhaps he's already sneaked it into the academy and it's training with Iruka? Kakashi, please, I urge you to get to the p-"

"It's not out yet."

This time it was Hinata who spoke. She remained in her seat, but her eyes were stapled to Sasuke's torso. The byakugan lines spidered out across her cheekbones like heavy scars and she linked her hands in her lap demurely before she continued:

"T-that is, it is still inside S-sasuke-kun. Not, um, born. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry, I just… I figured…" She glanced up toward Hiashi, who appeared to have turned a rather mottled shade of green-grey. "The fact that he… uh… has a girl's body. And… I noticed his chakra was different. I mean, everyone must have but…" She blushed heavily, but she she caught her father's expression, she bit her lip and nodded ever so slightly. "It's true, father. Look for yourself."

Hinata let her kekkeigurenkai fade away as her father took his turn to look, nodding slowly, dazedly in agreement. "I… She's right." Hiashi coughed out. "There's… Well, there's two full chakra systems. His own and… a smaller one, located…" Reduced to gestures, Hiashi merely waved his hand toward the general area of Sasuke's stomach.

"Pregnant. Are you saying the Uchiha's… pregnant?" Yoshino gawked.

"Fuck off," Tsume growled, pushing to her feet. "Hokage-sama, I don't know what kind of idiot prank this is meant to be, but-"

"It's not a prank," Kakashi told her. "I did say there were unique circumstances. And I did say this was out of the ordinary. What we need are the facts before we can lay out a suitable course of action – one that we can refer to in front of the press-

Homura muttered at the mention of the paparazzi and Koharu's expression soured considerably. Neither were particularly keen on the incursion of the media society within Konoha, but if they were trying to create an amalgamated world that could fit alongside the developing civilian cities, then communications had to match. Kakashi offered them a consoling look.

"-and later to the Shinobi World Council. Now Yakushi is prepared to appear in court regarding the examination and care of Sasuke as a patient, and his condition, but there are holes in our information." He looked pointedly at Sasuke when he said that. Sasuke was staring at the ground. "And of course, the prior charges we must take into consideration."

Sasuke muttered something under his breath. Akamaru, picking up the not-so-flattering remark, gave a low growl, but ultimately let it peter out. Kiba didn't seem to have anything to say about it. But then Kiba...

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**Kiba:**

... was still stuck on the fact that Sasuke was
a) a woman and
b) a woman and
c) a wo- does that mean he has breasts and a... a...

- repeating on him like suspect chicken katsu. Sasuke was a g- a girl. He'd left the village as a fucking ornery bastard who had managed to get a team of five elite genin completely bulldozed in their efforts to retrieve him. And while they were successful in standing their ground, the mission had been a bitter failure.

He was the same clan that bastard Uchiha warlord had been from; he was the same blood. If he'd been on their side earlier in the war, they might not have suffered the casualties they did. Ino and Shikamaru might still have their dads; Neji might still be alive. But no, the asshole was always going on about himself. Everything was about him. And now that they had a chance to make him pay, they were stalling? What the fuck?

Kiba looked over to his mother, who had returned to her seat, grudgingly, but was grinding her teeth with the same menace as some mountain tengu and her eyes were narrowed, calculating. She looked almost as though she were sizing Sasuke up to bite – wondering if she could take a chunk out of him before anyone noticed. Tsume had been hugely unimpressed with Kiba's treatment over the course of the retrieval mission - that he'd been wounded and the fact that the entire matter had been handled so thoughtlessly. While Kiba was excited to have been included, he had to admit, he felt the same.

Akamaru, on the other hand, seemed to be of a slightly less churlish opinion, and was watching Sasuke carefully from beneath his shaggy brows. The mission had left him severely wounded, and while he'd healed very well, Kiba was never entirely certain just how Akamaru had felt about the conclusion – the fact that they had, indeed, failed. He seemed more upset at his owner's behest, and hadn't mentioned it past Kiba's initial tirades. Whether he actually cared or not was something of a mystery but given Akamaru's pride as a ninken, he probably did. A lot. And his opinion over Sasuke's return was not something his companion took lightly.

Akamaru.

"Oi," Kiba whispered, as the conversation around him began to stagnate into legal banter. "Buddy? Did you... really know?"

"Dunno. Maybe. Not sure. Akamaru is too old now."

"Aw you know that I don't mean it." Kiba sighed. "C'mon man."

"Hn... Akamaru smelled something familiar. Not certain then," the ninen answered after a moment. "Didn't know it was a bitch with pups."

"Bitch," Kiba rolled his eyes. "Yeah. Kid... I mean, what the fuck? Bet they'll go to foster homes when they put the bastard away. As if we don't have enough war orphans to deal with already."

"That what you think?" Akamaru lowered his voice even further and moved to lay his head on Kiba's lap. The others were still arguing among themselves, this time over the inclusion of Kabuto and his own legitimacy to appear in court. Shikamaru was just absorbing everything, Chouji was absorbing whatever he had in his pocket by handful after strategic handful. Hinata was watching the proceedings mutely, the same as Lee, and Sakura looked as though she was drilling through Sasuke's skull with her eyes. Kiba shrugged.

"Yeah. Don't you?"
"Family is shinobi way. If bitch loses her pups, no training. No clan. Konoha lose shinobi."

"Who cares, he doesn't deserve them. They'll be better off raised by civilians. Uchiha are just trouble."

"Human are trouble." Akamaru grumbled. *Besides*, he continued to himself. *You don't see the way that he's looking at the kid. 'Cos he keeps looking at her. Over and over. He's mad, and he'd scared - stinks of a whole lot of emotions you wouldn't be able to pick. Too many. Confusing for him, prob'ly, as it is for me. But every time he looks at her, that goes away. Shouldn't mess with that; that's a good thing.*

"Him particularly. That guy doesn't know when to quit. Hope they throw the book at him." Kiba snorted, folding his arms over his chest. "Hope they knock his smug face off with it."

He said the last part loud enough for Sakura to hear, since she looked as though she was in need of a little acknowledgement. But she didn't reply. She continued to stare at Sasuke's head, hard enough it seemed she was looking through him. That didn't bode well. But then again, pretty much everything surrounding Team Seven and their errant member seemed to prophesize catastrophe, and Sakura knew it.

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**Sakura:**

She didn't know what to think. She was numb. All feeling had melted away from her like ice on a summer day; the wall that built around herself sinking down with it. It had taken a long time to learn to put Sasuke behind her. To tear that feeling of need and longing out of her and replace it with work duties, new prospects; new love. It was like losing a limb; the prosthetic would never feel quite the same.

But slowly, painfully she gathered herself together. Day by day she was able to push that image of his face from her mind. The sensation of his hand through her chest lingered, tingled; it was harder to remove, considering her impalement had been a fantasy, but a fantasy designed to be so real it had patched itself into her long-term memories. But she'd unpicked it. Over time it had gone. Over time she'd become someone very, very different. Someone who was focused on her work and responsibilities. Someone who put the care of her friends and colleagues above anything else. She had stronger connections, she had lovers – damnit, she even had students. Over time, she'd become better. A better ninja. A better Sakura.

And then he came back. He didn't even have the grace to slip back into her life by increments, slowly, carefully drawing her attention to him as he established himself, no. In typical Sasuke fashion, he was there in an instant; in a flurry of drama. He was in the limelight, forever a superstar of scandal and whether or not the attention was good or bad didn't seem to matter; he was there. He interrupted. And he still had that effect on her that would stop everything; ruin everything. She could never escape him. She felt like crying.

*And Naruto... Wouldn't he..?*

"Is it him?" Sakura whispered to Ino, not trusting her voice to rise above a breath. Ino's hand in hers was comforting and she clutched it a little tighter. "Really?"

"I knew I saw him," Ino murmured back. "That day... The paper lady, remember? We sat and watched-
"

"I remember. I thought you were crazy."
"I told you so," Ino grinned, ducking a little when Santa glanced over at her. "I mean, not about the crazy; about Sasuke! I knew I saw him! God, this is so weird. It's all so serious!"

"He is a criminal, Ino," Sakura replied stonily. She was trying desperately to stop her heart pounding so loudly in her chest, but it was a failing effort. "He killed people. He's a traitor."

"Yeah, but… He's back." Ino sobered a little. "That has to account for something, right? Turning yourself in?"

"I don't know. They all seem to be up in arms about it." Sakura nodded to the elders, who were still talking animatedly amongst themselves. Occasionally a question was directed at Sasuke, but his responses weren't giving much away. Shrugs. Non-responses. She used to think his holier-than-thou attitude was cool. Now it couldn't have annoyed her more. "He's not helping himself. Never fucking did, really."

"Mm…" Ino nodded slowly, lowering her chin. "I can't believe it. Do you really think he's…"

"Always said he wanted to rebuild his clan," Sakura said, her voice trailing off as the courtroom seemed to settle again. "Considering he went to Orochimaru, I wouldn't put anything past him. Even something… like that."

"And are you suggesting, Tsunade," Koharu was arguing. "We ignore the fact that Sasuke killed a Konoha official and seven of Mifune's samurai simply because he has some… condition?"

"He's pregnant, Koharu-sama," Tsunade growled. "He's not… I don't know.. sprouting a tail. Someone did this to him-

"Oh I'm sure Orochimaru was more than obliging. Wasn't he terribly interested in Sasuke?" The village elder raised her near non-existent brows as she addressed Sasuke. Her mouth pulled into a thin line. "Or more correctly, Sasuke's body? Is this his current path to immortality, boy? And how much power did you bargain for in return, mmm?"

"That's… No!" Tsunade hissed angrily before she seemed to collect herself. "How could you think any of this was Sasuke's idea? That's ludicrous!"

"As ludicrous as anything Orochimaru's ever done? I repeat, Tsunade, I-

"It's none of your business," Sasuke interrupted his defense in one swift blow. He looked straight ahead, his gaze like granite.

"What the hell'd he say?"

"I think every part of it is our business," Koharu pounced, beating Tsunade into silence. She eyed her former employer triumphantly. "And I think Sasuke has just proved me right."

"Hokage-sama." Kakashi.

"Well, Sasuke has proved before that he was willing to trade his own body's integrity for greater power," he began. "Why he left the village after the war is not clear, not yet, but we do know that in time he'll come head to head with the Hokage slated to replace me. We all know how they felt about each other."

"Sasuke and Naruto were always rivals," Homura said, nodding slowly. "That much is true. Is that your intention, boy?" He asked Sasuke. "To fight against Naruto for the Hokage title? Is that why
you left? To gain the power needed to surpass Naruto?"

"Well that makes sense." Koharu added.

"Not like he hasn't done it before…"

"Oh this is the stupidest thing I've ever heard!"

"He said he wanted to be Hokage when he joined the war!" Kiba stood up, pointing a finger at Sasuke. "Shitty, fucking jumped-up little-"

"You will put your hand up if you've got something to say, boy!" Tsume bellowed. "And don't fucking swear before the elders!"

"But he's right," Shikamaru murmured, narrowing his eyes as Kiba meekly poured himself back into his seat. "Sasuke did proclaim his right to the Hokage candidacy. And he said he didn't care what the rest of us thought of him."

Ino turned a little to look at her teammate, paling slightly. "R-really? So this is to… what? Prove himself a stronger ninja than Naruto? D-does that mean the babies are… just a means to an…" She made a face. "That's gross."

"Where is Naruto anyway?" Hinata added, softly. "Surely he should be here. After all, aren't they-"

"I'm here! I'm here! Sorry!"

There came a flurry of movement, a burst of colour in the room and suddenly Naruto was there. Unexpected, just as he always proclaimed himself to be. He began apologizing profusely for his tardiness to one of the other officials in a way that was intended not to be disruptive, but ended up being a showstopper of a performance to get the blond seated. It didn't matter; everything would have ground to a halt anyway. Now that he was here. Now that the key player was in position.

Sakura drew in a long breath.

"What'd I miss?" Naruto whispered loudly as he wiggled down next to his team mate. He smelled of earth, moss, jungle foliage – obviously he'd been training somewhere and missed Kakashi's note until he returned to his apartment. That wasn't uncommon, in fact he'd taken it upon himself to test his father's hiraishin no jutsu - generally to visit Mount Myoboku, though his success was often patchy. Still, Sakura hadn't been ready for him just yet, hadn't quite summed up what to tell him. *Hey, we had an emergency meeting today and it turns out the guy who wrecked your life and disappeared without a trace has decided to come back and grace everyone with his presence. Oh, and did I mention he was a girl? Inexplicably? And yes, those kids are his and most likely Orochimaru's. So how was training?* Sakura just stared at him.

"Er, do I have slime on my face?" Naruto continued, giving Sakura a funny look before he began wiping at his chin. "I swear, if Shima serves me any more of that worm soup, I'm just going to barf into the bowl. Seriously, those guys need an Ichiraku. So what's going on here?" He nodded toward Sasuke as he tucked away a few stray hairs behind his ears. "Who's that?"

"That's your undoing. That's the guy who made you sick for months. Who pulled everything out of you and made you sit in the middle of it, trying to figure out how to fit the pieces back together again. That's- "Um…" Sakura began. "Naruto, that's-"

_Kakashi:_
"Sasuke," Kakashi continued, ignoring the fact that a game-changer just came into play. "Perhaps you'd like to discuss what you feel is and isn't our business. Considering this hearing will serve to influence the High Court's decisions later when you stand before the Shinobi Union Council."

In fact, they had one of the council representatives there with them, although Shikamaru wasn't aware of his responsibilities yet. He'd been a little shaky to start with, which was unlike him, but he was probably taking the time to process everything. And he'd bounced back swiftly, already on top of the facts that he knew. If he'd been properly briefed, he could have been leading this hearing. Kakashi paused, tapping his finger on his knee. Shikamaru was also far more logical than the others when it came to both Naruto and Sasuke. He might have found a friend in the Jinchuuriki, but he didn't let that friendship cloud his judgement. Instead Shikamaru observed clouds; he taught himself to decipher how they worked. And at the moment he was studying Sasuke, who'd suddenly seemed to gum up like an oil-clogged spark plug. Bringing in Naruto late had been a genius idea - naturally the court would get a wholly different side of Sasuke without his former team-mate present. His rival. His… well, they were much more than anything Kakashi recognized. And he was almost certain Nara felt that as well. Naruto and Sasuke were twins of the soul. Yin and Yang. Two parts of one. When they were apart they were one thing; when they were together? Well, that was for here and now.

Naruto must have finally caught up to speed and the glare that followed his comprehension was so unlike him, so alien on his usually bright and cheerful face – Kakashi wondered if he'd been swapped out in place of a doppelganger. One who had far more of a fiery temper than the original. And Sasuke? Kakashi had never seen him appear quite so… affected. It was as though someone had pulled a plug and all the colour in his face drained slowly away, leaving nothing but a pale, wan canvas; whitewashed by… was that fear? Guilt? He couldn't tell. Not on Sasuke.

Whatever it was, Sasuke seemed to have become so affected by it that he completely ground to a halt, only moving to very, very slowly place himself in his seat. His breathing became shallow, his hands shook as he lay them in his lap. If Kakashi looked very closely, he could have sworn he saw him shaking.

Because of Naruto?

"Sasuke," Kakashi repeated. "We're waiting. Do you have anything you'd like to say in your defense?"

There was a numb shake of the head. Sasuke seemed to taking a world of interest in Kakashi's knees. His eyes seemed empty. Hollow. A curtain had fallen over him; the weight of it pushed his resistance down so far, he'd become little more than one of Sasori's puppets, nodding along to a string that was connected to his primary defenses. Kakashi frowned. He knew something had happened with Naruto, he'd watched his student burrow into depression, licking his wounds raw for a number of months until they were finally able to coax him out of his cocoon with distractions and bright shiny things to do. He'd always considered Sasuke to be the perpetrator. He'd never thought their final battle over the decimated valley would have torn something from them both.

So this is how it's going to be? Kakashi stroked his chin, thoughtfully. Naruto thought his complimentary powers would fuel Sasuke to become stronger, but that isn't the case at all. He can hold the fan; he can let the wind blow the fire in any direction he wanted, but he could never stop it burning. It would always burn, no matter what.

"Then I'd like to conclude this hearing for today." Kakashi said, suddenly, much to the surprise of the entire room.

"But we've barely gotten started. He hasn't said anything!" Tsunade gaped. "We can't-"
"Sasuke will be standing trial for his crimes. As per Konoha's laws, he will answer for his
defection, his murder of Shimura Danzo and Mifune's Samurai and his ulterior motives at the
conclusion of the war. He is still considered a class S criminal and will be treated as such."

"But-"

"What about the children?" Chōza said, slowly, glancing toward the court Official and the little girl
in her arms. "I mean… There's one on the way… And what if he's already bonded with the little
girl? I mean… You can't really. Well, that's a bit much, don't you think?"

"Your brain as soft as your body, Akimichi?" Tsume rumbled. "He's a criminal!"

"All of this… perversion," Hiashi added. The look of distaste that coloured his expression was
faint, but it was there. Kakashi wondered if he really felt so disgusted by Sasuke's apparent choices,
or if he was simply victim to a prolonged knee-jerk reaction. His daughter didn't seem to share the
same view. "This doesn't excuse his crimes. He must be controlled. He is obviously… confused."

"Threatening Konoha isn't 'a bit much'?" Koharu preened, sitting up a little higher in her seat. She
seemed happier now that she was getting what she wanted. "Sasuke is an adult now, therefore he
should be tried as one. His daughter will be put in the care of the state, his unborn. Well, we'll cross
that bridge when we come to it."

"But he's…" Yoshino bit her lip, glancing at Santa, who shrugged. "Koharu-sama… He's
not really an adult… I mean, these kinds of situations… decisions... uh-"

"You'd consider an eighteen year old a child, then?" Koharu replied. When Yoshino seemed to
falter, she continued. "Even in civilian villages, an eighteen year old can work, vote, drink, buy
property and travel freely across the world. We should not coddle our own simply because they are
more capable than a common civilian. Sasuke will be tried as an adult before the Shinobi Union
and the Kages. And in the meantime, he will reside in Konoha's holding cells under the care of
Ibiki. Ume-san?"

This time she addressed the squat official who had been caring for Mikoto, watching the
proceedings with turquoise-lined shrewdness. There was something amiss with her. Something that
sat just beneath the surface. A strength and solidarity that belied the sapless guise of her initial
appearance. She stood up when she was addressed.

"Koharu-sama?"

"Please take the girl to Urushi-san, he'll sort out a carer for her. We'll get her settled in a nice, quiet
intermediary house until-"

The clatter of the chair in the silence of the room was like a gunshot. It punched through the dazed
courtroom as unexpectedly and disruptive as Naruto's entrance a mere few moments beforehand
and echoed off the walls for several seconds afterward. Koharu blinked as Sasuke was suddenly on
his feet, his arms at his sides, hands tensed in kinetic readiness. His chest rose and fell with deep,
shaking breaths and his whole body seemed to constrict against itself to such a degree his muscles
could have burst their fibres and thrown themselves clear of his skin, just to escape the pressure.
And his eyes. Those haunting eyes. Not bloodied with the sharingan, not fanned like a peacock's
tail in a gaudy display of power, no. His eyes were wide, bleached pale. The pupils pinched into
tiny, painful points – an outward representation of the emotional strain inside him.

Frozen in place, shaking so badly with fear - with the sensations of loss that he hadn't experienced
in nearly a decade - Uchiha Sasuke opened his mouth and let out the faintest whisper whose weight
was loud enough to shatter the windows.

"no..."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: So many ellipses. So many interjections, geez Konoha! Hopefully I've got most of my facts right - it was hard trying to establish some aspects, but it all seems to make sense. As always, thank you all so much for your lovely comments - they really keep me going when all the characters won't give me a word in edgewise and I can't wrangle them to save my life. Look forward to next chapter for Sasuke's inner thoughts... And maybe Naruto's? Maybe... ;)

Lyrics credit: Pink Floyd
The Hearing: Empty Spaces

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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*Konoha, 6th March*

*Year of the Hare*

*Sasuke:*

*Naruto…*

Sasuke breathed slowly as he stood in front of them all: the eyes upon him were a weight he couldn't shrug, but they were no less than Orochimaru's stare and he was well attuned to that by now. He could deal with it. He could deal with them all, Sakura, Kakashi - all of them. Until he heard:

"Sorry I'm late. Where do I sit?"

Naruto had whispered, but the room was so quiet it came out like a bellow. The court assistant pointed to his seat, and Konoha's Peace Ambassador made his way toward it, blushing. He hadn't looked up yet. Sasuke wasn't sure he knew what was going on, but he didn't think so. He would wager his best shuriken Naruto had no idea why he was here. Or that his old rival, his failed mission, his so-called *friend* was strung out before him, ready to be "rescued". Had he thought he'd lost him back then? Had he wondered about him? Had he… cared after what happened? What was he thinking now? What did he think of him now?

In fact what had he told the others, if anything at all? The entire group seemed fairly confused as to why they were there, Shikamaru and Chouji especially. Kiba, he didn't expect to bother with pleasantries; he'd never liked Sasuke much. Lee and Hinata weren't of particular concern either. Lee had fought Kimmimaro (and not died), which drew a kind of grudging respect from the Uchiha and Hinata was… Hinata… Well, she was. She'd always been part of the background, to be honest – Sasuke wasn't sure he knew much else about her. She was from a clan as old as his which could still be found choking on the bone of its sordid history, so perhaps they had some sort of accord there. Ino would have given him the shirt from her back had he asked for it and while he acknowledged that, the way she was staring at him made him uncomfortable. That slippery look of commiseration; that insipid, watery sympathy, he couldn't handle it. Not when he was trying to be strong. Not when he needed to stand his ground among them. Not when Sakura was next…

She wouldn't look at him. He wondered what would happen if she did; perhaps her chakra alone would crush him? Killing intent be damned, she had years of disappointment, fear and misplaced longing under her belt.

Add to that the fact that he'd attempted to kill her, then later thrown her into a genjutsu that saw her impaled by his fist. Yeah. That didn't really inspire heartfelt reunions. Sasuke was vaguely surprised that he was still breathing even now – surely the first moment she saw him she would have entertained the option of throwing a chair through his head. But then, she had to behave in front of Naruto. And Naruto?

*Naruto…*
As if reading his thoughts, Uzumaki leaned over and whispered to Sakura, gesturing lazily about the room with his hand. The idiot had band aids all over his fingers again; he must have been practicing his kuchiyose. Probably would have ended up biting his fingers off if they hadn't called him in. The whispers continued, then turned into murmurs. Glances were thrown in his direction. They were talking about him, he knew it. He held his chin high, confident that he could face them; confident that they could throw anything at him and he'd take it, like he always did. He expected anger. He expected sour feelings, maybe even hatred. And that was fine. That he could deal with. That he anticipated.

What he didn't expect was his own reaction coming face to face with his old team mate. His bullshit prophesy sibling. His-

"Sasuke..." Kakashi said, motioning to him with a little nod. There was more, but Sasuke wasn't listening, he was fixated on Naruto's face. He was waiting for that recognition. And it was there like a brick to the forehead; Naruto snapped from one expression to the next in mere time it took to blink.

Well, his questions were answered, certainly. What did Naruto think of him now? Not much, that was for sure. Surprise couldn't even begin to describe Naruto's expression. Shocked wasn't even close. The look on the blond's face was every synonym, every instance of complete and utter flabbergast that could be found in every thesaurus on every shelf in every country of the world. Sasuke's sudden, unexpected presence hit Naruto in the face harder than if he'd been punched and his mouth fell open and stayed open until his anger caught up with him.

Then everything closed. Everything became firm, pressed. His face seemed to darken with rage like a storm cloud brewing meteorological misery. His fingers pressed together and his shoulders hunched. The lip curled into a shadow of a sneer and finally, those bright, friendly eyes narrowed; their hue, affected somewhat by his ire and perhaps the beast inside, turning a deep shade of purple. He wasn't in danger of metamorphosis, but it did go to show how utterly incensed he was.

And Sasuke knew his anger all too well. He'd known it in the past and it had been the last emotion he'd seen on his soul's brother before he left him. Before he tore that crevasse of pain between them, turned tail and ran. The distance had helped, hadn't it? Time, surely. Here and now, he thought he'd be able to deal with it. The pain must have lessened, right?

Right?

But instead his stomach dropped and his fingers went numb. His breath became caught in his throat; his heartbeat accelerating to a hammering pace. Suddenly he was locked in place, petrified, despite the fact that Naruto had been something of a constant travelling companion on his journey back to Konoha. The cheery cut-outs of him in Amegakure, the posters along the highway - all of that was him. It was almost as if they never parted ways, if he forgot the hell that was the middle part. Sasuke had almost made a move to approach him a few weeks prior in the village streets, and while that was in disguise it still counted for something. He had known this moment would come and he thought he was ready for it. But that face halted everything. That anger, that whole damn portrait of contempt froze Sasuke's words on his tongue and all reason to the back of his mind where it cowered beneath layers of his shattered defenses, trying to shut itself out; trying to forget.

Nnn...

And Sasuke stopped. He didn't stop breathing, didn't stop moving – no. All basic functions carried on as usual. But everything that made Sasuke Sasuke ground to a halt. His voice disintegrated. His eyes stared with a glossy deadness that sheened thickly over their surfaces. A cold sweat grew in fat beads on his forehead and in the thick hair about his temples. Once again, that old sensation of
fear prickled over him. Not the type of fear that he could use to his advantage but the fear that physically smothered. The fear that was an emotional garrote. Sasuke found himself paralyzed in the headlights of that ire, trembling like a deer and there was nothing he could do about it.

Sasuke had seen Naruto angry before, many, many times. This was not that Naruto. This was not the kind of angry that had manifested during their time as rivals. That face... That face was the one he was wearing when he hunted Sasuke down. When he laughed and told the others to restrain him. When he trapped him beneath his body, his hands rough and brutal and he drew blood when he sank his teeth into Sasuke's skin and shoved his length in deep, deep and those eyes were like lightening and they amplified the pain and his teeth were needles and the stripes on his face were like dark brands of malice his voice was grating when he laughed when he broke Sasuke apart when he drove in the final nail

*I win.*

There was nothing after that. Nothing good in the world until the world came down upon him. And Sasuke was stuck under that mental rubble, barely registering where he was or why. He saw the man's face. He saw him as Naruto, and he saw him as himself. He heard him whispering in his ear. He felt the weight of him on his chest, smelled the musk of his skin close, too close. He was all around him. He was through him. And it felt like his whole body was withering, drying up and dying in response-

-What's your name?- 

-Fuck you.-

-Fuck you? Is that your name? That's a pretty name-

-It's a piece of advice-

-Why? I like that as a name. Does your daughter have that name? Did you call her Screw?- 

-I called her Fuck Off- 

The smile was predatory, then. The eyes were pale, bloodshot and they were round and wild. He sucked his teeth and tongued the corner of his mouth.

-I'm lying. I know your name. Your name is #UCH02. Your daughter's name is #UCH05. They tell us that's all we need to know about you, but I'm interested. I want to know, you see. I can't help it. You're famous, at least to me, anyway. I've heard so much about you.-

-Then you know what my name is.-

-Oh-
He laughed. It was an unpleasant sound.

-I do, Sasuke Uchiha. I do-

-until they made to take her away. Until they wanted the only thing he possessed that was his. His prize, his reward. He'd stolen her back from the Kakkou with shaking fingers, unsure if he could care for her, uncertain if he could even love her and he still didn't know the answer to that. But something deeper down, something that linked to the fabric of the universe itself held her, needed her. Something in him knew it couldn't function without her and it forced him up, pushed him forward; pried the words out of his mouth through numb lips.

"No…"

Kakashi:

He'd witnessed Sasuke folding in on himself in the same way that someone might watch a train crash or an avalanche that was happening in front of him. Like the world had slowed down and was running at a quarter-speed, letting events draw out over seconds, minutes rather than instantaneously; it was disastrous. And there was very little he could do about it. Sasuke eased back down in his seat as though his joints were struggling through glue, his expression pinched, eyes dull. When he stood again, after a short period of name calling and wicked spats from his audience, he called out for his daughter, reaching toward her with a kind of unthinking, drunken movement that was purely driven by his most base instincts. Even his voice was tinged with the deep, low keen of a grieving animal. A primal gutter. He took a few slow, heavy steps toward the official, his eyes locked on the little girl in her arms.

"Nno…"

"Sasuke?"

"Is he alright?" Hiashi said, looking over to Kakashi as though Kakashi would know. The Hokage didn't answer, he simply watched, letting the situation sink in.

"Hokage-sama?"

"I…-" Koharu began, visibly shaken. The whole courtroom seemed to pause, didn't breathe. They were watching Sasuke - completely fixated. "I beg your pardon, Sasuke? What did you say?"

Sasuke didn't blink. Sasuke didn't move. He didn't acknowledge anyone; he didn't even seem to hear Koharu. His eyes were only for his daughter, saw only the girl. Otherwise they were devoid of cognizance, pupils blown.

"no… No… Can't. Don't."

Kakashi paused for a moment, then,

"Ume, let him have her."

"Yes." Ume didn't even blink. In seconds, she was striding over to Sasuke almost and gently transferred the baby into his arms. Then the entire room let out a breath. Sasuke took the girl into his arms with a gentleness and a familiarity that was as shocking as it was magnetizing. Sasuke's whole body seemed to relax the moment he held her. He pressed his lips against her forehead and fingers buried in her thick, spiky hair, pulling her close against his chest. She let out a happy squeal and grabbed his bangs, burbling at him joyously. And she was all that could be heard in the room,
for the rest had fallen into stupefied silence. Even Koharu blanched a little, intimidated by this sudden and overwhelming show of sheer, base need.

"Hokage-sama," Koharu said, carefully. "What are you doing? I thought we came to an agreement."

"Mm, we had," Kakashi agreed, looking pointedly around the small room at the shocked expressions before him. "But I'm starting to wonder, Utatane-san, whether splitting them up is really such a good idea…"

"That's what we agreed."

"Er…"

"Did we? All of us?" Kakashi focused on the Akimichi Head, pursing his lips a little as Chōza seemed to be fidgeting a sentence together. "I think perhaps we ought to slow down a little. After all, attempting to remove the child seems to have caused some serious effects. What do you think, Chōza-san?"

"Ah… Well…" Chōza began.

"Serious effects… That's a serious effect?" Tsume muttered. But quieter this time, as though she wasn't quite convinced of her own rebuttal. "He's hardly affected…"

"You think?" Yoshino was quick to leap in. "And what exactly constitutes 'affected' to the Inuzuka, mm? Overgrooming?"

"Shut it, Nara."

"That's not really appropriate," Santa started to say, but quietened as Chōza continued.

"I don't think we ought to split them up. Um. Do you?" He said, carefully. "I mean… Well, look at them. It just seems wrong. And I don't think he's in the right frame of mind to be questioned. Not right now, anyway."

"Something else has happened," Yohino added. "There's something amiss. Factors we need to take into consideration, and we don't know what they are yet."

"That's very true. It's certainly not a clear-cut conviction," Kakashi supplemented, trying hard not to look over as Koharu simmered.

"There's also the fact that he originally defected as a child," Tsunade piped up. "And that law has now changed, given the exchanges of citizens between villages. The Shinobi Union gave a temporary pardon for war victims who absconded as an act of goodwill."

"Sasuke wasn't a war victim at the time!" Tsume parried, narrowing her eyes. "He left in a time of peace. Doubtless he knew something!"

"Maybe he did, maybe he didn't." Kakashi spoke in front of Tsunade, who clapped her mouth shut and glared at him. "But that's something we have to find out, isn't it?"

"It's been a… well, a really long time since anyone with a dependent has been tried," Yoshino swallowed hard, biting her lip. "Uh… definitely not one who didn't have any immediate family to take their child. Or one so… young."
"No, that's very true," Kakashi agreed. "We haven't done that before."

"As Yoshino said, there are factors we don't know about yet. What Sasuke has experienced to become like this? We have no idea. Was it his decision, was he forced? Hell, even if it was his idea he shouldn't be separated from the child. Not unless there is absolute proof – thoroughly researched and documented – that the relationship is in any way harmful to either of them," Tsunade added. "Hokage-sama, Council… We're talking about trying a boy who's been changed, physically altered, and has carried children. Whether they're Orochimaru's or not – and that isn't an issue right now – we can't just run ahead on assumptions alone. It's not right and it's not fair. Remember, this is a boy who could have hidden anywhere in the world, and yet he returned to Konoha. For safety. He came home."

"Home." Rock Lee breathed. "That's what we're told, isn't it? The village is our home. The village is our family. Our family is always there for us, no matter what."

"Yeah, but you don't just turn around and try to kill your family when you disagree with them!" Kiba shot back. Then he paused, realizing what he'd just said. There was a scarlet blush that scattered across his cheeks, making his markings almost blend together. The whole room sucked in a breath, feeling the awkwardness as a unit. "Ah. Well. You know."

Kakashi looked over his council, then the Clan representatives with a long, thoughtful gaze. Tsume still didn't seem convinced and while Hiashi didn't seem overly pleased with the sudden, awkward dogleg into leniency, he wasn't arguing against it either. Yamanaka Santa was watching his cousin, who in turn hadn't taken her eyes off Sasuke the moment she caught sight of him, and Nara Yoshino was biting her nails anxiously – a clear sign of indecision. Really it was only Koharu and Tsume who expressed the most ardent opinions in opposition, but the Inuzuka Jounin hadn't made to comment on Sasuke's behavior. She watched, closely, but when Kakashi raised the metaphorical gavel, she made no move to disagree.

"Losing a father is one thing," Kakashi said, quietly. "Losing a family is quite another. And to lose them twice? No, I don't think so. I'm afraid, Utatane-san, Mitokado-san, I have to agree with Lee-kun on this one. The Third praised family before anything else, as did the Fourth. The Fifth, Tsunade-sama, praised fairness and responsibility – like her Grandfather. I may not have worn the hat for long, but I think we should bear these things in mind when we move forward with this case. Sasuke's crimes are one thing, but this situation calls for more attention than a simple open shut case. And for the meantime, until we're sure with our verdict, Sasuke should stay with his daughter."

"But."

"Koharu-san," Kakashi said, patiently, as once again his council made to protest. "Perhaps you ought to try asking Sasuke another question and see how well he responds. We can't question a defendant who can't physically answer." He nodded toward Sasuke, who had slowly sunk back into his seat, still staring out into nothing; still holding his child as though his life depended on it. The look on his face – or lack of – suggested there would be little else to draw from him. Something had shut him off and Kakashi was willing to bet that the fascination from exposing who or what caused such a breakdown effect was far more tempting for the present party than the simple satisfaction of just locking Sasuke away. Koharu pressed her lips into a thin line, but Homura sat forward, nodding.

"Yes, I see. I agree, Hokage-sama," he said. "I think perhaps, in this case, it is a wiser decision to allow the pair to stay together until we have run through a more thorough set of proceedings."

Homura liked his proceedings, that was for sure. "It appears he needs some rest. Some time to…"
digest his choices without feeling harried. Rather than one of the holdings cells – which would not be at all suitable for a young child to stay – we could use one of the suites in the Hokage apartment block. It is close by, it is entirely enclosed and guarded by ANBU and it is away from the public eye."

"A house arrest, then?" Koharu pursed her lips. "With a minder? He should be monitored at the very least.

"The science division has developed a new set of trackers they intended to test on lower-level criminals in Kusagakure," Santa added, helpfully. "The ones sentenced to probation anyway. No private is guard necessary with the devices and if we reduces the radius to the Office and apartment grounds, we could make do with the guards we already have in position. Er… since he's not in much of a condition to fight…" Santa blushed a little. Koharu tapped her chin with a gnarled finger.

"That's adequate, I suppose," she said. "However, he'll still be facing the same charges with the World Council. What sort of treatment are we putting into place that will prove that this leniency was viable? He may very well shut down in court as he has here. And you are well aware of how the Raikage will find our… special treatment."

"You're afraid it will look like favoritism?" Kakashi raised his brows.

"I'm only preempting the kind of mind set that I have, many times, witnessed from Kumogakure," Koharu told him. "You know that I am only trying to protect the village from slander. We are meant to be a union."

"Then we play by the union's rules," Tsunade piped up immediately. "We instigate mandatory therapy sessions with a court-appointed social worker. It's what they're doing for the war victims; it's what we should do for Sasuke."

"A what?"

"A specialist… well a third party, separate from the shinobi regulation, who can… talk to Sasuke."

"Anyone can talk to him," Koharu looked mystified

"Regarding his transfigurement; his decisions or lack of. What happened." Tsunade continued through gritted teeth. "The defendant has the opportunity to talk to a neutral party and there's a degree of confidentiality which can help put the patient at ease. The knowledge isn't shared unless the defendant allows it, or unless there is harm intended very specifically. It's another new implementation, inspired by some of the civilian villages."

"Bunch of bullshit." Tsume grumbled. Koharu and Homura looked at each other for a moment. Then Homura pushed his glasses up his nose.

"Er…. And they've found this works?"

"It's certainly insightful. I've had reports that the patients in Suna's trials have felt more secure. Comfortable. Able to deal with painful memories and repressed trauma," Tsunade replied. "And after all, as the Hokage said, aren't we supposed to be all about understanding our clans?"

"The Uchiha are… unstable." Koharu muttered, twisting her rings around on her fingers. "That I understand. History has proven it time and time again."

"The village has been unstable all its life. And don't forget, the Uchiha lived in reasonable comfort
beside the other clans for many years." Tsunade motioned to Sasuke. "Let me also point out the fact that there are only two left in the world. We have a choice to render a clan extinct or-"

"Or to study it under supervised conditions!" Santa seemed satisfied with that. "It really is a rather perfect opportunity. One of the strongest doujutsus that existed… having the chance to study it at such a young age could tell us a lot more about the nature of chakra…"

"She's not a guinea pig!"

"I-I didn't mean it that way-" Santa stammered, blushing. Yoshino snorted.

"Sure you didn't."

"We won't be putting Sasuke's daughter up for study. Nor Sasuke," Kakashi sighed. "At the moment, we are simply dealing with the fact that he is now back within Konoha's jurisdiction and we will need to act accordingly before we discuss a trial date. We will initiate a house arrest for Sasuke, let him retain the custody of his daughter in return for community service and bi-weekly sessions with a counselor."

"Uh," Homura glanced at Koharu, who pressed her lips together into a smart, puckered line. "That does sound appropriate. Yes."

"How interesting that it didn't take you long to formulate a plan, Hatake-sama." Koharu touched her hair, stroking a tiny piece back into place. "You're certainly one of our more decisive Hokages. When it comes to the Uchiha, that is."

"Well, I am known for being quick on my feet." Kakashi replied, smoothly. "One must think of all possible outcomes in this situation. Besides, Tsunade is right, not enough is known about the situation to issue a sentence without a little uncertainty, don't you think? And if we have the opportunity to gather more intel, we really should."

"You know Ibiki could help with that," Koharu added, darkly. "It is, after all, the interrogation of a criminal."

"Historically, that would be the way we'd do it, I'm sure," Kakashi replied. "However, you've seen what the media circus has done for Naruto's popularity. Lots of good vibes; lots of coverage on our social events. It's excellent exposure for Konoha. But what if they caught on to this story? How do you think they might take it? After all, we know already from the… business in Kusagakure, they'll do anything for a story."

"Who… How can they find out?" Homura said.

"They have their ways. They have plants everywhere. The press could give us ninja a run for our money these days," Kakashi pointed out. "The reason I'm trying to get things moving along, the reason I've asked so many of you here, is because I'm pretty sure they've already caught wind of the situation – or at least that's what my informant tells me. And I'd rather you all found out at once than through the papers. Fair's fair."

"I suppose."

"So I guess the decision we make here ought to be a good one. Right?" Kakashi looked toward the original members of team seven, who seemed incredulous that he'd spoken to them at all. Sakura looked away, picking at the hem of her skirt.

"Whatever," she mumbled.
“Naruto?”

Naruto hadn't stopped staring at Sasuke. Kakashi wondered if he was even listening; he'd moved about as much as Sasuke had in the past ten minutes. He cleared his throat and repeated,

“Naruto?”

“...” Naruto said, his voice tarred by his anger. "It would make us look good, I guess. After all, that's what we're about, isn't it? Caring for the...frail..." Those blue eyes narrowed. "The weak. We're the reasonable party here. It'd be a great publicity act."

An act. Kakashi watched as Naruto lifted his chin haughtily, looking down his nose at his former rival. Sasuke didn't seem to have a response, but that wasn't the point. Naruto was taking a shot where he could. Strategically. He'd learned a lot on the road and how to take a punt at your opposition without looking like the bad guy was something he'd seemed to have mastered. Kakashi nodded.

"Then perhaps we break for today. I will make the necessary arrangements an update you all on the situation, similarly I will also provide a press sheet underlining what we can and cannot say at this point. Remember, this is more to cover our own asses, more than his."

"His generous ass," Kiba muttered, getting to his feet with the rest of his comrades. Ino shushed him, but it was a half-hearted effort. They shuffled out, far quieter than they had been when they entered. That wasn't surprising. Kakashi coughed again then rose to his feet.

"Alright, let's see about getting Sasuke settled. Then it's a world of paperwork for me."

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"I can't believe it," Rock Lee mumbled as he trudged down the steps from the office pavilion. "Was that really Sasuke-kun?"

"I guess so," Shikamaru said, frowning a little as he caught the glare of a lens in his eyes. There was a snap of a shutter, then a photographer, seated casually on the benches by the courthouse, got to her feet and waved the small party over. She smiled a little too widely, which only served to raise Shikamaru's hackles. Damn, Kakashi had been right.

"Hi kids!" She exclaimed, ignoring the set of wary looks aimed toward her. "How's it going?"

"Good, thank you," Lee answered, matching her tone. Ino shoved him.

"Fine," Shikamaru replied, pushing his hands in his pockets. Glancing at the others, he added: "Y'know, if you want some good pictures, there's a store about a block from here that sells tourist maps. Heaps of places to photograph."

"Oh I'm not a tourist," the woman laughed.

"I know," Shikamaru countered. "But since nothing has happened here this morning, you might as well be."

"That's not what I was told."

"Well that's what I'm telling you." Shikamaru narrowed his eyes. "Who'd said otherwise?"

"About 'nothing'?" The woman deflected, beautifully. She batted her eyelashes. "Why, no one." But if you ever want to chat about 'nothing', I have a card.
Realizing he wasn't getting anywhere with her, Shikamaru just grunted and began walking away—hoping like hell the others followed. The last thing he needed was division between his friends. Kiba was angry, but he was angry on behalf of his mother and his own strangely healthy respect for the village rules. Kiba snorted, jerking a thumb behind him as the woman waved.

"We should talk to her," he said. "We don't owe Sasuke nothing."

"Kakashi-sensei said we have to wait for instructions," Sakura said, stiffly. She stared straight ahead, her expression unreadable. Ino made to thread their arms together, but stopped short of the action when her friend pulled away. "It's just unnecessary attention."

"He's good at gathering unnecessary attention," Kiba growled.

"He gathers unnecessary attention because he's good," Shikamaru parried. "Skilled. I mean, the guy's a damn head case, but he always had the skills to balance the crazy. Can't argue that."

"So what? He doesn't get to hang because he's talented? Ain't that talented."

"And we don't hang people," Hinata threw in, softly. "That's a horrible thought."

"I didn't mean-" Kiba backpedaled a little. "It's an expression, Hinata."

"Well, you sounded like you meant it," Hinata picked at a fingernail. "I thought I'd better make sure since you were so… outspoken in court."

"Hey, your dad wasn't holding back," Kiba shot back. Hinata, for one of the first times in nearly a decade of comradeship, actually glared at him.

"I'm not my father."

"Hinata-chan," Ino blinked. She seemed pleased. "S-so you support Sasuke? I didn't think you knew him that well…"

"I wonder how well any of us know him," Hinata looked up, watching the back of Naruto's head. He didn't turn around, but he slowed a little. His shoulders were hunched, hands in his pockets. He hadn't said a word since they left the court houses. Instead he'd been wandering in front, leading the group away from the main street and west towards the canal where it was quieter. No doubt he needed to gather his thoughts, but it was also unsurprising that Ichiraku's new gyoza cart was located in the memorial park as well. Hinata shrugged. "And I don't think it's a case of for and against. I think it's much messier than that."

"How do you figure?"

"I've sat in a lot of formal meetings with my father," Hinata said. "You know… learning the ropes. Show more interest… I've never seen Utatane-san or Mitokado-san so unsettled."

"Think they're hiding something?" Shikamaru asked. Hinata nodded which made Kiba sneer again.

"As if! Those old farts? What the hell would they have to hide? They're like… a million!"

"With three wars under their belts," Chouji spoke up, suddenly. "I don't know. Lotsa stuff happens in wars. Lotsa stuff gets forgotten. 'Specially if you're fighting. Best time to hide things, you know." He looked at Naruto pointedly. "In all that confusion. Who's to know what's true and what's not. I bet they do."
Shikamaru nodded. "Remember, they were put in place by the Third when they retired as Shinobi. They know everyone's dirty laundry. The Uchiha were one of the most mysterious clans of all the Leaf."

"What, the fuzz? Nothing so secretive about a bunch of trumped up cops." Kiba pushed back his hood. "One went berserk and offed the rest, so what? Product of inbreeding anyway, you know how those clans are."

"Do we?" Hinata said tightly. "Maybe you should enlighten us."

"Well, not you of course."

"No, just the other ancient clan interested in selective breeding for their dojutsu. There's not much difference between the Hyuga and the Uchiha, you know. We're both founding clans. We're both users of ocular jutsu. You say we don't know Sasuke that well? You know, I wonder if he grew up like me; maybe he actually found it harder to make friends because everyone was intimidated by him from reputation alone? Or maybe he grew up like you, Kiba? Maybe his Mom was tough and his Dad wasn't there a lot. At least you had Akamaru."

Akamaru gave a short, soft yap at that, something of a thank you. He walked forward a little closer pushed his nose into Kiba's hand, letting him know he was there. It was his unspoken way to remind Kiba to mind his manners. However Kiba wasn't listening.

"Intimidated? Hard to make friends? He did that to himself being such a damn show off. And he had a brother, that's way more than some of us here!"

"Itachi… wasn't it?" Lee frowned. "Um… wasn't he the one that… uh…"

"Hn, that's what happens with bad breeding." Kiba snarled. "Put too much of the same bloodline into one pool and you get aberrations like Uchiha Itachi. If you ask me, it's always a problem with the bitch-"

He made to laugh but was interrupted by Naruto's fist connecting with his jaw. He staggered back a few steps, his eyes glazing with surprise. One hand touched his mouth and pulled away slightly dampened by blood. The air around them seemed to fizzle with energy and it was only a few seconds later that the others realized Naruto had even moved. His eyes were flat, grey. His lip curled.

"W-what the hell, man?" Kiba yelped, feeling about his jaw. "You're just as pissed off at him as the rest of us! Weren't you the one sayin-"

Naruto's fist flashed again, this time catching in Kiba's jacket to pull up toward him. Pressing into Kiba's space, dangerously close, Naruto let out a low growl of his own – dark enough that even Akamaru backed off slightly, his tail lowering to miserable droop.

"You don't pretend to know anything about Sasuke's family," he rumbled. "'Nothin'. You don't talk about his Dad. You don't talk about his Mom. And you s'pecially don't talk about his brother. You have no idea what it's like. You got nothin'. So shut your damn yapping mouth before I shut it for you."

Kiba swallowed hard, but he didn't submit, not yet. He narrowed his eyes.

"This what it's come down to, huh? You realize that this is that Uchiha bastard at work again, making us all turn against each other. You know he pissed himself back there? Fucking cowardly little bas-"
"Kiba stop!" Ino protested. "That's enough. We get your point!"

"Do you?" Kiba continued, still holding Naruto's stare. "Y'know, if you rough me up, people are gonna hear about it. Even if I don't say anything, my Mom's gonna know. And she'll bark, let me tell you. How's that gonna make you look, eh, Ambassador Uzumaki?"

Naruto laughed suddenly, coldly, making the others wonder if that was him or the beast inside. It certainly didn't sound like the Naruto they knew. "No. No, your Mom's not gonna bark about anything to do with me. And you're not gonna yap about anything to do with Sasuke anymore, y'understand? Cos if you do-" he leaned in closer, so that only Kiba could hear him. ":- your Mom's gonna find out about your girlfriend. Y'know… the civvie? And I'm not gonna pretend I know anything about your family, but something tells me that's gonna account for more than a hiding, right? More than a few bruises from a disagreement with me, your Mom'd throw you through next week."

The look that Kiba gave Naruto was such an exemplar of flabbergast, it was, despite the context, almost amusing. He'd worn the same look when Naruto had fought him in the chuunin exams; his final technique being quite the underhanded trump, and not to mention, hilariously unpleasant. But there was little humor in Naruto's threat and Kiba felt it. He backed down, finally, looking away.

"Geez man… I didn't mean-"

"Breakfast!" Chouji said, suddenly. Loudly. The tense silence practically shattered around them. Chouji gave a thin, forced smile and seized Kiba's arm in his large fist, marching him forward. "Food. We all need some food. Meat, I think. A little protein in your stomach'll calm your nerves. No point in arguing when we can fill our mouths with food instead. We'll go to my cousin's place, it's close."

"Mm, good idea," Shikamaru said, pointedly looking over at Ino, who seemed to be nodding mindlessly as though her head was no longer attached to her thoughts. "Bet you didn't eat, right Ino? Let's get you some of Chochi's pastries, mm?"

"Y-yeah," Kiba staggered along after the others, firmly clenched in Chouji's grip. Lee cast a look behind him as Sakura and Naruto remained, but he knew better than to try to coax them along. Not now. Hinata paused for a moment, then continued walking. There was little she could do. Team Seven needed their time.

Once they were alone, Sakura reached out, resting her hand on Naruto's shoulder. It was surreal. The whole morning, the whole thing. Completely unreal. But it was there. And now it was their problem once again. He was.

"Are…" You alright? Sakura attempted to swallow the lump in her throat. It didn't work. Are you alright. What a stupid thing to say. Of course he wasn't alright; they weren't alright. "Naruto…"

"Sakura…" Naruto breathed. He didn't look at her; he looked past her, his eyes fixed on some point in the distance. "Is this real?"

"Yeah," Sakura replied, familiar with the question. "Yeah it's real, Naruto. Things have been real for a long time, remember?"

"I know but… That… was Sasuke… wasn't it? Or it wasn't? That was a girl."

"Apparently he's a girl now."

"And he had… a baby? Or was having one? Both? I got lost."
Sakura shook her head. "I don't know. It's insane. I think we all know as much as each other apart from Kakashi and Tsunade. Oh, and Kabuto."

"Kabuto?"

"Mm… Tsunade brought him in. Most likely to make sure that he was who he said he was." Sakura shrugged. "The guy's about as suspect as a really suspect thing, but he knows his stuff. Someone was telling me he saved Sasuke's life in the w-

"Hit me."

"Mm?" Sakura blinked, then groaned. "No. Geez Naruto, not this again. I told you it was real; don't make me prove it."

"Do it."

"No! I can really hurt you!"

"Do it. Please," Naruto growled. "Please do it. Then I know it's real. Then I know it's… I can… I can start on this." He hasn't beaten me. Not again. This isn't him. "Please, Sakura."

"Fine… Ok fine, damnit." Sakura sighed, then cocked her fist back. A second later, Naruto was stagger away from her a few steps, his eyes filled with tears and his hand at the side of his head. "Ow!"

"I'm sorry!"

"Ow! Shit, ow!"

"Well, you asked."

"I asked you to hit me. You pulled my hair!"

"That's better than hitting you." Sakura showed him her hand. "Look, I didn't even take any with me. I barely touched you."

"That really hurt!"

"Really?"

"Ok, no. Not really. Still!"

"Still what? You were yelling at me!" Sakura folder her arms across her chest, somewhat guilty. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I really did just tug it. But do you feel better now?"

"Kinda. No. Yes." Naruto straightened, rubbing at his temple. He wasn't hurt so much as surprised. That was the point, really. "So… he's a girl. And were those his... kids?" When Sakura shrugged, then nodded a moment later, he scrunched up his nose in distaste. "Do you think it was Orochimaru?"

"Who else would it be? There is no one else who'd want to get under Sasuke's skin as deeply as that. No one else who could. He wanted Sasuke's body, remember?" Sakura shivered. "To take it over… Search for eternal youth. Tsunade-sama said he'd been obsessed with immortality since he was a kid. I wouldn't put it past him to try that."
Naruto jaw tightened audibly. "Do you think they… Y'know… Uh-"

"Uh… Gross? And well… probably? That's how you make a baby." Sakura squeezed her eyes shut, trying not to picture it. "I mean, he could have been inseminated, but… I dunno. I don't want to know."

"Stupid bastard! He's a stupid bastard!" Naruto snarled, suddenly. "He's a stupid, stupid bastard and he… he deserves everything he gets because he's stupid. What the hell's all this for anyway? More power from Orochimaru?"

"That's what everyone thought. It makes sense," Sakura added, kicking her toe in the dirt a few times. "He went to the Sannin for power in exchange for his body. Then he was with that other guy for a while… Obito, was it? I mean, who knows what that guy promised him."

"Obito was confused," Naruto replied, immediately. "He wasn't a bad guy, he was just… told the wrong things. People took advantage of that. That Madara guy took advantage of that. But he saw it in the end. He knew. He was a good guy. Sasuke-" won't listen. Never listened. "- no. I don't…. I just don't wanna think about it."

But wasn't Sasuke tricked too? Wasn't that what you were trying to prove for so long? Naruto winced. There was a long moment of awkward silence between them, punctuated here and there by the sounds of the village. Or normal life carrying on around them. Two hours ago, they'd been part of that, and now Sasuke had come along and ruined everything. Sakura bit her lip.

"Do you want me to come over?" Sakura asked. "Maybe we could go for a walk? Or just… sit for a while?"

"No…" Naruto shook his head. "Nah. Thanks. I need… I don't know what I need. Bleach my eyeballs or something." Get him out of my head. For once, get the bastard out of my head. "I'm going home for a bit…"

"Want me to send for Gaara?" Sakura said, quietly.

"No."

"I'm sure he'd want to kn-"

"Just leave it!" Naruto snapped. "Sakura, please! You don't need to fix everything! Fixing things doesn't always make them better. You can't just go and give people exactly what they want! Fuck!"

In a flurry of signs, Naruto disappeared into thin air – transported to wherever he'd hidden his other kunai. Sakura stared into the space that had once occupied her friend, almost as if she could still see the outline of him hanging in the air; his aura. Then she clicked her tongue.

"Shit it."

She spun on her heel, turning stalk in the direction of Tenten's house, her fists clenched at her sides. Ten strides later, she broke into a run.

_Fuck you. Fuck you Sasuke. Fuck you!_

"I can't get up."

Tsunade crouched near Sasuke, her hand on his knee. The courtroom had emptied of the Sasuke's
peers, but the representatives and the council still remained, somewhat unwilling to end the proceedings despite the fact that Sasuke had been frighteningly unresponsive for a full half hour. Finally, after a little more time and after Naruto had left the room he'd begun to thaw, though his capacity for reality was still questionable. He blinked heavily, his head nodded as though he were drunk. He seemed to be answering questions, but in an abstract way – removed. He hadn't stopped clutching Mikoto close to his chest and while she was making soft hungry noises at him, his attention was still drawn elsewhere to another time. He murmured, absently, his hand drifting to the neckline of his tee shirt in order to undo the buttons and help Mikoto to his breast. But it then stopped short. He switched off. He returned to staring and his hand drifted away, all intentions forgotten. Tsunade frowned.

"Sasuke?"

"Can't get up," he repeated, blinking. He looked at Tsunade, then over at Yoshino, Chōza and Santa, who were standing a little way behind, eyeing him worriedly. "...right now."

"You feeling sick? Dizzy? Nauseous?" Tsunade reached forward to touch his side, letting her fingers run over his hips. "Something hurt?"

"No."

"Loss of feeling?"

Sasuke shook his head. Tsunade smiled faintly. "It's ok then. Maybe you're just a bit fatigued. Give it a moment and we'll try again. You'll feel better on your feet. We're taking you to the Hokage apartments, know where those are? You can stay there until the trial."

"It's not that," Sasuke whispered. "I um… I think… Um…" He looked away. "I need something to um… cover. Me. A-around the w-waist."

"The w-Oh," Tsunade backed up a little, then pulled off her haori, bending a little to help Sasuke up. Sasuke eased up - his movements slow, syrupy, as if he was in a dream - and let her help him position the haori to cover the accident: tying the sleeves around his hips for security. "It's ok. You were upset." She offered, kindly. "It happens with trauma."

"I know."

"Oh," Tsunade looked down then cleared her throat. "Sasuke… Do you remember what happened?"

"What happened when?"

"Just now. At the hearing."

"I didn't hear anything."

"No, that's not what I meant." Tsunade pressed closer as he leaned on her heavily, unable to move any faster than a dazed shuffle. He was responding, but there was a delay. Things were coming through garbled and she wasn't quite sure why. "The meeting just now. Remember? Everyone was here. Naruto, Sakura-

"Mikoto needs feeding," Sasuke said, dreamily. "She won't sleep if I don't feed her. Then I can't keep moving. It's better to move while she's asleep."

"You don't need to move, Sasuke. The apartments are just down the road."
"I can't afford an apartment. I don't have any money."

"That…" Tsunade clutched his shoulder tighter. "Sasuke you don't need to pay for it. You're going under the care of the state, remember?"

"I can't pay for it. I can't. I need money…" Sasuke stopped suddenly, staring up at her. No, not her, just past her. Not quite into reality. "I can't pay for her. I don't know… I left my job… I think. I can't go anywhere else, there's nowhere else to go. I need to keep her safe, don't you understand? It's not her fault! I can't… I can't do it! I ca-can't… Don't take her…"

"Tsunade-sama?" Yoshino was at her side, deer-stepping nervously. "Are you alright, do you want some help with him?"

"I don't know," Tsunade looked at her helplessly. "He just switched off again. Maybe?" She supported him for a moment while he slowly canted from side to side, breathing shallowly. "Sasuke? Stay with us, all right?"

"Should he go to a hospital?" Santa asked, throwing a look toward Kakashi and the council, who had stopped debating and were watching the small group with the same kind of unhelpful fixation as civilians watching a fight between shinobi. Kakashi pushed his chair backward out of the way. "Is he alright?"

"Right now? Probably a little better than he was?" Tsunade replied, acidly. She glared at the council. "And you wanted to lock him away. Really."

"We're not getting into this again, Tsunade," Koharu sighed. "You got what you wanted."

"Did I?"

"Oh can we just get him out of here?" Yoshino said, now crouched in front of Sasuke, her hands on his arms, lightly. "He needs to rest. Can't you tell? He's exhausted!"

"Please… just don't take her. Don't take her. I don't know what's left if you take her. Please. All I need is some money… Just for a place. Some food. Please…" Sasuke's voice petered out and he seemed to collapse a little. Yoshino wrapped her arms around him, letting him sink into them. "Sasuke? Um-" There was another glance to the surrounding adults. "Little help?"

"Yeah," Tsunade hurried around her, gently trying to pluck Mikoto from his arms. He held on like a limpet, groaning slightly, but she persevered. "Come on, Sasuke. Just a second. I'll just hold her for a second then we'll get you settled in your new place, ok? Just a little bit…"

It took a moment, some soft words and persistence but finally Tsunade managed to coax him into giving her the baby. She eased her away, rocking Mikoto lightly as she bleated, unhappily. Sasuke's front was wet. Two small, dark patches bloomed on his shirt where his breasts had seeped and he looked down at them, dazedly. "…leaking."

"Oh…" Yoshino blinked. "He… feeds her?" She glanced up at Tsunade, who rolled her eyes. Hiashi eyes widened enough to make him appear positively ghoulish. Even Koharu seemed surprised.

"Of course." Tsunade told her. "What else was he supposed to do?"
"I just…" Yoshino glanced over at Kakashi. "Did you know that? Don't you understand what that means?"

"I supposed it proves he's had a child before…" Koharu said slowly. Homura was trying not to look, a blush painting his lined cheeks. Koharu nodded. "You had better let him rest."

"That's what we're trying to do." Tsunade grumbled. Yoshino tried lifting Sasuke, but Chōza interrupted her, picking Sasuke up easily.

"Allow me," he boomed, nodding at Kakashi as he headed toward the door. Tsunade, Yoshino and Santa trailed behind, feeling slightly redundant. Seconds later an official caught up with them, keys jingling in her hand. She proceeded to tell them that apartment four was already prepared and waiting and that once they had Sasuke settled, they could discuss medications, food requirements, Sasuke's counseling sessions.

"We will need a list of everything," she prattled on, "for the records. Utatane-san and-"

"I'll meet you afterward," Tsunade interrupted her. "Seriously, just back off for now, ok? Utatane can-" blow it out her ass. "-can wait until we can ensure that Sasuke is safe."

"Yes m'."

"Do y'think…" Sasuke murmured as Chōza carried him through the door, and laid him carefully on the bed. "Do y'think she looks like them?"

"It's ok, kid," Chōza replied, kindly, pulling off Sasuke's shoes and positioning his feet on the comforter. "Just take it easy. You gotta rest for a while."

"I thought she did… at first. But then she didn't. Nothing like them. Not a bit."

"Like who, Sasuke?" Yoshino asked, helping Tsunade arrange a bed for Mikoto on a futon in the sitting area. They'd been quietly discussing the need for extra furniture in his apartment, but clicked to attention when he spoke again. "Who does your little girl look like?"

"Them."

"Who's them?"

"I could-" Santa made to offer. Tsunade shook her head. No way.

"Sasuke? Who's them?" She asked instead. "The people holding you? What were their names?"

"No one," Sasuke breathed, rolling over. "They're no one. Not anymore. It took them out. They're gone. She doesn't look like them, so it's fine."

It wasn't, of course, but Sasuke didn't feel that right now. He merely slipped into another doze as his caregivers tiptoed around him, making sure he was alright then investigating the apartment. Someone mentioned feeding Mikoto and he called for them to bring her over – suddenly present for a few seconds before he dived back down under the blanket of nothingness again. Someone helped him up and there was air on his chest, then the familiar clamp of his daughter against him. His hands went to her back, smoothing it lightly. He might have been talking to her, murmuring – singing perhaps, low and slightly off-key, but he wasn't entirely present to witness it.

Tsunade heard him, however. She had to lean close, tell Yoshino to stop whispering around them. She had to concentrate, but she heard it. Singing. A song, definitely – in fact it was a lullaby. She
could tell by the tempo, the repetition. It wasn't familiar, not a tune she knew – certainly nothing her mother or her grandmother sang her as a child. In fact, after a moment she realized it wasn't even in a language she knew. The words threaded together, the vowels clipped and strange. And it repeated, over and over until he finally fell asleep, possibly comforted by the fact that his daughter was still warm and heavy in his arms.

Chapter End Notes

This one was a monster. I'm sorry if the editing is a little shocking, I haven't had much time this week and I didn't want to shorten it. We're out of the hearing now, so we can move forward to the aftermath. Next chapter we may learn a little more about the Kakkou...

As always, thank you all so very much for the kind words and encouragement. I'm so glad you're all enjoying my little piece of insanity orz Much love :)

Konoha, 7th March  
Year of the Hare

"So… You'll do it?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Don't grumble, of course you do. And y'know I wouldn't be askin' you if I didn't think you weren't at least interested."

"It's a mission. Solo. Haven't done one of those in ages. 'Course I'm interested."

"Good. Thanks. I'm counting on you."

"You know he's gonna be pissed though."

"Well, you have a way of sweet talkin' him. You'll manage."

There was a pause.

"…Does it bite?"

"The little one? No, it doesn't."

"And the bitch?"

"Just don't call him a bitch and you'll be fine."

"Roger."

Morning was a beast, and not a kind beast to anyone. Even in the sanctuary of the indoors it was loud, bright and invasive, bursting through the thin curtains of Sasuke’s borrowed apartment like a perky summer camp counselor. The day after the trial, however, was one of the few times in Sasuke's life where morning had decided to behave. It tip-toed around him, brightening slowly, quietly; hushing the birds a little and chasing away the joggers with gusts of cold winter wind. Then, after it had a few hours to primp and run the comb through the dawn chill, it finally rapped on the window, greeting Sasuke a warm and gentle slant of light across his nose.

Sasuke blinked. His head felt heavy. Not clogged with gunk as though he had a cold, just heavy. Weighty. His eyes still closed, he let his ears wander about the room first, uninhibited by visual stimuli. The first thing he noticed was the silence. No, not quite silence. There was birdsong. There was the distant drone of children laughing and playing. Bees. It wasn't silent like this in the holding cells beneath the Hokage's Offices where the atmosphere was fringed with the collective noises from of other inmates. Mundane sounds like coughing, yawning, groans. The hum of the mechanized security system. The electronic chatter of whatever devices the science department had decided to inflict upon their subjects (and similarly, whatever devices Ibiki had decided to inflict them in). But there was none of that. Sasuke winced.
There was also sunlight on his face. A long scar, warm and bright, lit the skin across his cheeks like a bandeau of heat. He wrinkled his nose a few times, then finally opened his eyes. He was greeted by the welcoming sight of an empty room - a large, comfortable looking room, which proved that he definitely couldn't be in a prison cell. Ibiki's playground was a minimalist structure and the chambers that held Konoha's prisoners were parched for interest. This room looked as though a collective of well-meaning pensioners had simultaneously vomited bad taste in interior design over it, under it, through it; not missing a single detail in their projectile kitsch. Tiny flowers in sprigs and clumps sprayed across the curtains. The walls were a cacophony of forest animals and trees. There was no carpet, but there were mats – rainbow-flecked monstrosities constructed from an era of loudly coloured rags. When Sasuke pushed up, glancing about dazedly (and somewhat painfully in response to the assault of pattern in his face), he spent several moments staring in wonder (horror maybe?) at the ceiling, upon which someone had attacked with a n.02 paintbrush and several day worth of painting roses. Obviously, given their identical nature, that was all the person could paint. The comforter covering him was paisley while the pillow slip was striped. Anyone with any artistic leanings would have, within hours of subjection to this room, quickly shrivelled up into a husk of over exposure. But Sasuke was no connoisseur of interior design. Frankly, the fact that the room could inspire nausea in most didn't bother him. He cared only that it was his room. Alone. It didn't have bars or a door that locked from the other side. They hadn't put him away. Why the hell not?

And where was Mikoto?

Sasuke sat up straighter, ignoring the jab in his side and the swarm of ache in his head.

Where was Mikoto? She wasn't in with him. She was always with him. Did they take her? Weren't they talking about taking her? Didn't Kakashi say-

Panic seeped in for a mere second before he heard her laugh and his fear shed away, layer by slow layer. She was close by, in another room by the sound of it. He heard Tsunade's voice as well (not surprising) and let out a long breath as he rolled out of bed, currently ignoring the sleepwear that someone must have dressed him in. There was a sticker covering the drip line needle in the back of his hand and it tugged as he moved, but he yanked it out, carelessly. He was far more interested in finding his child. Finding out what happened; how he suddenly materialized in this strange house.

Easing off the bed and down onto slightly unstable feet, Sasuke made his way out of the bedroom, his fingers trailing the wall. He felt unbalanced, strange, but nothing seemed physically different. His knee ached to walk on which caused him to limp slightly and there was a queasiness in his stomach, otherwise it was really just fatigue that plagued him. He followed Mikoto's laughter, taking it slow as the room opened up into a small, sparsely populated living space. The furniture was eclectic and minimal and consisted of a table and chairs, a highchair (which Mikoto was currently occupying) and a small futon-style couch that was worn enough to have developed a deep sag - frowning into its old age. There was a small kitchenette, stove top and sink, and a fridge freezer rather like the one he used to have growing up. Tsunade was sitting at the table shaping rice into onigiri balls. Mikoto sat next to her with a pile of rice on the plastic tray in front of her to play with, though a good amount of it was on her face and even more speckled through her dark hair. When she saw her mother, she squealed in delight and Sasuke responded by smiling slightly. He didn't often find an excuse to use the word 'cute', but he could make an exception for his daughter. Not to mention his relief that they weren't separated. Locked away. Criminals. What the hell had happened at that bullshit hearing?

"Morning," Tsunade greeted him, jovially. She pointed at the rice balls. "Breakfast?"

"Not right now," Sasuke said, then added. "Thanks. Where are we?"
"The Hokage apartments. Under guard. This is your new home for the time being until the trial."

"I wasn't arrested then," Sasuke seemed vaguely baffled at that. "This is some kind of home detention. Hn. What time is it?"

"About a quarter-past ten."

"Late," Sasuke seemed unhappy about that. Tsunade ignored it. "You should have woken me."

"For what?" Tsunade went back to shaping the rice, jamming a sour plum into the centre of her creation. "Diaper changes? Spit up duty? Help making the onigiri? I certainly don't need that, Mikoto's been doing a wonderful job already."

"She can't make onigiri, she isn't a year old yet."

Tsunade shot him a withering look, but her smile ruined the effect.

"I know that. It's a joke. Why don't you sit down? I'll get you some tea." Pushing to her feet, Tsunade padded to the counter where she switched the on electric jug and reached over to pluck a small, earthenware cup off the mug tree. It appeared the interior design certainly didn't improve the further it infected the house. "So..." Tsunade cleared her throat. "How are you feeling?"

Sasuke was in the middle of picking the grains out of his daughter's unruly bracken of hair. He shrugged. "Reasonable."

"Just reasonable?"

"I guess I'm glad I'm not locked away. Do I have you to thank for that?"

"It was a fair decision by many," Tsunade answered, diplomatically. "You don't remember?"

"I remember the start of it. I remember Utatane basically telling me to shove it. "Sasuke scowled. "A few people being assholes, but nothing I didn't anticipate."

"Do you remember Naruto?"

Sasuke stopped then. His hand dropped to brush Mikoto's chubby cheek while he stared at the mess on her tray. At length, he nodded. "Yeah. Sort of."

"You told me before the hearing that you weren't sure Naruto wasn't going to be much of a help because you gave him what he wanted," Tsunade pushed, lightly. "Whatever that meant. Then, when you saw him in the courtroom, you just shut down. We could barely get a word out of you."

Sasuke didn't comment, though he was given a pause to do so. Tsunade licked her lips.

"Sasuke?"

"I heard you," he replied, quietly. "What happened after that?"

"You just... stared into space for a while. You only reacted when Koharu made to take Mikoto. I think that surprised everyone. And I think-" Tsunade spooned tea into the teapot, methodically. "-I think everyone is now one hundred percent certain that Mikoto is yours."

"Even Naruto?"

Sasuke didn't look up. Tsunade opened her mouth to speak, but closed it again, unsure of what to
say. So, he still cared what Naruto thought, despite the obvious tension between them? Or was that fear? She wasn't sure. At length, she said:

"Sasuke… Did Naruto... do something to you?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Is… Is he Mikoto's father?"

Sasuke's head snapped around so fast, Tsunade could have sworn she heard his neck crack. "What the fuck?"

"I'm just… You reacted so strongly when he came in," Tsunade backpedaled, hurriedly. "When he came in and recognized you, it was almost immediate. And with the way you shut down, then later passed out I thought… I mean-"

"He's not her father. I haven't seen Naruto since the end of the war, not in person anyway. Those posters from that campaign thing he's part of? They don't count." Sasuke told her, reaching out to accept the cup of tea as she placed it in his hands. He took a draw of the steam, gratefully, and sighed. "He just reminded me of someone. Not her father."

"Do you remember her father?"

"Yeah, he was about this long," Sasuke held his hands out around waist-wide. "Made out of plastic. See through. Syringe at one end." Sasuke raised a brow. "That's all I know."

"You were inseminated." It wasn't a question, but it was something Tsunade had been only semi-certain was the method of at least one conception. But then Yakushi had dropped the Uchiha bomb and now she didn't know what to think. He had been almost positive the baby wasn't born from a frozen pop, and yet here was Sasuke telling her otherwise. She leaned in, crossing her legs under the table. "Weren't you? Mikoto was engineered."

Sasuke bounced his shoulders again, noncommittally. "If that's what you call it."

"By whom?"

"It doesn't matter," Sasuke blew on the tea, his eyes to the table.

"You said they were dead."

There was another pause. Mikoto cooed, holding out a handful of rice to Sasuke, then threw it on the table. Sasuke reached out, absently, combing the remainder out of her fingers. He didn't remember saying that at all, but then again he had quite the blank space that spanned at least a day; he could have missed anything. Said anything. It made him incredibly uncomfortable.

"Yeah. They're dead. That's all. So we don't have to worry about them."

"How are you sure?" Tsunade tried, but backed off when he shook his head, his long hair dusting his shoulders. His face was pinched, brows knit in response to the painful memory. She shouldn't have tried this soon. But… "Sasuke… We will need to know. At some point, soon, we'll need to know. Investigate. I mean, if there's any chance of their survival-"

"I know. But they're dead. If they weren't they would have caught me by now. They wouldn't have let me get as far as…" He let his voice peter out and stared at his hands. He couldn't be absolutely sure and he'd be stupid to take his safety for granted. But here? Now? The safety of the village
gave him some respite – offered him at least a little vacation from the terror that plagued him his entire journey. He wanted that break a little longer – just a tiny bit longer until he had to deal with reality. With what happened.

Noting the tense silence and the discomfort emanating from Sasuke, Tsunade let the subject slide. Instead she began clearing up the breakfast mess, placing some of the onigiri into a lunchbox and the rest into a fridge for the container. After that, she found a cloth and began cleaning the table. "Look, will you be alright for a couple of hours? I need to pick up a few things from the office—"

"I'm fine."

"Seriously, Sasuke. Don't give me your bullshit bravado when you know you need help. Fainting in court—"

"I didn't faint."

"-delerium? Confusion? I don't even think I should leave. Actually, I shouldn't. Maybe Shizune—"

Sasuke sighed. "Go. It's fine. I'll be ok for a while. Really. If this is my new home for a while, I'd like to get to know it a little. Check corners, under furniture. Ninja stuff." He actually meant the last part as something of a joke. Tsunade didn't laugh, but her expression lightened a little.

"Well… Alright," she nodded, agreeably. "I suppose. And after a rest you'll be in a better mood before your first session with the counselor."

"The what?" Sasuke blinked at her, thoroughly confused. Tsunade twisted the cloth in her hands.

"You must have… missed it. Uh. It's a condition of your probation. Well, house arrest, like you said," she squeezed the cloth a couple of times and hung it over the tap. "You stay in this apartment. You have a tracker - well, tomorrow you will. And you'll be seeing a counselor three times a week. It was two, but—"

"What for?"

"To talk. Speak your mind. Tell her things. She's a neutral party; by law, she can't tell anyone what you've told her, unless you've planned to harm someone intentionally."

Sasuke's face bore a mixture of incredulity and annoyance all at once. "You're asking a ninja to spill their thoughts to a complete stranger. Confide in someone they've never met before?"

"Well, she is court-appointed."

"So are Utatane and Mitokado. In fact, they're about as legit as it gets and I'd rather eat my own sword than tell them anything about anything."

"Well you're not talking to them, are you?" Tsunade replied. "Besides, you can just sit there, if you want. You don't have to say anything at all. You can let her talk to you if you like."

"This is a trial method in itself, isn't it?" Sasuke was unimpressed. No one knows what they're doing. No one knows what to do with me so you're all just trying to keep busy until you sort it out."

Tsunade let out a long breath before she folded her arms. "It's keeping you out of jail, Sasuke. It's keeping you and Mikoto together. Please, give it a shot. She's there to listen, you can tell her anything."
"I suppose I have a few choice words," Sasuke replied, darkly. He watched as Tsunade finished cleaning up and excused herself, promising to return soon. Then he was left in silence. Sasuke waited for a few moments, taking in the quiet of the room, the safety of the space before he rested his chin on his hand and looked over at his daughter, studying her. He'd done this so many times as they'd been travelling, he'd almost forgotten how much she'd grown. They'd barely missed a moment together, but it wasn't until he saw her interacting with someone else for longer than a few moments, that he realized how quickly she was becoming a little girl. Not just a baby, not just a sort of symbiote that clung to him and wailed when it was hungry, but an actual talking, thinking, interactive person. It seemed almost baffling how it all came together, but there she was.

Mikoto regarded him a moment, smiling widely, before she made a few noises and returned to squishing the remainder of the rice under her rounded palm. Sasuke sniffed, taking another sip of tea.

"So they let us go, huh?" He said, quietly. "Well, they didn't split us up. They didn't lock me away like I thought they would. Guess they're not all bastards."

"Ba," Mikoto added, sagely. Sasuke sighed. Several long minutes passed over them. Mikoto hummed and played. Sasuke watched her, soberly. At length he spoke again, and his voice was taut and quiet:

"I know you're different. I know... you weren't... You didn't start out the same as the other one, but... But I've never understood why you don't look anything like them. I don't know how babies work at all, but I thought there'd be a little part of you that wasn't me somewhere in there, at least. Maybe your hair wouldn't be straight. Or your eyes wouldn't be brown. You wouldn't look so much like Mom..."

He ran his hand through his bangs, feeling the weight of his words on his tongue. The room fell impossibly quiet. Even Mikoto stopped cooing to herself almost as though to listen.

"I wish you did." There was a crack in his voice as he spoke and he looked down at his hands, hating the way his words shook and his cheeks filled with heat. "I really fucking wish you did, sometimes, I-"

There was a noise. Sasuke stopped in mid-sentence, ears pricking to attention. He'd heard something. Someone. There's been movement outside the door: a small, hollow, shuffling sound. It could have been the shift of a foot, or a sweep of clothing – a bag or coat tails perhaps? It could have been guards. Tsunade hadn't mentioned the presence of any kind of chaperon, although it made sense he would have one or two. The council were pretty antsy, they'd have placed someone nearby to keep an eye on him, no doubt. Depending on their level of anxiety, it may have been ANBU or some unlucky and very bored Jounin. Maybe Nara or Aburame – someone with a little sense who'd managed to pull the short straw. Someone who might anticipate what he might try to do, regardless of the fact that he was sick, pregnant and generally apathetic about the whole idea of being under surveillance.

But then again, what if it wasn't a guard? What if it was someone else; something else? A good number of people knew he was here now, which meant a good number of people were forging their own ideas about him. What he'd said. What he'd done in the past. It was certainly true that some might not be so pleased he'd returned. They might want his silence. They might even pay for his silence.

With a mixture of curiosity and foreboding egging at him, Sasuke glanced toward Mikoto, making sure she was ready to grab if need be, then felt about the table for something to use as a weapon before he tiptoed over to the door. The peephole revealed nothing, just empty air – which was
almost as relieving as it was disappointing. Sasuke considered ignoring it after that, but then the noise came again and he knew, he just knew he wouldn't be able to rest until he found out who it was. He pulled open the door, slowly, warily, clutching his weapon in practiced fingers. There was no one there. Still, empty space. The sense of being watched remained, however, and the sound simply repeated – this time accompanied by a thin, almost apologetic whine. Sasuke blinked, his gaze dropping down to a pile of white fur collapsed outside the door, paws crossed, tail thumping lazily against the apartment wall.

"Akamaru?" Sasuke asked, thunderstruck. The Inuzuka Ninken offered him a huff in response and got to his feet, bowing his head a couple of times. It was weird not to have Kiba as an intermediary, but he could do well enough with simple gestures. Sasuke glanced at the teaspoon in his hand, guiltily and summoned all the nonchalance he possessed to try to slide it into his pyjama pocket without attracting any attention.

"Are you guarding me?"

Dogs couldn't exactly shrug but somehow Akamaru managed. Sasuke glanced around the door frame, looking out for the compound guards and frowned as he caught them standing to attention by the outside stairs.

"Yes or no." Sasuke answered. "I've been dicked around enough. Are you guarding me?"

*Yes.* Akamaru nodded. *Geez.*

"So… you're appointed by the council?"

*Nope.* A shake of the head.

"No? Uh…" Sasuke blinked. "Does… Kiba know you're here?"

*Nope.* The tail wagged this time. Akamaru's expression was something quite serious, but his enjoyment at having a mission all his own for once was clearly obvious. Sasuke nodded slowly.

"Are you here to kill me?"

It wasn't a joke, but Akamaru laughed anyway – or at least expressed the doggie equivalent. It was a kind of open-mouthed chuff; a series of small snorts that really did sound like a restrained human chuckle. He shook his head, no, then thumped his tail against the wall in a pattern of strokes which Sasuke, after a second, realized was code. *Fucking clever…*

"P. A. K. K-" he spelled out, his brows sinking in concentration. "Pakkun? Kakashi's ninken? He sent you?"

Akamaru severely wished he could wink at that point, but it really would have been a little too cavalier. Instead he just nodded and Sasuke eased back, leaning against the door frame. So. Pakkun. Kakashi's right hand – uh, paw. *That* was interesting, why would Pakkun, ergo Kakashi, have offered him a secondary guard if he was so blasé about Sasuke's safety? Was he actually worried? Then why didn't he lock him away? Unless…

Backing up a little, Sasuke held the door open, gesturing inside. "It looks suspicious if you're just hanging around out here; you should come in," he said. "Pretty sure you can smell well enough to sense someone coming through the door anyway."

It was also quite cold, and wasn't Akamaru getting on a bit now? Surely he was the canine equivalent of middle-aged and while he *was* a ninja and ninja were fine with completing their
missions in all kinds of weather, he didn't exactly have to be outside. Sasuke didn't really know what to think of Akamaru. He was Kiba's dog, his partner actually, and from what he could tell at the hearing, Kiba wanted him buried like a goddamn bone. But Kakashi trusted Pakkun, and Pakkun seemed to trust him enough to send him over. That fact in itself was intriguing.

Could it be that Kakashi was worried he might be taken out from the inside? Was he offering him a secret guard in case someone decided to take him out? For his silence? Surely the council were pissing themselves now that he'd returned. After all, he had ammunition against them. And Kakashi knew it. Was there more to his teacher's indifference that met the eye? He'd been positively stoic when Sasuke met him at first, but during the hearing things had been very different. The way he was leading some of the representatives. The way he just let Tsunade chide him openly? Sasuke wasn't so familiar with Tsunade's tendencies to speak her mind – not as much as the other teams – but he was fairly sure that Kakashi wouldn't have given her quite as much leeway if he'd wanted silence. What the hell was going on?

Akamaru hesitated for a moment, then padded inside, giving a small polite huff in thanks as he parked himself by the door, sitting to attention. Sasuke looked about, suddenly feeling a little self-conscious with his company. He'd… never had visitors before. When he thought about it, he'd never had his friends around, even when his parents were still alive. He hadn't… really had friends. Or guests. What did one do with a guest? A canine guest, no less. Offer him… uh… offer-

"Uh," Sasuke tried, unhelpfully. "Tsunade made onigiri… Think it's plum though… I don't know if you eat that. There's not really much else. Not yet. I guess she's gone to get food."

He linked his fingers, awkwardly. Tea? No, stupid, he's a dog – dogs don't drink tea. Or do they? He might? "There's… tea? No? No tea. Um…” Sasuke found himself spiraling into a pit of awkwardness, wondering what on earth to say next (if anything at all. Silence he could do), when Mikoto suddenly spotted the Large Soft Furry Object in the room and practically screamed from her high chair, reaching eager fingers toward him. Her face was the sheer manifest of glee. Sasuke couldn't resist a helpless smile as Akamaru jumped at the clamor

"Oh yeah, uh… This is Mikoto. She's not going to stop screaming until she gets a better look at you, hang on." Sasuke rolled his eyes and padded over to his daughter, helping her out of the chair before balancing her on his meager hip, walking her over to Akamaru. The ninken eyed her warily, knowing all too well how puppies could pinch and hurt, but once they got close and sat down, Mikoto held back, suddenly shy. Her thumb went in her mouth and she clung to Sasuke, leaning her head on his shoulder. "There. This is Akamaru. He's a shinobi just like me. Ok? You've seen him now."

Akamaru, surprised by her good behavior, pushed his nose a little closer, perking his ears up in a friendly manner. Mikoto hummed around her thumb, her big dark eyes fixated on that soft fur. Sasuke cleared his throat. Oh, he knew what she wanted. It was the same with every single animal they'd encountered. Clearly Mikoto had inherited some of his cousin's genes, he was always a bit of a soft touch with companion creatures. He motioned to Akamaru's coat, looking sheepish.

"I think she wants… uh… do you mind?" Pat. She wanted to pat him. Was it offensive of him to treat Akamaru like a dog? Surely he'd still like to be patted, wouldn't he? Pakkun always seemed to enjoy a scratch behind the ears, not that Sasuke offered, but Naruto had always obliged. Akamaru simply smiled and moved his head even closer, tipping it to the side a little to offer her the softest spot behind his ear. Sasuke reached forward and stroked his head lightly with the backs of his fingers, encouraging Mikoto to try if she wanted. After a few moments, she copied her mother, giggling to herself as she buried her pudgy fingers in the thick fur.
"Gently," Sasuke reminded her. "Gently. That's good. He's soft, isn't he? You like soft things." Like he had when he was little. He remembered begging his mother for a kitten, but she'd just smiled sadly and shook her head. No animals for him, he'd be too busy training. Like his brother. That's what father wanted. After sulking for the next few days, Itachi had cheered him up by taking him on one of his first missions to meet the Ninneko, introducing him to some of their feline allies. Back then they were just kids bombarded by a whole bunch of kittens, their mission being to entertain the youngest cats enough that they would take their naps on time. Now that he thought about it, Itachi had probably just made the focus of the visit up enough that Sasuke wouldn't feel guilty going against his father's wishes. But that's just how Itachi worked: the focus of anything he did - anything at all - was centered around his little brother's happiness. Always.

Sasuke smiled wanly, holding Mikoto as she petted Akamaru with the kind of unintentional brutality that only babies could imagine was a loving caress. However the Ninken simply put up with it, grumbling softly to himself. She was fine, she wasn't hurting him. And he was rather surprised at how polite Sasuke was. He'd always thought he was fairly stuck up and self-involved, but when he wasn't training, when he wasn't simply trying to be better than everyone else, he was actually rather pleasant. Quiet. Not yelling all the time, like Kiba, or talking far too much like Ino or the creepy Aburame kid. The house was warm and peaceful, apart from the awkward tension that hung in the air between them - that may soon clear once they got used to each other. And Mikoto was rather sweet and cheerful. Even after another light scolding for her over-enthusiastic petting, she didn't grouch, she simply toned down her excitement and patted him lightly with the tips of her fingers. Then she gave up and just buried her face in his fur, much to the embarrassment of her mother.

Hn, Akamaru thought as he found himself somewhat enjoying the very mundane, almost charming idiosyncrasies of the small, odd little family. Perhaps this job isn't going to be so bad after all?

Gaara was attending a school assembly, smiling faintly as the children of the Suna Academy stood on fidgeting feet in the amphitheater and sung him a song about bees, sunshine and the Shinobi way, when Naruto tumbled into the playground beyond, looking as though he'd brought half the desert with him. The song petered out into a dribble of words, a hundred pairs of eyes turning to look toward the sea saws with wide surprise. Naruto coughed out several buckets of sand and gave a half-hearted wave.

"Hey," he said, casually. "Thought I'd uh… pay a visit. Gaara, can we talk?"

"Uzumaki Naruto, everyone," Gaara covered smoothly. He was used to surprise visits from his lover – usually during the most inappropriate times. Naruto didn't seem to have developed an inner sense of the opportune and while Gaara could have written a book on polite excuses to remove oneself from company in order to deal with a randy fox, the publishing and press of such a volume would have been something of a challenge. "The Hero of the Shinobi World. How kind of him to come listen to your wonderful performance."

He clapped a few times, starting a round of applause and Naruto blushed, scratching at the back of his head.

"Aw thanks. Um… You guys were really good! Wish I could sing, I'm better at shouting." Your name. Naruto whispered as he moved up to stand beside the Kazekage. Gaara, I really need-

"And I'm afraid I have to cut my visit short today, it looks like I have some business to attend to." Gaara smiled ingratiatingly and gave his cheering audience another wave before he turned and strode out of the hall. A flash of orange, yellow and back trailed behind. Gaara didn't stop until he reached the Kazekage's apartments and when they did, Naruto's hands were down his pants before
he'd even opened the door.

"Naruto!"

"What?" Naruto replied, his breath heaving lust, his eyes full of need and a desperation that Gaara really didn't like. He stood back a little, his hands on his lover's wrists, stilling them.

"What happened?"

"What happened, what? Nothing! Nothing has to happen for me to want to come visit my boyfriend, right?" Naruto's eyes were busy drinking in Gaara's body beneath his light dressing of robes. Gaara shook his head.

"We never decided on boyfriends, Naruto, you know that." Gaara said, gently. "Something's different."

"Nothing's different! Wait, are you just playing hard to get? Is this-" He dropped his voice, whispering conspiratorially. "Is this roleplay?"

"No," Gaara didn't buy it. Naruto was covering. He always knew when Naruto was covering something. And then, it was always better to get to the point. "You look like… You did before. Broken. Shattered. "There's something else."

"What makes you think that?"

"Naruto."

Naruto stopped for a moment, his eyes on his hands. He licked his lips, coughing a little more dust before the facade eroded and he whispered. "Sasuke. Sasuke's back."

"Sasuke?" Gaara's pale eyes widened. "In Konoha? He actually returned?"

"Yeah."

"When? How? Do you know why?" Gaara pulled away entirely then, putting space between them though he continued to hold his lover's hands. Naruto didn't seem to notice.

"Dunno, dunno, dunno… Wait. No. Five weeks ago. And by foot, I guess. And who cares."

"You do."

"I don't." Naruto snorted, jerking his hands away. His retort was about as convincing as his lack of concern. "I don't care about him."

"Yes," Gaara disagreed, gently. "You do. A great deal. I know. I can tell. And maybe one day when you finally let me in on what happened between you two, you'll see it as well. But for now, Naruto, the silence is only hurting you."

"M'not hurt. There was a hearing, or something. More like a meeting really," Naruto began, stonily. He eased down to sit on the bed, looking at his fingers. "And he was there. And he was a girl and there were kids and… and I got mad. I fucking punched Kiba."

"You punched Kiba?" Gaara raised non-existent brows. "Why? I thought you were friends."

"I don't know! And I yelled at Sakura and then I… I just had to go. I had to run. Kurama got all worried and upset and wanted to talk but I just needed to move. So I came here."
"You ran here? Suna is two days by foot."

"Ten hours by run." Naruto closed his eyes. "Sort of. I used Dad's dagger for the last part. Ended up in Kusa. Had to try to remember the pattern back, stupid thing."

"Naruto, why did you hit Kiba?" Gaara said, deftly steering back to the conversation. Naruto was dodging the subject - his hackles spiking akimbo, rather like his hair. And the guilt… well that was seeping through almost visibly. The guilt was so strong it was tangible. Heavy. Naruto shrugged.

"I don't know. He was talking shit. Saying bad things. Bein' a dick."

"About you?"

"Fuck no."

"About Sasuke?"

"Yeah," Naruto rubbed his face with his hands.

"But you hate him," Gaara asked tentatively. When Naruto didn't answer, Gaara eased down next to him. "You don't hate him, do you."

"Damnit, no. Damnit. Shit. For all he's done I can't… I just can't listen to people talk shit about him. Kneejerk reaction, I guess. Weird huh? I want to hate him, I really do. Fuck… for what he did-"

"What did he do?" Gaara asked, sighing when, once again, Naruto shook his head. "It's painful. I get it. It's… something only someone like Sasuke can do. But Naruto, you have to understand, I can't help you if you don't give me some idea of the… I guess scope of Sasuke's actions. And you came here for help, this isn't your regular… appointment."

"No," Naruto picked at one of the band aids on his hand. "It's not. 'Cos the more I think about it, the more I'm not sure I should be mad or not. And then… he looked like that and…"

"Naruto?"

"Help. That's why he returned." Naruto murmured, numbly. "'Swhat Tsunade-baba said. He needed help. The others were all babbling and squabbling together like damn chickens in a coop, but he was just staring at me. The whole time. He was staring at me. Like he couldn't believe I was there. Like I didn't have a place there, I wasn't important enough… no," Naruto closed his eyes. "No that's not it."

"You keep thinking of him like you used to," Gaara said, carefully. "As though he still judges you like he did when you were both genin."

"Technically, he's still a genin-"

"Is that really relevant anymore?"

"No. It's not. I just can't help it… You know? After all that time. After he did actually acknowledge me, I just go back to that. I don't know…" Naruto paused, dropping his head. "He looked like he was in shock and I... I kinda was too. He had kids, Gaara. They were all saying they were his. With… Who knows. Orochimaru, probably."

"He did profess a specific interest in reviving his clan," Gaara said, slowly, trying to wrap his head
around the idea of Sasuke pregnant. "I don't- Are you sure?"

"You're asking me if I'm sure I saw a pregnant boy." Naruto shook his head slowly in disbelief. "Um. I don't know. He had a little girl with him, apparently. And he looked kinda fatter," he clapped his hands on his stomach. "Here. And I'm pretty sure he had b-..." He had the grace to blush and had the skin tone to transform that blush into a beet-red stain. "Y-y'know. Um... Yeah. He did look like a girl."

"I see," Gaara said, gently."Was he hurt?

"Hurt?"

"Were there bruises? Cuts?"

"N-not that I could see. I dunno..."

"Did anyone mention his condition much?" Gaara pressed. "He might have run because he was being harmed. He might be injured; might have been trying to protect the girl from the same fate. I know from what you've told me, Orochimaru was more interested in Sasuke's body than anyone and probably wouldn't dream of damaging his property. But why else would Sasuke leave him, if he was already prepared to bear his children? Had done so? You know, the last we've heard of Orochimaru was from a scout in Kumogakure, of all places – somewhere in the mountains. If Sasuke had been with him, he must have traveled for weeks to get back here. All that way and with an infant. She can't be older than five or six months, Sasuke has been gone for a little over a year so."

Gaara stopped as he felt Naruto's eyes on him, staring with wide disbelief. Perhaps mild horror, it was hard to tell. "What?"

"I-" Naruto started to say, then looked away, twisting his hands together. "I don't know."

"You didn't ask?"

"I didn't... think. I didn't..." Naruto closed his eyes. "I-I didn't think to ask. To even look. I didn't even consider that Sasuke could be hurt – he doesn't get hurt. He doesn't need help. He comes back here and he throws himself in the centre of all the attention again and-"

"It doesn't. Because it isn't. Because I didn't even ask if he was ok. I didn't even... I couldn't." Naruto continued, miserably, his hands tangling in his hair, shaking. Gaara reached over and stroked at the fine, soft wisps of blond at the back of his neck. He was listening. He'd always listen. "I couldn't... 'Cos he was staring at me and all I could think of was his damn face after... after he..."

"After what he did."

"Y-yeah. 'Cos I'm the biggest fucking coward ever. I'm a coward, Gaara. I couldn't face him. Not after that. Not after what he made me do."

"Is it that bad?" Gaara murmured. "After all this time, what could he have done to you that would make you feel this... conflicted?"

There was a laugh. It was strained, but Naruto lifted his head, his eyes red-rimmed. He wasn't crying, not exactly. His body had gone into the kind of shock that mountainous realization brought.
That weight. That pain. That horrible dichotomy between the need to care and the need to move on. He shook his head.

"If you're saying that now, then you obviously haven't been paying attention for the last, I dunno. Six years?"

"I'm just trying to understand," Gaara replied. "You love him. You do. But you're trying so hard to hate him and it's different from before. It's not that rivalry; it's not all the arguing you did as kids, it's something else. I don't get it."

Naruto nodded. He had to agree, he felt the same way, but even worse was the fact that he couldn't stop feeling it, no matter how hard he tried. It was ingrained. And he hated it. Swallowing hard a few times, Naruto waited until his nerves settled. When he spoke, his eyes were downcast and his voice was hoarse.

"Gaara? When you were in the Infinite Tsukiyomi, what did you see?"

"The… genjutsu?" Gaara blinked. "The one Madara cast? I don't really recall. It was peaceful. I was happy. I think Yashamaru was there. And my father. My mother perhaps… It just felt… warm. Complete."

"Sounds nice."

"It was…" Gaara shrugged. "But it was too perfect. Too much. Our counsellors here have been saying that it might be what life is like for those who have passed over. Those in the pure lands. Endless happiness. But for us, it's strange. Our souls haven't left our bodies, we feel the tug of reality. We need hardship, pain and sorrow to balance out that happiness, otherwise we begin to doubt."

"Then that genjutsu was shit." Naruto muttered. "And Sasuke's was way better."

Gaara stared at him. "Genjutsu? Is that what he did to you? I thought… I thought it was difficult to trap you with dojutsu because of Kurama's influence."

Naruto closed his eyes. "It is. But Sasuke's good. Better than good. 'Cos he made it so… He… He gave me what I wanted. It was a means to an end. A trick so that he could win the fight 'cos he knew, he damn well knew what would make me stop. But I don't think he anticipated how good I am at deflecting genjutsu, I don't think he knew that Kurama had an effect on it. And y'know… I don't think I realized how good he was at making them. So… "

Gaara blinked. "You… cancelled each other out?"

"No. I think that made it worse." Naruto finished. "He didn't give me what the Infinite Tsukiyomi gave everyone else. He didn't give me a perfect lie. He gave me a reality that I… I knew could be so possible. I still can't get it out of my head."

"While you two fought? He orchestrated the jutsu so that he won?"

"No," Naruto swallowed again. "More than win. He wanted me to give up. He wanted more than just the end of a fight, he wanted everything gone. He gave me what I wanted, he gave me what he knew I'd buy: He surrendered. We returned to the village. Things were perfect."

"And?" Gaara asked, tentatively. There had to be an 'and'; there was always an 'and'. Theirs were never straightforward battles; both were accustomed to fighting dirty - or at least creatively - when pushed. "And then what?"
Naruto nodded slowly. He bit his lip a couple of times. Turned a few sentences over in his head and when nothing seemed right, he simply replied:

"And then I killed him."

Forty minutes later Tsunade returned with an armload of groceries and several delivery receipts wedged in her bra for various different items: a crib, a changing table, a small bath – things that Mikoto would need sooner rather than later. Most were on loan from the hospital - they were worn but they would do. She doubted Sasuke would care particularly. In fact she'd wondered if he even knew how much equipment a baby required, considering he didn't seem to understand why the baby couldn't sleep with him, or why she needed her own chair at the table, or why he couldn't just change her on the bed. He probably could have, after all, these things weren't necessities. But they tended to be useful and Tsunade had no problem providing a few items just to make Sasuke's life a little of. At least she was cushioning the hardship a little, that was undoubtedly a more realistic approach rather than thinking she could solve all his problems with a few hired luxuries. The best she could hope to achieve at the moment was to try and make him comfortable. After that? Who knew? He was broken, like so many of them after the war. There had to be something more than just soothing the injuries. There had to be more than just bandage after no one had really discovered what.

Sighing, Tsunade pushed into the apartment, dumping the grocery bags on the counter before she turned and almost tripped over the giant ninken lying across the living room floor. He was at full stretch, and turned, giving her a doggie grin as she overcame her shock.

"Akamaru?" Tsunade exclaimed. "What the hell?

Akamaru just offered her an open-mouthed pant, eyes at half squint as he thumped his tail happily against the floor. Sasuke sat near his front paws holding Mikoto in his lap, watching as the baby stared fixedly at the giant dog in front of her.

"That was fast," he said, not looking up.

"W-what's going on? Why's Akamaru here?" Tsunade glanced about. "Did anyone else come with him? How'd he get clearance?"

"Don't know," Sasuke answered with a shrug. "Says he was sent by Pakkun. If that's got anything to do with Kakashi, I don't know – thought you might." He looked up at her. He looked tired, but somewhat at ease. He didn't seem worried about the Inuzuka at all, despite Kiba and Tsume's disdain of him. Tsunade frowned.

"He hasn't told me anything. But then again, how novel is that?" She rolled her eyes, making a mental note to murder Kakashi secretly and hide the body. "What are you doing?"

"He hides his head in his paws for a few seconds and then pushes it up again, really fast," Sasuke seemed mesmerized. "It drives her insane. Watch."

He motioned to Akamaru again, who obliged – hiding his snout behind his massive front paws, before he snapped his head up again, barking along with Mikoto, who let out a peal of delight. She waved her hands toward him and he let her bat at his muzzle, throwing Tsunade a side glance as if to say I taught her that.

Tsunade chuckled a little. "That's peek-a-boo. You've never seen that? Look, we can do it too…"

To demonstrate, Tsunade called for Mikoto's attention, then hunkered down in front of her,
covering her face with her palms. She waited for a few tense seconds, then whisked her hands aside swiftly, punctuating the movement with a "Boo!" On cue, Mikoto went berserk. Tsunade grinned triumphantly. "See?"

"I think Akamaru gets a better reaction," Sasuke replied, loyally, but he was smiling. He leaned down brushing Mikoto's hair with his fingers. "And I think," he addressed her. "I'd better teach you that people don't disappear just because their hands are in the way of their face."

"Oh she won't understand that yet," Tsunade told him, easing up to fish some fruit from the shopping bag. "Anyway, did you want to rest? You still have to see Ume later."

"That doesn't sound particularly taxing."

"Don't underestimate fatigue, Sasuke. You slept eighteen hours yesterday." Tsunade warned, arranging the fruit in a bowl. "And you've been in bed for most days before that, recuperating. You're still w- er… unwell. The only reason we're rushing is to keep Utatane and Mitokado off our backs."

Sasuke sighed. "Fine, we'll take a nap." He got to his feet with some difficulty, but, as always, refused help. Tsunade almost felt like she may as well not offer, but it was the polite thing to do. Besides, give it another month or two and he'd be happy for it. That belly was growing and pretty soon it wasn't going to offer much flexibility. He took Mikoto with him, bouncing her a little in his arms. When he got to the door, he paused, glancing behind him.

"Her name's Ume? This counselor person?"

"Yeah. She was the one holding Mikoto at the hearing. Takada Ume."

"And you made Umeboshi?"

Tsunade smiled, sheepishly. "I guess I did. Kind of funny though, right?"

"You're an idiot."

Tsunade exhaled patiently as Sasuke left the room. She glanced at Akamaru, raising her brows. "And you want in on this?"

_Quiet here. It's good._ Akamaru signed.

"Just that?" Tsunade seemed surprised. "I know Kiba's got a litter of new puppies that he's training, but seriously? You'd rather sit here with these two and play peek a boo?"

_Puppies bite, baby doesn't._

"Fair enough."

Chapter End Notes

_AN: Once again, sorry for the haphazard editing. Being so close to Christmas now, all my spare time is sloooowly starting to run out. Party season, I guess orz"
As always, thank you all so much for the kind words, hello to new readers and thanks to you all for putting up with my crazy notions!

Stay tuned next week for more Gaara and Naruto romance/drama/soft focus overacting and Sasuke's visit to the ol' Umeboshi!
Konoha, 7th March
Year of the Hare

I killed him.

"What?"

Gaara stopped short. He wasn't even sure if he asked a question or made a statement. It wasn't something Naruto did, killing Sasuke. It wasn't something Naruto could have possibly contemplated unless someone else put the words in his mouth and the blood on his hands. Naruto didn't kill Sasuke that just wasn't right.

But Naruto wasn't looking at him. His hands were shaking as though they remembered the blow, the deep, deep cut that took away something so precious. The shadow of the deed remained. Gaara tried again.

"Naruto…"

"I mean, he made me kill him." Naruto said. "He made me do it. I didn't want to - I'd never want to. He made me." Words became a bottleneck in his throat. "H-he gave me no other choice."

"And this was… in the genjutsu?" Gaara said, slowly, trying to get his bearings on the source of Naruto's grief. Naruto nodded.

(You lied to me. You lied. You did that. Is that what you wanted from me?)

(Is that all I am to you?)

"Yeah."

"But... that wasn't real."

Gaara, even while trying to remain as tactful as possible, still managed to fall a little short on the empathy Naruto sorely needed. It wasn't for lack of trying, it was just that pragmatism tended to get in the way - a trait practically branded into the shinobi system through sheer necessity alone. Naruto looked up through his brows, his gaze heavy. Strong shoulders stiffened, a marked jaw clenched.

(Blood was in his hair, in his eyes. All around it smelled, it stand. Sasuke's mouth was filled with it. Eyes red, but not from proud ability. From failure. That skin was cold)

(He cried so hard he thought his lungs would turn inside out)

(He suffocated on grief. The world fell down around him. Sasuke's blood salted the earth)

His hair hung in his eyes as he spoke: "You think that makes it any better? Ever been in genjutsu like that before? Not that nice one, not that dream. The real stuff; the bad stuff. I'm not that practiced at handling genjutsu – not the type that Sasuke used anyhow. You know when you're at that point after you've been fighting someone for hours: you're both completely tapped, you want to
stop but neither of you can? He still keeps swinging, you keep swinging - well past the exhaustion of your chakra. But you have to keep going because otherwise… otherwise, you're dead. I didn't want to be dead. I didn't want him to be dead. I was tired, Gaara. I was tired of fighting him and I was tired of having that hope crushed again and again. He got me when I was down in the worst way. It was real enough for me. That's what matters."

He paused, rubbing his hands together before he clutched them at his shirt, his whole body folding inward. He squeezed his eyes shut. "I can still feel the blood on my hands. I can still smell it. A-and… w-when you hold someone…and the warmth just flows out of them. It gets so cold. A-and you think that if you just keep calling their name, they'll stay with you. They won't go. If you just keep talking to them. B-but then they're gone and the hole that's left… the… emptiness."

Gaara nodded, thinking momentarily on his uncle and his death: the final coffin nail that changed him into the monster. "It's heavy," he murmured. "It weighs so much that it pulls everything down with it." Yashamaru's suicide had been the catalyst that forced him into madness through a dangerous mixture of guilt and pain and loss. Was Naruto on the edge has he'd been? Was Naruto in danger of losing his mind to grief? It had been nearly two years and yet the wound still seemed so fresh. "But Naruto, you have to think logically. It was a dream. A dream, nothing more."

"A dream?" Naruto closed his eyes. "Itachi put Sasuke into a genjutsu once. I saw it. He just leaned over and whispered at him and Sasuke screamed and then… that was it. He was in a coma for ages. When he came to, he just closed off. He was different. He wanted to fight me, then he went to Orochimaru without thinking twice about it. That's not a dream. That's not a dream at all. I-I lost him."

The tears had started to flow now. Uneven streams rolled down Naruto's tanned cheeks slowly, leaving trails in their wake that caught the light. He bit his lip, feeling the lump rise again and he gasped at the pressure of it. "I lost him, Gaara. And then… then things got worse. I think it was meant to end, but it didn't. It just went on and on and… And by the time it was over I couldn't tell what was real anymore. I just felt that loss repeating through me. That pain. Over and over, that pain in my heart, in my chest - everywhere."

Naruto pressed the heels of his hands into his cheeks, his back heaving with sobs that couldn't rise to the surface, that lay confused underneath. "And then I saw him alive and staring at me and I knew that he'd seen everything. Just fucking sat and watched my whole life fucking destroy itself. I didn't know what part was his idea and what part… I don't know, just happened, but I was angry. It hurt; everything hurt. Kurama got really mad and… and we kinda… I don't know. I just don't know; I don't remember. There was light. We kinda yelled for a bit - or I did, something. Then I blinked and then the world woke up and he was gone."

"Gone?"

Naruto shrugged, listlessly. "Maybe we ended the jutsu? Maybe something else happened. It's gone from my head. I just remember what it felt like. How it hurt. It's a blade," He patted his chest. "In here. And it's been here for so long I'm worried what'll happen when I pull it out."

"Naruto," Gaara said, slowly. "You're alive. He's alive. Whatever happened, you both survived the outcome. You're here. Maybe you should concentrate on that instead of regurgitating all these things that didn't happen."

"I should. But I told you, I'm a coward." Naruto swallowed hard. "Besides, something didn't happen. And it was my fault. I don't know what he did after he disappeared, I don't know how he ended up having kids, but it's my fault. It's totally my fault."
"Don't be ridiculous, how's Sasuke's... uh... condition your fault."

"It is."

"Why? How could you ever be held responsible?" Gaara frowned. "Unless... you-"

"Me?" Naruto said, not quite connecting the dots. "Unless I... what?"

"Slept with him."

"What?"

"Well," Gaara managed, awkwardly. "How else would a child come about, I mean-" He trailed off. The look on Naruto's face, that anger clouding like a thunderhead clouding over his guilt and grief was enough of an answer as the storm of acid that followed.

"Me? You think I'd do that to him? You think I... I-"

"No, I don't!" Gaara reconsidered, swiftly. "It was stupid."

"How could you say that? How could you even think that? They all said Orochimaru, but you're thinking it was me?"

"No, no of course not! Please calm down, Naruto. I jumped to conclusions, I didn't mean-"

"You're just like the rest of them!" Naruto flared. He was on his feet in an instant and although he seemed angry, his hands were palms out in front of him. In defence. "You're just like them! All of them! Jumping to conclusions. Pointing. Laughing behind my back! You're no better! You're just going to call me a monster and fucking throw me aside just like they used to!"

"Naruto, think about who you're talking to!" Gaara's eyes never left Naruto's face, he may as well have been taming a wild animal. "Why would I judge you? Me of all people. I'm not just another jinchuuriki, Naruto. We both know what it was like to be feared-"

"It's not enough! Don't you see? Nothing we do is enough! It's not "what it was like" it's "what it IS like". They'll never forget. We'll never live it down! It's only a matter of time-"

"Naruto, please!" Gaara stood, slowly. "That's not how things are anymore. You know that."

"They'll take it from me. All of this," Naruto choked. "Everything I fought for b-because I'm not what they think I am. I'm a coward, not a hero. I'm not normal. I'm not-"

Gaara stepped closer and let Naruto approach him if he wanted. It was best this way. He listened. He absorbed. He wasn't anything else other than a sounding board for Naruto's fear and grief. After all, it wasn't as though this was a new development. Naruto was exceptionally good at hiding the broken parts from the light of day, but inside he was a mess. A guilt-stricken, heartbroken mess – one that hadn't sorted itself out for years. And Sasuke, whether he saw him, heard about him, or even simply thought of him, thumbed those bruises every time. Naruto had never healed, he'd festered. And he'd festered being a bright, strong smile while he preached words of peace and strength. A complete walking, talking contradiction and it was wearing him down.

Naruto had never been the sensitive type, but Naruto never had so much to lose. Now that he did, things were different. Perhaps now he understood Sasuke more than he ever had. Perhaps that's why he was so torn apart. He hadn't exactly been wrong before, but he didn't quite grasp the scope of Sasuke's emotional black hole.
It took a while. Naruto was shaking, pacing. He stopped talking for a few minutes. Eventually he remembered Gaara was in the room and he came to a halt in front of him, his eyes on the floor. Gaara could have sworn he heard his heartbeat bouncing off the walls as he slowly, grudgingly began to calm down.

"Sorry," he muttered at length. Gaara watched him bite his fingernails. He nodded.

"It's ok."

"I just… I can't-"

"It's alright, I understand." Gaara told him, quietly. "If you want to stay here awhile, you're more than welcome. I'm sure we can make some kind of excuse."

"No, I have to go back. I wasn't supposed to leave." Naruto murmured. "It'll look bad."

"Who cares how it'll look?" Gaara said, but he knew the answer immediately. Naruto didn't even have to say a word.

"You know I have to."

Gaara padded closer. He reached up and gently pulled Naruto's miserable, chawed fingers away. Kissed them. "Talk to him, Naruto."

"I can't."

"Who the hell is going to stop you?"

"I can't… I can't. I can't do it. I can't even imagine what I'd say."

"You can't stay in this limbo, Naruto, you need to clear the air." Gaara said, brushing his fingers over his lover's face. "This guilt is driving you to your wits end, it's not healthy. I won't stand for it much longer."


"Naruto."

"Or, oh! Oh! Or what about this thing with us? With me… y'know, not being normal-"

"How are you not normal. Abnormal," Gaara corrected himself. "You're talking about our relationship?"

"Yeah, cos they don't expect that, do they? I'm Jiraiya's student, so I gotta be a ladies man like him, right? I'm not supposed to like dick, right? Should I apologize to all those girls who keep sending me letters and things, cos how stupid are they going to feel? And Sakura, for blowing her off every single time she wanted to get close just to make me fucking feel better?"

"There's nothing wrong with the way you feel, Naruto. You're not abnormal just because you choose to be with a man rather than a woman."
"Really? Does Suna know about your little boyfriend then? Do they know about me? Can't say I've seen you introduce me as anything other than your friend or Konoha's 'champion'. How come I'm not your 'partner' or your 'better half'? How come I don't get to be someone special to you?"

"You are special to me," Gaara explained, gently. "You mean very much to me, Naruto, you know that. My silence is at your request, remember? You were nervous about how people might react, seeing as we're both such public figures. And similarly I had asked that we refrain from specific titles because I didn't feel that it was the right time to commit."

"You didn't think I'd be loyal?"

"I love you." Gaara's patience was unending. Naruto calmed considerably, toeing the floor with his sandal as he simmered down. "I do. Sometimes I wish that we could just be together. That we could throw out the past and start again; just us. But that's not fair on you, it's not fair on me and it's not realistic."

"Why," Naruto was hesitant to ask; he already knew the answer.

"Because you still love him." Gaara said. "And you always will."

"No, I love you, right? That's what this is, right?"

"Love isn't straightforward, Naruto. And I'm not Sasuke; I can't be Sasuke. I can't be the fire to your wind. I have spent my whole life caring only for myself and it was thanks to you that I began to realize how wrong that was. I've channelled all my love, all my strength in one place for so long, I don't feel right doing it again. I love my village, Naruto. My people are precious to me. That's what comes first."

"Bully for you." Naruto sighed. "I don't know. He came back to our side. I thought… I was so sure… And then he turned again. Just like that; like it didn't mean anything. Like we didn't mean anything."

"Turned? Oh, his idea to start a revolution?" Gaara nodded slowly. "I'll agree, it was drastic and it certainly hasn't placed him in a favourable light. But everything about Sasuke is drastic. Every decision. Every choice he's made has always been what he thinks is the only one. The last ditch. His single option. He's single-minded that way, Naruto. But with what he's been through, I don't think I can really blame him."

"He was going to kill you."

"I didn't say I liked his plan; I'm just saying I understand it." Gaara said. "They would have been calculated assassinations. Removing those in power in order to overthrow the current regime, it makes sense. Killing you however-"

"I was the only person who could stop him." Naruto replied, quietly. "I thought he meant physically. But now, after what he did. After that I think he meant… well, everything. That's what makes this worse. I don't know how I feel about him anymore. I don't think anyone knows what to think of him anymore. But… But if I do still love him. If we do end up together…"

Gaara smiled. "There's an ideal that the world just doesn't follow and it's really time that should be addressed. You're not abnormal. You're Uzumaki Naruto. You're a hero. When you speak, people listen. Even if they don't like what you have to say. They listen."

"But… if I say enough stuff that they don't like, they'll stop listening." Naruto replied.
"Then you start doing," Gaara told him. "Show them. Prove your ideals. You've done it before. You can do it again."

"Funny," Naruto said, easing up to look out the window. He drew his arms across his ribs as he gazed out at Suna, feeling the heat lean against his skin. "We say that kind of thinking makes a leader. And it does. But that's exactly what Madara did too. I guess it's all in the delivery."

"Or the lack of body count."

"Yeah," Naruto said, resting his chin on his forearms. "Or something else. There's something else I'm missing. I dunno what it is yet, but there's something else I haven't thought of. I've come close to it - I know it's there. But I don't know how to make it work. And I think he does."

"Who?" Gaara frowned. Naruto turned, smiling at him sadly.

"Sasuke."

Three hours later Sasuke was fed, dressed and was sitting in Takada Ume's office, Mikoto on his knee and an expression of mild displeasure gracing his face. The room was dimly lit, windows half-covered by strange yellow curtains that looked about a half-century old, and dust hung in the air, catching the light. The carpet was thick shag pile and worn down in paths of traffic across its chocolate brown recline. The walls were papered, Northern-style, but the pattern was so old and faded it was hard to tell the design anymore. They could have been flowers, animals - they could have been decapitated heads for all Sasuke knew. He hoped it was the latter, that would have at least distracted from the rest of the décor.

There was an odd smell in the room. Mustiness, old plastic. He was reminded of the Tupperware containers his grandmother used to use to store leftovers in. He and Itachi hated them as they made the food taste like rubber. Another Northern Invention. Horrible. Sasuke wrinkled his nose.

Ume herself sat behind the desk, a solid lump of floral print and rosewater cologne. Her hair had been curled and sat on top of her head like a mop, bubbling up in a mass of thick black curls. Her eyes were turquoise lined as they'd been at the hearing and watered behind thick, horn-rimmed glasses. A gash of red lipstick split her thin, puckered lips, hardly improving the view. It looked even worse when she spoke.

"Hello Sasuke," she said, reaching out to offer her hand. Sasuke glared at it, then at her.

"Yes," he wasn't about to start with pleasantries. Ume raised her brows.

"It's nice to meet you."

"Are we supposed to be friends?" Sasuke said, shortly. Ume finally retracted the greeting, linking her fingers before her. The wound of a smile remained but her eyes were dark, calculating.

"No. We don't have to be anything. We're just two people having a conversation, that's all."

"Tsunade said I didn't have to talk."

"Well that's not entirely true, we do have to have a chat." Ume explained. "How short or how long that chat is, however, would be entirely dependent on you." Rounded shoulders attempted a shrug. The button at Ume's breast - the one clinging to its buttonhole as though its life depended on it -
sunk dangerously. "I have some information though, so I'm just going to go over that. I think you should know what I know."

"Doubt it's much."

"You doubt right." Ume agreed. "But let's see here. I have a file. You can look at this any time if you request it. Hmm… Well, I have Kabuto's notes. You're five months pregnant. It's a boy, mhm… Mikoto is nearly seven months old. Hn, they didn't muck about, did they? The people who took you."

"I never said anyone took me."

"No? So you did do this to yourself?"

"This is stupid."

"indeed." Ume ignore him. "So. What else… There's a statement here from the Hokage which outlines the events of the end of the war. You joined close to the end of the last battles with Uchiha Madara after a long period of estrangement. Shimura Danzo still had you classified as an S-Class criminal and two of your team mates had submitted reports confirming violence and hostility upon approaching you."

Sasuke just glared. Ume sniffed. "But somewhere along the line, you resurrected the four Kage using Edo Tensei and brought them to the front lines which effectively aided Konoha in more ways than one. In fact, when you look at the events afterward, bringing the Kage to the battlefield was really quite the deus ex machina for us." She leaned in a little. "Without the Fourth's help, Naruto would have surely died after the removal of his Biju."

Sasuke shrugged.

"You know, it's all written here. It's all recorded."

"Funny what people remember." Sasuke said, quietly. "Naruto was quick to take the credit."

"And you were quick to threaten Konoha again with your radical ideals of a revolution."

Sasuke's jaw snapped shut quickly. His eyes narrowed.

"I guess that's recorded too."

"Why? Do you regret what you said?" Ume asked. Sasuke shook his head.

"Of course not."

"Because… now what did you say-" Ume scanned the paper in front of her. "The system is broken?"

"Kakashi didn't leave anything out, did he?" Sasuke snorted. "Typical."

"They're facts, Sasuke. Whether they're incriminating or not relies on what you do with them." Ume put the paper down carefully on the table, smoothing it with her fat hands. "And that's what I'd like to ask you about. What you want to do with these facts?"

"Keep them in whatever drawer you pulled them out of," Sasuke replied, stubbornly. "There's no point in bringing all that shit up now."
"Why?"

"It doesn't matter. They want me locked away. They're going to find a way to do it."

"Even though you saved Konoha by proxy?"

"You're thinking too much into things. I didn't bring the Kage back to save the village. They decided that on their own." Sasuke pulled Mikoto a little closer to him. She was bored and was gumming her toy of plastic rings that she had acquired from Ume at the hearing. Wide, round eyes glanced out at the woman before them, and a long, slow thread of spit decorated her tee shirt. Sasuke wiped it away. "I just wanted answers. That's all."

"I think you're missing things out."

"I think I don't care. I don't want to be a hero. I never wanted to be a hero," Sasuke scowled. "And I don't want to play that card for any kind of defense."

Ume sat back a little. "You'll need *some* sort of defense if you want to keep your daughter. And your son. You want to keep them, don't you?"

Sasuke shrugged again. Ume noticed that he held the child a little closer.

"I want to help you, Sasuke-"

"I didn't ask you to-"

"-and I don't give a shit about that." Ume finished, sharply. She paused a moment, taking the time to gaze about the room mysteriously, before she leaned back in her chair and tapped her fingernails on the edge of her desk. "Now, I've listened in on some of the other counselors," she continued. "I've done courses. I've done the paperwork. According to them, I'm not supposed to sit here and tell you what I think; that's not how it works. It's about you, you see. You're supposed to talk about you."

The snort that issued from Sasuke was louder than he meant it to be. Ume didn't bat an eye.

"And that's horse shit. You're Shinobi - these guidelines were built off a system tested and measured on civilians. You can't expect them to help us relate to a group of people that risk their lives daily for the sake of others. People who follow the Shinobi way: the idea that a person who succeeds is one who helps themselves. One who values strength above all else. One who swallows injury. One who views pain as weakness. It doesn't work like that. Round peg, square hole."

She tapped her fingers again. Her nails, painted cerulean to somewhat match her make up, left a hollow sound reverberate throughout the room. Mikoto watched her like a hawk. Same as her mother.

"Some people can talk to a blank page just fine, but ninja? Ninja are always suspecting something." Ume told them both. "Ninja are always aware of who they're talking to, looking for tells, looking for the truth behind words. So I'm giving you that truth straight up. That way, you know everything about me, and I know everything about you. How does that sound?"

"So you're a rebel," Sasuke fought the urge to roll his eyes. "Good for you."

"And I can see we're going to get on splendidly." Ume parried.

"You're an idiot."
Ume smiled a little.

"And you're still talking."

It was early evening when Sasuke turned in, exhausted after a long day. From Ume's annoying appointment he'd been hoisted over to the hospital, handed a tome of paperwork to wade through, grilled thoroughly on Mikoto's health; her diet and eating habits, his diet and eating habits, illnesses and ailments and almost everything he could think of in his entire medical history before he was asked to lie on the examination table for a physical. That's where things went completely downhill. The response was a flat no. A digging in of claws. Sasuke hissed at any coercing the medical staff attempted, clutched his daughter tighter when they attempted to pry her free. By the time Tsunade arrived to pick him up, Sasuke had barricaded himself behind a chair and had landed several choice hits at the examining doctor's head with a barrage of pamphlets and finally a waste paper basket which had let a rather prominent bump. Tsunade didn't even have the heart to chide him. In fact, she was more impressed by his aim.

He would have to comply eventually, she'd told him. She couldn't remain his medic, not without interrupting her ability to testify for him. Kakashi had, frustratingly, ordered Sasuke to be seen by a regular doctor – something which the council seemed to be backing enthusiastically. Tsunade wondered if there were trying to separate her from Sasuke, which, in a passive-aggressive way, would have left him with fewer people to confide in. Yet Kakashi didn't bat an eye when she reported Akamaru's presence, and only asked if she needed some dog food, because he had plenty to spare while Buru was away. There was no mention of Pakkun's involvement in Akamaru's implementation, but Tsunade was becoming terribly suspicious that the Rokudaime had more plans up his sleeve than he was letting on.

She said nothing though, as she walked Sasuke back the his apartment, taking care to hover beside him on the stairs. He grumbled at the help, but she took Mikoto anyway and walked behind him, watching closely as he favoured his left leg over his right. His posture was changing and the weight of the growing child played on his small frame. He'd really have to learn to stop grouching – pretty soon he was going to need all the help he could get.

Once inside the apartment: shoes off, baby fed, the pair settled down and let time slide by as the evening stretched into darkness. Sasuke ate a meagre dinner, ignoring the plum onigiri with thinly veiled disdain. Tsunade offered to take Mikoto and give her a final meal before bed while Sasuke showered. Naturally Sasuke grumped about it, but Tsunade insisted. He needed a break from being a mother; even if it was only for a few minutes to wash. It was important. Further to this notion, Tsunade had managed to erect the cot that afternoon, intent on introducing separate sleeping spaces to allow Sasuke a better rest. It was clear that Sasuke had been faring much better with a full eight hours or more cushioning the weight of his illness. And Mikoto still woke a few times a night. She didn't want them moving backwards now that Sasuke had started to mend.

Of course, Sasuke wasn't particularly keen on the idea and broadcast his opinion through a long tennis match of silences, short sentences and ugly looks. He finally caved, however reluctantly, and let Tsunade show him how to put Mikoto down to sleep. In retaliation the drip was ignored and the sleeping meds were refused, but there was a push and pull for everything. Tsunade made herself comfortable on the couch as Sasuke settled into bed, taking her work with her. The couch wasn't her futon at all, but it was comfortable enough. She waited in silence, listening to the sound of her two charges resting. Akamaru stretched out on the floor, his nose close to the crack under the front door, listening, sensing. So Pakkun had enlisted his help, huh? He didn't say much else about it,
but Pakkun wasn't one to act on his own. What was Kakashi doing?

Don't take this away from me. Not now.

What the hell had that meant? And what was this odd façade he'd been building – this kind of hot/cold support for his ex-student? Allowing him his own apartment and limited freedom, yet requesting that he use of public facilities, care, counselling. The whole thing reeked of clumsily handled espionage, but strangely enough, that seemed to make it less suspicious. The was the beauty of it. With Kakashi, people expected a ninja, not a politician. But what if Kakashi had his own agenda too?

Tsunade pushed the end of her pen into the corner of her mouth and chewed it, thoughtfully.

For all their power, Shinobi villages tended to be particularly narrow-focused and Konoha was no exception. The village suffered a from a heavily myopic history and no one had ever really tackled the issues of the past until Naruto came along. The wars of the past had implemented a need to become a little more forward-thinking and when Konoha had attained peace (of a kind), Hiruzen had wallowed in it. He cared, but he didn't care particularly far past his own seat on the council and Tsunade had to agree, she hadn't done much better. She'd tried, but it wasn't exactly the same thing. She'd never wanted to be a leader, she was much better in a supporting role - it suited her.

Kakashi on the other hand? Kakashi was a wild card that no one knew they had in their deck. Kakashi had achieved more behind a screen of apathy and nonchalance than any other Kage had on a soapbox or a battleground, swathed in banners and colours. Kakashi had made the decision to push Naruto forward as an ambassador, utilizing his hero status and popularity to introduce the idea of the Shinobi union throughout the world. Inspire peace. He'd put more chunin and young Jounin in positions of importance. While Hiruzen had attempted to protect and nurture the future generations of ninja, Kakashi made conscious decisions to implement them where their skills and talents were proven to be beneficial. Shikamaru was being groomed as the new face of Konoha at the Shinobi Union Council. Tenten and Lee had both taken on roles in organizing the chunin exams, with the former often travelling with Naruto in order to promote the exams in other villages, encouraging greater participation. Sakura had risen in the ranks at Konoha hospital with Ino following close behind – working part time at her family's flower shop. They weren't kids anymore, but they weren't solely ninja taking missions either. Hiruzen's nin, Tsunade's nin - they had been soldiers, bodyguards, hired muscle. Kakashi's shinobi were rounded members of society.

The ninja of the past wore masks; the new protectors of Konoha had faces.

Kakashi wasn't playing a short game. He was lining up positions. And it was then that Tsunade realized she was on the board, just as anyone else was. And she knew exactly who she was facing; the question was, who else was on her team? Who else would support Sasuke? Then it dawned on her: That's exactly what he was trying to find out.

Well, she could help with that. Sasuke had a shell that was thick, but it was changing. It was worth watching. It was something to learn from.

Clever bastard.

Tsunade started writing on her ledger, making notes here and there. Guessing. Perusing. The house was quiet - the only sound came from Akamaru's tail when it shifted against the floor, or the scrape of her pen against the paper. At eight o'clock, Mikoto wailed for her mother. Tsunade made to comfort her and ended up with an elbow to the ribs from Sasuke, as he nudged her aside - sleep mussed, but spiky as ever. Tsunade backed off. Sasuke put Mikoto back in the cot when she'd calmed. Push and pull; push and pull.
At nine, Akamaru excused himself to head back to the Inuzuka compound. He seemed somewhat reluctant to go, and even padded in to check on his charges before he left.

At ten, Sasuke fetched a glass of water from the kitchen. He didn't look at her.

At ten-thirty, Tsunade heard Sasuke snoring lightly and smiled to herself. Well, that meant he was asleep, finally. Good. She returned to writing, pausing only to watch the flicker of the electric light as a small surge pulsed through it with an ambient fuzz.

Sleep. Yes. Sasuke could sleep. Or at least, he could close his eyes and let his body rest which was exactly what he'd been doing for the past decade since the luxury of true and uninhibited sleep passed with the death of his parents.

Sasuke dreamed. His dreams were never good. He wanted them to be - he often wondered what it was like not to wake in the middle of the night, sweat-soaked, heart racing as he tumbled off the edge of a nightmare back into reality. He'd dreamed very rarely since his time in Tsunade's charge – the meds had a lot to do with that, no doubt. They pushed him into a deeper slumber, bypassing the stimuli that tickled his subconscious and encouraged the strange and usually frightening dreams that used to plague him and that was a relief in itself, however synthetic.

Tonight, though. Tonight Sasuke did dream. Sasuke dreamed of a clear day. Of a windswept hillside. Nodding grass and bright flowers and trees surrounding a small mountain cabin. Friendly smoke drifted lazily from a cooking fire. The sounds of children playing filtered through the air. Sasuke himself sat on the porch of the cabin, gazing out at the field beyond. He felt strong. Warm. The wisps of his hair caught in the breeze and ticked his jawline – it was short again – he could feel the wind picking up his cowlick tufts at the back. He liked it. His mother had liked it, which was she she kept it short. The memory warmed him and he relaxed a little, threading his arms inside his kimono of cool silk.

His feet were bare. The wood was smooth beneath his toes and sent a buzz of pleasant feeling up through his soles to his ankles. In the distance he spotted children, three of them. Two were dark and fair, one towheaded and tanned. He couldn't see their faces, but he guessed from their appearance that the first two were his daughter and son. The blond could have been anyone. A friend, perhaps? He wasn't sure. He called his daughter's name, but they were too far away to hear – playing around a large tree with low hanging branches.

There was a creak and a footfall on the porch beside him. Then:

"They still out there? You'd think we had monkeys, not children."

Naruto appeared beside him, suddenly, standing with his hands at his sides. He seemed taller. His hair was longer. Sasuke stared at it. Naruto grinned. "At least it's a nice day."

"Not it isn't," Sasuke replied, strangely hollow. "A storm's coming."

"There's no storm."

"There is. I can smell it on the wind." Sasuke insisted, nodding to the sky. "It's fine out now; it's going to rain later. We'd better get them inside."

"No. The clouds have passed. It's clear now." Naruto told him. "It's gonna be clear for a long time. C'mon, you like it. You're just not used to the light."

"Hn," Sasuke grumbled, but he was smiling, finally. "Maybe."
"Should leave them out there. Let them play. They need to play." Naruto mused. He watched them a moment longer before leaning in, pressing his lips to Sasuke's. Warmth flowed between them. Longing. Sasuke tasted salt in the kiss; from ramen, probably. Miso. Naruto smelled like sunshine and grass. He smelled like home. He was home. For a moment, Sasuke was lost. He felt Naruto close, felt the heat of him. His fingers ached to slide into that long hair. He wanted to shed the layers of their clothes. He wanted nothing else between them, but them. He wanted to sink back into his mind and hold his soul against his chest - feel that love and that light pulsing through him. He wanted. He needed.

Sasuke needed-

But Naruto pulled away. And when he stood up again, straightening, he'd changed. He was wearing Sasuke's old uniform from his time with Orochimaru: the white haori, the obi. He held the obijime in his hands with the rest looped about his arm. He petted the end of it like a snake, absently.

"There's a storm coming," he said. "We'd better prepare."

"I thought you said it was clear." Sasuke frowned. "Didn't we just-"

"No. There's a storm. A big one. A monster. No one's safe. No one's gonna be able to hide." He weighed Sasuke's belt in his hands now, as though testing the strength of it. Blue eyes slowly melted into red. Naruto blinked. He was crying. "It's a storm that'll find you. It's a storm that'll raze everything."

"Naruto, there's nothing in the sky." Sasuke reasoned, glancing upward. "Nothing there. Not even a cloud. Nothing."

"That's right," Naruto whispered. "There's nothing is there?"

But that rope was in his hands and Sasuke remembered that thump, that horrible, hollow thump of bare heels against the wood and the scrape of toe nails on floorboards. He remembered hearing the last gasp of breath from his mother's mouth and he never expected to hear the same sound from-

There's nothing, is there.

And the noose.

It swung.

Naruto was heading toward the children.

The tree bough creaked, sanity snapped.

It swung.

It swung.

Sasuke didn't scream when he woke but he could feel his daughter's name on his tongue sitting heavy and wet. He'd never gotten out of bed so fast before, he almost defied gravity. Hands rested on the edge of the cot, his heart jackhammering his ribs, eyes wide, fear draining out of his pores in long cold streams of sweat.

But the baby simply yawned and sucked her thumb, mumbling to herself a little. Sasuke knew he probably shouldn't wake her, but he couldn't help himself
and she was in his arms in a second. He didn't hug her so much as clung to her fervently, desperately trying to wedge that dream out of his mind. It was all too real. It was too much for him to remember. He couldn't do that again – he'd pushed too far that time. No wonder Naruto looked at him like that. No wonder he hated him. He'd been trying to put distance between them, trying to convince him to forget. He may as well have killed him like he'd originally intended.

*But I couldn't do that either, could I? And so we just kept throwing punches, and throwing out options until I did the only thing I could think of.*

He *should* have killed him in the same vein that Itachi should have killed Sasuke: it would have been far less cruel.

*He saw it. I saw it. I didn't think it would ever come to that. I never thought it would come to that.*

But Mikoto wiggled in his arms and groaned. It was too hot being squeezed like that; she needed space, she wanted to sleep. Sasuke eased back a little, and finally, after a moment spent checking her again, he gently placed her back in her cot. She smiled at him, sleepily as she settled, his finger caught in her little vice-like grip.

"Ma,"

Sasuke blinked. His eyes were rimmed with cold sweat or tears or whatever. Weird.

"I'm not 'Ma', I'm Sasuke. There'll be no 'Ma'," Sasuke said, quietly. He sniffed again, then reached over, tracing his fingers along the curve of her cheek, stroking it lightly. "I can't be a Ma. Sorry, Mikoto. I'm not a mother. I just had you. That's all. I'm just a—"*means to an end? A machine? An incubator?*  

*(But don't you love her?)*

Sasuke withdrew his hand, slowly, and took a few deep breaths. Did he love them? These children? These… products? His hands, now empty, slid down his changed body to his stomach and he leaned backward slightly, curving his spine. He pushed up the tee shirt he'd been given to sleep in and touched his belly with tentative fingers. He'd grown. A *lot*. How hadn't he noticed? He'd felt the weight, sure, he'd observed the lack of movement, but now he was starting to show and it was sobering. What only seemed to be a thickening of his middle for months was now a stout, sturdy curve that had developed, pushing his belly out into a bump. Soon he'd be that huge waddling mess he'd been the first time. It hadn't been much fun then. He doubted a reprise was going to be any better.

Fingers tapped over the taut skin, and he drew in a long breath as a flutter of movement answered. *So. It had started moving. He'd started moving. Pretty soon he wouldn't be able to put it off. Soon he'd be a constant reminder. Already Naruto had started it, shoving that damn face back into his mind – forcing him to recall the times when that bastard worn his friend's guises, just to fuck with him. His cousin's face.*

His brother's.

And he'd been damn good at it too.

Sasuke swallowed hard, and took another breath, pressing his palm in a little more tightly. That bastard. Yes. He was still there, behind his eyelids. Still there waiting in silence – all white teeth and pale skin. A wild, thick surf of chestnut brown framed an angular face. Strong cheekbones
caught the light and his chin was rough with shadow. Eyes that were a murky green, studded in the
centre with a copper brown that gave them something of a reddish tinge, a predatory glint, fixed on
him. Always him.

There was his worry. There was his constant fear. What if his son ended up looking like his real
father? Like that man. He'd been lucky with Mikoto, but she'd been different. This one? This one
was a product of what that man had done to him. The outcome of violence, pain. Suffering. That
man had taken so much from him; he didn't know if a reminder of that would leave him quite sane.

But he relented to ignorance for now and Sasuke closed his eyes, dropping his shirt. He touched
Mikoto's hand, lightly, feeling her soft skin, her delicate, fingers. She was helpless without him.
And she'd almost been crushed like the rest. Killed. And if she hadn't been, what then? Sold to the
highest bidder? Trained to turn against her family, her clan? Would she have even been Uchiha? Or
just a weapon, manipulated and drilled to kill, nothing more.

Like a ninja
Like a monster.

Something Naruto could have been. But Naruto was saved. It took far too fucking long and the kid
was messed up for years, but he'd been saved by people who cared about him.

_Loved him._

Sasuke closed his eyes, and took a breath. Without him, she would have been hurt, tortured. She
wouldn't have had a life. He wasn't promising much, but he'd brought her safety. He'd brought her
choices. And he owed her the truth. He owed himself the truth. And Tsunade… she'd been good to
him. She'd tried. He couldn't afford to lose that now. Stroking his daughter's head, touching her
cheek one last time, he wandered out of the bedroom and into the lounge, standing in front of
Tsunade as she relaxed on the futon, making notes on a small legal pad. Her eyes rolled up slowly.
She wasn't used to Sasuke lingering.

"Can't sleep?" She asked, warily. "Something hurt?"

Sasuke swallowed. He moved his mouth several times. His hands were in his pyjama pockets, then
crossed about his chest, then resting on the rise of his stomach. His eyes were glassy and for a
moment, Tsunade thought he was sleepwalking.

"Sas-"

"They called themselves the Kakkou," he said, suddenly. Tsunade blinked.

"Kakkou? Like the bird?"

"There were about… I don't know… twenty of them?" Sasuke ignored the question, though it
wasn't entirely certain he'd even heard it. His voice rolled on, mechanical. Stiff. "They were based
in the Northern mountains, just over from Tsuchigakure. I don't know where they were from
originally. They had weird names and heavy accents. I couldn't understand them most of the time,
but that didn't matter to them. They just made me do what they wanted me to do. They didn't even
really look at me."

Tsunade watched, quietly, not wanting to interrupt, not wanting to do anything at all save listen.
She placed the legal pad on the futon beside her and folded her hands in her lap. Her eyes never left
Sasuke's face. Sasuke spoke. He'd never spoken so much before, not at one time. But once he
started, it was there. It was weird, it felt strange. But it was there. And someone was _listening._
"I remember... bits and pieces. Not much early on; it's clearer later, when Mikoto was due. I was... out of it for a long time," Sasuke continued. "They used all sorts of sedatives, I guess. I remember chanting. I remember guys in robes. They had long beards, I think. I don't know... They were that ones who all the jutsu. They used kata, but they called them something else. Runes. They used a lot of smoke and herbs and... Pungent smelling stuff. I don't really remember details. I remember pain. I remember getting dragged around a lot – for old guys, they were pretty strong. I felt needles, stitches. I felt so much of it, but at the same time, nothing at all and I... I..." Sasuke closed his eyes, drawing in a shaking breath.

Tsunade leaned forward, holding out her hand. "Do you want to come and sit down?"

He didn't answer. "The ones who found me to start with, they were different. Spoke differently, even looked pretty different – they were younger. Ripped. They looked like they could tear trees in half and when I fought them – tried to, anyway - they fought... strangely. A different method from anything I've seen before; and I've studied plenty of styles. They were just... strength. Brutality. No finesse, just swing after swing."

He paused, threading his fingers together and he looked at the floor for a moment as he considered his words. "I think they died. I think. The earthquake tipped their entire base inward. It was at the centre of a mountain and it caved in. You should have seen it – girders just bent like noodles. Boulders rained down from the ceiling. The lights went out first and for the most part it was pitch black and the noise. That noise of the earth groaning and scraping." Sasuke sounded almost fascinated. It was only the lack of colour in his face and the cold sweat on his brow that gave away his true feelings; the trauma he felt at recalling such memories. He licked his lips again. "I took out a few as I escaped. The younger guys. They were freaking out. They had torches but they weren't doing them any good. Panic changes things. Fear knocks out your system. People take their own spaces for granted. It's only when you have to remember; when you make a point of logging steps, noting distances. Smells. Temperatures. That's what helps when everything has turned to shit. It was still hard, though. I still don't know how I made it."

"But you did," Tsunade said, gently. "You and your daughter. That's all you need to focus on, Sasuke. You made it, you're safe. That's all that matters."

Sasuke shook his head. He was still plagued by that floaty, dreamlike moment, as though he wasn't entirely sure he was there. As though half of him still remained in bed, sleeping, while the rest of him dealt with the horrible truth. It was a conscious nightmare. A living terror.

"You don't understand," he said. "There was a nursery. I remember it. They take you there to feed the babies, because they need you to. I'd been there before, I knew the place. In the quake it had half collapsed. The other kids they... they were already gone. I saw... S-saw them. It was" Just like that night. I almost caught myself looking for nii-san. I almost thought I was seven again. "-saw the mothers dead. The bastards dead too. And she was crying for me. She knew when I came in, she knew it was me. B-but-" And that's when the tears came. He'd been holding up so well, so strong. But the gloss in his eyes grew heavy and spilled, sending hot tears plummeting down his thin cheeks. He took a ragged breath. "S-she was an afterthought. I didn't even mean to go that way. I could only estimate where the exits were – I didn't know for sure – but the way I was headed had been blocked by rubble so I backtracked and took another route. I didn't mean to pass that way. I didn't make the decision to go and get her, it just happened. I didn't know her. I didn't even think of her as mine, she was just this thing that... that came out of me and... b-but I hadn't taken her then she'd... She would have been..."

His voice broke. Tsunade made to stand, but he shook his head again. It was better this way. "She didn't look like me; she didn't look like anything really. I didn't know her, I didn't love her. But I
knew she was mine. She was made by them, but she was mine. And I wasn't going to let them have that over on me. If I could take anything from them, I'd take her."

Tsunade nodded, not taking her eyes off her charge. She felt for him, her heart went out to him. It was a horrific situation, knowing that one simple decision – one single change of direction in the mad panic of his escape and his daughter would never have been. Would he have regretted it later, after the birth of his son? Would it have been even worse for him? Or would he have felt less connected to his second child, having had no experience bonding with the first? He might not have even found the need to return to Konoha without the drive to protect his daughter. He might never have come back.

"And you did. And she's here. That's all you need to worry about now, Sasuke."

"No…" And Sasuke's voice was sticky with loathing. "He could come back."

"He?" But Tsunade understood. She swallowed. "You said that they were all dead. They were killed in the disaster. But you're not sure, are you? You want to be, but you're not that naive."

"I thought they all died. No one followed me. And they would have, they would have chased me down. He would have." Sasuke motioned to his stomach, his voice dropping. "This one's…"

"Father." Tsunade licked her lips, the moment weighed on her. She felt like she was under water. "You son… He's different, isn't he? He's not the same as Mikoto…” How else was she supposed to ask? How could she even breach the subject? She knew. She wanted to help him so much, but at the same time, how could she? How could she even attempt to relate?

And yet Sasuke only nodded.

"He took some sort of umbrage to me, I don't know why. He kept saying I was 'the favourite', but I couldn't see how – I wasn't treated any better than anyone else. But he'd find ways to get at me. Steal me out of my cell. He'd find ways to torture me. Use faces of people I knew. And I'm worried… Because I think he might still be out there. I don't think something like an earthquake would have stopped him. I don't think anything could."

But he couldn't face the reality of it until now. It was too painful, too much. It was one of the few things that frightened him. It was the source of those nightmares, that man. Tsunade's hand hadn't dropped and her mind hadn't yet begun to digest the logistics of it: Mikoto inseminated, possibly using samples from Uchiha Shisui. Sasuke's unborn a product of rape which must have occurred in the prison he was being held. Perhaps this man was a guard? Someone in charge? How could a system so careful, so precise be interrupted by some… what? Revenge-seeking madman? Surely they kept a closer eye on their subjects? Why hadn't the baby been aborted if they preferred to control the conception – which they must have, considering Mikoto's genes. She was the perfect Uchiha, at least, that's what Kabuto said.

"I should have said something earlier," Sasuke continued, quietly. "I should have said at that stupid hearing. I thought they were gone, you don't understand. I saw so many of them dead. Them and their stupid uniforms – never looked better than when they were covered in their own blood. I wanted to see him crushed. I wanted to split his throat." He swallowed hard, his arms snaking around his body, clenching his ribs. "More than anything, I wanted to see something else in his eyes. I wanted him to be scared. But he wasn't there. And I keep thinking I've seen him. I keep thinking that every step I take forward, he's one behind. Hiding in my shadow. Just waiting for the right moment. I know he is."

Sasuke paused a moment to think, before he slowly moved to the couch and sat down beside
Tsunade. Soon she realized why; he was shaking so badly his knees probably couldn't have help him up any more. Slowly, carefully she took his hand and held it in her own, firmly. He let her.

"He was tall. About… maybe half a head taller than Kakashi and bigger. Muscular, like that other jinchuuriki. That Bee guy. Brown hair, pretty wild looking. Thin face, defined. Shaved jaw. He had green eyes. He was good at henge. Really good. And if he's still out there, I don't know what'll give him away. I don't know how their version of jutsu worked; I don't know how long he can hold a henge for – he'd flick it on and off just to haunt me. Just because he thought he could. I don't know how well he can hide. He had a lot of scars, but nothing one the face – nothing that he couldn't cover."

Sasuke looked at his hands, his fingers threaded in with Tsunade's. They were warm now, they used to be cold. They used to be too thin, tinged purple on the pads and around the nail bed. They used to be damaged, held together with bandages and rags. Nails split and bleeding. The skin rough and cracked. First, those hands bore the physical tattoos of a ninja; they were strong, calloused. They were channels for chakra, powerful. Then, when that chakra was taken from him, they became weak. The strength fled. They were bruised. Trembling. Hands that clawed at walls, gripped bars and shook. And now? Now they were healing. The wounds were mending, the colour returning to them. They'd learned to be gentle again, they held skin and flesh that was softer and weaker than his own and they protected it. They protected and were protected. Sasuke drew a breath.

"The only thing that I can think that might expose him is the accent. He'd run words together. Leave things out. Speak too formally. He'd laugh when I tried to pronounce his name; he liked to make me do it because he thought it was funny. I had to settle on a shorter version of it in the end, but he didn't seem to care. The others were pretty close-lipped – they spoke only when they needed to - but Caliga just let his mouth run as much as he liked."

"Caliga," Tsunade repeated.

"Caliga," Sasuke confirmed. "It's longer than that, but that's all I could say of it. He was the only one who didn't seem to be part of the system. The only one who didn't seem to care. He had his lackeys. They-" held me down. "-they were extra muscle almost unnecessary with a guy like him, but still they followed him around like chickens to a bowl of feed. You could tell that if they were reigned in, they'd go. But Him? Caliga? He did whatever he wanted. And he made sure you knew that. He told me, every time, how much he hated the rest of them. How much despised them all. He'd tell me how he was planning to kill them all; all the elders, all the donors, the soldiers, the subjects and the children. He said he'd take them all down."

"Why?"

"I don't know. He didn't have a reason. For a moment I thought that he was the same as me; that he wanted to fix a system that was broken. But it wasn't that at all. He just wanted them dead. He wanted to win." Sasuke paused. "I hate it but... I saw myself in him. I saw Itachi and Madara. I saw a fucking crazy demon. I knew that he was mad; I knew it. But the worst thing was, the really fucking sick thing was: I think I understood."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I'm not sure if this is correct, but I'm calling the thing Sasuke wore in Part II an
Obi (the purple blanket/wrap/sash) and obijima (the belt). I've only found a few places that explain this. I am no expert whatsoever, so if it's something else, let me know and I'll amend it.

Long chapter is long. Sasuke may be suffering from Stockholm syndrome (however vaguely) along with everything else, poor kid. Naruto is just fucked up. We need to give these kids a break. I mean I do. Oops. (You know I will).

Next chapter will be my attempt at trying to draw past chapters together. Sakura tries to make amends. Naruto contemplates his next move. Ume's pesters the shit out of Sasuke and gets /told/. Until next time, you guys are awesomeface.
The Delicate Sound of Thunder

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Konoha, 8th March
Year of the Hare

"The really fucking sick thing was: I understood."

The slight distance they sat apart became a chasm that yawned between them. Understanding. Understanding what? Pain? Loss? Was that what this Caliga man had told him? Or was this something Sasuke was attuned to divine by himself? Naruto had tried to convince Sasuke of his mutual understanding for years in order to bring him home – with plenty of ammunition in his defense to boot. And Sasuke had turned him down each and every time, turning the charade into a pissing contest, rather than a genuine offer to help. But Caliga? Who knew? Tsunade could only guess that Caliga must have worn him down. Destroyed every other option systematically; boxed Sasuke in for lack of options. At least, that's how a ninja would have approached the problem. Sasuke had underlined the fact that these Kakkou weren't ninja at all; they were something else. Who knew how they thought, or what their tactics were - Sasuke, obviously, wasn't prepared for them.

Tsunade watched as Sasuke looked at his feet. They were thin, slender, rather like the rest of him and his toes were long. Callouses framed the sides of his heels and a few of the nails were misshaped – broken many, many times through careless training injuries. She wondered how much weight they'd carried alone, those poor, strong feet. It was at least a month's travel from one end of the country to the other on foot - perhaps longer. Much of the Fire Country was flat, but Ame? Tsuchi? They were mountainous. Dangerous. Even now, there was still plenty to worry about: bandits, wild animals, rogue ninja. The war and Konoha's peace campaign had managed to ally the main villagers, but it was a hit-and-miss system. There was still plenty in the world to worry about.

And Sasuke had pushed through all of that. He'd returned. He'd managed that with a baby, carrying a baby. He'd accomplished this expedition while he was sick, weak and wounded - still suffering the acute effects from the enormity of his trauma. Hundreds of miles were covered by sheer will and persistence. Hundreds of hours spent confused, in pain. In fear that he was being followed. That Caliga would catch him again and all his efforts would be for naught.

But he'd been lucky. No. No, he hadn't been lucky; he'd been brave. He could have hidden anywhere. He could have disappeared into the forests, or blended into one of the villages along the way – moved off track and travelled far, far east – melting into the sea of bodies in their large cities. That wasn't Sasuke, though. Sasuke didn't disappear. He couldn't disappear. He came home. And he came home to face whatever faced him because he knew it would be better than the alternative.

And now he was feeling guilty? He felt responsible, he felt like he should understand because how else could he retain coherency around someone so insane? Caliga sounded like a bomb ready to go off. What his reasons were, Tsunade didn't know. Neither did Sasuke, by the sound of it.

He felt guilty. That was the really sick thing.

"You might feel like you understand," Tsunade said, slowly. "You might think you did, but it's not the same thing."
"He hurt people because he was hurting too," Sasuke replied, dully. "He had to be. Everyone is, right? Everyone has a reason for what they do."

"What do you mean?"

"Naruto used to act up because he was feared by everyone. Obito was tricked by Madara because he lost that girl of his, and his life, pretty much. And Madara brainwashed him for years – you could tell just listening to the guy. Gaara had Shukaku inside him, driving him insane. Someone told me he hadn't slept since he was a really little kid, that's really going to fuck you up. And Itachi..." Sasuke paused. "Everyone has reasons. Even that thing - that Kaguya creature."

"Kaguya?" Tsunade stared at him. "What's that?"

Sasuke stopped. He turned slowly, staring at her face. Wait, she didn't know? Hadn't Naruto and Kakashi said anything? Sakura? Anyone? The truth surrounding all the pain and mistrust in the Shinobi world and... and... "No one... No one told you about Kaguya? No one mentioned Kaguya?"

"No? Should they have? Who's Kaguya?" Tsunade frowned. Sasuke didn't seem to know what to say for several moments. The words were turning over in his head, she could tell, but when they came out, they were very, very different to what she'd imagined.

Tsunade regarded him closely. Was it another of the Kakkou? The way he spoke about it – him or her, she wasn't sure – it sounded as though she should know. Perhaps it was something to do with the war – or the end, before Naruto ended the jutsu holding the village captive. Whatever it was, Sasuke seemed absolutely dumbfounded to learn she knew nothing about it.

And yet-

"No one," he replied, quietly. "Nothing. It's not important."

"Sasuke?"

"I'm tired." Sasuke didn't look at her. Instead he pulled away, withdrawing his hand from her grip. His concentration seemed to drift. "I'm going back to sleep."

"Wait, Sasuke-" Tsunade shifted in her seat. "D-don't... don't be afraid to tell me more, ok? Anything you like. Tell me about this Kaguya person. Or what happened at the end of the war. I'm happy to listen, ok? I want to."

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes it does." Tsunade replied. He was closing up again. She was losing him. Fuck. Fuck. "It matters a great deal-"

"You don't get it," Sasuke laughed suddenly. "It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what I do or how hard you listen. Nothing is going to change and no one is going to care. Thanks, Tsunade. Thanks for trying, but you're fighting uphill." He pushed to his feet. "Konoha is a joke and I'm the punchline. I've cemented it now. They're going to take Mikoto, they're going to take the other one and they're gonna hold me like the bad guy I've been written to be. That's all."

"Sasuke!" Tsunade was on her feet in a second as Sasuke began to move, promptly crumpling to the floor as his strength went out of him. Her arms were around him before his ass even hit the ground and she held him tightly, letting him leaning against her – laughing softly to himself. He was shaking. Badly. "Ok, hold on. Just take a few deep breaths. Breathe. Good. That's it."
Calming him down was one thing, trying to give him something to hope for? Something to give him respite at least until she could figure out what the hell was going on? That was a war in itself, indubitably. She didn't expect him to bounce back – not after everything he'd divulged, not after simply trusting her enough to reveal the secrets behind his condition, no there was far more than that. There was a wealth of work to be done, but she'd have to shelve it for now. Sasuke had been brave, but he wasn't giving her anything more, not this evening. Any questions she had, anything about this Kaguya person she'd have to learn in her own time. No doubt Kakashi would have a word or two to say on the subject, if she was crafty enough to trick it out of him. Unlikely. If he hadn't spoken now, who's to say he ever would.

"We'll find the bastard," she told Sasuke as she lifted him easily, padding back into the bedroom. He was still shaking and she stroked his hair a few times, trying to calm him while he eased into the warm nest of his sheets "We'll find Caliga. He won't even get close enough to spit on Konoha before the ANBU find him. I'll make sure of it. We'll make sure he pays for what he's done."

Sasuke shook his head slowly against his pillow. His voice was rusted. "Good luck. They didn't seem to use much jutsu that I recognized, but what he could do was henge. And he was good at it. Really good." Sasuke paused for a moment. "Well. I think he was good at it – we were pumped so full of sedatives it was hard to tell what you were seeing and what you were dreaming. Sometimes I don't even know if Nuja was real."

"Who?"

"My cell mate. She… helped." Sasuke said, summing up months of companionship structured through mutual pain and suffering in one word. It wasn't a term he used lightly - few people had helped Sasuke in his life and the word held more weight than it seemed. "She said he was one of the donors. Said they kept them separate to us for our safety. Apparently they had about as much freedom as we did. By the way he acted, I don't think he let anyone tell him anything."

"Wait, donors?" Tsunade blinked. "Did you ever see them? Who they were?" An Uchiha, perhaps? Shisui…

"No. Maybe. Once? I don't remember." Sasuke muttered against his pillow. "They didn't exactly line up and introduce themselves."

"Sorry. No, of course they didn't."

Sasuke paused. When he spoke again, his voice was subdued. Hushed. "I don't know how they operated exactly; I don't know if there are scouts still out there who are still active. Searching. I don't know if there was another unit or if they were the only one. I just don't know. I don't… I'm s-"

"Don't you dare!" Tsunade interrupted him. "Don't you even think of saying that. Don't even let it cross your mind. You have nothing to be sorry for, Sasuke. Not with this. Not with what happened. It's not your fault. And don't your ever think that you deserved it."

"Tell the Leaf that." Sasuke murmured, before he rolled over.

He slept badly.

Not just badly, horrifically.

Before, with the buffer of the sedatives, he'd managed something close to rest. Before, with Mikoto in his arms, he had everything he needed within his grasp. Now that he was separated from her,
sleeping naked without the veil of supplements, he was exposed. He was nervous. The absence of
the baby worried him, the lack of meds left him raw to his trauma. Tsunade had thought that
weaning him off the medication and training him toward a proper sleeping schedule would have
helped, but all too soon did she realize her mistake.

Seven times Sasuke woke that night.

Seven times his body wrenched him bolt upright in bed, arm outstretched. His eyes staring into the
darkness, his mouth caught in a silent scream. Awake, yet not awake. Caught somewhere in
between the dreaming world of monsters and reality which, for Sasuke, hadn't ever been much of
an improvement.

Seven times he needed to be soothed. Sometimes he fell back into a doze with little fuss.
Sometimes he fought her, struggling against whatever his nightmares had costumed her to be. A
few times he cried. On the eighth interruption, Mikoto woke as well, and Tsunade spent a good
quarter of an hour propping up a sleep-starved Uchiha, helping him feed his child before easing
them back into bed.

He didn't wake again until morning and when he did, he was a wreck. Tsunade knew what it was
like to be broken, but she'd never been shattered. It wasn't just pain. It wasn't just fatigue. It was a
depression that had sunk in deep and gripped onto him with fat, heavy fingers. His movements
slowed down. He stopped responding. When Mikoto burbled at him for her breakfast, he just
started at her for a full three minutes before he finally rolled out of bed and took her in his arms. He
didn't find a seat, he simply sank to the floor and nursed there. It was another reprise of the
hearing; Sasuke had regressed back into a state that simply survived. Going through the motions.

Tsunade called in sick at work. She briefed Akamaru when he turned up just before ten o'clock.
She alternated between filling the house with noise – some soothing, ambient music - and leaving it
quiet. She didn't know what to do; she only knew that after she'd lost Dan all she wanted to do was
stay in bed and just be. Music covered her tears, her screaming. The presence of another let her
know she wasn't alone. Perhaps Sasuke would appreciate the same thing? She'd never tried it
before, never thought to – not with any of her patients and it made her wonder why. She spent
years fixing bodies, why hadn't she put more thought into treating the mind? Meditation, inner
calming – that was all one thing, but it wasn't the same. It wasn't talking, sharing. It wasn't reaching
out to actively help another. And yet, her Grandfather had been all about talking. Naruto had
veritably taken the practice to a near academic degree... Where had it all gone wrong?

Morning stretched to afternoon and suddenly Sasuke was in the doorway, dressed, face washed.
Mikoto was secured against his front with a carrier blanket, resting her head against his chest. She
was asleep. Tsunade asked him where he was going.

He replied, "I have an appointment don't I?"

She said, "Are you feeling up to it? You don't have to go if you don't want to."

He said, "Don't make this out like I have a choice. I have to go. Konoha wants to see their puppet
dance before they cut its strings."

She said: "Puppet?"

He said: "Never mind. Are you escorting me, or should I walk around the corner myself."

"Stop. Just hold up." Tsunade rested her hand on Sasuke's shoulder. "You can't just work to a drill
like that. You can't just pretend it… it didn't mean anything. What happened last night… that hurt,
didn't it? I mean, it needed to, but it has undone something you've been holding on to for months… maybe longer. The aftermath of that isn't just a bounce back to form. You shouldn't push yourself."

"Walking ten feet around a building isn't pushing myself."

"That's not what I meant," Tsunade sighed. "Sasuke, ignore everything else. Ignore Homura and Koharu. Ignore Kakashi. They're not important right now, you are. I know they're pulling me back, they don't want me so close all the time, but I'm going to fight them. I want you to know that. I won't let anyone push you. You need time. It's ok to take time."

There was hesitation. It was the most Sasuke-like reaction she'd seen from him all morning. He frowned slightly. "Why?"

"Because," Tsunade smiled a little. "It's the right thing to do."

Sasuke let his fingers drift into Akamaru's fur (who had approached, worriedly, his ears perked to attention), and patted him lightly before he nodded. "Tsunade, I'm not an invalid. I'm not sick. I'm also not stupid. Konoha's going to groom me as a scapegoat and that's fine, I don't care. But I'll play by the rules because that's the cost of coming back here. That's what I pay for protection."

He didn't care? Bullshit. "Sasuke--"

"I'm feeling… better," he said, finally looking up. He didn't look better, but that was beside the point. He spoke again. Words he didn't use – words he hadn't used since he was young, since Itachi was alive. "Thank you. I… I appreciate you looking out for me."

You don't have to. I never asked you to. Don't humor me. Don't patronize me.

The thoughts invaded, but Sasuke nudge them aside. It was a mindset he'd become far too accustomed to – an attitude he fell back on by default – but it needed to change. He needed to break it. He needed to learn. He knew that. He felt stupid, but that would pass, wouldn't it? This is how people worked, right? He used to be so good at this. His mother certainly hadn't brought him up to be such a sour bastard.

He tried again:

"You've… Uh… You've made this--" So much better. I can't thank you enough. You're like the first human being I've encountered since my family died. I feel like I can be myself around you. You can't know how calming it is for me to have you around and to know you have my back I--" – bearable."

Tsunade blinked. That was… unexpected. Regarding him curiously – which was difficult to mask with politeness, considering the level of her surprise – she said: "I made mistakes before. We all have."

"Mistakes?" He wasn't going to disagree, but still, he was interested. Few ninja admitted their shortcomings – certainly not the Shinobi from Tsunade's era.

"Yeah," Tsunade nodded. "Mistakes. Mistakes that I ran from once. And then, when I came back? I didn't really try to fix much - I could have done more for you once, back when you were a kid, but I didn't. I was trying to respect the system. I was trying to do my best in a world that was macerating with the ideals of people like Homura and Koharu. And Danzo," she added. Sasuke bristled. "I wasn't even young and gormless; I was well-established in this world, Sasuke. But I was afraid of rocking the boat." There was a mirthless laugh. "I fucking hate sailing, but I didn't want to end up in the water alone, before everyone else.. I'd been through a war already. Two. I don't think
I could have survived another. Two losses, and I felt dead on the inside. I know that's nothing compared to what you've been through, but I-

Sasuke hand was on her arm at that point. She stopped talking when he squeezed, gently.

"There's no comparison," he told her. "One person, two people. Ten. Fifty. It doesn't matter. There's no comparison. That's something I didn't understand until now." Sasuke cleared his throat. He took a step back, wrapping his arms around his daughter to soothe her. He clicked his teeth with his tongue. 'Y'know, Naruto and I fought over everything. Surprise, surprise, right? But it's true. It was all about who was the fastest. Who was the strongest. Who could do the most jutsu; who could wield the most powerful jutsu – it went on and on. And when he told me he finally understood my pain because his teacher died? Because he'd lost someone? I thought that was just another challenge. I thought he was trying to get on the same level as me. I threatened the village because I thought no one understood my pain. I was wrong."

"Sasuke," Tsunade murmured, not even entirely sure why she said it. "You weren't-"

"No. I was wrong." Sasuke insisted. "I've seen it now; I was wrong. Naruto really did know. He always did." He took a breath, then patted Mikoto's back, turning toward the door. "You want to know how I deal with all of this, Tsunade? You want to know how I keep on top of everything that's happened? I keep moving. Every step, every stretch of distance I move - however small - is something further away from the past. It's something pushed to the back of my mind when I train myself into exhaustion. It's me forgetting a night's worth of bad dreams to go butt heads with an old lady in an office that smells like cat piss and cigarettes. I agree to those stupid check-ups, I let someone undress me and ask me to let them put their hands where I wouldn't let anyone touch me because ahead of that I know that my son needs to be healthy. Because he's mine. He's mine and Mikoto is mine. I don't have anything else in this world but a graveyard and bunch of memories but now I have them, and that's... it's just something I can't give up. No matter where they came from. I can deal with that."

"That's not all you have," Tsunade said. "You have friends."

Because I'm your friend.

Sasuke looked at the floor. "Yeah? We'll see about that, I guess."

The visit to Ume was uneventful. Questions were asked. Questions were ignored. Sasuke threw her a couple of choice insults, but ultimately his heart wasn't in it. He left after a total of twenty words but she didn't seem disappointed.

His second exam was more successful for his doctors than it was for him, but Sasuke didn't have the energy to fight this time. He put on the gown without comment. Handed Mikoto to the nurse without a sound (though he kept a close eye on her the entire time). He sat on the bench, opened his legs, grunted when it hurt and said nothing when it didn't. He shook constantly throughout and when it was finished, he excused himself to vomit in the bathroom.

The doctor was close-mouthed and made no comment save to tell him that his son was fine, but he'd need to take it easy himself. There was an offer of something for his nerves. Sasuke shook his head fervently at it. He didn't need that – he'd rather the nerves than nothing at all. Even if it meant the dreams, the fear. The choking feeling that the world was closing in on him. That every shadow breathed, every noise was a footstep coming for him. That was better than nothing. That was better than the void. The doctor checked Mikoto (who liked it as much as Sasuke had), and proceeded to inform him that his daughter was healthy. And that was that.
The nurse was better. After his superior had left to check the results, he stayed behind, sitting with Mikoto while Sasuke dressed. He was pleasant, more than polite. Friendly, more than ingratiating and he spent a good half hour with the small family – showing Sasuke how to best position Mikoto in order to prompt her crawling instincts and how much she enjoyed being helped up to stand. He beamed at Mikoto's ability to make coherent noises and praised her quick thinking and responses. Sasuke had no idea how common her behavior was in comparison to other children, but he enjoyed the small surge of pride he felt when Mikoto giggled at him and cackled when the nurse tickled her feet. It was normal. It seemed so normal. Sasuke reveled in it. He had no idea why.

When he returned home, there were flowers outside the door. No note, but it wasn't hard to guess who they were from. Sasuke made a face as those thoughts invaded again. The predisposition toward distrust – a skepticism he'd developed over many years in order to protect himself. He picked up the blooms and examined them. They were purple, elegant. Long stemmed and carefully arranged to show off their prettiest petals. He snorted.

*Flowers. For a boy.*

Ino just didn't *think,* did she? What the hell would he do with flowers? Why would he even want them? Flowers were a girl's thing; he wasn't a girl! Was that what she thought of him? That he and her could be buddies now, because they shared physical similarities? Because now that he was like her, they could get along? Now she finally had him on her side?

*Bitch.*

Only, something inside Sasuke urged him to keep them and he took them inside instead, placing them in water like his mother used to do. He tried to keep the arrangement intact and a large jar was the best he had for a vase, they had water now. They could stand on the table, showing off their colours. Sasuke stared at them as he sat down, easing Mikoto off his front and onto his lap. They weren't... actually that bad. Thanks to his training with Orochimaru, Sasuke could recognize a wealth of plants useful for poisons and antidotes, but decorative flowers didn't often fall into the mix. He wouldn't have known an iris if it bit him; but it didn't seem to matter; Mikoto adored them. She stared, fascinated at their deep indigo colouring, their bright yellow tongues and cooed in appreciation. Sasuke watched her, quietly – moving only to stop those questing little fingers from tugging the display over completely. He hadn't realized, hadn't even thought of it before, but he'd never really introduced Mikoto to flowers. They'd passed many bushes and trees, but conventional blooms like this? Not really. Weren't girls supposed to like flowers? Wasn't it good that she learned to appreciate them? And even if she wasn't a girly-girl, perhaps she liked the idea of enjoying nature. There was nothing wrong with that.

*Like 'em now, huh?* Akamaru wagged his tail. Sasuke glanced at him.

"Never said I didn't."

*Saw your face. You think... What is word? Demeaning.*

Sasuke looked guilty. "No. it's not that. I just... didn't think it was appropriate."

*Not appropriate? For florist to give flowers?*

Sasuke shut his mouth. Mikoto squealed happily, thumping the table with her hands.

*They mean things, you know. Not just colours, it is message. Heard Yamanaka talking to Hyuga about it.*
"A message?" Interest piqued, Sasuke studied the flowers critically. It made sense, after all, certain types of signifiers could be left as unspoken messages during battles; coloured flags had their meanings – even the use of certain types of birds as messengers could all affect the weight behind the words they carried. Flowers might have been a little more romantic, but they were a universal gift. Sasuke felt his earlier rancor slowly dissipating. "What do these ones say?"

Dunno. Akamaru padded over the table and studied the blooms a moment before snorting. Maybe ask Yamanaka?

"Hn," was all Sasuke could reply. He retreated to the couch for the rest of the afternoon and took Mikoto for a nap. He felt strange. Empty. He slept and the tide washed over again.

By evening, Tsunade was coaxing him to eat while Akamaru watched the baby - Mikoto's coloured rings hooked over his tail. He waved them over her head and let her reach and bat at them as she lay on the floor. Sasuke didn't notice. He only managed two mouthfuls of rice and half a bowl of miso before he needed to excuse himself for the bathroom where he brought up the food again, then sat in the shower for a long time, watching the water curl about his toes. The baby kicked inside him; it took all of his strength not to punch himself in the stomach. It wasn't good. He knew it wasn't good but he couldn't pull himself out of it.

He crawled into bed at six-thirty in the evening. Sleep was disparate. At two in the morning, eyes full of grit, he stumbled out of bed to bring Mikoto in with him. He was surprised to find that Akamaru was asleep on the mat by the door and almost tripped over him as he passed. Tsunade's snores could be heard from the next room. The irises breathed scent into the room from their vantage point on the windowsill. Someone had moved them there, goodness knows why. Sasuke yawned widely, tiredly and glanced about the room while Mikoto clutched his tshirt, pulling herself impossibly close to him.

This was different. So different. Even without Mikoto, without the Kakkou's interference, he hadn't been in situation like this for a long time.

This wasn't falling asleep while pretending not to listen to his parents arguing
This wasn't his father planning and plotting deep into the night, the smell of his pipe piercing the air.
This wasn't his brother checking on him in the early hours in the morning after he'd returned from his shift.
This wasn't the silence of the dead, thick in his ears and hollow in his heart.
This wasn't the short, empty-calorie sleep on the road where fear hung off every noise and every shadow.
This wasn't a sleep that was heartsick, broken and afraid.

This was Akamaru, whuffling softly as he dreamed of Kiba's puppies biting his ears and climbing over him.
This was Tsunade's unladylike (but impressive) snores from the lounge where she sprawled on the futon, one leg under the covers, one foot in her empty teacup.
This was Sasuke looking at the blooms on his windowsill, wondering if there might be some more tomorrow.
This was the nurse smiling and telling him how smart his daughter was.

This was now. This was where he was now. The level of good in his life was small, but it was there. It was growing and he found himself wondering if he liked it. It seemed extraneous. He felt undeserving. But at the same time, it was ok, wasn't it? It was ok to like it, because it was there. Because he had… friends. They were here for him and they wanted nothing from him, besides his
well-being. Simple. Neat. Sasuke slowly laid Mikoto back in her cot and watched her until she fell asleep. Then he eased back into bed and slept until morning. If he dreamed, he didn't remember them.

The next day harbored the same events.

Sasuke slept, woke, made his appointments, then slept again. He still felt strange, but it was starting to pass. He rose a little earlier. Made sure Mikoto was fed and that there was water for Akamaru before Tsunade rolled into life. He set the rice cooking for breakfast and switched on the jug. He ate. It was only a little, but he ate.

The doctor was brusque, but Sasuke expected little else. He saved his pleasantries for the nurse instead. Different things were checked this time – a few appointments were going to be close together for the next couple of weeks until Sasuke put on weight. It was more of a reminder than anything. It seemed the council wanted nothing flying under their radar. Sasuke smiled to himself when he thought about Akamaru. Kakashi might have implemented his ninen guard, but something told him Koharu hadn't a clue about it. Or Kiba, for that matter. Good.

The counselor was en point as usual. Sharp as a shuriken, yet desperately blunt at the same time, Ume seemed to be building towards an agenda of some kind. Sasuke made what he felt was a mistake in revealing a little about the Kakkou and she pounced on it, refusing to let the information go until she'd strangled every last fact out of it that she could. The moment she began her strange method of passive-aggressive probing, Sasuke closed up again. The woman might have thought she was approaching him in a straightforward manner that he'd relate to, but in truth she simply came off as grating. Sure, the whole idea of having a Shinobi counselor was novel and understandably new systems would have their hiccups but Ume? Ume was a belch.

She told Sasuke she thought they were making progress.

Sasuke told her to shut her face.

And the day continued.

And Sasuke went to bed.

And Sasuke woke.

He wondered how many days this would keep going in limbo before someone decided to sling the first kunai.

He didn't have long to wait.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This chapter was meant to include Sakura, but it ended up getting far too long for me to deal with and I've had to split it in two (again!) in order to get something out before Christmas for you! Look forward to the rest of this chapter before New Years: Sakura's ramshackle attempt at an apology, another visitor comes into play, hopefully I can do a holiday-themed scene… And then a little something interesting, because if
you're going to bend the rules, bend 'em good.

After that I'm afraid to say I'll be taking a break for a couple of weeks again. Apologies to all - work is upping the ante on me and it's really exciting but incredibly busy. When I started this fic, I was a freelancer and finding time was much easier to balance between work and writing. Now I've moved to a full time position and I've gone from running two projects to four. I would love to keep up with the weekly updates - and I'll try, to be sure - but it's just a little much - especially during the holidays, where we're light staffed.

Thank you all so much for the lovely reviews – I love to see the reactions, ideas, predictions! You all rock :)

Have a safe and happy holiday! Remember to be good or the Krampus will get you (side note, great movie).

Big loves, Juju.

- Title borrowed from Pink Floyd.
Konoha, 10th March
Year of the Hare

Sunlight seeped in the windows of the Nara household, warm, but thin. It was winter light, the early warning of a cold snap and a prime example of Konoha's weather idiosyncrasies - which often tended to suit their own needs more than anyone else's. When it was pleasant, there'd be a cold wind to nip at any exposed flesh. When it was brisk, there'd be a warm fog. Rain would pair chilling, heavy drops with mugginess, or plumes of mist on a sunny day. The climate particular to Konohagakure was everything a ninja would expect: unpredictable, inhospitable and pretty much an all-round bastard at times, which was why Shikamaru had spent as little time as possible engaging in it. Summer was for clouds, winter was for ceilings. Feeling the effects of an early morning work out (blasphemy) on a too-cold day (the horror), he stuffed a piece of toast in his mouth and trudged down toward his parent's workroom in search for a little arnica to smear on the new smattering of bruises Ino had left on his shins. He located the cream with ease (third shelf to the right in the cupboards lining the stairs), but was surprised to find his mother back at her workbench – her pestle scraping with practiced consistency and pressure against the cup of the mortar. Strange. Yoshino had said she'd finished the week's orders and had been looking forward to taking a break - stocking up her ingredients and what not. This couldn't be a late order and it wasn't like her to miss a shipment. Shikamaru frowned and shoved the last of the toast in his mouth, chewed a moment, before he said:

"What are you doing?"

"What? Nothing! I'm not doing anything." Yoshino barked in surprise. Her feigned innocence was at the detriment of the mantle of embarrassment on her cheeks. She blinked at her son in the dim light of the workroom, scrubbing at her brow with the back of her wrist. "What're you doing up so early? It's your day off."

"It's not early, it's eleven o'clock," he told her, raising a brow. "I'm going out for some Barbecue with Chouji. Thought I'd better let you know."

"What's wrong with leaving a note?"

"What's wrong with me telling my mother where I'm going in person?" Shikamaru parried. He drifted over to the table and eased down to perch on a tall wooden stool. "My mother who is also supposed to be taking a break. Whatcha making in there?"

"Just… a few anti-nausea pills," Yoshino shrugged. Hands coloured a strange muddy purple by the ugly-looking mix in her mortar dusted against her apron and she cleared her throat. "Nothing interesting."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why're you making them?"

"Because we need them."
"Who for?"

"Am I being interrogated?" The woman picked up a bottle of peppermint extract and let a few drops fall into the mixture. A cool, fresh tang pierced the air. "I'm just stocking up, Shika. Give me a break."

"But we've got heaps of those in storage. We gave a massive box to Chōza last week, remember?"

"We do?" Yoshino scraped the sides of the bowl and began folding in the mint essence. "You sure?"

"Yeah."

"How did you know that?"

Shikamaru rested his chin in his hands. "I did an inventory."

Yoshino finally paused to look up her son, her expression a mix of wariness and bewilderment. "Since when do you bother to help me with inventories?"

_Since Dad can't do it anymore._ Shikamaru opened his mouth, then closed it and shrugged. "You're always bellyaching at me for not being helpful. So I thought I'd be helpful. Besides, Kurenai-sensei said she needed some half-dosage ones for the kid, so I went to go and find some and it took ages because all the stock as mixed up. It's a pain, but I sorted it out."

Yoshino stared at him.

"Thank you. I —uh… thanks." Her gratitude was something slightly foreign, but nonetheless genuine. Yoshino loved her son, but she wasn't always the best at showing it. She tended to be of the opinion that _teaching_ was loving. And teaching, being a somewhat distant synonym to _yelling_ was all the more worthwhile when it loud and frequent. But for now Yoshino just smiled and leaned over to rest her fingers on Shikamaru's wrist. "That's really helpful. I'm… I can forget things, sometimes. What we have and what we don't. Dad was always better at…" She stopped for a moment, picking at a spot on the table. "It… just slips my mind, you know?"

"Should take some rhodiola for that." Shikamaru replied. He smirked more than smiled, but it was the Shikamaru that Yoshino knew and remembered and that was exactly what she needed. She sighed.

"Yeah. Sage leaf tea. True." She patted her son's arm. "Or, you know, lavender is goo—"

"Mom, you've got crap all over your hands."

"Oh, sorry," Yoshino exclaimed, whipping her hand back to wipe it against her apron. "It's ok, it's really just a mix of dandelion and a few succulents—"

"These are for Sasuke, aren't they?" Shikamaru said, cutting to the chase. He didn't want to ruin the moment, yet he didn't like the fact that Yoshino thought she had to tiptoe around him. His mother balked, silenced for a few seconds before she rolled her eyes, defeated.

"Alright, smart-ass, go on. How the hell did you know that?"

"Well, you were really sympathetic toward him in that hearing. It was basically you, Chouji's dad and Tsunade-sama against all the rest. And Kurenai used to get stomach aches a lot when she was pregnant; you're putting the same stuff in these as you did for her. Kinda put two and two together."
"You remembered that?"

"It's a pain," Shikamaru shrugged again. "But yeah. I remember. I gotta remember – it's my responsibility as a member of the Nara to keep track of that kinda thing. Considering you're one of the best herbalists in the village, I should pay attention. Learn and stuff. Even if it's annoying." He added the last part somewhat reluctantly, but his mother just smiled wider and nodded.

"I said the same thing to my Grandfather, you know. Then my mom kicked my ass for mouthing off." She laughed. "Ok. Alright. These are for Sasuke."

Shikamaru nodded slowly. Then he said something which surprised himself as much as it did his mother. "Want me to deliver them?"

"What?" Yoshino blinked. "Really?"

"Well yeah. I mean, I guess I'm going that way anyway," Shikamaru gave a theatrical sigh. "Why not."

"Why not," Yoshino echoed. She started rolling the pills together, humming a little as her son watched her work. She didn't need to explain the method, the size or the shape – he knew. It may have never seemed like it, but he knew. When the medicine was finished, Yoshino packed it into a small, insulated bag and let Shikamaru take it.

"You make sure you explain the dosage properly, all right?" She told him.

"Yeah, yeah." Shikamaru paused. "Mom?"

"Mm?"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why're you being so nice to him?" Shikamaru motioned to the pills. "I mean, he's a nukenin. He turned his back on the village. Why would you support a guy like that?"

"You mean you don't?" Yoshino raised a brow. "How come you offered to deliver the pills?"

"I don't… " Shikamaru paused. "Well, I don't hate the guy. I mean, he's back – so it's up to the justice system now. He's not a danger to anyone really, so-" He looked at his mother, helplessly. "I mean, you've never cared about the Uchiha before."

"Perhaps I didn't," Yoshino agreed. "No. You're right. I didn't. It wasn't really not caring though… It was more a lack of caring – you know?"

"That doesn't make sense."

"Fair enough," Yoshino scratched at her cheek, leaving a purplish mark. "I guess it is rather strange. But things were strange after the third war. Then the was the Kyuubi's attack and the death of the fourth, his wife and their little baby. I think after all we lost back then, we were sort of… ambivalent to what happened to the Uchiha, horrible as it sounds. Even though I had Uchiha friends. I used to buy a lot of stock from their herbalists. They worked with us, their kids went to school with ours. Then they were gone. I mean sure, people would talk about the upstarts – the trouble makers like Fugaku and his posse – sometimes even Madara, depending on who you were talking to. But once the compound was razed and the banners were gone and all that was left was a
few ruins and relics, everyone sort of… carried on." There was a pause, then Yoshino sniffed. "I think that's a problem that this village has always suffered from."

"Not caring? I mean, lack of caring?"

"Not looking past our own noses. Not bothering to find out what else is there – who else is there past the gates of our own clans. Oh we're pleasant to each other well enough, we're civil." Yoshino tapped her fingers on the table. "But it's not the same thing."

Shikamaru leaned against the table and raised a brow. He slid the pills into his pocket and crossed his arms. "What made you start worrying about this all of a sudden? Sasuke?"

"It's funny you know…" Yoshino mused. "It wasn't sudden at all. In fact, I'd been thinking about it for a long time. About the way the village is now; the way it changed after the war. The role that Uzumaki boy has taken on and how well he's doing, for himself and for everyone."

"He was always good at talking the talk," Shikamaru agreed. Yoshino nodded.

"He was, wasn't he? Little brat - always showing off, always clamoring for attention. Who'd have thought he'd do so well?" Yoshino's voice petered off momentarily. When she spoke again it was soft, sad. There was a heaviness in her words that was far more solid than it had been as Shikaku's funeral – not longing, regret. "Poor little kid. Left alone. Left an orphan with no one but the state looking after him and no one even wanting to look at him given the rumors as to what he was."

"Jinchuuriki?"

"Mm… Well, the vessel for the Kyuubi. That's what everyone saw him as. Not the hero he was meant to be. We just couldn't see it that way. And so we were sworn to secrecy – you know, not to tell you kids, but-" she shrugged. "That didn't seem to stop the rumors. The prejudice. And we all just… let it happen. Like someone else was pulling our strings."

"That's pretty… stupid." Shikamaru muttered. "You mean, no one ever said anything?"

"Not really. Umino san stood up for him a couple of times, but he was ignored because he was just a young chunin back then and no one listened to kids like him. Until they had to… that time…" Yoshino cleared her throat again. "You were a little younger, then. You'd just graduated from the academy and had gone to spend the night at Chouji's to celebrate. That night your dad was asked to go on a particular emergency mission. Top secret."

"He was?" Shikamaru frowned. He'd never had a conversation like this with his mother before, but once it started, it didn't seem to want to stop. It was good. It was needed. It was the first time she'd opened up since the death of her husband and he wondered if it was something she'd wanted to get off her chest for a long time, only it had caught against the bottleneck of conformity. A problem indeed. He licked his lips. "What was the mission?"

"To find Naruto - who had apparently stolen a scroll from the Hokage's office - and detain him." Yoshino began. "Naturally it was a serious offence, him taking a scroll like that. The jutsu it contained was very powerful – it had had been sealed away for the safety of the village so of course it was imperative that they got it back. But… But Naruto was just a little boy. A little boy who probably didn't know any better. A kid who was just showing off. No one really taught him otherwise, I suppose. He just wanted to be noticed, yet Shikaku told me that some of the younger jounin who were tagging along were talking about how they'd take him down. Kill him to get the scroll back. A boy. A little boy."
"Well, he was a ninja, Mom. I mean-" Shikamaru pushed the pills into his bag. "-he wanted to be. There's responsibility there. He knew that. He knew he wasn't supposed to take the scroll."

"Did he?" Yoshino wiped her hands on a rag and started to pack up the ingredients. "Maybe one day when you have a child, you might reconsider what responsibility means to a twelve year old. Or consequences. We should have known better. All of us."

"It wasn't your fault, Mom."

"No. More than anything it's a fault in our system. A fault in the way we've learned to compartmentalize things." Yoshino looked away, running her hands over the grain of the table. She licked her lips. "We spend years looking after our own clans, caring for our own people. We ally with those who are beneficial to us, and we simply exist with those who aren't. But we're a village – at least, that's what we call ourselves. I feel like we're missing something. Like something's been forgotten and needs to be made right. It's just no one's had the courage to do it. That boy, Sasuke. I've heard a lot about him. I knew his mother, his father. His brother occasionally came to the Nara compound for congestion relief before he… Well…"

Shikamaru stared at his mother for a long moment, his hand still in his bag – fingers curling around the little envelope. He nodded slowly. "I remember. The other kids used to say they weren't allowed to talk to Naruto. Or that they should stay away from Sasuke and his family in case the Uchiha took offense to something we did. You know I didn't care about all that, Mom. It was too annoying to remember all those rules. Even Chouji didn't mind him because Sasuke used to give him his sweets and Naruto was always the last to be picked in activities rather than him. Naruto was a dumb ass, but he wasn't a bad kid. And Sasuke was just… I don't know. Haunted, I guess. Even now he looks the same. I heard from Sakura that he'd supposedly got his revenge against his brother but it doesn't look like it did him any good. I dunno what would."

"Tsunade seemed to believe in him." Yoshino murmured. "I'm not sure how much she knows about his situation – I don't know how much he'd ever tell - he's as ornery as his father. But I think, rumors aside, even if Sasuke chose to bring his condition on himself, he would never have known the consequences. He couldn't have. You wonder what might do him good? Maybe it's this."

"The fact that he's -" Shikamaru frowned. "Really? I know some people are thinking it was Orochimaru or there was some kind of concession going on, but I'm not so sure about that. What if he forced? You know... what's the word... R-"

"The end, not the means. He has a family now." Yoshino said, quickly. "No matter how they came about, he seemed very protective of them. How's that bad? How could we not give that a chance? And if he was... as you said - forced - how could we not help someone who's been through that? It seems impossible to me."

"I guess that's up to the law to decide." Shikamaru replied. But as he said it, the conviction slowly curled out of his voice. Was it up to the law? Was it really? With everything changing so much, with everything already so different? Why couldn't there be new laws? Why were they pandering so much to a system that hurt so many? He let out the breath he wasn't aware he'd been holding and straightened his jacket. "Or, I suppose, what people want to see. A criminal charged for his crimes or a man rehabilitated. Well, you know um… well, whatever Sasuke decides to be."

"I know what I'd choose. At least, I'm sure now," Yoshino said, quietly. She watched her son glance over at one of the storage shelves before reaching over to pull a small square box out from under a pile of books. He mulled over the parcel for a few moments before he drew it out and ran his fingers over the lid, thoughtfully.
"Yeah, me too."

Sliding the box into his bag, Shikamaru gave his mother a cursory wave, then trudged outside into the sunlight. His steps were dogged as usual but there was a lightness in his chest that he couldn't quite explain until he realized that there was a solution to Konoha's problem.

And it was simple. And it was right there, it always had been.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon and Sasuke was sitting outside the apartment block on a bench, staring grimly at a patch of grass. Tsunade had excused herself to finish a few jobs around the office, therefore Shizune had Mikoto inside and was watching her while she napped. While Sasuke hadn't been too keen on the sudden changing of the guards, he tended to see Shizune as an extension of Tsunade and therefore she was acceptable. Besides, he had other things to worry about. Ume's probing had bothered him; the mention of Itachi bothered him. And honor. His clan's honor. What the hell did she know? What the hell did she know about anything?

But what if she was right? What did honor mean to the dead? What did honor mean to him anymore – was it even worth worrying about now that he was turned inside out? Who would acknowledge this fortitude when no one respected him enough to appreciate it?

And then Sakura…

He didn't have a clue how to deal with Sakura. He was still numb from it. His skin crawled, his body felt… used. Violated. It wasn't the same as the Kakkou touching him, as Caliga getting his disgusting hands on his flesh, but it was unpleasant. For someone with that much ire and disrespect to examine him in such an intimate way - what the hell had happened to cause that kind of hiccup in the system? Or was it another of Kakashi's bright ideas? Sasuke was dubious, but his anger and disgust countered his suspicion. The way she'd looked at him. The way she'd touched him. She had no right. She had no fucking right. He'd made what some people might deem mistakes; he'd hurt people he was supposed to care about. He could be called a traitor, a friend-killer, an attempted murderer and he wouldn't have argued too far against it… but.

But…

They'd been at war. They were ninja. Soldiers. He'd left the front to fight his own battles and that should have been fine, but she'd refused to let it go. His business was his own but she kept pushing into it; kept thinking that her oily promises of love and devotion were something that would change a mind-set constructed over years of living amongst the scorched rubble of his memories. She had no idea and he held no responsibility to tell her. But she pushed and she pushed and how was he supposed to stop her? He'd tried being gentle. Sasuke knew he couldn't be gentle (any more), but he'd tried. He'd tried for her because she'd been a comrade – he owed her that respect. Then he'd had to make his point a little clearer and everyone got up in arms about it.

How obvious could he be? He wasn't interested; he'd never been interested. He appreciated her friendship when he was young, but enough was enough. And now she'd found the perfect vehicle to get back at him. To be able to reduce him to nothing under the guise of skill and impartial examination. If he wasn't so angry he'd almost have applauded her for it. But he wasn't an asshole and he didn't take that kind of treatment lightly. He might have been known for tricks, but he wasn't a fan of underhanded methods. Perhaps this was payback for the genjutsu? He'd used that as a last resort. Her actions… were just cruel. Just cruel.

Sasuke pushed to his feet and padded back into the apartment. Shizune received a nod, Akamaru earned a brief skritch behind the ears but ultimately Sasuke was only interested in the shower. He
needed to wash Sakura's fingers off him. He needed to forget. It took an hour and by the time he'd finished, he'd scrubbed his skin pink and raw. After that, he dressed in a yukata then settled himself on the futon, merely shrugging when Shizune left, promising Tsunade's return within the hour. He didn't care. He'd honestly had enough of people for the day. The silence was pleasant. Mikoto sat with Akamaru, who was diligently watching her play in her baby gym. Sasuke lay on the futon, thumbing through one of Tsunade's romance novels. Horrific stuff.

The trio remained peaceful and undisturbed for a half hour. Then there came a knock at the door, which was weird. Tsunade didn't knock. Kakashi probably wouldn't have either (the idiot probably would have climbed through the window). It might have been Shizune, coming back for something she'd forgotten, but that was unlikely, considering a good fifteen minutes had passed since she left. The knock repeated. Sasuke got to his feet, warily, stalking over to the door to peer through the peephole.

It revealed pink.

Sasuke felt sick. He took a few steps back from the door, his hands clenching at his sides when the knock came a third time and a soft

"Sasuke?" could be heard behind the barrier of wood. Sasuke swallowed hard before he said:

"What?"

"Uh… hi?" Sakura's voice was muffled. There was the crackle of plastic and the shuffle of her feet. Sasuke found himself hyper-aware of her presence, picking up every sound.

"What do you want?" He sounded about as angry as he was feeling – so much that even Akamaru lifted his head. Sasuke held out a hand: No. He could be calm. She wasn't worth losing his temper over.

"I wanted to apologize." It came after a strangled moment of silence. Sakura seemed to be juggling her words. "Um. You know. For before."

Sasuke didn't answer her, but he didn't move away from the door. He knew she could sense him. The sole of a sandal scuffed the wooden veranda.

"Sasuke-kun I…" Sakura started. She pursed her lips, feeling her gumption draining away. She'd been so confident before. She'd had it together, but now… Now her confidence had fled and she was back to square one again. Silly, stammering Sakura. Lovesick Sakura. Stupid little pink girl. In Sasuke's presence, she was her twelve year old self, nothing more. He did this to her. He always did this to her. Sakura took a deep breath. "I-I want you to know that… that what I did before… It was very wrong. I know it was wrong. I shouldn't have done that. It was unprofessional and cruel and I'm… I'm sorry."

Silence swelled in the wake of her words. Sakura found herself trembling. The guilt was a sickness that wracked her body, drenching her in flop sweat and veritably hack sawing her vocal chords until all she could do was punch out words with an odd, hammering intonation. She must have sounded mad. Even worse than that, she'd apologized. What the hell now?

"S-sasuke-kun?"

Oh the terror. The terror of silence. The pebbling sound of awkwardness as Sakura shifted the plastic bag from one hand to another, feeling the perspiration slick and wet on the handles. She licked her lips again, again. But then the door opened and Sasuke was in front of her,
God, was he that thin? Surely he wasn't that starved-looking when he came in today. Or at that hearing. How did I not notice?

his arms crossed over his chest,

*His hair's so long. It really needs cutting. And that skin… He's not pale, he's grey. Glad I brought a face wash, that'll help perk him up a little*

his thin brows heavy over his eyes,

*Wait… the breast. Don't tell me he has breasts bigger than mine. Does he have breasts bigger than mine? Does he have… Oh god, he has breasts. The boy I loved has breasts and a kid and he's pregnant and shut up Sakura shut up Sakura shut*

"Sakura," Sasuke drawled her name. He'd always said it that way. And it always made her jump to attention.

"Y-yes?"

*Heels together, butt in, boobs up, look down a little to take the focus off that billboard brow oh god is he looking at me-

Sasuke didn't move, but his eyes traveled from Sakura's face, to the bags in her hand, then back up again. Purely platonic. There were no unnecessary stops, no idling over lumps and bumps – it was just the same look Sasuke gave anyone he wasn't preparing to fight or even needed to bother listening to. Slightly distant. *Bored.*

"That it?"

"What?"

"Your apology."

"Uh." She wasn't prepared for a reaction. Well, she *had* been, but it was overtly romantic, dramatic, childish. It was tears and embraces. Even *she'd* known that it was pure fallacy. She swallowed. "A bit of it? Yes?"

Sasuke studied her, critically. She seemed terrified. But not scared, it wasn't the same thing. This was performance nerves, this was social anxiety. He still had that effect on her? Hadn't she grown at all?

"A bit of it?"

"Well, I mean, I don't really know what to say," Sakura continued, awkwardly. "It's been so long and all this stuff has happened. I just… I mean, after what you did-"

"After what *I* did." Sasuke's temperament clouded over. He'd held surprisingly well, but it was gone now. Patience drained away from him.

And Sakura seemed to blanch. "Well, *yeah*. It *did* start with that. B-because, you know, I was… angry. About what you did and how you treated us back then. I-it wasn't fair after we'd tried so hard and all I wanted-"

"Sakura," Sasuke narrowed his eyes. "This isn't about me."

"N-no, but-"
"Thank you for visiting," he wanted to be angrier. He dearly wanted to be angrier, but the acid wasn't in it. He'd been angrier others who had wronged him – hell, he'd been angrier at Naruto. But this wasn't the same thing. This wasn't the venom caused by ire, this was disappointment. It was exhaustion. He was just so damn sick of the same thing from her over and over. She'd been mad at him once – mad enough to want to kill him on her own and that had at least been interesting. This was just pathetic. He almost willed her to say something real for once, but he was really starting to wonder if that ability was there at all. Sasuke rested his hand on the door and took a step back. "But I don't accept your apology."

"B-but Sasuke-"

"I'm sure you're very busy and I'm not interested in a-" he gritted his teeth. Resentment dripped from his tone. "- follow up."

"At least take these!" Sakura blurted out, pushing the bags toward him. She bit her lip as he scrutinized the plastic shoved in front of him. He looked up, suspiciously, not willing to bite just yet. Sakura cleared her throat "It's just some staples. You know, nappies and powder and things. Although I-I guess someone gets those for you-"

"Tsunade does."

"W-well, always good to have more, right? A-and there are some things you like too. Some bathroom stuff and some food. I got your favourite snacks, a-at least the ones I knew you liked-"

"You knew?" Sasuke said, coldly. "You knew?"

"We did work together for a little while, Sasuke, give me some credit at least." Sakura reasoned, flatly. "I learned some things about you. I knew what you liked to eat and the sort of books you liked to read. Favorite foods, colours… even jokes. I picked up a thing or two, y'know"

"You never knew anything about me, Sakura. You knew what you saw. Those things are nothing, they're just fodder to fill a hole you couldn't comprehend while you tried to fix the problems that you projected onto me, that's all."

"That's not true! I loved you!" Sakura blurted out, feeling her cheeks stinging. "I did!"

"You weren't in love with me. You were in love with the idea that I felt the same way about you - that your attention was more valuable than everyone else's. You loved the idea of loving me and you thought that because you felt so strongly, I would as well. When I told you otherwise, you wouldn't listen. You were selfish. You thought you were self-sacrificing, but you were self-serving, that's all."

"W-well so were you!" Sakura moved back on the defensive, automatically. "Leaving. Turning your back on Konoha – on us! Just trying to get stronger, going to that man-"

"Is that what you thought?" Sasuke almost laughed. "That it was all about getting stronger? That my decision to leave, to seek out Orochimaru's teaching, all that….. That was just about power?"

"Yes. To kill your brother. That's what you said-"

"I said a lot of things," Sasuke stopped for a moment, listening to his own words for once. Hadn't he just uttered that very sentence to Ume only a few hours ago, verbatim? It was interesting to see it repeated in such a way, in a conversation that made so much more sense. It wasn't a conversation deflected back at him, Sakura took in the words, her mouth closing as she listened – actually listened. Sasuke reached out and took the bags. "People who are in pain can be selfish," he
continued, shadowing Ume's own words to him. "It's something that I needed to keep going. You wouldn't understand. You and him? You never really understood."

"How can you say that?" Sakura flared. "After what we suffered when you left, when you… teased us! How can you say that? And Naruto… Naruto was as alone as you were. Naruto was-"

"Naruto was…" Sasuke murmured. His hand closed around the bags and he pulled them toward him, not really looking at her.

_Naruto was-

Sakura tried swallowing the words that were lodged in her throat. Well, this was going swimmingly. Why was it that everything she _wanted_ to say seemed to sit low in her chest, while all the fodder that she didn't mean to blurt out just rose up to the top, like oil through water. She was going back to comparisons. She wasn't meant to go back to comparisons, fuck it. Hadn't she learned by now?

And he was closing off again. She'd had his attention – hell, she'd had his anger for a second or two (nothing new), but it was _something_. Tentatively, she reached out a second time – alpine eyes shaded by those strange pink lashes. "Sasuke? I really am sorry… I didn't-

"Good bye, Sakura," Sasuke said to the mat at his feet before he closed the door. If she protested beyond that, he didn't hear it. Sakura let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding and shivered a little in the cool air. He hadn't forgiven her. She didn't even know if she deserved to be forgiven and if that was the case, then she'd have to accept it. One didn't tell Uchiha Sasuke what to do – not if you wanted him to like you. She should leave it. She should just leave it – go back to Tenten and spend the rest of the day in her bed, sleeping off the disappointment and fooling around in her underpants. Not really a substitute, just a distraction, but a good one. Tenten was good to her. Tenten was good, full stop.

But there was still something here. There was still the shadow of something and she knew it. The cold, dead silence between words – that black hole vacuum she used to feel from him after every sentence, that was gone. There was something beyond the airlock now. Something else that gave him… more. She couldn't really put it into words, nonetheless thoughts, but there was just… More.

And very suddenly, very abruptly, Sakura decided that could have just been one of the most important things she'd ever witnessed in her life.

The second knock at the door was completely unexpected.

Sasuke blinked, first at the door handle, then at the keyhole with an expression that hadn't quite settled on perturbed or annoyed and sat somewhere between, giving him a very odd look indeed. He'd only managed to put away some of the things that Sakura had brought him (milk, eggs, lemonade? Well, Tsunade might like it) and had only _just_ managed to screw the lid back on his temper when he felt someone approach and heard the hollow rap of knuckles against wood.

Sakura again? No… There'd be the weedy voice outside the door, like air escaping a balloon, slow and pathetic. He knew the way she worked. And he was still angry. Still angry that he _wasn't_ that angry, just dull. Numb. No, not numb – he _knew_ numb, this was something different. This was disappointment. Somehow, it felt worse.

The knock came again and Sasuke glanced over at Akamaru. Then ninken just raised his ears a little as if to say
Well, I ain't expectin' anyone.

And so Sasuke's feet found their way to the door and before he knew what was happening, he was opening it. Shikamaru greeted him with an incline of the jaw, his hands mere outlines in his pockets. Sasuke felt dread lick over his spine momentarily, before the jounin said "Hey."

"Hey," Sasuke replied, unsure as to whether he should be searching for a weapon or holding out his hand to shake. Neither seemed appropriate. Shikamaru had only ever been a faint blip on his radar, but he'd known of the guy for a long time. He remembered he was terribly lazy. He also remembered that he was fucking sharp as a tack. A tack balanced on the edge of a knife. Dark brows sank a little. "Why're you here?"

Social pleasantries had never been Sasuke's thing, but luckily Shikamaru held the same view on filler conversation. In fact, he appreciated someone who could get straight to the point. Digging around in his pocket, he produced the nausea pills and held them out for Sasuke to take. The Uchiha looked more surprised than he'd ever seen in his life.

"Mom made you some pills for if your stomach's upset," he explained. "Tends to happen with kids, you know? Er... pregnancy. So... yeah."

Sasuke appeared to recover, though his hackles were up. He stared at the bag in Shikamaru's hand like he was preparing for it to explode. "She made them?" He asked, after a moment. Of course, Sasuke was familiar with the Nara's medical prowess, but he wasn't so comfortable with the idea of being given medication out of the blue and off-prescription. He eyed the package, cagily, hesitant to take it. As if reading his mind, Shikamaru sighed.

"It's not poison."

"That'd be stupid. I'm immune to most."

"Really? How's that?" Shikamaru said, not missing a beat. "That a freebie from Orochimaru?"

"It's just training," Sasuke said, carefully. "Like everything else. You build up an immunity; you work on it."

"To poisons? Doesn't that take years?"

"It should," Sasuke felt his lips curl. Sneering? No… smiling. "I'm persistent."

To his amazement, Shikamaru smiled back. Just a little. More of a smirk, really. The tension seemed to dissipate so tangibly, both ninja could almost hear the scrape as their defenses were sheathed. It was a weird sensation. And then there was calm. A kind of nubile, awkward calm that made ninja more nervous than if they were staring down the curve of a blade. Shikamaru rolled his shoulders.

"No shit," he stated, raising his non-existent brows. Sasuke shrugged.

"Wouldn't have guessed, would you?"

Was Sasuke actually making a joke? It was so unexpected, Shikamaru almost wondered if he was talking to a bunshin. And he was still not taking the offered pills, not that he could really be blamed. Shikamaru winced. God, this was a lot of work for just a simple delivery. He almost regretted it, save for the fact that Sasuke hadn't closed the door in his face and was actually making
an attempt at conversation. The Sasuke of half a decade ago would have just taken the pills and closed the door and whether he used them or not was a mystery to remain unsolved. *This* Sasuke – this new one, this wild card version – seemed to want something else. Or was that a need?

"Well, anyway," Shikamaru said, breaking the silence around them that was just standing a little too close for comfort. "They're a special order. A little weaker so they won't hurt the kid, but good enough to put a damper on most heartburn as well as that sea-sick sensation you get when the it starts kicking. Ask Kurenai, she'll vouch for them – practically ate them like candy up until she gave birth. Take 'em or don't, it doesn't really matter. Mom was just worried, that's all. Two before each meal – don't go over eight a d-"

"Thank you." Sasuke interrupted. More blurted than anything. His hands closed around the bag and he observed the gift for a second, before he looked up again. How was he supposed to do this? How did he… talk? It should be easy, but… "Uh… thanks. I'll be sure to try them. I get a little sick in the mornings sometimes."

"That's pretty normal." Shikamaru told him. Sasuke cleared his throat, inelegantly.

"It is? Do you… have a kid or something?"

"What? No!" The Nara boy spluttered. "No, no. That's… I helped a lot with Kurenai's kid. You know, K-… Shino and Hinata's sensei. Remember?"

*Remember? Like he put stock in anyone other than himself or Naruto back then. But he did, didn't he? Those times when he thought he was forgetting. When he was almost just like the rest of them. When he could have been something other than his brother's killer. He could have been anything.*

"Yeah, Kurenai. Yeah, I remember. She was a genjutsu expert, wasn't she? So she had a kid?"

Shikamaru nodded. "Yeah. Little girl. Mirai."

"And you're her…" Sasuke seemed to be foraging for a term. Shikamaru shrugged.

"Godfather? I guess?"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you care?"

Shikamaru shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "How do you mean?"

"She wasn't your teacher," Sasuke reasoned. "So why do you care? Why'd you get to be the Godfather? Doesn't she have family. Or someone from her clan? Isn't that how it works?"

"I dunno. I think it's more to do with the people you trust more than family. Sometimes people have more faith in their friends more than they do their own blood." Shikamaru pursed his lips, thoughtfully. "We were both close to Asuma. I think that's why. Might be some reminder there or something."

"Asuma?" Sasuke spoke only momentarily before he realized. "Oh. Right. Um… Sorry." He didn't even know why he was sorry. It seemed like the right thing to say. Why was it the right thing to say was always the lamest when it broke surface? Shikamaru just smiled again. This time, it was broad.
He really did look like his teacher.

"S'ok. Listen," he said, pulling something else out of his bag. A square parcel, about the thickness of a dictionary, he held it out toward Sasuke, who took it this time, glancing over the cover. "I gotta go, I left Chouji at the Barbecue restaurant and I'm pretty certain he's going eat the wallpaper if I don't get back soon. But yeah. That's for you too. Dunno if you ever played Shōgi, but if you ever wanted to learn… you know. Here."

"I… thanks." Sasuke stared at the neat little travel set. The pieces shuffled invitingly inside the box when he moved his hand. "I used to play with my neighbor. Kinda out of practice..."

"It's just a spare set I had lying around," Shikamaru shrugged again. God, did Sasuke actually look happy? He almost didn't know what to do. "Nothin' special. So yeah… Maybe have a read of the rules again and… I'll um. I could um… I'll come by tomorrow if you wanna try a game?"

Sasuke stared at him. "You want to..?"

"Yeah," Shikamaru said, nonchalantly. "It's one of the things I don't find annoying. 'Specially if you get a good challenger. Something tells me you'd be pretty good. I dunno. Asuma always said he found good Shōgi players in the Uchiha... Guess I'm keen to find out. That be ok?"

"Yeah." Sasuke agreed, quietly. "Guess so. I'm... home after three."

"Three o'clock then."

"Yeah." Sasuke smiled again, feeling his fingers tingle a little. Nerves maybe? He wasn't sure. "Hn. You'd better get back to Akimichi, huh? Uzumaki always used to complain that he'd put the price up on a shared dinner more than anyone else."

"Mm, but if you ever invited him to a potluck, he'd bring food enough for everyone three times over," Shikamaru pushed his hands into his pockets again. "He might fight you for the best meat, but man, if it runs out, you can be sure he's getting more for everyone."

"Oh," Sasuke said, wondering what Chouji would bring to a potluck. Mountains of steak? Bags of ribs? He leaned against the doorjamb. "Hey… Uh… There are guards down by the gate, right?"

"Yeah," Shikamaru swayed on his heels. "So?"

"How'd you get past them?"

"What do you mean?" Shikamaru frowned slightly. "You're not in Solitary. People can come visit. They just have to sign in, is all."

"Oh." This time, Sasuke really was surprised. "I thought… I guess I kinda thought the guard would be… stricter. Since um… Well, you know."

"What? Your proficiency for disappearing?" Shikamaru raised a brow. "I guess if they thought you were gonna run, you'd've done it by now. Or you wouldn't have even come here in the first place."

"No. Not that," Sasuke shook his head. "After what I pulled… I thought… you know, being a nukenin and all…And-"

"Whatever you're thinking one of the rookie nine might do?" Shikamaru stopped him in his tracks. "You're wrong. Very wrong. Ok? Just don't." There was a wave of the hand as Sasuke made to continue and Shikamaru snorted. "You're an asshole, Uchiha. I mean, you were. You were a stuck
up, self-centered prick and you were fucking talented enough that no one ever called you on it. But time's passed. And a lot of us realized that all we ever knew of you was just the little bit you allowed us to see. The way you've come back now? Whatever happened to you, whatever drove you back home or even if you just made the decision without any influence at all… it's shown us more. And that kinda tells me that Konoha meant more to you than you made out. And what we thought of you meant something as well. So don't go thinking that just because you took a shit where you live, we're gonna rub your nose in it. We're better than that."

Sasuke just blinked.

"And you'd better brush up on your play," Shikamaru continued as he turned to leave. "I know I can paste you, but I do kinda want a fair fight."

"You know you can beat me, huh?" Sasuke murmured, pleased. Shikamaru just grunted.

"Damn straight. Then again, there's always something satisfying in being proven wrong."

He left with a nod, a slight incline of the chin, and Sasuke watched the stairs long after the sound of Shikamaru's had finished echoing against the wood. Then he made his way back inside and spent the rest of the afternoon attempting to relearn shogi and recall the old strategies he used to play.

When he opened to door to bid Akamaru goodnight (and a final grudging congratulation for the eight games he'd won – yes, yes, he'd ask Tsunade to buy him some pork rinds for his winnings. Ninken didn't consider a game worthwhile unless there was an appreciable objective, so it seemed), there was a small, elegant bouquet of white heather sitting by the door. This time, Sasuke just smiled a little and brought them inside.

He considered them good luck when he finally won against Tsunade in a best-out-of-six match. Tsunade said that flipping daisies had nothing to do with it and that he was a damn sneaky bastard. Sasuke knew better than to call her a sore loser.

_Somewhere in the universe, Naruto held Sasuke's dying body, cradling his friend, his love, his life in his arms as he screamed so hard the stars toppled from their perches and tumbled into the darkness. Konoha crumbled, smashed by nine great tails, paws that shook the earth and a roar that was not quite a fox, nor was it quite human. Blood ran in rivers. The twisted bodies of the Leaf scattered across the ground in piles of flesh, bone and ash. The genjutsu wracked the very fabric of reality, the violation so pure, so deep and so powerful that time and space couldn't hold it. Finding a sudden surge of incomparable energy suddenly thrust into its hands that it had nowhere to place, the universe did what the universe does best._

_It created._

_Six hundred miles away from Konoha, in the deepest forests surrounding the fringe of Kumogakure, something moved in the darkness and belched into life. Something curled in the womb of shadow and earth that surrounded it, running the tongue that it found it had along recently discovered teeth. Something tested a voice, and the voice grated:_

"Sssssssasuke…"
A/N: HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Well here we are, another chapter of... lengthiness. The editing is a little meh I'm afraid, so I hope it reads all right. Pretty keen to start setting up some of the rest of our Konoha crew and finally getting Sasuke some company. Naruto's waiting in the wings, he isn't far away so for those ACHING for a reunion, it'll be soon. SOOON. I promise. I'm not going to wait until the last chapter, haha - this fic definitely doesn't work that way. We're in for a long run here, folks.

So from now posts will be a little more sporadic. I'm taking a break for a week or two - just got to get work settled and my brain in order before we keep trucking along. Any questions, feel free to direct them to my Tumblr - I'm usually on there at least once a day, but until next time, thank you for your support, your comments and everything you do. You guys are great and when I do get to read your messages back to me, they make my day!
"You really think it was Orochimaru?"

No one had spoken in some time and Ino's question lingered over the sound of jaws grinding through dumplings and the occasional scrape of ceramic against wood. Chouji's cousin, a sweet, apple-cheeked girl appeared at varied intervals, removing empty plates as they were finished and replacing them momentarily with new offerings of meat, vegetables, rice, noodles. The food just kept coming as much as the remnants of the rookie nine kept eating. It powdered the confusion a little, but it wasn't a replacement for true conversation. As much as their jaws were working, they weren't churning over the problem looming in front of them. A problem that couldn't be ignored, at least, not for long.

Shikamaru cleared his throat. "Do you?"

"I don't know," Ino replied, worriedly. "I mean… I know that Sasuke-kun was looking for power. And I know… well, I know from what Sakura's said, that he went to Orochimaru in search of it. But it was all to take revenge, wasn't it? On his brother? A-and isn't Itachi… dead?"

"Unless the Sharingan can bring people back to life, yes. He's dead," Shikamaru told her. "There are multiple reports from witnesses who saw his Edo Tensei representation on the battlefield. Naruto himself confirmed it."

"Did… Sasuke do it?" Rock Lee spoke up through a mouthful of rice. Shikamaru shrugged.

"That's what the reports say. Apparently that Obito guy - the one posing as Madara before the real Madara turned up - picked up Sasuke just after their fight. Something like that. He knew anyway - practically gloated when he told Naruto, Kakashi-sama and Yamato-sensei back on the way to the Kage Summit."

Lee seemed troubled by this, but chewed silently, nodding his head. It was a hard fact to digest, that one of their own could even have considered killing a family member. But then again, wasn't Itachi the one who slew Sasuke's entire clan? The guy sounded crazy.

"Itachi was dangerous," Shikamaru continued. "He'd killed over a hundred innocent people before he even became Akatsuki. Doubtless that was probably some sort of initiation process or something. You know, kill off everyone as a test of strength. He didn't just burn bridges, he dried up the water beneath them and salted the river beds. He made the Uchiha's deaths so final, we can barely remember to time when they were still in the village - there's not even a remembrance day. Then he suddenly turns up in Konoha years later, looking for Naruto."
"Those guys'd been collecting the Jinchuuriki, hadn't they?" Ino said. "You know, vessels of the Biju? I guess they'd managed to capture a few if they'd finally turned up to try their hand at the Nine Tails."

"I remember. Kurenai-sensei fought him too," Hinata added, quietly. "She said she'd never encountered anyone quite like him. She knew he was strong. But..."

"He was something else," Kiba finished, staring fixedly at his plate. He'd barely touched his food, though he'd picked up his drink and was holding the icy glass against his bruised cheekbone. Since his scuffle with Naruto he'd quietened down, but it was clear that his hackles were still spiking. Shikamaru could almost feel the air cutting around them. "She said he was light fighting a ghost - it was surreal. Every move she made, every attack... he just read her like her strategy was written on her forehead."

"That's how Sharingan works," Shikamaru said. "It reads, deciphers, replicates. And that's only the lowest level of the Uchiha's dojutsu. Kinda impressive, really."

"Sasuke copied the Front Lotus and developed it into his own attack," Lee pincered a dumpling with his chopstick and pulled it onto his plate. "It took me weeks to learn that move; he mastered it in a day."

"Fucking cheat," Kiba sneered. Lee pursed his lips.

"Not really. I mean, sure, he borrowed it, but it's taijutsu, it's a registered move. Any ninja can learn it. And he didn't just copy it; he perfected it. Made it his own. There's nothing cheating about that. He had a natural advantage."

"It would be like me calling Shino out for using his bugs in combat. Or you, Kiba, for having Akamaru." Hinata explained. "It's not the fact that we have these kekkai genki in our clans, it's that we use them to help others. That's the point. At least... it should be."

"Sasuke just helped himself," Kiba grumbled, shaking his head as Akamaru let out a low growl. Shikamaru frowned when Kiba clicked his tongue and looked away, annoyed. He didn't have the same grasp of the conversation that an Inuzuka would, but it certainly seemed that the ninken didn't share Kiba's views - certainly not to the point of Sasuke's detriment, that was for sure.

"Does that even matter?" Shikamaru said, looking around at the group. "He was one of the Rookie 9. Whether we liked him or not, he was part of our year. He helped us during the war - hell, didn't you all notice? He arrived with the Kages. The First through Fourth. I don't know if they were actually working together, but it's a bit of a coincidence don't you think? Imagine if they hadn't joined us."

"We'd have been in a pretty bad position." Hinata murmured, sadly. "We'd already lost so many."

"We've have... lost more people than... " Ino licked her lips. "And if the Fourth hadn't come, Naruto might have died. You know... something to do with the biju again. A-and I also heard that Orochimaru arrived with Sasuke too. He saved Tsunade-sama."

"When you weigh up the pros and cons, it's kinda unbalanced," Shikamaru reasoned. "We might disagree with Sasuke's motives and sure, once we were ordered to take him out. But things change. Look at Yakushi, he received a pardon. Orochimaru's team - Karin, Suigetsu and that other guy? They were free to go. No one's really even sent out a Black Ops team to recover Orochimaru. And that guy used to capture people and experiment on them. Why'd we let him go? Because he mumbled some kind of allegiance before slithering off as fast as his scales could take him? I don't
"You're giving him way too much credit," Kiba hissed. "He's a self-centered bastard and he brought all of this down on us. If it weren't for him, your dad would still be here! Ino's dad. Neji, even!"

"Now you're giving him too much credit," Shikamaru countered, evenly. "How'd you come to that conclusion, Kiba? It's like you're saying he's responsible for the war? Seems kinda unlikely, if you ask me. That shit's been going down for years. Obito was the Fourth's student, part of Kakashi's team. And Madara's a figure in distant history. This can't be just a grudge from some kid who's barely a year younger than most of us."

"They're all Uchiha. The ones who started it," Kiba said, angrily. "Every time someone turns against the village, it's always an Uchiha!"

"Orochimaru isn't Uchiha," Hinata added. "Most of the Akatsuki weren't either. And even if Obito was the one leading them, that wasn't the case for a while. Wasn't Nagato the one who began the Akatsuki in the first place during the Third Ninja War? Do I even need to mention Hanzō of Amegakure?"

"You can't just pin everything on the Uchiha," Shikamaru said. "There are other clans who are just as responsible for the unrest in this world."

"So what do you suggest then?" Kiba settled a little, fingering the corner of his napkin. "We just forgive him? Just ignore everything, like it didn't happen? And what about Naruto, huh? How come he's not here? Wouldn't he be the first to stand up in Sasuke's defense, given that he's spent years trying to protect the guy? Where’s he? What happened at the end of the war - why didn't Sasuke just return then? Why now? And with a kid!"

"Why don't we just try to understand first," Hinata replied. "Just... listen? He came here with a family, not a proclamation of war. Like you said, we don't know why he returned, and we don't know why he has a baby or how he became pregnant. But he is."

"And even if it is Orochimaru's, why did he run away from him? He spent three years with the guy, surely he'd know him pretty well by now," Lee chimed in. "Or at least what his motives were. It doesn't make any sense."

"He's probably slipperier than Sasuke realized. Holding information back and stuff. Hardly likely that Sasuke put a lot of thought into his decisions!" Kiba shot back, but Ino snorted.

"Then you and I didn't go to the academy with the same Sasuke. Everything he did was planned and organised so that the outcome would be perfect. We studied for our prelim exams together once. I swear he was reading the problems so intently his head was on the paper!"

"When... When my uncle died, I remember hearing our Clan elders counselling some of the Branch Family members on their grief," Hinata stopped and looked down at her hands. "They said that sometimes people use focus to help them through their grief, but others can end up relying on distraction to keep them from healing. It's too painful. And it's unpredictable. So they throw themselves into situations they can control. Training. Studying... working toward a goal that they can visualize, not a vague promise that one day maybe, maybe they'll feel better. Sasuke was left on his own after his family died... You talk as though Sasuke would act like the rest of us, Kiba, but how could he? The early times, the times when he was like us he's probably packed away somewhere. Keeping those memories safe or... I don't know. But after losing his family like that..."
You really think he could be like us? Think like us?"

"Dunno," Kiba looked away. "I guess… that's a way to look at it."

"Nothing is ever what it seems," Hinata breathed. "And that's why, whether the baby is Orochimaru's or not, I'm not making any assumptions until I know everything."

"Me either," Ino nodded. "I don't... I mean... I... yeah. I don't want to believe what they were saying at the hearing. Or what that... insinuated. Using the babies for... you know. Payment. Gaining power. It's... I just can't see Sasuke doing that. I can't."

"I don't know much about the situation; I definitely don't know Sasuke that well. But.." Lee hesitated. "But it seems... wrong to just take things at face value like that. I don't like it."

Chouji started smearing sauce over the rest of the barbecued buns that his cousin had placed on the table. He rested the spoon tidily on the condiments plate then stood up, distributing the food to each of the diners as he spoke. "Yeah. Food that might be salty, or bitter? It needs time. The right ingredients around it. That helps bring out the taste."

"Trust you to talk in food," Kiba snorted. Chouji narrowed his eyes.

"I talk food, you talk dogs, so what? Sasuke looked after that little girl. She was very healthy. Happy. Well-fed. If Sasuke was prepared to look after a kid like that in his condition, maybe it's worth giving him the benefit of the doubt."

"What do you mean his condition?" Ino said, resting her chopsticks down beside her plate. "You're talking about the other baby?"

"No." Chouji shook his head as he broke the bun apart a little, letting the steam escape. "He's been sick. Very sick. Didn't you all notice how much weight he'd lost? You don't get skinny in the face just by losing a coupla pounds - that guy's been starved. He had collarbones like drumsticks. Hollows in his cheeks. He's lost muscle mass too - you could tell by his posture."

"His chakra was thin. Barely there. The baby had more reserves than he did, he was barely over civilian level." Hinata contributed. "He was a powerhouse during the last wave of the war, he... well he radiated with it. Now it's... different. It's like it doesn't even want to stay in him. The pattern is... I don't know. Off."

Shikamaru steepled his fingers and let his gaze climb over them, thoughtfully. "The first time we went after him, he was locked up in that binding jutsu, remember? That coffin thing? I took a look at some of the seals that were locking it - those were barrier seals. They're traditionally used to put a person into a state of suspended animation if they've been badly wounded or poisoned. In fact, after a little research, I found that they were primarily developed to help calm out of control jutsu and they were often used when training high-level kekkai-genki or even jinchuuriki. Sasuke was powerful, but he wasn't that powerful. So whatever convinced Sasuke to go with those four from the sound? I don't think it's as straightforward as that."

Ino nodded slowly, gazing into her tea. "Sakura said that he had... some kind of seal put on him during the chuunin exams. Something bad; like a curse. She said Orochimaru bit him and then... there it was. It was like a type of poison and it was so strong he fell into a coma."

"And when he came out, he just broke that sound guy's arms." Shikamaru tapped his finger against his lips, frowning. "He was covered in those weird markings Sakon and the others had - that chakra-activated supercharger. It must have affected their personalities as well - he didn't even
"Think twice about beating the shit out of that guy. Maybe his attitude… maybe all this scrambling has something to do with that."

"What if it was killing him?" Lee reached for the barbecue sauce and turned it upside down a few times. "Like Kimmimaro. He only had so long, perhaps he was desperate to finish his personal missions?"

Ino could not have turned paler. "I… hadn't even thought of that," she gasped. "Oh my god, what if it's true? What if he thought he was dying? What if he was dying! What if he still is and that's why he's back? He needs someone to take care of his kids?"

"If he was dying, I'm pretty sure Yakushi would have picked up on that," Shikamaru reasoned. "Maybe it was the case once, but I didn't really get that vibe from him today. He seemed more protective than anything. And he's survived having a kid once already, if, you know, that's how things went."

The room fell silent for a few moments as six teenagers attempted to imagine one of their peers giving birth. Some saw Sasuke as a woman. Others with less imagination tried to amalgamate the idea of a male Sasuke and common imagery associated with childbirth. Both perceptions ended with a series of grimaces that could have melted paint. Shikamaru sighed.

"Look. Think about it. From what we've heard about Sasuke, and what he's said to some of us himself, everything he did was directed toward gaining the strength he needed to facilitate his revenge. That's it. And yet here he is, nearly two years after we saw him fight alongside Naruto with the kind of power that most of us could only dream about and he turns up with what? A baby? What's that going to do? Hinder him. Weigh him down. And, apparently, eat away at his chakra."

Shikamaru frowned. "It's not even the first one, he has a second on the way. So why'd Sasuke let someone do that to him by choice, twice, if it was obviously going to be such a detriment. It doesn't make sense. None of this does."


"We've been letting the village elders take care of these problems for so long now, doesn't it feel weird?" Shikamaru shook his head. "Disengaged. It's like we hand over our problems to the adults and just let them deal with it, like we don't ever have to care. It's weird. And it's not right. We're adults now too. We were adults the moment we tied on our hitae ate; that's what everyone told us. If we have a right to risk our lives for the village on missions, then we also have every right to disagree with what's happening if it doesn't gel. And to me, it's suspicious as shit. I'm with Hinata. I'm waiting for facts."

"The Sixth did ask us to attend the hearing," Lee said, tapping his finger against his chin in speculation. "If Kakashi-sama doesn't care about our opinion, why did he bother having us there? To confirm things?"

"Remind him who he's dealing with, probably," grunted Kiba. Hinata speared a green bean with her chopsticks.

"In any case, it wasn't like we were there to testify. It seemed more likely that we were there to listen. We were witnesses."

"Almost as if Kakashi wanted to gauge our responses." Shikamaru inspected a chicken bone, frowning. "Inviting us to consider Sasuke's predicament as much as the rest of them. I mean, he could have easily have just had Sakura and Naruto there, but no, he asked us for a reason."
"Because we're part of Konoha too." Chouji said quietly.

"We all are," Hinata folded her hands in her lap. "We're all Konoha."

"We're all Konoha," Shikamaru echoed, looking over the circle of friends before him. Some were smiling, some not so much, but there was accord there. There was meaning. There was a line in the sand. "Yeah. Us, and the children we might have. We are what makes the village; the village doesn't make what we are."

"Then," Hinata smiled, pushing her plate to one side. "Let's talk about Sasuke. Konoha's Uchiha Sasuke. And how the Hyuuga, the Akimichi, Yamanaka, Nara clans can help.

Konoa, 11th March
Year of the Hare

"Hey."

The door was opened slowly, warily and Sasuke stepped aside to let Shikamaru in. He was dressed in loose black pants and an oversized hooded sweatshirt that swamped him - effectively hiding some of the more obvious aspects of his pregnancy, while at the same time giving the impression that it had eaten him for lunch. His dark hair was pulled away from his face and secured into a messy bramble at the back of his head - a look that almost caused Shikamaru to double take. He'd rarely seen Sasuke without the frame of his heavy bangs shading his eyes. This kind of style made him look completely different. Almost vulnerable. And Chouji was right, the guy was damn thin in the face. He hadn't noticed before, but now that he was looking for it, it was impossible not to see. Shikamaru nodded politely and held up a couple of bags of roasted broad beans.

"I brought snacks."

"Taking a leaf out of Akimichi's book?" Sasuke closed the door as Shikamaru wandered inside. "Thanks. I haven't had those in a while."

"No? What were you living off, ground nuts?" Shikamaru looked around the room, unsure of where to place himself. The baby didn't appear to be here, but there were other rooms adjoining the lounge. She might have been napping. Something caught his eye and he stared hard at the futon couch before Sasuke said:

"Something like that," and shrugged, moving over to the futon to sit. He walked carefully, his shoulders rolled forward perhaps from the weight of his breasts, or to hide them. His gait was uneven - a knee injury, perhaps - and he favoured his right leg over his left. His hands were wedged in his pockets and he nestled his chin inside his sweatshirt in order to make him seem even smaller than he was. Shikamaru followed him, curiously, taking the seat opposite.

There was a break in the meagre conversation as they set up the board, and barely a puncture in the silence when Sasuke offered drinks and fetched a bowl for the snacks. The two didn't bother with chitchat. It was clear that Shikamaru was visiting for one purpose only and the game was all that mattered. Despite his primary discomfort at spending time with someone who he'd generally consider a stranger, Shikamaru found that he was rather glad he'd taken the risk. Sasuke didn't talk much, but appeared to enjoy the game highly. The first couple of rounds were simple and passed by quickly. Shikamaru won, but not so easily that it was boring. Sasuke was sniffing out his play and that was the mark of the true tactician.

The second game lasted forty minutes - an extremely narrow victory for the Nara, but the Uchiha
didn't seem to mind. Sasuke was patient, careful, and despicably difficult to read. The challenge was addictive and Shikamaru found himself unsurprised when Sasuke finally stole the third win from him. He grinned, popping one of the toasted beans into his mouth and crunched it, while Sasuke set up the board with mechanical precision.

"So how long's Akamaru been here?" He asked, lazily. Sasuke didn't look up.

"Nearly a week." Then, just for Shikamaru's benefit. "How'd you know?"

"No matter how well you clean, that guy always leave a little trace of himself somewhere," Shikamaru grinned as he heard a snort from the other room. "And I get a little allergic to his fur sometimes. In winter especially - cos it's so thick."

"He wasn't really trying to hide," Sasuke said, glancing behind him. "He just didn't want to interrupt. He figured you might know he was here."

"I contemplated the possibility since he hasn't been around much. Thought he mighta been staying at Naruto's, since he does that sometimes. But even Uzumaki's been outta town, so…" Shikamaru shrugged. "He seemed kinda supportive of you. I thought he might come to see what's going on for himself. After all, he isn't glued to Kiba."

"Mm," Sasuke nodded slowly, staring at the tiles. "Naruto's out of town, huh?"

"Surprised?"

"No."

Sasuke left it at that. It was difficult to tell whether he was annoyed, disappointed or entirely ambivalent to the news, but given the fact he'd brought it up, Shikamaru guessed that it was one of the former. The fourth game was set, however, tidy and inviting and the two settled back into play, far more invested in strategy than banter. Halfway through there was a small, interested peal from the bedroom and Sasuke disappeared for a few moments, emerging with a perky, bright-eyed little girl, who appeared to size Shikamaru up for a good minute before nuzzling back into Sasuke's shoulder, letting out a huff of compliance.

"Just wanted to see who was here," Sasuke explained, briefly. Shikamaru blinked.

"She knew I was here?"

"She knew you weren't Tsunade, Shizune or Kakashi. She's only become accustomed to a few voices." Sasuke rubbed Mikoto's back, slowly. "She gets curious."

"I see," Shikamaru stood up, moving a little closer to get a better look at the newest Uchiha in the world. And Mikoto, feeling the gaze of someone on her back, raised her head again and stared back at him - pert lips pursed into a contemplative bow. "Was she asleep? She seems pretty lively."

"Good reflexes," Sasuke shrugged. "Maybe? I don't know. She's always slept for a few hours in the afternoon. Wakes up at about five to counteract that, though."

"Nothing you're not used to."

Sasuke almost *almost* smiled. "Yeah. True."

"She looks like you." If that was a compliment, Sasuke didn't seem to register. He just glanced at the girl, then back at his guest and nodded.
"I guess dark and and eyes are dominant for my clan. Never really saw otherwise." He paused for a second, glancing at Shikamaru, sharply. "Are you going to ask if she's mine?"

"I know she's yours. I don't expect Yakushi'd lie about something like that. And considering you're pregnant, it'd be stupid to think people are confused about is whether you willingly had the kid or not. And... uh..."

"Orochimaru's involvement. I heard," Sasuke said, flatly. He didn't say anything for a few seconds. He stood still, holding his daughter, feeling her weight in his arms before he spoke again. "I made decisions to support my vengeance, nothing more. Orochimaru was involved to the point where he no longer became useful. I thought I'd killed him once, but he ended up being far too slippery for my blade or even my brother's. The only thing I've ever held on his behalf was part of his soul that he implanted in me without my knowledge. That's it. That asshole Zetsu did the same thing later on to spy on me and subdue me if necessary. Frankly, there have been far stranger things that I've carried than a baby."

"No shit," Shikamaru raised his brows. "When you put it like that."

"And nothing about her was willing," Sasuke continued. "Not even taking responsibility for her. That was without question."

"You know," Shikamaru exhaled. "I'm kinda of the opinion that nothing you've ever done was actually all that willing on your part. Even if you said it was."

Sasuke just looked at him. Then slowly, methodically, he retreated back to the bedroom to put Mikoto down for a second nap. Akamaru regarded him solemnly from the corner and Sasuke nodded, tapping his fingers on the side of the cot before he backed up and padded out of the room.

"Best out of five," he said, pouring them both another glass of water. Shikamaru seemed much happier about that than the course of the conversation. He smiled.

"Yeah."

The sun was low in the sky at five o'clock in the evening and while the shadows were cold, there was a strange feeling in the air. Shikamaru couldn't really explain it, but something about the afternoon playing shougi with Sasuke had settled him. Something about spending time with the guy had left him feeling confident. Grounded. When he thought about it, it was like gaining a sense of closure - the satisfaction that his gut feeling appeared to be right, or at least, somewhere on the right track.

Akamaru met him at the gates to the compound as he left, padding silently beside him. He didn't speak for awhile until Shikamaru cleared his throat.

"I'm not gonna tell Kiba," he said in a low voice. "Just so you know."

Thanks.

"Does he suspect anything?"

Puppies are distracting. Training in basics. Important to get right. Not much time for suspicion.

Akamaru sniffed at the ground a few times before slowing down. Large paws dragged as his pace slowed. Last time we search for Sasuke we get hurt. Many get hurt. He fears more than hates.

Shikamaru nodded, deciphering the code as Akamaru swished his tail noisily in the air. He was getting good at this. "He wants someone to blame, that goes without saying. Tsume's a resonant..."
voice against some of the recent changes to the integrity of the village and the amalgamation of the councils. It's obviously rubbing off on Kiba." They trudged through the clearing streets, watching the evening businesses - the restaurants and sake huts - begin to open up, throwing warm warm light in heavy swatches onto the road and up the sides of neighboring buildings. "There's a small part of me that understands. But that part is in the past, remembering how Konoha used to be. That opinion doesn't belong here now."

*Obstinance. That's all. Will understand after he sleeps on it a few times.*

"Or when he finds out Tsunade told you to watch him."

Akamaru snorted.

*Pakkun's issue. The mission. Came from him.*

"I'm not surprised. Kakashi's not really a stickler for the rules as much as he respects the Will of Fire. There are some scruples he keeps and I kinda agree with them."

*Need vigilance. Sasuke could be in more trouble. Other ninken keeping watch outside Leaf.*

"Yeah," Shikamaru pursed his lips. "Thought that might be the case. It's easy enough to think that Sasuke might have gotten himself into this mess. But the more you look at the guy and the more you remember what he was like, the less plausible it seems. Then you've gotta wonder who the hell would do such a thing, and why."

*Strong bitch, strong pups, Akamaru signed, sourly. Konoha forgets how rare the eyes are. Other village could give lots for that power.*

Shikamaru blinked. He glanced about them, then lowered his voice. "You think they're using dōjutsu - kekkai genki - as currency?"

*Not a new thing. Many ancient clans start this way. Besides, Biju are free now - what else to trade?*

"Trade," muttered Shikamaru, his voice laced with disgust. "You're right, it's not a new concept. It's just that those in business have way crazier methods than before, by the sounds of it." Chewing his lip thoughtfully, he stopped outside a dango stall, and watched as the vendor inside rolled small balls of dough, ready to be skewered and fried, or covered in patted his pockets for coins, absently."Who knows how far this has been spreading. Or who's already involved. They might have kids out there who already have a stolen bloodline limit. Probably being trained as soldiers. We need Sasuke to tell us more."


"I gathered." Shikamaru counted coins in his palm. "Seeing how he reacted at that hearing. And to *Naruto*, nonetheless. When he saw him he just kinda… shut down-"

*Marked chair.*

"Yeah… and that." Shikamaru made a face. "It's probably some sort of conditioning. Or torture. How… bad is it? Has anything helped?"

*Was bad. Now is better. Less nightmare when he sleep without pills. Sometimes I remain. Tsunade remain. Assist when needed. Otherwise we are just there. Waiting.*

"Watching his back. Yeah. Seems like he's decided that he needs to start trusting people. Good. I
think there are a few people who'd be glad to hear that.

*Used to think he was an ass.*

"Did you? Well, he kind of acted like one. I think. Sort of."

*Realized how different humans can be when there is no pack. Lonely. Wary. He has a pack now. Very fond of them. Want a reason to help beyond just getting information? Watch him with the girl.*

Shikamaru nodded, slowly. "Watch him with the girl, huh? Yeah. He brought her into the room for a moment. Knew exactly what she wanted. Went straight to her when she made a noise. Hn. I guess I saw it too. Those reactions, they're like emotional fingerprints; they don't lie. And you're right, Kiba'll come round. Maybe when Naruto does. At least after he's cleaned out whatever bug's flown up his ass that made him run off to the Sand."

Akamaru laughed. *Shino better not hear that one.*

Shikamaru smirked, then sighed. "There's gonna be a lot of drama, isn't there?"

'Fraid so. *But that is being adult.*

"No." Shikamaru motioned to the vendor and picked out a few flavors of dango - the kinds that Yoshino liked - and tucked the polystyrene box into his shoulder bag. "That's just being a good teammate. And a good citizen. And I'll be damned if we don't need more of those."

*Damn straight.* Akamaru snorted. Then he opened one eye and let his tongue roll out of his mouth, lazily - dangling against his chops. *You gonna eat all those alone?*

"Dango can't be good for dogs."

*Only if dog get caught.*

"Fine," Shikamaru sighed, handing Akamaru one of the soft balls from the skewer. "But if it gets stuck in your teeth and you have to get Hana to dig it out, this moment never happened."

"Hanabi?"

"Mmm?" Hanabi didn't look up as her sister padded into the room. She took another bite of her sandwich, thumbing the page of her magazine. "What?"

"Do you know how to knit?"

"Do I look like I know how to knit?" There was a scowl directed at the price of a new leather kunai holster, and Hanabi bit at her crusts, viciously. The older Hyuuga eased down beside her and curled her feet under her jumper.

"Do you think it's hard?"

"I don't know. Never really occurred to me to try." There was a roll of the eyes as Hanabi tore herself away from her catalogue and looked over at her sister, making a face at the ancient book of knitting patterns she had set in her lap. "Why on earth would you wanna knit? That's for new moms and Grandmas!"

"Well I… I just thought…” Hinata cleared her throat, awkwardly. "I'd try. It's good to learn a craft."
"You suck at crafts."

"No I don't!"

"Yes you do!" Hanabi laughed. "The cake decorating class resulted in a frosting explosion. Ikebana made your allergies play up and had you choking down antihistamines for a week. Three weeks of dressmaking and you produced a pillowcase--" "That's something!"

"-that no pillow could fit into unless it was a dodecahedron eight foot long! Seriously, Hina… You're not the craft type. You're a far better ninja."

"But that's not… I mean I…" Hinata sighed. "There's has to be something I can do. Everyone's creative somehow," she lamented, resting her chin on her hand. "I mean, all I need is some practice, right?"

"Maybe. I guess a scarf would be easy enough." Hanabi shrugged. "Seriously though, you could just buy one."

"I want to try. But not a scarf." Hinata said, flipping through the dog-eared, must-scented pages until she jabbed at a spread with her finger. "Those."

"Baby booties?" Hanabi blinked. "Why're you making baby booties?"

"Practice?"

"For what, toe-warmers?" Hanabi eyed her sister critically. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

"No! Me? What? That's ridiculous!" Hinata shook her head, bangs akimbo. "No way!"

"Ino then? She's been hanging around that Sai hottie, lately."

"Hanabi, no one is pregnant."

"Then why the booties?" Hanabi insisted. "They look pretty complex for a beginner. I mean, there's a part that bends around a corner and everything."

"Don't make fun of me!" Hinata exclaimed, defensively. "I can do this!"

"Well, I don't know about knitting, but I'm pretty sure that with your track record you could master knotting."

"I'm going to see if Mrs Shouganai if she has any wool, I've seen her knit before." Hinata pushed up abruptly, flicking her long hair over her shoulder. "You'll see. I'll have them done by… by… by morning!"

"Which morning? Tomorrow? Or sometime next year.."

"Very funny. I can do this, Hanabi. You'll see!"

"Oh I'll see alright," Hanabi returned to her magazine, smiling widely as her sister trotted out of the room, her heels thudding noisily on the floor. "And you'll hear I told you so'. Several times."

Three hours later, Hinata returned to the house, her hair covered in coloured fibres and her
expression grey enough to make Sai look as though he had tan. She held in her hands a piece of wool that looked like it had been tortured eight times over, then electrocuted.

"Where's the nearest craft boutique?" Hinata asked, stonily. When her sister raised a brow with an amused smirk, she added. "I want to get a gift for a friend who… doesn't want people to know s- they're expecting yet. Okay, nosy?"

"Round the corner from the chemists. They do a lot of homemade gifts. You know, for the home who can't make."

Hinata glanced at the pitiful amorphous wreck in her hand and sighed woefully. "The home who can't make. Guess that's perfect for me then…"

"I-"

"Oh go on then. Fine. Say it." There was a thud as Hinata dropped down to sit, ungracefully. She wrapped her arms around her knees and snorted. "I'm going to end up giving out a store bought present. Well done me. You told me so."

"I think," Hanabi smiled, kindly this time. "You're awful at crafts. But you have a great eye for colour. You always pick me out the nicest things for my birthday - the scarves and brooches and that cute hat you got me last year. I always get compliments when I wear them. That's just as meaningful, right?"

Hinata nodded, letting her fingers brush over the ends of her slacks and chuckled. "Just like Lee, right? He's not so good at ninjutsu, or genjutsu but his taijutsu is amazing!"

"Typically, you always bring it back to business."

"Well," Hinata shrugged. "I guess it's what I'm good at. Right?"

"Conceited, much?" Hanabi giggled as Hinata poked her.

"Oh shut up."

The hotel was old so much as it was jaded. Past its prime. Languishing. It was that kind of building that did not age well, nor gracefully. Stucco had been popular at the time of its construction, as had pastels and curved, voluptuous, bloated lines that echoed the architecture of the desert dunes more than it did the sprawling, uptight metropolis of Konoha. The effect was something of an ice cream melting in Suna over a banana and Kiba tried to ignore it as he leaned against the puce-coloured door and pulled his hood up, rolling his shoulders against the evening chill.

Shukuba wasn't much to look at during the day, but at night the town came alive in a surge of light and colour. Gambling houses unwrapped themselves like a gift to the street. Taverns bathed a warm golden glow into the streets. Neon sparkled and sang. Voices swelled in the once-hushed streets and filled the air with a pleasant hum of palaver. Kiba wedged a cigarette in his mouth and patted at his pockets for a lighter. He didn't normally smoke - he didn't like it really. But being here made him nervous. Being with Tamaki made him nervous. Maybe it was the smell of cats about her. Maybe it was the fact that he knew, someday, he'd have to tell his family about her. Hana. Tsume. He'd have to own up to his unconventional relationship; his "illegal" lover. He was breaking the traditions of the clan, breaking rank. Kiba never usually worried about stepping out of line, but this was something so close to him he couldn't quite figure out how to make it work. His respect and attachment to his clan and his love for Tamaki were directly at odds to one another.
Then there was his mother's wrath at disobeying the clan's laws. And Hana's disappointment. He didn't know if he could handle it. But he couldn't handle breaking up with Tamaki either.

And then, Kiba thought. Along came Sasuke, distracting everybody. Taking all the attention, just like that. Just like always.

He thought he resented him for it, and for a short while, he had. But after a long walk to Shukuba and a good, hard screw, he was beginning to see Sasuke's return as a boon. With him around, people would turn the other way. He might have been taking the spotlight again, but... was that really his fault? He'd dug a hole damn deep enough that it would impress even Akamaru, but had it been one he knew he'd never get out of? Was he already six foot under the moment he walked out of Konoha with Otogakure? In a coffin, nonetheless. It was highly likely he never meant to return and the war was only a hiccup in his plans, his proclamation for the title of Hokage might've just been something of a swan song. A final desperate stab for validation of a life spent as a compass for revenge.

Or he might have just decided to be a dick. It was hard to tell.

Palming his lighter, he snapped the flint and let the flame burst into life, searing the end of the smoke. He took a deep, satisfied drab before his hackles shook and he glanced to his right, blinking hard through the glare of lights from the casino down the road. A woman stood in the doorway of the rent-a-room opposite, cigarette smoke curling from her lips like a long, ghostly tongue. He could have sworn he'd seen her before and when he looked over at her, she smiled with coral-primed lips.

"Nice night, isn't it?"

"Er?" Kiba replied, rallying all the sophistication of a brick. "Guess so."

"Out here all by yourself?"

Conundrum. Technically he wasn't here at all.

"My friend's uh... " Kiba jerked a thumb behind him. "Getting ready to go check out the action. Heard there were a coupla good clubs out this way."

"Did you now?" The woman tapped ash into the gutter. "And how do you propose to get into those clubs."

"Duh," Kiba snorted, helplessly. "Same way everyone does?"

"You mean the same way every minor does, mmm? Fake ID? Friend on the inside? The "bustle"?" There was a laugh as the woman approached. "I don't think your mother would approve. Do you, Kiba?"

"W-who says-"

"Oh let's not bother with all of that, shall we? It's tiresome. And rather embarrassing on your part, considering you can't have forgotten about your clan's markings on your face?" The woman raised a brow. "No makeup this time, mm? But you don't really need to hide, do you? You and your... friend? You two barely come up for air."

Kiba's mouth opened and closed a few times. "H-how long have you been-"

"Long enough." The woman shifted her weight from foot to foot. She had a bag slung over her
shoulder and something that looked suspiciously like a camera poking its nose out through the zip. She noticed him looking and nodded at it. "She's pretty. A lot of good angles on that one. She could be a model. You know, if your mother doesn't disembowel her first."

"What the hell do you want?" Kiba growled, spitting his cigarette into the street. His fingers clenched into fists at his sides. "Seriously. I'm not doing anything wrong! It's just... I haven't... Fuck you!"

"Now, now, there's no need for that." A polished finger waved in the air. Kiba looked ready to bite it off at the knuckle. "It's not much, really. Just a conversation."

"What kind of conversation?" Kiba frowned, already sense the faint taste of premonition sour on his tongue. Yes, he had seen this woman before. He remembered now. An oily sensation settled in his stomach as she held out a card to him. The journalist from the hearing. He wasn't surprised.

"I did say I had a card," the Press grinned. "And a lot of readers who just might be rather curious as to why Uchiha Sasuke has returned to Konoha. Care to shine a little light?"

"Not really," Kiba answered, honestly. "But you're not going to leave without a statement are you."

"I can leave with either a statement, or an envelope of some very fetching couples portraits addressed to your mother."

"You're a fucking hack," Kiba snarled. "This is blackmail!"

"You think that matters to me?" The journalist rolled her eyes. "It's the story that's important. The method... well, you're a ninja. You understand. The mission takes precedence, right?"

"That's what they used to say. We do things a little different nowadays," Kiba said, darkly.

"Different?" There was a laugh. "In this village? Now that is something for you ninja. What's the old adage? You can't teach an old dog new tricks?"

"Very funny." Kiba sighed. "Fine. Ok. I'll give a statement. But that film better be toast when I'm done. And you won't follow me again, got it? This is all I'm gonna say about anything."

"Absolutely." The woman nodded, fingering the pen that was already in her hands. "After all, every dog has its day."

Ino was kneeling on the walkway outside Sasuke's apartment, hastily arranging sprigs of heather in a small, conical vase when the door opened and yellow light from the outdoor fixture washed her in tones of gold. She looked up, somewhat guiltily as Sasuke observed her, his expression sober, but as relaxed as she'd ever seen him. Naturally it had been obvious that she'd been leaving the flowers - she wouldn't have thought he'd be surprised to find her. But still, the moment was awkward. Especially since she wasn't even sure if he liked the little sentiments she'd been offering. She cleared her throat.

"Um. Hi Sasuke."

"Ino."

"How... um... How are you? Nice evening isn't it? Getting colder now, but it's still... not so... bad. Yeah." Ino felt the words slipping out before she could even stop them. Mortified, she pushed to her feet, tucking a strand of flax-coloured hair behind her ear. Sasuke didn't seem fazed.
"I'm fine," he said, before pointing to the doorstep. "What are those?"

"Oh the flowers? Oh just… " Ino felt her cheeks reddening. "Just a silly… You know I… Well, I just thought it'd be nice to give a little present now and then, you know? A-and I know flowers… I mean, they're my specialty. And I know you're a boy and all but I-"

"What kind of flowers?"

"What?" Ino blinked. Sasuke eased down with a little difficulty and retrieved the bouquet from its lonely post by his door. He sniffed at them, raised his brows and nodded.

"What kind of flowers are they?"

"H-heather." Ino stammered. Sasuke let his fingers dance over the light fronds of delicate blooms and nodded again, as though cataloguing the new information.

"What does heather mean?"

"Oh… Um… Admiration." Ino twisted her fingers in her shirt. "Friendship, really. I thought they'd be nice with gladiolus, to offer strength of character. But you have to be careful with those - sometimes they cause strong allergies and I didn't know if you had any and-"

"Ino."

"Yeah- uh- yes?" Ino blinked. Sasuke smiled and backed up a little, shifting out of the doorway. One hand cradled the flowers gently, the other gestured back into the house, palm up. Inviting.

"Would you like to come inside?"

Ino almost froze into a solid statue of astonishment. But slowly, after a second of dumbfounded staring, she bit her lip and gave a short, polite bow.

"I'd love to."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I actually had an afternoon to finish - hurrah. As usual, it's a little rough so please excuse the mistakes and lumpy grammar, but here you have it. 30 chapters down, 30 to go. Maybe. Probably. I feel like I need a party - I'm going to go make myself a paper hat and pour a glass of wine. I mean, another glass of wine…

As always, love you guys, love your work. Comments are marvelous - you all make my day, you darling things! Sorry if I gave away any spoilers last chapter, I just get so excited when people start ruminating XD

Stay cool, stay safe, be awesome. See you for Chapter 31!
Konoha, 11th March
Year of the Hare

"Well, isn't this—" Ino stared into the apartment, feeling instantly crushed by the onset of floral decoration that swathed the room in a battalion of petals. It was like walking into decoupage. "-cheerful."

"I guess," Sasuke followed her gaze with a slight grimace as he padded inside. He moved into the kitchen in slow, careful steps and scanned the counter for something to house the flowers. "Not really a word I'd use, but I don't really mind all of-" he gestured, vaguely, "-it. An apartment is just an apartment."

Ino watched as he pulled a large preserves jar from the drying rack and filled it with water. Her hands rested against her stomach, fingers linked into a braid of nerves. She was in Sasuke's kitchen. He'd actually asked her in and she was here, in his house; his space. And he was here, wearing his loose shirt and pants, hair long against his neck and his elbows full of elast-o-plasts covering the teeth marks and bruises from his old IV ports. He was here too. And no one was dead yet. Ino felt like she ought to pinch herself. Instead she marveled soapily as Sasuke began arranging the flowers clumsily, shrugging as they sprayed out the neck in bursts of tiny, nodding bells.

"Hn," he said - which could have meant any number of things - and touched one of the fronds lightly. "At least they fit."

Ino found herself making a mental note to appropriate a vase for Sasuke's small household. Not a necessary item per se, but a nice, solid, no-nonsense vase with a good stout bottom and a curving neck would look quite pleasing on the table. It would have to be the kind of style would suit the flowers she liked to match with Sasuke's temperament: blooms with long stems, graceful lines, but with a flash of bright colour just to liven things up. Pleasing. Yes. That was a good word for it. There was nothing wrong with pleasing. She gave a mild nod and followed him as he set the flowers on the table in the middle of the living space, then turned toward Ino, almost as if waiting for her to make her move.

She didn't. Neither did he.

An awkwardness settled between them, but it wasn't the uncomfortable kind. It was filled with an expectancy that lingered in the space just under the skin. It was a tingle, a want. Ino untangled her hands and rubbed at her elbow, trying hard not to stare. The surreal feeling of being here, being in this room with this boy who was no longer a boy, but not really a girl either, was encompassing. Yet, conversely, Ino couldn't help noticing how natural it seemed. Sasuke was a mother, a parent, pregnant and yet he'd hardly seemed to change at all. As though he was wearing the guises of tolerance and patience like they were a fresh pair of socks and could be removed and changed out at any time. The usual standoffish demeanor was somewhere just beneath the surface, but for some reason hadn't been exhumed. Honestly, she didn't really know what to do with herself. Neither of them did. She felt as though she was in a dream and that if she looked too hard for edges, for tells, the mirage would burst and Sasuke would disappear into a cloud of ash and ether. She'd wake up, her bed would be hot, her pillow would be soft, but there was still no Sasuke Uchiha in Konoha.
Only, he was here; that was the reality of it. Ino swallowed.

"I knew it was you," she began, figuring that at least she ought to acknowledge their earlier encounter. It might spark something at the very least. "Back then. At the flower store. And again in the streets when you were doing that paper route. I knew it was you."

"It wasn't a great disguise," Sasuke admitted. Ino shrugged.

"No, it was good. Thorough, anyway. The outfit totally threw me and that wig was amazing."

"Amazing?"

"Yeah, it hid your brows, which is a good way of changing your entire face shape. And the colour really worked. I guess you got away with it because you're pale, but it was a good trick. You could have passed for a natural redhead."

"Hn." Sasuke folded his arms over his chest, then, realized that it drew attention to his breasts, let them fall by his sides once again. "Well, it's gone anyway. I think I lost it somewhere."

"Oh."

They looked at each other, then at the floor. Her grasp on the conversation was sliding around on loose shale and for a moment, Ino felt lost. What an earth had she come here for if it was just to stand around, gawping away and prattling on with this disposable twaddle? Sasuke must have invited her in to be polite - even thanked her for the flowers (though they probably weren't his thing) and she couldn't even string more than a few words together? Useless! Hell, this was probably just as disarming for him as it was for her, letting her in his private space like this. To her knowledge, no one in Konoha had shared that privilege, at least no one in the 'nine. The least she could do was to try and put a brighter spin on things. But it wasn't just the invitation. This was different. More. This was acknowledgement. This was a threshold crossed. One, at first, and then came another.

"Mikoto likes the flowers." Sasuke said, suddenly. Ino blinked at him. Comprehension floundering haplessly, until she realized the only other person who could be here to enjoy the flowers and be called Mikoto was his daughter. Still, her tongue was lagging several thoughts behind her brain, and she said-

"Who?"

-before she could stop herself.

"Mikoto," Sasuke said, after a measured moment. "My uh-"

"Daughter?" Ino hazarded. Sasuke seemed to roll over the notion slowly and nodded.

"Yeah."

"Which are her favourite?"

"The purple ones."

"Iris," Ino nodded. "That's quite the noble choice. Elegant. She has good taste."

"Not really. She does try to eat them."

Ino laughed. "Ugh! No, that's not good! They look pretty but they're certainly not going to agree
with the palate of a… well… hey, how old is she?"

"About six or seven months? Seven, I think. At least, that's what that bastard Yakushi said."

"Ah," Ino pursed her lips, trying to push aside that part concerning Kabuto. Sasuke himself didn't seem so pleased about it, which was fair enough. To be honest, Ino couldn't imagine why Tsunade hadn't been able to do Sasuke's blood work herself. What had she said? She didn't think she was good enough? Why? Yet rather than dwelling on the mystery, Ino gave a "hn", and smiled.

"Is she teething yet?"

"A little. Tsunade rubs this green stuff on her gums. Smells like mint." Sasuke brightened a little. "She said they're coming through a little slow, but they're on their way."

"How about words?"

"Meh-meh, mostly."

"Meh-meh?"

"Kind of like mama, I suppose. Apparently it's just the easiest noises for her to produce. She copies things that… I don't know… sound good to her I guess. She's not really much for conversation: she mostly laughs and groans and that's about it." Although he made a face at the word "mama", a fondness was there, growing. It was small, delicate, but it was there. A bud against thorns; Ino could see it in him. His voice raised a little when he spoke of his daughter. He lifted his chin. There was the blueprint of a smile on his face. And something else. Something even stronger than pleasure. It was bright, but shy, careful. It could have been associated with happiness, but Ino wondered if it didn't feel just a little bit like pride.

"Does she sleep through the night?"

"Seven o'clock until five am for the past couple of nights, but it's intermittent." Sasuke said. "She gets better sleep than I do though."

"Why's that?" Ino asked. The look Sasuke gave her in return was not so much condescending as it was a complete lack of understanding.

"We're ninja. Sleep has never really been a thing for us."

"For us," Ino echoed, wondering if Sasuke knew any better. Or if, for almost his entire life he'd spent every night on edge, unable to turn off instinct. Of muscle memory. Perhaps, for Sasuke, that door never really closed. Ino licked her lips, too overcome by curiosity to give the train of thought much steam. There was something else she wanted suddenly, more than even a guest pass into Sasuke's personal space. Unable to stop her voice from bunny-hopping with nerves, she asked:

"C-Can I see her?"

Sasuke paused. Then, ever so slowly, there was a nod.

"Yeah."

Naruto was meant to be home.

In truth, it could almost be said that he was home, but at the same time, he wasn't. He wasn't actually anywhere; not in spirit anyway. In body he was sitting cross-legged on the bough of an
ancient pine that overlooked a rather picturesque clearing near the fringes of Konoha, but in spirit he lay on the cool floor of Kurama's dungeon-cum-dwelling in a place out of time; in a time out of place.

He'd left Gaara's a couple of days later than he'd meant to. The Kazekage was good for taking his mind off things and while he was thoroughly aware that he was probably being pursued by ANBU having blatantly ignored Kakashi's orders to stay put in Konoha, he'd made his own mind to let himself deactivate a little before he returned. He dawdled across Suna, finding himself first heading toward his old meditation spot on the dunes near the Konoha border, before he made for something shadier. He'd wanted to talk to Shukaku, wanted to make sure the old man was all right out there in the desert alone. He would be, of course, but Naruto had found that after his time acting as a container for all the Bijū, he felt a little strange with them gone. He still felt the fingerprint of their presence. He missed them. He could feel the pulse of the One Tails drifting though the sand that bounded after him as he ran,. But Shukaku had hidden himself away to sleep and even Gaara warned against bothering him too early into his winter nap. So it was Kurama who Naruto had sought for company, or perhaps a final spot of advice before he passed through the gates and returned to the Leaf.

To Sasuke.

And to whatever the hell had happened between them.

"He was an ass," the old fox was saying. He'd found a pipe somewhere - Naruto wasn't entirely sure how he'd gotten hold of it, but he was smoking it nonetheless. Orange plumes ambled from its bowl. The smell was archaic. "Fucking jumped up shit-stain. You oughta get him locked up for good."

"Look, I know you're mad about what happened during the war," Naruto began, patiently.

"See how he likes bein' inna cage, little ass-pucker."

"-and yeah, he was wrong. He shouldn't have done that. He shouldn't have bound you and threatened to… well, you know…"

"Kill me? Hn! Where'ya goin' with this exactly, brat?"

"I don't know," Naruto looked at his hands, dejectedly. "I just don't know. It was … What he did was… I still dream about it, you know? It's still in me, like it just happened yesterday. Even if it didn't really happen."

"It happened."

"It was genjutsu, though," Naruto said. "It wasn't real. It felt real. Sounded real… The smells and the..." Naruto winced. "I can still feel the blood crusted in my nose and under my fingernails. Sometimes I think I can see it. But it was a genjutsu."

"Don't mean it was any worse. It's still intent."

"I know. But… Gaara said I probably shouldn't dwell on it. Just… you know… get on with things. Find out why Sasuke's here and… and what happened. How he ended up like… that. But I can't. I just can't move past it. It's like a wall that I can't jump over. I can't walk up it; I can't go underneath it. It's just there."

"True, it coulda been worse; he coulda actually killed ya. Or actually made ya do all those things ya did. But yer over thinking it, brat. He got what he deserved."
"What?" Naruto looked up sharply. "What he deserved? Do you think that… he deserved to be… used? He deserved to be sucked dry like… like… some old fruit pip? All his chakra gone? Maybe for good?"

"He ain't dead."

"That doesn't make it any better!" Naruto exclaimed. "You know, it's highly likely that what we did made him end up how… h-how he is now!"

"What just by his draining chakra? Unlikely. This situation he's got himself into has gotta be more than just a problem with chakra. He'da built his reserves back up by now, kid, even you'd know that. Or maybe he took a short cut. Stole it outta some old hermit or somethin'; the little bastard."

"He wouldn't do that. And he didn't do that in the first place. Gramps offered."

"Who's to say?" Kumara blew a smoke ring. "He was always look'n for the easiest option to get stronger. Prob'ly offered his pale ass to Hagoromo just for a boost."

Naruto wrinkled his nose. "You're being gross. And even if Sasuke thought about it which he wouldn't Gramps wouldn't let him. He was a nice guy and your friend! Why'd you say something like that about him?"

"Fine…fine… " Kurama groused, relenting. "Still. The little shit ain't got much to show for all his bellyachin'… Apart from, you know, a pretty substantial belly."

"Yeah," Naruto said, thoughtfully. "Another Uchiha. There are more Uchiha in the world now. New ones."

"Exactly. And you really don't think he wanted that? Even if it came from a the snake?"

"I dunno," Naruto sighed. "It's true… I mean, he basically allowed Orochimaru his body in order to get his revenge… But it doesn't seem right. It didn't, even back then. I never believed him, I just thought he was trying to freak me out. Now? Now I don't know what to think. But I'm pretty certain that he wouldn't be in this mess if I hadn't done… whatever it was I did."

"You think it was your fault?" Kurama raised a brow. One bright, red eye opened and rolled downward, a blood moon waning. "He had me and all my brothers trapped in the Chibaku Tensei, siphoning our powers and promising to destroy us and the Kage in one go and you feel bad about stopping him?"

"No. Yes. I don't know. It wasn't like that." Naruto shook his head. "I told you, remember? It wasn't that simple."

"Yeah it was."

"No. It wasn't... It wasn't just that. He wanted to change everything. He wanted to break the bonds of the old world but to do that he had to force everyone to stay together. To become one front against another obstacle. Remove the temptation you guys were as weapons then become enemy to the world, because…. well that's what he figured we needed. That's what would keep the unity that he saw during the war. That was Sasuke's will… Only… He…" Naruto swallowed hard and looked away. "He had to get rid of the only people he thought could stop him. Me. You. The Kage were a tactical move, even I know that. But the rest…"

were growlin' about it in your sleep and all, after he left."

"Disappeared."

"Left, dope. He left. He ran outta that valley like his hole was on fire. Dunno how he even managed it, beat up as he was."

"I let him go…" Naruto said, miserably. "I shouldn't have… but I did. I left him slip through my fingers again. I coulda kept him here; maybe he'd be safe-"

"Kept him? Ha! You collapsed from exhaustion, kid. Blood loss. Woke up two days later in hospital hallucinatin' like a sand fox on dropped fruit. After that you were pretty much a basket case until that dog-friendly stilt gave you somethin' to do. Recall any of that?"

Naruto seemed to wallow further into his own self pity and made a few sunken noises. Kurama groaned.

"Oh fer cryin-"

"Shut up, I'm getting my head around all of this, ok? I'm… I'm working it out."

"Two years later? You're slow, brat, but you're not slow when it comes to Sasuke."

"I'm… I'm still…"

"Look." Kurama sighed again. "Whaddaya want me to say, mm? He's here. He returned. he came back. He mighta been chased back; mighta felt that this was his only option or maybe he damn well just wanted to be here. Or maybe it's a ruse? You're not gonna know until you get off your damn ass and ask. He's got his hands full of that kit, and a gut fattening up with another. What the hell's he gonna do, huh?"

"I don't know! I don't- it's not about what he's gonna do!" Naruto was a sound byte of exasperation. "It's what… what I remember! What I… What he made me do. No… What he thinks I'm capable of." His voice dropped and his hands fell loosely by his sides. Kurama took another deep, burning draw and let the acrid tendrils of smoke curl out through his teeth.

"So that's it, huh? Still worried about what that little shit thinks of you."

"Don't do that. Don't dumb it down like that."

"I'm not. Never said I was." Kurama replied, carefully. After all, if the person you loved thought you were nothing more than a mindless powerhouse of destruction there were few things that could be worse. And Naruto loved Sasuke, that was certain. It wasn't writ in the stars as it was in his blood, in his bones. In the way his temperature spiked whenever Sasuke was around. In the way he dreamed strange, giddy dreams about the boy, thinking that no one else was mindful of his fantasies. Naruto was in love with him - always had been. There was no breaking that bond.

The demon fox thought for a minute, then raised a giant hooked a finger and picked at one of his canines with the point of a claw. "You're forgetting one thing, brat: Sasuke's a ninja. He's a stuck up, judgmental sod with airs so lofty his ass smells of ozone, but he's a ninja. And what ninja won't give all their strength to their last strike when they know they're done? What ninja won't throw everything into that last jab, mm? Sasuke was trying his damn hardest just to get outta that mess. He was losing and he knew it. He knew how he could hurt you and he wasn't in any hurry to surrender himself without throwing in that one last trump. And why wouldn't he? You're rivals, aren't you? It's all about one-upmanship. And that last fight was just a fight."
"It's not just that," Naruto murmured, woodenly. "Can't be just that."

"You two are about as subtle as stones, kid. It sure as hell can be just that."

"I don't know."

"No. Cos he called you out. Cos he threw up a mirror of your own nightmares against you. You know that. You know how genjutsu works - you remember that guy Itachi's attack on you? The one you told me about, even though you didn't have to… shit, even I felt it back then. Like the sun belting down on a tin roof. You've seen what those Uchiha can do - it's based on your own fears more than it is his prejudice, idiot. You're too much of a puss. I might hate the smell of the guy, but your little boy-toy Kage is right. Genjutsu is genjutsu; death is death. Sort yourself out and leave the past in the past. And if you need to get all human about it, if you need to talk and get all in touch with your feelings or whatever, go confront him."

Naruto blinked, then nodded slowly. "Y-you think?"

"For fuck's sake, go plant yourself in the guy for all I care. If it'll stop your damn moping." Kurama grumbled, stifling his relief ineffectively. His whiskers twitched, a dead giveaway, but Naruto didn't seem to notice. "I get the side effects you know. Like the scent of blood in the air. Or death. Or a fart - depending on what's up your ass at the time. And I hate that freaking wishy-washy dismal feeling you're letting eat ya up. You damn meatbags are way too complicated sometimes."

"I'm so sorry to have… farted on you," Naruto said, flatly. He meant inconvenienced, but the word hadn't sprung to mind and with Naruto's vocabulary, probably hadn't found the potential regardless. He had to admit, however, he felt a little better. He'd spoke to his inner passenger countless times before about Sasuke, but that was through a lens of desperation and loss coupled together with the joy and elation of saving his beloved village from destruction. To most, the feeling might have been described as bittersweet but that kind of polarity shift was unfeasible for Naruto. Being forced to choose between two things he loved dearly - something that had never fazed him in the past, but had now become mountain when social responsibility, popularity, historical propriety and public order supplemented its base. Before the war, Naruto had needed the time Sasuke wouldn't give him. But now he had it. It didn't end his problems, but it did make some things simpler.

"I just need to see him, right? Just… check on him… yeah."

"Are you talkin' to me or to yerself?" Kurama yawned. "Cos I have some sleepin' to do."

"No wait... w-wait. What if I did wanna talk to him, what then?"

"Kid," Kurama sighed. "You open your mouth and words come out. If you need more help than that, you oughta go to someone who actually does talk to people. Or wants to. You done?"

"Yeah, yeah," Naruto replied, but he was smiling. "Sure."

When he opened his eyes, he was in the forest clearing surrounded by the low, haunting call of night birds, the vociferation of the undergrowth. He was aware of something in front of his face and at first he thought it was the shadow of an overhanging branch and batted at it, only to find the branch caught his wrist and said, "I do not believe that is polite."

"Shino?!" The yawp of surprise Naruto was about to admit was successfully, albeit painfully, swallowed. Naturally, he hadn't expected to awaken with the Aburame's bespectacled face looming in front of his, but Naruto had become astonishingly ductile when it came to surprises.
"What the hell?"

"Forgive my intrusion," Shino replied, moving back a little. "I have arrived to bring you back to Konoha."

"What… they're looking for me already?" Naruto said, feeling a level of guilt rise in his stomach. He hadn't really told Kakashi-sensei or Sakura where he was going - he hadn't thought to say anything to anyone, really. "Er… hadn't… someone sent a note from….uh.."

"The Sand? Oh yes. We were alerted to your diplomatic mission." Shino spoke as though he were reciting a card in front of him. Naruto wasn't sure if he was placing invisible quotation marks around the words 'diplomatic' and 'mission', Shino wasn't really the type for sarcasm but he wasn't about to put anything past the guy. "I have been on a task of my own with the Hokage's ninzen."

"Kakashi's… Really?" Naruto blinked. "So you were tracking something?"

"The mission is S-class," Shino said, authoritatively. "Top Secret. I cannot divulge any details, suffice to say it is in regards to the recent events that you have been privy to."

"Privy? What about the toil-"

"I mean situations you have been cognizant of."

"Eh?"

"Stuff you know about." Shino surrendered. "That happened… a short while ago."

"Oh… Wait," Clarity fell with the finesse of cinder block. "You mean… S-"

Shino clicked his tongue suddenly. Loudly. Then cleared his throat. Then looked behind him with a kind of theatrical surreptitiousness that was bordering on the banal. "Let me return you to your apartment and I will divulge," he said with practiced mystery. Naruto hadn't thought about it at the time, but later, as the two rushed back from the forest and into the safety of Konoha's gates and the privacy of Naruto's apartment, there was a certain strangeness in the air. Almost like sense of someone watching him. Not a feeling of intent or danger, but… a feeling of being. It was off and Naruto shuddered as he kicked off his sandals and padded into the kitchenette.

Shino nodded for the ninzen to wait outside. They sat on the rooftops, testing the air with noses bobbing in the darkness. He followed Naruto indoors, accepting his offer for a glass of water as the other surveyed the apartment he'd left in a rush of embarrassment and anger several days ago. It was a wreck, which spoke volumes for Naruto's state of mind at the time.

"So… " Naruto began, picking up a few empty noodle cartons he'd left lying around in his wake. He made a face as he tossed them in the trash. "About… about Sasuke…"

"He has returned."

"No shit."

"Sasuke's return," Shino continued. "Is a fact that not widely broadcast at the moment, but it is on the Hokage's word that we do not speak of him. Not openly. Not yet. I am sure, in their own homes, others may not adhered to the promise quite as strictly, but it seems that few have made any opportunity to accidentally reveal information. Why do I feel that? Because I have picked up on various responses through my observations of those who were present at the hearing. So far it
seems that gossip has been kept to a minimum."

Naruto just stared at him. "Wait… what? You knew about the hearing as well?"

"Yes, I was present the night Sasuke arrived in the Hokage's office. I recall him discussion the timing of the event with Tsunade-sama"

"Then why weren't you there?"

"I'm not sure," Shino said. "I suppose since I knew the situation, the Hokage thought it wise to keep me separate from the others. Though I cannot see why, as I was a key witness in the events. As was Shizune-san and Yakushi Kabuto."

"Events…" Naruto echoed, somewhat complacently. For a moment the mystery of Shino's absence from the hearing was forgotten and he found himself leaning in a little, still holding a half-rinsed plastic carton. "You… were there the night he arrived. The night he came back. What…uh… what happened?"

"It's confidential," Shino said, and to Naruto's crestfallen response, replied, "However the Hokage has allowed me share information with you, provided you returned to the village. Thus, I feel it is right for me to-"

"What happened, Shino." Naruto interposed, desperately. His eyes had grown wide, his colour dropping a little. He had to know. "Kiba's saying he's gone off and screwed Orochimaru for more power; someone else said he'd done it to himself somehow. Tsunade-baba… she says someone hurt him… And… I don't know what to… I just… I need to know. I have to know. What you saw. What the truth is. I have to."

"I am afraid I do not know all the facts, Uzumaki-san." Shino replied, soberly. "But I can validate the fact that Uchiha Sasuke appeared in the Hokage's office late at night with his child. And I can confirm that he was running a dangerous fever, with the little one faring just as poorly. Sasuke had collapsed on the Hokage's floor. He had lost a great deal of body temperature due to his exposure to the rain and the cold and was delirious. He implored the hokage to help him and his child before he fainted."

"He was sick?"

"Yes. I had informed the Hokage of my opinions toward Sasuke and his daughter's acute conditions, stating that I felt it best to take them directly to hospital, but the Hokage was worried for their security and opted to take them to Tsunade-sama instead. I cared for the baby girl for a time, then was relieved of my duty under the strictest orders to remain silent on the matter."

"Naruto-kun… I would not say I was Uchiha Sasuke's friend. I would not even consider him a particularly close comrade as I know very little about him. But he is one of Konoha's. And regardless of his brand as a nukenin, he is one of the village. I trust the Hokage's judgement. Why? Because I feel that his personal connection to Sasuke aids a stronger and empathetic consideration of his position than that of someone who does not know him particularly well – like myself."
"Yeah," Naruto murmured, not fully understanding. "What?"

"In short, I feel the Hokage has a greater plan in place than that of simply incarcerating Uchiha Sasuke." Shino replied. "If he had wanted to exact punitive measures, he would have simply taken the baby and ordered Sasuke to be delivered – if you'll excuse the term – to a maximum security cell. I am sure Ibiki-san would have easily drawn any truth the Hokage wished to know from Sasuke by force. And most certainly the Kage Council would have seen this as an appropriate ruling. It is quiet. It is tidy. It keeps the public out of such… vilifying affairs. A few years down the line, you might say that no one would even remember him. He would remain forgotten. Tucked into the neat space of memory that our village tends to rely on." There was a slight hacking noise. "-heavily."

"You think Kakashi's got more up his sleeve?" Naruto said.

"Besides his arms, yes. " Shino rested his hands in his pockets. Naruto eyed him critically for a moment, wondering if that was a joke, then, unsatisfied, tossed the empty carton he was holding into the trash.

"So what was your mission?"

"Investigating the whereabouts of Sasuke's attackers," Shino replied, to which Naruto nodded slowly.

"Kakashi thinks he was attacked?"

"He informed me thus." Shino told him. "Without painting too graphic a picture, Sasuke's injuries told a story of violence and non-consensual… relations. He had asked me to analyze some of the dirt and debris on Sasuke's clothing and investigate the route of his journey. I have been working under Pakkun's guidance along with the other NinKen to execute sweeps of the area around Konoha in search of any pursuers."

"People are coming after Sasuke?" Naruto frowned. "For… for the babies?"

"There is a possibility. Thus far, we have extricated very little, though Sasuke has provided further information regarding the offending party's looks and physique."

"He… He said it himself… He told you… that someone…" Naruto seemed to fight for words. He felt like he was drowning. Guilt tugged him down as it curled about his ankles and whispered at him with slick, cold tongues.

*It was your fault.*

"He told Tsunade-sama," Shino answered, perhaps a little more kindly than before. "And she passed the information on out of necessity. Ostensibly, Sasuke has been reluctant in revealing details of his ordeal, but I believe that is a sense of fear and mistrust that may be affecting him. It is not common for Shinobi to put much stock in the nature of trauma affliction on the individual, but I have particular interest in the subject. Why? Because, like insects, Shinobi value strength and wellness. To the point where those who do not meet standards will remain as outsiders and will perish. While I believe this is natural for the world of… bugs, I do not think it is a principle that suits humans. After my own personal observations, I do not believe it is fair, or that it is right. That being said I trust the information I am providing will not be something your repeat at this point in time."

Naruto's head shook with a vigor that was likely to shatter a vertebrae. His eyes were dark. Sad.
The light behind them appeared to fade slightly, and Shino found himself resting his hand on his peer's shoulder, reassuringly.

"I am telling you this, Uzumaki Naruto, not simply because I have been allowed to, but because I feel that it is necessary for you to know. You were alone once, as was Sasuke. Now you are not and you have flourished. You are a hero. You have proven your ability, strength and compassion just as you have always proclaimed you would. I believe that this growth of character could be developed by your friend as well, given the support and encouragement that you have sought, received and inspired over the years. I tell you this as a ninja of Konoha, to a fellow ninja for a fellow ninja. And I feel you will do well to seek a reunion with your errant team mate."

"S-sure…"

"My insects tell me that Shikamaru has visited twice now. And Ino has been offering colourful gifts of flowers to help brighten his mood. Though they have been unable to locate Kiba at this time, the others of the Rookie Nine have all become rather… protective of him. In their own way."

Shino smiled. It was hard to tell as his thick flak jacket covered most of the bottom of his face, but Naruto could see the apples of his cheeks grow rounder, and the skin at the corners of his eyes crinkle ever so slightly. Even the creepy insectophile could be supportive. Naruto just felt the sinking feeling in the pit of his belly grow deeper. He was an asshole. And it was his fault.

"D-does Sasuke… like having company?" He asked, as though it was a completely foreign concept. Shino shrugged.

"It difficult to ascertain, but it appears so." Shino pulled up his collar and took a step toward the door. "Though you may know better if you asked him yourself."

"Yeah," Naruto replied, taking Shino's glass to rinse it. "I should. I probably should."

Shino waited for any further commentary, and when none came he let himself out of the apartment, steeling himself against the night air. Naruto was affected far deeper than he'd thought and it was certainly something more than just an awkwardness at Sasuke's return and unconventional predicament. But he knew far too little on the details of Sasuke and Naruto's personal grievances, and sought instead to continue with his mission. Bull loomed down from the guttering and snorted.

"Ain't picked up nuffink here, Shino-kun," he rumbled in a low voice. "Shiba said we oughta give it a rest for t'night and try norff tomorra, bright n' early-like."

"The scent picks up stronger in the morning," Shiba explained, leaping off the roof to the balcony below. "The others have the walls covered for tonight and we'll rendezvous with them at dawn."

"Agreed," Shino said, calling forth one of his moths to settle on his finger as he outlined the new plan of action. The small creature appeared to wait until Shino had finished speaking, then fluttered off into the night, heading toward Sasuke's apartments. Shino watched as the ninken vanished in a puff of ozone. He paused, listening in toward Naruto's apartment - just to make sure the other was all right - before disappearing into the night himself.

Had he held a moment longer, he would have heard the muffled shattering of glass as it exploded in Naruto's hand and the dogs would have smelled the scent of the jinchuuriki blood that dripped to the floor for a few long, painful seconds before the wounds closed with a speed and efficiency that only the strongest chakra could provide. Perhaps they would not have seen Naruto double over, crouching low to the floor in the mixture of grief and pain that arrested him so suddenly and so violently, but they might have heard him utter Sasuke's name. And they might have heard, if they
really listened, the brief, choked apology that followed.

The woman linked her fingers and frowned at the paper in front of her with the kind of dismayed expression primary school teachers have bound into their DNA through constant experience.

"That's all?" She said. The boy across the table from her glared out from under his fur-lined hood.

"That's all," he replied.

"It's not much to go on."

"I don't know much, do I? I told you that."

"You don't know much, or you don't want to know much." The woman spoke, shrewdly. Kiba shook his head, trying hard not to roll his eyes.

"I don't know much. He didn't say anything about anything." There was the scrape of sharp teeth and the sound of claws tapping on the formica surface. "Can't give you any more than that – you'll have to wait for some kinda public statement or whatever."

"That's far too late."

"Beggars can't be choosers."

"I guess so," the woman sighed, then opened her camera and handed Kiba the film inside. "There. As promised. Your torrid tete-a-tete as tit for tat. No copies were made, you have my word."

"Your word?" Kiba narrowed his eyes. "Yeah right. And how much is your word worth, eh?"

"Oh about two-fifty a line," the woman smiled. "But in your case, it's worth your head. And your girlfriends'. Don't look down your muzzle at it."

"Yeah thanks," Kiba grumbled, glaring at the table as the woman eased up out of her chair, dismissing herself with a smile. He hated that smile. He wanted to crush it through her face. as for the 'nine? They would know it was him. They'd all know it was him, it was obvious. He doubted they'd even be surprised. There would be words when he returned; he'd have plenty to answer for. But now, there was only the comfort of Tamaki's arms as he slunk back into the hotel room and curled up next to her. There was her warmth. Her smell. Her kindness. And as he lost himself once again in the song of her scent and her flesh he wondered: How could this work if love wasn't involved? How mechanical and alien would it feel, if there was no connection. Or no want, or will. Through a body that wasn't your own, that you were forced to inhabit?

What would it be like to do this if it wasn't his choice?

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Part two to come soon! Those of you on my Tumblr may notice Naruto's little peeping Tom stint isn't in this chapter - it's on its way, as is Ino's introduction to Mikoto and Sakura finally, finally buying a clue.

Thanks for all the support! And thankyou Apeture_Living for the beta, counseling and
slaps-upside-the-head!
Konoha, 11th March  
Year of the Hare

Ino could honestly say she had never seen such a pretty baby in her life.

Sure, Mikoto slept with wild abandon in her cot – her positioning similar to one of Lee's stances mid-fight, if someone had thought to film him, then hit the pause button at the right moment. Sure, her little pajama-ed feet splayed in the most unladylike manner while two balled fists rested in kinetic readiness on either side of her face. Sure, there was drool crusting slowly on her cheeks and her hair was a manic black plume cresting the top of her head. That was just inconsequential fodder. Mikoto was beautiful because she was here. She was alive. And because she managed to bring something out of Uchiha Sasuke that Ino had never seen before – to the point where she wondered if it ever really existed until now. The metamorphosis was underway as soon as he caught sight of her: nonchalance faded, his common dismissive exterior softened and crumbled away. And when he reached into the cot to stroke the hair on her little damp forehead, he did so with such gentleness and such possession that it robbed Ino of the few words she'd lined up. Instead she stared, her fingers resting on the edges of the little bed as Sasuke smiled ever, ever, ever so slightly.

"Mikoto," he announced, somewhat apologetically, "in all her glory."

"Oh," Ino breathed. "She's beautiful."

One thin, dark brow arched. "She's a mess."

"Babies are messy, though, right?" Ino reached out, letting her hand follow Sasuke's as he stroked Mikoto's cheek. She was soft. Her skin felt like rose petals that had only just unfurled to greet the sun.

"Are they?"

"So I've heard."

"Hn," Sasuke said, somewhat appeased. "Been around many?"

"No. Well, yes. I've seen them into the shop all the time. But I don't have any younger sisters or brothers. And my cousins all moved to the east of the Fire Country. We never visit them that often, really. Dad was always too busy for much visiting. And now it's just me and Mom in the store, so…"

Sasuke kept toying with Mikoto's hair. "Your Dad's in the Intelligence Division, isn't he."

"He was."

"Was?" Sasuke looked up. He was about to ask if Inoichi had transferred, but the look on Ino's suggested that the relocation was far more permanent than a simple shifting of office. Something tugged in his chest, and the words
"I'm sorry," fell out of his mouth before he even realized they were there; he didn't even know where they'd come from. He stopped to consider them as though he could see them hanging in midair. He'd never been on the other side of this situation before, not with someone like Ino. As it was, Ino just shrugged.

"Sorry? Why? You didn't kill him."

"It's what you're supposed to say, isn't it?" Sasuke replied. "I'm sorry? I guess…. for your loss? Or something."

"Oh," There was a slow nod. "Yeah. Maybe. It just doesn't feel like anything though. I mean, I'd like to say thank you, you know, because that's polite. It's what people expect, but it never feels right to me."

"People say it a lot?"

"Mhmm" Ino frowned. "What, they didn't to you?"

"No," Sasuke seemed to mull this over for a second, then shook his head. "Not really, no. Sometimes, at the start, but after a few months, no."

"Oh."

"Do you hate it?" Sasuke's voice dropped a little. "When they say 'I'm sorry' as though it was partially their fault, or they feel guilty or just bad for you… It's bullshit, right?"

"I think people just don't know what to say."

"Maybe they shouldn't say anything at all if they can't say something worthwhile."

Ino turned and gave Sasuke a skeptical look. Somehow she felt as though she'd learned more about him in this small exchange of words than she ever had in thirteen years. Was this what grief could do to people? Was this why Sasuke had pushed them all away - because no one had ever known what to say. All he'd ever heard were hollow apologies?

"I don't even know why I'm complaining," she said, tentatively. "To you, I mean. I lost one person. Just one. That's nothing like a clan."

Sasuke hesitated. Nothing like a clan? Hardly. It was thoughtful of her to say, to offer that kind of modesty even in grief, but he could see that she was bordering on tears. She must have missed her father terribly, and while she was holding strong - maybe for his benefit, maybe for herself - that resolution was briskly crumbling. It almost hurt to hear, the loss was so close to the surface, and he felt a pang when her tears finally breached.

He remembered Naruto's claim to understanding his own personal tragedy after the death of his teacher. There was need in those eyes. Common ground. It was there just like it always had been, yet Sasuke was too angry to see it. Too angry. Too involved in himself. Naruto was competition, not compassion and the blinkers of disgust and rage kept his focus steady on his own path. He hadn't considered how much even one person's death could affect the life of another. He knew grief, only he didn't understand it. Yet after he'd watched Itachi die for the second time, things started to change. Lucidity intervened and disrupted. Pain stopped being a scale and began to morph into something else. It was a roadblock, a mountain. It was still an obstacle, but it wasn't his anymore. He'd begun to feel it around and through everyone, everything. He wasn't sure what it had become – not yet – but it didn't feel something he could claim anymore.
"No," he said. "It's not the same thing. But it's loss. It's not a competition." Of course, the obligatory Try telling me that three years ago popped into his mind because he knew, he just knew she'd be thinking it. But Ino merely looked up at him with wet eyes and sucked her lip as she nodded.

"Yeah," she said, offering a wan smile. "It's not. I just wish the sorry thing would stop, though. No offence-" she added quickly. "I just wish… people could find something else to say."

"Like 'Those fucking bastards'?"

Ino almost fell over. "W-what?"

"Wouldn't it be better if someone said that?" Sasuke elaborated. "'Fuck those guys' or… I don't know 'Shit, didn't expect that' or something. People should be more honest with their reactions. Say what they mean."

"You mean like 'That's the worst thing I've heard!'?"

"Yeah."

"That's horrible'," Ino said, perking up a little. "That's… That… uh… That-"

"That fucking sucks'."

"That fucking sucks!" Ino laughed, tears spilling over her cheeks. "It… it does! It really sucks."

"It blows," Sasuke encouraged, channeling his memories of Suigetsu's colourful expletives for inspiration. Ino's lip quivered though her smile, but she only laughed harder.

"It blows! It sucks! Right? Because it does suck. And there's nothing anyone can do about it. So there's no point in being sorry. Fuck sorry."

Sasuke watched as Ino seemed to let loose of something inside of her. It was irk that had sat under the surface for far too long, itching and burning with its constancy. And he smiled. He knew that feeling. He knew exactly how little "sorry" meant when there was nothing that could be done. He almost suggested revenge, but decided that perhaps that was not in Ino's nature. Perhaps it never was in his.

"Things will… Settle." Sasuke offered, finally.

"It won't get easier, though, will it?" Ino said. Her voice had become thick and syrupy, like each word was dragging itself through the last. Sasuke shook his head.

"No," he said. "And you don't miss them any less. You just get used to it. More things come along, and start to build over the sadness. And if you want, you can keep letting that happen. It helps. I would have never said it at the time, but I think it did. But they're always there. And it'll always hurt."

"Yeah," Ino sniffed. "Damn. I do miss him. I miss him every day. I miss the way my Mom used to be before he died. I miss spending time on missions, instead of being at the shop. But I can't say any of these things, because people will think I'm selfish. They'll think that I'm weak or that I'm belittling my father's death. But I'm not. I'm just being realistic. Mom's still wearing black. But I can't. After six months I started wearing my usual outfits again and when she saw me she burst into tears. I've never felt so shitty in my life, but I… I couldn't go on like that. I couldn't stay dead like that….you know?"
"Stay dead," Sasuke repeated. He'd never heard it like that before… but that's what it was. It was death. It was never moving from that spot – it was being an avenger and that was all. It was focus, but it was stagnation. For all the power he'd accumulated, all the ability he'd built, in the end, he was dead. "Yeah."

He wanted to touch Ino. He wanted to rest his hands on her skin and feel that grief bleeding through her. He wanted to know how it felt coming from someone else. It was mesmerizing as much as it was awful. But he couldn't. There was a neat fold in reality that separated them and he couldn't smooth it out. Briefly, he teetered on the edge of the crevasse, unsure of how to crack the silence then Mikoto gurgled and shifted, blinking her dark eyes a few times before she let out a loud yawn.

"Oh," Ino said, worried. "We woke her?"

"No, you'd know if you did," Sasuke said. He let Mikoto take his hand and snorted when she gripped it, smiling widely and cooing. "She usually dozes for a while before she drops off, it's fine."

"Look at her grin!" Ino exclaimed. "What a smile!"

"Yeah," Sasuke replied. "Don't know where she got that from."

"You, obviously."

"I don't smile like that."

"Maybe you do," Ino said gently. "When you think no one's watching."

Sasuke nodded a little before reaching into the cot and hefting his daughter into his arms. "Maybe I do," he said, then turned and held her out to Ino. "I guess only she could tell you."

Ino glanced at him apprehensively, before she reached out and slowly took the baby to hold. Suddenly was a light, warm weight in her arms and the smell of Mikoto's milky skin surrounding her and Ino had to admit, she felt a lot better. Mikoto let out a concerned guff, but smiled again when Ino kissed her nose. "Hello Mikoto," she said. "I..." There was a pause, and she laughed. "I don't know! What else do you say to babies?"

"'Ow', 'No and 'That Hurts', most of the time," Sasuke replied. "But really, you can tell 'em anything you like."

"You," Ino swayed a little on her feet. "Are so cute! Did you know that, Mikoto? You're so cute, I just wanna eat you up!" Her tone was light – almost falsetto - and for a minute, Mikoto just stared at her, completely thrown. No one had spoken to her like that before – not with that squeaky, funny voice. The grin crumpled for a minute, the frown came down and Ino held her breath waiting for the cry that was sure to come. But suddenly one of her long bangs slipped over her shoulder, and the baby was immediately entranced by the tempting ribbon of corn silk-coloured hair that dangled perfect vicinity of her grabbing hands. Ino winced when she obliged. "Oh… ok… ow. No... no! That hurts, honey. Ow!"

"Told you."

"Help!" Ino was caught between crying and laughing as Mikoto yanked with gleeful abandon. In seconds, Sasuke had intervened – a bullet of greased precision - and took his daughter back while Ino tucked her hair away, making sure the elastic held all the strands away from her face. "Guess you have to remember to do that all the time."
"She doesn't pull mine so much anymore," Sasuke said, padding over to the bed to sit down. "Not when she found out how fun it was to torture Tsunade. I guess yours looks a lot like hers. I'm surprised you grew it out again."

"Yeah, well I guess I just like it long," Ino began, then stopped and blinked in surprise. "Wait, you remember I had it short?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"I didn't think you noticed things like that."

"I have eyes." Sasuke replied. He understood where she was coming from, but at the same time it baffled him. "Never thought long hair on the field was a good idea. Gets caught in everything. Leaves traces behind."

"Well you had longer hair than quite a few of the guys!" Ino challenged, playfully. She moved across the room and, not wanting to sit on his bed, kneeled on the floor in front of him, happily accepting Mikoto a second time. Sasuke shrugged.

"Not long enough to be a hindrance," he replied. "Not like the Hyuuga."

"What's wrong with the Hyuuga?"

"Never really understood why a clan whose signature move included *spinning* would grow their hair long. You'd think they'd end up tangled in it."

Ino laughed, hard. "I never thought of that!"

"The girl in our year... H... Hana..."

"Hinata."

"Hinata. Yeah. She had the right idea," Sasuke nodded. "That kinda short thing she had going on. Made a lot more sense than having it pose a potential problem. That genius from the year above ours... I don't know what he was thinking."

"Well she grew hers out anyway, so maybe you could ask her," Ino smiled. "Unfortunately Neji is... no longer with us so... might be kinda hard to get his opinion."

"Oh," Sasuke ran his hands through Mikoto's messy locks. "Well. That fucking sucks."

"It sure does," Ino mused, bouncing Mikoto a little. She watched as Sasuke attempted to tidy the bird's nest atop his daughter's head and smiled. "So... Are you going to keep Mikoto's hair short like this?"

"Yes. Easier to wash. Easier to keep clean; she gets everything in it." Sasuke gave a sly smile. "Besides, it's kind of entertaining at this length. Watch."

He placed his hands at either side of the baby's head and gently ran his fingers through her hair, bringing them to a steeple them at her crown. The thick, dark crest stayed in place, a perfect mohawk. She blinked at Ino, confounded as Ino started laughing again.

"That's *way* too cute! Does it stay?"

"All day," Sasuke grinned, smoothing it flat, then combed it to the side. Never before had a baby looked more like she was wearing a toupee. Ino gasped with laughter.
"Oh no… no don't do that – that looks terrible!"

"That one's 'Greasy Small Town Arms Dealer', then you've got "Wind Tunnel"," he combed the hair straight back from her face. Mikoto cackled along with her guest, wondering what the joke was. "And "Okonomiyaki". The hair went forward this time, just like the pancake of its namesake. Ino snorted and ruffled it out of the shape with careful fingers.

"When did you figure that trick out? Has she always had hair this thick?"

"Yeah, but not as long as this." Sasuke said. "And I don't know. On the road, I guess. There were a lot of times we were rained in and couldn't travel. You find your own entertainment."

"I'll bet." Ino started forming little pin curls to frame Mikoto's face. "So you… you were travelling for a while?"

"Can't remember how long. Maybe a month or two."

"You… you must have been far away," Ino tried, carefully. Sasuke just raised his thin, dark brows.

"Did you get caught in the weather a lot?"

"Sort of. The early winter rains sucked, but it's better than snow. The mountains were hard enough without snow."

"You travelled over the mountains?" Ino stopped playing with the baby's hair to look up. Sasuke was staring at the ground between the space of his knees. He nodded vaguely in response. Ino wet her lips. "I-Is that where… the people who took you-"

"I'd better put her down," Sasuke cut in, suddenly. He pushed to his feet, his gazed focused somewhere on the floorboards. "If she doesn't sleep now, she'll wake me early. We've just gotten into a routine type thing, so-"

"No it's fine, it's… yeah. Don't want to interrupt that," Ino agreed, letting Sasuke take the little girl. She watched as he rocked her a few times and waved at her as he lay her back down. "I-I should get going anyway. It's late. Mom'll be wondering where I am."

Sasuke walked her to the door, holding it open as Ino slipped her sandals back on. One hand fell to his stomach as his son began moving, but he didn't let the discomfort show in his face. Ino adjusted the straps on her civilian shoes and straightened, smiling again.

"Thanks, that was…" She sought for something to say, and came up dry. Another shrug covered what words could not. "It was so nice to meet Mikoto. Maybe I can come by in the day sometime? I-I should bring by a vase for the flowers, if that's alright with you?"

"I'm home after three, usually." Sasuke told her, without really adding a formal invitation. Ino just nodded.

"Sure. After three. Ok." She sucked her lip again. "Sasuke… It's… Good to have you back. It really is."

"Is it." A statement, not a question. Sasuke looked away. "It was a necessity."

"Despite that-" Ino drummed her fingers against the doorframe. "-It's good. Despite the reasons and… and everything… It's good."

"I can't believe that."
"I know. But… Just trust me, ok?" Ino a step back onto the porch before she paused and raised a hand to her jawline, gesturing lightly. "You know, if you ever wanted yours cut, I'd be happy to do it for you. Take it back to how it used to be, uh… if you wanted."

"Maybe," Sasuke replied. He stepped back as she excused herself and watched as she left the compound, turning to wave at the gate. _Take it back to how it used to be_ he thought, lifting his arms to cover his thin shoulders against the evening chill. He didn't know how he'd feel if he tried to make any attempt to look like himself again, it didn't feel right. He was too different now; it would probably only highlight how much he'd changed; how much he'd been forced to alter. It was unlikely that he'd ever really be able to go back – he'd been moving forward for so long out of utter, desperate need.

He'd returned to Konoha, and that was one thing. To relapse into Uchiha Sasuke again – the real Uchiha Sasuke? Hell. He wasn't strong enough for that yet. He didn't even know if he could. Limbo was comfortably hollow and he would remain in it for as long as he could until reality caught up to him. It wouldn't be long now – he could see the familiar trails of recognition in the distance.

Sasuke watched as Ino disappeared into the dark streets beyond the Hokage apartments.

He didn't wave back.

It was much later that night when Naruto pressed his nose against the cold dusty glass of the window and squinted into the gloom. The building – an old, musty bookkeeper's store room filled with parchment and scrolls and a regular haunt of Naruto's - was positioned across the street from the Hokage apartments and separated from the compound by long and narrow wall. The street was wide and had been, up until an hour ago, particularly busy with a steady stream of ninja and civilians alike as they headed past the rear of the offices and into town for a late dinner. But the hubbub had long past and the street had shifted into silence. Every now and again a dog barked. A few pigeons in a small, tight nest to the right of his window cooed and fluttered in their sleep. Naruto was uninterrupted in his vigil, which was probably for the best as he didn't quite know why he was there. Technically he was meant to be watering the bookkeeper's plants while she was away, and since he'd already done that an hour ago (after guiltily stashing one of the dead begonias in the cellar and making a mental note to buy another off Ino in the morning), the question became less about attendance and more concerning the length of the visit. He should have gone home; it was late. He'd have Kakashi to answer to in the morning. Then Sakura, if she was still feeling salty from the outcome of their last discussion.

He didn't even know what he expected to see given that Sasuke's window was rather small and the room was as dark as pitch. But he was there. And he was watching, because watching was so much easier than speaking. He felt his breath sliding painfully around in his throat as he leaned his forehead on the glass, peering in closer.

Across from him, Sasuke's apartment was dark and still. There was light in one of the windows, but it was Tsunade's pigtailed head that he saw bobbing around as she drank sake and read her reports. Sasuke was in the small room beside hers. He could feel him there, could almost sense the heat from his body; almost smell the scent of his skin. If he wanted, he could have leapt across to the wall, crept over the tiles and placed himself directly outside - maybe even let himself in. But he couldn't be in that space yet. He wanted to be, but he couldn't. He was still the boy who walked the street alone, staring down at the other solitary figure on the wharf. The boy who understood, but didn't. The best friend. The rival. The brother. The Enemy. Judge and jury.

Saviour and executioner.
Naruto swallowed hard.

His eyesight was better than most, sharper. His night vision could rival Kiba's, even Hinata's if he really concentrated. He could see Sasuke asleep in bed, saw his t-shirt rumpled, his blankets a knotted mess about his legs. That dark hair was splayed like an ink blot over his pillow and every now and then he tossed and rolled restlessly, his body registering discomfort before his conscience even caught wind of it.

Naruto had watched Sasuke sleep before, back in the days of missions and arguments. When they were camping together, training together and at that point in his life Sasuke had slept like bedrock. Motionless. Deep. At least Naruto had interpreted it. But the way that Sasuke looked when he woke in the morning, Naruto wondered exactly how restful that sleep really was. Or if he'd just spent the night quietly listening. Planning. Waiting. Revenge still thick on his mind. His eyes had always been sharp, but they were forever cradled by dark circles beneath them, or redness in the corners. Later, Naruto had begun to doubt that Sasuke really slept at all – not the way normal people slept anyway. He was always ready. Always alert. In their time as part of team seven, Sasuke slept on guard. Now Naruto was witnessing what might have been the way Sasuke really acted in the throes of his dreams. Messy. Erratic. It was so unlike him, so hilariously opposite, that Naruto almost laughed.

Almost.

But then something shifted and suddenly Sasuke was awake, sitting up slowly, blearily. Naruto felt his heart leap into his mouth and hang off the dimpled skin of his tongue. Blue eyes widened and he pulled away from the glass a little – considering briefly ducking under the windowsill and counting to ten. Though he was hidden away in a building well out of sight, he still felt vulnerable and as wide open as ever. He even hid his chakra in case Sasuke might be able to sense it. He couldn't, of course and Naruto knew that, but he did so anyway. Force of habit. Everything about Sasuke was habit.

But Sasuke didn't show any sign of awareness that he was being observed. He scrubbed at his face with his hand and he pushed himself out of bed, moving with the kind of tired determination only a new parent could possess. He wore only the over-sized t-shirt and what appeared to be pajama pants, but the whole ensemble dangled off him experimentally as though he were no more than a clothes hanger. He drifted over to the cot and picked up his little girl, holding her close to his chest while she appeared to fuss. All Naruto saw was the dull blue of her Babygro and her dark head against white skin. He hadn't managed to get a good look at her yet – not even at the hearing – and he found himself wondering how much she looked like Sasuke. Was she just a mini version of himself, or would there be differences? Would the father be in there somewhere too? Who was he? What did he look like? Who was the other mixture of genes that helped to create the little person Sasuke was protecting so diligently?

Did she have blue eyes? What if she was blonde?

Naruto let the thoughts hang in the back of his mind, reckless and stupid while he sat, his eyes following Sasuke as he attempted to comfort his child by pacing the room in lumbering, fatigue-weighty steps. Finally he shuffled over to sit on the bed and held her against him, supporting her with one hand. The other he slipped back into the arm of the shirt, then out the neck revealing his shoulder his chest and oh god…

Naruto gulped when he caught sight of Sasuke's breast, and he shut his eyes for a second, embarrassment surging over and engulfing him like a wave. That was a breast. That was a lady bit and god, Sakura used to elbow his jaw for even catching sight of her bra strap. He shouldn't be
Only two seconds later he was flat out staring; morbidly curious, undeniably fascinated. Sasuke’s breast was there, right there! It was something that was part of him, when really it was really something that should have been on a girl. And Sasuke wasn’t a girl, was he? Though his figure spoke the contrary and he held, with sleep-sluggish, yet practiced hands, the little child up to a prominent nipple, he wasn’t. He couldn’t be. He was Sasuke, he. He wouldn’t be changed like that – couldn’t be. Not him. Not even with breasts like that, with the middle bits all dark like a cherries and swollen – he was… he was still him! Still…. Still. Naruto bit his lip.

Still him? He was so different though. The hair was sort of the same and the eyes were just as elegant and sharp as always but the rest? The rest of him was sliding so far away on the Sasuke-scale that it was starting to become extremely obvious why he was able to hide for so long in Konoha without anyone noticing. Those breasts (well, that breast – the one he could see) were small, but plump and high. It would have looked very strange had he been as muscular as he was back when Naruto had known him, but he’d been reduced to a mere sliver of himself. The strength that he’d built over his countless hours training had melted away, leaving behind a thin, near-starved looking figure that wouldn’t have been out of place in a cornfield scaring crows. As it was, Sasuke’s shoulder blade stuck out like a wing and the naked arm that cradled his daughter’s head was threaded with long lines of muscle, not from strength, but more from emaciation. His elbows seemed unnaturally large in comparison to his upper arms and his wrists were collared by a network of prominent veins.

He was sick. Naruto thought, remembering Shino’s words. Yeah. It looked like it. Sick enough to lose such a vast amount of muscle mass that he now appeared more slight and feminine than ever. Sick enough that his only option was to come home. To return to the people he’d sworn to forget, then kill, then save… Or was it control? Naruto was never sure he caught what Sasuke had really meant that day on the battlefield. After all, he had previously taken a few choice blows to the head. And died. And fought a God. Though he’d heard every word Sasuke had spat at him, it was understandable that the meaning might have skipped a few chapters. It hadn’t been good, that was certainly clear. Clear enough for Naruto to want to stop him, after all. And he really only meant to stop him. Not this. He’d never wanted this. Sasuke would have rather died than this, surely. Surely? But he was Sasuke. And Sasuke didn’t ever seem to care what happened to him as long as he reached his goal. Whatever his goal was now. Did he even have one?

Naruto hunkered down in the darkness behind the window, resting his chin on his arm. He felt something old and lonely stretch out inside him like a cat taking a nap. Was Kurama right? Should he just go talk to him? Make conversation? Try to pretend what happened between them never happened? Brush it off like pollen dust? Knowing full well that Sasuke had seen everything inside him; seen him at his worst.

And his best. When the world was right and Sasuke was his. Not just back in Konoha; not just part of team seven again. His. Those dreams, those warm, wet little thoughts that he’d entertained – first as a sort of fascinated obsession, then as routine exploration of his own desires – became far more prominent after Sasuke had left. If questioned, he could rightly admit that his aspirations were a way of keeping Sasuke close – a proximity that felt natural to him, simply because if a ninja lost sight of his goal, he would lose his motivation for improvement. On the other hand, Sasuke’s memory was very particular to Naruto and the way that he remembered his friend might not have been quite as platonic when viewed from the sidelines. Naruto remembered Sasuke the way that Kumara remembered the thrill of hunting a small animal or fucking another demonic fox. There were voyeuristic intones, haptic resonances. Images and instances where he’d mapped Sasuke’s body with his eyes and played it over and over again in his thoughts. His fantasies of lives that
You little freak, his mind – the nasty, frightened part that still lingered at the very back in the shadows - hissed at him. You little abnormality. You psycho. Is that why you wanted to beat him, huh? Is it twisted in your mind into some sort of sexual thing? Do you want to fuck him that badly?

Sasuke had seen everything and Sasuke would hate him. No, that wasn't right. Sasuke wouldn't hate him; Sasuke wouldn't anything him. He'd snort the way he always did when something wasn't worth his attention and just turn away. Naruto didn't linger in Sasuke's thoughts the way Sasuke was infused in Naruto's. He wouldn't care. He really really wouldn't care, though he might perhaps think him less of a man because he preferred men. Less of a man, less manly… well that meant he was less strong, right? Less dangerous or… or heroic. That's what the village would think. All his fan girls would think. Everyone. He'd been different all his life… Why the hell did he think he could be anything like the rest of them? Ultimately, Sasuke probably wouldn't care and it was that apathy that would burn him to the core. He was weak to give in to his desires and he was weird to admit that he liked guys. The fact that Gaara also spent a lot of time with him and was the first to invite him up to his room and ask if Naruto would like to put his dick in his mouth, well that little fact was forgotten for now. Naruto was caught in his brooding, and the world was never more blue than when Naruto felt sorry for himself.

He swallowed hard and bit at a fingernail, nibbling the ragged edges until he tasted blood. He was pathetic. He was an idiot. Here he was, busy worrying about himself and how he would look to the world and Sasuke was here in front of him, skinny, exhausted and completely, utterly remodeled into something that wasn't even recognizable as the boy who'd stood up against the Shinobi Way with nothing but an idea and a truckload of vilification. Naruto's grounding for social anxiety was sound – his fear of rejection was still basic instinct no matter how strong or popular he became – but when it was compared with Sasuke's predicament, it seemed so… trivial. So small. Whatever happened to Sasuke had changed him, and yet rather than hiding away, obsessing about it, Sasuke had reached out to those he knew could help him. It was a risk – a great risk. Hell, he could have come back only to find himself thrown into Ibiki's cells, his daughter and legacy ripped from him without much of a chance to state his case. But he'd risked it. Public humility, shame, embarrassment, incarceration… he'd risked it all, because he needed help. He had less reason to trust Konoha than anyone, and yet in his time of need, he'd put his faith into the village. Maybe for the fact that he had no other choice, or maybe because he found the strength to honor his brother's wishes.

Or maybe he was just fucking strong enough to deal with anything that might come his way. He was still Uchiha Sasuke. He was still himself.

You're Uzumaki Naruto. You're a Hero. When you talk, people listen. Even if they don't like what you say; they'll listen.

And suddenly Naruto felt more ridiculous than he ever had in his life. Fretting that he might be shunned just because he liked to ride cock, and Sasuke - his eternal rival, his match - was literally twenty feet away from him, breastfeeding. That trumped any hand Naruto could deal, it put his entire deck out of the equation. And while the sudden clarity gave him a new perspective on his reactions (and the fact that he was, definitely, a complete assat), it didn't help how he would approach the issue of their relationship. Or fill the chasm that sat between them. Did Sasuke hate him? Would he hate him? Or could they start again?

Naruto had… well, forgiven was a tough word, but it was accurate. Naruto had forgiven him. he practically had the moment he'd left the hearing, only he couldn't understand why and that just made him angry. So had the menacing thought Well, haven't the mighty fallen? that had sidled into
his mind as soon as he'd caught sight of Sasuke's face. So had the *I win*. He hated this habitual reaction that seemed to be knotted into his DNA and made everything into a competition. He hated that, when it came to Sasuke, he still hadn't moved past his singular need to beat him. Battle him. Prove his one-upmanship. He hated thinking that.

So he'd forgive him.

Only he wondered if Sasuke would do the same. Something low and visceral told him he doubted it.

Naruto watched Sasuke for a long time. He fell asleep with his chin on his hand and his nose prickling in the cold. He fell asleep alone.

Tenten sighed as she rolled over and crooked her arm beneath her head. She was wearing the panties that showed the line of her ass through the lace, and the fancy bra with that straps that built an A frame around her breasts, but Sakura hadn't seemed to notice. The other girl lay on the bed, naked, staring up at the ceiling. Her expression was troubled; nothing at all like someone who'd just enjoyed a solid hour of physical gratifications. Tenten wiped her knuckles over her lips and cleared her throat.

"You know, you kind of deserved it," she said after a moment. Sakura seemed to startle, then turned to look at her bed mate. Her expression was that of a kicked puppy.

"What?"

"You deserved it." Tenten repeated. She flicked a tendril of dark hair out of her eyes.

Sakura stared at her. "Deserved it?"

"Yeah." The smile on Tenten's face wasn't unkind and the matter of fact tone in her voice made the statement seem less accusatory and more reflective, if anything. "Well, you *did* trash talk the guy while you had your fingers in him. Kind of an intimate time to be pulling rank, don't you think?"

"Yes, I know that. I told you already how bad I felt about that." Sakura replied glancing down at her hands. There was a time when she used to paint her nails. Now the polish stayed on only as long as her first left hook. She'd donated most of her colours to Moegi, who'd offered to paint them for her on special occasions instead. "It was wrong."

"Wrong? Unprofessional. Cruel. No… what's the word? Vicious…"

"I get your point, Tenten!"

"Do you?"

"Of course I do!" Sakura sat up abruptly. "Shit, I was about to quit that day! I don't know why Tsunade-sensei let me carry on! I practically had to force her to give me some form of punishment and that's only going to last a week or so! Where are you going with this, exactly?"

"Well, you accept the fact that you pulled a pretty damn nasty stunt, but you're here complaining that Sasuke didn't forgive you. How's that understanding?" Tenten answered. "You're getting the reaction from him that you didn't get from Tsunade, yet you're *surprised*?"

Sakura paused for a moment. True, she hadn't really expected a glowing reunion from him, but she *had* apologized. She *had* admitted fault. "I said I was sorry."
"Sorry's really only an acknowledgement that you've done something wrong," Tenten said. "It's not going to fix anything. Sure, you might have felt better-"

"-I didn't feel better –"

"- but he was probably still smarting after that. You hit him where it hurt and for no other reason than because you could. And he knew that."

"I know! I know!" Sakura wailed. "And I tried to tell him that! I tried to explain! I told him that it was hard to see him again because of all that happened between us, I said I was sorry. I said I felt terrible! I don't know what else to say!"

"You don't? Try using the word "I" less," Tenten told her. When Sakura glanced at her, aghast, she shrugged. "Sakura, I really like you, ok? I do. You're strong, you're brave. You're an excellent kunoichi and a talented med nin. You're kind and you're sweet and you're an awesome lay. But hell if you aren't one of the most self-centered people I've ever met."

Sakura didn't know what to say to that. Her mouth hung open. Betrayal flashed in her eyes and materialized in heavy tears. "Tenten…"

"Hear me out, alright? I'm not saying this to be cruel, I'm trying to help." Tenten continued, gently. "You told him you were sorry. That you felt terrible. That your reactions were because of the pain you felt in response to his treatment of you. You're constantly talking about how he didn't understand how you felt and how you were prepared to give up everything for him. Don't you see? You can't blame him for being angry; you were basically just apologizing to yourself."

Sakura swallowed hard. "I don't…"

"Exactly, you don't see it, right? That's your problem. I mean, we're lying here, we're trying to have sex – which is supposed to be about us – and all we've talked about it how much Sasuke hates you. You were using your tongue more than I was, and none of it felt good to me."

"Oh," Sakura's hand touched her lips and her expression grew soft. "Oh… shit. Tenten. I'm sorry… I didn't."

"No, you didn't. You never have – not when it comes to him." Tenten reached up, brushing the hair that skated over Sakura's shoulders, noting where the colour changed from a bright rose hue to sun-bleached blonde. "Don't misunderstand, there's a lot of love in you. A lot. I don't think Naruto would have ever recovered if it weren't for you. I don't think team seven would have survived past the end of the war if it weren't for you. But when it comes to Sasuke, you're eight years old again, arguing with Ino over who was going to marry him first. You're blind to anything else that isn't him – or more accurately, the hurt you suffered because of him. You see what I mean?"

"I think so," Sakura let out a breath, leaning over to let her cheek brush Tenten's fingers. "But I don't know what to do. I don't know how to… I can't just forget everything. I don't know how to… talk to him otherwise…"

"You kind of have a tendency to tell him what he is, rather than letting him speak for himself," Tenten explained. "Maybe it's better not to talk to him at all. Maybe give him something to talk to you about." When Sakura looked confused she added. "You gave him some pretty thoughtful gifts, why not keep that up? You know he needs medicine. You know he needs supplies. You could just help him out by providing those things. Making it easy for him. Maybe talk to the rest of the 'nine, see what they've come up with. You could try and get some of his old gear out of asset forfeiture and give it back to him – he might have some stuff from his house that he wants. Or just some of
"He was raped." Tenten said, flatly. "You need to say it. You shouldn't gloss over it – not if it's the truth. It was rape and it happens. They like to hide it, you know. Cover it up. But it's part of Shinobi history just like anything else."

"How.. How do you know about it?" Sakura blinked. "No one ever told us what could happen. Even our teachers. Even Tsunade… they never said we would need to be careful if we were ever taken prisoner because something like that might happen. No one ever said."

"Back in the old days, kunoichi used to carry pills on them to stop them becoming pregnant if they ever found themselves in that situation. It was common place. Apothecaries like the Nara used to make them as part of the regular kit. Hell, they used to make medicines that would allow girls to control their menstrual cycles because it allowed them to participate in missions where the enemy might be able to sense or smell their change in hormones. Or the blood. I don't know when we got so goddamn wimpy, but somewhere along the line, someone thought that it was better not to know that women function differently from men. And that we don't always want to carry the kids we're forced to have – be it sired by the enemy or- " Tenten sneered. "-by our own clans."

"How on earth do you know all this?" Sakura was mesmerized. Tenten shrugged.

"I was training to be a med-nin once. I liked all the really old books. They may be outdated, but there's a lot of interesting notes in them. Lots on the truth behind our glorious ninja way. And lots on the ugly truth they like to hide from us bright young things because Konoha doesn't want that kind of blemish on ninja history. And this is why, no matter what Sasuke did, I'm behind helping him. No one deserves what he went through. He was raped by those bastards and it's disgusting."

"But I… I don't know how to help him… for that. I… I don't know what to do. The books don't tell me." Sakura shook her head. "I mean, I can treat bruises. I can sew sutures. I can give him something for the pain and I can stop infection. But… there's so much more to it than that. I can't even get my head around it."

"Then you learn from it." Tenten said. "I'll give you the titles of the books that I studied. From there, perhaps you should seek a greater understanding. It'd be great for a med nin to outline a support group. An anonymous confidence ring. You take what you've learned and you open up to more. And then you give back. No one's done this before, no one's even thought of it, but it's there. And I'm sure there are women out there who'd appreciate it. I wish I'd thought of it myself, wish I'd done something when I first read all those records. But I didn't know where to start. And I don't think I have the gentleness and tact that you do."

"Tact?" Sakura smiled, wryly. "Though we'd established I had none of that."

"Only when it comes to Sasuke. And speaking of- " Tenten wiggled her shoulders, finding a more comfortable spot on the pillows. "-you don't need to do much. Just let him know you're there. Don't make a big thing about it. If he wants your help, he knows that it's on offer. Maybe in time he'll ask for it. Maybe he won't. But at least you know you tried. It's about him, not about you."
"Yeah," Sakura said, slowly, feeling the idea begin to grow in the back of her mind. Sasuke had always criticized her lack of understanding and she had to admit, she'd really done very little to broaden it. She knew what she knew about his affairs only through the gained knowledge of others. There was not much else that she'd contributed herself to the knowledge pool about the man she'd claimed to love. It was ridiculous really, how she'd put on such airs. And she'd been helping Sasuke selfishly – to balm her own wounded pride more than his. No wonder he thought so little of her. "I'm an idiot, aren't I?"

"Idiots learn," Tenten grinned. "And no, you're not. You're just stuck in the past when it comes to him. But look at you now. Do you even love him anymore?"


"But we can't leave him languishing in that tower," Tenten agreed, pulling Sakura into her arms. 

"Can we?"

"Awfully poetic of you," Sakura replied. "But wasn't it the princess in the tower?"

"Not in my stories."

"Touché."

The two women fell back into their embraces and that night, Sakura left everything else behind that wasn't either her or Tenten or the sweet amalgamation of their bodies. She'd found a calmness she never thought she had in her mind, a serene confidence that seemed to soften the blow of her guilt and her anger. She'd already forgiven Sasuke, she knew that, and now she no longer felt the frustration that came with her lack of understanding. It wasn't Sasuke that she couldn't comprehend; it was herself. The more she could acknowledge as to why she felt the way she felt about him, the easier helping him became. He was family. He was the older brother who made stupid decisions and could be cruel and unkind because of his suffering, but he was family. Team seven was family. All Sasuke needed was for them to prove that.

Sleep was kind and deep. When Sakura woke, she smiled. Her steps were light as she bounded out of bed, practically skipping down Tenten's narrow stairs to collect the morning papers. She felt a strong sense of purpose like she hadn't felt since she first tied her hitae ate above her forehead. This wasn't just training, this was life. This was more than just a haircut, this was a trimming of the past. This was a future growing on strong roots. This was-

"Who's Your Daddy? Konoha's Most Ancient Clan Returns With Successor! Uchiha Sasuke's Solo Parent Struggle!"

"Shit," Sakura whispered as she read the headline, her temperature dropping.

This was public.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: And so, shit gets real. Real-er, anyway. Next time: What To Expect When You're An Expecting Ex-Criminal and other exciting headlines from The Daily Flame: Fire Country's First and Fastest News!
"Give me three good reasons why I should try it."

"Well," The man said, leaning over the counter to jab a finger at the steaming bowl before his guest. "One: It has fried eggs on it. Two: There's bacon in it and Three: It's six 'o clock in the morning, son – who wouldn't want the Egg and Bacon Supreme! to start their day off properly?"

Naruto eyed the "Ichiraku Breakfast Special (Egg and Bacon Supreme!)" ramen bowl before him critically. Fried eggs drooped in a surrealist manner over the noodles, while stiff rashers of bacon poked out over the sides of the bowl at all angles - giving the whole meal an odd, whiskered appearance. He made a face and asked carefully:

"What flavor is the soup again?"


"So, bacon substitute?"

"Yes! Otherwise it's too salty," Ayame piped up, stirring a large pot of stock in whirlpool motions. "We've got bacon dumplings too, you can try one on the house if you like. Can't he, Dad!"

"Sure he can," Teuchi ground out, which perhaps meant that he was angling more for the 'buy one; get one free' approach, but he pincered a couple from the steamer with his chopsticks and added them to Naruto's dish without further comment.

"I'd never say no to dumplings," Naruto said, a little more convinced. He picked up his chopsticks and poked at an egg, experimentally. It cried yolk over an arrangement of artfully dissected carrots. "It's just a bit.... Weird."

"Unconventional, yes, yes. But you have to keep up with the times, you know!" Ayame said, leaning back against the counter cheerfully. "All those folks in the North – all them big cities past the mountains – this is what they have for breakfast. And if it's all the rage up there, it should catch on pretty fast down here too!"

"What, soggy fried eggs and rock-hard pig strips?" Naruto bit into one of the rashers and chewed it. "Are you sure?"

"I'm positive!" Ayame nodded enthusiastically, before she added. "Well, I'm sure that they eat those things. Perhaps not in soup. With noodles. But the eggs and the bacon? Those are popular."

"Yeah, but it's popular here too, just not... wet." Naruto reasoned. "Chouji's favourite meal is bacon sandwiches. I'm not sure I get why you're trying to make this a thing."

"Sometimes it's fun to try something different," Ayame snorted defensively.

"Then master it," her father added. "A good chef should always be a champion over her
ingredients. Speaking of, Naruto, didn't you promise to give me an update on how the shop's doing in Suna. How's Maia? Do they like Ichiraku over there?"

"Course they do," Naruto said with a smile as he threw caution to the wind and destroyed the egg. He stuck his chopsticks in the centre of the bowl and mixed the broken yolk with the soup. "Who doesn't like Ichiraku? It's the perfect meal. And that tsukemen thing really works over there too, I guess. It's not Ramen, but it's a good option considering how hot the weather can be. I guess people like to control how much soup they drink."

"Told you," Ayame said, nudging her father. "Now are you going to listen to me about the Soba?"

"Shhhh!" Teuchi hissed at her. "Not so loud! Do you want ol' Goraku to hear?"

"Dad, Soba isn't exactly revolutionary. There are eight restaurants in Konoha-"

"But they're not Ichiraku restaurants!" He replied. "There's a difference! Quality! Integrity! Innovation! We can't let that old bat at UdonsOn know what we're up to! He'll steal the idea!"

"Then stop shouting about it."

"Yes, yes, good point." Ichiraku defused a little and started peeling the vast mountain of carrots by his elbow. "So you went back to Suna recently, hmm Naruto?"

"How'd you know that?" Naruto stopped slurping his noodles. His eyes rolled up, slowly.

"That Haruno girl was looking for you. Sakura. Muttered something about you running off somewhere, before she figured you must've gone to see the Kazekage."

"Oh," Naruto blinked.

"So how was it?"

"What, Suna? It was fine. Cooler, you know, being winter and all. Temari's keen to come back to Konoha, Kankuro's got new face paint, that kinda thing. There are discussions about the next Chuunin exams for next year and stuff."

Teuchi smiled rather proudly. "You're Konoha's Ambassador now, right? Do you get to be involved with that? The exams and the planning?"

"Yeah, I'll probably go to some rallies. Advertise it. That kinda thing." Naruto moved his noodles about despondently.

"And how's the Kazekage?"

"Mm? Oh, he's fine."

"You two gonna make a formal announcement about your relationship yet?" Teuchi asked, offhand. Naruto just let his mouth fall open, his good humor (as well as his noodles) tumbled down his chin.

"W-what? What relationship? What're you talking about?"

"Well, the Sun seems to think you two are… what are they calling it? An 'item'?" Teuchi replied, not looking up. "They keep publishing pictures of you two together, calling the 'bromance' of the new era."
"They are?" Despite the soup in his stomach, Naruto felt his gut begin to ice over.

"Dad, bromance doesn't mean romance," Ayame sighed, rolling her eyes. "It just means they work so closely together and so well, it appears to be a romantic relationship when it isn't. It's like the guy version of being really close girlfriends."

"Is that what it means?" Teuchi seemed mystified. Naruto glanced between the pair of them, eyes like azure headlights. Ayame nodded.

"Mm, they say they're the new star pairing," she said, tapping her wooden spoon on the side of the pot before she drifted over and leaned on the bar counter, resting her chin on her hands. "I think it's kind of sweet."

Naruto swallowed drily. "You do?"

"Well I always thought you two would make a good pair. Bromance," she chuckled. "It's cute."

"It's a stupid word," Teuchi puffed up, sniffing. "Confuses things."

"Dad, you're so old-fashioned!" Ayame laughed. Teuchi aimed a spoon at her and shook his head.

"Not at all. A man can be a friend or a lover. A man can choose who he wants to spend time with. We don't need all these buzzwords and bromances and things – it's none of anyone else's business! Same goes for women. People. Shoulda said people, really."

"You... don't think that it's weird?" Naruto said, slowly. "F-for me and... y-you know-"

"Naruto, son... Let me give you some advice. People... They're a lot like noodles," Teuchi said, sagely. "They could be wheat noodles, or rice noodles. They might be hot or they might be cold. Sometimes they're thin, sometimes they're fat."

"Sometimes they're floppy, sometimes they're h-"

"Oi!" Ichiraku shot another sharp look at his daughter, who giggled and returned to sorting the vegetables. "What I mean to say is, like noodles, the variety is vast and you can choose the kinds that you like. You might change the construction of the dish a little, but you've got to experiment or you'll never know if udon will work with broth, or if it can be fried or... well... If there's another way that you like to eat it."

"I should... try fried udon?" Naruto stared at the man helplessly. Teuchi sighed.

"I mean, you should feel free to be with whomever you like. Spend your time wisely, my boy. You'll soon find it doesn't last as long as you think it does."

Naruto blinked at him. "Whomever I...? So what if I wanted to... to uh... eat noodles... with someone, but I was pretty sure they didn't want to eat noodles with me, you know? What do I do then?"

"Well you just have to ask them. You're not going to know unless you ask. Then you just take their answer and respect that. If they want to, that's great. If they don't, it's not the end of the world."

"Don't know about that," Naruto muttered. He shoveled a mouthful of the breakfast special between his teeth. "Don't people, you know, expect certain people to be together? More than, you know, other people."
"Son," Teuchi leaned over the counter, pulling out a cloth to mop up the few spills on the surface with near-psi-<region>ncic precision. "Naruto. I've known you since you had to jump to see the top of the counter. That's a long time watching someone. And you're not a kid anymore so I think that we can talk plainly."

"We've kind of always talked plainly. I dunno how much plainer we can get."

"I mean plainly about adult things now, not your regular things. Grown up things."

"Eh?" Naruto said, chopsticks poised in the air above the soup. Ayame let out a minute sigh and did an about-turn, shuffling out toward the back of the shop. Teuchi's eyes followed her as she left.

"I mean, if you wanna go ask that Kazekage out to dinner, you go right ahead."

"I don't get it," Naruto said. "We eat together all the time."

"When I say dinner Naruto, I mean the kind of dinner you finish by inviting someone for "coffee" after, you know what I mean?"

"Are we doing the noodles thing again?"

"Coffee, Naruto. coffee! You know, like they do in the movies." Teuchi hissed, shielding his words with his hand. "You know."

"But I don't drink-" Naruto began, then it dawned on him and he blushed. "Oh," he said. "Oh."

"Yeah," Teuchi recovered. "And it ain't none of my business. 'Specially if you want to bring them here. Then it really ain't my business. You can do whatever you want, Uzumaki Naruto. Just never say you'll stop eating Ichiraku noodles."

"Hah! Hell no!"

"That's what I thought you'd say, kid." Teuchi grinned, but Naruto paused for a moment, thoughtful.

"Teuchi-san," he said, quietly. "You know… I like Gaara and all, but… but it isn't him who I… you know. Wanna… uh… share noodles with."

Teuchi chuckled. "You think I don't know that? Sasuke's a sour plum. And God knows that boy's had it hard enough to have earned his right to that sullenness. But I'll be damned if he doesn't sugar up when he's with you."

"What? S-sasuke?"

"Yes, Sasuke. Kid who likes duck ramen with sesame. Used to pick up my tuna onigiri all the time after you introduced him to my specials. Sasuke. Guy you've been moping over for the past five years."

"I-I don't like S-sasuke…" It was pathetic. The tomatoes in the vegetable basket paled in comparison to Naruto's flush. "He-he's just…"

"My pristine pearly peach you don't like Sasuke," Teuchi smirked. "I see a lot of people every day, Naruto. I know that look on a person when I see it."

"What look?"
"The kind of look that takes someone out to dinner. Coffee dinner. You should go ask him."

"I don't think Sasuke would want to go out to dinner with me," Naruto replied, weakly. "I don't think he wants to go out to dinner with anyone – even if there was coffee at the end. Pretty sure Sasuke drinks his coffee alone." There was a brief consideration of the metaphor. "Uh… y-you know what I mean."

"Maybe? Who knows… What's the worst that could happen?"

*You really, really don't want to know.* Naruto thought. He shrugged a little and stared into his soup. "Anyway how can I? He's… He's not here. He left after the war. E-everybody knows that."

"Really? I thought he'd just come back." Teuchi frowned, pulling up the morning paper from his stool.

"What?" Naruto glanced up abruptly.

"He's returned to Konoha. Thought an early bird like you woulda seen the press already!" Teuchi held the paper out. "See? Here. Back in Konoha. Apparently he's been here for a little while. And with a child nonetheless. I-" The man frowned as the colour drained from Naruto's face. Blue eyes, wide as lamps scanned the page. "-wait. Are you telling me you didn't know?"

"No I…" But Naruto was already on his feet, still reading as he began to edge backward, pushing the noren out of the way with the back of his wrist. Sasuke. Sasuke was in the paper. People would know about him. Was that a bad thing? Was that Kakashi's idea? It didn't seem like it. He didn't think Kakashi would let the papers in on the secret before he'd talked his ninja through the situation first. There must have been a leak… a… what did they call it? A mole? Was Sasuke in trouble? How much did they know?

He dragged the paper up, almost pressing his face against the print as he read. Then, marginally sated with the brevity of the publication, he tossed the paper back on the counter and with a *damnit* squashed between his teeth, bolted back down the street.

Teuchi watched him go, blinking in surprise. Slowly, he picked up the paper and stared at it again before he uttered. "My *God…""

"What?!" Ayame said, materializing from the storeroom as she called a plastic bin of fresh noodles to the kitchen refrigerator. "Is there something else in the story? Did Naruto say anything? Does he know anything?"

Teuchi just turned toward her, a look of divine inspiration crossing his face. His eyes bore the glassy veneer of a maturing brainwave. A smile dawned slow and magnificently.

"We should be making *kids meals!*"

The man rolled out of bed in a mess of limbs and blankets and fell gracelessly to the floor. There was a muttered curse, then he rose and pushed his snowy hair out of his eyes as he staggered toward the door. The coffee machine had turned on automatically forty minutes prior, though he picked up the leftovers in his cup from the night before and drank it anyway, swishing the gritty remnants around in his mouth.

When his eyes fell on the headlining story of the crimson-capped Daily Flame, the coffee ended up painting the hallway in a thin spray of grey-brown droplets.
"Fuck," said Hatake Kakashi.

"Fuck," said Nara Shikamaru, dumping the paper on the breakfast table as he secured the tie on his kunai holster and pushed out the door.

Ino handed Hinata the paper as she stood at the door in her nightgown, tugging her long hair out of the plaits she slept in. Both girls read the headline, then glanced up at one another.

"Crap," Ino said at the same time Hinata hissed,

"Fuck."

"Hinata!" Ino spluttered in astonishment. Hinata just shrugged.

"What? Every word has its occasion. Hang on, I'll get my coat."

"You're still in your nightie!"

"I don't care!" Hinata called, before emerging on the step, tugging her furred jacket over her deep blue nightshirt. She shrugged, a wild, excited glee that was alarmingly out of sorts on her sombre face lit her smile, brightly. "This is more important."

"Ok," Ino said, frowning. She'd never seen the Hyuuga heir appear quite as driven as she had in the last few days - especially not for anything that didn't revolve around training or team building. Hinata certainly wasn't the type of girl who would leave the confines of the Hyuuga compound without at least a decent level of dress, yet there she was, ardently tugging on her sandals, her hair striping across her face and her knees already pink from the cold. She grinned as she linked her fingers in her friends' and dragged her forward. "Let's go!"

The two ran all the way across town, feet splashing in the puddles left from the early rain. The temperature was slightly warmer given the overcast sky and although rain threatened a second performance, the air sponged it up instead and let it sit heavily around them. There was something of an electric charge to the atmosphere, a build in synapses before a genius thought ignited. Something was going to happen. Something soon. Hell, for all they knew, it might have happened already. The only thing left to do was to see who else might have felt it too. The two women arrived at Chouji's house in minutes, both unsurprised to find him sitting outside already one hand clutching the paper, the other curled around a fried egg sandwich. He nodded at them gravely as they approached and motioned for them to sit down.

"If you haven't eaten, there's some there on the tray," he said. "Shikamaru is nearly here."

"Thanks Chouji." Ino said and reached for one. Hinata shook her head.

"I don't think I can eat. I'm just… I mean, who would do this? It had to be someone from the hearing. No one else knew he was here!"

"To be fair," Shino said, materializing from the hallway. He carried another tray in his hands. This one was loaded with a pitcher of hot tea and stacks of cups which he placed carefully on the porch before he sat down. "He hasn't been wearing any disguises when he travels from the apartments to the hospital and the courthouse where he receives counselling. It would be a simple matter of observation for one to realize that Uchiha Sasuke has returned to Konoha."

Ino just stared at him, the sandwich halfway to her mouth. "H-how do you know… I mean, apart
from the paper, how do you-
"Shino was there the night Sasuke arrived."

Shikamaru strode up the path to the house, his own newspaper under his arm, and with Rock Lee in tow. He looked harried. He hadn't bothered to wrangle his hair into its usual topknot and it hung limp in his face like a disillusioned octopus. Lee appeared almost as disheveled as his sleek bowl cut sported angles that seemed impossible and his usual green jumpsuit was abandoned in place of a pair of dun-coloured pants and a close-fitting knit top sandwiched under a puffer vest. Shikamaru shook his head at the offered breakfast and shoved his hands in his pockets with an angry click of his tongue.

"I caught up with him last night after we handed in our mission reports," he explained. "Kakashi's had him on a mission of his own this whole time, searching for any trace of the people who took Sasuke."

"Why didn't he tell us that?" Ino frowned. "You'd think he'd tell the people who were at least trying to help, rather than keeping us in the dark! We could have formed a team!"

"And drawn more attention to ourselves?" Shikamaru raised a brow. "Team activity now needs to be registered with the Allied Council, not just the Leaf. Letting the other Kage know that Sasuke is here probably wasn't high on Kakashi's list. My guess is he's trying to keep everything under wraps for a reason."

"Why? Because it is more likely that the pursuer will make mistakes if they do not think they are being watched." Shino added, sipping his tea. "A small unit does not have to be reported, nor does it seem entirely out of place. In the case of myself, my actions are not exceptional. To the onlooker I was simply checking the stations of my beetles to ensure that they had begun the hibernation process correctly and would not suffer through the winter."

"Oh," Ino blinked. "Well, I suppose that makes sense."

"Yet it does not mitigate our current conundrum." Shino went on. "The fact that knowledge of Sasuke's return is now within the public sphere."

"And that someone blabbed," Ino added, sourly. Shikamaru shook his head.

"That's besides the point right now. We all know it was bound to happen – it wasn't as if the news went down all that well anyway." There was a sigh, an almost imperceptible so troublesome and Shikamaru scratched at his neck. "Whether it was who we think it was or not, I think we've all made something of an unspoken pact to defend the integrity of the rookie nine. The original nine. And that's what we should be focusing on."

The other nodded their heads, slowly, eyes downcast to cups of tea or the sandwiches in their hands. The support, it seemed, was mutual, however a proactive response was in slow bloom. Silence fell over the small group like a blanket until Lee squinted into the glare of the morning mist and said:

"Is that Naruto?"

There was a shape in silhouette against the gloom. It was tangerine coloured. There was, literally, no other ninja on the planet who would be seen dead wearing that colour and still remain thoroughly convinced they could pull off any form of covert operation thrown at them. Naruto's sunny coloured figure darted down the street in front of them before it skidded to a halt and turned
to stare at the assembly on Chouji's porch. His original mission completely shelved in place of curiosity, Naruto blinked at them. Blue eyes hosted a well of consternation.

"What are you guys doing here?" He asked.

"What are we-" Ino shook her head, confounded. "What are you doing here. Where the hell have you been?"

"Suna," Shino and Shikamaru said at the same time. No one seemed to notice. Naruto shrugged, indifferently.

"Had to sort out some stuff, nothin' important. What's all this?" He gestured to the group, noting their varied states of composure. "What's going on? Hinata, are you in your nightie?"

"Uh?" Hinata looked down at her blushing knees, then shook her hair in her face and tucked her hands under her armpits to warm them. "Well… yeah. I was in a rush… and… well it doesn't matter, right? We've got other things to worry about!"

"Like…?"

"We were meeting about the headline this morning," Lee said, flattening the newspaper in his hand before he offered it to Naruto. "Someone blabbled about Sasuke."

"Sasuke…" It was clear Naruto's head was only good for a few thoughts at a time. He'd never quite grasped the act of mental multitasking and at the sudden mention of Sasuke, he was primed to run again. "That's right! I gotta-"

"Wait. Wait…" Shikamaru held up a hand. "Gotta what, exactly?"

"Well, I gotta go… you know. Make sure that no one's… uh…" The tension dropped out of his form. Naruto looked around. He wasn't really sure what he'd meant to do either. His body sort of moved on its own. One minute he was at Ichiraku, enjoying breakfast and a very odd conversation with old man Teuchi, and suddenly Sasuke was in his thoughts and he was running. Just… running. Maybe it was an old instinct of his that he'd never quite grown out of? Naruto chewed his lip. "I mean, I don't know. Maybe he's being, uh, spied on. Or something. Maybe-"

"The article only mentioned Sasuke's return and the fact that he has a dependent with him," Shikamaru went on. "There's nothing in-depth, no details. Kinda makes me think that whoever's responsible doesn't actually know much more than that. I'm also pretty certain that the journalist doesn't know where Sasuke is, or any of his movements."

"No photos," Shino nodded. "You're right, it's obvious they're working on a insubstantial tip. How do I know this? Because this kind of paper strives for visual evidence. No photographs means they have not obtained all the information necessary. They're most likely working on a blind hunch."

"So what do we do?" Lee mused.

"We could just keep Sasuke inside? Or give him another disguise?" Hinata suggested. "I mean, if he doesn't show up again after this, they're just going to look stupid."

"Not to mention it's against the law, right?" Ino added. "It has to be against the law from them to do this. Kakashi would have put down some kind of ban, wouldn't he?"

Shikamaru shook his head. "We can't vouch on that. Considering Sasuke's involvement in the war and his earlier attacks on the Kage summit, Kakashi might not be able to keep information on him
secret. It could damage the relationship between the countries if they were to find out. I'm not sure how it works with the new media these days. He didn't want us openly discussing Sasuke's return, but at the same time, he didn't exactly hide it. Sasuke's been travelling between the compound, the hospital and the legal buildings without really bothering to hide himself. Albeit they're only within a short walk of each other…"

"Well we should just call them out," Ino snarled. "Tell them they're wrong, make them do a… what's it called? A retraction. Then they'll look stupid!"

"This kind of publication will not care if the information they have provided is false. The proverbial egg on the face is not something that bothers them," Shino mused. "They will simply absorb the backlash if their wager proves to be inconclusive and hide their mistake beneath another sensation. What is dangerous is the fact that they have, as one says 'stirred the hive'. Our best course of action is to begin formulating a contingency plan to help divert the attention."

"Like disguises," Shikamaru said. "Or… something else. I don't know."

Naruto listened to the group mutter amongst themselves and slowly padded into Chouji's garden. He leaned against the stone birdbath that sat resplendent on a small square of neat grass and tapped the thin coating of ice on the surface. The cold bit at pads of his fingers, pinking them. He frowned. Everyone was talking about a plan of action, but no one had talked about punishments yet. No one had mentioned the guilty party. He could almost taste Kiba's surprise and fear on his tongue when he said:

"It was Kiba, wasn't it. The one who told the press."

Shikamaru stopped trying to understand Ino's fascination with dressing Sasuke as a "sweet Lolita" *(Because no one would expect that, right? It's so not him!)* and regarded Naruto gravely.

"It's a logical conclusion. Obviously Kiba's influenced by his Mom's stance toward Sasuke's sentencing, no matter how he felt about him during the war."

"Why?" Naruto asked, narrowing his eyes. "He was part of the original retrieval team. He was always supportive when it came to getting Sasuke back. Why the change of tone now? I don't get it."

"Tsume-san was openly against lenient treatment for Sasuke at the hearing," Lee said. "Maybe she had something to do with it?"

"Dunno about you guys, but I'd think twice about arguing with her too." Ino mumbled. "She's frightening."

"But why would she suddenly get all defensive now?" Naruto pressed. "I mean, after all the time we've spent looking for Sasuke, it doesn't make any sense-

"Tsume was away for the retrieval mission. To my knowledge, she was still dealing with the aftermath of Orochimaru's attack on Konoha." Shikamaru said. "Later on she was supportive of bringing Sasuke back, but as a missing nin. A prisoner, not just a headstrong nin gone AWOL. Now that Kakashi is pushing to treat him fairly, she's digging her heels in."

"Why?!"

"Dunno."

"Um, well, from what I heard at one of my father's meetings with the Branch Family, the Inuzuka
and the Uchiha always had bad relations," Hinata said. "I was quite young at the time, but I remember him saying it was something to do with their treatment of the Canine Unit that Sasuke's father was trying to implement in the police force. I think the Inuzuka was taking offence to... I don't know. The idea of it, possibly? Or their methods. They might not have had a proper trainer involved. Something like that anyway. I was just more worried about the dogs. I never told Hanabi because I thought she'd cry."

"A canine unit? Now that would definitely piss Tsume off," Shikamaru said, raising his brows. "But that's her, not Kiba. Kiba might have threatened to talk, but we can't automatically-"

"He's got that girlfriend though," Naruto interrupted in a low voice. "That one that he meets in town. The one that he doesn't want his mom to find out about." He paused as the group fell silent and felt a little guilty. Sure, some of them may not have known about Kiba's secret trysts, but Naruto was too angry to care. After all, he hadn't exactly promised to keep his mouth shut about the situation, had he? And he'd taken Akamaru in plenty of times to hide him from Tsume. Kiba owed him. And Kiba had just basically taken a giant dump on their mutual trust. Anyone who knew anything at all about Naruto knew never to fuck with him when it came to Sasuke. "He's probably trying to protect her... Take the attention away from himself because his mom suspects or something."

"Maybe he is, maybe he isn't," Shikamaru said, calmly. "We can't just start pointing fingers at people. Besides, he could have said a lot more. Think about it: there's no mention of Sasuke's pregnancy, or the fact that Mikoto is his daughter, only that she might be. It's all speculation. Kiba could have given them hard facts, but he didn't. Which kinda tells me he really didn't want to, but maybe he didn't have a choice."

Naruto grumbled to himself, his face twisted into an expression of discontent, but he didn't comment further. Lee tapped his feet against the ground and bounced on his toes a few times to keep warm.

"Well, we don't even know where Kiba is right now," he said. "So we should focus on the problems we can try to solve. Like coming up with some way to take the heat off Sasuke."

"I keep saying!" Ino sighed. "Dress him in something no one will expect!" She folded her arms over her chest, sending Shikamaru a pointed look. "But somebody thinks it's a bad idea!"

"We cannot rely on costume," Shino shook his head. "Sasuke will keep getting larger, creating a constant battle to pick clothes for him. We would have to keep updating everything to fit. Fairly soon we're will run out of things he can borrow and will have to start buying clothes instead."

"Hm, I don't know about you guys," Shikamaru said. "But my paycheck doesn't stretch that far. And hell, who wants to have to go pulling on a costume every day when you're already tired and sleep deprived and you've got another kid to care for already-"

"Sasuke," Hinata answered the rhetoric, quietly. "Because... well, that's what he said at the hearing, right? He had a costume. Ino saw it. A wig. Different clothes. He's done it before. Who knows how long he's been hiding like that?" She swirled the dregs of tea in her cup and squinted at the pattern they made as they settled. A bird, she decided. It was a bird. "How he got those things in the first place, well. I guess that's something to ask another day. But I agree with Shikamaru. It shouldn't really be a costume."

"Well, really the easiest option would be if he were able to use a henge and change his appearance," Lee said, rolling his shoulders. "But he can't use jutsu, can he?"
"He can't?" Ino frowned. Hinata shook her head.

"His chakra lines are damaged. And his reserves are practically non-existent. The only time I've ever seen anything like that is... Um... It was with torture victims. The ones we uncovered after the war. Some of Orochimaru's old test subjects."

Naruto seemed to stiffen at the mention of Orochimaru, and when Hinata explained the poor state of Sasuke's chakra systems, it was like a physical blow. He winced. He'd heard it over and over again in his head, but it was only starting to really come together now. Sasuke was... weak. Sick. He needed help. He'd never ask of course, because he was Sasuke. But Naruto was his friend. And Naruto had been loyal to him through every obstacle. Through every challenge. He'd pushed so hard because he thought they'd had a similar level of suffering. Which would, in theory, generate a level of mutual understanding.

But Sasuke's suffering was worse. Closer. Personal. Gaara was right. Kurama was right. Hell, even Teuchi was right, damn them all.

_Because you love him. You always will._

Whenever it came to Sasuke, Naruto would be there. If Sasuke stumbled, Naruto would throw himself down to break the fall. If Sasuke rose, Naruto would be near, offering a hand to steady him. Sasuke was Naruto's goal, his equal, his everything. Sasuke had seen inside him, torn him apart – used his own love against him... But so what? So damn what?

_He threw up a mirror of your own nightmares against you. You know that. You know how genjutsu works._

It was as real as Sasuke had made it to be, but Naruto realized as the chill in the air lifted and the rain began again, slowly drifting to the ground in soft formations, that meant _nothing_. The genjutsu was tailored to break him. Sasuke had thrown out all he could to hurt him, because he alone knew _how_. But Naruto held. His heart had broken, but it hadn't fallen apart. His body was battered, but he could still stand. He got to his feet again. He pulled himself back together and with the help of his friends, he became whole. There was still a little missing, but he was whole.

Who the hell did that for Sasuke when Itachi tore _him_ apart? Who was there when Sasuke was fighting his way back to Konoha? When he was suffering? When he was carrying two children hundreds of miles, barely in any position to help himself? Naruto swallowed hard, letting his lungs fill with a shaking breath. Guilt, ever the familiar presence, rattled through him, but he ignored it. He let his thoughts saturate with images of his friend. He let his heart warm as he took the better parts of that dream and clutched them close. He closed his eyes and saw Sasuke, curling up on his bed with his child in his arms. Warm. Protected. And after a moment, he began to rally.

"Hey," he said, holding up a finger to shush the muttering around him. "I have an idea. Sasuke can't use jutsu, right? So he can't use henge."

Ino frowned. "Yeah. Apparently. So?"

A smile bloomed on Naruto's face, causing the whisker-like marks on his cheeks to curve into parentheses. He might not have been part of this support group for more than a few minutes, but he'd be damned if he couldn't offer one of the best ideas on the table as his inauguration. "But _we_ can. They want a Sasuke? We can give them a Sasuke. Just not the Sasuke they expect."

Hinata blinked. "What?"
"No, I think I see where he's going with this." Shikamaru grinned. "It's so damn simple, but… shit. I think it'll work. If, that is, you're up for it."

Naruto nodded. "Leave it to me."

Akamaru looked at the paper that the puppy had dropped on the ground in front of him and sighed. It was covered in drool and the front page was marginally shredded, which rendered the headline near indistinguishable. But he saw the word Uchiha and already knew what to expect. He offered the puppy a nod, then eased up off his mat and padded out of the Inuzuka compound toward the East Gate. He knew where Kiba would be coming from. He should really be the one to meet him first.

The shape of the boy was dark against the morning sky, washed out by the cold mists frosting the air. His hood was pulled up against the chill. He was wearing his green jacket with the black trim, the one he stashed in his locker at the Shinobi station, the one his mother didn't know he'd bought. His head was bowed, his footsteps heavy. When he saw Akamaru, he didn't greet him as he normally would instead he pulled his hands from his pockets and let them hang loose at his sides. When he approached, Akamaru could see the deep shadows of fatigue under his eyes, prominent in his wan, sleep-deprived complexion. He stank of cigarettes and sex, but the usual self-indulgent pleasure that wafted around him when he'd been out to visit Tamaki was missing. Instead, he reeked of guilt. Sour, pungent guilt.

Kiba opened his mouth and closed it a few times, unable to look at his friend. After a moment, he managed. "Akamaru? I… uh… I think I might've made a mistake."

"You talk to reporter."

Kiba nodded slowly. "Yeah."

"Why do this? You hate Uchiha that much?"

"No! No, not really. I mean… Sasuke was always a dick, sure. And I still think he's getting off lightly for everything he's done-"

"You talk. You don't know." Akamaru interjected, softly. "Uchiha hurt more than you think. Konoha punishment only little salt in wounds."

"H-huh..?" Kiba frowned at him. "How do you know that?"

Akamaru rose to his feet with a sigh and gave himself a shake. Kiba had really no idea, had he?

"So busy with bitch and pups, you not notice? Akamaru took mission. Guard Uchiha. Keep safe. Sometimes Akamaru stay all day, sometimes all night too. You too busy to see, but Akamaru understand. Is ok."

"You stayed with him?!!" Kiba's eyes were wide, but rather than finding himself angry at the betrayal, he found himself simply confused. "As what, a bodyguard? Why?"

"Is mission. Akamaru ninken, do not forget."

"Yeah. Yes. But."

"Some things bigger than what we see." Akamaru explained. "At hearing, Uchiha made scent marks in fear. Big fear. You notice, but you not understand. You smell marks, but not the fear."
Akamaru suspicious. And… what is word? Compassion. Compassionate. Think fear is for pup, which mean pup very certainly be his. Pakkun-taicho give Akamaru mission to protect Uchiha. Akamaru take. Help understand fear. You understand fear; you understand Uchiha."

Kiba nodded a little, but he still looked slightly taken aback. "I don't get it," he said. "Why would you care? Before Sasuke turned up and helped at the end of the war, you were more against him than I was."

"Uchiha did wrong thing, yes. Uchiha still need answer on certain questions. But Uchiha return broken. Akamaru think now maybe broken for long time. Akamaru think that Uchiha need mending before Uchiha can atone. And Uchiha return with pup. Shows strong feelings for it. Love. Akamaru think bad idea to stop that love. Family more important. Most important."

"Oh." Kiba looked at the ground. "I didn't know."

"You not ask."

"Mm…" Kiba licked his lips. "No. I didn't. I didn't think you'd take a mission like that."


"Yeah." Kiba agreed slowly. "G-guess it is."

"You know. You not say much to reporter."

"I didn't really want to. It… felt wrong the moment I saw her again. She was the same one from the hearing, remember?"

"Akamaru remember."

"She knew I'd be the weak link. She knew it. Think I kinda did too."

"You angry. Your dam angry too. Good reason, yes. History shows bad decisions from Uchiha. But Sasuke, he is not his father. He respect ninen. Does not deserve same treatment."

"Yeah." Kiba said again. "I-I didn't tell her much. I knew I was in breach of Kakashi's instructions, so I said as little as possible. But she threatened to reveal me and Tamaki and… I just. I didn't see why I had to cover for him, when all we've ever done is struggle and hurt and in the end nothing comes out good!"

"Is different. He different. Goals are destroyed. Purpose destroyed. Uchiha come to Konoha for help. In end, Konoha should help."

"I know." Kiba let out a long breath and hung his head, his arms swinging listlessly at his sides. "I know. I really fucked things up, didn't I?"

"Yes," Akamaru didn't hold back. But his tone was gentle, forgiving. And he pushed his nose into Kiba's hand and leaned against him in a familiar way. "Bad human."

Kiba laughed a little, rubbing Akamaru's ears, fondly. "Furry bastard."
"Two-legs."

"Why don't you go lick your own balls."

"Jealous. If you could do to yourself, you would."

"Not so sure about that," Kiba snorted. "Still, grooming aside, I guess I still have a things to… clean up. Starting with… Uh…"

"Nara. Talk to Nara. Take time to make up mind. Cannot change bark so quickly – it not in your nature. But take time to find truth. Not worth all the anger if no truth in it."

Kiba nodded slowly. "No. I guess not."

Tsunade found Sasuke sitting on the futon, his hands clasped in the space between his knees. He'd dressed and was wearing a long tunic of black jersey teamed with loose blue pants underneath for warmth. His hair was gathered into a messy knot at the back of his head and small tendrils from his bangs hung in his face as he leaned over a newspaper that was spread on the coffee table. His lips moved as he read. His expression was sparse, but there was tension in the air around him. He'd read the headline; Tsunade already knew, She'd almost spat an entire mouthful of tea over the offending thing herself. Shizune had to wrestle her to stop her setting it on fire. But Sasuke seemed to be accepting the situation. Probably. It was hard to tell with him.

"Are you ok?" Tsunade asked, easing down to kneel at the table, adjacent to her charge. There was a shift in his concentration, but he didn't look up.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

Tsunade pursed her lips. This game again, huh? She was getting good at it. In fact, she'd never been so patient in her life as she was when she was with Sasuke.

"Because of the article. And what it means."

"I don't care about the article."

"Why? It's done now. No point in worrying about it. It was bound to happen anyway."

"Why do you say that?"

"Why?" Sasuke finally looked up, his eyebrows raised. "Why? Because I walk from the compound to the hospital and the legal buildings almost every day. It's not exactly heavy traffic in that area, but people see me. I still look like me, somewhat, although for some crazy reason I seem to be able to blend better than I thought I would. I suppose it's because no one was actually looking for me here. Certainly not a version of me with…" He didn't even bother to gesture; he was fairly sure
Tsunade got the point. She nodded, folding her hands in her lap.

"I know. I... I know. Sasuke, listen. We'll find out who opened their mouth and make su-"

"Don't even bother." Sasuke rolled his eyes, dismissively. "It's not like I didn't expect it. The Inuzuka looked ready to skin me and the Hyuuga couldn't have sat further away if he wanted to. Bet Hiashi was trying to figure out whether I'd infect him or something."

"Neither Tsume nor Hiashi would say anything." Tsunade reprimanded, gently. "They might have been angry or a little confused, but they are loyal to Konoha and to the Hokage's orders. They move with the future of the fire country, but I know they both share a fairly dim view of this 'civic journalism' movement that was borne out of the war. Trust me, they'd have no interest in talking to reporters."

"Kiba then," Sasuke shrugged. "Or Naruto."

Tsunade took a moment to digest that before she licked her lips.

"You really think it was Naruto?"

"He's pretty comfortable with being interviewed, isn't he?" Sasuke muttered, but there was little vindication in his voice. After a moment, he shook his head. "No, I don't think it was him. And I don't care who it was. Like I said, it was bound to happen. The article doesn't say much anyway."

"Sasuke," Tsunade said, but he waved a hand at her.

"Is Kakashi going to keep me indoors now? Make sure no one gets a chance to "glimpse" me before the other Kage arrive to put me down for good?"

"Sasuke no one said that's going to happen. And the Hokage hasn't given any orders yet. The paper's only been out for two hours."

"Hn," Sasuke grunted, sounding slightly more like himself. Tsunade offered an empathetic smile.

"It'll blow over," she said. "After a few days, people will forget. It'll go-"

"No. People won't forget. People don't forget. If you think they do then you're lying to yourself. People pretend not to be interested in your business, but they are. They always are."

Sasuke pushed up to his feet and held the back of the couch as he swayed a little. Balance was a slippery customer now, and would be for the rest of his pregnancy. He wasn't built like a woman - his centre was still too high and he was too slight to carry such a pronounced weight very well. But he righted himself and padded into the kitchen to fetch a glass of water.

"Besides," he continued. "I don't care what people think. I never have." It was a lie, of course. And it was an old lie, one he'd told himself over many years to keep the edge sharp and his focus primed. He almost believed it for a time, he even banked on it when his power grew enough that he felt he was above the aspect of caring for anyone else's opinion bar his own. But then the powers were gone and reality started to bleed back in where an absence had built and suddenly things began to change. He couldn't afford that lie anymore. He needed to care in order to protect himself, had to understand others in order to stay invisible from them.

Despite himself, Sasuke was shaken by this necessity to interact and respond. It felt so strange to be part of... people again. It was like a spectre coming back to life; a myth that had been sighted. The newspaper confirmed his existence and Sasuke felt... weird. He turned away from his guardian,
"Let me know when Kakashi's decided if I'm a kept pet or not," before heading back to his room. Once inside, he closed the door and stood in the centre of the mat, staring at his feet. The article played out in his head, over and over in his own voice; he couldn't stop it. His mind was a swarm of someone else's words and he felt cold and strange because of it.

**Uchiha Sasuke-** His brain persisted. *- a rogue ninja turned hero during the 4th Ninja war has returned to Konoha in a wave of mystery. Joining him was a small child, which he kept close at all times. According to a source, the child was very similar in appearance to the Uchiha himself and may have possibly been his own. Sasuke attended a mysterious meeting with the Hokage, before disappearing again. While it is a popular notion that he still resides within the Leaf Village-*

"The Rokudaime has refused to comment on the matter," Sasuke breathed, finding his balance. He looked toward the cot where Mikoto lay sleeping and swallowed hard. His mouth felt dry, and while he had a glass of water fixed in one hand, he couldn't bring himself to drink. He couldn't move. He'd been named. The news was there now. The talk would start and the talk would stretch.

And Caliga would find out. There weren't pictures to accompany the article, but there was a name. Caliga knew his name; he never let him forget that. He liked to call it over and over again in mocking. Feel it grow dirty on his tongue and flick it back in Sasuke's face like a handful of dirt in a fight.

Caliga would find out because Caliga wasn't dead.

Caliga would find him.

The glass had slipped from his hand before he knew it and fell to the floor with a dull thud. How it didn't break, he didn't know, but Tsunade appeared in the doorway regardless, concern darting puckering her brows.

"Are you-" she began to say, but stopped before she could even finish the thought. Sasuke turned to look at her with such an expression of defeat she found her breath catching in her throat. It took him a few moments to speak, and when he did his voice was strained.

"I don't… want to go out today."

"I'll cancel your appointments," Tsunade told him, gently. "I'm sure everyone will understand."

"I don't… think I want to go out tomorrow either."

"It's…" Tsunade shook her head, letting her pigtails roll over her shoulders. "Sasuke, we'll sort this. The press, it's something that Kakashi has been anticipating. We'll handle them, don't worry. There was always a chance that the story would get out; the world isn't as closed as it used to be but it's not a bad thing. You shouldn't feel like you have to hide."

"Yes," Sasuke looked at her. His voice that sounded like grit. "I should."

And suddenly Tsunade realized she had grossly underestimated something very, very important. He'd told her, and she'd listened, but she hadn't quite realized the extent of Sasuke's fear until he spoke. Konoha wasn't the problem. The article wasn't the problem. It was the audience it reached that bothered him.

It was the fact that the Flame had all but marked the spot where Sasuke stood for Caliga's benefit. He knew he was alive. And he knew where to find him.
An hour later Sasuke was back in bed, his blankets tucked around him like armor. Only his face and his dark hair were visible atop the mountain of sky blue polka dot and sunflower assaulted comforter, but Naruto stared at him anyway. He sat on his haunches, face solemn, brows knit. His fingers were pressed against the window, eyes locked on Sasuke's motionless form. Occasionally Tsunade stuck her head around the door to check on him, and every now and again he rolled and tossed a little, but otherwise the room remained still. Naruto smiled softly to himself.

"Morning, Sasuke," he whispered. "Having a good sleep in? Did you dream this time?" Hopefully they were good dreams, but if the previous night was any kind of indicator, then probably not. Naruto had arrived at the bookkeep's just after Sasuke returned to him room and retired back to bed – he hadn't seen him get up, though he wouldn't have been surprised if he did. "Have you fed your little girl again?" He continued to himself. "Or does she eat later? 3am's kind of a crap time to wake up, eh? Kinda always has been, even when we were young enough that time didn't seem to matter."

He rested his chin on his hand and closed his eyes, imagining himself tucked up in bed beside his friend. He would wrap his arms around Sasuke's body, warm him. He'd tuck his nose down under the fine hairs at the back of Sasuke's neck and just breathe in the scent of him. He remembered it still from the time in Nami no Kuni. On the bridge. When he thought Sasuke was lost. Naruto held him close and tried to keep the life from leaving him. He held him. Memorized his scent. He'd never forgotten.

"Will you have breakfast soon? Do you still eat rice and tomatoes, or steamed fish and scallions? Damn, I shoulda brought you something from Ichiraku! Would you want your old favourites? Or are you doing that craving thing they say people get when they're having a baby?"

"Pickled radish," someone said.

"What?"

"No, pickled onion. It's pickled onion, they like!" There was another voice joining the first. Naruto waved them both silent with an angry swipe of his hand.

"Quiet!"

"I was only trying to-"

"Shh!" A third, identical voice hissed. "He'll hear us!"

"He's not gonna hear us!"

"Dumbass, he's got ears like a freaking hawk, you know that! Sasuke hears everything!"

"Not this far away!"

"Guys," Naruto sighed, turning to the roomful of clones who sat draped over the cluttered furniture, watching their primary with wide, inquisitive eyes. "I'm trying to have a moment here."

"Why'd you summon us first then?"

There was a shrug. Naruto scratched his chin. "Wasn't thinking, really."

"So what's new."

"Don't be a jerk, he's just excited about the plan!" said a more understanding doppelganger, who
offered his mirror a kind smile. "It's good to be focused again. Don't you feel focused? Feels great, right?"

"Actually, yeah," the others replied. Some nodded enthusiastically. Others bounced their shoulders, a little more subdued.

"Focused," Naruto said, turning back to watch as Sasuke rested. He licked his lips. "Yeah. Focused. That's right. T-that's right!" The second part of the sentence had him pushing up from the window, striding (as well as he could in the claustrophobic room) over to his small army, hands on his hips. "That's right! We're focused! We have a mission, and that mission is to take the fire off Sasuke!"

"The heat off Sasuke, not the fire," one clone corrected him. At the dirty look it was given, it shrugged. "Well, that's what Eyebrows said."

"Whatever," Naruto regrouped quickly. "We have a job to do. Now remember, don't show yourselves too often. We have a schedule to keep and we need to stick to it. There can't be two of you out at the same time, or the cat's out of the box-"

"-bag."

"-shut up. You've got your partners, you know who you're interacting with. Remember, keep it subtle, don't talk to anyone else but your assigned agent. Shika's getting us a list of known journalists, so you wanna make sure you're glimpsed by them, ok? Don't overdo it. Now you've all got your costumes, right? Remember to alter them on a daily basis, we don't need a whole wardrobe change every hour. And don't wear the blue one – logically he wouldn't fit into that one anymore. Ok, let's have a look at you."

There was a popping noise – a kind of pneumatic huff – then Naruto found himself grinning at five perfectly replicas of Uchiha Sasuke standing before him. Five sets of brilliant dark eyes regarded him with an almost flawless portrayal of Sasuke's default expression: seriousness and self-importance. The shirts were crisp with just the slightest show of wear. One had even given his illusion a few nicks on his fingers, while another had cracked a toenail and battered his sandals a little. Finishing touches that accented the believability of the piece. Then there was the smirk. By God, the smirk was just matchless. Naruto had to admit, he was damn good at making himself a Sasuke. Though he'd be hard pressed to admit he'd never practiced.

"Nice," he said with a grin, nodding affably at his crew of copies. "Let's go."

Killer B sat on the stoop of the Raikage's private home, humming to himself as he composed a string of new lyrics over the sounds of his brother frying eggs in the kitchen. They had breakfast together almost three times a week now and met for dinner on several occasions as well. B liked his freedom, (as much as he could steal of it anyway), but A seemed to actively seek his company more and more after the conclusion of the fourth war. Perhaps A realized just how close he came to losing his brother. Perhaps it was the fact that the world was changing. Perhaps it was because A found the constant meetings with the foreign ambassadors and guests far more difficult than he'd anticipated and he longed for company that was just less… formal. Or perhaps he finally realized how great a musician his brother was and actually wanted to stay and listen to his genius! Bee liked to think his constant invitations to A's house was something of the latter, though he suspected it was really a mix of the three.

He had the newspapers in his hand – a thick bundle delivered early by the usual yawning, sleepy-eyed office deputy. B ignored the local papers, they were dull. He also tossed news from the Grass Country, the Sand and Earth, flicking instead to the papers from Konoha, where the most
interesting news was always bound to germinate. The Tribune and the Star – the corporate, award-winning media vendors - were full of relevant information as always, but B was a sucker (no pun intended) for gossip, and eagerly dumped the remaining legitimate news in favor of the red-topped tabloids. They were trash, of course and the stories were often ridiculous exaggerations, but B always appreciated the creativity of them. Only the new media could think that a simple business lunch between the Ambassador of Konoha and the Kusagakure's elderly regional council seat was a date between an 'experienced cougar and Konoha's sexiest new celebrity!'" The idea that anyone would see his dorky little friend as a sex symbol had made B laugh so hard he almost snorted Gyuki's chakra out his nose.

Only he wasn't smiling this time. Instead, he stared very carefully at the paper in front of him, his eyes scanning the headline several times before he read the meat of the story.

So. The brat is back, is he? Back in Konoha. B sucked his lip as he felt Gyuki shudder and he swallowed, drily. A hero, they're sayin'. Some hero. Show's what them fools know.

B was well aware of Sasuke's actions after Kaguya had been defeated. He knew what Sasuke had done, and what he had attempted to bring about at the end of the war. It was a secret Naruto had begged him to keep, him and the rest of the biju. Sasuke had been wrong, he'd told them. Sasuke wasn't thinking clearly. Sasuke hadn't really wanted to kill anyone, he'd just… He… He needed to sort it out. He'd sort it out, as soon as he found him. And when Naruto prostrated himself before B, when he bowed and placed his forehead on the ground for the friend who'd let him down over and over again, B could only nod in slow, numb affirmation. He didn't like Sasuke, not at all – not one bit. The little shit needed the sense pummeled into him more than anyone else on the planet, save perhaps that Orochimaru weirdo he'd heard about, but Naruto still pursued him. Naruto wouldn't give in. So B agreed.

Sometime later after the reconstruction began across the globe, Naruto found B again and told him in confidence that he didn't think Sasuke would pose the same threat as he had once before. He mentioned an explosion and an exchange of energy that seemed to rob Sasuke of his chakra, leaving him only slightly more adept than a common civilian or an academy beginner. He didn't know how he'd achieved it; he didn't know what it meant. But he said it as a means of reassurance, a kind guilty, wild pride in the fact that he'd neutered something so damn powerful. Something so close to him.

B had to admit, things did feel a little different after the dust had settled and the war had ended, but he wasn't so sure the world itself had benefited from Naruto's accomplishment. Something felt weird. Something was off. Even the stars themselves seemed altered, and there was something in the wind sometimes that felt old and stale. Something had shifted, but he couldn't quite put his finger on the cause of it.

B stared at the headline. He remembered the pain of feeling Gyuki shut off from the world inside that Chibaku Tensei. He heard Sasuke's threat cold and sharp in his biju's ears as though he were hearing them himself. Then he remembered the soft wet feeling as he buried his fist in Sasuke's chest and tore his ribs away from his lungs. He licked his teeth as he saw, still so clearly, that little stain gasping for breath – a landed fish on a sun-scorched shore. Sasuke was wrong. But Sasuke was beaten. That's what the Kyuubi said.

So let him be beat. B thought. Then he bowed his head and tore the front page off the Daily Flame, balling it in his hand. That little blond turd could punch him through a week anyhow.

A would find out soon, regardless. Someone would tell him – Mei, probably. But his interference would give the brat a couple of hours at least. It was more for Naruto and the Hokage anyway.
Almost on cue, he heard A bellowing from the sitting room:

"Breakfast is- Oi! What the hell d'ya think you're doing to my paper?"

"What? Fool, you want me to leave the dog shit just sittin' there?" Bee hollered back. He held up the damaged front page, innocently. "Could scrape it off if ya want but-"

"Just… I'll get another," A sighed, placing the breakfast plates on the low coffee table, before thundering back to the kitchen for the drinks. "Go wash your hands. And get Yukidama inside. Can't have him crapping on my damn porch. Damn mutt's got a box. Hell."

"Yo!" B agreed brightly, before winking at A's little Pomeranian, Yuki, who had been sitting on the porch beside him the entire time. The tiny dog – more of a walking puffball than anything – eyed him inquisitively. "You saw nothin' little bro," B added, before he tossed the paper in the trash and disappeared indoors. The Pomeranian watched him for a few seconds before it got to its feet and trotted around the side of the house, out of earshot. Putting a paw to its ear, it spoke into a small, wireless comm, voice low and hushed.

"Pakkun? Yeah, he hasn't seen it yet. Yeah. Think B-sama's on our side. Yeah… I'll let you know as soon as I do. Thanks again for the opportunity, I really appreciate… Yeah. Yeah thanks. Ok I'd better go, there's bacon on the table and I'll be damned if I'm not going to guilt a piece off him for that crap thing. 'Kay, bye. I mean, Kifu over and out."

The paper that lay open on the bed was been stolen.

So was the bed. And the bedroom. And the house that sat quiet and forgotten in the early hours of the morning. The ticking of the large Northern clock was the only sound in the tiny two-room dwelling on that sat on its own in a little forest glade just south of Kusagakure. The owner of the house was meant to be on holiday in the Southern Islands. And in the Southern Islands they'd remain until someone finally found their mangled body slowly decomposing beneath the storehouse floor.

He didn't care, he would be long gone by then.

A man sat on the bed. His pale hands smoothed over the surface of the paper and ran over the curve of the typeface with near tender familiarity. The long fingers were bandaged, the nails a mix of dark purple to sickly yellow from heavy bruising. But the man didn't seem to be in any pain. In fact, he was smiling. Spiralling curls, damp and heavy with travel debris hung like a thicket over a pair of dull green eyes and Caligula of the Kakkou ran his tongue over his unbrushed teeth and whispered in a voice that was fetid and dark as a flooded grave.

"Hello," he said. "Hello, Sasuke. How's my boy?"

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Long chapter is long _
Enjoy! Thanks for the support as always! You guys rock! Thanks heaps also to Aperture_Living for the betas and the RPs to get some of this sounding right, and
Gweatherwax, you know what part's for you. Hope you like it 3
Konoha, 12 March
Year of the Hare

There were few people Hatake Kakashi wanted to punch through a wall. He had his death lists, of course, most Shinobi did, and they varied in levels of both violence and creativity. But when it came down to simple taxonomies in killing, Kakashi really only bothered with two things: business and pleasure. The business side was for those criminals who were given silent executions: asphyxiation, poisoning, a thin knife by moonlight, that sort of thing. Textbook ninja stuff, all above-board, or at least as candid as a soldier who was, by definition, an assassin could get. The latter – the pleasure list – had been cultivated from the business list due to Kakashi's compounding paradigms of job dissatisfaction and comprised of the kind of sentences that standard capital punishment just didn't satisfy. Most involved the type of criminal that was best wiped from the face of the earth, preferably leaving a smear.

Naturally Kakashi realized terms like "satisfaction" and "execution" weren't commonly bosom buddies in the professional sphere, and he tended to lean on far more humane terminology in his debrief reports, mostly to dodge the inevitable questioning which followed phrases like "accidental beheading" or "haphazard dismemberment". Even as Rokudaime, the word "mulch" had somehow worked its way into a few of his mission briefs and to which he had developed a breezy nonchalance upon enquiry. He'd said it was a typo. The officer who'd asked him what the hell he'd meant to write in the first place subsequently found new employment in the mail room.

It seemed odd to him that while he worked in an industry which involved killing and death almost as naturally as a desk job required pencils and efficiency, people seemed surprised such dispatches could be noisy, messy affairs, glut with graphic violence. In more recent times, however, Kakashi had found that the people who often required clarification on these types of missions weren't ninja. At the same time, Kakashi quickly discovered that, on a government level, he wasn't good with people who weren't ninja. Shinobi were not complicated creatures. Militant by nature, ninja would (for the most part) obey orders, appropriate team structures and generally just follow without much more than a breath of insubordination if something were amiss. That world, that oeuvre Kakashi knew inside out and backwards. Civilians, on the other hand, were untrained, wild cards who made no sense and whose ideas and aspirations danced in a world that Kakashi couldn't comprehend. They thrived in a world of business and stocks, a world of gossip and stature. No clans, no rules. Ninja were either rogue or team participants; civilians flip-flopped between social responsibilities and a sense of self.

The man that had sat in front of him, one Katsugi Higurashi, was one of these civilians. He was also Chairman of the Press Association, an agency that governed the flow of new media between the allied countries and oversaw the distribution of news though fortified and contemporary settlements alike. He was new to the job, Kakashi could tell. That suit still bore the crispness of the ingénue, but the attitude stuffed inside it was practically veteran. It was attitude inherited, Kakashi decided. Not his own, but one that fostered under a keen and watchful eye. Higurashi wasn't a game changer, he was a tool to be sacrificed in copiously greased mechanism by an engineer of far grander plans. The tie he wore seemed about as thin as his integrity; he hadn't yet learned how to disguise himself, but Kakashi was sure that whomever sent him knew his transparency wasn't going to be a problem.
The conversation was a cul-de-sac of rebuttals, with Kakashi misfiring at every chance of counter. It was clear that the Press did not answer to the Alliance, nor did they show any inclination of honoring the original treaty implemented by the Fire Daimyo to protect the rights of Shinobi over the scrutiny of the general public. That time had passed. Now, the mysterious Sasuke Uchiha was a hot topic, both the villain and the hero who assisted the great Naruto Uzumaki captured both the imagination and the public's hard-earned cash. Neither D notice, nor threats of injunctions nor breaches of professional conduct phased a man like Katsugi and he was relaxed when he told Kakashi the only way the press would back down was if the Rokudaime or the mythical Sasuke Uchiha himself gave an exclusive interview. Even if they didn't, the idea was already planted and the news was there, even if nothing existed to prove it. It was one of the first times Kakashi had felt misplaced in his own office, that everything around him was just a thin veneer over a world that was changing so swiftly beneath his nose he couldn't keep up with it.

Of course, every Hokage had witnessed a time when his village was out of his control – the God of Shinobi himself had chewed the worst of to have it overthrown by civilians? To be told what could and could not be done by men who wrote newspapers? Kakashi had waved him out of the office feeling like he'd been sucker punched. What was it they said? The pen was mightier than the sword? Kakashi had laughed at the old adage once when Iruka had tried to use it to win an argument. He wasn't laughing now.

He really should have killed him. Surely no one would miss him. Not with that comb-over.

Kakashi cocked an eye toward the clock on the wall and sighed heavily. It was nine thirty-five in the morning. The paper had been out for nearly four hours, give or take an hour for delivery and reading times. Calls would be coming in soon, probably Ohnoki first – the old goat never even seemed to sleep (but luckily had such trouble getting the modems connected in his office, he'd have to wait for his assistants to rise before he called anyone). Katsugi had hinted on publishing reaction pieces from the other hokage, but it was unlikely many of them would say anything before contacting Konoha first. Aside from A. A would probably hit the roof. He picked up his coffee and took a long swig of air, having earlier drained the contents and had only just replaced his mask when Shikamaru pushed into the office, looking unusually harried. He wiped his brow as he caught his breath.

"Sir?"

"Getting some training in? You look like you've run here from Kusa."

"Across town, actually. South Gate."

"What the hell have you been doing this early?"

"What you told me," Shikamaru tried to stifle his yawn and came up unsuccessful. Kakashi didn't seem to notice. "Diffusing problem situations in any way possible. Primarily the press leak we experienced this morning."

"Hn," Kakashi grunted. "Come up with anything?"

"For the time being, Naruto's using henge to disguise himself as Sasuke." When his superior blinked in consternation, Shikamaru added. "We know we can't really stop the rumors now they're out, so Naruto came up with the idea of keeping the focus away from the real Sasuke, by giving the press a fake one to chase. That way we don't have to jump through hoops to hide him; journalists will be looking for someone who looks like... well, you get the idea."

"Indeed," Kakashi raised his brows. "And Naruto came up with this?"
"Yeah."

"Thought he'd need a few more days to get his act together."

"Me too. Seems whatever Gaara's told him, it's helped. Uh, I mean the Kazekage-"

"I won't tell him," Kakashi said, wryly. "Gaara's always been sympathetic of Naruto's obsessions and empathetic toward Sasuke. I've already send a message to him – he'll reply in an hour or two, he always does," he paused for a moment. "How's Sasuke?"

"I haven't been to see him yet, we've spent a good hour or so coming up with a plan to implement. Then Naruto ran off to… I don't know… he said 'prepare', but I suspect it was to psyche himself up. Ino's positioned by the main news quarters in town, Hinata's watching the envoys at the West gate where most of them come and go. Haven't seen Kiba, but-

"He's back," Kakashi interrupted, waving a hand dismissively. "Lying low for now – can't really blame him. I'll see him later, he's not the most pressing issue we have."

"So what's our next move?"

"Next? Next we have-"

There was thunder on the stairs. Sandals pounding against the steps so hard, it seemed the they could have left a brand the wood. A huff of success signalled the completion of the ascent, followed swiftly by a rush of air as the door burst open, revealing a panting, red-faced Naruto. Blue eyes regarded the meeting before him with confusion.

"Kakashi sens-" Naruto began, but slowed when he saw Shikamaru. "Oh… You talked to him already?"

"I said I was going to. Where were you? It takes that long to set up your clones?"

Naruto looked guilty. "Well, they needed to be briefed… They don't always do what you say unless you tell 'em a few times."

Shikamaru just shrugged. Kakashi nodded.

"Welcome back, Naruto," he said. The greeting was met by an embarrassed mumble, but Kakashi ignored it and inclined his chin toward Shikamaru instead.

"So… As we were saying. You'll be checking on Sasuke this morning?"

"Yeah," Shikamaru nodded. "Just quickly. I don't know if he's seen the paper yet-"

"He has," Kakashi said. "He won't be going anywhere today. Probably not tomorrow either."

The two younger ninja looked at each other apprehensively. Naruto seemed to take a shaky breath. Shikamaru pursed his lips, concern puckering his brows.

"I'll see if he wants a game."

"Good idea," Kakashi said. He waited, watching as the jounin excused himself. Naruto looked primed to do the same but he held up a hand. "Not you. Not yet."

"But-"
"Already set to run off and save Sasuke again?" Kakashi motioned to the chair in front of him. "Do me a favour. Humor me for a few minutes, would you?"

"You want me to tell you a joke?" Naruto ventured, sitting down gingerly. His ass dropped, but his feet seemed to want to stay standing. It was a very odd look.

"No," Kakashi said, moving behind his desk himself. "We're going to have a conversation. It's one we've put off for a long time. In fact, it's one that we've never had. But I'm starting to learn with this Hokage gig. And I'm starting to think that over the years I've approached many things the wrong way. With Sasuke, with you. Especially with you. Sometimes the kind of impersonal approach works, but I think we're beyond that now."

Naruto looked at him warily, unable to shift his gaze elsewhere. He sucked his lip. "You want... to know what happened, don't you. That day. When Sasuke disappeared."

"No," Kakashi replied, pouring a glass of water from the jug at his elbow. He pushed the glass toward his student, and offered him a smile that Naruto couldn't see. "I want to know how you are."

"How... how I am?"

"Yes. How are you, Naruto?"

"Good?" Naruto hesitated, feeling the weight of his teacher's gaze the entire time. Kakashi was a placid entity before him; a statue of worship - if he held up a hand in forgiveness, it wouldn't have looked out of place. Naruto eyed him a little longer before he glanced at the water in his glass with procreating suspicions. Kakashi rolled his eyes.

"It's just water, Naruto."

"You're being weird."

"No, I'm being a friend." Kakashi said, patiently. "I was your teacher once, but we've moved past that now, I think. You used to be honest with me; as honest as you were with Iruka, but that's gotten lost somewhere along the line. Maybe it was Yamato. Maybe I just don't exude that kind of vibe, but I'd like to think we're friends."

"Yeah," Naruto said, slowly, as though wrapping his comprehension around the idea. Of course, they had always been some form of comrade, it was just a very strange connection. He hadn't gelled with Kakashi the way that Sasuke had; his paternal relationship ended with Jiraiya and had somewhat formed again with B in a more abstract form. But he did like the guy, and he did understand team 7 better than anyone. Naruto sipped the water, gingerly. "I'm... I don't know. I guess... I guess I feel pretty dumb."

"Why's that?"

"Because Sasuke's in a lotta trouble."

"What makes you think he's in trouble?"

Naruto shot Kakashi such a look of incredulity the man had to blink a few times to shake it.

"He's... you know... He's... in the wrong body and... and he's going... you know... " Naruto motioned awkwardly with one hand. "Gonna... have a..."

"He's pregnant, yes." Kakashi finished. "Do you think that's troublesome?"
"Yes!" Naruto said immediately, then sat back, sighing. "No? I don't know. Sasuke never makes anything look particularly hard. He already has a baby and he got it all the way back to Konoha from… where ever he was."

"Earth Country, by the looks of things."

Naruto blinked. "What?"

"We think it was Tsuchi. We've run tests on some of the debris in his clothes. The results aren't entirely conclusive but it's the best answer we've had for a while."

"Shino… Shino said. But it was really all the way up there?" Naruto paled a little. He'd known Sasuke had travelled far - unimaginably far in terrible conditions. It seemed worse hearing it out loud. Kakashi nodded.

"All the way up there. He'd been travelling for weeks."

"With a…" Naruto looked at his hands. "And after… after he'd been…" There was silence for a moment. The he said in the smallest voice. "I don't like the word."

"Neither do I, but according to three medical professionals, it's what happened. Rape is not uncommon, Naruto, we just don't address it."

"Why not?" Naruto frowned, suddenly. "I mean, people get up in arms when someone gets killed, or if someone starts a fight or… steals something. How come people don't get angry about… about… doing that. Doing a rape?"

"I guess because we're still old-fashioned and stupid." Kakashi said, bluntly. "The nature of the act is something we've always tended to tip-toe around in commonplace conversation. People still regard sex as being something that shouldn't be talked about. So I suppose sex crimes are in the same category."

"That's horrible."

"It is. Even the civilian settlements to the north are beginning to recognise the ramifications of downplaying these injustices. Rape, domestic violence and sexual abuse charges are now being examined by the High Courts, rather than remaining in private practices."

"It should be like that here. It should be like that everywhere."

"Yes, but Shinobi have a long history of interbreeding." Kakashi said, carefully. "Basically, clans would pair off their best ninja to create the strongest offspring, even if one of the partners was not as consenting as they'd like."

The look on Naruto's face was ghastly.

"Y-you mean if the lady didn't want to-"

"Very much so."

"And they weren't married or anything?"

"No. Some clans would arrange marriages, some would just… treat it like a mission, I suppose. It's an ancient practice, barbaric. Sadly, many clans still persist."

"Can't you stop them?"
Kakashi took a moment to gather his response. Could he? Yes, probably. Should he? Absolutely. But it was a tricky situation; the Shinobi world was still so far behind the avant garde of the North. It wasn't his place to throw his weight around, not when the practice of selective breeding was something even Hiruzen condoned. Tsunade, thankfully, was saved from having to deal with it, as a period of war tended to discourage the clans to keep their best and brightest off the field while they dealt with child-rearing. Now that peace had settled on the Shinobi lands… well… It was his problem now.

"I think… it's best to go with the whole "Show, don't tell" reaction," he replied after a moment and at Naruto's confusion, added. "Think about how you might tell someone they're wrong and they just don't get it until you show them what they're doing and why it's bad."

"Like… with Sasuke."

"Yes."

"Did the people who took Sasuke…" Naruto bit his lip. "Did they make him a girl because they wanted more Uchiha? Because he's the last one?"

"We believe the people who performed the act, or were responsible for possibly orchestrating it, were likely to be breeding Sasuke for his Kekkei Genkai, yes." Kakashi said. "It must have been a lot of trouble, forcing him into a body that can actively grow and support a child."

"It's more than a henge isn't it."

"Sasuke can't perform a henge as he is, his charka's too low." Kakashi watched Naruto carefully. He knew that. He knew why too, he was sure of it. "We needed Kabuto to help unpack the mystery of Sasuke's transformation. Stop making that face, you know there's no one else that could have done it."

"Besides Orochimaru," Naruto said, his expression still bitter with distaste.

"You know we'd never have asked him, even if we had found him," Kakashi explained. "He'll be locked away for good when we do, I promise you that."

"But you won't kill him." Naruto didn't like the word execute as much as he didn't like the word rape. To execute sounded too formal. Sterile. That wasn't Naruto's way. To kill someone made it sound as though they had a chance. Naruto may have hated Orochimaru with every fibre of his being, but he couldn't deny the man was talented enough to deserve being duly killed rather than facelessly dispatched. Kakashi shook his head.

"The man is insane, but his knowledge base in forbidden jutsu is… unparalleled. Konoha would petition the Allied Shinobi Council to keep him alive, purely for the fact that he's left so many afflicted persons in the world that still need help. Not even Kabuto could save all of them."

"Konoha would petition…" Naruto frowned. "Is that because he's an international criminal?"

"Yes. We don't have the right to punish him as a nukenin by national standards. The other villages have the right to rebuke or adjust his sentence."

"And Sasuke's the same."

There it was. Kakashi pressed his lips into a thin line, linking his fingers before him. "Maybe. It was Danzou who changed Sasuke's missing status to that of an S-Class criminal. And unfortunately it was around the same time Sasuke moved to attack the Kage summit. That doesn't look good, I'm
afraid."

"It wasn't his fault! Danzou was the one who-"

"I know. I know, Naruto." Kakashi closed his eyes. "The situation isn't straightforward. We're lucky enough that most of the Kage recognize this. In their own ways. But we'll need to have a trial. We need Sasuke to testify."

"Why?" Naruto scowled. "So people can ignore him again?"

"No, so people will listen. It seems like the right time for people to listen." Kakashi replied, quietly. "And not all of us have been entirely truthful either. We told people what they wanted to hear, Naruto. We didn't tell them the truth."

Naruto seemed to blush. Kakashi just nodded a little.

"But that's another conversation. I'm not finished with the first one yet. You said you feel dumb because… what? Because of Sasuke's situation?"

"I took his chakra away. He… probably couldn't fight those people off."

"He's Sasuke," Kakashi raised a brow. "The last time we stood against him before the war, he was nearly blind. You honestly think a lack of chakra would stop him?"

"I don't know." Naruto bit his lip. "I can't remember what happened very well… not after… Not after the thing that… Not after what he did." His voice petered out as he spoke and as Kakashi made to intervene before he became more uncomfortable, he ploughed on ahead. "I know you told me you'd listen when I was ready and I know I said I didn't really know what happened. Well, I was lying. A little bit. I was… worried you'd… look at me different if I told you. That everyone would."

"You said that Sasuke attacked you and you retaliated," Kakashi said, outlining Naruto's original patchy recollection of the events as succinctly as he could. "And with your defending jutsu, you took his chakra. Depleted it somehow. Which is why it was difficult for us to track him."

"Yeah."

"And you mentioned a genjutsu. A type of genjutsu he used in the attack."

"Yeah. The same kinda one his brother used, I think. Back in Shukuba." Naruto placed the glass of water on Kakashi's desk ever so slowly. He took a breath. "I didn't tell you what was in it though. I didn't tell anyone, not ever Sakura. Only Kurama knows because he saw it. He thinks I'm a pussy for not telling anyone, but… but I think he was scared too."

"Scared of what Sasuke showed you?"

"Scared of how… it made me feel." Naruto whispered. Kakashi linked his hands in front of him, carefully.

"He hurt you? He made you feel pain?" Sasuke could be sadistic, that was true, but would he have even bothered with Naruto in genjutsu, when Kurama could have broken him out at any point? It had to be something more than that. Something that held Naruto in it. But as it was, Naruto shook his head.

"No. He… it's the opposite of that. He… I... I'm… in... um... I love Sasuke, Kakashi-sensei." Naruto
managed. "To me he's... he's not just a rival or a brother or a reincarnation or whatever that ol' fossil said we were. He's... I love him. Sakura always said she did but I don't know it if was the same..."

Kakashi was nodding slowly, but stopped when Naruto seemed to need an answer. "It's not the same," he agreed. "Everyone falls in love differently." He left it at that and Naruto faltered, expecting more.

"Y-you don't think I'm weird?"

"I think you're weird all right, but for making packet ramen when Teuchi would feed you for free for the rest of your life. And for burning your fingernail and toenail clippings so that tengu can't eat them. And for liking the smell of your own farts. I don't think you're weird for being in love with Sasuke."

"But..." Naruto blushed again, possibly for the mention of his obsession with his odours. "He's a boy."

"I know that. And you're worried because?" And Kakashi meant it. He would generally look more toward women if he ever felt the urge for physical gratification, but that didn't mean he hadn't looked at several men the same way. Naruto was, predictably, surprised.

"You mean... You don't think it's... abnormal?"

"I don't. But I'd be lying if society saw things the same way I do. I'm not surprised because I know you two. I've trained you both for a long time. I remember how you were in each other's company. Those looks toward him you thought you were stealing?" Kakashi smiled again a little. "I am a ninja, Naruto. Observation is one of my primary tools."

"Oh," Naruto sank lower in his chair.

"I'm not saying that to embarrass you, I'm explaining my reasoning."

"I know."

"So, you're in love with Sasuke," Kakashi coaxed. "And... you told him that day?"

"I think he knew. Or... no... Actually, he didn't. He was surprised because his jutsu kinda... pulled it out of me. It..." Naruto took a moment to craft the explanation. "It... made a sort of... other world where I... We..." Naruto closed his eyes. "We got to be together."

Kakashi leaned forward a little, giving Naruto his full attention. He didn't want to interrupt, or say something like "go on", but he knew Naruto needed to feel safe. He picked up the jug instead and poured his student another glass of water. Finally, he said:

"Did you feel relieved when you saw that?"

"Yeah," Naruto swallowed, forcibly. "I thought... I mean, it was so good I thought it was real. I did. I'm not sure when I got caught in it - it must have been when we knocked each other out for a second. We'd fought for so long, we were tired. Kurama was out for the count. Our chakra was exhausted - well I didn't have much left and I knew he didn't either. So when he gave up and acknowledged me and my...what's the word? Victory... I just accepted it. It seemed... real."

Naruto stared at the glass on the table. "You know... apart from the Tsuki no me, you hear about genjutsu always being a bad thing - like torture. Nightmares and stuff. But what Sasuke didn't
wasn't a nightmare. Not immediately. If anything, it was... It was a really great dream. It was real
life, so believable, so... detailed. Thinking about it now, Sasuke really didn't let anything slip his
attention - like you, and watching me and stuff. He knew what to put in. When we'd eat, it was the
type of ramen I always buy, but sometimes he'd put in my second favourite as well, just so it wasn't
too perfect. When we slept, he knew what side of the bed I preferred. I've got a single mattress at
home, but he still knew what side I sleep on the most!" Naruto shook his head in disbelief. "He let
me be Hokage, but not straight away, I had to work for it. He even made up a little fight that he had
with Sakura over me... Now that I think about it, it probably was exactly what he thought I'd want,
but it just seemed so unlike him to even consider those things, y'know?"

Kakashi nodded. He knew genjutsu - very well in fact. Almost as well as Sasuke. But it seemed
Sasuke was leagues ahead of him when it came to the finer mechanisms of the Tsukuyomi. He'd
made use of it as a weapon, like Itachi - it was something to throw into a fight to disorientate or
confuse. Sasuke had obviously risen past that, though Kakashi had no idea how.

"So... it went on," Naruto continued. "And on. And on. And we... we got so close. I can still
remember the conversations - not the words, exactly, but the feel of them. The... the similarities
we shared. I learned new stuff about him and he learned about me. I took him to meet Kurama...
properly this time. We prayed at our parent's graves. I felt... " Naruto bit his lip. "I felt... whole.
We were together for... I don't know.. Four years? Five? It was hard to say... But it was enough
that...when he twisted it, it hurt. It hurt more than anything."

"Twisted it?"

"Yeah," Naruto whispered, then shook his head. "No. He destroyed it."

"How?" Kakashi couldn't help it, but he _was_ captivated. It was a rather evil pride that he felt toward
his ex-student, but he had to admit, Sasuke _was_ brilliant in his own right. Full of surprises almost as
much as Naruto had been when he was young. It was like they'd swapped at a halfway point;
Naruto became more reliable - almost to the point of predictable, and Sasuke, in all his misgivings,
became the worst type of uncanny. But the best kind of ninja there was. It was then that he noticed
Naruto's fingers were shaking and instantly quelled his pride. "You... don't have to say, Naruto. If
you're not ready, you don't have to."

"I killed him." Naruto breathed. He made to take the water, but felt the strength slip out of his
fingers, and moved his hand back into his lap instead. Kakashi felt his throat tighten.

"Killed him?"

"Yeah."

"Why? Where you were told to?"

"No." There was a slow, dreamy shake of the head. Naruto's expression was haunted, but there was
a tension in the room. Kakashi recognised it as Kurama's chakra. Naruto was that upset it was
seeping from him like condensation beading on the side of his glass. Kakashi pressed his lips
together.

"No, of course not. No one could have made you do that. You'd never have believed it then. The
genjutsu would have been revealed."

"Yeah," Naruto closed his eyes. "Yeah. It wasn't like that. Wasn't an accident or a mission or
anything. He just... He... I... turned it off. That's all I did. There was a machine. It had a switch. It
was keeping him alive, but... not."
"Was he sick?" Kakashi asked quietly. He felt his lungs twist a little when Naruto nodded, tearfully.

"He… collapsed one day in the kitchen. It was summer. Warm. People had been fainting a lot in the heat so I thought it was that. But… but he didn't come round very well and he was woozy and threw up a few times so… so I took him to the hospital. Summer then. Yeah. It was summer, just before the new moon festivals." Naruto blinked. "That's all he saw of the season that year. Cos… after that he… They said he was sick. Tsunade-baba hooked him up to this machine and he just lay there and she said he wasn't in pain but I could see it. I could see it in his eyes. And I knew…"

Naruto's voice cracked. Blue eyes glossed threateningly and striped cheeks bloomed in high points of colour. "I knew that… that he was dying inside not being able to… to move or… be himself or… anything. I knew it. And it took me so long to be able to do it and he lay there all that time because I just couldn't. I couldn't. It was winter when he finally… I did… He made me-

He couldn't finish. The tears fell. They were so heavy, they hit Naruto's black clad legs with an audible *plop*. The lines they painted on his cheeks were deep and dark. They were tears of guilt, of fear. They were tears of responsibility. Naruto hadn't shed them in a long time, perhaps not ever.

"He was suffering. I made him suffer because I couldn't let him go. I couldn't lose him." Naruto choked. "And I think… I could almost see that's where he wanted to end the genjutsu. You know… back in the real world. I think he was sure that I'd be shocked enough by that point, that he'd be able to escape or… or throw a punch or *something*. But… but it kept going."

Kakashi frowned. "You think he pushed it further?"

"I think we got stuck. I think… I believed it was so real I couldn't leave. And he was sorta in it too - I don't know. Something like that. It just got worse and worse. Our friends in the dream tried to help me, but they couldn't and I started… I… hurt people. Lots of people. People I care about. Friends…Then Kurama… tried to stop me… Things got… bad." Naruto paused again, rallying himself. He tucked his hands under his armpits and curled over a little, almost protectively as he rocked back and forth. "I can still smell the smoke sometimes. When I blink, sometimes I see the bodies on the ground. You think… all screams are the same but they're not. They really aren't. I've heard the bad ones. I know… And I know it was a dream, but somehow… I know it's real too. Like I've heard it before. Like I've always known it."

A chill splintered down Kakashi's spine as Naruto spoke. He'd always known had he? Was he tapping into the Kyuubi's memories? Was this part of something the Kyuubi had experienced before during his entrapment and his time as Obito's weapon? He wanted to ask what happened next, but Naruto was beginning to fall apart at the seams and he knew it wasn't right to pry, not now. He pushed out of his chair slowly, padding over to his student. One had was on Naruto's shoulder while the other rested on the boy's shaking fingers. He'd shook his hand before; they'd hugged once or twice, but Kakashi had rarely let Naruto reach out to him the way that a son could reach out to a father. Konoha didn't like that. Konoha didn't teach children to be in touch with their feelings and they certainly didn't promote their parents to accept such behavior. Naruto hiccuped.

"Then I ended it. And it was over. I can't remember much after that. There was noise and I was yelling and there was power…So much power everywhere. Like fireworks. It surrounded us. And then it was gone and we were holding hands and the tsukiyomi was falling away. I don't know how or why he changed his mind, but… But there was this *look* on his face and I realized I'd broken his fingers and I went to say sorry, only we got startled as the Chibaku Tensei cocoons dropped. When I looked back, he was gone. That's all I know."
Kakashi waited for a moment, wondering if there was anything more. Naruto had curled over so far that his hair was hanging in his eyes and his nose was almost touching his knees. The tears were still falling, he could feel them on his hands.

"I'm so stupid," Naruto moaned. "I'm so goddamn stupid. It was just a jutsu. It was just a dream. I shoulda gone after him again. I didn't need to be a hero anymore. I got what I wanted. But I was so afraid I'd lose it again, I... I stayed. I let him go. I let him leave and... and he... And people got to him and-" he sat up suddenly, his hands clasped into fists which he slammed down onto his thighs with a solid snapping sound. "It was just a genjutsu! It was just a dream! I was stupid; I am stupid. I shoulda gone after him! I shouldn't have believed any of it! It was dumb!

"Naruto, don't be so hard on yourself. Sasuke's brother used genjutsu on him only a few times in his life and that put him in a state of mind to leave Konoha behind and pursue his vengeance for years. It's not just a dream, it's a very real and very dangerous subliminal weapon. You remember celebrating as a hero after the war? You did, but only weeks later. After the dust settled, I arrived at the valley of the end and had to fight to calm a nervous, frightened young man who was still struggling with reality. You were a wreck, Naruto. You barely knew who you were. You didn't let Sasuke leave; you weren't in any position to try and make him stay."

"I should have tried harder. I shouldn't have done whatever it was that I did to him. Stole his abilities or whatever. I should have done something else."

Kakashi thought of the times his father had patted him on the head when he was upset and told him 'better luck next time', or 'you did well' or 'it's ok, don't feel bad. You'll get there'. Affection, past the age of four or five for most shinobi children, was strained and withdrawn. to the shoulder. Fistbumps. The occasional hug. That was the common reaction for even the most loving fathers. Gai was probably one of the few exceptions, but Gai never seemed to worry about what anyone else thought (and Lee, despite his genius, was a uniquely passionate kid). Kakashi knew he might have been stepping out of line. But Naruto needed him. And fuck linear boundaries.

The Rokudaime leaned in, wrapping his arms around his student's shoulders and pulled him close, resting his nose in Naruto's spiky hair. The boy was surprised at first. Confused. Then he relaxed feeling the warmth around him and nodded as though accepting the embrace. He didn't remember ever receiving a hug from Kakashi. Perhaps once when he was younger, but it hadn't stuck in his mind. This was different. This was something to heal, it was support. Naruto closed his eyes.

"I gave up. I never give up. But-"

"You did all you could."

Naruto didn't seem absolved. "I don't know."

"You were mad when you saw him at the hearing."

"I was... not mad. I was... I dunno. Guilty? Surprised? I didn't know how to take it. I couldn't believe it was him. And then I couldn't believe how much he'd changed. It hurt... to see him like that."

"Female?" Kakashi tried, tentatively. Naruto shook his head.

"Sick. He looked... terrible. I guess that made me feel worse so I... I... I just needed time to think. I just remembered the... what happened in the dream. Then Shino said Sasuke was really sick when he came to you and when I heard that, I-"
"He was weak. The jutsu making his body female was under a lot of strain." Kakashi said through the thicket of Naruto's hair. "Tsunade and Kabuto came up with a solution very quickly. After that he just needed rest, that's all."

"A-and the baby?"

"Maybe these are questions you should ask him."

Kakashi felt the blond nod slowly beneath his chin and he sat up a little. Naruto seemed to have calmed somewhat and was looking at his hands, his lower lip tucked under his teeth, thoughtfully.

"I have...uh... been watching him. I mean... I looked in on him a few times since I got back..."

Kakashi raised his brows. Naruto didn't just "look in" on someone like a normal person would.

"You sat outside his window, didn't you."

"No! Of course not!" Naruto glanced up, scandalized, but then the blush returned. "I... was across the street."

Kakashi snorted. "All night?"

"I went for ramen breakfast around 7ish."

"And how was Sasuke?"

"He looked... tired. " Naruto said. "He woke up a couple of times in the night. I heard the baby crying, so I stayed up to check if... well. I don't know. He was still in bed when I got back from breakfast and talked to Shikamaru about the plan. Guessing you already know about that."

"I do. I don't think it will work for long, but it might keep the press busy until we're ready for our next step. I'd like you to go through with it, but stay in Konoha and keep the appearances fleeting. Look out for anyone that might be watching too closely."

Naruto frowned. "Why?"

"I have reason to believe he might have been followed."

"Oh... you mean Shino's mission?" Naruto leaned in close, whispering. "He told me. He said it was ok."

"Yes, I know." Kakashi nodded. "But that's why I need you doing what you're doing and leaving Shino alone. If this person is tailing Sasuke, we don't want him or her getting suspicious. We ought to find them first before they realize we know."

"Yeah," Naruto agreed, picking at a loose thread on his sleeve. "Ok. I'll tell the clones. He thought for a moment before he went on. "I'm... not being creepy or anything. You know... with the... watching. I... just want to make sure he's ok..."

"Naruto, go and talk to him."

"Yeah," Naruto replied. "I know. I... I want to. It's just... W-what if he blames me?"

"Then you can be sorry," Kakashi replied, stolidly. "And that's that. What he did to you must have hurt. I understand that. I empathize, Naruto, I do. But you're alive. He's alive. And he needs our help. I intend for him to have it, in perhaps more forms that he realizes, but that's my mission."
Right now, I need you two to clear the air. I wasn't going to ask you until you were ready, but I believe you are."

"I don't know," Naruto said. "The way he looked at me back then, at that hearing. I've never seen him look at me like that before." That fear. No, not just fear: horror. He'd never seen anything like it. Not directed toward him, anyway; not from Sasuke. There'd been disgust, gloating, amazement and a spectrum of other emotions in that vein, but never horror. Naruto shivered. "That was the first time I've felt like a monster. It was like I was six years old again. So… whatever I did on that battlefield… Or maybe what he saw in my head… It was bad enough that… That he didn't just hate me, like he always has. He… he was scared of me."

"I don't think it was all your fault," Kakashi told him, quietly. "There's a lot more going on than you realise-"

"I know. I know that now. B-before I ran because… because I couldn't have him looking at me that way; not him. But I thought on it some more. And I talked to some people… and I realized it was bigger than that. Bigger than me. And… and now I just wanna help. Even if I see that face again, I wanna help."

"Good. Then you know what I think you should do."

"Yeah. Kakashi-sensei?" Naruto asked, after a moment. "Shouldn't… Shouldn't we have told people about Kaguya? I mean, it's never come up; we haven't even said anything to the Kages. Even B doesn't really know the full story – Gyuki's only told him bits and pieces. But… Shouldn't people know that it wasn't just Madara we were fighting? Shouldn't…. shouldn't they know what really happened?"

"Yes, they should." Kakashi said, easing back to sit on his haunches. "But that's not our story to tell anymore."

"What do you mean?" Naruto was perplexed, if not slightly taken aback. "Of course it is, we were there! And we've been lying about it all this time!"

"We told the public the truth as far as they needed to know-"

"But the Uchiha… and Sasuke-"

"Like I said, Naruto." Kakashi repeated, firmly. "It's not our story to tell. Sometimes you need to be the unpopular guy. Sometimes you need to wear black so that the guy in orange stands out."

"Are you talking about me?" Naruto blinked. "That makes no sense whatsoever."

"You'll see," Kakashi pushed up to his feet, grimacing at the crack resounding in his knees. Damn desk job. "You'll understand soon enough. Your only job now is to keep those reporters away from Sasuke. Secret mission, all right? Only the nine can know."

"Got it."

"And Naruto," Kakashi sighed. "Stop peeping on Sasuke; it really is weird."

Naruto turned a pretty pink, but simply nodded and left after a string of muttered consonants tinged with chagrin. Kakashi turned, thumbing over his notes, idly. His shorthand was grotesque – certainly only something he could read, but that was the point. Dark eyes, now matching rather than odd cousins, scanned the page and he drew in a long, revitalizing breath as he centered himself for the next challenge. Who was it? Ah yes…
"Kaori?" Kakashi spoke into his intercom, listening for the telltale crackle as his assistant picked up the other line. There was a murmur of confirmation. "Send in Ms Naoko, will you?"

Two hours, four coffees and a short nap later (one that Iruka had interrupted and was rewarded by a sandal to the head in retaliation), Kakashi made his way down to the mailroom to pick up the written mission debriefs from the external teams. It was usually a job for Koto, but today he was glad for the walk. If he was brutally honest, he was glad for the walk every day. People didn't tend to bother him down here; people didn't notice him slip between the double doors like a tall, inverted shadow, and settle himself in the old leather armchair by the inbox. It was a good place to read. Not peaceful, exactly, but quiet enough.

He picked up a stack of reports and perched on the arm of the seat, thumb ready to flip through the pile when the solid figure of Akimichi Chouji pushed into the room and glanced at him, seemingly thrown.

"Uh," he said. "Reports?"

"Here," Kakashi said, waving the papers, idly. He had to admit, he enjoyed the way Chouji tended to misplace formalities when he was surprised. It wasn't rudeness, it was a kind of nervous tic that he'd never managed to shake. "That yours from yesterday?"

"Monday, actually. Been training with Dad since then." Chouji said, adding a few neat pages to Kakashi's pile.

"How's the study going?" Kakashi asked as the boy took a step back. "Do you have your exams soon?"

"Yeah," Chouji answered, shyly. "Sorry 'bout taking time off."

"Don't be sorry, I think your team's happy for the break. It's a good time for you kids to start broadening your specialties a little."

"Yeah." Chouji said, awkwardly. He nodded slightly, as though to excuse himself, but stopped when he saw one of the boxes sitting open on the send table. It was full of food – packages of instant ramen, dried noodles and powdered milk poked out over the sides. His small eyes narrowed.

"What's that?"

"Food parcel." Kakashi said, absently.

"Thought the rehabilitation supplies came from Kusa," Chouji frowned. "They had dedicated farms. Fresh produce. Good meat. This is all dried stuff."

The disapproval wasn't mild, it was clamorous. Kakashi regarded him evenly.

"The refugees are still being supplied with the approved food parcels - many have actually found employment within their production." There was a careful pause. "That one is for Sasuke."

"Sasuke?" Chouji looked over the offending article again, this time fending disbelief. "You're sending him this? This is… it's…"

"Well, we've had to keep knowledge of his presence here under wraps so… We take some of the donation food. I know Tsunade's been supplementing him, so I doubt he eats all of it, but-"

"Hokage-sama," Chouji said in a voice that challenged geiger counters. "If you don't mind, may I
take the responsibility of organizing Sasuke's food plans? This… these packaged foods aren't suitable for-
"
"By all means, go ahead," Kakashi said with a gracious gesture. "Thanks for volunteering. And I'm sure I can organize a few funds to be wired your way if you need them. Extra if you manage to put some meat on him."
"
"Thank you sir," Chouji said with a determined look. "I'll do my best."
"
"You're an Akimichi, Chouji," Kakashi replied. "And a member of Team 10. You won't do your best, you'll do better."

The look of sheer pride on the Akimichi's tattooed face was uplifting. "Yes sir," he said. "You can count on it. Uh… but how come you didn't ask in the first place? Dad would've helped; he wanted to. Someone told him it was already covered."
"
"Well it was at that point," Kakashi shrugged. "But if it hadn't been, we wouldn't have had this conversation."
"
"Sir?"
"
"Thank you, Chouji." Kakashi smiled. "For volunteering."

Chouji looked confused but nodded and picked up the box of goods to take with him - most likely to burn. Kakashi sat back in his chair, counting the seconds before another of his aides burst into the mail room, waving a telegram.
"
"Hokage-sama. Telegrams, sir. From the Sand, Earth and Mist. Urgent!"
"
"Yes, I understand that from the way you almost dismantled the door," Kakashi rubbed his temples. "Anything from Lightning?"
"
"No sir, not yet."
"
"Good," Kakashi yawned. "Then it looks like our speakers won't be breaking until mid-afternoon then. Fire up the coms, will you? It's time we started some conversations. Who's first?"
"
"The Mizukage, sir."
"
"Hm," Kakashi rubbed his chin. "Better get me a comb as well."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Apologies for the lack of Sasuke and the awful editing, this one needed to go and was dragging its feet. Kakashi's getting his ducks in a row, Sasuke's about to receive Masterchef Konoha lunchboxes and Naruto's battling, fielding and bowling for Team Sasuke. He's also on the cheer squad. Wait, what kind of sport metaphor is this?
For those curious as to Caliga's odd precognitive powers regarding his child's gender: he doesn't. He's just a misogynistic asshat who would immediately assume his kid is a boy. He's a douche, not Jean Grey. That's really all there is to it.

Thanks so much for the support, thanks for reading. Just thanks, really. Rock on.
Konoha, 12th March.
Year of the Hare.

Of all his emotions and gut reactions, Sasuke respected fear the most. Fear was a loyal instinct, true to itself; near impossible to replicate. Fear was one of the few instincts that could be controlled, could be put to good use. The baser emotions were cathartic. Happiness, sorrow, anger, they were useful in their own ways, but fear sharpened the senses like nothing else. Fear learned and fear taught. And, as long as it never governed, fear was always the whisper of doubt worth listening to. The second guess that should never be ignored.

Sasuke had an intimate relationship with fear - one that he had remained dominant in for a very long time. Naturally he suffered from the usual childhood traumas: monsters under the house or in the closet, child-swallowing kappa lurking in the canal, tengu in the forests. Then, as it was with many young shinobi, his fears began to emigrate from the realms of fantasy and myth into something far closer to home. They became fears of his father, fears of failure. Fear of his brother then, briefly, fears for his own life.

As he passed sleekly through the awkwardness of puberty (the vocal pitch blunders, acne and body changes easily forgotten under the weight of his mission and distractions provided by Orochimaru), his fear became a close cousin of his anger. The two procreated and evolved into something else - something that was wiser than rage, but far more reckless than dread. It was a type of higher anxiety, one that drowned out the voices of others and honed only his own desires. Outwardly, Sasuke was cold, efficient - seemingly deadly in his steadfastness. Inwardly, he was focused, proactive. He never looked backward if he could help it, because to step back would be to know that fear again. To step back would be to remember. And Sasuke didn't like remembering. He'd tried calling it "honoring" but it wasn't the same and it didn't hurt any less.

However, had anyone ever told him he'd been a chronic sufferer of post traumatic stress he wouldn't have believed them; it wasn't a thing. Ninja didn't get stressed, ninja didn't suffer from feelings. He was an avenger, that was all. He would exact his vengeance on those who hurt and marred the name of his family, his clan. That was all. Surrendering to grief, initiating a healing process wasn't viable to Sasuke. He didn't want to dwell on the emptiness he felt inside when he slowed down, stopped moving. He didn't want to examine the nightmares that plagued him still - once watered down by Orochimaru's potions, now a matinee of horror in the wings of his mind. Fear kept them going. Fear kept him going. It nurtured his sense of self preservation now more than it ever had, with one finger lodged in his sanity - corking an already cracked bottle.

Some days, Sasuke would simply have to remind himself that it was his fear that kept him and his daughter alive. Shortly after, he'd wonder if that was a good thing or not. He'd be forced to recall how it was with the Kakkou and what Caliga put him through and the pain, the humiliation, the torment. All of it would come crashing back, sending him completely offline for a few moments or so, then shaking with shocks throughout the rest of the day. After he'd heard that he'd been named - after the headline had graced the top of the Daily Flame, he knew there was no way he could hide from it anymore. He'd pushed him away for as long as he could, but now his name was out there. Caliga would have seen it. Caliga would be thinking of him as he was thinking of Caliga. Caliga would remember him, intimately. Caliga knew his body almost as well as he knew the back
of his hand. Caliga would remember his ownership over him; the delight he had in expressing just how much he could do to him without any reprimand whatsoever. Caliga morphed his fear as the Kakkou had morphed his body and now Sasuke couldn't purge him from his mind. Caliga rendered him powerless, derided him, peeled away the hard layers of armor he'd built after so many years, protecting what was left him him (or what could be recognised as the real him) inside. Caliga saw that centre and sank his teeth into it. Turned his fear into something unhelpful, something to be dreaded. Inadvertently, Caliga made him realize something he hadn't turned his mind toward in years: he was mortal, he was breakable and he could be helpless.

Morning bled into early afternoon as he lay under his covers, his arms crossed over his thin chest, over his heart that was hammering against his ribs. His breath was short. His skin was mottled with a grey, cold was a whine in his ears and a thinness to his vision. To swallow took minutes. To think; seemingly hours. He didn't see Caliga, but he heard him in his mind, hissing his name. He remembered his outline in the dark, the vice of his hands on his skin. Sasuke pressed his knees together, and tried to take a few stilted, forceful breaths between his teeth. He had to calm down, he was growing faint and while he was already lying down and wouldn't fall, he couldn't stay long like this. It frightened him. He frightened him.

Moments later there was a knock at the door. It sounded like a hammer to the skull. Sasuke cringed and didn't look up when Tsunade slid into the room. She carried a glass of water in one hand while the other travelled up his blanketed form, letting him know she was there. He was shaking. He hated it, but he couldn't help himself.

"Hey," she said gently. "Miki's due for her feed. You want to sit up?"

"Got… bottle… fridge." Sasuke managed in half a voice. His fingers spasmed and he swallowed painfully again. Tsunade shook her head. She was worried, he could sense it in her voice.

"No, let's feed her, ok? You should try and sit up."

"No." Sasuke managed. "Formula. C-can't-"

"We'll just try. Just a little." She didn't want to push him, but after checking on him a few times and finding that he hadn't pulled himself out of his slump as he usually did, Tsunade was beginning to worry. In in his worst of speights, he'd always managed to care for Mikoto. This was something else. "Will you sit up for me?"

"No."

Tsunade sensed desperation. Pain and worry coating the underbelly of that obstinence. An internal battle of need versus obligation. Sasuke was stuck. She wasn't surprised. Carefully she pushed to her feet and moved over to Mikoto's cot, lifting the baby out with practiced hands. Mikoto yawned sweetly, then started to fuss a little, suddenly realising how hungry she was. Tsunade sat down on the edge of the bed and held her in one hand, the other patted at the blankets by Sasuke's head.

"She's not going to take no for an answer, I'm afraid."

"I fucking told you-"

"Sasuke," Tsunade said, stroking the damp hair at his temple. "No matter how bad things have been, no matter what state I've seen you in, you've always cared for your daughter. Don't let him stop that now, don't let him. You're too strong for that."

"Leave me the fuck alone," Sasuke said, almost to himself. Tsunade didn't move.
"Sit up and I will."

"Damn b-bitch, this ha-hasn't got… got anything to do with you-"

"Sit up and I'll go. I promise."

Sasuke hissed at her, but after a spell he complied. Slowly, he let his legs swing to the floor and his spine curve as he began to catch his breath. Sweat-laden hair hung in his eyes. He squeezed them shut.

"Tsunade, " he gasped, not knowing where the air had gone. "I'm… I'm s-

"Breathe. Just breathe, I'm here."

"S-sorr-"

"Lean over a little more," Tsunade held her free arm in front of him and let him hang over it, gaining balance and bearings. He exhaled, long, shaking, then drew in a breath again. She could feel him trembling. "Panic attack. You'll be ok. You've had them before. This is a bad one."

"Ninja… Shouldn't have panic attacks."

"Ninja are probably the most prone to anxiety attacks," Tsunade told him as she helped him sit up and take his daughter. Sasuke let the shoulder of his shirt slide down and cupped Mikoto against him, drawing in another sharp breath when she latched. Then the euphoria was there, the connection, the relief and he relaxed slightly. That was better.

"Thanks," he said, licking his lips. Tsunade shrugged.

"Don't mention it. Try to drink some water, you're dehydrated."

He drew in another breath and let her help him drink. The water was cool and fresh and it washed away the stale feeling of bad memories that stained his tongue. Slowly the room came back into focus from the cold womb of his fear. He frowned, suddenly sensing more than just the usual congregation of minders in the apartment. There were other voices. More feet padding across the floorboards - heavier ones at that. There was the sound of cutlery scraping, pots clanking, a knife thudding against a wooden board. Then, there were the smells. Rich savoury scents infused the air, successfully coating the odd, somewhat musty incense of the apartment's natural odor, and drifted under the door. There was meat - grilled, he could pick up the lash of charcoal on the surface of the flesh. Vegetables added a pungent tang - carrots, leek, celeriac and scallions. An almost cakelike scent of rice brought up the whole bouquet of gastronomic perfume. Sasuke's stomach twisted mindlessly in anticipation.

"Are you… cooking?" He asked tentatively, if not somewhat concerned. Tsunade wasn't really well known for her prowess in the kitchen and she tended to eat more at her desk than with Sasuke. It was Shizune who arrived with meals if the food rations were measly or Sasuke didn't seem up to making his own. Tsunade shook her head, absently pushing Sasuke's hand closer to his daughter to help support her.

"No, that's Chouji," she replied and at Sasuke's confusion added, "he came by about an hour ago with your rations for the week. There was so much in the box it was bursting at the seams and even then Shikamaru was behind him with a second."

"Chouji's here?" Sasuke blinked. "And Shikamaru?"
"Well yes. Shikamaru was waiting to see if you'd like a game and Chouji offered to play a couple of rounds while he made lunch."

"Chouji… made lunch?" The words came out as though Sasuke couldn't quite believe he was saying them. He'd never had much to do with the Akimichi, though he understood Chouji had been in the original group set to rescue him. He hadn't known what became of him after that until he saw him on the battlefield and he had to admit, he hadn't really cared. "Why?"

"I'm not sure. He had a rather rushed note from Kakashi's office which explained that he was now looking after the assembly of your food parcels, but the rest of it is a question for him, I'm afraid."

Sasuke gave her a disbelieving look at which Tsunade just shrugged. "Well, it's certainly not my cooking, that's for sure."

Sasuke's brows knit with confusion. That wasn't what bothered him. "Chouji's here with visitation permission from Kakashi. Shikamaru comes by and plays shougi. Ino's delivering flowers… Don't these guys have missions or something? And I thought you said that Kakashi was following the law to the letter? I'm getting half of the rookie nine coming at my door, god knows why."

"Missions are fewer these days; most of the nine are sticking close to home, working with their families," Tsunade explained. "Kakashi is… well… You know what he's like. His plans are about as secret as his face." Tsunade sighed. "Sasuke, people want to help you-

"-so I gather. I don't know why; to me it's senseless-"

Tsunade smiled a little as Sasuke floundered. "Not senseless," she said. "Just… instinctive. Giving. Your comrades want to help because… I guess they never really got the chance to. Maybe they figure that helping you now sort of makes up for being distant in the past?"

"We were just kids then," Sasuke said, quietly. "They can't have known what I… What it was like. It didn't matter. I didn't care whether they felt sorry for me or not."

"It's far more than just sympathy, Sasuke." Tsunade told him. "It's maturity. It's being a good person as much as a good friend. Take us, for example. I never understood much about you, but I trusted Naruto and his constant faith in you."

Sasuke looked away, his eyes downcast. "Naruto paints his own pictures to fawn over. Half the time he doesn't want to see what's really there."

"Perhaps." Tsunade said. "But when Kakashi came to my apartment that night, I found I really had no other choice but to help you. It was the right thing to do. It would have been… Well, inhuman of me not to. No matter what the law says. No matter what the council would have said."

Sasuke's frown turned thoughtful as she spoke, his fingers idly brushing against Mikoto's thick hair. He didn't remember much about that night, but he knew Kakashi hadn't wasted any time getting him medical treatment. He probably should have gone to the hospital - in fact, out of the field, that was the usual procedure. He'd figured Kakashi had wanted some form of control over the broadcast of his return, but he hadn't actually told any of his advisors until the hearing a few days later. For a small island of time, Sasuke had the ability to regroup, to form an alliance with Tsunade, if he chose to. To heal and to settle. There was Kakashi's threat of taking Mikoto away, but… But now he thought on it further, even that had been half-hearted - perhaps more of a warning than anything.

And now the Rookie nine were rooting for him. And Naruto… Naruto was helping. Sasuke shook his head.
"You helped me because it was the right thing to do. You're not an asshole - good for you." Sasuke said, flatly. "You said I had friends - the nine… I ignored them for most of my life and now they're here and they want to be part of it. Is that the right thing to do? Is it some weird sense of loyalty? They don't even know me."

"Maybe they'd like to," Tsunade smiled. Sasuke bit his lip.

"They could spend their time with far better people than me. You could. You don't have to be here."

"We've been through this," Tsunade said. "Every time that armor gives a little, every time there's a breath of air between the links, you question your guard. You question me. And a little more of you comes out. I didn't know you before I helped you, Sasuke. I knew about you, but that's a very different thing. I knew you were an accomplished shinobi. I knew you had no one; that you were alone and withdrawn because of the loss of your family. Hiruzen was… apt to sugarcoat things. He considered the village a unit; he thought the holes that had been punched a family due to war and loss could be filled by a kinship with konoha itself. It doesn't work that way. He was well-meaning, but he was wrong."

Tsunade paused, taking the water from Sasuke to place on the floor at her feet. "Later reports from sightings and meetings with you had you labelled as ruthless, but I'd always thought relentless might have been a better word. And when I met you, well. You were who I thought you were: isolated. Cold. Standoffish and self-absorbed. And I fell for it for the longest time."

"Fell for it?"

She chuckled a little. "It's nice to be wrong sometimes, you know? To find out that such a dissociative attitude is really just self protection. That single-mindedness is actually a form of distraction. That pride is second to attachment… and love. That a boy who's had his life torn apart on so many occasions can still find strength enough to take care of innocent collateral, and remain responsible for their safety. You're a collaboration of coping mechanisms, Sasuke, bound together in a skin that has thickened so much against any further possible hurt that you almost can't be sure what is underneath anymore. But then, you told me about the Kakkou and Caliga. You trusted me with information that was so close to you and so painful, but you felt you could share that with me. That's respect. Hard won - more for you than me. And so I help you now because it's right and because I want to. Because you deserve it."

Sasuke stared at her, his lips slightly parted - eyes a little wider than before. Then he snorted a little and said:

"Don't get mushy or anything."

"Can't help it. Comes with age, I'm afraid." Tsunade shot back, smirking a little. The situation had diffused and Sasuke was the better for it, she was sure. It was faster this time. That was good. Very good. Considering Sasuke had every right to worry, it was heartening to see him come round. He let Mikoto finish, then stroked her back to burp her, considering his words.

"He could be dead. He could have died with the rest of them, but I'll never be sure." Sasuke said, at length. "Not unless I either find him or he finds me. It's the latter that I'm-" Sasuke heard the pop as Mikoto let out a bubble of air and stopped patting her back in favor of an embrace - something to make her tired. "I thought Orochimaru was dead once. I was wrong. And Caliga is like Orochimaru. Perhaps not in skill - though I'm not sure, their ways were so different - but in longevity? They are sheep of the same flock." There was another pause, then, slowly, Sasuke eased Mikoto off his shoulder and handed her to his guardian, settling her in Tsunade's arms. He crossed
the room and started pulling out some clean clothes, folding his sleepwear neatly as he changed. He didn't care that Tsunade saw him, didn't care that she saw his odd shape: the bulging stomach, the breasts, the bones and the flesh. The scars. The woman had been right: he trusted her. He actually did. It was a strange feeling but it was sort of of. Sasuke fished out a soft, neat-fitting crop top from his drawer and pulled it on, before turning back to her, his hand resting on the curve of his belly.

"The difference between them is that I have something that's his," he said, motioning to his stomach. "Orochimaru was presumptuous enough, but he was also weakening. He was never a threat to me - I had already trained past the point where I knew I could beat him. Caliga's attachment to this kid and his… proposed ownership of me, that's different. I've already fought him and I was stronger then… Wasn't… like this then. I fought him and I lost."

Tsunade blinked, curling her fingers in Mikoto's hair. "To be honest, I'm having difficulty imagining that."

"Hn," Sasuke shrugged, tugging on a t-shirt. "I'd been sick. If I hadn't, I'd probably have been able to take them. Him. Or at least fight them back enough to get away." He clicked his tongue, disparagingly. "I should have been able to. Even then. Now there's nothing I can do-"

"Nothing?" Tsunade rolled her eyes. "You've been able to keep ahead of him so far. I don't think you're quite as helpless as you make out."

"Maybe not right now, but give it a month, maybe two, and I'll probably be on the same bedrest I was on with Mikoto. Practically immobile for weeks."

"She was too big, wasn't she?" Tsunade said. "She would have been causing you all sorts of problems."

"They kept poking me with needles. Took all sorts of tests. Yeah, I heard someone say something about her being too big or that I was too small or something, I don't know. There was just a lot of drugs, and pain in between them. And stack on top of that, Caliga" Sasuke pulled on his shirt and smoothed it over the bump. His fingers teased his hair, and, slowly, unhappily, he looked in the mirror. "I can't fight. I can't use my clan's bloodline limit. I could try to keep moving-"

"Don't." Tsunade interjected, quickly. Sasuke just shook his head.

"-but I can't anymore. I don't think I could from the moment I set foot here. I thought I had a plan but..." There was a brief sigh. A realization. "I don't."

"Maybe talking to some of your friends would help?" Tsunade tried, ignoring Sasuke's look of consternation. "I know, I know… You think they're not your friends, but- "

"You say they want to get to know me? There's nothing else to know past what they've seen already."

"Either you're a very bad liar or you're vastly underselling yourself." Tsunade parried. It probably wasn't too far from the truth, but Sasuke was also proud. Despite his changes, despite the turmoil his life had been up until this point, he was proud. And now he was being coerced back into a world where people who used to revere him, would be stronger than him. Ino was one thing, Shikamaru seemed to be alright, but now the list was growing. And Naruto was on it. The rival. The competition. That couldn't have been easy to get his head around.

Still, Sasuke was up and dressed. He'd tied his hair back and was looking far more together than he
had when he first woke up. If a little pride meant that he would take care of himself a bit more, Tsunade didn't mind nurturing it every now and then. She handed Mikoto back as Sasuke reached for her. He wiped a little spit up from her mouth, before he glanced back at Tsunade and shook his head.

"I've never sold myself as anything," he told her, quietly. "That was what everyone else did."

He left the bedroom and padded slowly into the kitchen, feeling the temperature rise between the rooms as a result of Chouji's efforts. Though he rallied his hackles, he found himself oddly at ease. The scent of the food was comforting, the sound of Chouji working was almost pleasing. The Akimichi didn't look up when Sasuke entered, only moved his hand away from the chopping board to push a cup of something hot and steaming toward him. All he said was:

"Entree."

Sasuke blinked. He didn't know what to expect when it came to Chouji, but he wasn't reading any danger in the situation - despite the large knife the boy held in one meaty hand. Shifting Mikoto slightly, he took the cup, but not without a hard study of the contents first.

"What is it?"

"Beef broth." Chouji glanced up briefly before dropping his eyes back to the cup in Sasuke's hand. He held up a stocky, powerful finger, then returned to the wooden board for a few seconds of hammering before adding a pinch of minced scallion tails to the soup. "Northern style. Good for the appetite."

"I don't have your appetite," Sasuke replied bluntly. Chouji just ignored him. He didn't even seem to acknowledge Sasuke or the child on his hip, he was far too invested in his craft. Sasuke frowned, unsure of how to proceed with someone who was almost as silent as he was and scanned the room instead, wondering who else had decided to let themselves in. He found Shikamaru and Akamaru deeply embroiled in a rather tense match of Shogi. Neither seemed to have noticed him enter the room. Neither made any noise save for the occasional grind of teeth or the shift of a shougi tile on the board. Akamaru's tail dusted the floor every now and again, while Shikamaru buffed his chin with his hand, his usual tell that he was winning.

It was… strange. Sasuke wasn't sure how he should react. He felt like he'd walked into a painting - a traditional family scene, only the mother was replaced by another man (or was Sasuke meant to be the mother? He quickly purged that thought from his mind, despite its accuracy), and the father was playing chess with the family dog. It was enough to make Sasuke wonder if he was still dreaming. But he wasn't and he knew that he wasn't. He eyed the soup again and his instincts hissed at him to ignore it. Put it aside and return to his bedroom to wait out the storm of company that had taken over his kitchen. But there was a growl in his stomach and a bubbling interest that motivated him to try it. And… was his mouth watering? Was he actually craving soup?

Sasuke licked his lips. He should be more careful. He was usually more careful… But… There were here. Just here. If they'd wanted to hurt him, they'd have done so already. So he blinked and asked, tiredly:

"What are you doing?"

"Thought it was obvious," Chouji said. "Making lunch." Finally he looked up, properly this time. His small eyes drifted over Sasuke's form as though scanning him. Sasuke frowned. "Hn, or perhaps brunch? You haven't eaten today."

"Wasn't a question."

"Whatever. You don't have to do that. I can make my own food."

"Don't doubt the ability," Chouji replied. "Just the frequency."

"What are you talking about?"

"You just eat when you're hungry, right?" Chouji said, putting the knife down beside the board. He cocked an eye at a simmering pan on the stove then turned back to Sasuke. "Easiest way to do it; body says when it's hungry and you feed it."

Sasuke gave him a blank look. Was he simple? Of course that was how it went. "So…?"

"So how often do you listen to your body? And how regularly does it tell you when it's hungry? Mm? Stress diminishes appetite. 'Specially if you've had to fight for your food for a period of time. 'S'not good… Not if you have to take care of three people at once."

"I… don't know," Sasuke admitted. "I don't pay that much attention, I guess."

"Hn. You should. 'Sbetter to make time for regular meals. Then you know you're getting all the nutrients you need." Chouji nodded at Mikoto. "Better for her, too. Gonna have to learn pretty soon that you tell her when to eat, not the other way around."

"I can take care of myself," Sasuke replied, but it was weak. He had to admit, he was rather impressed by Chouji's tenacity to debate the subject. He thought the only time Chouji ever opened his mouth was to stuff more potato chips inside. His stomach made a pitiful noise. It physically ached to drink the soup, but he held on. He didn't know why. He just wasn't comfortable quite yet.

"I know," said Chouji, and merely returned to his chopping. And that was... infuriatingly passive. And at the same time, it just seemed to put Sasuke further at ease. No wonder Nara hung around this guy so much, he was pretty damn agreeable. Sasuke, finally obliging, sipped at the soup.

And everything stopped.

It was an old, tired cliche that told of a woman's ability to win a man's heart through his stomach, but the concept of food as a healing tool for the memory as well as the body was both apt and appropriate. The smell, the texture, everything. Food linked to memories in one of the most absolute and tangible way; direct and simple. To taste of Chouji's plain, unassuming beef broth was to step back time to his old kitchen, thick with steam and the shimmer of hot oil for frying as Uchiha Mikoto made supper for her young family. Sasuke's throat was thick with reminiscence, his eyes almost searching for his mother - remembering the silhouette of her as she stood near the sink, preparing vegetables. He could hear the grind of the peeling, smell the tang of carrot in the air. He could almost feel the cold autumn air on his back as his father and brother strode into the room, still shedding their respective armor and uniforms down to their more comfortable tunics. There'd be broth on the table; sometimes miso, always senbei to snack on with it. Sasuke's ears strained to hear his mother's voice telling Fugaku to remove his chokuto from the table and for Itachi to tied his hair out of his eyes so it would stop dangling in his soup. And Sasuke I've told you before to take that dinosour off the table, he doesn't eat with us…

Sasuke laughed. Then realized he was sitting in the middle of another tableau, with another group of people. And there was no mother, no brother… Yet the coldness of loss didn't invade… He still
felt warm inside.

"What the hell did you put in this?" He found himself asking, thunderstruck. Shikamaru, who'd not spoken a word since Sasuke entered the room chuckled under his breath as he cornered Akamaru into a very difficult position.

"That's Akimichi cuisine for you. They cook as well as they eat."

"Damn straight." Chouji added, a little proudly. He motioned to the soup. "Roasted beef bones, tomato, few herbs and some good quality vegetable water and you've got a pretty good broth that you can drink alone or use as a base for pretty much anything."

"It's..." Sasuke shook his head a little and took another draw, deeper this time. When he put the bowl down, there was a little colour in his cheeks, and he shifted Mikoto from one hip to the other, awkwardly, tasting the salt on his lips. "Why?"

Chouji motioned to the simmering pot behind him. "It'll get your appetite going."

"No, not why you made the soup." Sasuke said, feeling awkwardness cloud over him. He wasn't used to being looked after and now he had Tsunade and Shizune doing most of the housework and watching Mikoto when he needed to rest, Akamaru as a guard-cum-babysitter, Shikamaru as entertainment... and now Chouji for meals? What was with the Daimyo treatment? It was almost too much for him. "Why you made it for me? We... don't exactly know each other..."

Chouji just shrugged a little and cast an expert eye over the bubbling rice before he dusted his hands together.

"I owe you for all the desserts you used to give me out of your lunch."

"Eh?" Sasuke looked at him quizzically. Chouji simply took the bowl out of his hands and refilled it, making sure to sprinkle on the scallions again.

"A gift of food is considered very honorable to an Akimichi-"

"I don't even remember that, it was probably just the crappy stuff they used to put in our lunches at the Academy. It wasn't really anything..."

"but I liked it. You could have put it in the trash, but you gave it to me because you knew I liked it. Sometimes you'd swap for the roasted soybeans, but usually you'd just say 'Here, you like this. Take it.'. Always surprised me. Never knew why, when you didn't wanna get on with anyone else, or give anyone else the time of day, you do a little thing like that."

Sasuke looked at his hands. He knew why. He hadn't thought about it in awhile, but he knew why. Itachi had been the one who liked sweets, so they'd always swapped at meal times. It... felt weird to keep it on his plate, but throwing it away didn't feel right either. After the massacre, all the memories he had of his brother were tarnished, but the strange customs they'd shared seemed to stick. He shrugged, unsure of what to say. Chouji just motioned to the soup again.

"People used to think the Akimichi were just dumb fat-asses. Somewhere along the line, people got mean, rude. They didn't understand us any more. Forgot how we could fight and why we are as we are. When you think about it, we're kinda the most different outta all the clans. Sure, the Aburame are covered in bugs and the Hyuuga have weird eyes... Most of the Inuzuka get fleas every now and then-"

"No flea!" Akamaru barked. "Just allergy! Sensitive skin! Ninneko get flea!"
"Well," Chouji continued. "Whatever. But if you look at us on the outside, we pretty much look like everything a ninja shouldn't be. We're not the best in taijutsu, we're not fast and we're... not the same shape everyone else is."

**Understatement.** Sasuke's brain hissed, but he stamped it down. He wasn't one to talk anymore.

"But we have our specialities, and we're loyal. Just like you."

"Me? I'm not... What does that mean?" Sasuke asked, mystified. Chouji nodded toward Mikoto, who offered him a wide, toothless stare in return.

"What happened with you and Konoha and all that, that's one thing. S' prob'ly bigger than most of us understand. I'd like to, someday. Understand, that is. But for now, we're kinda free to make up our own mind. At least, that's what Shikamaru said the Hokage told him."

"Not *verbatim*," Shikamaru interjected, snorting as Akamaru blocked his attack. "But something like it. I told you, Sasuke, not matter what you think we think of you, we're better than that. I wouldn't stiff another Shogi challenger. And Chouji wouldn't ever let you keep eating all that freeze-dried crap in the rations box-"

"-Too much salt. Too many preservatives. It's all really bad for you and for your little ones." Chouji finished. "Thought what they were giving you was crap, so I signed up to manage your state-subsidized parcel. And add a few things of my own to it."

"At whose expense?" Sasuke said. "Surely you don't have time for all this. Just how rare are missions these days?"

"With the alliance? We don't have to travel as much as we used to. There are some groups who do and others who get a respite to train and develop our skills," Shikamaru explained. "Chouji's finishing his second term of gastronomic arts and nutritional studies, Ino's helping her Mom, I'm helping mine." He shrugged. "Everything's less frantic than before. We have time to do other things."

"Hn," Sasuke replied, which could have meant that he either approved or he was grateful or neither. He drank more of the soup instead and wiped some of the drool from Mikoto's lips as she watched Chouji intently. He started mixing a bowl of ingredients and caught her eye, smiling at her.

"Anyway," he said. "I saw what happened at the hearing. I saw how you were when you thought that old bat was gonna take your little girl away. That's not fair. I don't think it's fair at all. Not for you. Not when you've travelled for so long, trying to keep her healthy... prob'ly just trying to keep her alive was hard enough. You coulda chosen to do other things to make your life easier I guess, but you didn't. You made choices that were good for her over you."

"You don't know that," Sasuke breathed. But it was more to himself than anything. Chouji rolled his shoulders.

"I figure if I just go ahead and make like we're friends, who knows? Maybe we could be? If ya ask me, I'd rather be standing here makin' you winter stew and risking the fact that you might just hate me or sit there calling me names or something, than not trying to help at the very least.. Maybe you don't think anything of me at all. But someone's gotta see the kindness in people sometimes. That's all."

Two years ago, SAsuke wouldn't have said he was kind. He wouldn't have cared for Chouji's speech - wouldn't have acknowledged him or agreed with him. It was too much like Naruto's...
unending blather and he was an avenger. He didn't have time for the ideals of others. And he didn't have time for love and understanding and all that bullshit.

But with Mikoto on his hip, gurgling wetly at her guest, with his belly warm from the soup and his mind fogged with memories and placid and warm, he felt differently. He could tell them both to leave him alone, tell them that they were wasting their time - that he'd never be like them. But what did that matter now? They might have come because they wanted to see the weak, hopeless Uchiha Sasuke… Or perhaps they came to do what they said they'd do. Be what they said they'd be and nothing more.

Friends. Perhaps Tsunade was right?

He felt her presence behind him, felt her smile on his back and he sighed as he padded over to the futon and sat down, placing Mikoto on the floor. He studied the game on the table and smiled as he spotted Shikamaru's plan. Then he sipped his soup again and said:

"I guess I am a little hungry."

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"I told you, we're not covering it," Naoko Kirihito explained, resting her palms on her desk before she leaned forward to cast a menacing look over her crew. The handful of journalists, photographers and assistants regarded her with surprise and a slight shadowing of mild shock.

"But… the popularity of the story, boss…" One brave soul piped up. "It's… we'll fall out of the loop if we mention anything at all about Uchiha Sasuke. We'd look foolish."

"Wrong. We'd look like every other tabloid," Naoko corrected him. "We're news, not gossip."

"But-"

"Hon, if you wanna go write for the redheads; if you wanna pen articles about the latest ninja diet or consider the Hokage taking a stroll around the village breaking news, by all means, do so. We cover what's important. We publish what people should hear."

"Like Homura's recipe for bean dumplings?"

That earned a glare. The young assistant who'd opened his mouth shut it again abruptly and with an audible snap. Naoko pushed her glasses up her nose.

"Community sections aside, I'm not having new media fodder gracing my pages. The cooking columns have been filled ever since my grandfather's time; the comedy column was my father's invention to help relieve some of the tension and balance all that propaganda floating about during the Third War. I respect their efforts to remain loyal the Konoha Shinobi, not parrot their every freakin' bowel movement. If Sasuke's back in Konoha, that's his business. Leave him alone."

"Yes Naoko," The group chimed, half heartedly. Naoko waved a hand at them.

"Now go get me some real news," She finished. "And if you catch any of those red top bastards skulking about, give them a nice photobomb. A crappy shot to match their crappy incentives."

She let the team wander out, and nodded to her assistant, who closed the door quietly before joining her boss by the large desk in the centre of the room. Naoko had pulled a small piece of paper out of her pocket and was staring at it intently.

"Found this after our meeting this morning," she said, by way of explanation. "Must've slipped it
into my pocket before I left."

"Who, the Hokage?"

Naoko nodded. "I only found it when I fished for some loose change." She smoothed the small post-it open and frowned at the message - a series of numbers and sigils. Her assistant frowned.

"What on earth-"

"Ninja code," Naoko replied, rubbing her chin. "Real old school stuff, not the new system they teach now. The kind of thing my Grandfather would remember."

"I didn't think anyone in your family ever enlisted," the other woman said, peering at the note. Naoko raised her brows.

"They didn't. But a little respect goes a long way with ninja." She wet her lips. "They don't have the same voice civilians do; they don't benefit from the same methods of communication. It's all secrecy and… mirrors. Smoke...and all that."

"Only… the Rokudaime gave you that message for a reason."

"No," Naoko picked up the paper again and held it to the light, smiling a little. "He gave me an option. I don't have to do what he says by law…"

"But you're going to."

"Yep. It'll take me a little while to decipher, but I think there a place for us in this… whatever is going on. You know. Legally."

"Naoko… This is… It's just speculation. The Flame got jumpy, they needed new material so they went for something easy. Everyone knows that."

"Then why're all the other redheads getting involved?" Naoko said. "Where does this sudden interest come from. Why's the Uchiha such a hot topic two years after his disappearance? Someone's seen something. Heard something. And it's enough to get the Hokage riled."

"Then why'd he give you the clue in code?"

"I told you, Tsume," Naoko said. "Ninja don't have the same voice we do. This is an olive branch, a signum of trust. We have to honor that."

"If you say so," Tsume sighed, taking a pile of papers to sort. "But honestly, how's he to know that we don't have a ninja expert on staff? Someone who can decode that in a second? And how are you to know it isn't some wild goose chase designed to smoke you out? The Rokudaime could be meeting with all the newspaper editors in chief, just making examples of those who don't comply with his ideals!"

"Maybe. Or maybe I should just trust him and let him trust me?"

Tsume shook her head. "If it turns out we miss the boat on this hype, we're going to pay later."

Naoko eased back down into her chair and kicked her high heels off slowly, her eyes focused on the grain of the wood before her. "We don't speculate, we don't harbour gossip. That's it. I'm not budging, Tsu."

There was a mumble from her employee, but Tsume left the room without further complaint.
Naoko took the piece of paper in hand again and frowned at it, thinking of her earlier conversation with the hokage and the avenue she could see opening up before her. Hatake had been considerate… but not just considerate, protective was really the word. He hadn't asked much, just what her stance was on the Flame's headline and how she intended to respond to the immediate hype that follow. Naoko told him exactly what she'd told her staff: Uchiha Sasuke's business was his own. The Herald wouldn't publish spots on personalities unless it was within the press domain to do so, or if she had expressed permission from Sasuke himself.

Hatake Kakashi merely smiled (at least, she thought he did) and thanked her for her discretion and for honouring the original contract that had been penned between the Press and the Shinobi. Naoko thought the meeting was a little brief and odd, but then again, she'd always thought the choice of Kakashi as the 6th was a little brief (perhaps rushed) and odd, and frankly didn't think more on the situation until she went to buy herself a cup of coffee.

The note wasn't as hard to decode as she'd made out - her Pop had taught her the old format for secret communications when she was a little girl as a way to entertain her while her parents were busy working. She'd never forgotten; the code was as easy for her to read as a children's book. It wasn't a message the Rokudaime had given her. It was an address.

"What the hell have you done to your hair?"

Kakashi winced as Mei's face filled the screen, immaculate, beautiful and goddamn perilous as ever. He shrugged somewhat, aware that his usual crest of white was a little odd-looking as he'd attempted to tame it in order to look more presentable. The result was similar to a badly shaven sponge.

"Brushed it."

"Don't ever do that again." Mei told him, curtly. "And what's all this about that Uchiha Sasuke boy? I'm guessing that's why you called?"

"Yeah," Kakashi said, running his fingers through his hair, sheepishly. "I thought I'd better talk to you and Suna first before I tackled Earth and Lightning."

"Me and the freaky sand kid, huh?"

"Ladies first, I think they say." Technically he had contacted Gaara initially, but he wasn't going to let her know that. Mei snorted at him.

"Don't patronize me. You think I'm the soft touch, hm? Figured you'd sound me out before you tried your luck with Ohnoki and A-"

"I thought I'd go with reasonable and rational before I attempted to… how should I put it? Draw blood from a stone or chase lightning? I need support, not a lecture."

There was a slight pause as Mei studied him. Kakashi could almost hear her hackles dropping as her temper reduced to a mere simmer. She sat back in her chair, then turned and spoke quietly to her assistant. There was a shuffling movement in the room behind her and when she spoke again, her voice was quieter.

"Is it true?" She said. When Kakashi nodded, she sighed. "You've talked to him?"

"He came to me for help, Mei."
"The kid's his?"

Kakashi paused. "Yeah," he replied. "She's his."

"Oh," Mei seemed perplexed. "I didn't… So he… Wh-where's the mother?" Who is the mother? She really wanted to ask, but held her tongue for the moment. How old was the kid, seventeen? Eighteen? A veteran by Shinobi standards, but still a boy, really. Just a kid. Last time she'd seen him he was all fire and gumption - a force to be reckoned with. But suddenly he'd turned up back home with a child? It didn't make sense.

"I think it's best if you ask him yourself," Kakashi said. "There are… hmm… things you ought to be aware of that… are better discussed in person."

"You want me to come to Konoha?" Mei blinked.

Kakashi nodded. "Yeah. I mean, I uh… formally invite you, Mei Terumi, uh Godaime Mizukage-"

"Write down your formal invitations, it's much easier," Mei rolled her eyes. "Fine. I suppose Sasuke will have a few things to answer for, won't he?"

"Hopefully more than a few things." Kakashi replied. "Even more so, questions. The Shinobi world has been holding its tongue for a long time, Mizukage-sama. I think it's about time we all had a good conversation, don't you."

Mei pursed her lips, then smiled. "I'll see you in a few days."

Chapter End Notes

AN: Fastest editing in the west - sorry if it's a bit shit. Enjoy! Thanks for the support and the comments! One day I'll get these chapters out faster, but for now asldhafldfgadg. Sorry if I left any questions unanswered - gotta go draw a whole bunch of con pics - eep!
The Moment When The Music Rises.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Konoha, 12th March
Year of the Hare

Somewhere, deep in the woods where things became forgotten and knowledge dissolved into myth, a creature stirred into wakefulness. It was the sunshine that did it. Daylight hadn't bothered the creature much before, but it had moved in its slumber - rolling and fidgeting as its synapses began to register its limbs, skin and internal organs. As it began to realize it was alive. It had inched out of it's earthen cocoon and lay curled at the opening, toes curled in the mud. Sunshine had broke through the forest bracken, weak and filtered and it painted the creature's face in meagre stripes. It wasn't much, but it was enough brightness to be annoying. It blinked.

Eyelids. It had eyelids. It had forgotten what they were, but it seemed obvious when it opened then in order to see. Eyelids. Eyelids and… and eyebrows. Yes. Those were the things that were frowning at the light, helping it squint so that it could peer through the glare, past the low-lying forest brush to the woods beyond. It was squinting, cheeks tensing in the cold. It shivered, then let out a chuff of surprise as the follicles on its body seized in a scattering sensation across its skin, hair prickling all over. Momentarily, it calmed and let out a breath. That was a normal thing, wasn't it? That reaction. What did they call it? Goose pimples? Gooseflesh? Goosebumps? There were a lot of names for them. It didn't really know why. It didn't know why it remembered what it was.

It hung on the feeling for a second longer, then sniffed at the air. It blinked away tears as the cold assailed its nose and the tang of wet moss and earth, teamed with a pungent undertone of various fungi, almost overwhelmed its senses. The creature sniffed, then scrunched its nose a few times, drawing in a slow, deep breath - filling its lungs with scented air. It felt the rush of oxygen permeate its body, then, slowly it started to move.

It was alive. It understood that concept now. Before it had thought (perhaps not so coherently) that everything it had experienced might be a part of its subconscious and that it was constantly on the verge of dream. A dream before death perhaps, or maybe death was entirely made of dreams. But this? This didn't… feel like a dream. It didn't know why, but dreams kind of gave the impression that the might be airy. Formless. Light on sensation and complexity. Here, the ground was wet against its belly, the air was a kind of piercing cold that commanded wakefulness and the cacophony of scents around it was tantalisingly variegated. The oxygen it drew into its lungs filtered through its body, strengthening it, adding fuel to its muscles. And it understood. It was alive. It was awake. How it came to be and where it was from was still a complete mystery, though, as was the name that sat so prominently in its thoughts; a memory of someone or something.

"Ssssa…..sasuke," the creature said. Tested. Then it frowned. Sasuke. What was a Sasuke? What it something to find? Was it something to eat? Was it someone it knew or something it owned? It wasn't even all that sure why that word was the only detail that had stuck when it…. Became whatever it was. When it had first awoken, it was simply a mass of sensation and feeling, but now those instincts were taking form and becoming thoughts and expressions. It was currently experiencing perplexity, and that was altogether a difficult emotion as it wasn't certain why it was confused or what it was meant to be confused about in the first place. After a moment of tenuous silence, it jumped, finding that it had stuck its fingers in its hair and was scratching at its own head.
in consternation. Had it done that before? It felt like it had, only it didn't remember. It didn't even have words for its head or its hair, they just… materialized into its head. As though it knew them before; as thought things were starting to slide back into place - memories falling back into their given slots. It dragged its fingers through its hair one last time, then moved the hand under its nose for inspection. It found that its skin was warm and sun-browned. It had long, dirt-crusted nails. The fingers looked strong. So did the feet, it noticed, when it looked down; they were strong too. The body was tall - but not too tall - tanned and rippling with lithe muscle. It felt power flowing through it. Power, but no purpose just yet. It wasn't sure what it was meant to be doing just yet.

There had to be something though. It had to exist for a reason. It had begun to understand what questions were and had tasted the satisfaction of answers. It knew that it had to seek more, look further. It knew to want. And in order to do so, it would need to move. It sucked in a breath and curled its toes in the mud. It was standing, therefore it had obviously figured out a thing called balance, but locomotion was a different story. Testing its feet a few times, it started walking. It was slow and wobbly at first but after a few steps it had gotten the knack. It had done this before, it knew that. The evidence was in the body, in the muscles. It felt like it could walk for days on the strong… things… legs… beneath it. For the time being it walked without direction, rather it followed something of an innate navigational system that was currently honed on finding food. Consciousness required fuel, and its body was eagerly, painfully aware of the fact that it hadn't been provided with any sustenance for quite some time. The stomach clenched and growled and the creature let out a hiss of suspicion, before groaning in sympathy at the plight of its empty belly.

Food. It needed food. It needed to eat. Then, when it was satisfied, it would find Purpose. It would find Sasuke and whatever Sasuke meant to it. The creature nodded to itself, content with its plan and fully aware of what it needed to do.

It would soon learn, however, that with knowledge, fuel and Purpose it would probably also need some pants.

The light clinking of cups alerted Sasuke to the fact that he'd nodded off on the couch and he blinked a few times, trying to rouse his senses in order to sit up. Mikoto was hugged against his chest, warm, heavy and drooling, and he could feel the swish of Akamaru's heavy tail on the floor by his feet. Everyone had taken a nap, it seemed. Everyone aside from Chouji, who offered him a placid nod as he quietly placed a small, pottery teaset on the coffee table. Sasuke stifled a yawn, trying hard not to appear as chagrined as he felt.

"What time is it?" he asked, shifting his daughter from one shoulder to another. Chouji set down the teapot and began arranging the cups with silent precision.

"Just past three," he whispered. "You all started dozing off after lunch. Seemed like you needed it."

Sasuke drew in a breath, tasting the fragrant perfume of jasmine on the back of his palate. A floral tea. Interesting choice. Good for the digestion, he's been told, though he felt he didn't really need to repeat the fact to someone like Chouji, who probably knew everything about the tea he was serving, down to the origin of the teacups he was pouring into. He sat up a little, noting, with little surprise, the slumped figures of his caregivers around him. Tsunade was draped on the seat adjacent - artlessly arranged on the cushions. Akamaru was snoring on the floor and Shikamaru had managed to withdraw to the sliding door next to the balcony, where he rested with his head propped up on one hand, dozing in the thin afternoon sunlight. Dropping off… like cats near a stoked fire. Sasuke snorted and stretched, wondering if Chouji had slept as well. He hadn't, of course. Further inspection presented a spotless kitchen - almost cleaned to the point of torture, and a loaf of warm, sweet bread sighing on the counter next to a few bulging packages of preserves,
dried goods and leftovers. Sasuke's brows raised impossibly more.

"Did you actually eat?" He asked, oblivious to the idea that such a question was rarely asked of an Akimichi but Chouji just shrugged.

"Yeah," he said, waving his hand over the steaming teapot. "A little. I don't really get that hungry when I'm working though, so..." He shrugged. When he offered no further comment (something Sasuke found he greatly appreciated - he'd forgotten that not all the Nine were as verbose as Ino, Sakura or Naruto), Sasuke let him work, watching with guarded fascination as Chouji gauged, tested, then finally and with a delicateness seemingly unattainable in his large, blunt fingers, poured the brew. It was a deep olive in colour and smelled divine. Sasuke took the cup that was offered to him and breathed in the scent of the tea with slow relish.

He hadn't noticed earlier, but Chouji wasn't wearing the usual red jacket and plate armor that was normally associated with the Akimichi. Instead he'd arrived in a grey tank top and dark pants that hung to mid calf, emblazoned with some popular civilian band or catch-phrase or something. His hair was gathered into a messy topknot that hung off the back of his crown and he sported what appeared to be the beginnings of some carefully maintained stubble colouring the edge of his jaw and chin. Sasuke was almost surprised to find how much Chouji had changed; the more he looked, the older the other boy seemed. He was no longer the awkward fat kid the academy bullies had found such investment in torturing; he'd finally grown into his grand size. His skin had cleared and the lumbering awkwardness he used to exhibit no longer seemed to plague him. In place of that poor, teased boy was a young man who seemed to exude a quiet, but enormous sense of value. Sasuke found that he was reminded of Juugo: someone exceedingly powerful, yet outwardly humble of his abilities.

His eyes travelled up Chouji's strong, thick arms to his wide shoulders. The man was built like a bear and probably twice as strong. Tattoos of scarlet spiralled up from the collar of his tank top to his nape, matching the same pattern as those on his cheeks. His eyes, Sasuke observed, were a rather fetching amber. He had to admit, he'd never noticed before.

"So cooking's your thing now?"

Had Chouji been less polite, he would have arched a brow and responded with something automatic like: what kind of question is that? Instead, he merely shrugged a little, before picking up his own cup.

"I guess."

"Still training?"

"Yeah. I split my day. Study and practice in the morning, training in the afternoon. At the moment, I have some examinations though, so I'm off the training and missions for now."

"Hn," Sasuke grunted, forgetting how disappointed his nonverbal reciprocation could often sound. "So... what kind of cooking? Do you specialize, or..."

Chouji offered him a gentle smile that was almost sympathetic. "It's ok," he said kindly. "You don't need to pretend to be interested."

"I'm not-" Sasuke began, though he could feel his cheeks pinkening. It wasn't that he didn't care, he just couldn't think of putting anything else above a career as a Shinobi. Even if it might be something he would have to face himself, eventually. He'd known there was a possibility; he'd worried about the long term effects of his forced civilianship until he'd worn down the thought to
the quick, but it was still there. He wasn't ready to face it yet, was all. "I was just-" _making conversation? You don't do small talk; never have._ "-curious."

"Oh," Chouji said before sitting back on his haunches, turning the delicate cup in his large hands. "Well. I've already passed the generic levels that cover preparation, cooking and serving and all of the related skills. What we Akimichi really specialize in is specific nutrition and medical partnerships with other clans - like the Nara or the Yamanaka."

_Now that_ was interesting. Sasuke sipped his tea, taking note of the full-bodied flavor and the absolute perfect temperature at which Chouji had presented it, and nodded. "So that's what you're doing now?"

"Mmm, finishing."

"And what's after that?"

"We continue our studies that focus on various branches of the community. We can specialize in dietetics through a lot of different fields: Shinobi-centric; where all kinds of innovations in nutrition are being made. Community. Medical. Commercial…"

"You found anywhere to focus yet?"

"Well, I'm more… uh…" Chouji blushed a little. "I like the idea of… sharing and… and making meals for other people, so I guess um… I'd prefer to look toward commercial cookery or community-focused projects. I really enjoyed the module on pediatrics too. There's a lot of cool stuff that goes on between a kid and its mother that goes all the way down to genetics. It's pretty amazing."

Sasuke blinked. "You mean… What?"

"Well, for example," Chouji motioned to Mikoto. "It's kind of obvious that you've been taking proper care of your daughter up until you got here. She's way too robust to have just been benefitting from a couple weeks of good food - she's been treated right since she was born. Good head of thick hair; good skin; bright eyes. I'll bet if you looked at her nails, there's be no white spots or stunting of any kind."

"I-" Sasuke glanced down at his girl who made a burbling noise around her thumb. "-I did what… I mean. This body has… Ways to provide so… I used them. That's all."

Chouji just offered him a faint smile. "You helped her build immunities by doing that. Made her tough against illness. Your body was helping hers. It remembers her from her time inside you. It helps you keep her safe. Like passing chakra, but better than that. I don't think many people would have thought to do what you did."

"There aren't that many people in my _position_," Sasuke corrected him, quietly. "It's not that mind blowing. I did what I had to."

Chouji poured more tea. "Start looking up some of the ancient clan practises and you'd be surprised. Eugenics is a scary thing, but some clans were really into it. I've read papers on some ancient cultures who used to do the same thing - used to think that they had a type of chakra that could be bred and cultivated through lineage. It's all pretty hardcore."

"Yeah well. It is and it isn't." Sasuke closed his eyes. "Might read as hardcore. Doesn't feel like it."

"I didn't mean-" Chouji flushed. He looked mortified. "S-sorry."
"You didn't know." Sasuke replied. If his response sounded sullen, his upset wasn't directed at his guest. They sat in silence for a little while, tense, unsure before there was a sudden knock at the door. Sharp. The entire lounge suddenly perked to attention. Sasuke was surprised (and pleased) to note that Shikamaru had already slipped a discreet shuriken between his fingers. Then Akamaru thumped his tail against the floor and yawned.

"Is flower girl."

"Ino," Shikamaru let out a breath and nodded to Chouji, who graciously answered the door. Ino shuffled in - a strange amorphous shape comprised mostly of an oversized powder blue poncho and a large spray of flurry white chrysanthemums. She grinned around it, kicking off her winter boots before she entered the lounge.

"Plan's working great!" She announced, placing the blooms on the counter before marvelling at Chouji's work. "Wow, you've been busy, Cho!"

"It's just a meal and some extras," Chouji replied modestly. He poured some tea for her and held out a cup as she moved into the lounge, kneeling beside her team mate. Sasuke frowned.

"Plan?"

"The… plan. The Henge Initiative," Ino said, grinning at Mikoto, who just burbled and turned in her sleep. "You know."

"I don't." Sasuke glanced at the others. Tsunade raised her brows but the boys looked sheepish.

"We were getting around to mentioning it. Though we'd… uh…” Shikamaru looked over at the shogi table and shrugged. "Got distracted, I guess. I wanted to give it a little time until I'd mention it."

"What have you done?" Tsunade asked, in cement tones. Shikamaru held up his hands.

"Nothing bad! It's actually kind of a good plan, which, you know, is surprising coming from Naruto but-"

"Naruto's plan?" Now Sasuke was fully invested. He leaned forward as much as Mikoto would allow, his dark eyes eager. "Plan for what?"

"Keeping you out of the spotlight," Shikamaru said, motioning to the paper on the table. "Making sure to keep reporters and suchlike away from your door. It's only a matter of time before they figure out you're staying here. Naruto thought that by giving them a false trail, they'd be too preoccupied with his decoys to focus on the finding the original."

"You look different," Ino added. "O-of course. But you don't look that different. Not if the reporters are really searching. He… He thought it would help."

"Decoys," Sasuke mulled on this a moment. "You mean, he's dressed like me?"

"He's kind of a master at Henge. Well, Kage Bunshin. He can make sure the decoys never linger in one place too long or ever form a trail. And he can take note of which reporters tend to watch him more than the others. That way we know who to look for."

"That's very helpful," Tsunade said, watching Sasuke carefully. "Thoughtful. Does Kakashi know you're doing this?"
"We ran the idea by him this morning," Shikamaru replied. "He was happy for us to start immediately. Said it was a good way to keep people talking about something, rather than have them looking for gossip."

"I'd rather they weren't talking about me at all. Even a fake me." Sasuke said, quietly, though he understood the benefit of such a tactic. People wouldn't be looking for a woman. They wouldn't be looking for a baby girl. They'd be looking for a Sasuke who looked like Sasuke and possibly a child who... well, he was sure Naruto's imagination was good enough to cover that. No one would expect any of the nine to be visiting him either - he'd never appeared to have friends, so Shikamaru, Chouji and Ino's appearances on this side of town weren't really all that suspicious. But of course, his main concern wasn't for the interest in Konoha, but for those outside. Those who might be waiting for any opportunity to get close. What could Caliga do with a clone? What if he caught the real one? Naruto was strong but... but he didn't know how efficient the foreigner could be - didn't know if that weird type of henge was the only trick he had up his sleeve. They never mentioned chakra, and yet Caliga could change his guise just as well as any practiced Shinobi, so what else could he do? Sasuke swallowed. "Tell... Naruto... Tell him... Keep him... in the village. I wasn't... I wouldn't go wandering about the forests outside the wall. No point. Training grounds were better. Or near the library and scroll merchants."

Shikamaru blinked. "Oh... sure. Okay, we'll let him know."

The others nodded in unison. Had Sasuke looked closer, he would have seen them smile ever so slightly. Then Chouji offered Ino some roasted vegetables and the mood lightened again. They rested. Shikamaru and Sasuke took in a game of chess while Tsunade and Ino played with Mikoto, watching her wiggle about on the ground on her stomach. Apparently, she was close to crawling. Sasuke didn't seem particularly inspired by the idea. Tsunade figured it was more to do with his daughter gaining mobility while his became more restricted than anything else, but she held her tongue. Sasuke tended to forget that he had other willing to help him - even when they were right under his nose.

Tired, but cheerful and well-fed, the group left a few hours later, leaving Sasuke alone in the apartment save for a dog on the floor and woman snoring on the couch, her logbook she was supposed to be studying covering her face. Evening was beginning to spread its orange cloak over the sky and the temperature was dropping as the heat bled out of the day. The sky was clear, faceted with stars and the air was biting, but Sasuke enjoyed the cold. It made him feel alive. Made him feel sharp, the way he used to feel when he was balanced in some tree, kunai in his hand, target hidden close by, waiting for him. He couldn't do that now, couldn't be that Sasuke now, but he could feel a little relieved with the nine watching his back. With his house guests. With Mikoto making soft noises to herself in her cot; chattering away in her own tongue. With his son curled inside him, heavy and grounding. Caliga could be out there, and Sasuke knew he'd never feel entirely safe, not with the man being so unexpected - not with his mysterious clan and his untraceable power. But he could try to trust the others. And he could allow himself a little relief. Maybe just for a while. Maybe just a little.

Kakashi started back at the pixelated face before him, trying desperately not to squint as the brightness of the screen hacksawed at the film of his eyeballs. He stood as straight as he could, attempting to adopt a stance that was somewhere between casual and respectful and failing at both. He cleared his throat, but the screen beat him to the punch.

"I think," Ohnoki said in measured tones. "You have something to tell me, don't you, Kakashi?"

The old man was sitting cross-legged before the commlink unit, hands linked before him with his
forearms resting on his thighs. He was wearing his traditional green, gold and crimson split coat of office, but rather than his tactical gear beneath, he wore an elegant kimono in a deep forest green. He appeared to be alone in the room, but Kakashi knew better than to assume he had total confidentiality. The Rokudaime nodded.

"I do."

"It's about Uchiha Sasuke isn't it?" Ohnoki continued. "The kid who disrupted the Kage Summit a while back."

"Two years, give or take." Kakashi said. "You almost disintegrated him, right?"

"If it wasn't for that other guy, I would have." Ohnoki said, frowning impossibly harder. "He appeared to be in league with that war-monger at the time, but it seems that wasn't the case."

"No, I don't think so." Kakashi shook his head. "I can't say for sure. At that time, I might have thought he had. But things turned out very differently. You understand that without his help-"

"I know, I know. It's been addressed. We wrote it all down," Ohnoki waved a hand, dismissively. "It's in the history books or computer files or whatever it is they're calling them these days. But we'd also thought he'd disappeared. Possibly destroyed in some final aggregation with your jinchuuriki master. You never really specified, Hatake. I'm getting the feeling that was on purpose."

"It was… difficult." Kakashi swallowed. Then he relaxed a little. "Look, you know he's here," he admitted, tiredly. "And you know why I stalled in contacting you and A. Sorry. I know it wasn't… Hokage-y of me-"

"That's not a word."

"-but I never said that I was good at this."

"He's an international criminal, Kakashi," Ohnoki said, evenly. "And you're showing select treatment."

"No, that was supposed to be amended. He's still a missing nin. He became an S-class when a criminal instated that rank on his own. A criminal who had been well known to… meddle. One who encouraged warfare."

"Yeah I know. Wasn't that fond of him either."

"He had an agenda. He always had an agenda. The Third never really trusted him as far as I could tell-"

"I may have my own opinions on that, Kakashi, but you can't go putting words in people's mouths," Ohnoki warned. "Even dead people."

"No? But people do. And Shimura Danzo was one of them. He aspired to the Hokage seat from day one, that's common knowledge. He was thoroughly against the Uchiha-"

"Look," Ohnoki stroked his moustaches. "I didn't contact you for a history lesson. I know why you've been evading contact with me. I might be old, but I'm not senile. Not yet anyway." The small man sighed. "We've both lost prized students to the Akatsuki. Yours ultimately besting mine, though I must say, I don't doubt Deidara wasn't paving the path to his own destruction long ago - he had that kind of attitude. What I want to know is what you intend to do next."
"Are you-" Kakashi eyed the screen suspiciously. Hopefully, even. "Are you planning on supporting-"

"We have the liberty to investigate freely now," Ohnoki said. "Being an alliance, we have the benefit of trust from each other - something no hokage would have ever dreamed back in my day. If you have thought this Uchiha Sasuke was a threat, I believe you would have dealt with him - connection or no. Seems you don't feel that way. Seems you're more worried about what everyone else thinks."

"What do you expect? He's from the same clan as Madara and Obito, both of whom are responsible for the fourth war." *Not entirely.* Kakashi thought, but he held his tongue. Now was not the time for such a revelation. "As… far as we know," he finished. "Nothing is ever as simple as it seems."

"Aye," Ohnoki agreed. "Still, criminal or nukenin, your Uchiha was never pardoned properly. Which means, by law, he still needs to stand trial. And he'd really better. With that kind of power he was packing on the battlefield, and with his prior insult to A, his fate should really be something that is made privy to the public."

"You mean *paraded.*"

"I'm trying to be fair, Rokudaime. Remember, I called *you.*"

Kakashi sighed and nodded slowly. "Yeah. Sorry. Is A… does he know?"

"He knows," Ohnoki said. "He's not waiting for a call. He's on his way now."

"Shit-"

"I can head him off at the borders of Lightning country. Get him to slow down. Stay a night or two in Ame or something. I *can.*" The old man leaned forward a little, scratching at his bulbous nose. "But I want to know why I'm doing it."

"Sasuke is… He's not well." Kakashi said, quietly. "He has returned to Konoha in a state that… it asks a lot of questions. And I want answers. And the only way I'm going to *get* answers is by gaining his trust and letting him speak in his own time."

"So it is preferential treatment-"

"No, you-" Kakashi caved and rubbed his temples. "It's not as simple as that-"

"If you need someone to interrogate him, I have many operatives." Ohnoki went on in attempt to be helpful. "I'm not really that surprised you're finding it difficult, but I can help if you need-"

"He was tortured, Tschikage-sama," Kakashi breathed. "Tortured. Horrifically. That may not be something to the veterans, but it's not about our experiences or our "stiff upper lips" or any of the bullshit we were fed as regular infantry. It's about the individual. It's about him. Sasuke was tortured in a time of peace by a faction I've never heard of. Never even known about - never even on my radar. I need to know more about them - who they are, *what* they are. But he's the only one who knows. He's our only point of information."

"Ever thought he could be making it up?" Ohnoki raised a brow. "Saving his own skin?"

"No. And when you see him, you'll know why." Kakashi said. "Besides, you've met him before. Might have been for a short time, but you got an idea for the type of man he is. He has persistence, Ohnoki. Resilience. Strength of will. Sasuke has been through a type of hell you wouldn't even
consider gilding your worst curses with, but he survived. He protected others. And he's returned to us for help."

"Others…" Ohnoki pressed his lips together. "A child?"

"Two, actually." Kakashi said. "I don't think he hoped for forgiveness… perhaps sanctuary more than anything. But I want to give him a little more time. He won't leave. He won't run. But he needs time. A few more days. Can you give me that?"

"You sing his praises like you think you can carry a note," Ohnoki raised a snowy brow. "But all right. Fine. If you're putting that much stock in him… And if it's something that might affect our villages in turn…. I'll talk to A. It might not do any good, but I'll talk to him."

"Thank you," Kakashi closed his eyes. "I… I appreciate-"

"I don't trust him though. Watch yourself, Kakashi - I may not know the Uchiha, but I know a sense of self preservation when I see one. I certainly don't doubt the kid's probably messed up." Ohnoki sighed. "Just make sure you aren't taken down with him."

It was well past dusk by the time Naruto himself finally took to the streets, tugging at the collar of his shirt of which sported a height he was used to, but was a little too wide to be warm and let the cold air slip down his back in uncomfortable wafts. He'd never seen Sasuke wear anything under his standard blue, not even in winter. He probably did - a vest or thermals or some kind, maybe he managed some soft of scarf-no-jutsu that no one ever noticed - but Naruto hadn't seen it, therefore it couldn't be part of the costume. Then there were the shorts. Those damn shorts. Naruto had only ever really suffered from chilly ankles, but Sasuke had always worn something of an abridged outfit, and the shorts were, well… a lot shorter than the jinchuuriki was used to. His knees poked out like pale ice-caps from under the hem and itched with cold. And the bandages, he found, were more or less decoration than anything. They made things slightly warmer, but not by a hell of a lot. Of course, he'd considered the possibility of wearing one of Sasuke's later outfits - at least the kimono doo-dad had pants and long sleeves. But it also had no front and if Naruto's nipples weren't capable of possibly shredding steel at this point, relegating them to open air would make him a potential hazard to society.

He did not, however, consider the possibility of keeping Sasuke's face and simply adding to the costume. Naruto might have had some good ideas, but he was a purist at heart. Sasuke needed to look like Sasuke. And he didn't in anything other than his crest and his usual blue. Or that… purply-grey-y colour. Cold be damned.

Truth be told, he didn't mind. He liked the way he walked as Sasuke. His strides were long and confident. His shoulders were rolled back, chest high and open. It was automatic, blood deep. The Uchiha pride, even in a facsimile, was unextinguishable. As though it could simply spread through the air. There was something about the way that Sasuke's body was fashioned that just made him… well, glide. Drift. Like smoke. Like a true shinobi. Even the thick, long fringe that hung in his eyes didn't seem to get in the way; tickle his nose or obscure his vision. He moved confidently, though it was a struggle not to smile or pose when he noticed people staring. He was so used to the attention as himself; it was difficult to react as though he didn't care to be noticed. Watching out the corner of his eye, he found his targets. Noted the familiar signs of someone digging into their bag for a camera or notebook. Their stance as they tried to line up a shot. The spring of a shutter. He knew his clones had been snapped several times earlier that afternoon - there was bound to be something in the news about Sasuke hanging around the old Uchiha compound or the West Gate. Well away from where he was staying. Good. Mission accomplished for the day.
He changed back into himself after half an hour of traipsing back and forth through the shadows, and ducked down a few alleys before bounding onto the rooftops. Toeing the guttering, he blew on his hands and sprung away across the village, heading back in the direction of his apartment. The sun was low in the sky, tearing a ribbon of crimson across the horizon. The evening paper had come out. Naruto watched as the vendors changed the issues on their stands, bundling the old gossip away in favour of the new. There would be stories in them. Sasuke's name in bold perhaps this time, almost more real in print than he was squirreled away in the Hokage's apartments - thin and sick and swelling with child. Was he worried? Had the earlier story bothered him? Was he afraid he'd be found? Or was he taking the news like he always did: cool, unaffected. Unwilling to show just how much something hurt him.

And yet… things had been different at the hearing. He'd been afraid. He'd been scared. He'd shut down. And those dreams, nightmares… those choked noises, that cold sweat in the dark, that wasn't the Sasuke Naruto knew. That was a Sasuke who had run out of options; who had come home for help. A Sasuke who had been damaged beyond recovery - or at least any sense of a swift recovery. A Sasuke who perhaps shouldn't have seen the morning paper and found that the village was now buzzing with news of his return. One who probably wasn't all that interested in seeing the evening paper either.

_It might upset him_, Naruto thought, as he suddenly changed his mind and his course - veering away from the familiar rooftop path that led him to his balcony in favor of the rickety fire escapes that spidered across the faces of the buildings opposite. _He might get those… those bad dreams because of it. Might make him nervous. Maybe he'd try to run away again. Maybe…._

News was a problem. Exposure - even fake exposure - could be a problem too. Naruto decided, as he jogged over roof tiles with barely a sound, that he would help on the other end of the initial project as well. He'd give the world a fake Sasuke, and also take the world away from the real one. The paper, the articles - they weren't going to do him any good. He should take it before Sasuke saw it. Just get it out of the way. Ninja were supposed to protect, weren't they? They were all looking out for Sasuke, right? So taking one little paper from his doorstep was perfectly acceptable, for sure.

It had nothing to do with the fact that in getting closer to the apartments might reward him with another glimpse of Sasuke again. No, it wasn't about that at all. It had nothing to do with that fact that Kakashi had helpfully put one of his ninen outside the bookkeep, just in case. Nor was it that Naruto now felt completely dirty as he attended to his plant watering duties whilst trying to sneak the odd glance toward Sasuke's window. Bisuke never said much, but he watched. And he had those eyes, those dark ringed, lethargic eyes that reminded him all too much of his former teacher. Perhaps peeking in on Sasuke was a little weird, but the bastard didn't have to make his point quite so obviously.

Naruto wasn't even sure if Sasuke got his paper delivered, but they did seem to drop them off everywhere. And even if he didn't, he should check, right? He really ought to… Really. He nodded at the guards as he trotted through the main gate, completely obviously to the knowing look one gave another. His mind was filled with things he might say to Sasuke - conversations that could possibly crop up if given the chance. Outwardly, he'd say that he wasn't expecting anything at all: he'd either reach the top of the stairs, pick up the paper and go, or simply find there was no paper to begin with and vacate the area as silently as he'd come. But his imagination told a different story. It rattled off conversation starters, searching for the perfect thing to say if Sasuke happened to be waiting for him.

_It said: Hi Sasuke! How're ya doing?_
No, too casual.

Yo Teme, just checkin' in on ya, making sure there ain't no troub-

Fuck's sake, he wasn't B.

Hi Sasuke! Wow, cold night, huh? Hope you're all warm and cozy in there. Got a new comforter? That's great. Your hair looks kinda cool when it's long like that and-

Nope, too creepy. And weird. But mostly creepy.

Heyyyyy Sa-

No.

Naruto paused at the bottom of the stairs, looking up to the balcony above. What the hell was he going to say? And why was he even thinking about a conversation anyway, Sasuke wasn't going to be waiting at the door for him! Hell, he could have even been napping about now. Or eating dinner. Or looking after the baby or something. Naruto was just going up to his doorstep and he was going to retrieve the paper and that's what he was going to do.

That's what he was going to do.

Yup, he was going to do it.

Oh fucking get up there and do it, you idiot.

He took a breath and started climbing the stairs, feeling the weight of his steps grow heavier and heavier the closer he got to the top. It was as though gravity was fighting against him, pushing him down, filling his lungs with lead. He'd watched Sasuke before, but in secret - there was no chance of getting caught. This was... It was closer. The door might open. He might be there, standing, waiting. That look of shock horror on his face like there'd been two years ago when they finally burst free of that dream. When he saw what he'd created. When he learned how Naruto really felt about him; that he'd take down the world after losing him. That he'd rather be dead than live alone without him. Even to the point where he would tie the noose itself.

Naruto's fingers twitched, still itching from the memory of the rope fibres in his hands.

He swallowed.

Then he let out a breath and in one, swift movement he was on the landing, reaching for the paper that was, as he'd pictured, curled up in a neat baton on the doormat - its pages rife with hearsay and scandal in fresh nine-point serif. His fingers closed around it. That was satisfaction. That was the part in the movie where the music rises. He let out a low, triumphant yesssss and then the door opened.

The door.

Opened.

oh.

Naruto would have recognised Sasuke's shadow anywhere. It was the hair that tipped him off initially; the stance second. He wasn't standing like that now, however - not with that contrapposto of self-assuredness, that was long gone. And the hair was different, longer, like he'd seen at the
hearing. But those things were irrelevant; Naruto knew. He knew without even looking up, that Sasuke had opened the door and was now standing a mere few feet away. He could hear his fingers curling around the doorjamb. He sensed that surprise and felt the density of the pause as his former rival rallied himself to speak. He closed his eyes at that small wet sound when Sasuke opened his mouth, just before the words came, and bit his lip hard when he heard:

"What are you doing?"

Naruto looked up. It seemed to take an age. It wasn't just that his nerves had rusted his joints into grinding pivots that would squeak given half the chance, but it was his sudden, insatiable desire to take in every detail possible of the person standing before him that just slowed everything down to an ambling, arthritic slog. Naruto looked. He looked and he remembered. Every scratch on Sasuke's toes, every stitch on the hem of his pants. The thick, swampy look of his oversized hooded shirt that hid the changed figure beneath and the breath of a curve when he was no longer getting away with it. The way his neck looked, poking out of the collar, like a pale loose thread. That painfully angular jaw. And those eyes. Those eyes. Still narrow, still rimmed by long, heavy lashes that had always made him look more feminine than the rest of them. Still dark and guarded. Still miles away but part of the moment all at the same time. It was Sasuke, it was still Sasuke.

But there was hesitance in his voice. The bored drawl was replaced with something slightly more breathless. Something almost fearful. Naruto blinked and gazed at him agape; mesmerized at the way the light was framing Sasuke's face and, after a long moment, he said the best thing he could think of. Which, unfortunately, turned out to be:

"...Um?"
like Cosmo... Also he can play shogi by moving the pieces with his nose or picking them up veeeeeery carefully with his teeth.

Be cool, see you next chapter xxx
Naruto had said some amazing things on his life. That was a fact that no one, not even Sasuke, could deny. Though not necessarily the sharpest Kunai in the set, Naruto's intrinsic talent for capturing even the most guarded of hearts was something of legend. He couldn't be described as an oratory - not with a vocabulary so limited, it would have been more at home printed on thick cardboard in primary colours - but what naruto lacked in verbosity, he gained in persistence, volume, and a faultless optimism. Naruto believed in what he said and that made his audience believe it, even if what he said was complete shit. Conviction was hard to mimic and conviction was everything. Along with his motivational prowess was his ability to make himself seen as well as heard - something, Sasuke would grumble quietly, that was aided indefinitely by the use of the tangerine two-piece - thus every naruto speech tended to be a performance worth persevering through.

Sasuke, though used to naruto's spiels, had to admit that he wasn't overjoyed to find himself the possible audience to another. But he could also say that having been on the receiving end of a good 85% of them, he had rather expected something a little more imaginative than "um".

Naruto looked outrageously guilty.

Sasuke blinked.

"That's it?"

"Um?" Naruto said again. He appeared to stall a little, unsure of how to proceed. He hadn't stopped staring at Sasuke's face, if that wasn't disconcerting enough. Those brilliant blue eyes were wide as planets. "What?"

"I said, 'is that it'?"

"Uh-"

Although both were as surprised and unprepared for the moment as the other, Sasuke could tell Naruto was probably the worst off. As much as that mouth could run, there was, on occasion, a jam in the gears. And, historically, that jam was either a) Sasuke, b) Mention of Sasuke or C) Something or someone who looked, sounded or just plain reminded Naruto of Sasuke.

The real deal, however, just cleared his throat a little, trying to decide what was best to say. He went with:

"Are... you...stealing my paper?"

Mildly accusatory, but good enough to swing his stunned mullet of a guest into a response. Naruto stared at the rolled newsprint in his hand as though seeing it for the first time.

"Yes?" He tried. Then: "N-no? I don't know."
"Kinda looks like it." Sasuke licked his lips nervously - though he did his best to make the action appear casual. His flight instinct was on overdrive. Naruto wasn't Caliga, but for a time, Caliga was Naruto. And in that guise he taunted Sasuke. Hurt him. Tortured him. His feet, though weighed down by his heavy form, remained engaged as per his training; he was ready to move at a breath of notice. His mind was automatically racing eighteen steps ahead, categorizing exit points, weapons, the positions of his daughter and housemates. Both Tsunade and Akamaru were inside. They were strong, intimidating. And they were certainly stronger than Caliga. One yell for help and they'd be at his side.

Except this wasn't Caliga. This was Naruto. It was. It was… wasn't it? Sasuke couldn't be sure and he wasn't, not for the moment. It seemed ridiculous that Caliga would be able to penetrate Konoha's defenses, that he'd be able to slide in, unnoticed and steal away the incubator for his child. But Caliga was, if anything, a master in his strange and singular skillset. And Sasuke's faith in Konoha's security was questionable at best. So he squinted a little as they sat in the tense silence, his keen eyes focused on naruto's form and mannerisms - searching for any kind of mistakes or breaks in character. His heart was in his mouth, solid, uncomfortable and his chest felt tight. He didn't know how - it was doubtful they'd ever met - but Caliga had gotten Naruto so very right every time, it was almost hard to accept the real thing. Even the eyes were the same…

… and yet, the more Sasuke looked, the more he realised that… well. They weren't. Caliga had simulated their appearance, sure - he'd even attained the right kind of crystalline blue that made Naruto's eyes his most attractive feature. But while the attributes were the same, the personality behind them wasn't. Caliga's surprise was not naruto's surprise. Caliga's composure was nothing like the blond's. He might have managed the same smile, but it wasn't as wide, and didn't show that tiny bit of tooth that was always poking out when the idiot laughed. Naruto's joy was always turned up to full, every laugh was the best laugh he'd ever emitted. Caliga mostly sneered or laughed without mirth. When Sasuke really began to think about it, perhaps the foreigner wasn't so close after all. Perhaps Sasuke was just so out of touch with how naruto looked these days. Perhaps it was only the dream version that remained stuck in his head.

Loving.

Crying.

Screaming.

Sasuke squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again to the real Naruto. Caliga might have copied the look, but he hadn't gotten the feel. Naruto exuded warmth like sunshine - probably something to do with the massive amount of chakra inside him - and retained a kind of infallible earnestness to him that just bred and multiplied until it became contagious. Even crouched on the cold wooden balcony, silent, the tufts of his sunny hair picking up in the breeze, Sasuke felt more from Naruto that he ever had with Caliga wearing his guise.

He relaxed, though his relief was only surface deep. Inside, he was still in turmoil. His fear wouldn't let anxiety slide, anger was still present for the very catalyst of his predicament was sitting there in front of him and guilt sidled shamefaced to one side, reminding him of his actions toward his friend. His brother. His-

"I uh… I thought… Thought you wouldn't really care for the… y'know… stories." Naruto explained, lamely. "Y'know, c-cos they're about…"

"Me?"

"Yeah," There was an audible gulp. "Thought you… wouldn't care for them..."
"I can decide that for myself." Sasuke said automatically. Naruto appeared to wilt.

"Y-yeah… 'course… But-"

Naruto petered off, feeling his voice die in his throat. Slowly, as though he almost couldn't decide what he wanted to do, he pushed up to his feet and leaned back against the balcony railing. His eyes were aimed at his sandals. Sasuke watched him warily, trying to swallow around the vital organs lodged in his mouth. It was automatic, so automatic, this banter. This ire. He couldn't help it. It was unfair, but he just couldn't help himself. Sure, he was angry that their battle had ended so badly and he'd been left so damn helpless, but what the hell was Naruto supposed to do? It wasn't really his fault. They'd gone to a fight, fair and square. Sasuke was the one who'd pulled the tricks; Naruto had only retaliated with the one thing he had over his difficult friend: Power. He'd always had more power. Always.

No… not just power. It wasn't just that at all…

\textit{It wasn't just power because you'd gotten into it too, hadn't you? Sasuke's mind chastised. He'd fallen in love with you - he is in love with you - and you liked that and you wanted more of that, didn't you? You almost didn't go through with the whole plan because you saw what it was like to be with him. You felt the warmth of his body. You filled up on the unlimited gift of his love. Cos it stopped all that coldness; it got rid of the holes. You remembered feeling complete for the first time in years with him…}

You loved him back. You did.

But if you're anything, Uchiha Sasuke… You're a stickler for a plan.

And you had to win.

His hand ached to rub at his chest, to where it hurt, but instead he held it out for the paper, palm up. He looked at Naruto almost coldly, though it was simply that he didn't trust himself with any other expression. Ambiguity was strength.

"Give me the paper."

"There are misprints." Naruto lied. "It's just all stories about cats. Old Ladies with cats. Making the longest scarves in the world. Yeah. Seriously, it's trash. You don't need it." But there was a pavlovian response beyond his control, and before he knew it the paper was in Sasuke's hand. He turned it over, glancing at the headline, which announced the discovery of Uchiha Sasuke buying groceries in the west side of town. The west side - where he'd never gone or been able to walk to anyway. So that was Naruto. And in fact, when he looked at the blurry, ink-saturated photo, \textit{obviously} Naruto.

Naruto himself, however, was shifting his feet awkwardly, unsure of how to stand or what to say. Was Sasuke offended that he'd tried to look like him? Did he think the plan was stupid? And to look at him now, this close, it was ludicrous to think he'd considered himself a good representation of the real thing. Sasuke looked nothing like his former self - \textit{God} he was thin. He looked thin from his window, but in front of him, he was just \textit{tiny}. That hand could have slid through raindrops. And he smelt like medication. And there were dark circles beneath his eyes. His Sasuke had the Sasuke of the celebrated past - something much more… Sasuke-like. This Sasuke, this Sasuke was…

Naruto couldn't stop staring. He - didn't want to blink lest the boy before him \textit{was} a dream and faded away again. He hadn't ever been this close to Sasuke. Hadn't spoken to him. He'd \textit{watched}
but that wasn't the same thing. This was real. This was him. And they were, arguing over a stupid paper like nothing had happened. Like he hadn't ruined Sasuke's life after Sasuke ruined his. Dream or no, he still felt that ache inside. He licked his lips, easing up slowly, icing over on the inside.

*Did he hate him? Did he? Did-

"A-anyway," he continued. "Um... So... 's been awhile, huh? Um... Hi Sasuke." Oh... redundant. So damn redundant! Naruto groaned inwardly before making a subsequent attempt. "It's good to see you." Much better. That was much better. Then Sasuke said:

"Is it?"

"Well, yeah. 'Course." Naruto wavered for a mere second before rallying. Of course it was, that was obvious. Right? He ignored the fact that he probably looked about as resolute as a straw castle and sounded as convincing as Kakashi on his best lie. "I-I mean, you're back now. You're back home."

"Home?"


"Konoha ceased to be home the day they razed the Uchiha compound to the ground," he replied, woodenly. It was lies. Konoha was more of a home to Sasuke than anywhere - his other abodes he'd simply inhabited, calling them HQ, or Main Camp. But he couldn't admit to that. Because he was a fucking moron. A fucking stubborn moron. One hand slowly fell to the rise of his stomach as the baby punted him on the inside - sensitive to his rapid pulse, his stress. He licked his lips again. "I'm... here because it's convenient."

"I-I know," Naruto said, almost sadly. "I know that. But... Y'know. You're here. Never... Never thought you'd come back and-" *And we have so much to talk about. I have so much I need to tell you. I don't even know where to start."

"I wouldn't have if you hadn't put me in a position that left me few choices."

Oh that was cruel. That was cruel and Sasuke knew it but he couldn't help himself. The truth was there, pushed forward by his nerves. He knew it was Naruto, but he still saw Caliga in that face. In that body. Should he go back in? Disappear back to bed? No. No, Uchiha Sasuke ran from nothing. Nothing. Not from the man who stole his powers. Not from the man who... who... Loved you.

He let out another breath, his heart sinking at the soul-puncturing look Naruto's eyes. The same look he'd worn at Orochimaru's hideout all those years ago, only that version was weighted by his failure to save a friend and fulfill a promise to a teammate. This time, the look was overladen with guilt and shame and Sasuke didn't like it. Naruto was an idiot, but he didn't deserve to bear the culpability of a phenomenon that wasn't entirely his doing. He was angry, yes - he had a right to be. But at the same time he was just as liable as the other. Naruto had been trying to stop him. Naruto had been the one on the defensive.

Sasuke made to open his mouth, to say something, anything, but for once Naruto beat him to it.

"I didn't know what I did. I don't know how it happened," he explained, quietly, hating the gap between them, but relieved that, for the moment, they still weren't quite in a believable space together. To bridge it. To touch... that would make everything real. That would make Sasuke being here a possible thing, however implausible.
It would mean he'd have to be responsible for his feelings.

It would mean he'd have to accept Sasuke's for him, however they might lean.

He almost wished they were standing before the valley of the end again - not like they had at the end of the war, but the first time. Everything had been easier then. Ignorance was, in this case, far preferable to guilt. Naruto shook his head. "And... and so much happened. I want... Sasuke... After what happened, I just w--"

"The clones were a good idea." Sasuke interrupted, quickly. He seemed almost surprised that he'd said it. Maybe that wasn't a conversation he wanted right now. Maybe it was better to stick with the simple things. But Naruto, who was never one to perform a particularly graceful about turn - verbal or otherwise - looked stumped.

"Eh?"

"The diversion. The clones. It was a good idea. Stupid, but," Sasuke shrugged. "Might be stupid enough to work.

"I just... thought it would be easier that way. People will be looking for a Sasuke who looks like... you know." Naruto's eyes rolled down to Sasuke's middle, again, following the curve of his sweatshirt with a kind of torrid fascination. There wasn't much to see, Sasuke wasn't particularly round - not yet - but the presence was there. He could sense the chakra. It was young, beautiful, but it wasn't Sasuke's chakra. "S-So no one knows about the baby or your tummy, ah... you know. Your, uh... preg... puh..."

"No, they won't." Sasuke finished. "Not for a while at least. Not if I can help it. At least until the time when I'm called to-"

"...msorry"

"What?"

"I said... I-I said... I... Sasuke, I'm sorry!" Naruto blurted out abruptly. "I'm sorry! I didn't... I didn't mean for this to happen. I didn't want you to get hurt! I just wanted you to come back. A-and not to kill me. But having you back was the most important! I don't know what happened after the war, I don't know why you... you wanted to do all that stuff and kill the Kages and all that, but--"


"You being right? Which makes me wrong. I didn't think I was wrong, Naruto. I still don't."

"No! Shut up. That's not what I meant to say. It's coming out wrong. It always comes out wrong. A-and you..." Naruto stopped. Blinked. Sasuke didn't... what. Think murder was wrong? But- "D-do... Do you... still want to kill me?"

"No. No, you idiot." Sasuke sighed, the exchange relaxing him somewhat. Caliga hadn't been much for the banter either - not in the way that he was used to. Caliga would boast and sneer, but Naruto left embarrassing openings and often repeated himself for the chance at a better comeback. This was authentic Uzumaki bumbling. "Obviously that isn't the case anymore. I'm in no position to try to kill anyone. Maybe." He added for good measure. "There are aspects of the Shinobi way, parts of the system I don't agree with. Many, in fact. There are many things that are just... archaic.
"Stupid." He sighed. "I have no choice but to surrender to them now, though."

"So…so you're staying?" Naruto looked hopeful. Sasuke rolled his eyes.

"Do I look like I have any other choice?"

"You look tired." Naruto said. "Look like you've been through hell. A hell… I can't even begin to understand -"

"This isn't about you."

"I know! I know that, but I -"

"-Any of it. I don't expect you to understand, because you won't. Stop trying to take the blame; you put me on a different path, that's all."

"I put you on… B-but Sasuke," Naruto seemed dazed, which wasn't uncommon. There was a softness to his voice, a kind of gentle regret that made him want to reach out, close the distance between the two. He took a step forward, his arm outstretched, palm flat as though to place his hand on Sasuke's shoulder, but let out a yelp of surprise when Sasuke jerked backward violently. The dark eyes were wide, his face pale.

Too close too close too close get away too close...

There was no thought. It was complete impulse only. Sasuke gasped at the looming embrace, his mind flicking to such dark places that he launched back against the door; the movement so abrupt and forceful he overbalanced and lost his footing. Unthinking, Naruto shot forward, catching his friend before he could hit the floor. His arms wrapped around the other, protecting him, holding him close. Sasuke landed on him as though he were a rather poorly placed landing pad and they lay together for a moment in a tangle of limbs and confusion. Sasuke felt the lack of hesitance in Naruto's body and Naruto felt the warmth of his friend, the slightness of him. The pulse of the child within him, a flicker of warmth against his skin. Then Sasuke was pushing him away with all his might - hands, feet, shoulders, everything involved.

"G-get off me… get off! Get away!" He hissed, but the words sounded almost foreign and were chased by a few that Naruto didn't recognise at all. He moved back, out of the way of Sasuke's fingers, but didn't let go. Not yet.

"Sasuke…"

"..go… to h-hell. Go to hell!" Sasuke snarled, finally ripping himself out from Naruto's grasp, sprawling in his efforts to retreat toward the door. His dark eyes were painfully wide, his mouth twisted into a grimace, cheeks were struck with pink against the dead pallor of his skin. He was breathing hard, his hand stretched in front of him to put the distance back between them. Naruto, completely floored, slipped away and backed up against the railing.

"I didn't… I wasn't going to…"

"What the hell is going on!" Tsunade roared. She was at the door faster than Naruto could even blink with Akamaru at her heels, looking set to pounce until he saw who what at the door.

"Naruto?"

"I didn't do anything!" Naruto panted, his eyes fixed on Sasuke. The other was pressed against the door, his hand over his face as he tried to calm down. Tsunade dropped down to his side in an
instant, her arms around him, helping him stand. He didn't appear hurt, and since it was Naruto himself who was the only other person in the vicinity, it was likely Sasuke had experienced some kind of panic attack, or simply just couldn't handle his emotions. Many would argue that Sasuke was about as emotional as a brick, but Tsunade knew of two people who could easily elicit a response from him - good or bad. She offered Naruto a sympathetic glance.

"I think it's time we went inside."

"I didn't-"

"I know. But Sasuke is not well, Naruto. He needs to rest. I'm sure he's glad you visited."

"Doesn't look glad." Naruto murmured, sliding his lower lip under his teeth, his expression wrought with concern. Sasuke wasn't looking at him. He wasn't really looking at anything. "Is... Is he mad at me, Tsunade-baba?"

"Naruto, I don't think-"

"I told you!" Sasuke said, his voice as unstable as his composure. "I told you, this isn't about you. Not everything is about you, Naruto, but butting into other people's business is what you always end up doing. Making me your mission. Making me your problem. I never wanted that. I told you. I t- told..."

Perhaps more embarrassed or exasperated than afraid at this point, Sasuke sagged against his caregiver, trying to catch his breath. Naruto looked crestfallen - so much that Akamaru stepped around the others and pushed his nose into the jinchuuriki's hand, his tail low.

"Come, I will walk you to gate."

"Akamaru? Is he saying things? I don't understand when he's saying things," Naruto said in a tight voice to no one in particular. But he let himself be led by the ninken, sidling miserably along the railing until he reached the stairs. "I d-didn't... I didn't do anything. Is he ok? I didn't..."

"It's been a long day." Tsunade sighed. "I think Sasuke would like to be alone for a little while." She didn't want to put words in his mouth, but Sasuke didn't look up to dealing with Naruto for much longer. He leaned on her and she walked backwards, slowly. "Maybe another time."

"O-ok." Naruto replied, quietly. Oh that worry. That pain. That was Naruto all over. It was one thing knowing Sasuke was unwell and needed help, it was another experiencing his pain in person. He reached down to pat Akamaru a little, then turned to leave, but not before Sasuke managed to croak:

"Usuratonkachi..."

"Y-yeah, b-bastard?" It was an automatic response - well rehearsed, often employed and it slipped out before Naruto could even think. Yet while he almost looked horrified at himself for saying it, Sasuke seemed to breathe something of a sigh of relief with those words, which stayed Tsunade's fist. She let him stand alone as he rested his hand against the doorjamb, straightening his sweatshirt as he muttered:

"Parchment. Ink. I need some," he didn't, but what the hell. "You know what I use."

"S-sure," Naruto brightened instantly. He nodded with such enthusiasm, he cracked his head against one of the hanging baskets and spilled half a pot of dead petunias on the floor. "Oops... B-but yeah... Um, sorry about that. I can get that stuff for you! You want it t-"
"Tomorrow." Sasuke finished for him. "And don't steal my damn paper again."

The Kusagakure plains were a wide grass sea that made the stars seem far brighter and colder than they seemed near the mountains. Caliga was from a land where the cold was not uncommon. He didn't mind the chill of the air, the crisp evenings or the damp from the grass and the earth that seeped in through the floorboards of his little stolen house. Those things were nothing to him. He'd lived in colder, fought in damper... The people of this land built stronger houses. Found better materials. Caliga's people were not the same - they were people of huts and hearths, not cities and roads. The invaders had cities and roads. They'd tried to build cities and roads for Caliga's people. Caliga's people weren't particularly grateful for that.

The foreigner stretched his long legs in front of him, sucking on a cigarette as he read the night sky. Smoking wasn't really something he cared much for - not here, anyway, for the inhalant that was available in these lands was acrid tasting and synthetic, nothing like the hemp he was used to. But it calmed him some. Numbed the pain a little. His leg had mended, finally - he knew he'd been right to get that Kakkou bastard to set it correctly before he slit his throat. The fool. Caliga relished the look of surprise and horror on his face when he'd pressed his dagger to his throat. The old goat had honestly believed he was one of them. That he was bonded to their cause. That he would look for survivors; send for help. Caliga laughed in his face and whispered the name of the Bloody One before he slit the druid's throat. Caliga worked for Caliga. And now he answered to no one.

That druid had been the last of the Kakkou at this point. The great earthquake had done him a favor by crushing the faction in one swift, clean swoop, leaving only a couple of scouts for Caliga to pick off himself. Though having a few lackeys at his side to through any curious shinobi off his scent would have been helpful, Caliga preferred to work alone. They may have all been called "Kakkou" in this land, but they were not his kin; he felt no affinity to them. And, if he did end up in need of help, more would come in due course. They were a while away - there was still another breeding season booked for this year, but when the others did not return with their precious cargo, they would come.

But at this moment, Caliga was feeling fortunate. He was alive and free to operate without side-stepping operations and questions. He knew the mother of his son was alive and where he was hiding. All his ducks were lining up in rows, pretty rows and Sasuke made two. The third? Well... that he'd have to wait for. That one would require far more precision, being as powerful as they were. Caliga was one man and this land was full of powerful ninja. He might have been a warrior for his people (and perhaps, had he been given the chance, he might have worn the blue of Kings), Caliga was nowhere near the level of even the most inexperienced ninja. He was strong, but the Shinobi had strength and power. He was skilled with an axe and a sword, but he'd witnessed a child emit fire from her lips, and a young man shoot lightning from his fingertips. Many years ago, he would have thought they were Gods.

Only Gods were immortal and these people bled. Died. Caliga had tested that on many occasions. And while the ninja were indeed powerful, Caliga had acquired the blessed artifacts of the Bloody One to even the battlefield. One, a sword, he'd stolen back from a raid on Magh Slécht, the other he'd retrieved from the rocky tomb of the druids themselves. Then, of course, there was his abilities honored by blood: the ability to change his shape at will and fool shinobi with a flawless disguise. He knew they measured an energy called chakra, could mould it, could use it like a tool or weapon, but their stealth ability seemed to be flawed in that they also detect and read chakra when it was being manipulated. Naturally, more skill offered more disguise, but that was something long learned with much practice. Caliga didn't have the time to practice, but he also didn't have or require chakra to be able to use his glamor. And in that sense he was untraceable. Dead still within their silence; a giant hiding in plain sight.
Drawing in a long breath, Caliga slowly got to his feet, letting his damaged bones adjust to the cold. He was stiff still, but he could fight. His leg was painful, but he could run and pain was not something that had ever bothered him. His treasured sword lay on the stoop beside him and he picked it up in one hand. It was heavy, thick. It had a broad shaft and a heavy crossguard, balanced by an equally weighty pommel. He'd seen Shinobi use all kinds of weapons - including swords that were far bigger than their own slender, fae-like bodies - but this sword was of his people and forged of their Gods. It might have appeared plain and uninspiring in comparison to the beautiful folded steel of the shinobi, but it had power. A power he knew, and they did not.

Straightening, he adjusted his ruined leather jerkin and draped a long travelling cloak about his shoulders, snorting at the pitiful length. The hem barely reached his knees. He secured his sword about his waist, hiding it from view as best he could, then slung his bag over one shoulder. With a breath, and a mercurial motion, he slipped into a guise that was more fitting to the area - a young, dark-haired man with pointed features and a slighter build than his own. This guise would have him appear more like the other treasure - make the lie he'd told to keep it safe all the more believable.

The stars were bright and cold but they were a fine compass this night. Caliga rolled his shoulders. He took one glance to the South where Sasuke hid, growing full and fat with his son, before he turned on his heel and headed East.

"Guess you saw the paper, huh?"

To say he was unimpressed was an overestimation, almost everything Orochimaru did was never really that creditable to Suigetsu. In truth, he was usually more horrified by the snake sannin than he was awed. But the years had kept them together, and the edge that the younger man used to feel around his creator had dulled somewhat. From mad and dangerous, to eccentric, Orochimaru was a changed man by the end of the fourth ninja war. Quite literally.

This was a slightly different situation, however. The pair were not in Orochimaru's war room, nor one of his many laboratories or even his dungeons. They were, in fact, in a rather lavish parlor of which Suigetsu couldn't remember having ever visited. It was lined from wall to wall with racks of lavish garments: kimono, furisode, haori and hakama, evening dresses, tuxedos and great coats. It was eight o'clock in the evening. For most of the day Suigetsu had been haunting the halls of the hideout, searching for his boss who had disappeared shortly after breakfast and hadn't been spotted since. Given the feature articles in both the morning and evening papers from Konoha, Suigetsu wondered if the Sannin might have run off to do something drastic.

He wasn't worried, per se. Just… well… The pay here was good. Sort of. Sort of good. Alright, the pay was non-existent and sure, Orochimaru treated him more like a small, entertaining animal than he did a colleague, but still. Still. It was probably good form to find out if your boss had gone off to get himself arrested or something.

But Orochimaru hadn't left at all. In fact, he'd spent and inordinate amount of time here with his clothes, trying things on, preening in front of a full-length mirror, exchanging one garment after the next. Suigetsu had watched him mutely for a while, convinced that he'd either blown a fuse somewhere or was trying really hard not to let the news affect him but when his boss slipped into what appeared to be his twentieth kimono, the kiri-nin decided he had enough.

"You aren't honestly thinking of going to Konoha to see him, are you?" He said with a frown, picking at the edge of a heavily embroidered obi. Orochimaru continued to admire himself, his strange golden eyes fixed on his own reflection.
"I don't know what you're talking about, Suigetsu. I'm just having a wardrobe clear out, that's all."

"And what're ya gonna do? Pack 'em all up and sell 'em at a Sunday market? Like you even go out these days."

"Why would I part with these precious flowers?" Orochimaru raised a thin, elegant eyebrow, turning a little to ensure he had the best view of his sculpted neckline. The new body he'd chosen was smaller than the last, but unbelievably beautiful. Suigetsu had no idea where he'd acquired it (and had earned kneecap to the spleen when he suggested an upmarket pleasure house), but he'd certainly chosen well. As usual, the line between male and female with Orochimaru was blurred, but his grumbling (and usually somewhat pained) assistant was used to that by now. Suigetsu sucked his serrated teeth, a habit from childhood he'd never quite dropped, and waved a hand at newspaper laid flat on one of the cursive parlour tables.

"Ya didn't answer my first question."

"Question, dear? Or observation?" Orochimaru purred. "Seemed like rhetoric to me. Not really worth responding to as it is obvious that I know Sasuke-kun has returned to Konoha."

"Yeah? Didja read the bit about him at the dumpling store?"

"Yes."

"Didja see he's gone back to his blue duds?"

"Yes."

"Man… Thought he'd grown outta those. Better than that purple colour though. Always felt we looked a bit too similar, us both traipsing around in purple. Didja see-"

"I read the article, Suigetsu," Orochimaru interjected, with uncharacteristic patience. "Whatever you're going to say next, I know. I have read it, therefore I know."

"Hn," Suigetsu sniffed. He drifted across the room, shifting his attention from his boss to the collection of colourful garments cluttering the room. Some were covered in plastic, some appeared more worn-looking than the others and had notes pinned to them - most likely for mending. Some looked over a hundred years old. Suigetsu raised his snowy brows. Then he said, quietly:

"Did you see he has a kid?"

"Mm."

Orochimaru seemed to pause at that, his gaze dropping a little from his face to the floor. Suigetsu, feeling a little chastened, laughed awkwardly and followed it up with.

"Man, Karin's gonna blow a gasket, right?"

"If she does, she would be wise to keep it to herself. I am sure Sasuke has enough on his plate already."

"Why'd ya think he went back?" The frown deepened. "I mean… he hated that place. Then he wanted to protect it, but, yanno, never really seemed convinced about that - like it was someone else's idea. Juugo said he-"

"Sasuke does as Sasuke does, there's no need to analyse it." A strange comment coming from a
man who was famous for analysing everything, but he added nothing else. With a roll of his elegant shoulders, Orochimaru shrugged off the peach and scarlet silk-embroidered piece to a plainer, blue cotton yukata, emblazoned with clouds. Most of his kimonos were intended for women to wear, but that irksome little detail had been duly ignored in favor is his appreciation of the art he was wearing. His bodies were always intended to be one way or another traditionally, but that had never stopped him becoming whatever, or whomever pleased him. For a time, the transition had only been part of a quest for power, but since then he'd found he preferred to select a form that was more to his liking and well as containing notable abilities. That's where Sasuke had been perfect.

And yet Sasuke was also unattainable. Which, to Orochimaru, was even better.

"But… a kid? I mean…" Suigetsu shrugged. "Seems weird, right?"

"I suppose he has his soft spots. Perhaps it is an orphan. Perhaps a wayward child from Konoha that he is returning home," Orochimaru surmised, idly. A wayward child returning… funny that. "It's not for me to say. And it is also foolish to trust the word of the media, Suigetsu. They were never particularly accurate in my day and they don't seem to have matured much farther than hearsay and gossip even now. If you want to find out the truth, you have to take it from the horse's mouth, so to speak."

"You mean… Go ask someone? You kidding, right? They'd torture me to get to you, yanno."

"Oh yes, I suppose they would," Orochimaru was smiling faintly. Suigetsu couldn't see it, but he could hear it in his damn voice, the bastard. "What a pity. I suppose you'll have to stay here."

"Whatta surprise," Suigetsu groused. "You ain't ever going back, are ya?"

The look Orochimaru levelled at his assistant (Suigetsu couldn't be his prodigy or his protege, he simply wasn't at the level of Sasuke or of Kabuto) was one that could have caused mountains to bow. It wasn't a look he often aimed at the Kiri-nin, but when he did, he was sure he felt the other evaporate just a little.

"I might be old, Suigetsu-kun." Orochimaru said. "But I am not senile. That little copycat of mine may have managed to sweet talk his way out of capital punishment, but impressive as it is, my tongue is not as silver-lined as Yakushi's. My judgement will extend to offences far prior to the third ninja war and Danzo's little… clique. I would not be pardoned, even if I weren't executed."

"So we're just gonna stay here and… skulk?"

"You are welcome to leave if you are bored."

"Really?"

"Of course," Orochimaru smoothed the yukata over his chest and swung his long hair to one side. "Though as you say, they'd torture you to get to me so I guess it would be kinder to kill you first."

"Yeah, thought that was a bit too easy," Suigetsu snorted. Orochimaru shrugged in response but said nothing further and the room fell into the usual tentative silence that stretched between the two when Orochimaru jokingly threatened Suigetsu's life, and Suigetsu either followed it up with a complimentary quip or just simply stopped complaining. Rather than prattle, he continued to peruse the lines of garments instead, taking note of the more ornate ones and their placement among the lesser, plainer pieces. After a while, he became intrigued by the way that they were grouped and wondered if Orochimaru had ordered them by age, or region - though he was certain he could recognize some of the Earth's geometric patterns against the Kiri's waves and water
flowers. And some very old silks were placed next to synthetics, so neither category worked.

"Are these just..." He gestured vaguely. "...put in here randomly? Or-"

"By order of importance." Orochimaru replied.

"Like... who wore them?"

"No. Personal importance. All the articles in here, be they kimono, yukata, haori, jinbaori - well, the list goes on - all of them mean something. They are art, not just clothing. They have importance to me. Some more so than others."

"You kinda sound like that guy Deidara there. Yanno... talking about art."

"A subject that is surely beneath such a connoisseur of swordcraft." Orochimaru shot back. Suigetsu had the sense to blush at the very least.

"Ok, ok... Well... how about those ones?" Suigetsu pointed to a rack positioned at the far wall of the room, away from the rest. It was met at each end by two low tables, groaning under the weight from piles of folded fabrics and trim and was backed by a curtain of velvet. "Those the most important? They look fancy."

"Not fancy, just... precious." Orochimaru glanced over at the collection as though seeing them for the first time and nodded faintly. "Those are the pieces that I commission or make myself. They are to remind me of... important things that I've lost."

Lost. Oh. Suddenly aware he was bordering on dangerous territory, Suigetsu eased back a little, wondering how he could make some sort of polite excuse and get the hell out of there before he pissed off the boss. Maybe he should just deconstruct and slip away along the grout in the floor before the sannin got angry - hide out until the storm that was Orochimaru's temper passed. Apparently the snake had nothing on Sasuke's ire, but Suigetsu would be the first to admit that while he'd found Sasuke pretty startling on a bad day, he'd never seen anything worse than Orochimaru on a rampage. The thought alone was chilling enough to frost the sweat on his skin.

But Orochimaru merely drifted over to the rack, offering Suigetsu a cursory wave of the hand, which could usually be interpreted as a type of beckoning, and so the other simply joined him.

"L-lost?" Suigetsu repeated, treading carefully. "As in... died?"

"Certainly not. Death isn't the only form of loss that exists. Some of these-" and Orochimaru motioned to a few as he spoke. "Are... well I suppose they have been made in memorandum more than anything. These ones are from the bodies I have taken over the years. Though I have their mortal form, I respect the fact that their soul must leave something behind in the world. Therefore I have a garment constructed in the memory of each. A snake sheds her skin to be born anew...these are to honor those who allowed me that ability."

How... oddly sentimental. Suigetsu nodded, approvingly. "Guess it's better than a rack of people-skins..."

"Yes." Orochimaru answered, again with insurmountable patience. Suigetsu was, if anything, earnestly blunt. "It is far preferable to human hides. The aesthetic is all wrong."

"Ew."

"Now these," Orochimaru ignored him, rather inspired by his own explanations. "Were made to
honor a few childhood friends - most of which were killed in attacks on the village in the early stages of the war. These- " A pair of pretty, white and lavender kimono in the thinnest silk were eased forward. Thin as petals… or perhaps shed snakeskin. "Are a memorial for my parents."

"They're… real nice." Suigetsu offered, keeping his hands firmly by his sides. No way in hell was he touching these, he knew better than that. His eyes drifted over the collection, then rested on the piles of fabric. "So those are ones you're gonna make?"

There seemed to be a number of colours present, all with numbers pinned to them. Suigetsu frowned at the group of crimson, green and gold that had an expensive-looking white pelt included in the bundle, but the huge amassment of purple, charcoal, white and red was abundantly clear. That one was for Sasuke. Did that mean he was over him? Or was this yet another distraction to stop that felonious want?

"Yes." Orochimaru answered, then continued, almost as though he was talking to himself. Suigetsu head bobbed numbly as he half listened, half explored for himself, when one piece suddenly caught his eyes. It was one that seemed so very different from the rest. Something Smaller. Shinier. He pointed at a hanger.

"What's this one?"

"Ah... " Orochimaru cocked his head to one side, perturbed. He plucked the hanger from the rack and held up the kimono to inspect, humming curiously. It was small, but that might have just made it ornamental. It was decorated lavishly in gold and silver thread and while that what eye-catching enough, it was the patterns that really attracted Suigetsu's attention. Rather than simple, effective geometrics or recognizable pictorial elements, the decoration was that of intricate whorls and lines - patterns so dense and confusing he couldn't begin to understand where one end began and another finished.

"What… what is that?" Suigetsu breathed, one finger reaching out, if not to touch then to follow the labyrinthine interlace of line that dove and crested each other, passing in and out of larger shapes. "This from Kawa or something?"

"No," Orochimaru said, eyeing the garment wistfully. "North, actually. Very, very far North. So far, you wouldn't recognize the land, nor the people who lived on it."

"The people?" Suigetsu frowned. "You mean-"

"Once, a long time ago, I was travelling in search of a great snake-"

"Manda?"

"No, even greater than him," Orochimaru smiled. "This one… Well, his name was myth. In fact, there were many names associated with him, accumulated over time, no doubt. I'd only heard rumors of him, whispers of a great serpent in a language much less delicate than our own. A beast of gold and silver." He slipped his fingers under the collar, stroking the fabric, tenderly. ":and blood."

"So… this kimono is for that snake?"

"No. It's for someone who… well… is associated with my journey at that time. Someone I left behind long ago. He was given a different name, one I don't think I can even pronounce very well any more, but it didn't suit him. It was meant for a warrior, a king. But he could never have been that; would never have had the ability. So when I marked his grave, I vowed to give him a different
name - one that might make him as immortal as I. As I wished to become, anyway."

Orochimaru paused for a moment, thoughtfully. Suigetsu might have later noted a strange brightness to his golden eyes - maybe a subtle hitch in his elegant throat, but he wouldn't have mentioned it. Orochimaru's voice was soft for once; possibly even sad.

"I didn't think of it for a long time," he continued. "In fact, it was many years later that I looked upon this little piece again and really thought about it. Perhaps I needed to see if I really could because as immortal as I'd proclaimed."

"What was the name?" Suigetsu asked quietly, watching as Orochimaru held the little kimono up to the lamp, turning it slowly, to let the threads catch the light.

"They called him Conn, but me?" Orochimaru smiled. "I called him Mitsuki."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Orochimaru is sad. Sasuke is trying. Caliga is plotting. Sakura is... working? Chouji is cooking and Shikamaru is trying to repress the memory of kissing Sasuke (note: We haven't covered this yet, but thanks for reminding me). Thanks for the support everyone - hope you enjoyed the chapter!
You want a revelation,
You wanna get it right
But it's a conversation,
I just can't have tonight
You want a revelation, some kind of resolution-

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Konoha, 12th March
Year of the Hare

He said he was fine as she led him away from the door.

He said he was fine when she offered him some water.

He said he was fine when she asked if he wanted some space and told him that she'd be in the next room if he needed her. All he had to do was say. All he had to do was nod, or gesture or give any slight indication at all that he didn't want to be or couldn't be alone and she'd be there.

It was then that Sasuke realized the level of respect he'd developed for Tsunade. He'd come to her as an enigma, a tattered miscellany of secrets and confidentialities that had rotted and festered and grown over the parts that were himself so much, he could rarely tell his own thoughts from those he'd been conditioned to respond to over so many years following his broken ambitions. Tsunade knew this and Tsunade let it be. And slowly, as some secrets became so toxic that even a veteran sufferer like himself could not hold them in any longer, Tsunade acknowledged them with grace. Listened with such careful, empathetic poise as to allow Sasuke to keep some sense of dignity, and to truly earn his trust. He had not known her well before he came into her care, and he had reached out blindly, somewhat afraid of what was on the other side. Tsunade had exceeded his expectations. Tsunade had been the rock he didn't know he'd needed. She wasn't a mother figure; that wasn't her style, but she was a teacher, a supporter, a caregiver. A friend.

And such a friend. Such a friend that Sasuke suddenly knew there was one secret he could ever tell her, not for his sake, but for hers. He'd mentioned that Caliga used some sort of henge, that was certain. But he'd never mentioned Caliga had worn Naruto's face. He couldn't.

He couldn't tell Tsunade that the boy she loved and valued like a little brother had the same face as the man who had tortured him. Had brutally raped him. He couldn't. He couldn't ever let her see him that way; for all Naruto's many idiocies and countless faults, he wasn't cruel, nor should he ever be ever be associated with cruelty. And if he opened his mouth, if he let loose the secret of why he'd reacted so dramatically to his close encounter with the blond, that would be all that Tsunade would see. She'd never think that it had been Naruto, but the association would be there. The hint of deviancy. The lustful slip of the imagination into horror. He couldn't do that to her; he couldn't do that to Naruto. Sasuke was stubborn and, at times, coldly vindictive when he wanted to be, but he too wasn't cruel. So when Tsunade asked what was wrong, he merely shook his head and closed his eyes, leaning into her as she walked him toward the bedroom.
It was just a turn, he said. He'd tripped and that had startled him. And he hated to look startled in front of Naruto, so the whole thing had blown out of proportion.

She nodded. She understood.

Sasuke felt sick from the lie, but he simply sat himself down on his bed and announced that he'd nap for a while. Perhaps try a little of the leftovers later. He was fine. He promised. And that seemed to please her enough that she let him alone. His eyes followed her as she left the room and he let out a slow breath as the door closed behind her. He hadn't been prepared. If he had, things might have been different. He would have had backup plans, tertiary plans. He would have built a wall as he'd done so many times in the past, hidden his fears behind bricks made of a false sense of security. He'd have at least psyched himself up - if he had a knack for anything, it was his own ability to talk himself into things. He'd had built his defenses and found ways to help himself block the memory of Caliga - push the bastard to the back of his mind and keep his thoughts clear. He'd seen Naruto once and completely freaked out, but he was better now, he'd had time. He'd found… he'd found safety now….

Caliga wasn't Naruto. He wouldn't let Caliga be Naruto. They were so different that Sasuke felt ridiculous for becoming confused in the first place, it was just his fear that had gotten in the way. Now he needed to surpass that fear. He needed to find a way to speak around the pain clogging his throat. He needed to because he wanted to talk. They had to talk. He'd never felt the need to communicate so strongly before, but now that it was in him, infecting him, growing within him like the child that slowly pushed him out of shape, he couldn't let it be. He had to speak because he'd been wrong. Naruto had stolen much from him; he'd damaged him so severely Sasuke wasn't even sure that if he were able to shift all of the broken layers the same person he once knew would be underneath. Naruto's actions had allowed Caliga to take him, for the Kakkou to change him, for Mikoto to grow inside him.

But Naruto wasn't the real catalyst; Sasuke was. Naruto had been defending his own - his life, his village, the hope he had left for his friend - Sasuke had been the one attacking. And while he didn't consider his position as any shade of fraudulent, he did acknowledge the fact that his genjutsu - his hypnotic suggestion, his stolen journey and his exploitation of Naruto's closest thoughts and weaknesses - was the harbinger of his downfall. He was the one trying to prove himself; he was the one trying to be right. Their fight had been long past the point of one-upmanship, had travelled well past a spat of sibling rivalry. The gloves hadn't just come off, their knuckles were bare bloody masses of truth and pain, the breath that moved their bruised, broken ribs was one exhale away from cries of heartache and injustice.

Sasuke had to kill Naruto not because Naruto was stronger, but because Naruto was the only person who could stop him. The only person who could say no. Sasuke had to kill Naruto because if he transitioned into what he knew he must become, then there would have to be nothing in the world that could ever draw him back. He'd been standing on the same precipice as his brother, yet his resolve surpassed Itachi's. He had not fashioned himself an out. He had not left his belief in others behind as an inheritance of pure will, simply because he had formed no true belief in others. Itachi had faith in the village he loved; Sasuke had only ever been let down by everyone he had ever loved. Sasuke had lost everything in the world that had ever meant anything to him at all and the world had simply responded by upping the ante time and time again. It destroyed the slim comfort he'd allowed himself for the small window of time he'd been part of team seven. It had shredded the bonds that had once threatened to heal him. So he'd chosen to strip emotion away entirely. To leave pain behind. To be numb.

Naruto threatened that loss of feeling. Naruto sought to balm that bruised flesh. For Naruto had to stop Sasuke, not to prove himself the better fighter, not to be the more powerful ninja. Not to fulfill
a promise or win a bet or avenge Konoha's honor, no. No. Naruto had to stop Sasuke because Naruto loved Sasuke. He loved him. More than he could admit; more than he could acknowledge or even fathom. It was so pure it hurt. Sasuke knew that when he pulled away and broke everything, he'd ruined something perfect. It hurt.

Naruto loved him. Had loved him. But now there was guilt and fear and that feeling, that perfect, honest, warm feeling to which he'd let himself nearly surrender inside that dream? Well, that was gone. Sasuke knew he'd never be able to get it back. Not even if Naruto forgave him.

He didn't remember checking on Mikoto. Didn't remember singing to her dazedly before he curled into a ball on his bed and burrowed into the blankets around him. He didn't remember falling into a heavy slumber that sank his limbs and rounded his breath. He just did. Everything that was Sasuke had flown from him in that moment; he was a shell. He had nothing but an empty carcass and sleep and that was all. His own inner turmoil had short circuited everything. Sasuke Uchiha had, for a short amount of time, completely shorted out.

It was long into the night when he woke again, himself again, discomforted as his passenger fidgeted inside him - a regular thudding that Sasuke quickly interpreted as hiccups and slowly, tiredly pushed to his feet in order to lull the child back to sleep. Hands on his stomach - an action he rarely pulled in public - he rubbed his belly in large, languorous circles, his eyes half lidded, lips moving as he muttered to himself quietly.

It took a few moments for him to sense the person watching him, but despite his lack of chakra Sasuke's intuition was still as sharp as ever. More programming than a reliance on his resonance with ninshu. He drew to a slow halt, making sure to keep his eyes forward while his ears trained for any sound - anything to give the other away. They were outside, possibly on the windowsill. Their perch was precarious, but it appeared they were used to such a position and had no problem maintaining their balance. A ninja, then. There was a slight hitch in their breath from the cold, but whilst they were quiet, it really didn't seem as though they were trying to hide.

He kept the light off and moved across the room, silent as his cumbersome form would allow. When he reached the window he inhaled slowly. If Caliga had wanted him, Caliga would have come and taken him, closed window or no. He could be canny as he could be psychotic, and simply waiting for Sasuke to open a window three stories up a building nestled in the heart of a fortified village didn't really seem particularly Caliga-like at all. Not after everything he'd been through. Not after all this time.

And besides, after a few subtle calculations, Sasuke was almost one hundred percent certain of his visitor's identity. He didn't even need a moment to second guess as he pushed open the window a little and sighed heavily.

"Figured Kakashi told you to stop stalking me from across the street."

It wasn't an informed observation, but it seemed viable enough. As it was, Naruto coughed weakly and shifted a little from under the guttering above.

"How'd you know?"

"Despite your boasting, you're actually textbook in surveillance, Uzumaki." Sasuke said, as though it explained everything. "When you want to do it right, anyway."

"Whaddaya mean 'do it right?!'"

"And you're prone to thinking that creepy antics are honorable, despite appearing inherently flaky
Naruto cringed, blushing furiously. Sasuke could have sworn he felt the heat of it in the gloom.

"It… it wasn't that creepy. I was worried, that's all. Just… Just wanted to keep an eye on you."

The instinctive I don't need your help settled on Sasuke's tongue, but he swallowed it back, tasting bitterness. He did need help. He really did. And he would be stupid to deny Naruto the opportunity to contribute, no matter how much it stung his pride. To afford himself the stubbornness of his youth was to deny everything he'd been through; everything he'd learned. While Naruto still rubbed him up the wrong way by default, Sasuke couldn't push him aside anymore.

So he shrugged and said, "whatever," which was about as affable as he got at two o'clock in the morning. He didn't look up though. He couldn't. Not yet. Naruto shifted on his perch, his sandals scuffing quietly on the wooden wall, chakra soundlessly throbbing beneath the soles of his feet as it glued him in position. He crossed his arms over his chest.

"Sorry," he said in a small voice. Sasuke leaned sideways against the window frame. He didn't need to ask what the sorry was for.

"It doesn't matter."

"You always say that." Naruto mumbled, gazing at his knees. "It matters to me."

"Hn."

"After… after what happened, you know that I…. You know I-"

"I know." Sasuke closed his eyes. He knew Naruto wouldn't blame him. Perhaps, for a while he might have, but after the war, after learning so much, blame became entirely subjective.

"Do you?" Naruto said. "I mean… I guess you would. Considering you saw everything-"

"I don't want to talk about that right now." Sasuke cut him off, curtly. Then he sighed, anticipating Naruto's tendency to bristle and throw back some half-baked excuse or retort that made him appear less embarrassed, and added: "Not at two in the morning."

"I.. yeah. I know. I know. I wasn't gonna," Naruto explained. "I wasn't. And um… Sorry. Sorry… I know you said come tomorrow, but you… Y'know, the way you reacted and… and um… I just... I just wanted to… check."

"Check?"

"Yeah. Check that you were… um. OK. I guess."

He couldn't stay away. He just couldn't. Even with the invitation to visit the next day; even with that allowance from Sasuke, he couldn't stay away. Something warm blossomed inside Sasuke's chest. Something that came from the little pause between were and um. He licked his lips that were, for some reason, strangely dry.

"You said that already," he pointed out. "But… yeah. Thanks."

Sasuke could feel the air settle around him and he listened for a moment, drinking in the sounds of night around them, the frogs rasping in the forest beyond, the electricity humming through the wires that laced through the streets, the rise of their chests as they breathed in the cool winter air.
Sasuke had to admit, he'd never felt particularly calm around Naruto before, but here and now it was quiet. Peaceful. Sort of.

Until Naruto swallowed again. The bob in his throat could almost be heard echoing down the street it was so quiet and when he spoke again, his voice was low, husky.

"Sasuke?"

"Mm?"

"How come I scared you?"

Oh. Oh right. That. Sasuke had been counting the moments until that little, innocent question came up. The thought of it made him nervous - even the memory of his reaction served as a trigger and forced a shiver skittering down his spine while nausea rose thickly against his tongue. It was a simple, honest question but it was because of that, Sasuke found it too hard to digest. He knew Naruto was looking down at him, but he couldn't meet his eye. He didn't want to look at that face, that damn face. The face that loved him, the face that hurt him. That face. He couldn't deal with that face right now. What if he reacted again? He might. Caliga always sat so close to him, right up at the tide line. The product of his torture lay in Sasuke's stomach, his scars marred his flesh and his thoughts. The only way he could protect himself was by keeping it a secret. If he kept it close and silent, it wouldn't have the air to live. It would die with him, this. And Naruto would never have to know.

Without thinking about it, Sasuke's hands fell to his stomach again and he looked down. Fear bobbed on the horizon. Pain and guilt floated close behind, all drifting along the deep riptides carved by Sasuke's frighteningly established PTSD. Years ago, something like that little question would have been crushed under a tirade of bitter jealousy and cold resentment. He might have laughed in Naruto's face, might have charged a bolt of chidori, might have, would have, definitely, denied it. Scared? Him? Never. Never!-

-years ago. The Sasuke of this night just closed his eyes, letting his brows sink down, his breath flow over his lips slowly. Evenly. He said:

"You don't need to know."

"I don-"

"You don't want to know." Sasuke corrected himself. "You don't. You might think you do, but you don't."

"Sasuke-"

"Can you give me that?" Sasuke replied, quietly. "Can you just, for once, not hunt for answers. Not pull me apart. Can you not make this a goal or… or whatever. Just believe me when I tell you, you don't want to know. It happened. That's the end of it."

"Ok."

That was unexpected. Sasuke felt a subtle hint of surprise idling under the bridge of his frown. Naruto could be agreeable, yes, but not when it involved something he really wanted. And certainly not when he wasn't getting his way. That when double when Sasuke was involved. He knew that a simple agreement wasn't really going to satisfy the Jinchuuriki for long, but he'd not punch a gift horse in the mouth, not when Naruto really seemed to be on his best behaviour. Either he was reining himself in for Sasuke's benefit, or someone had bullied him into it, neither could be certain.
"Would it happen again?" Naruto went on. Sasuke bit his lip and pushed his hair out of his eyes.

"I don't know," he lied, hoping that the next time he'd catch it first. Hide it better. Make nothing of it.

"Oh."

He knew those eyes were on him. He could feel them; bright as the stars. He waiting for another impatient prod. Like clockwork, naruto opened his mouth again. Breathe. He needed to breathe, he needed to-

"Sasuke?".

"How many… times-" breath. Swallow. Breathe, ",you gonna say my damn name, Uzumaki?"

"You're right." Naruto said. "You're right. I haven't learned. I know that. I um… I've done some things different for a while now. Kakashi… kinda taught me a few things and Tsunade was all kinda in my face about public speaking and those two old goats were trying to…what'd they say? Groom my public image or something but… but when you got here. When you're here… I just fall back into old habits. Like I was having a dream and if I remembered things too much, I'd wake up. So… You're right… But maybe… maybe you'll see I've learned a bit too…"

"Because this is about you," Sasuke said, asserting his earlier comment. Naruto's jaw snapped shut, audibly. Well…Seemed he'd at least recognized he'd made the same mistake. Sasuke closed his eyes and let out a long breath. "But I understand; the way you think is the way you are. You never change."

"Guess not." Naruto admitted. "Guess I haven't. Well, I have a bit… in the way I… um… feel. About you." He slid down a little further, now resting in line with the windowsill. He breathed plumes of cold air, but despite that, seemed to literally bleed warmth. "Sasuke there's… there's so much I wanna tell you. And I wanna know… everything. I wanna know what happened but… But I also get why you don't wanna tell me."

"No you don't." Sasuke rubbed his face. "You don't, Naruto. That's your problem. That's what I keep telling you."

Naruto thought for a moment. "I'm fucking this up well and good, aren't I?"

"Looks like you finally understood something."

"'Kay." Naruto said, resigned. "Well, since I'm so far down the shit track already but you're still here listening, guess I'm just gonna tell ya that I'm… I'm happy you're back. Real happy. I know I said it before, but I mean it. I really do."

"Uzumaki…"

"Well, I'm not… you know… happy about the reasons and the situations and all… Cos I don't know anything about all that, cos even if I do I know I don't, y'know?"

"What?"

"Yeah. Guess that sounds crazy." Naruto let out a little, embarrassed laugh. Sasuke hadn't realized how much he'd missed it. "Still, I'm… I'm happy you're home. That's all. Just… That's it. S'all I'm gonna say."
He used the wrong terms and made the wrong assumptions at every opportunity. But still Sasuke had to admit, the integrity was there.

"Fine," was all he could really say. He could have flared up, could have chided naruto for celebrating the fact that he had been uprooted from his mission so brutally. Could have laughed in Naruto's face for his pettiness, his weakness. He could have told him that once the baby was born he would leave. Threatened to give the children over to the state and free himself from the responsibility and the pain they induced. He was an Uchiha; he had no family, he needed no one. He was an avenger. He was a force of resilience, of change.

But that was all bullshit now and Sasuke knew it. Everything had changed and he had to accept that. He wasn't the facilitator, he was just like everyone else - things changed and he was forced to move along with them. Maybe Naruto had changed too; maybe he was that one who didn't understand.

Sasuke looked up then, finally, braving a glance at the boy who claimed to be a friend. He was surprised to find Naruto wearing black rather than his traditional orange, with slim dark jeans replacing his drill shorts. In the time between his first meeting at Sasuke's door and his night visit, he'd showered - his hair was damp and heavy, which seemed to tame the fluffy spikes somewhat. He wore fingerless gloves and canvas sandals rather than leather. His expression was solemn, which, unknown to Naruto, made him look so much more like his father.

Naruto noticed Sasuke examining him and smiled a little.

"We still ok for tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

"Even though I broke the rules?"

Sasuke snorted. "I didn't make any."

"Ten-topper still sells that #2 parchment you like, I'll bring some. And some pens and stuff." Naruto stroked his chin, feigning contemplation. He did it so obviously sasuke didn't have the heart to call him out. "Need anything for… Um...uh..."

"Mikoto." Sasuke relented. "No. She's covered."

"Her names Mikoto?" Naruto brightened.

"That's what I said."

"It's nice! It's a nice name. Sounds familiar…"

"Probably pretty common," Sasuke replied, shortly. He didn't feel like making that emotional bridge yet. Mikoto was just Mikoto for the moment, not an Uchiha heir. Not his mother's granddaughter and namesake. He shook his head. "I have to check on her. You probably woke her."

"Oh." Naruto said in a whisper that was about as loud as his normal voice. "Sorry."

"Doesn't matter." Sasuke backed up a little, then waiting as Naruto seemed to be rallying the nerve to say something else. No, to ask something.

"Hey, um… I know it's… Well, it's prob'ly outta line but… Would it be ok… I mean...C-can I..?"
See her. He wanted to see her. Of course, that was right, Naruto hadn't met Mikoto yet. He probably hadn't even noticed her at the hearing; if he did, he hadn't put any stock in it. Now it had finally sunk in that Sasuke had a daughter. A child of Sasuke's own flesh and blood. And extension of himself, somewhat, which meant that this new Uchiha addition was surely under the automatic protection of the Uzumaki, whether Sasuke wanted it or not. Sasuke tried not to choke as he swallowed. Naruto wanted to come in. He'd be in his room, close to his daughter, to the one thing he'd started to put above anything else in the world.

He laid a hand over his heart, trying to stop it beating so hard before he simply nodded a little. He had to do this. There was a kunai under his pillow. Tsunade was a wall away. He had to do this. This was Naruto, this was-

"Don't be noisy."

"I won't." Naruto climbed into the room and tiptoed theatrically across the floor. Sasuke stood beside the crib, one hand on the wooden slats, and reached in to adjust her blanket as Naruto approached. His eyes on the blond, he whispered.

"She's stirring."

"Will she cry?" Naruto murmured, his eyes transfixed on Mikoto's small face. He watched as her expression crumpled, then relaxed.

"Probably not."

"Is she having a bad dream?" Naruto frowned as Mikoto's features morphed fluidly through a number of expressions. Sasuke shrugged.

"Gas, more like."

The grunt was predetermined (Naruto's sense of humor had never risen much further out of the gutter, not even with his social responsibilities) and, smiling, Naruto leaned over the edge of the cot and let his fingers drift over the fabric of Mikoto's grey and orange onsie.

"She's beautiful," Naruto breathed. It didn't seem like the right word for him to say - Naruto was more of a "pretty" or "cute" kind of guy. But Mikoto was a very, very handsome baby - even Sasuke couldn't deny she'd inherited some of her grandmother's charm and her uncle's good looks. He would not admit that he possessed either.

"Mm," was all Sasuke could reply. She was beautiful. But the way Naruto said it just sort of cemented it. Sasuke looked away from his daughter, back to Naruto's face and suddenly everything just seemed to stop. It wasn't the way Naruto was smiling or the gentleness of his finger tousling Mikoto's dark hair that. It wasn't his warmth or his smell or the way that he seemed to chuckle under his breath when she burbled at him and rolled over messily, her dark eyes opening a crack.

It was the way he was looking at her. An expression Caliga could never have pulled, not even if he had everything he wanted in the world, all the heirs, all the power, all the Uchiha that ever were, Caliga could never have looked at any of them like this.

That was when Sasuke knew he couldn't be afraid of Naruto any longer. That was when the fear began to lessen - not melt away, nor disappear, it wasn't that magic a revelation. But it was something Sasuke could count on. He knew that look was just for him; he'd seen it before. Sasuke's genjutsu might have conjured false children, a false relationship, a life that was a lie.

But Naruto had breathed every word of it. Found peace within that lie and brought it back with
him. Was that how he could be here, talking to Sasuke? Saying he was happy that Sasuke was back? That he still had feelings for him? Was that how? Because he could still look at him like a friend. And he could look at his daughter like…

...like a father.

Perhaps not a father by blood, but the link was there. The want to protect, the will to love. It was there. Even in this small patchwork square of a moment, it was there.

Sasuke hadn't felt so light in a long time.

"She's named after her Grandmother," he admitted, quietly.

"Then it's the best name ever." Naruto's grin softened. He turned to look at Sasuke, his thousand-watt eyes a deeper blue than before, inexplicably. "Bet your mom would have loved her."

"I have to get her back to sleep," Sasuke said, feeling rooted to the spot. "She won't nap if I don't."

"Mm… kay." Naruto was moving *how the hell could he move?* And stopped at the window to give Sasuke another dismantling smile. "I'll see you tomorrow then?"

He left so easily. How he could shift his feet off the floor, Sasuke had no idea. But the pain had rolled away somewhat and the stifling, gripping fear had abated. He coughed.

"Whatever," he said to Naruto's disappearing form, taking a few steps back toward the window to close it. He watched as the blond shot like a silver arrow into the night, leaping across building tops like they were stepping stones in a pond. Sasuke felt the jealousy for that freedom and ability tug at his heart, but his envy was quickly forgotten when he felt the weight of two small eyes on his back and turned to see Mikoto awake and silent in her cot. She was staring past him through the bars, her eyes trained to the sky beyond her mother's shoulder. Sasuke nodded at her.

"Yeah," he smirked a little. "Figured you'd like him too."

In the next room, Tsunade gently tucked her kunai back into her sleeve and slowly moved away from the window. Naruto posed no threat, of course, but one could never be too careful.

Likewise, Pakkun turned around a few times on the blanket that was hidden under an overturned barrel across the street from Sasuke's window. After a few moments pacing, his comms unit cracked and Akino assured him Naruto had safely returned home to his apartment and was throwing together some packet ramen for a snack. Pakkun signed off, waited until he heard the window close, then rested his head on his paws and returned to sleep.

One could never be too careful.

*You can't choose what stays and what fades away.*

__Konoha, 13th March__
__Year of the Hare__

"He did what?"

"I… I told you, Ma'am. He invited the Mizukage to Konoha and-"

"And she's on her way? What, now?"
"I believe she left immediately after speaking with the Hokage, Ma'am. That was yesterday afternoon."

"He left a whole evening before telling me. Typical" Tsunade clicked her tongue before leaning back on the futon, adjusting her robe as she did. It was too early for this bullshit. Too early for any bullshit, regardless of its specification. Her guest, the mild-mannered greyhound Uhei, flicked a bandaged ear, sympathetically.

"I'm sorry the news upsets you, Ma'am."

"Upsets me? This is Mei we're talking about. This is the Mist." Tsunade shook her head. "The Bloody Mist. They might have shrugged the moniker after the Fourth was taken out, but their attitude's still pretty shifty."

"According to the latest popularity charts, Terumi-sama has been registering very high in positive votes." Uhei said. "She has always made a good impression as an ambassador."

"And last time she met Sasuke, she tried to melt him." Tsunade replied, flatly. Uhei took a drink from the water dish that had been kindly provided for him and licked his chops.

"Again, I'm apologize Ma'am, I'm just the messenger. My sources tell me that the party travelling from Kirigakure will arrive in Konoha late today, if not first thing tomorrow. Apparently the wind has been in their favor."

"Your sources? Who was that, a seagull?" Tsunade snorted, then shook her head as the ninken offered her a sympathetic look. Or at least something that she figured was something of the like, she wasn't well versed in dogs. "Fine. Alright. Thank you. I'll make sure Sasuke's briefed. Although I'm not sure what Mei would want with him. It's not like her to come alone…. Unless the rest of the Allied Council already knows?"

"I'm not at liberty to say, Ma'am."

"Of course you're not." Tsunade rolled her eyes.

"But," Uhei continued. "I do have something for Sasuke. If that's alright? A little gift from us from us Team Kakashi Ninken". He reached into jacket and pulled out a little parcel, nudging it onto the table with his nose. The state of the wrapping was a clear indicator that the dogs had done it themselves, which made the whole offering a rather messy but entirely charming gesture. Tsunade wondered if it was a bone. It was rather shaped like one.

"Thanks," she said. "I'll make sure he gets it."

The ninken dismissed himself, vanishing in the usual cloud of summoning smoke, which Tsunade fanned aside with her hand, coughing a little. It was still quite early, too early for guests, but she could hear Sasuke stirring in his room and wondered if he'd been able to get back to sleep after Naruto's interruption. He really did need to stop with these midnight visits, although keeping the two apart was not something Tsunade condoned to any degree.

She yawned and stretched her spine, rising to drift over to the kitchenette and start some water boiling for a fresh cup of tea. Chouji had left a plate of fried eggplant and chicken, as well as some homemade pickles and miso, which would all make a good breakfast with some rice. She was in the middle of heating some oil on the stove to refresh the meat and vegetables when Sasuke padded into the kitchen, carrying a sleepy-looking Mikoto on his hip. He gave Tsunade his usual cursory nod before helping himself to a cup of tea.
"Sleep alright?" Tsunade asked, tentatively. Sasuke shrugged in response, which was usually about all he had the energy for in the morning. "I forgot to tell you, I picked up some books yesterday. Thought you might be interested."

"Don't I have the councillor?" Was the dry response. Tsunade turned the eggplant fritters over.

"I told you, you don't have to do anything or go anywhere for a while. Kakashi's been very responsive to the newspaper stepping out of line like that."

"You mean he wants to stop me being seen." Sasuke replied. "He wants to control the situation."

"That's not a bad thing necessarily-"

"I never said it was," Sasuke interrupted, sipping at his tea. "What's this about the Mizukage?"

Tsunade exhaled forcibly. She hadn't expected any less.

"She'll be here in Konoha within a day or two. Never knew a kage to move that fast without motivation so doubtless it's about you."

"Hn."

"I'll try my best to find some way to keep her at bay, but I'm not too sure what legal hurdles I can lean on for long. I'll get Shizune looking into som-"

"Don't bother." Sasuke said, bouncing Mikoto a little. "She won't buy it." And he wouldn't hide. He knew the Kage wouldn't be far away once the story had hit the papers. It was only a matter of time. "This was expected."

"Yeah, well… if she tries any melting business… If I catch a whiff of acid-"

"Mmm…" Sasuke seemed to ignore her, instead he raised his chin toward the parcel on the coffee table. "What's that?"

"Gift from… Er… Kakashi's ninken. Forgot that one that came around…"

"Big; small; fluffy?" Sasuke listed, moving over to place Mikoto on the floor while he picked up the parcel and turned it over in his hands. "Crazy eyes?"

"Bandages up his neck. Short fur…" Tsunade frowned. "Long nose-"

"Uhei." Sasuke told her. "Hn. 'From all of the Kakashi Ninken: welcome home, Sasuke'," he read and raised his brows.

"Polite of them."

"They always were. Better manners than their master, that's for sure." Sasuke said, opening the present. It was a rattle. It was shaped like a bone. Relatively tacky, but sweet nonetheless.

"Oh look," Tsunade made a face. "A… bone rattle. Well, they're dogs, I guess."

"They're ninja," Sasuke corrected her, frowning at the ribbon that was wrapped haphazardly around the handle of the toy. "They're not just dogs." He let the wrapping fall to the floor which was most appreciated by his daughter, and sat down on the couch, slowly. Turning the rattle over in his hands a few times, he pinched one end of the ribbon and carefully unravelled it. After a moment, he cleared his throat.
"Tsunade, if you can do anything about the situation, do this: get the Mizukage here. Alone. I want to speak with her alone if I can."

"Are you sure that's wise?" Tsunade switched off the rice cooker and the gas and leaned peered over the counter at her charge. "I mean, I might be able to, especially if the elders don't know about it yet, but."

"A clan representative is able to request a meeting with the Kage. I know that. My father used to do it occasionally. I am the head of the Uchiha at the moment, so I'm doing just as I can. And considering that these are the Hokage apartments anyway, we're still on Government ground so it's not a private matter." Sasuke said. "Bring her here. I'll speak with her."

"May I at least ask why before I put you and your children in danger of marbling the floorboards." Tsunade asked patiently. "What's with the sudden penchant for all the social niceties?"

"Hn, if you mean the nine, they invited themselves," Sasuke replied, wryly. "But for Terumi, well. I'm not afraid of the Mizukage. In fact, I'm pretty sure Kakashi's got her here first for a reason."

"Yes, she's less of an asshole than A and Ohnoki, that's a given," Tsunade frowned. "That doesn't make her any better though. She still tried to kill you."

"And if she had really gotten in my way, I'd have done the same. I did threaten the Kages, Tsunade, that's one of the main reason I'm being handled like an explosive tag set to detonate. I'm not going to sit here and feign innocence when we both know that in the eyes of the public, I have much to answer for."

"That's never bothered you before."

"It still doesn't. It's just something to be aware of," Sasuke explained, threading the ribbon between his fingers. "Will you open this for me?"

"What?" Tsunade frowned. Is that ribbon-"

"A summoning scroll." Sasuke said, holding out his hand as Tsunade made her way over to the couch and picked up the thread, gingerly. "Seems to be, from the code it's written in anyway. I can't say I trust Kakashi one hundred per cent, but ninken don't like underhanded methods."

"This is code?"

"It's Ninken code. It's the Horse, Pig, Bull sequence, but you leave your thumbs out of the kata. It's simple."

"Leave out your thumbs?"

"Dogs don't have them, therefore they don't summon with them." Sasuke explained as though it were obvious. Tsunade snorted.

"You're surprising on so many levels, Uchiha-kun," she said, before linking her fingers and charging her chakra. In seconds the binding on the summon cracked, releasing the contents of the scroll onto the table. Sasuke reached out and took a set of plain manila folders in hand, eyes narrowing as he opened one, skimming the contents. Tsunade brushed the remnants of the ribbon out the way. "What is it?" she asked. "Dirt on Terumi? Classified documents? A death warrant?"

"Better," Sasuke said, laying the papers on the table and spreading them out to better study them. "It's a full profile. Med records. Family history. Everything."
"That's nothing special. I could have gotten that for you," Tsunade frowned. "That's typical for most political leaders. Those details are handed over to the state once the formal ceremonies and signings are over. It's all pretty standard."

"Exactly." Sasuke said. "Which is what makes it legal ammunition that I am well within my rights to possess and utilize."

"I suppose. As long as you can find something in there." Tsunade shrugged. Sasuke frowned.

"Orochimaru was as mad as they come, but he did have a particularly skill in obtaining, storing and manipulating intel. Kabuto was the same. In fact it was from him, that I received the best advice when it came to understanding what motivates people. I didn't think much of it at the time, manipulation isn't how I like to operate, but now I can see its usefulness."

"What did he say?"

"People are always looking for a connector," Sasuke told her, his finger tapping his chin as he spoke and read at the same time. "No matter how much they dislike another person, or how different they feel they are, they are always looking for some kind of recognizable attribute that will give them grounding. It is then how you present that link that may determine what the other person will do. It's well known that ninja of a high level have the ability to share their thoughts with their opponent before a fight - I've experienced it. But now… Now I have to use a different tactic."

"What, blackmail?" Tsunade raised a brow. Sasuke shook his head and grinned.

"No. Surprise."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you all for your support over this very difficult few weeks, I appreciate your messages and your patience. Please pardon the grammar slip ups and bad spelling if you come across any - I've tried to get this one out as quickly as I could, lest something else come along and trip me up. There may be the odd instance that might stall my writing, blocks might sit on my keyboard (cats do as well), but I'm not giving up. Things just get tough sometimes.

See you next chapter. Take care.

Naruto 13th March,
Year of the Hare

Black hair.

Check.

Pale skin.

Check.

Brown eyes...

Naoko looked again. ... or were they black? Blackish brown? There was a squint at the small square of paper in her hand, then another into the haze of Konoha's downtown marketplace. Light caught the particles of dust that lurked in the air causing a jewel-like bokeh effect and masquerading a warmth that certainly wasn't present in the early winter sunlight. Naoko flicked the corner of the paper with an impatient fingernail. Dark, she decided. Dark eyes. Serious eyes. Serious and haunted. A frown pinched the edge of the journalist's brow. She'd obtained the picture via a confidante who worked in public records and while it was almost too old to be of any use, it was still good enough to give her a vague idea of what the Uchiha looked like. It was a small thumbnail, a copy of the original yearbook entry from his academy class and it beheld a tidily dressed young boy of about eight or nine; round-faced but sombre, with a fashionably errant fringe and a penetrating gaze. He looked like the kind of boy who might not so much punch the photographer for persuading him to smile, rather plan a slow, yet untimely death from suspicious causes a few short years in the future. There was a weight in that face. A heaviness in that lack of a smile. Hatred sat intransigent in those young eyes. Pain. And most importantly, guilt - an awful, insidious guilt. It was terrible to see on someone so young. But that was Uchiha Sasuke. At least, that was the Uchiha Sasuke she understood.

In all honesty, she knew about as much as anyone else. Uchiha Sasuke had been part of a doomed clan, tragically murdered by, seemingly, one of their own (and even that fact was only hearsay in the public sphere). He'd been a prodigy at the Academy, had battled Gaara in the open leg of the Chuunin Exams, then... he'd disappeared. Without a trace. There had been reports of him emerging as an international criminal, but that was news for the Shinobi airwaves, it wasn't something that was important enough to earn a public announcement. Ninja disappeared quite a bit - it wasn't really in their nature to be in any kind of limelight. Being visible wasn't a core skill in the profession. But Sasuke's second vanishing after the war had caused ripples within the Shinobi world, enough that the general media knew to report any instances of his subsequent apparitions (and thus most of the red tops had turned him into a romantic solitude - an object of curiosity and old-fashioned mystery). But who he actually was any why he was such a big deal remained to be seen. When the Hokage said jump, everyone, including the media, inquired as to the level of the proposed ascension.

How high? Naoko narrowed her eyes as she sipped her coffee and frowned. How high indeed. Her fingers deserted the photograph for favour of a stubby, chewed pencil with which she proceeded to document her notes in a restrained, well-practised shorthand:
Blue high collar shirt and white shorts. 5'6"? 5'7"? Possibly taller. Black hair, tidy. Long fringe. Hitae ate. Looks healthy. Engaging in chit-chat but to who? Hanging around dumpling store, but buys no dumplings. Stands by miso vendor, buys nothing. Always just out of arm's reach of everyone. Where are friends? Where are school mates?

And where was that look, that ghostly, tortured look - the pain that was hidden beneath the briefest respite of composure. The look the boy had; that look was missing. The person she was watching intently - the one who had been identified as Uchiha Sasuke - was standing by the dumpling vendor, several stalls down from where Naoko was seated with her morning coffee. From what she could tell, he may very well have been the real thing. He certainly looked like Sasuke. He wore the Uchiha crest. Apparently his comrades had identified him - hell, she'd heard rumors that the original tip had come from one of his classmates themselves! He certainly seemed good enough for everyone else… But something was off. It wasn't the way he dressed or the way that he looked. It wasn't anything to do with the way that he smiled or nodded in greeting, or even the way he walked down the street. It wasn't even the simple matter of his abrupt return to the village, to a system that had (allegedly) marked him as a wanted man. What tickled Naoko's suspicions was how he did all of these things. He spoke, sure, but always just out of earshot. When he did appear to be having a conversation, it didn't seem to be directed toward anyone in particular. He'd been seen in public places several times in the last forty eight hours, but those nuances were always around the end of a street - near a corner or alleyway, near an exit. He was never seen moving in any particular direction; never satisfying any obvious decisions. That look was gone. Naoko had seen faces of survivors before. The pain is never quite gone.

She had a mind to send some birds out, just to see if Kusa or Fumo had anything further to add, but the little piece of paper - the one the Rokudaime had slipped into her pocket - told her to wait. It was a clue, a small but effective detonator, ready to time her patience. The eagerness of discovery and the thrill of espionage tantalized her. She had something the others didn't. She had a step closer than anyone else. She had an address. No, better, it was code for an address. An address that made sense. Rather than the shopping district where he was out in the open and seen by everyone, the little piece of paper mapped out a location well away from the public and far closer to the government buildings and the holding cells and interrogation departments nearby. If rumors were correct, Shinobi law had branded Uchiha Sasuke as a traitor, liable for incarceration - possibly death. Naoko had seen a few interesting legal cases in her time, but she'd never heard of many probational loopholes that allowed shopping trips. And wasn't he supposed to have a child? Where was the kid? Who was looking after it? Like most stories associated with the red tops, it reeked of illegitimacy. But then there was the note. And the meeting. Someone wanted her to know something.

Naoko eased up slowly, her keen eyes following "Sasuke" as he rounded a corner and disappeared out of sight. She'd been following him all morning - each time he moved out of view, he was gone completely. His path, no matter where he went, would always end on a broken trail, there was no clear indicator as to where he left after that. There was no trail; people left trails. One did not have to be trained in the shadow arts to know that.

Shadows the hand continued to write, even though she was standing now. Her notebook lay open in one hand, that marred pencil sightlessly scrawling in the other. Shinobi are all about tricks and shadows. Disappearing acts. Act? That what this is? Why take measures to hide something only the hidden know about? If that guy isn't Sasuke, and Sasuke IS locked up in the gaols, then why create a fake?

Sasuke left and so did she. She left a tip on the table. Generous. Naoko always tipped when she felt she had something; tip for a tip as it were. It had only been a day since Sasuke's proposed "return" to Konoha, but that may as well have been a month in the new media timeline. Yapping mouths
this early were common and expected, the Red Tops were bleeding stones trying to find out more on this delightfully illusive character but the Tribune held. "Proper News" as Naoko's father called it - Proper News was not gossip. Proper news was for the people, gossip was for the easily distracted. There was nothing noble about gossip, it did not treat its audience with respect, nor weighted any significance on intelligence. News was order. News was truth. She wasn't entirely sure she had all the pieces yet and even if she followed the Rokudaime's lead, things may still need to be set in order before she could figure out what to do with them. But she watched as Traci Ueko from the Sun padded after the apparition - camera rather indiscreetly wedged beneath her haori - and as Botsuki Sarano from the Bell Times skittered over to the dumpling vendor and began grilling him with that serious air of his which was a tell revealing his utter confusion and smiled as she made her way slowly down the street away from the town centre.

Gossip was ignorance mongering and Naoko's father would have none of it. Nor would Naoko. And nor, it would seem, would Hatake Kakashi.

Morning came and went with a brief visit from Shikamaru, then Chouji. The former brought with him more medicine from his clan, the latter, bento for lunch, and a fridge load of supplies for dinner. There was miso. Broth. Roasted duck. Vegetables and rice. Small jars filled with handmade pickles and preserves - Chouji knew how to tempt even the palest of palettes like no one else. And the Nara pills were doing wonders for their sickly charge's selective stomach. However, despite the tempting lure of another tabletop battle, or the tantalizing fragrances emanating from the kitchen, Sasuke barely heard either of them. He acknowledged their entry, played a halfhearted game of chess with Shikamaru and graciously accepted a morning snack from Chouji, his attention was captivated by the few slim manila folders by his side. Winning or losing, eating, drinking or half-participating in conversation - nothing seemed to matter to him. His fingers danced over the pages as though reading through the very ink by touch. He would often pause, distracted by a notion that lay abstract in his head until he murmured it soundlessly and bounced his brows as though subscribing or negating the idea. Akamaru whined at him to be polite, but he simply patted the dog's head, absentmindedly, for once forgetting the Ninken's station and was sharply reminded with a bark of displeasure. Mikoto lay on the floor by her mother's feet and rolled back and forth, determined to heft her round little body from her back to her tummy. Occasionally, Sasuke would reach down and set her away from the coffee table, or sometimes put her on her belly himself when she began to kick and grunt in vexation, but otherwise he was rapt.

Later, after Chouji left and Tsunade snored on the couch - victim of the Akimichi's latest culinary triumph and subsequent food coma - there was a knock at the door. Akamaru lifted his head and sniffed their air. With the usual thud of his tail, a shorthand of which Sasuke had become ridiculously familiar, he signed a name. Sasuke frowned. He got to his feet and cautiously padded over to the door. Akamaru whined slightly and put his head on his paws. He didn't say anything this time, but Sasuke could have sworn there was a little sympathy in the response. Sasuke sighed. He was getting soft. Well, softer.

"Sakura," he announced as he revealed her, his fingers gripping the door handle tightly. She had another bag in her hands and that same wretched smile on her face. The fake one. The one that his copy wore, his lukewarm replacement. How she came to adopt it, he'd no idea, but it wasn't the smile he remembered.

"Hi Sasuke," Sakura said. She held out the bag. "Um… I brought a few things-"

"I don't need your help."

"-from the hospital and… and um… put it together with a few. Uh… Personal items," she
euphemized. "Stuff that's easy to forget but... well... Annoying when you don't have it. I-I just remembered always having to remind new mothers to get this stuff so-"

Sasuke didn't know why, but he couldn't help but rankle at the 'm' term Sakura had so easily acquainted with himself. Erroneous, but irritably, he hissed:

"I'm not a woman." It sounded stupid the moment it left his lips and while the statement was true in every aspect bar the physical, he felt all the more aware of his female body because of it. Which only served to baste his chagrin further: he really had no ammunition readied to deal with Sakura that morning and he couldn't help but feel a surge of animosity every time he saw that damn plastic grin.

"N-no, but. Um-"

"Sakura," Sasuke sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "What do you want, exactly?"

"Just to..." Sakura looked at her feet. "I don't know. Be as we were, I guess. You know-"

"As we were?"

"You know, for things to go back to the way they were."

"You're not twelve any more, Sakura. You're a decorated soldier. You're a celebrated surgeon. You've been through a war. Wishing for things to be back the way they were is negating everything that you've been through. You're just as childish as Naruto."

"Why's that childish?" Sakura frowned. "I'm being honest! I just look back on the past fondly, that's all. The way that we-"

"You look on the past fondly, do you?" Sasuke repeated, a dangerous spike in his voice. "I'd wish for that privilege. Can't say there's much fondness that I can recall."

"What? Even in Team Seven?"

"Team Seven was a distraction," Sasuke lied. "And I quit long before things stalled and became stale. I had little use for any of you when it was clear I had better chances of improving elsewhere."

She kept her cool. Sasuke had to admit, he was mildly surprised when Sakura merely shifted her weight and placed the bag on the ground, nodding slowly.

"Y-yeah. Well... I don't think we... got stale but I guess we all needed something different... Orochimaru is pretty amazing. All three Sannin were. I-it's just he was - is - a dangerous criminal. Who wanted your body of all things. I mean, you can't blame us for thinking he'd got you under a trick somehow. Honestly, we thought you were... well," she shrugged. "That you had more pride than that. S-sorry, but-"

"I intended to end him once I'd learned all I could." Sasuke admitted. "I guess that's pride enough."

"End him like you were going to end me?" It was quiet, almost whispered. Sasuke, in all his sourest moments, might have thought she was trying to push the notion of tenderness once again. But she didn't peek up at him from under her bangs, nor did she attempt to appear coquettish. It was a selfish statement, once again, but at least it wasn't dredged in false romanticism. It was real. Still, Sakura wasn't exactly blameless herself, and Sasuke's dignity was still too bruised by her to care much.
"I was going to end a lot of people."

"N-no. No you weren't. You just… You were confused."

"No. I was angry, Sakura. I was angry and I wanted to hurt people. I'm not this Sasuke you've been searching for; I'm not this faulted anti-hero like the ones we used to watch in the cinema. I wasn't going to be saved by a few good deeds and a long, arduous heroic soliloquy. What I had was a bottomless pit, Sakura. I could fill it with as much distraction as I wanted; I could force as much joy and happiness as I wanted upon myself, if I really chose to fool myself. But it would always empty after a while. And I wasn't a fool." Sasuke thought. It gave him the time to stand a little straighter. To narrow his eyes. Then to say:

"Sakura. I acknowledge that you chose to make amends; it doesn't mean I buy it. I don't even know why you thought coming by was acceptable."

"Because I made a mistake!" Sakura blurted out, painfully. "I made a mistake and I was wrong and I just… I just want that to- I want things to be right. I want to make things right. That's all! I was wrong. I was awful! I'm sorry!"

Sasuke looked at her. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry you still feel this way. You should learn to get over things."

"Sasuke-"

"Does apologizing help? Hope it does. It doesn't stop you bugging me, though. It doesn't take away what you did, but hey, if it makes you feel better-"

"Sasuke," Sakura relinquished, faintly. "I… I just don't know what to say."

"Try the truth." Sasuke told her. He didn't speak unkindly, only with a firmness that he'd begun to put in place of his usual vinegar. Her expression clouded in confusion, but he didn't give her the time to dwell. He was right, he didn't have to stand to look at her. She caught him, just before he closed the door and motioned to the bags on the stoop.

"Please. At least take the supplies," she encouraged. "It's just…. Standard stuff; it's useful."

"Whatever," Sasuke said, letting her hook the bag onto his hand. She looked like she was about to respond again, but seemed to think the better of it and disappeared in a cloud of bedeviled muttering.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. Tsunade left for her office as Naruto arrived with Ino and Hinata who, being entirely new to the situation, said roughly two and a half words before disappearing into her bangs. Ino had brought with her sprigs of heather and pine and happily set about arranging them in a large vase, chatting intermittently as she did. Naruto's offering to Sasuke was the requested writing supplies, a small toy frog with button eyes for Mikoto and around a hundred and twenty-five pounds of blond hair, brassy eyes and grin that could power a small city. Both Naruto and Hinata were on their best behavior (though it felt like Hinata's best behavior was her default setting), but despite their initial shyness, they quickly perked up as Mikoto (yawning and sighing from her nap) was brought into the room. Hinata greeted her sweetly - even bowed a little in respect - but Naruto was just thrilled to see her again. He was smitten with her, clearly. He couldn't get over her pudgy cheeks or her curled little fingers. Even the shell of her ear and the tip of her nose was absolutely delightful. And he found it nearly impossible to grasp the fact that she was Sasuke's, despite their physical similarities. She was an Uchiha. She was Sasuke's daughter. Naruto couldn't express his relief ardently enough, but torture, pain and humiliation
notwithstanding, Sasuke had something, someone that was his own. Her conception may have been terrifying, but she had survived and so had she. They had each other. And Sasuke, as far as Naruto could tell, knew it. He held his daughter in his lap and let her greet the guests on her own, watching closely as she stared at Naruto with giant dark eyes. One fist was pressed against her mouth and every now and then a little tongue poked out to grease her chubby knuckles with saliva. Naruto knelt on the floor by Sasuke's feet, entranced. He smiled.

"Hi," he said in a voice that so gentle and strange, Sasuke wondered if he was a doppelganger. "Hi Mikoto. I'm Naruto. Can you say Naruto?"

Mikoto sucked her fingers. Naruto, unabashed, spelled it for her anyway.

"Naruto. Na-Ru-To. Can you say it, little one?"

"She can say 'ba', 'ma' and 'ga'," Sasuke told him, trying to curb the urge to roll his eyes. "Occasionally she alternates vowels, but that's about it."

"'Na-na'?" Naruto wasn't dissuaded. "Can you say 'Na-Na'?"

"Oh let her be, Naruto!" Ino chided gently. "She's still getting used to you. She's just a bit shy, that's all."

"Y-yes," Hinata all but whispered. "Shy. I-I think if you're a little quieter, she'll warm to you. At least, that's what my sister was like..."

Sasuke sighed, shifting the grappling baby on his lap as she bounced and wriggled. He didn't offer her to Naruto. Naruto didn't ask to hold her. His nerves were still sparkling, his hackles charged, and while having Ino and Hinata around definitely helped he couldn't stop himself wrapping a protective arm about his daughter's waist to keep her close to him. He didn't feel comfortable letting her out of his grasp yet - he still hadn't really let anyone care for her out of his sight besides Tsunade or Akamaru. It was painful to even muse that something might happen to her. She was precious. She was his. Yet soon he'd be running out of both hands and stamina. He'd need help. He had decisions to make and this meeting now was the path to one of them. Sasuke breathed in the scent of his daughter's hair and stroked her back. Ino was right, she was playing shy while she received so much attention - it would soon pass. The bashful pretense was crumbling as she became increasingly awed by the strange, marked face in front of her, and every now and again she would flash a dazzling little smile as she tried to figure out whether she liked what she saw or not. Naturally, if she had any of her mother's genes, she would. That was a given.

"Is she ticklish?" Naruto said suddenly. He had found her feet and was slowly moving his finger toward her socked soles. Sasuke shrugged.

"Don't know." She did squirm from time to time, but he'd decided it more from the interaction than sensitively. Naruto stroked her foot lightly anyway and she responded by babbling loudly at him, kicking. Sasuke grinned at that. "Guess she's learning typical responses early."

Naruto continued watching her a while, moving back when she got squirmy enough that Sasuke had to place her on the ground, then he eased down beside her on the mat, and held out toy after toy for her to play with. Having gained a little moxy, she was suddenly happy to show off, cackling hysterically when he started imitating her. Ino, wisely sensing catastrophe (it was Naruto, after all. Beloved, but not exceedingly articulate), joined them, calming the little girl when she started playing with her hair and attempted wrestling the black nest into a top knot. Hinata then took the opportunity to shyly comment on Sasuke's bravery and the relief she felt to have him home. Fishing in her bag, she pulled out an expertly wrapped parcel - her gift for Sasuke's daughter. It was
three pairs of little woolen booties, warm and soft and lined with fleece. Hinata blushed as Sasuke admired them and apologized profusely for their being shop-bought but Sasuke only told her that he wouldn't have known otherwise and that they were a good choice as green was Mikoto's favourite colour. In truth, the baby liked any bright colours, but Sasuke would have said anything to stop that judderbar stammering. He wasn't used to it. He didn't know how anyone could be.

He had to admit, he still found the sudden attention from the rest of the rookie nine rather discombobulating - especially when he was suddenly getting visits from those he'd rarely made eye contact with, let alone talk to. He and Hinata had once shared in a group activity back at the academy as far as he could remember, but it had never resulted in any kind of lasting impression. The Uchiha had little to do with the Hyuga, despite both displaying some of the strongest dojustu in the world. But hers was a powerful house, an established house. To have her here, visiting the son of a disgraced clan - for lack of a better word - that was… curious. To be… glad that he was back? Well, he knew her to be far more polite than her cousin, but perhaps that was just the gentle nature of the Hyuga Main House.

But Sasuke, being Sasuke, treated her the same as he did all his guests - polite toleration peppered with a hidden degree of obstinance that saw him accept his company, but not necessarily like it. Like a cat, he was fine with being somewhat observed as long as he was ultimately left alone. The visitors did not stay long. Naruto, clearly, had attempted to create a situation that would allow him to remain, but his efforts were kaiboshed with swift efficiency by both women and he said his goodbyes as he was marched from the house under the arms of one Hyuga and one Yamanaka.

Dinner was the roasted vegetables and grilled tofu with a tangy sauce. Tsunade took her tea into the lounge and watched Mikoto while Sasuke showered then studied his notes again. It wasn't until the baby had been put down for the night that Sakura returned, this time empty-handed but with an expression that seemed to bear far more integrity than any of the mawkish guilt she had originally defended. In fact, upon answering the door a second time to his repeat offender, Sakura simply looked Sasuke straight in the eye and said:

"I'm a bitch."

"Sakura." It wasn't agreement, anger or surprise. It was just an utterance. Sasuke was almost as impressed at the language as he was of the proclamation.

"I'm a bitch," Sakura repeated, levelly. "I'm an asshole. That's why I did it, Sasuke. That's why I hurt you. That's why I treated you like a… a fucking… I don't know. Horribly. I treated you horribly. And I did it because it made me-" She took a moment to swallow, but she didn't look away. "~feel… less useless. For once I kind of felt like… like I was on the same level as you. Above you, even. It's stupid. Pathetic. But… But I was angry and… and I felt stupid from the time I tried to… I tried… Y-you know-"

"Say it." Sasuke prompted her, quietly. The jaw clenched. Her usually round face was suddenly full of angles.

"I felt stupid from the time I tried to kill you and failed. I didn't want to kill you. I just… Needed to end all of that uncertainty. All that shit we were going through. I should have sat back and thought that maybe that might have been how you felt - how you always felt, all the time. But I didn't. I was too worried about myself. I wanted my way out. Then I couldn't go through with it and I felt so guilty. Then… frightened. There would have been no way for me to dodge your parry."

"You were meant to kill me." Sasuke said. "Stop obsessing over it."

"I know. I should have. But I felt shitty. You told Naruto that you wanted to break bonds… I guess
I felt them break there. And I panicked. Then when you turned up like that, I just… I just reacted. I wanted… I wanted you to feel bad because I thought that it was payback for all the times that I worked myself up about you. All the times that I felt let down because I didn't manifest in the real thing. But I realized… And after a long f-fucking long time, I realized it was me. It was always me. I didn't stop to think about how degrading it was or how much it would hurt, I wanted to feel better. And I thought I was justified, but… but everything I've ever gauged myself against has been a lie. Everything I ever saw in you was just… accented by my own stupid imagination. You're right, I don't know who you are, Sasuke - I never bothered to learn. And for that, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what I did, and I'm sorry for putting you in a box and treating you the same way everyone else did. Through their own lens, and at an arm's length. Friend or enemy or… just another person in the world, you're worth more than that. I'm sorry."

Sasuke just watched her, his expression murky. Sakura nodded.

"So I won't bother you anymore, I promise. I'll still send some things along because I'd still like to help somehow, but… But I won't come to the door. I know that visiting now kinda defeats the purpose, but… I wanted to say this because I… I just wanted you to know. And I'm here for you, I'll always be here for you. That's all I wanted. That's it. Thank you for listening."

There was another long, hard look. Sakura had an irritating personality, that was for sure - Sasuke had never really understood it. But he couldn't deny her trying. And she was trying. She felt awful, she'd admitted that she'd done wrong and even more bravely admitted that it was her own fault of character driving her toward her decision. If it were anyone else, he probably would never have forgiven them - let them rot in their self-detriment. But Sakura, annoying as she was, cared. She cared a lot. It had just morphed into some sort of ridiculous pseudo-romantic voyeurism. He sighed heavily, and closed his eyes.

"Thank you," he said. "For your apology."

He half expected some kind of gushing response, or an attempt at an embrace (which would have been swiftly vetoed, she hadn't earned personal space yet, certainly). But Sakura merely smiled and to his surprise only nodded as she backed up a few steps.

"Thanks Sasuke. I… well, uh-" There was a sort of verbal jumbling as he watched her quickly apply the internal brakes to stop her rolling further into redundancies. Then she nodded again and turned away. "See you round, maybe? Have a nice night."

Seconds later, she was gone, leaving Sasuke alone in the doorway, watching as the early evening shadows stretched luxuriously over the compound, tiger-striping the buildings in cold planes of blue. See him round… was that a prediction? Or just another pointless conversational stop gap that she felt she had to say. It was generous of her to admit her faults, though if her were honest, it had done little to curry her favour in him. He wouldn't say she was entirely forgiven either - what she had done was absolutely despicable. But there was context now, and he could somewhat understand the motive. Pain encouraged pain. Feelings of inadequacy encouraged frustration and on the right (or wrong) person, the response could build until it became volatile. He'd spent years despising his own weaknesses; she had only managed the same but of a different ilk.

He turned and closed the door. Before retiring that night, he reached under the bed and pulled out a bag - a thick plastic tote full of plastic packets and containers. From the depths of the collection, he pulled out a small plush - a fluffy green dinosaur that he patted a few times to revive the pile of the fur before tucking it into bed next to his daughter.

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_Sasuke 15th March, Konoha_
Two days passed almost unnoticed by the small household, though by the time Pakkun has sent forth another of his team to inform Tsunade that the Godaime Mizukage was quietly being escorted toward the apartments under the silence of the early morning hush, everything seemed to fall apart. Tsunade had turned the kettle on twice, lost her glasses in the couch, tripped over Akamaru at almost every opportunity and had, most unfortunately, dropped an entire packet of loose black tea down her front. She had just finished scooping out the worst of it when a polite cough from behind her stalled the laboring teaspoon.

"The showers free if you want," Sasuke said. There wasn't a hint of mirth in his voice at all. That was something Tsunade had always appreciated about her quiet charge - he rarely poked fun at the unfortunate. Unless it was Naruto.

"I don't think I'll have time," she began, trying to clean off the errant flakes of tea from her skin as she secured her shirt. "Mei will be here any second and I-"

She turned. And then she gaped. Wardrobe hadn't really been something they had discussed. In fact, bar Sasuke's study of Mei's file, there was very little at all concerning his planning that he'd offered to share. There was a time. A place. There had to be high quality tea and a good assortment of snack food, both sweet and savoury. But that was all.

And now Sasuke stood before her, looking about as female as he ever had and yet, at the same time, not. He'd synthesized something close to his traditional hairstyle by tying up the back of his hair into a knot and letting the long bangs fall loose to his jawline and the clothes he was wearing were plain, but fitted, showing off the unique shape he'd become. Most of the time she'd been around him Sasuke had turtled himself into oversized sweatshirts and hoodies - anything to hide his swelling silhouette. This was the first appointment to which he'd ever honestly revealed his pregnancy and seemed to embrace it. Even more surprising was that he seemed entirely comfortable with the concept, his hands on his protruding belly, rubbing the baby's kicks with gentle circles.

"Can't take long to clean some tea off. Go get a washcloth or something."

"You look," Tsunade stammered. "Are you… Did you know that… I mean... You're wearing-"

"What, do I look pregnant or something." Sasuke lifted an annoying perfect brow.

"Yes but Mei doesn't know."

"Guess I'm thwarting unnecessary questions."

Tsunade blinked. At length she said: "S-sorry I just… I guess I don't see you like this often… You look different."

"Don't get used to it," Sasuke snorted. "Perhaps some people like looking fat; I don't. And yes-" he cut her off before she could start, flicking on the kettle while he began rearranging the teacups. "I know. I'm not fat, it's a baby. Whatever. The longer I can keep the visual reminders at bay, the better. Trust me, I won't have the luxury for long. I know how I end up."

"So... this is a play for honesty, right?" Tsunade grabbed a cloth from the drawer and simply used that to buff the remainder of the tea from her cleavage. "That's your game. Just straight up honesty. That's why you were so invested in the files. They didn't reveal any dirt, but they gave you a level playing field."
"They gave me something, but no, not blackmail material. Not that I would bother," Sasuke said. "If you hadn't noticed, lying isn't something I care about, and extortion is just as bad. It's stupid. Pointless." _And probably one of the worst mistakes I ever made._ Sasuke paused a moment, then nodded, satisfied with his arrangement. "I'm going to get Mikoto. You'll be...?"

"I'll be... Oh. You don't want me in the room?" Tsunade wasn't surprised, but she couldn't help feeling slightly crestfallen. Sasuke just shook his head.

"No," he said, flatly. Then: "It doesn't work that way."

"I guess I could wait in the garden... or take a walk." Something close by. Something near enough... Just in case.

"If you want." Sasuke eased away from the counter and padded toward the bedroom to retrieve his daughter. Halfway there, he stopped. "Tsunade?"

She looked up as she pocketed the cloth, not sure of what to do with herself. Akamaru had already padded over to the door and was turning in anxious circles. It seemed he was as unwilling to leave Sasuke alone as Tsunade was.

"Yeah?"

"I'd really like some rice cakes. Could you get me some? Just the plain ones."

Tsunade brightened. It wasn't much, but it was recognition for her concern. Sasuke a unique way of comforting people: rather than simply accept her worry for what it was or try to placate by assuring her that he would be alright, he gave some sort of impartial admission or adopted a sudden desire for something from the market. Sometimes it was dango, but usually he chose rice cakes. Tsunade smiled and put on her shoes. "Sure. I'll get you Jinta's dozen - they're pretty good."

"Thanks."

Sasuke paused at Mikoto's crib, then breathed out slowly as he heard the door close. His fingers danced over Mikoto's errant hair as the price of his risk began to sink in, but he shrugged it aside. There was a level of maturity that he had to show, a strength of self, a lack of fear. Ultimately, the highest level of respect he could offer - trust.

There was a knock at the door, and, with his daughter on his hip, Sasuke made his way through the house to answer it. And with a low and gentle voice he said:

"Good morning, Mizukage-sama. Please come in."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So much Sakura orz. Thank you for your support :)}
His mother knelt at the table, busily dusting an arrangement of strange-looking china she had unpacked from a box that she’d found in the rafters. Uchiha Mikoto smiled as Sasuke watched her with wide, dark eyes and held out a cup for him to examine.

"What do you think? Do you like them?"

"What are they?" Sasuke asked, his hands firmly planted in his lap. He marveled over the delicate lines of the porcelain, the elegant paintwork; the gold trim. He’d never seen anything like it before in his life. He was too afraid to touch, lest he break it.

"They're part of a tea set." Mikoto explained. "A Northern-style tea set. It was my Grandmother's. She preferred these over our traditional yunomi."

"Why?" Sasuke gazed at a blossoming rose spreading its petals across the belly of one of the cups - frozen in perpetual magnificence. The sun was catching the fine material, creating a luminescence of subsurface scattering that made it appear as though it were alive, a glow akin to that of skin, a warmth beneath the pearlescent gloss. "They're like paintings."

"Yes, they are a bit, aren't they?" Mikoto laughed. She drew the tin of tea closer to her and began measuring out the servings. "Grandma, well, your Great-Grandma, traveled a lot when she was young. She'd pick up souvenirs here and there and developed quite a taste for foreign food as well. She was very fond of Northern-style tea, so on her birthday, I like to make some and remember her."

"What's Northern-style tea?"

"Well, it's the same plant that we get our green tea from, only... Oh she told me... she went to a plantation once; they explained it." Mikoto took the kettle and began to pour the hot water into the teapot to warm it. "I think they roast the tea leaves longer. They become darker in color and it tastes quite different. You will usually add milk to it. And sugar too."

"Sounds yuck," Sasuke proclaimed, sticking out his tongue for emphasis. His mother chuckled again and flicked his long fringe out of his eyes.

"Don't knock it til' you try it, ducktail," she smiled. "There's nothing wrong with trying something different." Mikoto whistled as she worked, something Sasuke rarely heard her do around the house. When it was ready, she poured a little milk into two cups and pushed one toward her son, nodding at the sugar bowl. "Here. See what you think. You may add some sugar if you like."

"Nii-san likes the sweet things," Sasuke said, somewhat disdainfully, but he spooned in a little sugar in anyway - just to be careful - then followed his mother's lead as she stirred the tea and set the teaspoon on the small saucer beneath. Mikoto took a sip and closed her eyes, smiling fondly. Sasuke frowned.

"Tastes weird."

"It's not that weird."
Sasuke looked into the pallid liquid, still unsure as to what he thought of the strange drink. Green tea was much prettier - it had a fetching, almost magical clarity to it. This was basically cloudy water. He pursed his lips.

"Does Dad like it?" He asked, picking up the teaspoon to examine it. To a young child, it seemed pointlessly elaborate. His mother raised her chin to gaze out the window. As she did, her face dropped into shadow while the slant of light that had been caressing her cheek slipped down and strung a small ribbon across her heart. She smiled again, but it wasn't in her eyes.

"Dad's never really found the taste for it," she said at length.

"Is that why you had to get the ladder out by yourself to get the box?" Sasuke pressed. "Is that why it's up in the ceiling? Cos Dad doesn't wanna drink it?"

"Dad..." Mikoto took a long sip. "Well... It's not just Dad, Sasuke. Many people in Konoha didn't understand Great-Grandma very well, you see. She was a bit different."

"Different how?"

"She was a traveler for one. And a storyteller. But people in her day weren't really either of those things. Not during the war years."

"Why? Didn't people like stories?"

"In wartime, the people of a village are expected to worked together to help the military." Mikoto explained. "But Great-Grandma didn't think that fighting against people who had very similar ideas to you was a good idea, instead, she believed that people could solve their problems peacefully by talking, rather than fighting. She was what people called a pacifist."

"So... no ninja?" Sasuke seemed to disapprove. Mikoto shook her head.

"Having Shinobi protect a village and uphold a certain set of values... well, traditions... that's one thing. Fighting constantly against each other, no side ever really winning or losing, that's quite another. Great-Grandma lived in a time when the clans were much more separate than they are now and it wasn't nice. She realized quite early on that the military life and the war effort wasn't for her and took to travelling to instead. To find other ways to help."

"The clan let her do that?"

It was a horrible sentence to have come from the mouth of a young boy who had celebrated his fifth year only a few days beforehand. The Uchiha clan that Sasuke knew had always been a strange dichotomy between the peaceful civilians, and the blade-faced ninja. The idea that someone might have to request the right to campaign for a better world was as frightening as it was a stark reality. Mikoto took a breath and shuffled closer to draw her arm around her son.

"There's nothing wrong with wanting peace, Sasuke. Your Great-Grandma was not a fighter. She was never allowed to join the Shinobi ranks due to her bad chest, so she supported the troops from the outside instead. After a while, she didn't like what she saw in the military any more and joined what they called a peace corps. They took it into their own hands to travel from village to village and meet other clans, help them, learn from them. The First was very approving of their movement, but by the time the Second had taken the seat things became very different. Peace had become..." His mother paused then. Had Sasuke known what he knew now, he would have seen her swallow back the words she wanted to say in place of something slightly more subjective. She settled with: "Different."
"How different?"

Mikoto took a moment to straighten his shirt collar with her free hand. "People were confused by what they thought was a better type of peace. Some thought that clans should go back to protecting themselves, others thought that a village was like a large clan and everyone should look after each other."

"And Great-Grandma thinks the world is a big clan." Sasuke said. When Mikoto slowly turned toward him again, the look on her face a strange mix of incredulity and pride, he offered: "Because... she thought everyone should be peaceful. Everyone should look after each other, right? So... the world is a clan."

It look nearly a full minute for Uchiha Mikoto to respond, but when she did, the smile had reached her eyes again. "Your Great-grandmother would have been proud to hear you say that."

Sasuke smiled the sly smile of a five year old who has learned to recognize when they're on to a good thing. "I drank her tea too!" He reminded his mother.

"Yes you did."

"Yeah," Sasuke nodded. "Maybe next remembrance day, we should take a rice cake for Great-grandma's grave as well! Then we can say a prayer for her and I can tell her that I tried her tea!"

Mikoto nodded, placing her cup in her saucer and leaned over to kiss her son's head. Perhaps by the time remembrance day came around, Sasuke might have forgotten his promise. Perhaps the excitement that surrounded the occasion might distract him. She might never have to tell him what the village really thought of pacifists. She might never have to reveal that her Grandmother had not been allowed a grave on Uchiha land. She was a traitor. She was disowned. The thought of it saddened her, but rather than dwell on it, Mikoto simply breathed in the scent of his hair and tickled his cheek lightly with her fingertip.

"You can tell her any time you like, Sasuke. She'll listen."

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Konoha 15th March,

Year of the Hare

"Please come in."

Mei Terumi studied at the hand in front of her as it gestured toward the interior of the small apartment. The hand first, then the thin, pale arm, clad in black and finally the prominent shoulder threaded by long, graceful lines of muscle that soared towards a fragile neck and equally gaunt-looking face. She didn't recognize it. The hand; the arm; the entire body. She certainly didn't recognize any part of it as Uchiha Sasuke. It was a woman that stood before her. Tall and waif-like with a child on her hip and a heaving middle. A woman. Only the thin face was somewhat familiar, but it was a face that, last time she saw it, had been attached to the body of a powerful young, man. Very carefully, and without yet committing to a single step, Mei said,

"Sasuke?"

"Yes?" The woman blinked at her with Sasuke's eyes. Her expression was calm and patient - almost as if she'd been expecting such a reaction. A small muscle tensed in Mei's cheek.

"You're not Sasuke."
"I've been told my face looks pretty much the same," Sasuke replied, bleakly. "Other than that, yeah, the rest of me is pretty different. But, Mizukage, I am who I say I am."

"I'm supposed to just trust your word?"

"How many people would want to masquerade as me given the state I was in at the end of the war." The woman calling herself Sasuke quirked a brow. Mei considered this, and nodded faintly. She, er… he, was right, only a madman would try to steal the identity of someone as powerful as Sasuke. He'd be captured within a week, or dead, depending on what country he set his charade. Logic aside, however, Mei was still confused as fuck. She turned to look into the courtyard a moment, watching as her four-legged chaperone paused momentarily to check everything was alright before he padded over to a barrel and plonked himself beneath it. She'd rather hoped the little pug would have followed her inside, but it seemed that wasn't part of the arrangement. Flicking her fringe out of her eyes, Mei stepped across the threshold, politely removing her shoes at the door.

"I suppose that makes sense." she said, airily. "Well then, thank you for your invitation, Sasuke."

"Thank you for coming." Sasuke replied. He motioned again, this time toward the couch. He could feel Mei's eyes on him, sceptical, but he looked past her face to a point on the wall behind her. Mikoto felt heavier in his arms and her damp breath on his neck rallied his nerves. He had to remind himself who he was doing this for; who would benefit. Fingers tightened around his daughter and he swallowed. "I appreciate your taking the time to meet with me."

"I can't say it's out of fondness," Mei admitted. "Curiosity, mostly. After all, last time we spoke you weren't quite so willing for conversation but-" She pursed her lips as she drifted over to the futon, "-circumstances change I guess…" The last part was drawn out over a long stare as she examined him again. Sasuke let her for a few terse seconds before he said:

"It is me, Mizukage-sama."

Mei didn't blush at being caught. It was her job after all. She only raised her chin a little. "The disguise," she explained. "It's a little… unconventional."

"Is it." That wasn't a question. Sasuke watched her look around the room, taking note of items; cataloguing. He didn't move when her eyes dropped to the pile of folders on the coffee table next to the snacks.

"For a shinobi, maybe. For a teenaged boy, yes. I can't say from experience, but...I'd imagine a pregnant woman isn't the most popular facade and difficult to pull off, to boot. Though in all honesty, I wasn't sure what to expect," Mei said. "All I know of you is what I've been told. All I've seen of you is the criminal who disturbed the Kage summit three years ago and the soldier who fought on our side during the Fourth War. I don't know any other versions of Uchiha Sasuke, I have no idea what you're like off-duty. My opinion is, like most, divided."

"Mm," Sasuke agreed.

"But," Mei continued. "Konoha and Kiri are on excellent terms, in fact, most of the villages are these days. The Hokage asked me to come; I agreed. He permitted your request to meet with me personally, I'll honor that."

"He did," Sasuke said, carefully.

"Obviously I had very little clue as to what you want to talk about," Mei's voice dropped slightly.
"But I wonder if it has, perhaps, something to do with my personal files being on your table?"

Mei looked up at Sasuke and Sasuke held her gaze. Silence passed between them, frosting at the fingertips. It was an elegant stand off. Mei knew her own tenacity came from her personal standing but Sasuke? He had some balls to threaten a Kage with her own private datas. If he even had balls in that form which, she had to admit, was bothering her. Feeling her temper start to warm, she made to protest again but this time Sasuke stopped her.

"Sorry," he said, not really sounding sorry at all. Or perhaps not used to being sorry. "I didn't ask you here to trick you. Or to fight," he added quickly. "The last time I had to explain myself to someone, I wasn't really in a clear frame of mind. So this is… challenging."

"Go on," Mei relented, icily. Sasuke drew in a breath and shifted his daughter on his hip.

"I wanted... I... Wanted to tell you some things myself."

"What things?" Mei frowned, folding her arms under her chest. "What else could I possibly want to know about you that I don't know already? I have facts, I have information. We keep records for reasons, you know. Is this to do with the story in the paper? That child? I'm sure I will find out enough in your coming trial, Sasuke."

He did know. And he knew she'd play that card. Who wouldn't? It was the only information that anyone had on him that was relatively recent. Anxiety gnawed at him. He had already played out a scenario where she was much angrier, scathing and cruel toward him and while this situation was definitely on the mild side, he was bordering unknown and unfashionable territory: the truth. He swallowed again, stomach churning.

"Then you'll know about me as much as I know about you and that's all," he said, nodding toward the folders on the table. Mei didn't blanch, but she didn't look happy.

"Those are restricted records." She told him.

"To the public." Sasuke replied, evenly. "Not to other Kage and not to clan heads. As my entire clan is gone, I am, by default, the head of the Uchiha." The words were rotten on Sasuke's tongue as such a pyrrhic victory it was to accept his true position. It was a fact he'd prefer to forget, but it was helpful when it was convenient, and that was a little footnote Mei did not have to know about. She nodded - fair enough - then crossed her arms a little tighter about her ribs.

"Head or no, sneaking around and sticking your nose in a lady's personal files? That's not a particularly good way to make friends."

"No, it isn't," Sasuke said. "It's also not a good way to start a conversation. But that's exactly how we would have done it had we only met at my trial. And it's the way that most villages knew each other in the past. Through paperwork and facts first. Research. Hearsay. Through everything but the person themselves."

Mei blinked. That was, well, pretty accurate actually. "Go on," she said.

"Shinobi villages were, are, all about keeping themselves to themselves," Sasuke said. "Even with the Union and this whole Alliance thing you've been publicizing; nothing has changed. Maybe you're all friendlier to one another but that's about it."

"That's quite the assumption." Mei raised her brows. "And what proof do you have?"

"The Union still allows the clans to function as their own independent factions under the governing
body of the Hokage. Every village has their own specialist clans kept close. There might have been plenty of propaganda about the military joining forces, but nothing to entice civilians to emigrate."

"You don't know that."

"It's what I've observed on my way here. Soldiers might be joining hands and singing peace songs, but everything else is still pretty much the same. Then there's myself," Sasuke continued. "After all, you only found out about me after the newspaper article. I doubt Kakashi wasn't going to make any kind of public play very quickly if that hadn't tipped his scales. I could have been here for months in protective custody without you ever hearing a word of it."

"Hn," Mei narrowed her eyes. He was right, of course. The Hokage had admitted that Sasuke's presence was being kept under wraps for political reasons as well as personal. She respected that. But Sasuke was right; a secret was a secret. Kakashi wouldn't have told her if press hadn't thrown a wrench in the works. "So, we're trading secrets, are we?" Mei asked, carefully. "For what? Power? Protection?"

Sasuke shook his head. "No… No not that. It's… I didn't ask you here to make that kind of a deal, that would imply the other villages are of a lesser standing in my opinion and that's not the case. I asked you here because I want to have a conversation. I asked you first because I felt that we have an… an understanding."

"Understanding? We barely know each other," Mei frowned. "Wouldn't you be better off talking to the Kazekage? After all, he's from your year. He's Naruto's friend, isn't he?"

"I don't know," Sasuke said. "Perhaps? Naruto will befriend pretty much everyone and everything if he thought he could get some attention out of it. But no, Gaara wouldn't understand the same way you would."

"Is this…" Mei paused, delicately. "Something to do with the uh…. The disguise?" She gestured. "I'm sure you're aware Kakashi has already confirmed that little girl is yours, so… I mean… I don't really understand-

"It's not a disguise," Sasuke said, quickly. He didn't look down, didn't falter, though every cell in his body screamed at him to hide his eyes in shame. "This… This body. It's not a disguise. It's all real, Mizukage-sama."

"Real?" The look on Mei's face didn't change, but her colour dropped a few shades. She licked her lips, brows knit. "What are you talking about?"

"Mikoto is mine, I'm… her m-… Her m- I gave birth to her," Sasuke said. "I… I've been travelling since late last year, trying to bring her somewhere safe. Somewhere… home." He let out a breath. His hands weren't shaking, but he could feel that fleeting numbness in his wrists and behind his knees. He thought he might become quiet or surly as he usually did in times of difficult emotional moments, but instead he felt nervous. He wasn't good with nervous.

"You... " Mei was barely uttering the words. "You gave… You… She's yours? A-and the-" The shock was registering swiftly now and that little colour the Mizukage had retained in her cheeks faded. Sasuke just nodded slightly.

"Her brother."

"Brother," Mei echoed. She was at a loss. On one hand, there was the failing belief that all this was a ruse and that Sasuke was trying to trick her somehow but… but… why? Why go to such lengths
and such a disguise that was, ultimately as difficult to perform believably as it was to uphold. The horrible truth was beginning to dawn on Mei and she felt a little sick to admit it but she was starting to believe him. It was insane, but it wasn't unheard of - not to a native of Kirigakure, anyway. The demon clan. The Bloody Mist. A people who would strive to any lengths for power, longevity. Victory. In her youth there'd been rumors of ninja in deep cover who practiced long-term henge, aided with surgical enhancement to help them stay undercover. And of course, then there was….

"Someone… did this to you?" Mei breathed, shaking the fearsome memories away, her gaze dropping to the files on the table instead. A record of her body lay in those notes, a solemn account of her carnal history, mistake after gruelling mistake. Had she looked up, she might have seen gratitude in Sasuke's face. For once someone had, without question, deduced that his condition was not the product of self improvement. He caught that sudden reflection, that pause as the gears began to turn, but he wasn't sure how to interpret it just yet. He nodded.

"Yeah," he said.

"And… You travelled? From the North?"

The room sank into silence then. Sasuke frowned suddenly, his eyes suddenly sharp, cheeks cold. He hadn't said anything to her about his captors yet, so how did she know where he'd come from. Tsunade wouldn't have said anything. Kakashi? Pakkun? No… That was against all this subterfuge they were managing so delicately. Then-

"How did you know that?"

"Distance. If you were travelling for so long, you must have been quite far away. What did you need my files for?" Mei bypassed, quickly. There was something else she wasn't saying, something probably important. But Sasuke sensed the familiar impasse of the immovable object paradox. He had ammunition in some very distinct pockets of knowledge, but she had the upper hand. Trying to swallow the spiky flummox clogging his throat, Sasuke said:

"I looked through your files, Mizukage-sama, because I wanted us on even grounding. Beneath those files are mine. The real ones. Updated by Tsunade herself. They aren't official yet as no one really knows what to do with the information, but they've been kept top secret for my own safety as well as my children. All the facts are all there, as official as the black and white print they sit in. So you could say we're even; your truth for mine."

"Even. Are we now." Mei stated, quietly. "Let me say this straight off the bat, Uchiha, if you think that by using that information you'll be able to extort some kind of preferential treatment, you're sorely mistaken."

"Blackmail?" It was Sasuke's turn to frown. "No. I wanted to ask you some questions, that's all." Sasuke said. "And… you can ask me some in return. I'll answer honestly."

"You were planning not to in your trial?" Sasuke didn't answer, but his posture did. That kind of maybe I will, maybe I won't shrug that was seemingly coined by boys his age. Mei smirked, and though her eyes were still full of flint, she leaned back, relenting. "Fine."

"Fine." Sasuke placed his little girl on the floor beside him, handing her a toy to play with. Mei noticed that he was able to amuse her while he poured the tea, turning to smile at her every now and again when she cooed at him. That was a relationship that couldn't be faked, not even under genjutsu. It was also clear that he was thankful for the distraction.

"She really is yours, isn't she?" Mei stated. Sasuke nodded.
"Yes," Sasuke said. "She is."

"How old is she?"

"Seven months, I think," Sasuke replied. "I don't have an exact date, but Yakushi estimated she was born somewhere between July and August last year."

"And her… brother?" Mei glanced at Sasuke's middle. His reaction was guarded, and he swallowed before he said:

"I'm… what do they say? Five months along or something."

"Five?" Mei blinked. "Five months? But that would mean-"

"They were persistent, the people that did this," Sasuke muttered. "If they could have found a way to make it happen immediately after Mikoto was born, they would have."

Mei took this in slowly and carefully, watching as a brief flash of pain momentarily glanced off Sasuke's features. These people, "they", may not have been able to force him to conceive immediately after the birth of his daughter; it didn't mean they didn't try. Mei knew of people like that. Her heart twisted a little with guilt. "Has Konoha send a team after them?"

"Yeah. But most were killed an earthquake. The hideout caved in. Only Mikoto and I escaped."

"You realize that sounds awfully convenient."

Sasuke shrugged. "S'pose. But if you want to go and check out the mountains east of Tsuchi, you'll find them there. Go get a bunch of Tsuchi-nin to lift the landslides - you'll find them there. What's left of them, anyway."

"Tsuchi huh?" Mei repeated, somewhat mysteriously. "All right. What were you going to ask me?"

Sasuke paused. Did she believe him? She was acting strangely calm, but perhaps she was just treading cautiously - keeping her hand close, so to speak. That kind of play he could appreciate and he had to admit, he hadn't expected any less of her, given her past and her people. Sasuke sat back on the couch, one hand under his belly as his son fusses a little. He'd asked questions of Kage before, but for entirely different reasons. Back then, his quest had been insular - the feat of a lonely, lost soul; a proud soul with no purpose to ground it. Sasuke had, in the end, wished for retribution. He sought to mend a broken system as swiftly and heartlessly as he possibly could as that was the only way he knew how change could be effective. He was a boy whose family, whose world was stolen away in an instant, thus Konoha would feel the same: a brutal system removed in the blink of an eye. Power freed, circumstances radically altered… They'd have to pick up their lives again. They'd have to learn to live. And they could focus their hatred on him. He'd stitched it all up, he'd made it easy. After all, he'd learned from the best, hadn't he?

But then the world had changed on him instead. Given him something else, a different path, another reason not to give up. On himself. On Konoha. Sasuke had walked into darkness long ago, thinking that there would be no saving him, no venture back to the light. Naruto had come after him, a blazing torch in the gloom, but to no avail. Sasuke was lost. Sasuke was gone.

Until Sasuke realized he could make his own light.

Sometime earlier, sometime alone, Sasuke lay on the mat next to his daughter, thumbing through Mei's file as the baby sang and rolled about, kicking her feet happily. Though he was engrossed in
his reading, he couldn’t help placing the papers down every now and again, just to check on Mikoto, or watch her for a moment as she blew spit bubbles, cackling happily as they popped against her chin leaving shining trails on her lips.

"Don’t go rolling under the table," he admonished softly, dropping the papers on the ground to stop her twisting too far away from him. Her mobility was on the rise and all of a sudden she’d graduated from lying only on her back with her limbs in the air to rolling messily from side to side. Her neck could now support her head. She could move her limbs independently of one another and could hold and move objects when passed to her. Her speech was garbled, but she seemed to realize what words were and would stop waffling once she had Sasuke’s attention. Even now she cooed at him sweetly, before curling over to end up on her stomach.

"Ba!" Mikoto announced. Sasuke rolled his eyes.

"What? You’ve got my attention," he said. "That it?"

"BA!" Mikoto repeated, louder this time. Sasuke eased up carefully, one hand under his unbalanced middle as he moved to sit on his haunches. Mikoto stared up at him with wide dark eyes. Sasuke shrugged.

"What?"

"Ba-ba," she told him, insistently. Sasuke sighed and took her hands in his as she waved them about, steadying her.

"Baa-baa is a sheep, we’ve covered this."

But that didn’t sate the child. Mikoto had something she wanted to do, something she wanted to show him and he wasn’t listening. She wanted to touch his face, feel close to him. Connect to him. She craved it. At first, simply being nearby was enough; hearing the sound of his heartbeat, feeling his warm skin, his breast, his soft words for her. But now that she understood more, Mikoto wished for acknowledgement and participation. She liked to be spoken to, she wanted games and stimulation. Her mother had been completely absorbed in that pile of rustly white sheets as of late and Mikoto could tell when her precious benefit was being squandered. She tried to tug at his bangs but they were too high. So with a determination that was tattooed in the Uchiha DNA, the child threw her weight forward, shoved her small foot beneath her and thrust herself upwards in attempt to bat at his chin.

Sasuke was so surprised, the aspiration succeeded. He gasped as his daughter’s fingers found a rope of dangling fringe and tugged it firmly. She giggled.

"Mmba-ba."

It was a little too close to "Mama" for Sasuke’s comfort, but at that moment he didn’t even notice. His daughter was standing, standing up on her own two feet. She hadn’t even crawled before - just wiggled and flopped around and now… now she was standing - supporting herself on her own. Almost. It was amazing. And sobering. Sasuke breathed an ok… to himself before slowly letting her down to the floor. He shuffled back a few feet and took a breath.

"Walk to me, Mikoto?"

That was a little advanced, of course. Standing had been with the help of her mother; walking was something completely different. But Mikoto could tell that she’d done something special - that Sasuke’s sudden and absolute fascination toward her was different from his usual attention. This
was something else. And she wanted to keep it going. Grunting, frustrated that he'd moved away, she swore at him (an assemblage of vowels and guttural) promptly stomach-shuffling forward to catch up. When that wasn't fast enough, she pushed harder, got a knee beneath her and accelerated, crawling. Just like that.

Sasuke dimly remembered the nurse telling him that some babies might walk before they crawled. Some might take a long time; some might be stuck in the stomach-shuffle for months before they worked out the logistics of fours limbs moving at once. But Mikoto just understood. Her need to interact with him was stronger than her frustration; she simply found the means necessary to continue their exchange and initiated them. She grinned up at him, wetly, drooling on his ankle.

"Mm-ba!" She said again. Yeah, gotcha, she meant. She'd done well; she ought to be congratulated. Sasuke ought to be proud; he was proud. But the vocalization of praise was not common practice in his family. How long had he waited, how had he struggled and suffered just to earn a few choice words from his father? If he ran his tongue over the insides of his cheeks he could still feel the scars from his persistent katon training. His desperation to keep up with his brother's standards had been debilitating, but he needed that acknowledgement. And his brother? Well... Itachi's was a very different type of accolade. Something that practically came off as punishment.

Sasuke swallowed hard, reaching down to his fingers rest on her dark fluffy head in an awkward presentation of acknowledgement. "Good. Very good, Mikoto." He began, feeling the words stiff in his throat. "As... As expected of my daughter."

The little girl gave him an odd look and Sasuke bit his lip, feeling redundant. Why had it sounded so different coming from him? He'd been over the moon when Fugaku had uttered the words in his wake on the pier that day, why was it so different saying them? Perhaps it was because he wanted to give her more. Perhaps he felt that level of compliment was below what a child would expect to receive. Sasuke hadn't quite realized it, but he found the more his daughter grew, the more comfortable he felt around her; the more she seemed like a person. Inside him, she'd been frightening, unreal. An unwanted presence that he had neither the means nor the resolution to distance himself from. At birth, his world was that of only her mouth, her cries and her weight, nothing more. The Kakkou cleaned away the rest while drugs dulled the world. When freedom arrived with all the pomp and circumstance of a major natural disaster, Sasuke could have been free of her. He didn't have to turn that corner. He didn't have to make his way toward the nursery.

It might have been guilt that helped. It might have been fate. It could have been love or simply an honorable sense of humanity that had rekindled itself again deep in Sasuke's soul. It could have been the ache in his chest that still throbbed from want of family. It could have been any of these things. Sasuke knew she hadn't called his name, she probably hadn't sounded any different from any of the other children wailing in fear and fright. But Sasuke heard her. And from the moment she was in his arms a second time, he found himself reunited with a splinter of the soul that had once been a warrior, a shinobi, a survivor. He would save her. He'd save them both. She was his. He'd fought for her long before he understood why he was doing it. He cared for her when he had every right to leave her. Let her become adopted by a family who wanted a child; let his life become simpler. But he couldn't. She was his. And he loved her.

Sasuke licked his lips then smiled faintly and pulled his little girl into his arms. Stroking her cheek, he looked into her eyes and said, "I'm proud of you."
Words he’d longed to hear from his father, words that meant so much. It felt so damn good to say them, it felt right. And Mikoto responded with an enormous grin, burbling at him with glee writ all over her face. She didn’t understand Uchiha expectations, she didn’t know what pride meant, but she did know what a smile was and she understood Sasuke’s tone and that was all that mattered. She knew she was loved and valued.

Sasuke closed his eyes as he held her, feeling warm. Feeling, for the first time many, many years, grounded by something that wasn't his hatred or his anger. Mikoto had grown under an umbrella of his protection; she'd become a person knowing only his care, attentiveness and acknowledgement. Now she was able to reciprocate, Sasuke found himself wondering what she would be like. How she'd grow as a person. What he could teach her about the world. For so long he'd cared for her out of necessity. Guilt, possibly. Perhaps a little wounded pride thrown in the mix, but now he wondered what his influence on her might affect her as a person. How she might become if he continued to care for her, how it would feel to see the ethos he'd help her develop blossom into a personality all her own.

If Itachi had ever promised him anything, it was love. And while his brother no longer walked the same earth as he, Sasuke could feel it: a little spark of light in a thicket of pain. It was his light, and it was growing again. He could almost feel its warmth the same way he could sometimes feel the impression of his brother's fingertips on his forehead.

Precious people. He had precious people again. And he would fight the world to make sure they never felt the loneliness and exclusion that was the Uchiha way for so long. He’d fight the world, and powerless, he'd do it the most difficult and effective way possible.

Legally.

"I don't want to talk about the summit or my actions or any of that right now," Sasuke said after a moment. Mei blinked, nursing her teacup in her hands. "That's what the trial will be for."

"So this conversation is about what then?"

"Understanding. I did the same before I entered the war. I asked Orochimaru to bring back the four Kage of Konoha's past, not for backup but for consultation. I wanted them to help me understand why I should be fighting for the village when all Konoha has done is to persecute and destroy my clan. This is kind of the same thing."

"You want to know why you should remain here?" Mei was incredulous. "Thought that was pretty obvious-"

"No. I don't want to just... remain. I want to... do something," Sasuke explained, awkwardly. "You and I, we both come from a history of hatred. The Uchiha were seen as untrustworthy and temperamental whereas Kirigakure was seen as brutal and dangerous. The Bloody Mist, we called you. I'm sure you've heard the moniker-"

"Naturally." Mei said. "So?"

"Well, it no longer exists, does it?" Sasuke replied. "That fear. That brand the past left on your village. You've overcome it."

"I'm not sure how well it's been buried, but I've done my best," Mei said, feeling rather gratified. "I still don't see how this is going to benefit you."
"Easy. I want to know how you took a nation that was so despised and turned it around. And I want to know why."

"Well that's simple," Mei frowned. "It was the best thing for the state. When you have the power to change things, you-"

"Power is never simple," Sasuke interrupted her, quietly. "Having power doesn't make things easier, it overcomplicates them. I want to know why you, Mei Terumi, saved Kirigakure. I want to know, because I now have things that I want to save."

"Your clan?" Mei asked. Sasuke nodded.

"My clan. And Konoha."

"Ko-" Mei blinked, astounded. "Konoha? Are you saying... You... want to be Hokage?"

"Even better," Sasuke smiled then, small and wry. "I'm going to apply for the Board of Trustees."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: He's going to hit them where it hurts. Mopey Sasuke is one thing, driven Sasuke is quite another. There's nothing like a mission to distract from trauma and Sasuke's a pro at redirecting his focus into something he can understand. But what's Mei hiding?

As always, thank you all for the comments, especially those who have taken a special moment out of a very difficult time to share a kind word - it is greatly appreciated and I'm honored that you are enjoying the story. I apologize for the sporadic posting, I am overwhelmingly busy these days with work and family, but I will always try to post at least a chapter a month - hopefully sooner. Some are harder than others and require research. My beta has also been busy and I have edited this chapter myself, so I apologize if it is a little messy.

See you next time (hopefully sooner rather than later!)
The Sleeping God

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Konoha 17th February,
Year of the Hare

"Hey Chiyoko, got your moaning Miori here. Again," Gorou said with false cheer as he held up a lavender-coloured envelope, grinning harder when Chiyoko from editorial groaned and rolled her eyes, trying hard to disappear behind her typewriter.

"Gods, that's been every day this week, can't she get a life?"

"It's nearly time for winter break. You know how the 'domestic brigade' get when the holidays roll around. Kids at home for weeks like loud, whining, attention-seeking missiles and after a while the parents snap. They gotta have someone to complain to, so they complain to us. Now come on, this one's addressed just to you."

"Fine." Chiyoko held out her hand for the envelope, and grimaced when 'gopher Gorou' - the moniker was developed by accident at a Christmas function and just stuck - delivered it to her. Her expressions could not have been less impressed as she began to tear open the letter and Sasuke watched carefully from his hot desk a few feet away as she read the complaint. One hand rested on the keys of his typewriter, the other dangling into the little playpen someone had set up for Mikoto near the desk drawers. He had no idea who moaning Miori was, or why she posed such point of vexation but he was sure he was about to find out. Chiyoko sighed again. "You know she goes to every paper, right?" She muttered. "It's practically the same patronising letter in every publication every damn week."

"Yes. And we print it every damn week," Naoko said, appearing like a spectre in front of her columnist's desk. "Because that's what the opinion section is for. You take that away and Hyuga Miori's going to lace up those decorative sandals and come ask us to explain in full detail why her opinion is less important that some complaint about the forbidden forest trees encroaching on someone's property boundary line again."

"Ugh," Chiyoko glared at the letter hopelessly.

"I think you've used up all your "mailbox is full" excuses this month too, hon. Better run it."

"But she's so annoying." Chiyoko whined, drawing out the 'ing' as long as she could while waving the paper in her hand as though it smelled bad. "Can't we just ignore her until she goes away? Lock the doors or something? Go on holiday for…. For the holidays?"

Naoko snorted and pushed her glasses up her nose. "It's not our job to mediate who gets to say what. Broadcasting opinions like Miori's gets them out in the open; allows others to have a say - maybe take a stand to oppose her. If we sit on her, she'll find another way. And I can only imagine it'll involve a picket, cupcakes and a petition that'll drag on for months. You want that?"

"No Ma'am."

"That's what I thought." Naoko turned and gave Sasuke a nod. It was almost as if she'd only just noticed him. "You'll probably bump into her Sarada, at the kindergarten or something. She pickets and procreates, that's about it. But she's practically a general on the 'clan purity' movement
infecting the scholastic system at the moment, so watch out."

"Clan… what?" Sasuke frowned suddenly. He hadn't been terribly interested in the conversation, but clan prejudice had always back combed his hackles a little. It was an old wound, but still smarted. "Purity movement?"

"Well, it doesn't have an official title, but I'll be damned if that isn't what it is. The birth of the Alliance has been happily accepted by most clans, but there are a select few in opposition - mainly because they're concerned that their own self-governance will be affected if everyone gets too lovey-dovey. At the moment they're set on keeping civilian kids out of the Academy, and Miori's been a little more than vocal about it. She doesn't believe that children without a clan heritage should be mixing with her pedigree brats."

Naoko emphasized the words with a gesture of her forefingers. Sasuke narrowed his eyes, despite himself.

"Mixing?"

"Basically holding the 'purebred' kids back. Even those from a mixed family or a satellite clan - one not based in Konoha. Nope, she wants them all Fire Country born and bred and nothing else."

Sasuke's expression soured at that. "Clans have advantages," he said. "But that doesn't mean children without strong clan bloodlines can't become ninja." At first, his one time protege, Shinza, sprung to mind. Then he thought of Rock Lee, the self-proclaimed Green Beast of Konoha. "There are ninja who don't even have the ability to manipulate chakra. They might not be able to perform Ninjutsu and Genjutsu, but they are aware of the dangers and capabilities. And usually their taijutsu is..." He almost winced at the recollection of Rock Lee's foot in his face the one time he'd manage to best the Uchiha prodigy. "-surprising."

"Well you try telling that to Madam Hyuga and see how well you do. The Hokage's been trying to shut her up for ages, but she has this way of wrapping other clans around her little finger."

"Sounds painful."

"You know what I mean." Naoko sighed. "You could have all the power in the world, but the moment you mention a clan's heritage and legacy, that's it. All bets are off. Never disturb a mother bear with cubs, right? Same applies."

"You're saying…" Sasuke frowned. "What? This woman is more powerful than, say, the Hokage because she's a mother?"

"In a way. Mostly she's just damn insidious because she has the ear of the clans. To some of the more established sects, nothing is more important than moulding their little legacies. To the extent of segregation. You know, making sure the little civilian upstarts who're all fired up from Naruto Uzumaki's bullshit about equality between clans and civilian and mending the rift between the villages don't get a cut in the real quality education. The word elite is getting a real bad rep these days."

"And… you're saying this woman is more powerful than the Hokage because of that?" Sasuke asked, slowly. Naoko shrugged.

"We're meant to be a democracy, aren't we? Weren't the last four Hokage chosen by the previous? Or at least, swayed by a well-placed word from the council. I didn't vote; did you?"

"Hn," said Sasuke.
"My thoughts exactly. And if the Seventh isn't going to play ball, then you can be sure Miori isn't going to give him an easy time of it. He doesn't have a family either, and that counts against him. There're old laws they still keep in motion just to keep their little spikes in - trust me, I've read up on it. Want my notes? I'll get 'em for you. You won't believe some of the crap that's still in the system because no one's done their homework enough to pull the council up on it."

"And... what if the Hokage does?" Sasuke said. Naoko shrugged.

"Hokage can get overthrown. Or the clans leave. No point in wearing the hat if there's no one to shield from the sun, right?"

"They'd do that?"

"Public opinion is worth far more these days. There are opportunities to emigrate. The ability to move between villages - the threat of taking your power elsewhere? That's still a very real problem, even if we are all in it together now. Then there're the civilians who've finally found a voice thanks to the confidence the peace proposals have wrought. They also write letters." Naoko shook her head, raising her hands to the ceiling in exasperation. "So many letters."

"Then, if the hokage isn't the true power behind the village." Sasuke murmured. "Who is? Not the clans, but... the people. People are power." He looked at the papers on his desk, thoughtfully and for so long that Naoko frowned, biting her pencil as she peered down at him.

"What?"

"Nothing," Sasuke said, his attention seemingly back on his desk, though in truth it was far away, far into the future, an aspiration not yet steady enough to become a plan. "It's just... something I thought once, long ago. Something like that anyway."

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**Konoha 15th March, Year of the Hare**

He hadn't lied, the thought that power lay in people themselves wasn't a notion unfamiliar to Sasuke, it was simply that at the time of the Fourth War and its conclusion he knew a power more direct, more amenable than to trust that of a broken system. He knew himself. Or at least he thought he did. But there he sat with the Mizukage of the once-feared Kirigakure, sharing tea in a small, dated apartment while he was under house arrest and his daughter cooed and clucked from the couch beside him. Sasuke watched as Mei's expression clouded with consternation, and he rested his hands on his belly, rubbing the bulge lightly.

"The what?" Mei asked after a moment. Sasuke set his teacup down on its coaster, carefully.

"The Board of Trustees," he explained. "The council that helps guide the decision making for the school systems and-"

"Yes I know what a Board of Trustees is," Mei interrupted. "But how on earth do you think you'll be able to join one. Or even apply? You are an international criminal. It's not really an option."

"A criminal?" Sasuke held her gaze. "So I guess everyone's still honoring Danzo's decision, despite the fact that he'd would happily sell you all out for power."

"Do you have proof of that?" Mei said. Sasuke's expression darkened. He certainly did, but Danzo wasn't who he wanted to discuss. That was a conversation for another time, he had to keep the focus on Mei.
"I'm applying anyway," he said, somewhat churlish. Mei just shook her head slowly.

"Sasuke, people might not… well..." Searching for gentle explanations was fruitless; Mei simply ploughed on with the truth. "They mightn't feel comfortable with their children in your care. Like I said, you're a criminal. You might object; you might argue that the information could be wrong, sure. I'll grant you that. It's why I'm here to listen to you; why you're having a trial in the first place. But to the public, that's what you are."

Trash, essentially. Sasuke's scowl deepened a little. Trash that could have been a war hero, had he actually stuck around. His disappearance post-war hadn't done him any favors. Then again, trying to murder the five kage and imprison the tailed beasts wasn't bleaching his wings either.

"The public, huh?" He said. "To the public, Gaara was a mindless monster. To the public, Naruto was the reason the 4th Hokage was dead. To the public, the Raikage's brother…" Sasuke let the sentence drop away. His attack and alleged abduction of B was why he was in so much trouble with A in the first place. And to be fair, he didn't really know much about the Hachibi. "The public chooses to believe what is given to them freely. You want the truth? My actions were for myself and my clan. That's how revenge works."

"Your actions hurt other people, Sasuke."

"If people were hurt, it was because they were in the way."

"Even your friends?" Mei challenged. Sasuke sucked on his teeth a little.

"I couldn't afford to have friends. I gave up that luxury for the same reasons you gave up the ability to have children."

Mei looked as though he'd punched her in the face. The words that followed were about as icy as the weather outside and as acid-tipped as Mei's own kekkei-genkai. "I beg your pardon?"

"You can't have kids." Sasuke said evenly. "Your file just says infertile, but it was your poison training, right?"

"How the hell do you know that?"

"Poisons are Orochimaru's speciality. He might be as crazy as they come, but he's a… thorough teacher." Sasuke said, unwilling to give the snake much more credit than that. "Did they tell you it would happen? Did your council warn you that you might lose the ability to have a family once they'd put you through all your training?"

"That's not something you should talk about lightly. It's very personal." Mei said, still a little too stunned to be angry, thought the urge to slap Sasuke, pregnant or no, was brewing. "The procedure was experimental. Many poison attacks are because of th-"

"The reaction of the body's defenses over the metabolism of the poison. I know. I told you, poison is Orochimaru's life. I trained under him for three years, understanding and neutralizing poisons was the first lesson I learned. The logistics behind the technique of utilizing poison as a kekkei tota - like Orochimaru's own jutsu- is similar to your Acid and Boil release. One look at all the notes and test data in your files, it's kind of obvious. Your signature jutsu aren't merely difficult to master, they're extremely hard on the body. Especially together."

"I'm not a fool," Mei told him, curtly. "I knew there could be complications."

"Because… you'd already had complications?" Sasuke let that hang for a moment, preparing
himself for some kind of retaliation. He didn't doubt for a moment that she might lash out, he
certainly wasn't holding anything back. But, blunt as he was, he didn't elaborate on the subject of
the many miscarriages Mei had suffered before she chose to put herself through her extensive
chakra training. He might have been ruthless, but he wasn't an asshole. Well, more of an asshole
anyway. Mei understood his imputation well enough however. Her cheeks pinked and her eyes
grew dark.

"How dare-"

"You tried though." Sasuke said, falling back from his aggressive position to passive as he'd
learned in the Kakkou's care. Testing. Always testing the boundaries. "You tried really hard. It
wasn't your fault. Maybe if the law allowed, you could have travelled to another village to get a
second opinion. Maybe there was a chance; still could be one. My point is, because of your training
- the training that, I would wager, your council suggested you begin - you don't have sole authority
to govern child welfare in your village because of this. Konoha is the same. I've seen the
documentation of it: some clans claim that a childless Kage 'won't understand' the logistics of a
'real family'. Which is bullshit; it just means the Kage has less power over them."

"That's a wild assumption," Mei said through her teeth.

"I can't speak for Kirigakure, but I know Konoha. I've read many articles and criticisms on our law
and government. Konoha still allows the Hyuga segregation between the Main and Branch houses,
while Aburame train their to carry insects within their bodies younger and younger to who knows
what effect? Isn't it meant to be a time of peace? Why is there still so much focus on training to the
point where children are mutilated? Why are some denizens of Konoha treated like second-class
citizens simply because they were born into the wrong family. It doesn't make any sense."

"You're naive. There are clan traditions. You can't just veto things because you don't agree with
them."

"And yet, isn't that exactly what happened to my clan?" Sasuke replied without missing a beat.
"Wiped out because some key people kept spinning lies enough that no one knew what to believe?
Vetoed because of what? Our clan traditions?"

"As far as I know, the Uchiha were famed for being difficult."

"Then I guess this is exactly what you should have expected." Sasuke shot back. "Now who's
making assumptions?"

"I'm not sure I know that much about your family, Sasuke."

"No, but you were happy to kill me at the summit because the people who were supposed to be
experts in my case wrote me off as mercenary fodder."

"I thought we weren't going to talk about the summit. Besides, that was not how it went. That's not
it at all." Mei said, angrily. "You think you know so much; you only know what you saw. You
posed a threat. You were attacking the Kage of the Five Nations. What did you expect would
happen?"

"I was up against the five greatest shinobi in the world." Sasuke patted Mikoto's stout belly. "If
you'd done your research properly, I could have been detained. I can't say I would have been
cooperative - you might have even killed me in the struggle - but only Gaara tried to reason with
me. The rest of you went for the jugular."
"You killed eighteen Samurai in twenty minutes."

"Twelve, actually. The others were killed by ancillary damage. I only fought those who stood in my way. I fought to get my revenge on Shimura Danzo, not you, not the Raikage, not anyone else. Just him."

"That's not how it looked to us."

"The Raikage attacked me head on. I would have bypassed you all if he hadn't."

"You friends tried to help you," Mei said. "Gaara. Your team. They were searching for you across the country, they were trying to bring you home. Apparently you weren't particularly gracious about it."

"They were too late," Sasuke replied. "Seven years too late. That's what happens when you grow up alone; things stick with you. Pain. Fear. Sadness. I was about to have my eighth birthday and my mother and father were dead. My clan, my world, was dead. They didn't die in battle, they weren't victims of war, or anything honorable - and when I say honorable, I mean understandable - they were assassinated. Killed in cold blood. I was all that was left. Do you think that made me particularly gracious?"

"Sasuke-"

"How about the apartment and the retainer the Government offered me? Their idea of reparation: food and shelter, the bare minimum. I dealt with my grief alone; how's that for gracious? No one talked to me. Everyone talked about me, but no one actually bothered to try to help. I should have been adopted into a family. Or assigned a foster home, a councillor even, for all the good they do. Someone. Even Naruto, the son of the Hokage, grew up in an orphanage and was later handed exactly the same thing, probably because he was a jinchuuriki and no one wanted him too near their kids, or even their prospective kids."

Mei just listened, her lips pressed in a thin line. Sasuke stopped for a moment and shifted Mikoto to the seat beside him.

"So no, I didn't learn to be gracious against those who opposed the one thing that made any sense to me at all. And sure, maybe I wouldn't have listened; maybe I would have just ended up the same anyway. The point is, no one tried because no one cared. No one cared because that's how Konoha decided to digest what happens when their decisions to deal with clans goes horribly wrong. I don't need to tell you this; it's all common knowledge. It's in my file. Everyone in this damn village knows about the Uchiha tragedy in one way or another and mostly they'd be incorrect. I never used to care what anyone else thought, but I do now. Because my daughter might. Or my son might. And I need to protect them from that. I'll be damned if their lives are in any way affected by some shitty, hundred year old lie."

Mei put her cup down, slowly. Sasuke stopped and made to refill it, but the Mizukage shook her head. She seemed to take this in as carefully as she could. A hundred year old lie, huh? Mei had heard the Uchiha had been persecuted from the moment they opposed the Senju, but wasn't clan warfare commonplace in those days? What had happened? Licking her lips, Mei nodded.

"So," she began. "Going back to your original question: you want to know how to rebuild yourself after you've been taken down. Plenty of people could help you with that: Kakashi for one. Tsunade. Even your old team mate. Why ask for me?"

"We both have a reputation put upon us," Sasuke said. "A shortcoming. Something inherited, and
something we have to constantly fight against. Yes, I could turn to Kakashi, Tsunade or even Naruto and to be honest, I've already reflected on what they've told me and what I had once learned from them. And that just made the differences between us even more apparent."

"What differences?"

"Family," Sasuke said. "Kakashi's and Tsunade's clans were assimilated into Konoha and became part of the base majority. Naruto never had ties to his clan; he never had family. He doesn't know what it's like to lose one. But you, Mizukage, wanted one. You tried and you tried but you couldn't. And then your ascension to Hokage sealed your fate."

"You think that makes us similar?" Mei said. "Your family was completely destroyed, your life as you knew it was obliterated and you consider that akin to… I don't know… a malfunctioning body? A poor decision? Bad luck?"

"I'm not going to lie, it's a stretch," Sasuke replied, honestly. "And yeah, sure, speaking to you now might seem to be my only chance to gain anything at all. I know how it looks, I'm not stupid. But this isn't about sides, it's about facts. Facts that are wrong. Facts that are wrong for me, same as they were for you. I want to protect my children because they're mine, they're Uchiha, and I want to change the system that could hurt them. And, as you have, I want to do it in a way that will be recorded. Legal and completely fair. That's why I value your opinion, Mizukage-sama. That's why I wanted to speak to you."

"Fine," Mei said, rubbing her chin. "I suppose I can give you a few pointers. I'd like to hear more of what you have in mind." That and she still wondered if she could somehow ask him about the 4th. He would be the only person to know. Since he seemed to be pulling all sorts out of his supposedly frank list of questions, perhaps she might take the opportunity to work in a few of her own. "But I wonder, what would you have said if I hadn't agreed to meet with you now? If the next time you saw me after the war was at your hearing and you hadn't had the opportunity to explain yourself. What then?"

Sasuke sat on this question for a moment, before he pushed his hair out of his eyes and looked up, resolute, but distant at the same time.

"I would ask how you, as someone who was given no choice but to relinquish the ability to have children, could let them be taken away from someone who was forced to carry them, birth them and yet still, after all that, learned to… to-" Sasuke paused. It was still so hard to say the words. He gave up. "You wanted children, Mizukage, yet now your body is as alien as mine is to me. You worked hard to accept your pain; I'm only just coming to terms with mine."

Mei nodded slowly. "I wonder if there are a lot of things you're starting to come to terms with," she said, watching as the young Uchiha managed to catch his daughter's hand before she lobbed one of the teaspoons across the room, one hand on his belly, pressing in a little as his internal passenger tried to stick his foot through his mother's ribs. "I don't really know what your endgame was, Sasuke. I'm not sure I ever really believed you were standing with us for Konoha, I wasn't convinced back then, I'm not even sure I am now. But I know what family is, even if I haven't lost one, even if I haven't borne one myself. My people are my family."

"Yes," Sasuke agreed calmly. "It is. Which is why you called off Kirigakure's graduation ceremony. You ended the era of the Bloody Mist. And it's why you forbade the military from illegally purchasing children bred for the very purpose of stealing the kekkei genkai from one village to distribute in another."

Well. That came out of nowhere. Mei just stared at him.
"What?"

"The black market trade of kekkei genkai in live merchandise," Sasuke replied. "Or perhaps the sector that deals with the collecting and selling of corpses, whether from the battlefield or from your own chuunin exams."

"Are you mad?"

"You must have called the exams off to stop the killing; you're a rational person. The 4th, not so much from what I've heard. Didn't you ever investigate the burials? Did you send teams to search for the bodies? Or did you just erect a mass grave and call it done, because you couldn't deny the sale of those dead shinobi really kept Kirigakure's economy afloat when Kumo was trying to establish an embargo on your trade routes and snuff out the growth of your export market."

"That is blatant slander, Sasuke." Mei shot back, coldly. "I suggest you shut your mouth right now, or-"

"It's only slander if I announce it publicly. Saying it to you is just offensive, whether it's correct or not. And I know that it's correct. Orochimaru might have slithered his way out of a lot of difficult conversations, but his game face wasn't as good as he thought it was. He wasn't shy to admit he learned a lot from the refugees whom he occasionally dealt with. The worst people are always the best resources."

"What are you talking about?"

"Wars are profitable," Sasuke said. "But this is something so many Kage tend to forget, or at least pretend to. You ask any shinobi and they'll tell you how wars are fought to protect Kage and country. Ask any citizen and they'll either spout patriotism or recount stories of terror and death. These opinions are legitimate. But ask any of the nomadic clans, talk to someone a little less honorable and they'll give you a very different story. These are the people who Orochimaru dealt with on a daily basis. I wasn't stupid enough not to tune in to his conversations every now and again."

"You think Kiri was involved in trafficking? Is that what you heard?"

"That's what I know." Sasuke replied, calmly. "I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt, considering you'd done so much for your country. But I started to suspect you knew more the moment you brushed over something I said. I want to know why."

"So this is extortion after all."

"No, of course not. How would I use this information against you from my position?"

"Interrogation, then."

"We agreed on truths, Mizukage - yours for mine. You're the one who broke that truce."

"Enlighten me. How?"

Sasuke leaned forward a little. "Why didn't you tell me how you knew I'd been travelling from the North?"

Mei didn't flinch. "The distance you mentioned… The time it took to return to your homeland. It's not a difficult equation."
"I could have travelled from the South. I could have come East. Either way would result in a long journey over several weeks. I never said whether I walked, sailed or otherwise. You responded immediately and brushed me off when I asked you about it."

"I did not, I-"

"You knew because you suspected Kirigakure was involved in the sale and purchase of illegally bred kekkei genkai, weren't you?"

"That," Mei halted her protest abruptly, narrowing her eyes. "Is a very dangerous allegation, Sasuke. I would watch what you say very closely if you're going to throw around accusations of that caliber."

"What do you know about the Kakkou?"

"Who?"

"The Kakkou. The foreign group that had been working with the Mist."

"I just told you, we are not responsible-" Mei massaged her temples in pure exasperation. Sasuke was weeding her out with lighting-fast efficiency and while he was throwing broad punches, he wasn't completely off target. And she had agreed on remaining open; she had to meet him somewhere in the middle to be able to bargain for information on similar terms. "I really don't know what you're talking about. I don't know anything about any foreigners."

"It doesn't make any sense though." Sasuke continued, more to himself than to Mei. "The Mist suffered for years from the persecution of shinobi with bloodline limits. Even when the tailed beast of Kirigakure vanished, the prejudice against nin with kekkei genkai continued under Yagura until you were appointed. Why would he need children bred specifically for their inherited abilities when he didn't want them?"

"Look, I don't know why," Mei relinquished, finally. "I don't. Really. I can only imagine it had much to do with the third caste when it was in revolt. And that used to happen so often..." There was a sigh, small, but weighty. Mei shifted to rest her cup on the table in front of her, and pushed her long fringe out of her eyes, tiredly. "I wasn't part of the trafficking operation, Sasuke. I don't think my predecessor was either, nor the Kage before us. Yes, it's true, we have a past that is patchworked in violence and depravity and that is something I have fought hard to repair. But although I had immediately dissolved some of Yagura's implementations, the caste system has been the hardest to address. And, naturally, there are... Certain relationships that had formed between the third caste members and other societies which further complicates things."

Sasuke nodded, wondering how deep those complications went. "Orochimaru had mentioned that he'd purchased a number of bodies from different villages. Kumo never made much of an attempt to hide the fact that they were interested in harnessing the power of the Byakugan, while there are many accounts of Iwa's public apology for their government sanctioned attacks during the first peace era. Konoha did its best to try and subdue Orochimaru, but underneath it all, they were still illegally experimenting under various guises. This third caste of Kiri... Did they sell the bodies of the local genin to other factions?"

"I suspected perhaps," Mei answered, carefully. "Processing stations were found on the mainland close to some of our trading routes. It might have been radicals acting independently, but I'm not entirely convinced they worked alone. There's always someone in charge, and that someone would have to know the mainland as well as the ocean in order to run a successful trade through the channels."
"And that someone was most likely a defector from the Mist. Or a mole." Sasuke pursed his lips, "The clan who held me, they mentioned… well, I overheard that test subjects had been acquired from a coastal town. One also threatened that he'd gained affiliates all the way from the mainland to the 'sacred island'. I assumed the sacred island was Mt Myoboku Island, so that meant—"

"One of the affiliates was probably us." Mei finished.

"Yes. Of course, I didn't believe him. Or at least, I didn't want to. But when you reacted before, I wondered; perhaps he wasn't as full of shit as he seemed. Now I have to know."

"Sasuke," Mei began. "You've suffered a lot. I… can't even begin to imagine, but you cannot just ask these kinds of questions without—"

"Why? It's a time of peace. The secrets are all out in the open aren't they? Or is it that they are merely supposed to be, when really each village would prefer to keep its skeletons tucked away in the closet where they belong. It's fine as long as we all get on now, isn't it? What are war spoils between friendly villages, mm?"

"This…" Mei shook her head. "If this is how you intend to talk to the Kage, then it will not work out well for you, Sasuke. I'm warning you now."

"And I'm warning you." Sasuke hissed, suddenly. "I thought they were dead. I thought they were gone, crushed. Wiped out. I entertained this fantasy because it was all I could do to keep going, to not drive myself insane. But I live with what they've done to me, so will my children and so will the others that these people have preyed upon. I need to know how far this rotten core goes. If you don't like that I speak plainly or that I ask questions without skirting the facts, so be it. My integrity stands. Will you help me or not?"

Mei sat back again and looked at the young ninja with a particularly disarming gaze. He didn't falter, only met her eyes - just as determined; just as hungry for the truth.

"You got all this because I dodged one single question?"

"It's been on my mind for awhile. Things have only just started to fall into place." Sasuke explained. "I needed a way to deal with certain... things. Being proactive has started to help." Once he'd begun to put two and two together, Sasuke had found that the mystery surrounding his captors and their goals might have branched much wider than he'd initially thought. Grief and fear and a whole lifetime of trauma had done its work to blunt the edges of Sasuke's analytical abilities, but once he gained a foot hold in a problem, he began to focus his efforts on understanding and solving the problem. It helped. It helped a lot. And the moment that Mei had stumbled, Sasuke found his opening. "Mizukage-"

"The documents I found were sparse," Mei said, just as Sasuke spoke. "Whomever gutted the labs, they did it well - they knew how to hide their scent. Forensics managed to find pieces here and there that identified them as some processing plants; some had holding cells, some were more like morgues. I suspected, as I said, radicals from the lower caste - many of which fled the village after the war. We questioned those captured and placed in custody but there were little they could say. Apparently they had traded to various groups - most to the mountains past Iwa, but the market on cadavers had ceased a long time ago. I was, like you, convinced that the whole operation had been smoked out, dying with the legacy of the 4th…. Then…"

"Then you heard about me. And it made you wonder if in fact the market hadn't died, it evolved to live subjects instead."
"Were you taken by Kirinin?" Mei asked. Sasuke shook his head.

"No. I was taken by another… group. The Kakkou - the ones I just mentioned. They didn't look like any shinobi I'd ever seen before. But I'd also heard stories from other prisoners who had different experiences. Some described the same people that took me, some spoke of their abductors wearing plain masks. None had identifying features that belied any clan." Sasuke picked at the hem of his shirt before he looked up again. "If you believed that trade had been abolished years ago, what made you think that it had started again? Not just me, surely."

Mei looked away. When she spoke, her voice was troubled. "The birth of the Shinobi Alliance caused greater ripples in the hierarchy of our society than we had anticipated. For those without a caste system, it was simply a matter of gaining a larger army, but for us, suddenly the differences between first caste shinobi and third caste shinobi were greatly reduced. I'd managed to settle several ongoing disputes - mostly regarding payment and transactions between the new divisions. Then the father of our current Daimyo died."

Sasuke frowned, confused. "The father of the Daimyo?"

"Mm, Kawaguchi Hisao. His son Genrou took over from him years ago, but the elder still lived in the royal summer house in the mountains surrounding the coast. Naturally I offered to hold a public service to honor his father's passing, but the Daimyo declined. He'd said that he'd cut ties with Hisao a long time ago and he didn't care to celebrate their estrangement. So he suggested instead that his father's home should be cleared out and turned into a residence for visiting Lords, Ladies or Kage. Kind of a nod to the alliance I guess. I didn't see any point in pushing the issue - not when the previous Daimyo... well, let's just say no one would really miss him." Mei shrugged. "He wasn't the most pleasant man. And I can't say that I was expecting a friendly welcome from his men either. What I didn't expect was to be attacked."

"They went after you?" Sasuke frowned. "They had something to hide, obviously."

"Wish I'd seen it that way before I travelled all the way up there," Mei grouched. "And took far too small a team with me. Turns out he had a much larger garrison there than I had anticipated. He was hiding something all right, and he'd selected a cabal of third caste shinobi and deserters from Kiri to protect it. No one ever suspected him because no one ever knew these people existed. We managed to detain them after a long battle, but they fought… desperately. I couldn't understand what was the matter. Then, after we had secured them and searched the mansion, we discovered why."

"The trafficking," Sasuke breathed. "It was never Kirigakure at all. It was the Elder Daimyo and deserters of the third caste who ran the coastal routes and supplied to the market."

"The summer house and its tower was positioned perfectly to overlook the channel," Mei continued. "They were guarding the passage, billing whomever needed to pass Kirigakure undetected, while at the same time buying and selling bodies to these people. There were records: instances of a general fee, like a retainer, and taxes. A type of gaol had been cut into the cliffs below, along with a laboratory."

"A laboratory?"

"Mm, yes. Well, something of a medical theatre anyway - more like a morgue, perhaps. It was empty; I'm not sure for how long, but..." Mei halted for a moment, her hand restless on her knee before it slipped into her pocket, pulling out a small volume - about the size of a bingo book. Rather than the usual utilitarian appearance of the former, it was rather decorative - bound in gold leaf and pale leather. When Mei flipped through it, Sasuke noted the pages were thicker and heavier than
paper. It looked ancient. Mei licked her lips again and smoothed her hand over a open spread. "I had an ulterior motive to visit you too," she admitted. "Well, several, actually. But for this... I don't know. I wasn't sure how to bring it up. I actually thought I'd be delivering it to Kakashi, but when you started to ask questions…. Then you talked about these... Kakkou people..." She turned the book around and passed it over the table to him. "...I figure it would be more useful in your hands."

Sasuke took the text carefully, supporting the spine as he moved it into his lap. Now that it was in his hanhds he recognized the vellum used to craft the pages - a material most of Orochimaru's antique scrolls were made from. It was far less refined, however; thicker and heavier. It smelled of old ink and hide and had a metallic tang about it, courtesy of the gold embossing. The writing was that of the foreigners: a strange chicken scratch of characters linked together by one long, solid line. He'd never been able to read it, but he'd recognized a few words that he'd seen used as titles and labels for things.

It was one word that he noticed which sent a chill running through him. One single word printed neatly beneath a photograph of a young ninja poised in battle, ready to attack. Unlike the bingo books Sasuke had seen in both Kakashi and Orochimaru's possession, this image seemed to have been taken candidly - it was badly framed and blurred as though the photographer had been moving quickly to take the shot. Leaves covered the entire left side and the whole composition was at a haphazard tilt.

There was no mistaking the subject, however. The symbol on the ninja's hitae ate was far too out of focus to distinguish, but those red eyes were a complete giveaway. Not to mention the fact that Sasuke would have recognized him anywhere.

"That's…." he said, his mouth dry. "That's my..."

"You know him? Thought so," Mei said, watching Sasuke's face carefully. "Who is he? Why would he be in this book? The whole thing is full of entries just the same. The images are either taken by some real amatuer, or they're simply drawings depicting the person of interest. There's a Hyuga woman in there too, but the picture is much older and-"

"I don't… understand." Sasuke interrupted, his eyes wide with shock. "He's dead. He was dead. All this time and… and…"

"All this time and he was with them, maybe? Is that it? Look, there are markings here - his is the only recent photograph that has them." Mei pointed to the set of sigils that stood alone beneath the image. "It's a tag of some sort? Like we have in our bingo books."

"It's not a bingo book." Sasuke breathed, feeling the strength sapping out of his fingers. "That's not what they do. This thing... it's… it's more like an order catalogue."

"So you have seen one of these before?"

"No. No I haven't. But that word-" Sasuke moved his finger slowly, almost drunkenly to rest by Mei's beneath the photo. His hand was shaking.

"You know what it says?"

Sasuke did. He didn't know much of the Kakkou's language - their alphabet was more difficult than any he'd seen before and he certainly hadn't gathered enough examples of it to piece together a cipher system. But he'd seen that word before, the first few sigils anyway. The last he guessed, though he knew he wasn't wrong. It was the prison code. It was the name for their experiments. It had been on a plastic wristband that had rested on his hand, under the tubes and bandages that
somehow held his protesting body together. It was on their clipboards, it was on his cell. It was his name. A new name for a new body. A new name in hell.

The air began to thicken in the room and Sasuke felt his lungs struggle against the weight of it. After a moment Sasuke realized Mei was speaking to him again and he turned to look at her, his eyes glassy, his cheeks drawn.

"Sasuke," Mei said, slowly, gently. "Sasuke... what does it say?"

"It says... #UCH01," he all but whispered, staring at the small, pathetically blurry image again.

"#UCH01?"

"I'm #UCH02." Sasuke went on. "It means at some point, the Kakkou were holding my cousin. It means that up until they found me, Uchiha Shisui might have still been alive."

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Yu no Kuni, 15th March,
Year of the Hare

The journey had been shorter than Caliga had increased greatly along the Kusa/Otogakure line since the war as most of the bandits had either been apprehended by the alliance or had evacuated further back into the mountains. Caliga hitched as often as he could, combining his unique ability to disguise himself and his strong accent with a good sense of humor to set people at ease. Even better was his enthusiasm in sharing a very large and very expensive bottle of sake with his charitable hosts. He said he'd been gifted the booze (along with his sword) for his assistance during the war. His companions bought the story without hesitation. Liquor was, as always, an excellent oil for the stickiest truths, while peace fattened the sense of trust between strangers.

Caliga left the convoy on the evening of his second day travelling with them, though he watched as the carts disappeared into the distance. His hands itched to fight them; to leave no traces, but he calmed himself as he made his way into the forest, through bracken and brush - following a path patterned by the stars that were only just visible through the dark canopy above.

The old man aimed a crossbow at him when he opened the hideout door. Caliga might have navigated the traps and defenses around the stronghold with practiced ease, it would still take several moments before the elderly lord would lower the bolt. Kawaguchi Hisao was not a friendly, nor a trusting man, but he certainly wasn't a dead man. Nor did he intend to be for some time.

"I expected you two months ago," he said with a voice like the darkness beneath a trap door. Caliga merely raised his chin.

"There has been a delay in shipping. I had to see to it myself," he said. "Seems we've been having a little trouble with the merchandise.

"Delay, my arse hole." Hisao snorted, though lowered the weapon if only to get a better glare on the taller man. "I can only pay so much to keep your boats safe and those damn freedom-spouting shit-pieces out of the harbor. Shifting operations was a disastrous idea, boy. I might be able to read the tides from here, but I cannot always predict when the sentries run their patrols! It was much easier when I had access to their records."

"And it was also much easier for that beautiful viper of a Kage to catch you out, Kawaguchi-sama. Your son was vying to flush you from your home and bring you back to his own palace to live as his..." Caliga said the word with a verbal grimace - as though it tasted foul on his tongue.

"...beneficiary."
"That little turd."

"Therefore I shall gather your intel for you, to keep your knowledge of Kirigakure's movements current. As for money, that is no problem. I will attend to your finances in the morning."

"Hn," Hisao snorted, which was about as amicable as he would get. "Where are the rest of you? Don't you usually turn up with a team of greasy, freckled giants?"

"Oh we're paring our operations down." Caliga lied smoothly. "With the change in social temperatures after that war we've got to be more careful."

"Careful? Like the way I was turfed out of my home? Things were left behind, boy. Who knows what those idiots might have found?"

Caliga couldn't have cared less. Nothing led back to him - nothing ever could. The notes that had been kept in Kirigakure were old - the shipments had sailed long ago. The cargo that had been shifted was long since destroyed or sold. Tracing them would be impossible. If the Mizukage interrogated Hisao's third caste guard, they'd find very little evidence of any current activity. The only relics that survived the Mist's long history of illegal trafficking were Hisao himself, his medic and advisor, Yukimura (a man just as marinated by time as his lord was) and their single commodity - one prisoner that Caliga himself had personally requested Hisao bring with him to care for. Caliga smiled his long, treacherous smile and bowed low to the Lord before him, his mocking eyes watching the floor.

"They will not find out, Kawaguchi-sama," he purred. "After all, they haven't made a move in years to try to find you. And the war covered our tracks nicely. Half your caste guard either deserted or were killed in battle. It was the perfect cover."

"Well, fine," Hisao mumbled, appeased for now. "I suppose you're interested in seeing your merchandise?"

Caliga smiled. "As ever, I am in your debt."

The staircase down to the lower chambers and Yukimura's surgery seemed longer than the journey across the Grass and Sound combined, but once Caliga was standing inside the doorway, facing the small raised bed inside. Yukimura greeted him with an elegant wave, nodding toward the sleeping figure on the bed.

"He woke for the first time a few days ago," the medic said, rising with shaky persistence to his feet. As he walked past the bed, his fingers tapped on the mattress arthritically, as though he were playing and instrument. "Been in and out of consciousness since then. He's confused. But docile."

"Severe head trauma can have that effect," Caliga said. The medic shrugged.

"Only time will tell how much damage has occurred from his injuries. I do not doubt that such a prolonged coma has left some significant defects. He might be growing stronger but... well... this is no longer a quality product, you understand-"

"If you're worried about payment, don't." Caliga said, breezily. "For your efforts I'll give you twice the amount the Kakkou pays for living candidates. He is worth every cent, I promise you. Especially when you give him my little birthday gift."

"You mean... You have it?" Yukimura's eyes widened. "You found it? It's here?"

"It is," Caliga patted his jacket. "I'll let you examine it if you like. Only grant me a few moments
with my friend here. It's been so long since we've spoken, I'm anxious to know if he remembers me."

"Of course." Yukimura left without a further word, though it was clear Caliga's news was exciting. The foreigner didn't bother to acknowledge him as he closed the door; Caliga's eyes were trained on slim figure lying prone on the mattress before him, their arms crossed over their chest, long lashes splayed on thin, sun-starved cheeks. His possession. His shinobi pet. His alone. Caliga let his fingers wander over Shisui's forehead and down into his dark hair - now long and slightly curly, rather like the heroes of legends only those from the North were familiar with. The backs of his nails traced Shisui's jaw, sliding down to his pale neck where strong fingers curled about the Uchiha's throat in a pincer, tensed and tempted.

Sensing danger through his slumber - an ability that was tattooed into his DNA through extensive training - Shisui let out a small gasp in his sleep of which Caliga caught and stifled as he pressed a kiss against the other's mouth, deep but heartless. Shisui murmured, still tense, though his lips parted slightly. Caliga dragged his teeth against the soft flesh, drawing blood. He eased back then, enjoying the way it welled on Shisui’s bloodless skin.

"Who… wh-what…" Shisui tried. His voice was faint and watery and it disappeared between Caliga's teeth as he kissed him again. Blood smeared on the skin between the two, blooming like pigment in water.

"My Lord," Caliga breathed, stroking the side of Shisui's face with gentle, homocidal fingers. "My Lord you have returned." He spoke in Shisui's language, not his own. He could have tried, maybe it might have helped support the facade he was creating but Shisui was broken and confused. It would have taken him too long to learn. Besides, it wasn't as though he would be meeting any of the other Kakkou any time soon, Caliga had made sure of that. "I've been waiting for you."

"Lord?" Shisui managed through cracked lips and a mouth that was dry and tacky. He was vaguely aware of his body, he could feel the weight of it pressing against the thin mattress beneath him and his skin itched at the tickle of his hair curling about his neck and against his ears. He felt the warmth of Caliga's presence and the smooth sensation of his hands on his skin. But none of it seemed particularly real. Voices seemed distant and muffled in the darkness that surrounded him. And then there was the darkness itself. Thick and strange. Usually light could be sensed or seen through the eyelids, but Shisui saw nothing. His brow creased in confusion, though he didn't try to open his eyes quite yet. Something inside told him that probably wasn't a good idea. "Don't… understand…"

"There was a battle, my Lord," Caliga explained, remaining a close and constant presence as though he were imprinting on his captive. "A great battle that shook the world. You fought for your people against the gods of this world. You fought bravely, but you blinded by their foul children and their great wyrm with-" Caliga paused, his lip curling in a feral manner. "Yellow eyes and an acid tongue. He took your sight, my Lord."

Blinded. Shisui knew in a kind of obliquitous way that true darkness could only occur two ways: deep underground or through complete blindness. Considering the temperature of the room and that he could hear doors moving and footsteps down distant corridors on occasion, he doubted he was that far underground. So that left the loss of his sight. Which, given his disconnect to his body and the dreamlike state he couldn't quite shake, was most likely the logical conclusion.

"Who are you?" He asked, finally moving his hands a little so that he might might touch his companion, learn more about them, or his environment. Caliga let him.

"My name is Caliga," he said, guiding Shisui's hand to his heart, allowing him to feel the rhythm
"I am your loyal servant, my Lord Aodh."

"Aodh?" Shisui repeated with some difficulty. That was a strange word. It sounded like a question.

"Your name, my Lord." Caliga said. "Aodh. Son of Lir and Aoibh. You have come to seek your revenge on those who have stolen the gifts of the Aos Sidhe."

"The...wh... what? I don't..." Shisui swallowed hard, his thoughts sluggish as they waded through the swamp in his mind. He couldn't remember.... The names didn't sound familiar at all - positively unrecognizable - but there was nothing else for him to grasp either. He was hollow. The only person he cling to, the only information he had was from this man. "I don't recognize... any of that. I don't... understand."

"No. You were so badly injured you had to take a mortal form," Caliga explained, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Something of a human body. You had to rest, enter limbo; let your body heal. The enemy took your eyes, but I have obtained another's for you."

It was then that Caliga reached inside his tunic, fishing out a small pouch that held a solid, spherical object within its leather folds. He guided Shisui's hand to the receptacle, and turned the small globe out into his palm. Shisui held it gently, noting the crystalline material and the lightness of it before he felt a pulsing sensation radiate from its core. A warmth that was pleasant, yet eerie at the same time. Shisui recognized that feeling. He'd known it a long time ago and it had nearly destroyed him.

It was power. Concentrated, volatile power. Shisui wet his lips with spit he didn't have. He tasted blood.

"Another eye?" He whispered and Caliga nodded, his grin cutting his face like a trench.

"The Bloody One blesses you," he said. "He has seen fit to aid you in your vengeance. You will see again, my Lord, through the eye of Crom."

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: Extortion and trafficking and.... Faeries? Oh my.

Sasuke fires shots. Mei retaliates with a bomb. Shisui is very, very confused and not into sexy times with a psychopath. Caligas got so many chips on his shoulder he could give the Venus de milo a run for her money. Did I mention he was batshit crazy?

Thanks for reading! Hope this doesn't have too many mistakes - I'm all thumbs when it comes to editing. Sasuke's getting his feet back beneath him now - we might be getting softer moments from him in the future, but he's overcoming that block of trauma that was beating the crap out of him. Also, his bedside manner is a bit shit, ah well. See you next time for Naruto interrupting, Caliga being sleazy... and other things that I think of. Hooray?
The Red Thread

Konoha, 15th March
Year of the Hare

"Your cousin," Mei repeated. It was a cloud of an answer, a small huff of air that barely formed the words, but the tragedy of it was so great, Mei floundered to provide anything more. Admittedly she knew very little about the Uchiha clan, she knew very little about the Uchiha at all, really; no one outside of Konoha did. But clans were family, and on an understanding of family dynamics, she felt she could sympathise. "Sasuke, I'm-

"It's nothing," Sasuke interposed, curtly. "He wasn't even a cousin, really, not a blood relative. He was my brother's friend. Just another guy that turned up for training every day."

Silence fell between them. The same kind of silence that accompanied a battle of uncertain victory once the swords were shattered and the blood ran dry. The silence of someone fracturing on the inside, old wounds that would not heal, feral edges that still cut. The colour had fallen out of Sasuke's face and his eyes seemed much larger. His breath came slow and steady but in such a measured fashion Mei could tell it was practiced. Deliberate. He didn't look at her. In the presence of a Kage, that could and should have been called out as rudeness, but Mei was far more forgiving than that. Reigning in emotions was something she was well familiar with. A Kage must know the lay of the land before her, and that cartography included her villagers and immediate council as well. She could glide across rudeness as though it had never happened. She could direct conversation like an orchestral conductor, effortlessly and with elegance. And she had a reasonable idea on how to speak to people in pain. It was a knowledge that empathy built over the cold pit in a wounded soul.

Sasuke was blunt and driven - his interview only proved that farther than she'd understood already - and that meant distractions needed to come in the form of truth and tasks. Sasuke liked truth because it provided answers and he acted upon those answers using discretion that was, if not somewhat repurposed, then confident at the very least. Time and boredom allowed him to wallow and something already (possibly innately) advised Mei that Sasuke wasn't the type of person to do well in wallowing nor in the arbitrary comfort of a stranger.

"Do you recognize anyone else?" She asked instead, pointing toward the book again. Sasuke's eyes followed her finger. Slowly he picked it up and started to flip through the pages. His expression said no, but there was something in his eyes that seemed doggedly interested. "From what I could tell, he seemed to be the only Uchiha."

"Mm," Sasuke murmured, gazing at the text and images before him. Mei watched as the concern weighing in the back of his mind began to show. His fingers tapped; his teeth worried his lower lip. There was an twitch to his mannerisms, a quake under the skin that proved anxiety was a churning dark river washing out the banks of sense in his mind. He was painfully on edge, trying so hard to keep himself under control while his imagination surged into bloodier territories.

Then his daughter, who was sitting on the seat beside him, reached over and rested her small hand on his arm. It might have been involuntary, but Mei suspected there was a closer bond between the two than could be explained - possibly one that wasn't even typical with children of her age. Mikoto looked up at her mother with those huge dark eyes, lips pursed and open as though she'd
forgotten what she wanted to say and in an instant Sasuke was hers. He abandoned the text immediately, turning to pull her into his lap, pressing her close to him. He kissed the top of her forehead - an absent gesture, more instinct than anything - and rubbed her back as he returned to the book, this time viewing it over the crest of Mikoto's unruly hair, the scent of her crown warm around him. His fingers stopped shaking and the muscle that was clenched so tightly in his jaw relaxed.

"Have you investigated any of the other names?" he asked, finally, after clearing his throat with a small cough. "What of the untagged entries?"

"A few are still alive. Some died during the third ninja war, some in the fourth. Some of old age…" Mei said. "Then there are the entries with only illustrations and the names written entirely in that… language which I can't read at all. Those I had to skip."

"I'd imagine they're dead too," Sasuke said, musing over one of the said illustrations. "Some of these look like they're cut from propaganda booklets - the kind that were popular during the second war. So they're either far too old to reproduce or they're dead."

Mei watched him a while longer as he gazed over the morbid catalogue, then slowly slipped her fingers under the edge of the cover and eased it closed, resting her hand on top.

"These people," she said. "This… Kakkou. Does the Hokage know about them?"

"Probably." Sasuke hadn't explained it himself of course - it was Tsunade who relayed the information out of concern for Sasuke's well being.

"Has he taken action?"

"I told… He was informed that they were all dead." Sasuke replied, with some difficulty. "That's what I'd believed and what I had… What I told Tsunade. I hadn't known how far their operation spidered out into other countries, I hadn't thought-"

"You hadn't thought, or you didn't want to remember?"

Sasuke blinked. "What?"

"It's a self defense mechanism, a side effect of trauma. In your case-" Mei shifted in her seat, gently pulling the book into her lap. "-extensive trauma. I don't believe for one second that a greater operation hadn't crossed your mind at some point."

"You think I was withholding information?"

"I think you were dealing with things a piece at a time," Mei explained. "Compartmentalizing. Saving pieces for later. Oh, you can see the whole picture all right, but it's frightening. It brings back memories that will haunt you. The kind that shut you down completely. And if you've shut down, you can't keep moving. You can't care for your daughter. I'd wager your ability to sequester information was, maybe still is, one of your best defences as you've had many years to become very good at it."

Sasuke looked at her, his hands moving in slow circles on his daughter's back, keeping her close. Sequestering information. Breaking it down, piece by foul piece. Mei was right. He had learned to deal with things in fragments from the very beginning, moving memory to memory, day to day, minute to minute. If he'd really sat down and tried to face everything that had happened to him, he would have lost it. Once, Itachi's questionable actions had focused the blame and anger into a drive for revenge that was so strong, his training and talent afforded him the ability to block out almost
everything else. After the Kakkou, he didn't have the luxury. He was weak. He had two dependants. And that sensuous, salacious blame? Well, that just collapsed on top of him, just like the rest of his life.

"Sasuke, I came in here with an agenda of my own and that hasn't changed." Mei continued, levelly. "What has changed, however, is my focus."

"Your… focus?"

"Yes. You see, your trial only involves all the Kage because of your actions at the summit, then your participation later during the war and Madara's defeat. This is really a first for all of us - there have only been a few times in history were a criminal trial has been observed by all five villages. Frankly, it all feels a bit redundant to me. If you still had your abilities, if you were threatening Konoha, then perhaps, but this seems more like an opportunity for A to air his grudges - something he’s had little opportunity to do now that the alliance bonds us all. I had figured that Konoha might sentence you to some time in prison, or at least some form punishment given that your actions during the war would probably grant you impunity. But I never speculated this would amount to much. Why would I?"

She looked up then, feeling the weight of Sasuke's gaze on her, the reaction to her proclamation that the impact of his actions and their consequences meant so little. But she was right, why would it? The Uchiha, with the exception of Obito and Madara, were Konoha's problem. Outside of world wars, they were spoken of by reputation alone; for the prowess of their jutsu, not the greatness of their actions.

"Naturally I was curious about the child," Mei said as she slipped the book back into her bag. "You didn't seem like the type to settle down. You had that girl with you-"

"Karin," Sasuke supplied, automatically.

"Right. But it seems you left Konoha alone on the eve of the War's end. No girl in sight. No girl mentioned upon your return. I thought that perhaps your lover had died. I thought the baby could have been an orphan, maybe she was somehow linked to you or your family? Whatever it was it struck me as odd. I was expecting perhaps a fight for custody, or a plea for sanctuary… Then I received your invitation and I figured you were making a play for leniency given your situation. You had a dependant, you became a parent. You needed to speak to someone who might lend a kinder ear. Certainly the only woman in the council of Kage would be the best place to start. That made sense."

"That's not entirely-"

"No, it's not. And with your veritable shakedown of my personal files, Sasuke, you proved that rather quickly. You're blunt to the point of rudeness, but, like your famous jinchuuriki friend, it seems to work. Yet while Naruto supports his austere manner with overbearing integrity, you have… well… I guess the best way to describe it is an ignorance of tact. And a keen eye for detail to back it up."

Sasuke frowned. "The truth shouldn't be seen as something rude. It just… is."

"Exactly. But considering most people think the opposite and do their best to pad the truth to take away the uncomfortable effects it might have, your opinion of it is particularly refreshing. You trust in truth and you trust in the good that it will do. I think I rather like that about you." Mei brushed the creases out of her dress then pushed up to stand, further smoothing her outfit. "I suppose you might just have my support, Uchiha Sasuke. Or at least my interest. Well done."
"You're going?" Sasuke looked up at her quizzically. "But -"

"We've covered a lot this morning. And while I would like to speak to you further about this Kakkou clan and their involvement with Kirigakure, I should report to the Hokage first. I'm anxious to know his plans with the information he has and if he has any recommendations of how the Mist can help. Also, you need some time." The latter was said with a sideways glance and a small but kind smile. "For your brother's friend."

"I told you, it's nothing."

"And I thought we agreed on truths." Mei answered. Sasuke reflected on that for a moment, then stood up to join her, nodding.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Do I need to tell someone I'm leaving?" Mei looked around the small apartment. "Surely you're not meant to be left alone."

"Akamaru's in the courtyard," Sasuke told her. "He'll send a clone to get Tsunade. It's fine. I'm... covered, I guess."

"Good," Mei slipped on her shoes and stepped out onto the stoop, sliding the Kakkou's Bingo Book into her bag. "Take care, Uchiha-Kun. I'll see you soon. Probably sooner than we both think."

"All right." Sasuke replied, woodenly. He followed Mei onto the balcony as she left, watching as Akamaru jolted to attention as she passed. The ninken cocked an ear when she appeared to speak to him, then he summoned a clone which leapt off into the street ahead of her. Then the real Akamaru padded up the stairs and greeted his charge with a friendly snort and a swish of his tail.

"You good?" Akamaru seemed to ask. Sasuke nodded mutely, still dazed from the revelation. Good. Sure. He'd survived the Mizukage just fine, in fact he'd probably put her through a worse grilling than she might have to him. But... Shisui. Shisui had been alive. How? Why hadn't Itachi known? Why hadn't Itachi gone to help him - at least return him to the village, give Sasuke someone to mourn with. Naturally, the answer was there at the back of his mind, but the shock surpassed it. The feeling of such unnecessary loss blanketed over any sense of an answer Sasuke could find. He was all questions now, all asking: why? Why? Why had the Kakkou been able to take Shisui? Why had his beloved cousin had suffered the same fate? Why?!

Sasuke felt cold. Ill. Distant. Though he tickled Mikoto and picked her up, he did so without smiling. He saw Shisui's face in hers. He heard his voice lying under the silence and in the creaks beneath his footsteps as he padded back to his room. Idly he was aware of Akamaru's mutterings, then there was the sound of the front door opening and closing again, but they were muffled by a fleece of shock in his ears. He was a world of one single question reverberating like a constant whine in his head and he couldn't shake it.

His back was to the hallway, so when the hands fell on his shoulders, Sasuke thought that Tsunade had returned and he found a sudden crack force an opening into the tension. He closed his eyes, letting the tears behind them gum his lashes slightly. With a quiet, budding joy (something Sasuke was very unused to), Sasuke leaned back into the touch, allowing it. Tsunade had earned that right; she'd seen him at his worst. It was an indulgence that he afforded himself to be honest with her, but she deserved it.

"They had... my cousin," he said in a voice barely distinguishable from a breath. Mikoto was held tightly against his chest. She lay quietly, listening to the sound of his heart, her small fingers
clutched in his shirt, twisting. "They had Shisui. He was the first. I thought he was dead - we all thought it. But it was so much worse than that."

Feet shifted against the floor, bare feet on wood. There was a pause, a slight intake of breath. Then the hands, larger, stronger than Sasuke recognised, pulled him back against a firm chest that was definitely not belonging to the former Gokage. A voice, deeper, gentle, but certainly male said:

"Your cousin?"

Sasuke yanked himself away with a gasp that burned against the back of his throat. Eyes wild with panic, his heart detonating in his chest, he whipped around to see Naruto standing before him, his expression writ with surprised horror.

"S-sasuke!"

"What the… hell are you doing here?" Sasuke managed, staggering backwards as Mikoto began to cry at the fuss. "You can't… You can't just… What the hell, idiot?"

"I'm sorry! Akamaru asked me to come over. I thought it was ok!"

It was. It would have been. With Akamaru there it wasn't the same as Sasuke being alone with Naruto - he still wasn't sure he could cope with that - but now he was caught in the midst of another emotional turmoil, his ability to think clearly impaired, his senses running haywire. He could have dealt with it had it been Tsunade who walked into the room, but it was Naruto. *Naruto* who could hear his panic. *Naruto* who could see… He'd see… He didn't want him to see-

*He can't see me break. He can't…*

"Sasuke!"

He'd see him frightened. He'd see him… anything less than… than perfect. In this form, that meant everything. He couldn't give in to Naruto, as stupid as it sounded. There was no competition, there was no fight, no battle, but even so, Sasuke felt defenseless. Shameful. *Weak*. But even if he didn't look like himself, he could still act like Uchiha Sasuke. He could still be himself. He didn't have to-

"Sasuke!"

*Lose.*

"Sasuke!"

"What?" Sasuke rasped with more effort than he realized.

"Breathe!"

Sasuke stared at him with wide eyes, wondering if Naruto had gone mad. Of course he was breathing, he couldn't talk without breathing. Only it was a little hard, wasn't it? And for some reason he wasn't getting enough air. His fingers felt itchy, tingly and his knees buckled as though they were made out of paper. He dropped, but Naruto caught him before he collided with the ground and maneuvered him carefully to lean against the side of the bed. Mikoto was wailing but the sound of it was merely a buzz and he held her stiffly with shaking hands and white fingers.

Suddenly there was a blanket over his shoulders and a pair of blue eyes in front of him, dredged in concern and fringed in milk-coloured lashes. Warm hands rested on his knees and Naruto spoke
softly, sounding so unlike him and yet so wonderfully him at the same time.

"Breathe, ok? Just breathe."

"S-shut up. Don't touch me."

"Ok. Not touching." The hands were moved, though Naruto looked slightly crestfallen at the order. He placed his hands on his thighs as he knelt before his friend, watching him dutifully. Sasuke focussed on rounding his breath, taking larger, deeper gasps while letting the anxiety settle. Naruto bit his lip. "Sorry, Sasuke. I… um… didn't mean to startle you."

"Can't… just come in here like that…"

"I shoulda known better; I just… I seriously thought your were expecting me." Naruto said, sounding very sorry indeed. Sasuke shook his head after a moment, focusing on calming Mikoto down.

"Fine."

"That was a bad one. You want some water or something?"

Sasuke frowned. "A bad one what?"

"Panic attack?" Naruto said, tentatively. To his surprise Sasuke accepted the diagnosis, though there was the usual grunt as pretext before he said:

"Fine."

"Maybe I should get… Oh-" Naruto disappeared for a second, but when he came back into view he was holding the glass from Sasuke's nightstand, half full with fresh water. "Here. Used to find that it helped a lot - specially when you get that big clog in your throat." He shuddered. "Ugh, that was the worst."

"You used to-" Sasuke stared at him. "How the hell do you know anything about-" panicking "- them?"

"Kinda had 'em a lot," Naruto said, still holding the glass toward the other. "Back in the day. Well, not so far back, actually. Had to take a bit of a vacation once cos… well… Things were a bit hard."

"A bit hard?" Sasuke couldn't believe it. Things weren't hard for Naruto. He was well known for bashing his head against problems until they went away or talking until they lost all sense of meaning and had to agree. Or were his panic attacks more dangerous because he was a jinchuuriki? Sasuke had seen how Naruto could react unconsciously - transforming with the power of the Kyuubi's unstable seal, but with the fox on his side now, that shouldn't have been a problem.

"After the war, you know. Everything was, you know..." Naruto shrugged. "Things got a bit… surreal. But um… it's ok. Tsunade taught me a few techniques and making it to Sage Mode took a lotta concentrating and meditation so… Guess I kinda got through it."

A bit surreal. Was that how Naruto processed Sasuke's attack? His grief? His betrayal? Did it all come down to a shrug and oh it all went a bit pear-shaped but we're all ok so good for us! No. Sasuke knew evasion when he saw it, and he looked away, wondering if Naruto could sense that spice of guilt around him.

"Naruto." He started to say, then thought the better of it and sat quietly for a moment, patting
Mikoto's back, listening to the sounds of the street around them. The birds. The drone of chatter from the marketplace in the distance. Oddly, Naruto made no attempt to break the silence, but instead remained still, his eyes trained to the floor. It was the quietest Sasuke had ever known the blond to be. Though at length he found the end to the conversation he'd been saving in his head for a long time. It didn't feel like the right moment to bring it up, but the trial was approaching, and the newspapers had only told him so much.

"You didn't tell them, did you," he said in a low voice. As was common with Sasuke, what should have been phrased as a question innately became a statement. "The truth. You never told anyone the truth."

"You mean... A-about what we-"

"About Kaguya."

Naruto's face fell. Kaguya. Yes, Kaguya. The Great Pale Elephant in the room. The great secret shared by none but Team Seven. The one that would set the Uchiha free and (according to some) ruin everything. Naruto stared at his fingernails. Absently, he wondered how on earth they'd gotten so long. The never used to be long.

"No," he said.

"Or the Infinite Tsukuyomi."

"No."

"No one knows about it. You, Sakura and Kakashi - you never mentioned it, did you."

"We couldn't," Naruto started to explain. "It... It was just-"

"What did you tell them instead?"

"We... That it was Madara. That his Eye of the Moon plan had them all enslaved, feeding the World Tree until you and I freed them all."

"You mean you freed them," Sasuke interjected. Naruto glanced up then, narrowing his eyes.

"You were a hero too, Sasuke. I didn't say anything less than that."

"If you said that much to begin with. So my clan will remain villains forever. Using Madara as the scapegoat only cements that."

"Well if you put it like that, sure. Okay. So you were going to start a revolution that was gonna start with killing the Kage and keeping the Biju as prisoners until you didn't need them any more!" Naruto parried. "You were still trying to be the villain, so what difference does it make?"

Sasuke laughed a little then, a short bark of a laugh completely devoid of mirth.

"What difference... That's great. That's just great. Nothing changes - you're just proving me right. Nothing changes without a catalyst. Nothing. The Shinobi world lumbers on in its comfortable safe zone, forever stuck in its prejudiced cycle because no one has ever accepted that change is exactly what it needs."
"What are you talking about?" Naruto frowned. "Kaguya was trying to enslave the world for her own power. Madara... well, he was really Kaguya wasn't he? But he was tryin' to do the same thing. Rule. And you-"

"I never said rule," Sasuke cut in. "I said change. I said revolution. I meant to become the enemy that you'd all fight so you'd stop fighting amongst yourselves. That's how I felt real power ought to be used. That's what I wanted for this world. It wasn't to enslave or destroy anyone apart from those who clung to the old world. And those who could stop me. The rest would have their own enemy to fight forever. I'd orchestrate it. It would've been different. It would have worked."

"It wouldn't have worked." Naruto said. "You can't make people change through violence like that!"

"I beg to differ," Sasuke said, drily. "After all, I ended up returning to Konoha, didn't I?"

He didn't need to state the rest, Naruto could put the pieces together himself without much help. And he was right, of course. Not even Naruto, with all his talk of redemption and friendship, his never ending trust, his undying hope, not even he could bring Sasuke back to Konoha. But two years of constant abuse at the hands of madmen. Two years of rape, humiliation and fear without any nuance of power left Sasuke with little else to do but change. He could never argue that point more concisely and Naruto just nodded with a numb expression.

"I... yeah. S-sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I don't expect you to agree with me. You wouldn't be you if you agreed with me."

Naruto picked at his fingers some more, toying with the skin about his halffoons, tugging at the spiked, dry ends. He pruned a hangnail in his teeth a moment, then he shook his head.

"Sasuke we... We didn't tell anyone because... Well, if we could have, we would. You're right, it wasn't fair on you. It wasn't fair on your clan. But I ended up wrecking the chance we had so... we had to leave it at that point."

"What do you mean you wrecked it?"

"S'nothing."

"If it's nothing then why the hell did it stop you?" Sasuke said. It would have sounded more like a challenge if he'd raised his voice, but somehow that didn't seem appropriate, despite the gravity of the conversation. Something was off about the way Naruto was dodging the subject. And Sasuke wasn't stupid enough not to realize that something revolved around him.

Naruto shrugged. "I just... wasn't... myself. After."

"After the war?"

"Yeah. So... I guess Kakashi an' Sakura thought it was better if I didn't... say much. Publicly. For a while."

"You didn't-" Sasuke blinked, confused. What the hell? What did that mean? Naruto said stupid things in public all the time - there was probably a new clause in the village's legislation Ignore dumb things the idiot says (sic). But that's not what it felt like. And Naruto was sidestepping clumsily now, but not the way he used to do it, all scoffing, blushes and volume. No... this was different. Naruto wasn't looking at him. This wasn't right. And the way that he was chewing at his nails like that? Gnawing. It was nervous behavior; anxious habit. It wasn't Naruto at all.
"Stop doing that," Sasuke warned him, gently, wanting to pull those fingers away from his mouth. "What are you talking about? You've never been disinclined to open your trap about anything and everything. Why stop now?" It wasn't meant to be rude; it was meant to be Sasuke. Naruto let his hand drift back down to the floor. He didn't say anything. "Naruto-

"I told you. I wasn't myself." Naruto muttered.

"Yeah, you're not yourself right now either." Sasuke replied, calmly this time. "What? You let the Fox take over or something? I thought you guys were friends now or something?"

"Remember our fight with Gaara?" Naruto said suddenly, raising to look up at the ceiling in reminiscence (or wasn't that what kids used to do when they didn't want their friends seeing them cry?). "Remember... during the Chuunin Exams. You got him all riled and ran off and we had to try and stop him. Remember how he was all kinda demony and scary?"

"He had a lot of issues," Sasuke condensed. "So? I thought that was the Ichibi."

"No. Biju don't work like that. Not entirely. Sure, that Shukaku was a piece of work to begin with - so was Kurama. But that wasn't all him. It was kind of a mixture of everything: his anger, Shukaku's rage, his guilt and his own power all rolled up in a ball of nasty. He told me he used to lose control when he got too stressed out. Said he had a lotta guilt about his Mom - she died giving birth to him. And his Uncle, who just... yeah. It was all lies and deception, you know? It got to him. Sometimes it got too much. Sometimes everything just compounded and just blew up inside him and it hurt," Naruto twisted his fingers in his lap before he closed his eyes. "It really, really hurt."

"So. You did the same thing then?" Sasuke said, carefully. "You lost it? You were angry because... what? I escaped? You shouldn't have been. What else was I going to do?"

"Stupid." Naruto hissed suddenly and with such venom Sasuke very nearly jumped. "That's stupid."

"What's stupid?"

"I used to think I understood you Sasuke. I know I said this before, but honestly, I can't believe how dumb I was."


"I used to think that losing someone was the same for everyone. Y'know. Cos it's bad as it is. Death. People gone forever. Friends gone forever. It's not. It's really, really not. But I can tell you one thing: Thinking that I lost it because I was pissed that you ran away? That's like saying you were just angry at your brother for what he did."

Sasuke ground his teeth at that, his eyes narrowing. There was no comment about Itachi that ever glossed over Sasuke's attention and there were few people who Sasuke would allow to mention him so casually. But he let Naruto continue - it was clear that the other wouldn't have registered his protest regardless.

"I had a life with you, Sasuke. I had a home. I had a family. I had... I had someone who I thought cared about me in a way that I'd needed and was never able to find in anyone else. I was relieved because, no matter how much thanks I get, no matter how many parades they are, no matter how many people acknowledged me, the only person that mattered finally did."

There was silence between them again. This time Sasuke felt the pressure of it.

"God," Naruto went on at length, a small laugh puncturing the air. "God you were good. I thought
you were skilled, but man. I used to be able to bust genjutsu pretty quickly, yanno, once me and Kurama had the whole thing worked out, but you?" There was a dust of his forehead. He pinched at his nose briefly with his thumb and forefinger. "You were somethin' else. Seriously... You took the most unrealistic perfection and sank me right in it, made me totally buy it. I don't even know how you squeezed out the power for it back then; we were completely wasted."

Oh. Of course. The Tsukuyomi. It was the genjutsu that had affected him, Sasuke had figured that might have been the answer, he just hoped he wasn't right. He was beginning to realize how naive that sounded, for Sasuke knew very well how terrible surviving a high level genjutsu attack could be. The victim might emerge physically unscathed, but the psychological effects were lengthy and dangerous. There was the immediate confusion, sometimes nausea or paralysis. Later there would come a lingering sense of unease, the hiccups in reality where one would experience fluttering at their vision or become hypersensitive to variations in temperature. Sasuke had experienced all of these in the aftermath of Itachi's attack - then a second time on his failed attempt to face him. Those hideous periods of blankness and red saw him curled up on bare floorboards, suffocating on his own panic and tears and suffering alone. He found it so hard to talk about, though the guilt washed back and forth in his stomach, a tide that covered something deep and dark that Sasuke wasn't sure he could face just yet.

"You had reserves," Sasuke explained, numbly. "I tapped into them."

"Yeah well, bravo. Nice work." Naruto said. "If that's what tapping into feels like then shit, maybe I shoulda lost."

"Shut up." At first Sasuke felt that wave of guilt again, sliding back and forth, back and forth. He'd wanted to either stop Naruto or kill him. He never meant to leave him hanging between. But that was quickly superseded by pride. Not pride for him, pride for the man that had, could, have taken him down. For only one worth his losing to. Naruto was an idiot and Sasuke had strong issues with several things that had happened before, during and after the war (though they were currently pushed aside given that they weren't entirely Naruto's doing either), but he deserved some acknowledgement at the very least. It wasn't that Sasuke owed him, it was that he finally (grudgingly) couldn't deny him the respect he was due. The two were very different. "You can't expect me to believe that."

"Sure I can."

"Idiot. You're not the type to crush everything you believed in because of one guy, Naruto."


"You're not making any sense," Sasuke muttered. But it did make sense, didn't it? It made the most sense in the world. Naruto lost him. He cared that much for Sasuke only to have him slip away. Permanently. Terribly. Sasuke forced his death upon the other in order in a desperate attempt to gain the upper hand and it had backfired worse than he could have ever dreamed. Sasuke, in all his sense-starved glory, in all his half-baked plans concocted through too many blows to the head, severe internal bleeding and broiled under an ego the size of a planet had thought that destroying an idiot's pipe dream would be a piece of cake. What he didn't realize was that he'd torn holes in something so pure he may as well have shredded the sun.

No, he wasn't just one guy - not to Uzumaki Naruto. Even without the Tsukuyomi, Sasuke knew that. It was different for the caster than it was for the victim, however. Genjutsu tended to be an idea that was transplanted, a seed that would grow without much tending afterward. Only Sasuke had stayed and witnessed, not out of spite but simply because Naruto had somehow willed it. If
Sasuke had heard Naruto's words to Kakashi, he'd have probably agreed: they just got stuck.

He hadn't returned to that dream much, not since that day. Though his mind had been a mess following his escape, then there had been the sickness and finally the Kakkou and then all bets were off for space in his own head for some time, occasionally - like a loosely recurring dream - he'd find it again. Hidden away. Pushed aside, down, down deep. Down amongst memories of his parents. Down by Naruto's first confessions of friendship. Down where the things that would hurt had to stay in order to keep him focused. Down where he didn't have to feel anymore. After a while he wondered if he might have put it there to keep it safe. It was riddled with guilt, steeped in pain and anguish, but it was beautiful. Because before the mess that it caused in his fake world. Before the fake village was torn down and the false victims were burnt to ashes. Before two puppets wearing the names and the hearts of Uchiha Sasuke and Uzumaki Naruto lost each other in Sasuke horrifying plot, they had loved each other.

Naruto had wanted it, embraced it. It became reality for him as that was simply a clearer facsimile of already existed. And Sasuke-

-seeing Naruto smiling beside him as they stood in a patch of warm grass with wildflowers nodding about their feet and he leaned in close and there was sunshine and light everywhere-

-walking behind Naruto, his daughter's hand a small but wonderful weight in his, smiling quietly as Naruto bounced his son onto his shoulders and ran about like and idiot, making them both laugh-

-lying next to him, tanned skin warm and smelling of the forest. The whisker-birthmarks on his cheek strangely linear as he slept, those thousand-volt eyes resting behind sandy lashes, his animated face, for once, relaxed-

He'd chided Naruto for so long over the matter of loss, but it was a moot point now. They weren't 'even', they'd never be; people weren't as perspective encouraged variation. But as much as he could argue that Naruto would never understand his loss, he knew he'd never appreciate how frightening it might be for a Biju to succumb to their own power. How they could rampage. How tempting it was to tear everything down and make it numb. To make nothing hurt anymore. The thought of it was sobering.

Naruto had pulled himself from Sasuke's genjutsu with the world tumbling down around his ears and woke up in another that was half torn apart. Small wonder he had freaked, thinking he was responsible. The shame and anger he'd had to have felt when he saw Sasuke staring back at him and he realized none of it was real. The humiliation when he cottoned on to how much truth was browbeaten from him without even a chance to fight back. Sasuke closed his eyes and stroked Mikoto's fringe gently. There was a lot that needed to be said and neither were ready for it, not yet. But in the meantime, he could grant Naruto this. He could swallow the blame this time, give a temporary parley. Ootsutsuki needed to be discussed, but perhaps not right now. If Sasuke wanted answers, Naruto wasn't the person to grant them.

"Oi," he said instead, shifting his daughter to balance in his lap, leaving his hands free. "Do this."

He held his his arms in front of him, crooked at the elbow as though he were starting a volley of kata, and looked up at the blond. Naruto frowned, suddenly thrown, but obliged, his expression quizzical.

"Why?"
"Because that-" Sasuke said, lifting up his daughter as he rolled up onto his knees and shuffled over to make the transition easier. "-is how you hold a baby."

There was a pause as he made to hand her over. The slightest hesitation that still saw Caliga in Naruto's face, still held onto that fear and that memory. But Sasuke swallowed it back, instead reaching for the time that Naruto first saw Mikoto. When he first smiled at her and she looked at him as though she'd always known him. Perhaps in another life. Perhaps in a fabricated dream where there were children. Where there had been happiness. Where Sasuke had, despite himself and his intentions, experienced peace.

Naruto drew in a breath at the sudden weight in his arms, his limbs tensing - typically nervous - as she relaxed against him. His face fought a smile and a grimace in sync - overbearingly happy, but scared shitless at the same time.

"S-sasuke?" He asked, not entirely sure what the question was. Is this right? Am I doing it right? Am I hurting her? Is it easy to hurt her if I move or something? Is she gonna cry? Does she like me? What do I do now? "U-um..."

"I held her when she was seconds old," Sasuke told him. "I was in a lot of pain, I was delirious with blood loss. I couldn't even remember if I had arms, let alone could hold her in them. But I managed and she's still here now. I don't think you could do any worse."

Backhanded compliments as usual, but Naruto was used to them. He missed them.

"She's just... so little," he said, quietly. Watching her as she stared up at him, working him out. "She just seems... so delicate."

"She's Uchiha," Sasuke replied as though that explained everything. "Give her more credit than that."

"Uchiha. Yeah." Naruto said, absently. "Heh, looks like you're now one up on the Uzumakis."

"Two up, dobe." Sasuke said, touching Mikoto's hand as she began to giggle. The nickname slipped out without a second thought and it was proof that Sasuke was getting familiar, possibly even comfortable with the situation. Naruto grinned and bounced her carefully. It was obvious he was still wary of her robustness, but he liked to see her smile. Which she was doing. A lot. "Karin's also a member of your clan. So is Tsunade, through heritage."

"So we're even?" Naruto leaned over and nuzzled Mikoto's nose, which she greatly appreciated. He was a natural. Sasuke wasn't surprised. Jealous, perhaps, though just a tad, and he would never admit it. "Heh, I think she likes me."

"She likes everyone."

"The Uchiha have evolved then," Naruto quipped, cocking a brow. Sasuke shrugged, trying to look bored, but his eyes were on Naruto, watching him, drinking him in. That unruly hair - much longer now and bleached pale by the summer sun - fell in his eyes over darker brows. That deep bronzed skin. The way he no longer looked so awkward - fitted blue jeans looked fashionable on him, and the track jacket he was wearing was angrily emblazoned with some band's name - nothing that Sasuke would have ever known. He didn't fidget and mumble like he used to. His smile still had all the friendliness to it, but it was warm and confident, rather than a plaster of tenacity. And it wasn't lust that made Sasuke stare, it was deeper than that. Complicated.

"Hn," he said, without thinking, knowing that, in the litany of translations the Uchiha grunt could
assume, it was something of an admittance this time. He leaned in closer to Naruto and brushed Mikoto's fringe out of her eyes, shaking his head, lightly. "Maybe."

"Maybe," Naruto echoed. He let Mikoto grab his finger in her pudgy hands, in the usual death grip that only babies could make cute. She kicked her feet violently and while that was disarming for a baby-holding greenhorn, Sasuke just shrugged, unfazed. It was something she always did. Inside and out. His son had started to learn the same. At length, Naruto had to shift a little, his ass was starting to fall asleep on the hardwood floor and besides, hadn't something been bothering Sasuke when he first arrived. In all honesty, Naruto knew better than bring up something that Sasuke had already stopped talking about, but persistence - especially in matters concerning Sasuke - was his vice. "Ne, Sasuke… When I came in, you were saying something about your cousin? What's… Is… Um… "

It was difficult to ask, though Naruto's inelegant muttering got the point across. Rather than give him a warning look, Sasuke thought for a moment instead. He hadn't wanted Naruto to know that much about the Kakkou, partly out of misplaced pride, but mostly because it might spur him to do something stupid. Chances were, however, Naruto had already heard plenty, maybe from Tsunade, maybe from Kakashi (thanks to said persistence) and he would only make matters worse by not saying anything at all. Once again, the luxury of solitude that his power had afforded him made its absence known.

"The Mizukage found some evidence," Sasuke admitted after a moment. "Old stuff. Part of it linked back to a cousin of mine."

"What kind of evidence?"

"Records." Sasuke watched as Naruto wriggled a little, trying to find a comfortable position. "In an old Mist Village castle or something. It belonged to a… shady guy who was likely dealing with…" There was an involuntary shrug. "... thepeoplewhotookme."

Naruto's eyes grew wide. "Th-the people who... They were M-"

"No!" Sasuke amended quickly. "No. Definitely not. They aren't. It's more complicated than that - I shouldn't even be mentioning it to start with-" But you are, because you can't help it. You need him. "-just..."

"I can keep a secret," Naruto nodded encouragingly. He wanted to tell Sasuke that he knew Kakashi had already sent out small intel teams looking for evidence of these people, but that was also a secret and he'd promised Shino he wouldn't breathe a word of it. "I am a ninja, after all."

Naruto grinned, accentuating the lame finish and while Sasuke raised a brow, unconvinced, it was clear he couldn't deny that the trust had already been bridged between 's best position now was to stick by Sasuke and help in any way he could without pushing too much. He recognised those boundaries now: Tsunade and Kakashi's training certainly wasn't in vain and he had to admit, the old goats of the council certainly had some pearls of wisdom to share, despite his lack of taste in their methods.

"Start with that, then." Sasuke said. "It's probably good that you know anyway, considering your alliances." He hadn't thought much on it, but it was highly likely Naruto might be groomed for the Hokage position in a few years. Kakashi wasn't the type to enjoy the responsibility - that much he knew for certain. Naruto was a war hero, a good soul and was already monumentally popular with all countries. It would be interesting to find out exactly where he stood and what kind of sway he had, but that really wasn't a question to direct at Naruto himself. Any whiff of political dissonance and he'd be tuning out completely, unwilling to handle that kind of responsibility without counsel.
The best method was to find out what Naruto had been told to promote and work backwards from there. Sasuke's current standing seemed to include Naruto on his side, and that wasn't likely to change unless he really botched it. Slowly the patterns were formulating, and though the revelations of the day still had Sasuke's mind reeling, he was also thankfully busied by a sudden plague of ideas.

"You... ok?" Naruto asked slowly, concerned at Sasuke's lapses into deep thought. "Is... it about your cousin? Sh... Shibui?"

"Shisui. And no. Yes and no." Sasuke said, one finger smudging his temple as he frowned. "It's more about what he wanted, which, I think, was to keep the peace in the village. And by extent, the world."

"Like Itachi." Naruto added, hopefully. Sasuke nodded vaguely.

"Like most of us. We strive for peace in one form or another; we just have different ways we think it should be achieved, right?"

"Yeah, I guess." Naruto agreed. "Why?"

Why indeed. Sasuke frowned, thoughtfully.

"What do you think is the most important thing for a leader to have? This person who will lead the village to peace. What sets them apart from everyone else?"

"Oh easy!" Naruto grinned. "Strength!"

"As in physical strength? Chakra prowess? Jutsu ability?"

"Yeah... All of those. And... and kindness too. You know. Caring about all the villagers. Like Old Man Third did."

"The Sandaime made a lot of mistakes. A lot." Sasuke's flicked up to Naruto's face as the other made to protest. "But he had the concept right. He just didn't deliver on it."

"What concept?" Naruto said. "If he was so wrong - which, you know, it weird considering he was Kage over Konoha's longest stretch of peace in years - what do you think is the most important thingy for a Hokage to have."

"Thingy?"

"What you said."

"Attribute?"

"Yep."

"I think... Trust." Sasuke replied. "A leader needs trust. Trust in the people beneath them. Trust from the people they govern. I used to think it was power. I used to believe that it was the strongest who prevailed but... things change. And when you change, so does your view. Kakashi isn't the most powerful ninja - he doesn't even that eye of Obito's any more. But he's-" Trustworthy. And he's smart. Small wonder why he's been keeping away from you, Sasuke. You're both more alike than you want to admit. "- he's decent at motivating people, despite being a flake. He puts faith in them. Trusts them. That way everyone's part of making things right."

Naruto's jaw had dropped out of surprise and when he felt Sasuke's eyes on him again, he closed
his mouth with a snap of his teeth. Trust. Yeah. That was a very big revelation, coming from
Sasuke. Considering his anger had been born from so many lies and manipulations, it was strange
he would even consider trust worth noting. Perhaps it just made the whole notion more obvious. Or
perhaps it was his experiences after the war that drew him to it. Sasuke seemed to trust no one but
himself... but maybe, thanks to those bastards, he couldn't even do that anymore.

"Sounds... yeah," he said, feeling awed. "Sounds about right."

"It didn't for a long time," Sasuke admitted. Rather than realize it, his answer was something he
had to accept.

"Y'know, if you said stuff like that to A, he'd probably forgive you. He likes to fight, but he's a
pretty good listener too. And that stuff is *smart*, Sasuke."

"It's observation, that's all." Sasuke said. "Nothing special."

"Are... Are you going to tell about Kaguya?"

It wasn't that Naruto was worried, more perplexed than anything. As though he'd been waiting all
along for Sasuke to say it. Only that hadn't been Sasuke's plan; he wanted truth, but-

"They won't believe me if I do," he replied, honestly. "After so long, and with neither you, Sakura
nor Kakashi reporting her from the beginning, it'd come across as a fallacy."

"But... " Naruto looked down, worriedly. "It's not fair."

"I'll find a way. I'm not letting it lie." Sasuke said. "You understand why, don't you."

"Yeah. I think so," Naruto said, biting his lip.

"It'll become a problem for you." Sasuke warned. And hell would it ever. Perhaps not directly,
there might be a way to soften the blow on Naruto's public image, but the damage was already
done. Silence had doomed them all and only keeping Sasuke quiet would allow Konoha's peace to
continue. Why then, had Kakashi persisted with such leniency toward Sasuke? Was he planning on
shutting him down in the trial? Did he forecast Sasuke's protests to be unanimously ignored? Did
he think that a hothead like Sasuke had absolutely no gift for persuasion?

"But... it's the truth. That's what matters." Naruto cemented with a nod, then a smile as Mikoto
cooed at him, perhaps voicing her approval. "I just don't get why he told me it wasn't something
for me to talk about."

Sasuke blinked. "What?"

"He said that it wasn't our story to tell anymore."

"Not your... What?"

"Story to tell. And..." Naruto squinted as he tried to recount the conversation. "That sometimes you
need to be the unpopular guy and... something about orange people. Oh, 'sometimes you need to
wear black so the guy in orange stands out'. Which makes no sense, cos that sounds like me and he
didn't ask me to do anything."

*Sometimes you need to be the unpopular guy? Was Kakashi planning...?*

"Did he say anything else?" Sasuke asked, narrowing his eyes a little. It didn't matter whether he
had or he hadn't, Naruto had already done exactly what Kakashi wanted. The blond might not understand, but Sasuke was beginning to - he hadn't spent two years training with the man not to pick up some of his habits. Kakashi knew that. He'd always known. In the presence of a great obstacle, hope and understanding were two very different things and yielded two very different was worldly enough to reach for the latter, but not so hard-boiled that the former didn't elicit some romanticism for him. Naruto might have firmly believed that his persistence could turn his errant friend back toward the light; Kakashi simply counted the burnt matches in Sasuke's wake, registering each failed attempt at penitence. He couldn't trust his teacher yet, he still wasn't completely certain of his intentions, but the cogs were starting to churn sweetly now.

Sasuke closed his eyes. Then he reached for his daughter, taking her back into his arms though she bleated unhappily at being moved from the animated, bouncy person. Naruto gave her a puzzled look.

"What's wrong?"

"She's hungry. Or she will be pretty soon," Sasuke told him, then nodded toward the kitchen. "Go put the kettle on. I'll show you how to prepare her bottle."

"O-ok," Naruto got to his feet uncertainly. "Um... Wait, you're showing me-"

"May as well make yourself useful." Sasuke replied, laying Mikoto down on the rug to adjust her jumpsuit. "Get the water on and I'll be out to meet you in a minute."

"Y-yeah."

It said a lot, asking Naruto to help. His team mate. His rival. Sasuke had spent so long at the mercy of his pride and that strange abstract notion of honor, he still found the idea that he needed someone so loud, so annoying and so... blond in his life. But it wasn't just he who needed Naruto, it was Mikoto. It was his unnamed son. It was his family. The help was there and it was willing, Sasuke understood that now. The Kakkou had taken his cousin, Shisui of the Body Flicker - probably one of the most powerful Uchiha alive at the time besides his own brother. Whether they had bred from him or not was a mystery - there had been two other Uchiha that came before Mikoto and whether they were linked to him or to Shisui he might never know. But he didn't have the luxury to guess. He wouldn't. And he couldn't mourn Shisui either. Not yet. Not without proof. Sasuke wasn't sure how he'd find it, but he would. He owed his cousin that. And, as Shisui had been another emissary for peace, just as Itachi had been, he owed him his patience as well. He would try. Better yet, he wanted to.

And Naruto? Well, At least he could trust in the fact that after years of making instant ramen for every meal, the dobe knew how to boil a kettle.

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Yu no Kuni, 15th March,
Year of the Hare

Shisui lay in darkness - or what he could only perceive as darkness - and waited. It was strange, being alive again. Feeling things again. Knowing nothing at all, yet all so aware of that gaping hole in his memory that seemed to yawn wider and wider each time he tried to look into it. He wasn't sure who he was. He'd no idea where he'd come from. This person named Caliga called him a God, but he wasn't so convinced about that. He'd no basis for comparison to accept the title, really, and he had to admit, with his delirium and incapacitated state, he wasn't feeling particularly very god-like. Shouldn't a God just be able to make new eyes for himself? Weren't Gods all about creating things? Perhaps eyes were a little bit complicated. He'd never made an eye before, as far as
he knew, so he couldn't say.

The missing appendages bothered him less than he thought they were going to. It was worrisome, not being able to see, not even feeling the sensation of his ocular muscles moving as they had nothing to cling to, that was just weird. Another man had introduced himself after Caliga - an older man who would cough and stumble over his words - always announcing when he was going to poke needles into Shisui's flesh; give him 'something for the pain'. But Shisui didn't remember any pain. He felt absence, but that wasn't the same thing.

Now Caliga - his loyal subject, apparently - lay on the bed beside him, taking up a vast amount of space, most likely hanging off the edge. Shisui was fairly sure he was naked, even through the blankets there was a certain heat an unclothed body could project and the scent of him, musky, warm and dappled here and there with smoke was wrapped around him like a veil. He wasn't sure he liked the man - Caliga had a way of making him feel venerated without actually offering any relief or sense of safety. Perhaps it was because of his injury, it might have been throwing his senses off, making him paranoid as he learned to adjust his hearing and sense of smell to do the sight work for him. Then again, it could be the odd accent Caliga had. The way he sounded different from the other man, different from even himself in the way that he clipped his words or rolled his vowels out longer than he should. It didn't feel native to him. It jarred with the way he pronounced his words when he told him stories of his - Aodh's - past. His achievements, his glory. Tales of battles long past, of 'fae' and of monsters. And the gift of his new eye, soon to be implanted, from the Deity 'Crom'. Shisui wasn't sure he liked the sound of that either. The article itself seemed to be made out of crystal, which honestly didn't seem so comfortable, and it stank. Of power. And blood. Shisui didn't know how much geology he'd ever studied, but he was pretty sure that crystals didn't smell. Not like that anyway. It was disconcerting, yet he had few options thus far to argue against it. After a rest, maybe, but not now.

Shisui relaxed a little, letting himself fall back into a doze that soon turned into a deep sleep filled with visions of Caliga's stories. Of battles and horses. Of winged creatures and children with red hair and eyes like stars. Of swirling blue patterns, skin daubed in woad. And a great serpent clad in silver and gold and blood.

*Oto no Kuni, earlier.
Year of the Hare.*

The creature knew its limbs now and could move silently and stealthily as ever, copying the animals it observed in the forest while it made its way toward… well, wherever it was going. Berries had been tasty, but few and far between now that the cold was settling in, and while the idea of a fat, juicy grouse seemed appetizing, a mouthful of feathers certainly was not. After several attempts, the creature learned to use its… ten dexterous bits with the hard, sharpish bits on top to pull the feathers away (legs, it had figured out. Hands, not so much). The meat wasn't bad then, but only if it was warm and fresh.

It kept moving. Once it hit the set of small, shallow rivers that hemmed the edge of the boundary between Kusa and Otogakure, the creature found itself satisfied with fishing instead. Watching the little creatures swim, waiting, then pouncing. Most attempts were unsuccessful to begin with, but with practice and very, very young patience, the creature's diet soon changed to pescatarian. It enjoyed the sweeter meat and the ease by which it could be eaten - straight from the belly, with very little pruning and cleaning involved.

When its travels brought it to the old waystation with the adjoining inn and onsen, it hadn't known how to process the information. It was used to trees and grass. Mud. This was a structure. This had
an inside and an outside. It had walls that could be seen through. Though it was run down, it seemed tame as opposed to the wilds surrounding it. Even more perplexing was that it came with a person living inside it. Shocked at first, the creature watched the person for some time, curious, although the fear it had felt initially vanished when it got a better look. Once it figured out how similar it was to the other being, things started to fall into place. The figure walked upright, just the same. Had the ten dexterous things on the end of the long wobbly things, just the same. There was fluff on its head and round looking things in its face and when it saw the creature for the first time standing buck naked in its garden, glaring at the window like an angry housecat it spoke. Just the same.

"You bin' in the onsen, kid?" The person said, shuffling slowly out of the structure. It adjusted a pair of the smaller see-through walls that were balanced on its nose and frowned. "Where're your clothes, son?"

"Sssson?" The creature attempted. He had wanted to say the only word he knew - to speak of the Sasuke - but that didn't seem appropriate yet. He wasn't sure why.

"Ye cain't just stand here on show, lad. If y'need a towel, you have to ring the bell."

"Bellll."

The person paused a moment, cocking its head to one side. The creature copied it.

"Bell," he said again. The person took another step closer, peering skeptically.

"You all right?"

"Son." He wasn't quite sure how it could copy the person so easily, but for some reason mimicking wasn't that hard. The person didn't seem unfriendly. It was old too - it smelled strange, like skin that had seen the sun too long and must that crept in no matter how diligently the cloth was washed. It smelled of age. That was good; old things weren't fast or dangerous. It was also female, and that tended to put the creature at ease as well. There were no young visible, thus the elder female might be lonely. Perhaps it could help?

As it was, the Old Female Person nodded, as though trying to understand.

"Maybe y'ought to come inside, mmm? Come and have some soup and I'll find some clothes for ye. That ok?" It extended a dexterous thing toward him. The creature, after a moment of study, took it.

"Ok."

"Now, it's pretty plain, but there's some ramen in there. Got that from Kusa on the last shipment.
It's old, but it's fine - still cooks the same. There's some cabbage in there too, from the garden, and miso - helps you forget the lack of meat. Oh, and bamboo shoots. You like bamboo shoots, kid? Yes?"

"Bamboo." The creature said, rather liking the word. "Yes."

"Well good, there's plenty to go around, cos I like 'em too. Not everyone does, but I do." The woman disappeared into another room for a few moments, then returned with a large pot - placing it in front of the creature and began labelling the contents into his bowl.

"S'cuse the serving method - I'm more of a throw-it-all-in-at-once kinda gal," she said. "Most people find that a bit sloppy, but I ain't most people. Don't think you are neither. Don't mind the splashes - eyes ain't what they used to be. Apologies. Anyway, eat up. Don't stand on ceremony or nothing."

The creature sniffed the meal a couple of times and while hesitation weighed in its fingers he couldn't deny that the food smelled awfully good. He ignored the chopsticks provided and dove straight in, slurping up the noodles and soup with violent enjoyment. After it had downed three bowls in one sitting it eased back in its chair and let out a healthy belch, to which the old woman snickered.

"You`re welcome," she said. "Glad it hit the spot. Now kid, we need to get you something to wear, ok? I don't get many visitors out here, but if I did, I'm not sure many would be too keen on a nudist. Not that type of area. You'd be more at home in Yugakure, really."

"Yuu…"

"Speaking of, we'd better find out where you're from too… Someone might be missing ya." The woman adjusted her glasses, peering closer. Small eyes, faded by cataracts narrowed a little. "Ya know, you really do look familiar… Feel like I've seen ya before somewhere. You have any family around here kid? Anyone who might be lookin' for ya?"

Family? Looking for him? Maybe… Well, he certainly knew that there was something he was meant to find. Fine, he'd say it, the thing. Let him see what happened.

"Sasuke," he said, with reverence. The woman just nodded.

"Sasuke? That you name?"

What the hell was a name? He looked up, confused, so the woman pointed at him.

"Your name, it's Sasuke?"

There was a flurry of dark hair as the creature shook its head. Oh, she meant a labelling thing? No. No, he wasn't Sasuke, he was looking for a Sasuke, that's all he knew. Somehow, deep down, the creature felt that a Sasuke wasn't a thing about his own person - it was something he needed.

"Well look honey, I'm Ona, alright? Ona." The woman said, patting her chest. "That's my name."

"Ona," he pointed at her. Ona smiled.

"Good! Good… And now you."

He could read the gesture aimed at him now. He realized what it meant. Your turn. Ona had given him a name - a label for herself. He needed to do that same. He needed something to call himself.
Lost, he glanced about the table, knowing for certain that a name wasn't something he'd remembered yet. Perhaps he never even had one… So that meant he could pick one right?

He pointed toward the bowl on the table and the remnants of his lunch that lay in a little sad pool at the bottom. The name he wanted was already taken, of course, but he figured it wouldn't hurt to be called the same thing. If they didn't look alike, surely that was fine.

"That," he said. "Name."

"Well I told you that word already, dear. That's miso and ramen and-"

"No," the creature said, motioning to the bamboo shoot. Then he patted his chest. "Name."

"Menma?" Ona tried, adjusting her glasses. "That's your name? Menma? Like the condiment?"

The boy in front of her smiled then, causing those strange, marked cheeks to dimple and those grey blue eyes to sparkle with triumph.

"Yes," he said, nodding. "Menma."

Chapter End Notes

AN: Welp, there you have it. Some had guessed it might have been a Menma-type creature, some weren't sure, but here's the confirmation for you. Some have also guessed at how he came about, but I'm just going to smile and nod-nod-wink-wink for now. Looking forward to letting that play out. Honestly, there wasn't supposed to be so much Naruto in this, but after the last episode, I kind of needed it. I'm trying hard to smoosh those two together already, but they're just playing hard to get. We'll make do with cuteness for a little while until they stop being so damn mopey. Poor Shisui, I have lots in store for you but you probably won't like it. And Kakashi's going to get a grilling just as soon as Sasuke can coax him within earshot, trust me.

Long chapter is long, enjoy! Thankyou for all the reviews and comments, they keep the fingers tapping!

Until next time: Menma.
Sasuke looked up, feeling the cool air on skin of his cheek as he moved his hand away from his face. Pins and needles assaulted his wrist and he gave his hand a somewhat bemused frown. How long had he been sitting like that? Had he tuned out? How long had Naruto been talking, or, more correctly, had he ever stopped?

"Huh?" Was the best he could offer.

Naruto lifted his face from the floor where he lay beside Mikoto and motioned to baby with Mr Roary the Cuddly Dinosaur. "She smells," he elaborated, wrinkling his nose. "Kinda bad. But she's happy though - see?"

Mikoto was cooing at him happily, a great smile plastered over her face. Sasuke snorted when he saw her. He had to admit, regardless of their situation, the learning curve new parent had to scale was immense and at times, daunting. But to watch a novice try to interpret a baby's smile as something harmless and beatific was genuinely glorious. Especially when they were corrected. Sliding from the couch to his knees he leaned over to pick up his daughter.

"She needs to be changed," he said.

"Changed?"

"It is what it smells like."

"Ew, you mean that's-" The look on Naruto's face was that of his twelve-year-old self - something thoroughly disgusted, but equally fascinated and amused by the prospect. Sasuke rolled his eyes.

"She's not even a year old. Sleeping, eating, puking and shitting is what she does best. She tends to need some assistance with the latter."

"Is it gross?" Naruto asked, rolling to his feet in a fluid movement which Sasuke found stung him briefly with envy. He hadn't been able to move like that for some time, nor would he be able to do much at all in the coming months - even tie his own shoelaces. Naruto even held his hand out for Sasuke to take in some ridiculous display of misplaced chivalry. Sasuke took it, though, despite himself. He had to ignore his bruised pride and that useless twinge of humiliation that fired in his chest. Some things were more important now. Instead, he merely rolled his eyes.

"Gross? Hard to say. I've never seen your apartment." Patting Mikoto's bottom, he shook his head and sighed. That was a full diaper all right. She must have been pleased about that one. Though it was clear he wanted to help, Naruto looked skeptical. Becoming part of Sasuke's life again was clearly one of his goals, but changing dirty diapers may not have been a premeditated step in effort to get there. His expression muddied, he took a step forward and swallowed bravely.
"Ok," he said.

"Ok what?" Sasuke snorted. "You're going to brave changing a diaper?"

"Why not? If you can do it, I can!"

"I can also go into labor," Sasuke parried with viper-quick efficiency. "Want to try that?"

Still remarkably cavalier, Naruto almost seemed to consider the prospect before he realized Sasuke was joking (possibly) and shrugged. "W-well, I should know, right? After all, you might not be here one day, and I."

"I might not be here?" Sasuke raised his brows. "What makes you think I'd ever leave her? With you in sole charge? Someone who thinks that a square meal comes out of a plastic pot and 'cooking' is pouring in the hot water?"

It wasn't exactly a joke so much as a humorous observation, but as Naruto had not been much of a domestic genius, Sasuke had a rather oblique sense of ridicule that seemed to lose more of its bite on paper than it did when aimed at the culprit. The resulting effect was a thick, awkward silence that left Naruto slightly crestfallen and Sasuke somewhat guilty. Though they'd managed to meet on comfortable terms, there were still plenty of creases sunken in deep and old that only time could iron out.

"Look," Sasuke said, nodding toward the kitchen. "Put the kettle on again and make some more tea. You want to know about my life now? There's lots of tea involved. Sitting, cleaning up after Mikoto and tea. I'll be back in a second."

"But-"

"Just do it." And that was that. Sasuke retired to the bedroom, laying his daughter down on the changing table in order to tend her. He listened to Naruto pottering about in the kitchen, snorting lightly as he heard the blond muttered to himself, clanging cutlery - somehow managing to upend a box of something that sounded like flour or cereal.

There was the hiss of a curse. Then there was a knock at the door.

Sasuke's ears pricked to attention, a feat honed by his many years copying his brother and cemented afterward through his genin training. He might have lost his ability to hold chakra - maybe even mould it as he used to - but his senses were as sharp as ever. Possibly even sharper. He sensed the hesitation in Naruto's movements as he waited for another knock; heard the pad of his feet on the floor as he moved away from the cupboards and closer to the door. There was a pause that told him Naruto was waiting for him to say something, instruct him, but he remained silent. Unsupervised, Naruto simply let out a breath and opened the door a crack, probably more out of curiosity than anything.

"Yes?"

A woman answered. Not Tsunade. Not Shizune. Not Ino, Hinata, nor even Sakura - no one he expected, yet he recognized the voice. He hadn't heard it for some time now, but that snippish tone, that casual familiarity which had always struck him as a little uncomfortable was strangely revitalizing. He didn't know if he'd ever see her again after he'd left weeks ago, but the sound of her voice now made him smile. He didn't quite know why, but it did.

"Sasuke? There's no one called Sasuke here." Naruto continued, awkwardly.
"Then how come you're here, Uzumaki Naruto?" came the reply. "Don't you live in the West District? They made a big deal about moving you into that brand new apartment and all."

"Well I -"

"These are the Hokage's apartments, why would you be here? Or is this where... Hmm... Maybe one of the other Kage are staying, perhaps? Gaara maybe? You two were quite goo-"

"Hello Naoko," Sasuke said, appearing in the doorway. Mikoto, now clean and pleasant-smelling again, chirped at their guest and, recognizing her, reached out to be held. "It's been awhile."

"And there it is," Naoko smiled as she leaned against the doorframe, tipping her glasses down her nose as though to get a better look at him. "Uchiha Sasuke, I presume?"

"That's who you came to find, isn't it?" Sasuke replied, familiar with this game. Naoko chuckled lightly.

"I'll admit; you got me," she said, ignoring Naruto's piscine gaping. "Once the photos of you began emerging, it was there, right on the tip of my tongue. I thought I knew that face. You still look like a girl, you know."

"Kind of goes with the territory," Sasuke said, stepping back so that Naoko could see the full picture. When her eyes widened in amazement he retreated further, beckoning her with a wave. "You ought to come in."

Robbed of a response for the moment, Naoko kicked off her pumps and complied, offering a dazed thanks to Naruto as she drifted past him. Sasuke motioned for her to sit and went to fetch some snacks. Not only to be polite, but to find a way to burst the bubble of amazed silence that had filled the room.

"Naoko is the Editor in Chief of the Konoha Herald," he explained, finishing Naruto's work on the tea. "I wrote for her for several weeks when I first arrived in Konoha."

"Y--yeah," Naruto said, slowly, his eyes glued to Naoko. Like a fox in front of its den, he looked ready bite off Naoko's ankles lest she even breathe in the wrong direction. "At the hearing... You told us you had a job."

"I needed the money."

"And the cover too, right?" Naoko added, her eyes still trained to Sasuke's middle. "That's what it really was."

"Made sense," Sasuke shrugged.

That it did, but not at first. Sasuke had come in asking for a paper route, a child's task. As soon as it seemed obvious he'd made a mistake, he took up the column. He'd probably never written much before, save for the odd report. It was certainly brave of him and it clearly demonstrated the desperate state of mind he must have been in when he made it home.

"Yes, well," Naoko continued. "With the funds you could get your own apartment - albeit a cheap one. And the position allowed you to be somewhere during the day - prevented any chance of 'helpful' visits and neighbors who'd definitely notice a woman living alone with a baby. Soon as a kid is involved, everyone turns into an expert, right? Can't keep their noses out of it."

"Pretty much," Sasuke said. There was the sound of crockery shifting behind him; Naruto had
started gathering the cups, giving his hands something to do while he tried to sink his head into the situation.

"S-so you knew Sasuke before Tsunade-b- uhh… Tsunade-sama and Kakashi-sensei found him?" He said.

"No, I knew a lady called Sarada," Naoko said. "A young redhead who came looking for a job. Dye?" The last part was aimed at Sasuke. Naoko's conversations usually required stage directions if you weren't used to them.

"A wig."

"It was a good one."

"So I've been told." Sasuke stirred the tea then put the lid on the pot, moving back as Naruto dutifully transferred it to the table and began setting out the cups. "I made a friend who was in the business of… I guess transformation is the word."

"Orochimaru?" Naruto blurted out immediately, worry striking his features. Sasuke shook his head.

"Of course not. I'm not stupid."

"The Sannin?" Naoko frowned. "The one who attacked on the Chuunin Exams? Surely he'd dead by now. Or at least retired."

"Both words have no place in his vocabulary. Orochimaru would turn himself in before he'd die or consider any notion of retiring."

"I thought he was gonna try and be good," Naruto mumbled, sadly. "Tsunade-sama said he healed her."

"Then you don't know anything about him at all," Sasuke replied. "Which is probably the most dangerous position to be found around a snake." True, Sasuke wasn't surprised his old teacher hadn't been apprehended, but he also knew Orochimaru wasn't dumb enough to try and approach Konoha either, despite the noise surrounding his return. Not with Naruto as a superpower and not with so many other high profile ninja surrounding Sasuke like protective charms. "There was the threat of running into him while I traveled," he added. "But I knew for a fact that he'd never go near the main highways and none of his operations were stationed anywhere near a fortified village except for his oldest base in Konoha. He'll stay well away for some time."

"I'd kill him if he tried anything," Naruto hissed suddenly, ferociously, though the effect was somewhat ruined by the sugar bowl in one hand and the brightly coloured packet of sesame crackers he held in the other.

"No you wouldn't." Sasuke moved across the room to sit by his guest, finally relinquishing Mikoto, who cheered at being reunited with her sometime babysitter. He wouldn't apologize for deceiving her, but he did offer: "Guess I'm not what you thought I was."

"Ha! I'm not a fool, 'Pomato-chan'," Naoko bounced Mikoto in her lap, grinning as the baby took her glasses and tasted them. "I knew you had something to hide. The wig might have been good, the costuming appropriate, but the aura you had about you was a dead giveaway."

If it were anyone else, Sasuke might have been surprised. But Naoko had many facets to her, one of which was a sizable penchant for goodwill. "Kept me about for the intrigue, huh?"
"You needed help," Naoko said. "That was certain. The stuff you made up about your husband, fictional or no, was gold and while I wasn't sure how much rang true, I didn't want to take a chance. You had told me he was dead, but you didn't appear any less worried. Seemed to me like you were looking over your shoulder for something else. That piqued my concern. And then you went missing."

"I fell ill," Sasuke explained. "Hit a wall. I don't really remember."

"Well, we went out looking for you awhile. You had Gou-chan in a tizz, she wouldn't stop going out every evening to try and find you. All the other columnists were asking after you."

"They shouldn't have," Sasuke muttered, feeling his ears reddening. "It was none of their business."

"Yeah, well that's how you ninja think, isn't it?" Naoko snorted. "The wider community can be a little bit warmer than that. People get anxious when a young woman with a baby goes missing."

*How about a whole clan?* Sasuke thought, acidly. At length he felt the crawling sensation of someone's eyes on him and turned to see Naruto staring, a half eaten cracker poised near his lips.

"What?" Sasuke asked.

"Po-Pomato-chan." Naruto mumbled. "You're potato chan?"

Sasuke pursed his lips, unsure of how to answer. He was of course, it was no secret now. But it must have been intriguing to someone who'd only known Sasuke for Sasuke, who had never seen him any other way. Sarada had been an extension of himself that he'd managed to fashion in order to stay invisible. She'd been developed over weeks of being alone, of learning new things about himself, his strengths, his weaknesses. Of his crash course in becoming a mother. Sarada helped him learn how to fit in with people he'd normally ignore, to chat, to ask for and accept help. Then, after she'd helped him back on his feet, kept him sane while his ninja instincts kept him safe, she transformed further, became "Pomato-chan", turned Sasuke in something he'd never been before: funny.

"Uh. Yeah."

"A-and all... those stories..."

"I had several years worth of good material," Sasuke replied, drily. He knew that harnessing the art of comedy wasn't much of a natural skill for him, but he had a fairly cutting tongue that complimented his wit and his recollections of Naruto's idiosyncrasies rather well. And obviously, Naruto had just realized why all Po-chan's stories hit so close to home. "No point in letting it go to waste."

"N-no. Guess not." Naruto said, turned a fetching shade of pink. Whether their guest noticed or not, Sasuke couldn't say. She was watching the pair closely, and for the first time since he'd met her, Sasuke suddenly felt aware of her calculating gaze. It was as though she was unpacking him, searching the mannerisms, the tells, the dusty corners. Like a ninja, she knew what to look for in a person - though rather than read their strength or stance, she studied personality and mannerisms. And she was good at it.

"You haven't asked me how I found you," she said after a moment. Sasuke shrugged.

"You're smart. It's not surprising you figured it out."

"Down to your location? Don't give me that much credit."
If he were truly honest, it hadn't even occurred to him to ask. He'd had so many visitors lately, having his old boss suddenly turn up didn't seem out of the ordinary at all. And with Naruto there, as strange as it was to admit it, he'd felt almost safe. Until Naoko said that.

"I give credit where credit's due," he replied, carefully. "I also know you protect your sources-"

"It was the Hokage," Naoko said, leaning forward conspiratorially. "After I'd met with him regarding that article."

"Kakashi?" Sasuke frowned. "He told you-"

"Didn't tell me. Showed me. Hinted, really. Just an address on a bit of paper. Seemed like he was trying to downplay it as much as possible."

"Why?"

"You'd know better than me," Naoko said. "After all, why would you want to speak to the press? Seems to me like you're in the kind of situation where the less attention is drawn, the better."

By Sasuke's expression, it was clear that was how Sasuke saw it too, though it seemed Kakashi had other plans. Naoko tapped her lips thoughtfully as the others digested the information. What was the Hokage up to? Why risk exposing Sasuke's secret? Sure, she hadn't published anything to date that covered any of the Sasuke mystery current circulating through the press, but she was a reporter and the truth surrounding Sasuke was the one of the most sought-after stories - even more so when word of the trial got out. Why was Kakashi trusting her with this?

"He said there was going to be a trial," Naoko went on, encouragingly. "Something to address Sasuke's misdemeanor in the Land of Iron a few years ago."

"He said a lot, didn't he," Sasuke replied, darkly.

"Yes, he did. Why, do you think he might have risked that?"

"I don't know, maybe he doesn't want to have to deal with the press hanging around the state offices. Maybe he's a pain in the ass. Maybe he has no reason."

"Or perhaps he wants to control what people hear?" Naoko sipped her tea. "After all, you and I have a rapport."

"A rapport. Really? So a few weeks of work in your office and a joke column is worth more than the amount of print you'd sell with an exclusive on me?" Sasuke remarked bitterly. Naoko put her cup down so fast she may as well have dropped it.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, it is," she replied, heatedly. "I'm a proud woman, Sasuke. I'm proud of my paper and I'm proud of the way I run it. You know very well that I value respect and truth far more than money-spinning prattle. You know that. And now I'm fairly sure your one-time teacher and Hokage knows that as well."

Sasuke looked down at his hands, churlishly, though he gave a brisk nod.

"Fine."

"I'm not here to fish for information," Naoko continued. "I was led here for a reason and I don't think it's anything to do with the Kage. I'd wager the Kage are the least important factor in this equation."
"I wouldn't say that to them," Sasuke muttered, darkly. "Besides, it's what Konoha wants to see, isn't it? The guilty getting punished."

Naoko merely pursed her lips. She could ask, but she was smarter than that. Besides, she had a different tactic in mind, both in dealing with Sasuke and with her village.

"This may sound stupid," she began, slowly, motioning to Sasuke's middle. "Your pregnancy... It's not a jutsu, is it."

"No." He didn't see the point in lying. He also didn't see the point in the question; surely it was obvious by now. Naoko only nodded.

"And Mikata?"

"Mikoto," Sasuke corrected her. "She's mine."

"Guessing they weren't planned either," Naoko asked without actually asking. Sasuke didn't need to answer; his expression, his carefully measured lack of reaction told her everything. Not planned, no. Not by him anyway. "I see."

"Why are you asking this?" Sasuke said, leaning back into his defenses. "Personal curiosity? Or did Kakashi set you up to pull more information out of me without having to do it himself?"

"Neither." Naoko replied. "It's more out of... I guess fascination, yes, but not in the way that you think. I mean... logistics aside, you're missing how incredible your situation is, how... truly shocking."

"Yeah I get it. A guy getting pregnant; having a kid. Doing it twice." Sasuke bristled. "I'm a freak, good for me. There's your story, there's your paycheck so-"

"-I can't even begin to imagine how frightening that much have been. How frightening it is now, every day. Each day." Naoko finished, then crossed her hands in her lap. "As I said, Sasuke. We have a rapport. I'm not here to oogle you."

Across the table, Sasuke's mouth closed with a snap. While Tsunade had been as close to understanding Sasuke's pain as anyone, Naoko had a way of summarizing that was so simple and so poignant it was humbling. "It's-" he began at length, licking his dry lips with due consideration. Many responses flung themselves forward for the task, the usual Sasuke fodder that resembled: nothing. Fine. Something I learned to deal with No big deal None of anyone's business yet it was "-alright." that he finished with. "It stopped being weird a long time ago."

"I-it did?" Naruto asked, bluntly. He'd been mesmerized by the two for most of the conversation and any input he offered was clumsy at best. Sasuke's expression darkened, but it was Naoko who caught the fumble. "Of course. It had to," she said. "No matter how they came about or why, the fact is, the children
are here. They're here. And Sasuke had little choice but to accept them. If he had choices, he would have made them and perhaps he wouldn't be sitting here telling us how he'd accepted his situation. But here he is. Here they are."

"I mean… It's not weird for him. I-I don't find it that weird either," Naruto continued, though somewhat uncertainly, as though perhaps he still found the idea of a gravid female Sasuke intensely unique. "But we've had a few v-"

"How come you're not freaked out," Sasuke spoke over him, quickly. "Is what he's trying to say."

"I thought you gave credit where it's due," Naoko countered. "I might be freaked out, but that doesn't stop me sympathizing."

"You pity me."

"I'm fascinated by you. Amazed. Astounded, even." Naoko corrected him. "Your honesty and frankness regarding your situation is even more commendable. You inspire me to want to help you. That's a good thing."

"Is it?" Sasuke narrowed his eyes. "Why? Are you going to make a story out of that or something?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. That is what I was considering." Naoko said, ignoring the way Naruto blanched. "You've seen my library, Sasuke. The collections of essays that I've saved over the years, the books and letters I've inherited from my father and Grandfather. You know that the purpose of the Herald is to educate and inform, not sensationalize. It's been our M.O since the day my Great Grandfather began publishing his accounts to detail the everyday life of our newfound Shinobi village."

"Y-you guys go that far back, huh?" Naruto asked in amazement. "They actually had papers back then?"

"Not really. It was more in the form of a manuscript that was passed around or relayed by an orator. And it only lasted a few years until the Second Hokage and his council asked him to to stop."

"That's not surprising." Sasuke muttered.

"It was for the safety of the village more than anything." Naoko pointed out. "The world was in turmoil at the time, it was probably hard enough trying to keep the village together when the clans were champing at the bit for war. My Great Grandfather honored his wishes, but that didn't stop him keeping his accounts to himself and passing them down through the family. Everyone added to it; every story was logged, every eyewitness named. Once Dad had permission from the Fourth to start a small print service, he began publishing again. But it was everyday stuff, safe was how he kept going for so long and that is why the Herald has a reputation for quality unlike most of the garbage being processed these days. We have history, we have integrity. We know Konoha like no one else does; we know it as a singularity, not an archipelago of secrets."

"I don't see your point," Sasuke challenged. "You have so much history, so much... truth you could have used to.-"

"What, take the government down?" Naoko raised a brow. "Oh yes. There's plenty there. That library of mine is an anthology of horror. I have so much dirt on Konoha, Suna - hell, the whole five nations combined - you'd wonder how I kept my hands clean."

"What kind of dirt?" Naruto wondered, blue eyes wide with intrigue.
"You asked me why I don't find Sasuke's condition weird?" Naoko said. "There are eighteen recorded cases of male pregnancy listed to date - most of which were in order to retain deep cover on long term missions. Of those cases, two survived - none could hold the baby past three months. There are fifty-three cases of experiments that link to a similar notion - twenty of these are from Konoha herself, thirteen are from the Mist. Sixty reports of male ninja undergoing illegal surgeries to alter their gender, only twenty of which were successful and a mere handful resulted in children. I only need to mention the name Orochimaru against any illegal procedure and council starts to sweat."

"Then why don't you?" Sasuke challenged.

"Timing." Naoko smiled.

"Timing?"

"My Grandfather used to say: Give something a name, you give it power. Give power a face, you give it empathy. Give the face a voice and you give it humanity. I can sit here and spin numbers and cases at you until your ears ring, but that's nothing if I don't have something visual to spark your imagination. We accept the suffering of the past because there is nothing for us to see that has not been filtered by the council; that doesn't exist quietly beside us, valuing peace over justice. Nothing, except you, Sasuke."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. But of course, I only know you from the scant information I've been able to uncover. I've read of a young boy, burdened by an idea of revenge that was too large and too sophisticated for him to understand further than a death match between two brothers. I've heard tales of a mere teenager who defected his village, who threatened Kumogakure and the Kage summit. I've been told of a traitor, a dark horse, a hero, a mystery. I know you're worried, I'll be you're forseeing the headlines in those ugly redtops where they use words like weakened, humbled, and weird-


"No. It's not a story," she said, quietly. "It's a challenge. It's a gamble. It's not showcasing you for your suffering, it's putting a living model toward very difficult, but very real problems. It's helping the public learn to see without filtering things or watering them down. Giving them something so close to home, putting it right in their face; cementing it on their doorstep. It's making them think. That's what the council has been so scared about; that's what my Great-grandfather, my Grandfather and my Dad refused to challenge because it wasn't time. But times are changing. You ninja can see openings in fights, right? Where you focus your energy to get one up on the opponent? I see openings in society. I see the council's hold weakening."

She eased back in her chair a little, unabashed by the effect her information dump was having on her audience. Sasuke was taking everything rather well, though he still appeared hesitant, Naruto looked as though he was simply doing to his best to keep up. But that was good enough.

"I'm proposing an interview. With you," she said. "No muss, no fuss. Just you, me and the truth."

Sasuke blinked.

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"You… Want me to just… sit down and tell you everything?"
"Yep."

"And then you publish it?"

"That's the idea."

"No one's going to believe it." Sasuke said, his frown deepening. "Either that or they won't care."

"How do you know that?"

"No one ever has, why would they start now?" Sasuke shot back, albeit hollowly. It was a knee-jerk response, and he regretted saying it immediately when Naoko raised her brows.

"No one ever has? And yet you're not in jail right now, Sasuke. You have your child with you - even better, you have a decorated War Hero right here visiting you."

"I'm… allowed-" Naruto began to protest, but Sasuke shook his head.

"That's barely a point. Naruto would be here even no matter what I'd done. He's annoying that way." It was a truth Sasuke had never spoken, but when he did, Naruto's mouth closed with a hollow sound and he nodded in validation. "Look," Sasuke continued. "It won't matter. The truth is - insane, no one in their right mind would believe it. No one would want to believe it. "It just won't matter."

He ignored the look Naruto was sending his way, something guilty, something defeated. Of course the truth mattered, but delivering it was the problem and not something Sasuke had been particularly delicate about in the past. He wasn't sure he knew how. As it was, Naoko seemed to be anticipating his reaction and smiled.

"Why do you suppose Naruto was made a peace ambassador?" She asked suddenly, tipping a red laquered finger in the direction of the aforementioned. "Aside from ending the war, why do you think he was given this position, this power over people?"

Sasuke replied with a withering look. "What power? He smiles and has his photo taken."

"Hey!" Naruto cut in, suddenly. "It's a bit more than that!"

"What, you open ramen joints as well? Encourage people to join the shinobi ranks because it's not as though we don't have enough people trapped in that bloodthirsty system already."

"Or perhaps it's the power of his natural rhetoric?" Naoko suggested, speaking over the two. "Persuasion. You can't say that Naruto doesn't have a bit of a gift for the gab."

Sasuke shrugged. Clearly he didn't see it as much of a gift, but he certainly wasn't denying that Naruto's influence had provided some crucial changes and while talk no jutsu (as Sakura had once secretly dubbed it) didn't have too much effect on Sasuke himself, it had piqued the interest of several volatile adversaries. Naruto had inspired people to trust him and it was a trust that was hard. Naruto was proud of it; he could tell. Yet Sasuke hadn't allowed himself to inspire that kind of trust. And if Sasuke were to speak the truth, if Naruto vouched for him... what would people think of their flawless jinchuuriki then? What if it destroyed him?

"That's reaching," Sasuke said. "Even if Naruto were to support my claims, it won't make a difference."

"I'm not asking you to claim anything, I'm asking for your story," Naoko told him. "Just you. Just
"what happened. It's not a media interview, it's not wheedling for answers or leads, it's a conversation with you."

"And what's that got to do with Naruto?"

"Nothing. Everything." Naoko shrugged. "What's the one thing we know about Naruto? He's a jinchuuriki, he's a war hero, he grew up in poverty and injustice yet he's the son of the 4th Hokage. We know everything about him, well, anything that gives his opinion weight in state-scale matters, anyway. Of you? You're Uchiha, You defected... I don't know. You tell me."

Sasuke sighed. "No one is going to care, Naoko. They didn't care before, they won't now."

"Are you so sure about that? Your whole family was slaughtered and yet you grew up alone... No one cared at all?"

Sasuke looked at her, the past cutting through his skin like a barb. It was an honest question, and Naoko had always been brusque, but it still stung.

"There was an announcement. A few people gathered at the edge of the compound when they cordoned it off. A few people dropped off some meals for a few days and my teachers were nicer for awhile, but-"

"No one really knew what to say," Naruto finished quietly. "It was like hearing about a storm passing over another village; you read about it, you feel sad for the people that got hurt, but it's kinda surreal. Some of the kids wanted to talk to Sasuke, but when he came back to school he was so different. Like he didn't even notice you were there. I think everyone thought someone else was helping, but in the end, no one was."

"Do you think people felt bad about that?" Naoko said, watching Naruto carefully. He shrugged, then nodded.

"Yeah but... Sasuke's just got this way of looking like he's on top of everything. Like nothing is out of his control. Maybe some people wanted to ask, but felt like they'd be doing more damage if they did... Like he'd take offense or something."

"Like a seven year old boy would take offense at being offered care and attention."

"Naoko," Sasuke said in warning. "I'm not interested."

A single protest hung in the air, unspoken. It was hard to tell whether it was Naoko or Naruto who was responsible, but Sasuke felt it anyway. Like a child's rebuttal, it was thin, scorned and painful. After a moment, Naoko sighed. "I know," she said. "I figured. Personality pieces are kind of a new thing now, and you boys are old world. Shinobi are ancient stock, no matter how you dress them up, it's all secrets and traditions. I'd hoped you might have been considering alternatives, that's all."

"Alternatives to what?" Sasuke frowned. Naoko only shrugged again, pushing to her feet.

"To walking through those courtroom doors alone," she said. "To being objectified by the village, to becoming one of the main sources of speculation and intrigue. Possibly ridicule. I don't want that for you, you know. I don't think I'm alone either."

"Maybe for now," Sasuke countered. "My story doesn't exactly place Konoha in a good light."

"Well, it's only through accepting our faults that we improve," Naoko replied. "Look, I'd better go. Think about it, if anything. It's not a perfect idea, but it's a first, and that makes it interesting."
"Interesting," Sasuke repeated, flatly. She was putting his years of pain, his suffering, his all-encompassing, destructive guilt down to interesting.

"Well, I don't know." Naoko waved dismissively as the boys made to stand in an odd gesture of politeness, and made her way to the door. "That's just a word I chose, being uninformed. Easy to do isn't it?" Her smile should have been crafty, as it always was when Naoko smelled a lead, but this time it was strangely solemn - perhaps out of respect for her former employee. "Sasuke, I want to help you. I know I can; I have to. There's something in this moment that... it feels like change. It feels like something needs to happen. But I won't make a move without your permission. So please, if anything, think about it. You know where to find me if you change your mind."

"If." Sasuke replied, nodding slightly as she left. He left it at that, turning to focus on his daughter instead, whom Naoko had placed on her playmat near Naruto. If Sasuke were considering anything, he kept his thoughts to himself and while that was something Naruto was quite used to, the lounge fell eerily quiet and remained that way for the next few hours.

When Tsunade returned, she was greeted by a rather grumpy, discomforted Sasuke and an anxiety-ridden Naruto - both of whom clearly needed a break from one another. Sending Naruto out shopping for dinner seemed to do the trick (she didn't tell him Chouji was incredibly efficient and completely thorough in providing all of Sasuke's meals), and for Sasuke she produced a letter that had been left on her office desk from the judicial court.

"Subpoena?" She asked, leaning against the counter as Sasuke read it, twice, held it up to the light, then read it again.

"It's from Ume," he replied, frowning. "She wants a meeting."

"Guess it's for the trial," Tsunade frowned. "Preliminary... something or other."

"Something like that," Sasuke pursed his lips. "She seems to think it's a good idea that we meet a few times before they announce the date. It doesn't give me a specific day, but I'd wager it's soon."

"Probably," Tsunade agreed, grabbing her purse. "I'll walk you down."

Sasuke nodded and let her take Mikoto, following her carefully as he descended the steps. He hadn't been outside much in the last few days - hell, he hadn't seen much of Ume since his cover was blown. He thought he'd said all he needed to say to her, but he had to admit, he wasn't surprised. It was all bueraucratic nonsense. The council probably wanted to find out if he'd changed his story or was attempting something they wouldn't approve. That was more like it.

However, when he entered the familiar room, squinting in the low light toward the desk where he expected Takada Ume to be waiting for him - a stolid lump of annoyingly mild-mannered plaid - he was surprised to find himself greeted by someone he certainly hadn't expected. Someone he hadn't seen after his collapse at the trial. Someone he wasn't sure he wanted to see. Not yet anyway. Not while his fist still itched to connect with that damn smug face.

"Pretty tacky, even for you," he said, stopping in the middle of the room. He folded his arms under his chest, frowning as Hatake Kakashi - a vision of Konoha patriotism in his Hokage robes and hat - regarded him over steepled fingers.

"Hello Sasuke," he said. "It's been awhile."
A/N: Pardon the wait on this chapter. I'm currently doing the work of about five people and it seems my country wants to shake itself apart :(  

Thank you all for your support and kind words. You're all lovely.
"Hello Sasuke." Kakashi said, pleasantly. "It's been awhile."

"Hasn't it." Sasuke managed through grit teeth.

"You're looking well."

"You're lying."

"Oh I don't know," Kakashi mused, an air of copacetic blandness wafting around him like a dust cloud. "You've got your colour back. Lack of colour anyway. You've gained a little weight-"

"Is that supposed to be a joke?"

"I'm not good at jokes."

It was true; he wasn't. Granted, Kakashi could be humorous when he wanted to be (and so effortlessly he was in constant danger of giving Might Gai a hernia out of sheer jealousy), but a traditional setup-hook-punchline delivery always seemed to fizzle with him.

"No need to break tradition then," Sasuke replied, scathingly. Kakashi shrugged.

"Seems you have more of a flair for comedy than I gave you credit for, though. Didn't think you were much of a writer either. Life is full of surprises."

"What do you want?"

"The way you managed to seem chatty is completely beyond me, though," Kakashi ignored him and motioned to a chair instead. "Have a seat."

Sasuke didn't move. "No."

"How is Miss Naoko?"

"Why am I here?"

"Can't we have a conversation?"

"You earn conversations with me." Sasuke replied, cooley. "Are you giving me my court summons?"

"No. Not today, anyway." Kakashi said, keeping his hands linked in a loose steeple in front of him. "That paperwork can wait until the other Kage are here."

"You mean you haven't even looked at it yet."

"Of course I have." Kakashi was granite. "I have to sign it all, don't I? In fact I've just gone through
a portion of it with the Mizukage, actually."

Sasuke watched him carefully. "That so?"

"She had a few interesting things to tell me. Showed me a particularly interesting book."

"More interesting than your usual selection, I'm sure."

"-said you were familiar with it?" By now it was clear Kakashi was showing off his immunity to Sasuke's venom and that made it very hard to force any answers out of him. He might as well have tried to argue with a rock for all the good his ire and snark were doing him. Conversations tended to lock between walls and though his usual tactics had worked well for him in the past, stubborn discourtesy had never, ever worked with Kakashi.

"Perhaps." Sasuke said, thawing slightly. "So what if I am?"

"Well, the Mizukage seemed to think your information could be helpful, if not vital, to our peace-keeping within the North Eastern countries," Kakashi went on. "There are still so many pockets of trouble here and there. Perhaps certain clans, certain groups that have missed our attention? Certain… people?"

If Kakashi was worried or outraged, he didn't show it and although Sasuke was used to this kind of standard covert behaviour from his superior, the coaxing was unlike him. Kakashi could berate a point until it screamed, but always through the implementation of moralistic fables or some kind of anecdotal guilt-trip. Ham-fisted persuasion wasn't his style. He was shepherding an answer. and made the whole situation feel instantly suspicious. Sasuke found himself glancing backward toward the door and to the other exits in the room.

"Tsunade's probably told you all you need to know," he said.

"For the sake of your well-being, yes," Kakashi acknowledged. "Does that bother you?"

"Do you care if it bothers me or not?" Sasuke shot back, trying not to notice the beat of his heart thrumming in his ears. "Is that why you threw the press at me? To try and wring more information out of my story?"

"Not at all. I simply offered her a chance to reunite with a friend."

"I'm not an idiot, Kakashi."

"No, but you can be a little blinded by your own plight sometimes," Kakashi said. "I made sure to provide you with a selection of newspapers, yet you must have noticed that the Herald never mentioned you at all. Not once. Almost everyone else was fooled by Naruto's clones, but Naoko's paper refused to merge with the status quo. She's a rare bird, that one."

"And you're going to let her interview me?"

"Oh that's what she proposed, was it?" Kakashi raised his brows in artfully crafted surprise. "I thought she just wanted tea."

"Don't be stupid," Sasuke said, somehow resisting the urge to roll his eyes. "What are you doing?"

"Well, I thought that was obvious, Sasuke. We're having a conv-"

"What do you want?" Sasuke raised his voice, finally, ground down by exasperation. "What do you
want from me? You threaten to take my daughter, then allow me to keep her. You hang this trial over my head, though I've barely heard a word about it. You allow me respite from my parole scheduled councillor because someone tipped off the press about my return. You allow me visitors, you let me speak to the Mizukage, giving me ample opportunity to swing her toward my favor if I'd wanted. You threaten to throw me in jail, and yet here I am in the Hokage Apartments of all places, guarded from the outside in, not the other way around. I'll bet if I wanted, I could just walk right on out of here!"

"And if you did, what then?"

"I'm not a science experiment!" Sasuke exploded. "Or some… I don't know-"

"Anthropology study?" Kakashi suggested.

"Don't get cute."

"I'm not. But it seems you think I'm trying to outsmart you; you're wrong." Kakashi replied. "It's the same as it has ever been between us."

"The same? You mean when you were trying to guilt me out of pursuing revenge, or when you were trying to kill me?" Sasuke snapped. "I've forgotten which level of animosity we were at now. Perhaps that's why I don't trust you."

"You don't want to trust me," Kakashi replied. "I'm your scapegoat. You're angry at a lot of things and I'm the easiest to blame."

"Don't put words in my mouth. You're setting something up; I want to know what it is."

"Setting something up?" Kakashi rose to his feet and moved around the side of the desk to lean on it, casual, though his usual nonchalance was missing. "Really?"

"All this leniency, all this… All the niceties, the lack of punishment. I should be in jail." Sasuke said. "The state should have taken my daughter. I haven't even been read my rights or-"

"Definitely Fugaku's kid," Kakashi reflected, obliquely, ignoring the sudden bombast firing in Sasuke's expression as a result. "You could probably recite the common arrest procedure statements like you can your basic kata. Yes, you probably should be in jail. If you were a danger to yourself or anyone else. But you're not. We've discussed this already at the hearing. Now that the trial is looming, you need to prepare yourself for some hard questions."

"Is this an exercise in the obvious?" Sasuke shook his head. "You've already grilled me once, even tried to prove that I'd orchestrated the… that… that Mikoto was my idea."

"I recall. I have the record." Kakashi told him. "Although, it's unlikely that mistake will be made again."

"Because of the Mizukage? Was that your idea to get more information out of me?" Sasuke scowled as he ran through his list of accusations. "Did you know about that book?"

"I did not."

"Liar."

"Not at all. It was news to me. The Mizukage was working on her own agenda there, though it seemed I was to be involved at any rate."
"Yeah, well you're all about agendas. You still haven't answered my question."

"What question? Am I with you, or am I against you, is that what you want to know?" Kakashi asked, raising a brow. "Well, that's what you really like to boil it down around, don't you: am I one thing or another. Good or bad. Senju or Uchiha? You put so much value on this flat definition, I wonder how much you've learned to appreciate the levels between, on the push and pull. Mm? Why it's so hard to be as transparent as you used to be; why Naruto can't understand what sometimes wrongs have to make a right."

"Oh, you mean the way you hid all evidence of Kaguya?"

Kakashi blinked. "When you get to the point, you certainly make a barb out of it, don't you?"

"Tell me why you did it."

"Haven't you asked Naruto yet?"

"I have," Sasuke simmered. "I want to hear it from you. Why have you never told the truth? Why did you hide it? All those lies she told, all the war and disruption she orchestrated over what? Two hundred years? More?"

"Oh that's easy," Kakashi all but shrugged. "It's completely ridiculous. No one would believe it."

"It's the truth, you're the Hokage. Make them believe it."

"Like your brother did?" Kakashi said, carefully. He waited for the fireworks, though after a few moments, when it was clear none coming his way, he cleared his throat. "Or my good friend Obito, perhaps? Is that how an Uchiha would conduct his government?"

"Kakashi." Sasuke was white-faced before him, fists shaking at his side, clenched in anger. It was a warning that warmed the air about his lips. Kakashi knew there'd be only one. But even without his chakra and abilities, one warning from Uchiha Sasuke was enough.

"That was how you were going to lead your revolution, wasn't it?" Kakashi replied, levelly. "How you were going to change the world? You had all the power you needed, you had Naruto's chakra, the Rinnegan, the Mangekyou. You had all the power of a God. You were going to rule uncontested, weren't you."

"As usual, you weren't listening."

"Oh I was. I heard what you said. You only think you had the best intentions hidden under that cloak of malice; I know you better than that. Well now you don't have any power. None. That must be disappointing."

"Right now? Yes. It is." Sasuke spat. Kakashi didn't waver.

"Isn't it? I rather sympathize. But the sharingan is lost to me too, don't forget. Your clan's Kekkei Genkai; gone. Maybe forever. Your daughter might have them, perhaps your son, but do you really want to push them that hard to find out? Will you turn them into your own private army just to challenge the peace we've attained just to tie a few ends here and there?" He could honestly feel the hate seething out of his student. The floorboards were surely charring under his feet by now. But Kakashi pressed on dutifully. Timing. It was all about the timing. "You ask me why I haven't spoken the truth, why I never sought to redeem the Uchiha or reveal the true instigator behind the Tsuki no Me plot? It's simple: I don't want to."
Sasuke felt the air leave the room and realised it was the sound of his breath stalling in his lungs. He’d expected some sort of elaborate explanation as to why the status quo was favored over the truth but this was just… unreasonably blatant. "But… you told Naruto-"

"I said lots of things to Naruto. We both know he's not the politically minded type. And it's so easy to play on his weaknesses if you need him to stay quiet about something. Guilt is something new and frightening to him now that he's needed to become more responsible for his actions. He doesn't know how to react to it apart from proliferate apologies. Makes him incredibly pliable."

"You…" Sasuke couldn't swallow. Not around the lump that had grown in his throat. Even breathing seemed a little trying at this point. He licked his lips, trying to make the shaking in his hands seem less obvious. "Why?"

"For peace. For stability. For a unified nation. All that, pretty much." Kakashi shrugged. "Honestly, Sasuke, it's sensible. It's the right decision. The Third knew it, your brother knew it-"

"Shut up." Sasuke caught Kakashi's eye and met it, stared back at him, refusing to retreat. "You can't throw my brothers name around me lightly. You know that."

"Itachi was a good soldier; a great one. And to honor his sacrifice, I will continue to support the original pact created between the Third and Itachi himself. That leaves Konoha, the Uchiha and most importantly you free of any misgivings associated with the initial coup. And keeps… well, everything neat, really."

Sasuke blinked. If the colour could have fallen any further from his face, it would have. Save two hectic points of a sharp fushia that on the high points of his cheeks that clung to his disbelief. Neat? Neat?

"You damn…. Liar… You… It's pride, isn't it? It's the honor of your goddamn broken 's why you didn't reveal the truth about Kaguya. That's why. It would have reflected badly on the Third's decision, on pretty much anyone's motives past the point of the original merger between the Senju and Uchiha!"

"There is nothing to be gained by bringing up the past, besides displaced sympathy and blame towards those long dead."

"Like fuck there isn't!"

"Itachi was part of my team, Sasuke."

"I don't care."

"Why? Because I failed to stop you falling for his ruse? Because I stand for a country that corralled his choices down to death or civil war?"

"Because you aren't Uchiha!"

"I was in the ANBU though. Itachi was in my unit before he lead one of his own. I respected him - well, I learned to. Uchiha were difficult to trust, even in that pre-war climate. I know very well the emphasis he put on peace. He fought hard for it; he died for it."

"How remorseful you must have been."

"You know what it's like to be part of a team. You know the ties that seed and grow over time. No matter how you claim to have challenged them, broken them, you understand how it is to let others
hold your life in their hands. How good that level of trust can feel."

"He was my brother, not yours," Sasuke hissed. "Don't claim to support his ideas when you don't understand them. Or him."

"But I do. Itachi primed himself to become a martyr and happy to be so long as there was peace. He ensured the Uchiha name stayed clear and that his bloodline would live on. I see no point in challenging that."

"And the Alliance?"

"The Alliance changes nothing."

"I don't believe you. If there's an ounce of truth in anything you're spouting, you can't think that what they did to him was justified."

"Itachi's wish was for peace. You challenged that with your little power trip, Sasuke, you are the one at fault." Kakashi said, flatly. "Itachi accepted his fate. That was his job. That was what he signed up for."

"What about the respect my clan deserves? What about the truth!?"

"Truth is relative. Why else do you think the Mizukage presented you with such evidence? She wanted to find out how much you knew. To make sure that Kirigakure wasn't entirely to blame for the rise in illegal trafficking." Kakashi paused. "What, you didn't think it was just for you, did you?"

"I think she has more integrity than you do," Sasuke shot back. "Terumi might have needed my consultation on that document and sure, she might just want confirmation that her people weren't going to be pinned with the blame. That's understandable. But she's got a far more substantial track record in peacekeeping than you ever will."

"Is that so?"

"You're a falsity, Kakashi. A false leader, a false Uchiha. You took, no… stole our bloodline limit to use for your own good."

"I was given the sharingan, actually. Fair and square. Benefit of having friends you see."

For anyone else, that would have been a low blow. But for Sasuke, whose general demeanor tended to push others to arms length, the comment was moot. "You had no right. And now you're using my brother's sacrifice to suit your story as well. You're pathetic."

"You don't agree?" Kakashi said, not moving. "You don't trust in your brother's benevolence? Itachi's choices kept the ninja world in a state of peace until Madara's plan rolled into action and forced the five nations to come together as one. It's a heroic story - a good story. And it's one that will keep you safe."

"Are you trying to make me thankful for your protection in exchange for your omission?" Sasuke snarled, feeling nerves prickle at the back of his neck. "No matter what you say, it's a story, it's a lie. And you know it."

"So you don't agree."

"Of course I don't agree."
"Well then," Kakashi nodded, swinging up to his feet. "I suppose you'd better fight me for it."

Debates with Kakashi tended to swing like unbalanced pendulums in most cases. It was a situation to which Sasuke had become well accustomed. However this time, the pendulum had snapped off its rod and catapulted itself into a nearby wall to an unknown fate. Sasuke stared at his teacher, suddenly completely thrown.

"Fight? For... it?"

"Yes, for the truth. Fight me. You want things square, I want peace. Either way, someone is going to win and someone's going to lose. Of course, the way I see it, and the way Itachi saw it, it's better to lose the branch than fell the tree. Your clan died for a good cause, Sasuke. And they died without blood on their hands, if you'll excuse the expression."

"Have you ever listened to me? Have you ever actually heard what I've been saying?" Sasuke's composure was dropping as the astonishment burned through him. He shook his head in disbelief. "Itachi died protecting a bunch of idiots who were too incompetent to handle their country! Why the hell should I be protecting someone like that, no... a system like that? My clan deserves better; Konoha deserves better."

"I disagree completely. We have a system that works just fine."

"I don't believe you. You know the Shinobi system is faulty; you can see it. You have all the power to fix it yet you're willing to keep feeding the lies?"

"Are you thinking you should have taken us all down when you had the chance?" Kakashi answered, wickedly. "Me, Tsunade - all the other Kage? You think your new world order would have changed things for the better?"

Sasuke glared. Kakashi was right - he had wanted to use his powers in order to force the surrender and downfall of the Shinobi way. To him, it was simple - those who had power made rules and Uchiha Sasuke had just about all the power anyone ever needed. He'd figured his plan would be no different to the way the countries were treated by their leaders anyway. And since he had no inclination for politics, why even consider that route when it was time consuming and unnecessary.. Sasuke, like his brother before him, was of fighting, tired of lies, of mistruths. He was tired of secondhand justice. Could he have changed things for the better? Maybe? It wouldn't have been better for Naruto (which had been one of the reasons why he felt he needed to finish him), it might not have been better for those who were happy with the system. And given that there had been few protests against the leaders of Konoha to date since the Sandaime, perhaps it wouldn't have been any benefit to those of the Fire Country at all.

But the Alliance was different. The Alliance was the world, not one country. And while Konoha may have been able to successfully sweep her sordid past by barricading her secrets behind the lives of the nameless and numbered, the rest of the world had been far more up front with their failings. Mei was pulling her country away from the brink of civil war and abolishing the class system that divided her people, while steaming away the blood that her predecessor had soaked into the land. The Tsuchikage and Raikage had admitted to hideous, underhanded tactics during the second and third ninja wars - even Gaara was humbled and empathetic in light of Suna's violent past. Everyone was trying, everyone was working hard to pursue the truth.

But Konoha still considered herself the pride of the Ninja World - she was the country who wouldn't be seen as tarnished, who housed and bred the great war hero Uzumaki Naruto. The Peace giver. The nation's heart. Konoha was just as accountable for the unrest in the world, yet she hid her injustices behind her shinobi, take the money of peasants to protect them from bandits, yet
never questioning the serfdom instigated by their governing Daimyo. Konoha was just as guilty as the rest of the world and soon, perhaps sooner than Kakashi thought, or the council, or any of her citizens, it would be time to pony up.

"Is that all?" Sasuke said, trying hard to keep the disgust to himself. Kakashi blinked.

"That's really up to you."

"You're not worth my time. I've already wasted enough of it here as it is." Sasuke's game face was no mask, it was clear he'd reached a level higher than anger than he could handle and he wasn't about to let Kakashi baste a moment longer in his ire. Whether Kakashi had been telling the truth or not, whether he would act upon his ridiculous claims, well, only time could tell. As angry as Kakashi had made him, Sasuke wasn't stupid enough to judge anything his former teacher had said at face value and in a few hours, Sasuke would take the time to reflect upon the conversation and unpack it. Only for the time being, he saw red. Red in the back of the door as he stormed out of the room. Red in the snowy pelt of Akamaru's fur as his dutiful guardian led him home. Red in the cold grey sky, in the naked carapace of the trees interposed between rotting thatch and drywall and the erratic gutting filled with dirty snow above his head.

And when he flung open his apartment door, punted his shoes against the skirting board and hurled his jacket against the crowded coat hooks, the red followed him like a terrier and nipped joyfully at his heels. He ignored Tsunade and Naruto as he blew into the kitchen, an angry dark cloud full of vinegar and fire, didn't respond the first time the former inquired as to his temperament. He slammed a few cupboards with off balance veracity, his jaw clenched so tightly that the curses which coloured his breath were dashed against the backs of his teeth in inelegant grunts. It was only when Tsunade got to her feet, rattled and uttered rather forcibly-

"Sasuke!"

-that he looked up. He had a butter knife in his hand. His eyes blazed.

"What?"

"What are you doing?"

Sasuke slammed the drawer closed with a metallic sleeting of cutlery.

"Thinking!"

Naruto winced as Sasuke's door made to slam, then closed curtly, but silently behind him - minding the baby in the room. "If that's thinking," he said. "I'd hate to see what angry looks like."

"You mean you don't know?" Tsunade replied with genuine surprise. Naruto just licked his lips, nervously.

"S'different… He's different. He's got the same face but…" Naruto winced. "It's not the body or the baby or anything. It's a… different difference."

"What?" Tsunade said, mystified. "What the hell does that mean, a different difference?"

"Dunno. Hard to explain."

"Something to do with the loss of his chakra?" Tsunade attempted, easing back slowly. Her hands were still resting on her thighs - not quite at ease enough to reach for her sake glass just yet.

"Power changes people. A lot."
"Well yeah I know, but it's... it's not just that. I don't know." Naruto hadn't sat down. He kept staring at the door. "It just... seems more... real now. Dunno why. I've seen him angry heaps of times but... this is just... It's like there's more to it.

"Maybe that's what Sasuke's anger looks like when it isn't just pain?" Tsunade suggested. It was a good suggestion too, as Naruto, after considering it for a few moments, seemed to relax. He nodded, slowly.

"Maybe it is," he said. Tsunade picked up her drink.

"Besides, angry and loud is good. Fine. It's when he's quiet that you've got to watch him. Just leave him for a bit - he's probably just letting off some steam."

"Letting off steam," Naruto echoed. He stared out the window. Steam. Yes. Just a friendly synonym for anger, ire. Power too, really. So was that that what happened last time? After the final battle with Kaguya? During the battle with Madara? When Sasuke threatened Konoha, his team, when he turned his back on everyone? Was that letting off steam? Maybe. It was as Tsunade postulated, though - that steam was driven by the machine of Sasuke's rage and pain like giant turbines fashioned to turn any emotion into soulless, guiltless power. That steam was hollow and limitless and that steam had dissipated somehow, somewhere along the line.

What was left was something different. Something had changed, not in circumstances, not in physicalities, no. Naruto couldn't quite put his finger on it but it was something to do with the way Sasuke was angry. There was... relief there, almost. Some little, timid emotion that sat a the back of the slamming and the shouting and just... was. It was the opposite of that haunting hollowness; the antithesis of a lack, it was... well, it felt like hope.

Dusk faded into night all too quickly as the winter daylight, extinguished - exhausted by the cold. And although Tsunade offered Naruto the living room chair as she curled up on the couch, her dreams already limned by alcohol, he politely declined. Something about going home, something about ramen going off in the fridge and he'd left the kettle on. Whatever it was, it was an excuse. Tsunade watched him as he padded out the front door, closing it carefully behind him. She counted to thirty, then smiled and leaned back against the violently floral cushions when she heard his shoes skidding on the tiles above. Then she glanced at the rod of light illuminating the bottom of Sasuke's door and sighed, rolling over into a sake-spiced unconsciousness.

The roof was cold, but he liked it. It wasn't snowing yet and the night was crisp and clear and punctuated by the pinholes of stars in the darkness. Here Naruto sat, staring out into the cold sky while his breath frosted into clouds as it passed his lips, and thought of nothing.

"You know you can't do much about it when he gets in these moods," Kurama offered, quietly. He'd climbed up out of his usual sunny plain of nothingness and sat curled around Naruto's conscious - probably in effort to keep it warm. Naruto rubbed at the back of his head - an instinctive reaction whenever his Biju spoke without warning.

"Yeah I know. It's just... It seems different this time. Bugs me."

"Course it's different, he's different."

"Well yeah, but-"

"Got two kits to care about now," Kurama continued with a snort. "Gotta think about other things
apart from himself for once. He's learned. Even I can see that."

"You were saying he should be locked up before."

"Yeah well, hindsight's twenty-twenty, ain't it?" The fox cleared his throat, sounding somewhat chided. He licked at his paw and began smoothing his fur behind his ear, downplaying his indiscretion. Naruto smiled wanly. He didn't even need to be in Kurama's inner world to know what he was doing.

"That lady from the paper wanted to tell his story."

"So I heard."

"If Sasuke tells the truth, it means people are gonna think I'm a liar."

Kurama stopped grooming at that. His ears pricked up ever so slightly as they always did when Naruto seemed fearful of something far away from his control, and was teetering on the verge of panic. Only the panic didn't come, just a slow, sad feeling of resignation which, when you were Kurama, could almost be worse.

"You know they won't."

"They might. Even with all the stuff Kakashi said, they'll think... They won't trust me."

"Why not?"

"Cos I'm... kinda part of his team. I was there; I knew what happened. I knew what really happened. Everyone's been looking at me, yanno... They count on me to make the right decisions, but... But I didn't that time. I didn't tell the truth."

"Who says the truth is always the right decision?" Kurama countered and when he felt Naruto blanch in distaste, added, "That's why you ain't a politician, kid. Look, Kakashi already made it clear you weren't in your right mind at the end of the war. You knew you weren't; everyone did. So he made the choice for you, and he did it in such a way that you could turn back on it if ya wanted."

"Why would he do that?"

"I dunno, you guys are the crazy humans," Kurama grumbled. "Maybe he figured you were gonna make the right choice in the end? 'Cos you know he knows how ya feel about Sasuke. Always did know. 'Course even with an out, it's still gonna take some work and confuse the shit out of people. Hell, it's like the Uchiha said, you don't even know if they'll believe it. But it ain't on you."

"Don't be stupid. I should have stood up for what I believed in."

"You did," Kurama pointed out. "You believe in peace."

"I don't know," Naruto licked his lips, flicking a leaf out of the guttering. "I lied for peace, that's different. Or... you know, sat on the truth or whatever. It didn't feel too dishonest at the time, but now it does."

"Why, 'cause Sasuke's here now? Even if he didn't want to tell people about that weird God woman, would you still feel this way?"

"Dunno. Yeah... I guess. Maybe. I mean I didn't at first because... well..." Naruto petered off,
feeling the disgrace of his earlier anger towards Sasuke warming the tips of his ears. Kurama sighed.

"Not everything rolls of your back, kid, you ain't a duck. Sasuke pulled a pretty low punch, though if we're bein' honest here, it's not unlike him to fight dirty. Not when he's out t'get what he wants. But you've forgiven him for that, right?"

"Yeah."

"And ya wanna make amends, right?"

"Yeah."

"And you'd protect him and those kits against anything, right? Even over the acknowledgement of the village. Even over all this fame and this attention you're getting. Even if it meant people'd know you prefer bucks over bitches, that you're different." There was an impatient growl. "I mean, c'mon… you yourself already stand against the status quo just by bein' you, it ain't that different."

Naruto swallowed hard. Then he nodded. Slowly. His fingers shook and the tears that threatened to breach were cold against the ledge of his lashes but his chest felt warm. So damn warm. Was that what it felt like to know, deep in your heart, that you were right? Was this what Sasuke was feeling?

"Yeah."

"Then I think you got your answer," Kurama finished, flicking a few of his tails blithely. "And if you're sittin' there mooching over it bein' the right decision or not, don't. You can have all the people in the village, all the people in the world fallin' head over heels for ya but ya know there's only one that really matters."

"What about G-"

"He knows, dumbass." There was another snort, playfully derisive this time. "He knew before you did. What d'ya think he was tryin' to say last time?"

(Because you still love him. And you always will.)

Naruto nodded again, slowly, dreamily. He felt Kurama stir one last time before his soul's guest tucked his nose beneath his tails and fell asleep - clearly done with human interaction for the evening. But sleep was far away for Naruto. He was awake, alive with tension, nervousness and plain, unadulterated jitters. He tried to think back calmly on the times he'd shared with Sasuke in the last twenty-four hours, then the times before that, but it always led back to the dreams and the lie that Sasuke told. Those golden years - which weren't even years - of their life together. Their love together. Of course, as dreams go, time had eroded many of the finer details, but that feeling remained. That sense of fulfillment. Closure. He didn't know if this Sasuke felt the same, he didn't even know if it would be a chance worth taking to ask if it meant he lost everything again. He'd been half a soul for most of his life - only hope and persistence had filled the gap. And now he knew how it felt to be whole, he couldn't let it go. He wouldn't. It was just that the downtime between not knowing and knowing was very, very scary.

Sunrise stretched over the roofs of Konoha by the time he plucked up the courage to shimmy back down the drainpipe and tap lightly on Sasuke's window. The Uchiha hadn't slept either, he knew that just by looking at him. He merely nodded from his perch at the end of the bed where he sat surrounded by a battleground of crumpled paper, pencils and several yellowed, dog eared
"The roof?" He stated, not looking up as the Jinchuuriki clambered over the sill with a level of adroitness only a drunkard could appreciate. Naruto straightened and tugged on the bottom of his shirt.

"Tsunade snores," he offered by way of explanation. Sasuke wasn't impressed.

"So do you."

"Not as loud as her!"

"You'll catch your death sleeping out there, idiot."

Naruto shrugged. "Kurama keeps me warm. If I've got a jacket I'm ok."

There was a shrewd glance from Sasuke as he inspected Naruto's attire. Still those jeans, a thin tshirt and some revamped version of his orange jacket. That thing probably wasn't even lined - he could have sworn he'd once caught the idiot sellotaping toilet paper to the inside of it as a means of making it warmer.

"Really?"

"Yeah. It's kinda like having an inner furnace," Naruto explained. "He's a pretty big guy so he makes a lotta heat, yanno?"

"If you say so," Sasuke replied, mildly. "What time is it?"

"About five thirty." Naruto glanced outside. The sun was hidden behind a wadding of thick, snow-laden clouds, but it was still bright enough to hazard an educated guess. "Maybe a quarter to six?"

"I'm surprised you're up this early."

"Same could be said for you only you didn't sleep." Naruto didn't fail to notice the dark crescents under Sasuke's eyes, nor the brittle chalkiness of his complexion. Sasuke looked back at him in an appraising kind of way.

"So?"

"So neither did I."

"I wouldn't expect you to maintain my sleeping schedule out of some weird congenial penance. Not sleeping is something I'm used to."

"Yeah, well it bugs me if you're not comfortable." Naruto replied, stubbornly. "And you came back from that lady's office in such a huff yesterday I couldn't help but be worried about you. What were you doing all night?"

Sasuke sighed, for once unable to better or even match Naruto's obstinacy. "Thinking."

"Thinking?" Naruto did a quick sweep of the room, eyebrows raised. Thinking obviously made a mess in the Uchiha household. The commonly neat room was overturned. Clothes were on the floor, paper was scattered about the bed and the rug in a variety of constructions, marked here and there with Sasuke's arthritically-slanted handwriting. Naruto toed a wodge of paper by the bedpost before his eyes fell upon a neater stack resting by Sasuke's knee. A stack that had a title and a name that read:
It was almost sweet how Sasuke had validated himself by way of authorship; surprising, perhaps. But Naruto wasn't at the point where he could appreciate such nuances and instead he stared at the paper and swallowed hard.

"That's a lot of stuff to think about."

"Mm," Sasuke said.

"You're gonna do it, huh?"

"Maybe." There was a slight shake of the head and Sasuke's dark, mussed bangs drifted sullen as flags in a dull wind. "Yes. I think so. Yeah." He turned his pencil about in his fingers, flicking it expertly as if he were maneuvering kunai. Naruto padded closer, dropping to his knees in front of Sasuke's crossed legs. Paper shuffled in a sigh of protest as he moved.

"Sasuke," he began. "If you do, you know... do it... You know it might bring up... what you said that time. Before we fought. About killing the Kage and -"

"Yeah."

"And if you don't... you know... do it... People won't know about what you said... and that."

There was a sharp look. Distaste. Sasuke almost, almost sneered. "You want me to continue this lie?"

"Well, no but..."

"You're worried you'll get in trouble?" Sasuke was too tired to roll his eyes, but the temptation was clear. "That's hardly likely, not with the popularity you have now-"

"That's not what I meant!" Naruto twisted his fingers in his lap. "I'm worried that... that it might cause a lot of trouble for you. It really could end up landing you in jail if you actually admit to... you know-"

"What, attempted regicide?" Sasuke replied, cooley. "Sure. But I'd already tried it once at the summit. If I was to be punished for my actions against the Kage, they'd have done it by now."

"That seems kinda... unsubstantial."

"Yeah well you're just as surprised as I am. I guess when there's no chance of a threat, people take a bit of a different view." Sasuke shifted in his seat, moving forward a little so that he could address Naruto more clearly. "I may have been wrong about some things. And I might not have given a shit about my methods as long as I saw results. But I was never dishonest. I said what I said and I meant what I said."

"But-"

"And if you don't think I'm in trouble already, you're more dense than I thought."

"Geez, what did that office lady say to you?" Naruto murmured, incredulously. "I mean, the Newspaper girl was kinda pushy and stuff, but even she didn't manage to persuade you."
"Office la- you mean my counselor? She didn't say anything; she wasn't there. The summon was from Kakashi."

"Eh?"

"Turns out he was interested in the same thing as Naoko," Sasuke said. "Though he was more interested in telling me where he stood on the matter of the truth than finding out where my intentions lay."

"Where he stood?" Naruto mused this bodily. "Oh, right… and that's with us, right? Is he going to make an announcement soon or something?"

"The opposite, actually," Sasuke replied, drily. "He thinks revealing the truth would be bothersome, he'd rather keep things as they are."

Naruto's jaw dropped. "He what?"

"Unsurprising really."

"But."

"So if you're on his side, you might as well climb back out that window." Sasuke nodded toward the ledge, his eyes flinty. "Kakashi has made it clear that if I cause any ripples - if I press for any kind of vindication - he will fight against me."

"And…" Naruto swallowed. "You're going to fight back?"

"You know what I'm like with challenges," Sasuke said, drolly. "Especially from him."

"But people will… You know… Talk and..." Naruto made an awkward motion about Sasuke's changed figure. Sasuke rolled his eyes.

"What? Judge me? People will already be making judgements about me, Naruto, the moment they find out who I am and they will find out. The council will take great delight in parading me around as a cautionary tale once the Kage are finished with me, I'm sure." Sasuke licked his lips as Naruto took a moment to digest the information, Kakashi's betrayal and the backlash that could and most likely would ensue were Sasuke to persist.

"You've never cared what people thought anyway," he said finally, smirking a little because hell, it was true. "I guess I was worried because it's different now. You have… a family again. And that's something, Sasuke. Even if it started bad, it's something."

Started bad? Naruto couldn't have shattered the grammar on a poorer choice of words - "bad" could barely begin to describe what he'd been through. Though, ultimately. He was right. He had Mikoto. He had his son. Eyes on the sleeping child in her cot, Sasuke lifted his hands and crossed them over his belly. He took a moment to reflect upon the words as he had done for every sentence he'd penned that evening, every paragraph. Every thought had been considered, reminisced, then written in thin but determined script.

"It's not a decision I made lightly, Naruto. It's not an idea that came to me overnight, it's more… of a long term goal. I understand that the outcome will have consequences that will affect my life, my children's lives… and yours." There was a glance to Naruto then. To that sudden surprise. Those blue eyes widened like headlights on the universe. Sasuke shook his head a little. "You're sitting there worrying about me, but… I know this won't look good on you either, idiot, no matter what I said before. I was… worried. "...concerned and it stopped me for a while when I was writing
this." He patted the stack of paper and smirked. "You actually stopped me for once, dobe. You should be proud."

"Sasuke," Naruto said, though he hadn't figured what would come after it. The smirk on Sasuke's face disappeared, leaving behind something tired and drawn. Something beaten, but strangely, not despairing about it. It was a kind of weathered sense of accomplishment or perhaps genuine pride.

"You're right." Sasuke continued, shifting on the bed a little. "I might have my children taken from me this time. Might have to serve time. Who knows, it might all go horribly wrong. But I'm tired now. I'm tired of lies; I'm tired of hiding. I've spent so long being someone else's ideal, I don't know where the projections stopped and the real me started. I only know that... I only ever knew what I was, who I was-" He swallowed. "When I thought of you."

Naruto jerked to attention then, his eyes wide, his heart flying up into his mouth like it had no business being in his chest. He could taste it on his tongue. Hot. Panicked. In that moment, he wanted nothing more than to reply but his words were caught in the web of conflicting emotions that closed over his throat. He thought of him; Sasuke thought of him. Naruto. Him. What's more, when he did, Sasuke remembered himself - at least, he remembered the person he'd had to leave behind in order to survive. The real him. Naruto did that. Naruto was that to Sasuke. He was that much to Sasuke.

"I know... that this will change things." Sasuke went on, though his voice was distant in Naruto's head like the scent of nectar on the breeze or the sound of laughter outside in the street nearby. "For you. Everything you have, everything you've built. People will ask questions. They'll want to know why you never spoke out and they'll want to know what happened. Kakashi might have covered for you, but that doesn't mean it's going to be easy. On my own I could handle it-"

"Sasuke-"

"I might even be able to convince a few people, maybe the nine won't turn on me. I could handle it. I can handle it. Only-"

"Yes." Naruto said without moving.

Sasuke stopped. "Yes?"

"Yes." Naruto nodded. "Whatever you're gonna say; yes. Whatever you want me to do, yes. Always has been yes. Always will be. I'm-" Oh god, was this happening now? Was he confessing now? He meant to have it all written out; he was going to plan it. Practice. Propose to his pillow over cup ramen, pretending it was fine dining. It was going to be a Thing. Not... Not blurted out like this. Not accidental. Not- "I'll just... fuck it. It doesn't matter. I don't care anymore. Nothing matters if you're not here. Not the titles, not the village, not anything! It doesn't matter." Naruto closed his eyes and fought to keep his voice strong, to breathe. To hold his head up when he raised his eyes and opened them. To look Sasuke in the eye and continue. "Nothing matters without you. You saw it, right?"

It. Saw it. "It" being the moment Sasuke was lost and Naruto ceased to be human. Every the slightest memory of it stalled Naruto for a mere second and he bit his lip, pushing himself to go on.

"I thought for... for so fucking long that it was just our connection. That we were best friends, or rivals or whatever we wanted to call it to make it feel less... I dunno. Intense. Whatever we had between us. I thought because of how we both grew up, we had a special bond, that we were the same and stuff. It kinda made things better, yanno? To know there was someone out there like me.
Someone who was alone, someone no one else got. You gave me goals, Sasuke - not the big hardcore ones like wanting to be Hokage and getting acknowledgement from everyone, but little ones. Important ones. To have the goal of just… wanting to talk to you, that's what used to get me through the day. I thought… if I didn't go and strike up a conversation one day, then I'd better look after myself so I could try the next. I had to stay alive and stay mostly out of trouble, because if I didn't, I might miss my chance. I might never meet you. That was all I wanted. Then when ol' Gramps told us about our ancestry, you know… all that prophecy stuff, I figured that must have been it. Our link. Why I couldn't stop thinking about you. Why I needed you around me; I couldn't rest until you were happy. I couldn't be happy unless I knew you were."

He laughed a little then, but it was really to soothe his own nerves. Nostalgia tickled at the back of his neck like a comfortable scarf, or perhaps the collar of his old white-trimmed jacket and for a moment he was lost in it, terribly aware that Sasuke was sitting right in front of him, while at the same time, almost oblivious of him. He eased up to kneel rather than sit, wringing his hands absentely as he spoke. Were he a child he might grip the front of his tshirt and look away, unable to handle the intensity of the situation.

But they weren't children anymore. The blue eyes caught brown again, valiant and determined as any time Naruto had stood before Sasuke as an adult. A man. A man who no doubt felt the sweat gathered at the nape of his neck and over the thin skin at the back of his knees. A man whose his tongue felt like leather and whose fingertips were electric with nervous energy. Some man.

"Nothing is… right without you, Sasuke. Nothing works. Nothing makes sense. I thought I could handle it after the war, thought I could deal with you gone because of what you said and what you did and damn, damn I wanted to be angry at you. And stay angry. Or pissed or just… feel… another way about you than I do right now. Or ever. But I couldn't. I can't. Not even when you tear my world apart - not even if you killed me a million times, I can't. Cos I love you. I love you, you d-damn showoff. You smug, stupid bastard. I f-fucking love you, ok? Shit…"

It wasn't a sonnet by any means. It wasn't graceful or elegant nor did it make a hell of a lot of sense. But Naruto wasn't one to wax poetic when he was barely capable of a limerick at best. He wasn't one for sophisticated courtship rituals, didn't know the right flowers to buy, nor what to write in a card if required - most prose of a romantic nature tended to course toward tragedy after too long in rumination. But Naruto was, and had always been when it came to matters of the heart - whether in friendship or love, arrestingely honest. For all his lack of concept when it came to delivery, Naruto had an ability to handle truth like no one else. It shone through him, illuminated his words. And though he stuttered and shook, though he swore and he struggled, the truth was there, resting like perfectly draped silk over his massacre of a confession.

He had no idea how Sasuke would react. He hadn't thought that far. Whether Sasuke was supposed to smile a little or say thank you or something equally mundane, it was all new to him. Only Sasuke had to do something now, because he'd gone and said all that stuff and even though Sasuke might have guessed his feelings. He'd had no idea how they'd sounded out loud and maybe they just sounded stupid after all? Oh god would he just brush it off? Would he just laugh and call him an idiot? Would he send him out of the room, disgusted? Tell him never to come back? Would he think he was weak and stupid and not worth his time?

The panic was there in headlines Naruto's face, but none of the fears that kept Naruto extraordinarily quiet had ever crossed Sasuke's mind. For once, blissfully, he found himself thinking nothing. Perhaps he thought (somewhere in the back of his mind where it told his lungs to take in oxygen or his aorta to keep pumping), that he could never see Caliga in Naruto again, not now, not like this. Not with this kind of raw sincerity and hope radiating from him in near-tangible waves. But Sasuke couldn't tell him that. Sasuke didn't need to tell him anything. Words were walls
between them and Sasuke didn't need words. He and Naruto were partners, opposite and complimentary at the same time. Yin and yang. Day and night. And for what Naruto could do to the truth with words, Sasuke could do with action.

Naruto might have made his point by blurting out an epic tale of apology, love and longing. All Sasuke needed to do was lean in, breathe in that gold and that blue, that warm honeyed skin, that laugh, that hope and strength, and kiss him.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Happy Holidays and long live SNS.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Konoha 16th March
Year of the Hare

A kiss.


Sasuke knew what kisses were. He understood their meaning and their weight. The pleasantness and kindness such a strange yet simple gesture could abet. He'd been kissed by his mother, of course, many times. He'd been kissed by his father - once or twice when he was very young. He'd had kisses from Grandparents and elderly neighbours and maybe, perhaps orchestrated by their mother for a photo opportunity, or perhaps his brother just hadn't minded when Sasuke was a toddler, a kiss from his brother. Sasuke remembered them.

So Sasuke kissed Naruto.

He'd kissed Naruto before, twice in fact. Both times had been more an accidental collision of the lips than an intentional show of affection, but the act had been hard to forget. He could have sworn he'd been tasting miso for week thereafter and every time he'd seen Naruto post hoc, he found himself shuddering in a mixture of uncanny excitement and revulsion, rather unsure as to his feelings regarding the situation. Then there were the kisses they'd shared in his genjutsu and these were quite different altogether. That plastic world of false desire and false happiness - the one that was supposed to be a farce and would finally win him victory over Naruto. - somehow became so damn real even he found it hard to tell the difference after a time. Perhaps it was because he knew Naruto so well? Perhaps he'd just been trying so hard and he was so damn tired. Or perhaps, just perhaps, he wanted it to be as real as Naruto thought it was. He wanted to be just as lost within it. To forget.

But he knew it was only a thin veneer of jutsu that separated them from the real world. He knew that the Naruto inside his genjutsu had been a poor substitute for the real thing. Weak, diaphanous - tasting only of wet air and ozone. Sasuke could make himself real for others… genjutsu didn't always work so smoothly the other way around. This Naruto, this real Naruto before him was hyper-substantial to the point that reality was almost pushed inside out and back the other way. Sasuke was suddenly so aware of all the aspects that made Naruto Naruto, he was hard pressed to regulate anything else in the room. The ramen/miso taste was gone, thankfully, and was replaced by a musk that was, while not unpleasant in the least, incredibly persistent. There was something so very masculine about it, but at the same time there were lighter notes within it like the scent of the air beneath sun-soaked linen or the tang of wheat on a northern breeze. As if sunshine itself had a smell. There was a coolness too, as though he'd just brushed his teeth, or eaten peppermints with the sweet taste reduced to nothing more than an idea or a memory. His lips were warm and soft, and his mouth was needy. There was an incessant feel to it, and Sasuke found himself quite lost to it all.

It wasn't perfect, though. It couldn't be. Sasuke may have finally allowed himself the awareness that he needed Naruto, but love was a strange and difficult emotion, and far too young to keep Sasuke's demons at bay. Trauma was ever the sticky houseguest, and he felt it still, nestled just under the skin. He tried to focus, but his wounds were deep and raw and still nothing that anyone
but time could hope to mend. Somewhere, deep in the thicket of his memories, he heard Caliga laughing at him. He saw those strange green eyes, that thin smile, curved like the blade of a scimitar. Caliga was in him, around him, through him and he was too much, always too much for Sasuke to bear. He closed his eyes as the revulsion boiled and dread froze his lungs. His control was slipping. Naruto was so close, too close, too soon. He couldn't forget, he couldn't parse the two, not yet. And when the blond raised his hands - an attempt to cup Sasuke's chin or perhaps caress his shoulders - Sasuke caught his wrists in mid air and held them. His fingers were white and cold, his breath was thin.

"Don't," he muttered. Naruto stalled abruptly as though someone had placed a stone in his inner workings. His mouth moved a few times, trying to find the right word. It had been so perfect a moment ago, unbelievable, in fact. And now… all of a sudden… this.

"S-sorry." His immediate reaction was to jolt and pull away, knowing that he'd somehow caused Sasuke some form of discomfort. But the hands held him still and the other merely lowered his chin, panting slightly as though recovering from a nightmare. Naruto rallied. "No touching. I remember. Sorry."

"Idiot. I don't... you-" Sasuke sighed, defeated. "You don't need to apologize."

"But-" Naruto protested. "When I came in yesterday, you said you didn't want-"

"There's still a lot of things I have to deal with," Sasuke explained, his eyes trained on his lap. "A lot of things I don't want. Other things…" I do want. I need. "I don't know."

"Did you want me to leave?" Naruto asked, quietly. Sasuke shook his head.

"No."

"Should I go sit by the window?" Naruto looked toward the sill, but didn't move. They were tentative questions, small steps. Sasuke wondered if it felt like he was dealing with a wild animal. He exhaled again, hopelessly.

"No."

"I could stay here a bit longer?" Naruto said, sliding his hands gently though Sasuke's, until he held those chilly fingers. His hands were warm and rough and very, very real. He smiled a little. "Like this? If you want…"

Sasuke felt his pulse through his fingers. He felt the blood coursing through his veins. Two years ago, he would have shoved Naruto aside, too blinded by his own pain to acknowledge anyone as similar as Naruto could possibly help him - even now, Sasuke found it odd to ask for anything, especially help. But Naruto was warm and close. He could feel the strength in his square shoulders, could sense the gentleness in his hands and his touches. It calmed him. He released Naruto's fingers after a moment's hesitation, willing his hands to stop shaking and his heart to stop pounding in his ears. He slid his hands upward to trace the line of that strong jaw, nestling his finger deep within that soft blond hair. He found the texture surprising, he'd always figured Naruto's hair was as coarse as a wire brush, but they were smooth and pale, like corn silk that whispered over his knuckles. It had felt wrong to push Naruto away and but his experiences had left him with a list of priorities that left his childhood spat with Naruto well in the dust. Calm for now and glad that Naruto kept his hands at his sides, Sasuke leaned in again breathing in Naruto's scent like nectar, and kissed him a second time. He'd forgotten how good it felt. He hadn't realized his facsimile had been a pale shadow of the original and he was glad to be disappointed.
"Bottle," he said after a moment, still a little too punch drunk at his own actions to register Naruto's consternation. "Get a bottle for Mikoto. Like you did yesterday."

"What now?"

"You want me to ask her to wait?" Sasuke raised a brow. Mikoto wasn't quite awake yet, but Naruto didn't know that. It would give him time to gather his thoughts, to centre himself, let this occurrence settle. He could have this. He was allowed this. It was all right. "Go on."

"O-ok." Naruto seemed very reluctant to leave, but he did so without further complaint. Sasuke remained sitting on the bed for a few moments, listening as Naruto padded back toward the kitchen and when he was sure the idiot was entirely out of range, he let out a breath and closed his eyes, rubbing his fingertips over his lips as though still searching for a tactile sample of Naruto's taste. He'd kissed him. He'd actually kissed him. It felt like he'd crossed an entire ocean from one moment to the next - that he'd traversed the stars the second he'd leaned in to the moment he sent Naruto away. His mind still reeled from the sensation and, mouth tingling, limbs jellified like warm glue, he eased to his feet, making his way back to Mikoto's cot.

She lay in a light sleep - slowly waking up to her own hunger and the noises around her. He could tell when she wasn't far away - her eyelashes fluttered now and then and her lips moved in slow, pursed motions. Strong feet kicked at her blankets in strange, irregular motions and her little hands pulsed in smart, strong fists as though challenging the world before she even woke. Sasuke observed her silently, noting her strange, half-asleep dance, her odd little fighting jig. He still couldn't believe how much of her was Uchiha and how little she'd inherited from the Kakkou - if anything at all. Now that she was growing into her features, he could see his mother's face in hers. Perhaps Itachi's eyes. Possibly his grandmother's chin. Her little nose was still a baby nose - it was far too early to tell what stories in her ancestry might inform the shape - but her smile was a mirror of his. She was all Uchiha, perfect Uchiha - there was no semblance of the foreigner's genes within her - none of their angular faces, their thin noses or their hooded, pale eyes. She was Uchiha. She should be Uchiha.

Which was why his decision to publicize the truth was even more important. He wasn't a clan by himself, he was only a single thread in the tapestry of their legacy, no matter how powerful he had been. Thanks to Zetsu's ministrations and century-spanning ire, Sasuke had grown up as a living ghost - a relic of a clan that had been purposely forgotten and remained only as a whisper. Konoha had buried the Uchiha a decade ago, but for the little anyone seemed to know of them, it may as well have been a thousand years. He could leave things as they were, it would be easier, safer indefinitely. He could keep the Uchiha in the past, bury them in antiquity to revive as storybook heroes - legends to influence and inspire. But his clan had lived. There weren't myth, they were people. They ate and breathed and fought and cried as only people could and legends could not. He didn't want her to feel that her ancestors were so far out of reach. They were stars in the sky now, but they'd walked on the soil beneath her feet only a few years before she was born.

The Uchiha had died at Konoha's hand for Konoha's peace. That was the bitter pill he'd had to swallow after years of misguided hatred and self-torture. The resentment of it still simmered keenly beneath the surface, a seed keen to sprout, flower, and shed its pollen. But he could now do what his brother couldn't. He could give Mikoto the truth and let her decide. She could be an Uchiha in a world who knew what they were, who accepted and acknowledged their loss without tiptoeing around the truth. A village who could be wrong. Who could pay respect through penance, heal old wounds by admitting their accountability. Perhaps in weathering the danger that might stem from stirring up the past, he might finally start to encourage the type of peace his brother had failed to achieve. He risked his future and hers in doing so. They might be separated, they might be mocked and judged - the village may not even care for their past tragedies and consider the bloodiness of
history more tasteful with a few years of neglect thrown over it.

But he owed it to her to try. And, if it meant that blood might drain from his memories - that he might one day recall the smiling face of his neighbour, or the kind words of the fan maker without seeing their dead staring eyes and their cold, lifeless skin - then perhaps he owed it to himself as well.

Sasuke smiled weakly as Mikoto cried for him before opening her eyes and he eased into the cot to take her in his arms, holding her close. He couldn't give her the prestigious clan that laid the very foundation of Konoha, but he could give her a history. And as Naruto bumbled about in the kitchen, muttering quietly as Tsunade, unaware that her charge was already away and about, hissed at him to be quiet and Akamaru skittered about, trying not to be a very large dog in a very small apartment, Sasuke realized she had more than that already. He looked down at his work, his life, his sins, piled neatly on the bed and nodded, resolute.

"Today," he said. "I'm gonna do something I haven't done for a long time. I don't know how it's going to go, I might fuck it up completely. But I'm gonna try. All I've been doing since we got out of that place is try, and… well, it's worked out pretty good so far." Sasuke let his daughter grab his bangs, squealing happily. He smiled. "It's time we had a conversation with our village. It's time the Uchiha spoke."

The sun was dawning slowly over the forbidden forest and the canopy glittered as the heavy dew caught and refracted the light into thousands of glittering, dancing eyes. The mist lay in a thick carpet above the trees, and opened here and there to let broad shafts of winter sunlight through, acting like a heavy stage curtain against the bright character spotlights. Despite the greyness and overall apathy of the weather, for a very brief, early morning stretch, the colours of the evergreens were magnificent, the light, jubilant. Even the air tasted sweet as spring and the chill of the morning breeze was uplifting and rejuvenating.

Onoki frowned at the entire ordeal and lobbed a missile of ancient, ill-tempered spit at the ground before announcing:

"Fucking weather."

"What's that?" Kurotsuchi asked as she handed her Kage his morning tonic. It was a concoction she'd invented to stop most of his early morning gripes and consisted mostly of tea and grain alcohol base. Thoroughly foul, though completely effective. Onoki grunted as he took it, his hands large and cartoonish within his thick, padded gloves.

"Fucking weather. S'what I said."

"And here I thought you were commenting on the splendor of the Fire Country on such a glorious winter morning." Kurotsuchi said, hammering the stopper back on the bottle before stowing it within her travelling duffel. She nodded toward the canopy stretching out in front of them - an endless sea of silver and green. "Funny, calling it the Land of Fire when it's really quite lush and green all year round. The forest trees here don't drop their leaves like they do up North."

"Well if they did, Konoha wouldn't be the Village Hidden in the Leaves would it? It'd be Village of the Manky Sticks."

"Poetic," Kurotsuchi smiled. "You don't like the view then?"

"I don't care much for the view. Don't care much for the trees," Onoki cleared a nostril with a
bubbling snort and took another draught of his tonic. "Don't care much for travelling and I definitely don't care much for the cold. Makes my bones ache."

"Everything makes your bones ache."

"At my age," Onoki replied, sagely. "That's what they like to do. Is your damn churlish brother awake yet?"

The last part he directed toward B who had appeared at the edge of the campfire, a wide yawn cracking his jaw. Powerful arms the size of telephone poles flexed then lowered and B nodded at them, somewhat sedately as he moved toward the dying embers.

"Nope."

"Does he tend to sleep in?"

"Dunno." B eased to a squat by the fire and picked up a stick, threading it between the warm stones with absent fascination.

"Hn," Onoki grumbled, loud enough so that B might hear him, but low enough that he might deny it. "Fat lot of good isn't he?"

"You're the one who invited yourself to travel along with the Raikage's party," Kurotsuchi said pushing up to her feet in order to fetch the kettle and find some tea. If they weren't heading off straight away, they might as well have something to drink while they waited. "We could have continued alone. The Mist did."

"Don't want to be rude," the Tsuchikage sniffed. "Village leaders don't just pass each other like ships in the night without a greeting, you know."

"What's that meant to mean?"

"Mean's they don't just coast…." B spoke suddenly, gratifying the statement by stretching his arms in a long graceful line, as though measuring distance. "Kage got purpose. They ain't gonna cruise, they got meaning, yo."

"Huh?"

"Kage are one, you get it? Like the countries, like the land, yanno. We're all one."

"Are you alright?" Kurotsuchi raised a brow and turned on her heel, tentatively. "That doesn't even rhyme."

"He'll be ready," B said, turning back to focus on the embers. Kurotsuchi frowned uncertainly. Everyone was certainly in a weird mood this morning. In fact, everyone had been in a pretty mood since both parties had made their rendezvous at the border of the Grass Country the day before - it was almost as though they weren't expecting to bump into one another. Yet Onoki, who never cared for travelling, seemed oddly keen to cover as much ground as possible, while the Raikage, A, and his brother, were sullen and quiet - strangely close-lipped for such an outspoken pair. Even Akatsuchi, who could usually encourage a few laughs with a joke or two, couldn't warm the crowd.

Was this meeting with Konoha really such a sombre affair? Was it that kid, Uchiha Sasuke's impending punishment that was bothering them? Because he was Naruto's friend? Because it might actually turn into something tricky and convoluted because he somehow, inexplicably, turned up back where he was supposed to be, but with a child? Was that it?
Unnerved by the unlikely quietude, Kurotsuchi fumbled about in her bag, finally locating the kettle and was about to take it with her to fetch some water when she heard movement in the trees surrounding them; a shift of loose rock. Her hand went to her kunai holster immediately, only to stall as she heard B chuckle.

"Hey Sandy. Arencha a bit out of your way?"

"I thought I'd escort you from here." Gaara's smooth, tempered voice drifted down from the surrounding boulders and he smiled a little as Kurotsuchi spun around to face him, kettle still in hand, raised and loaded appropriately. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

"Not startled," Kurotsuchi replied, flustered, and lowered her arm. She'd forgotten just how disconcerting those strange green eyes were, how disconcerting most of Gaara was, in fact. "I'm making tea, Kazekage, would you or your…" She nodded as a pair of familiar figures stepped into view: Temari with her blonde pigtails and holstered fan and Kankuro, whose face was painted like a strange, geometric pelt. "Cohort like any?"

"Tea would be welcome, thank you." Gaara replied, stepping down from his perch to take B's hand and shake it warmly. "How has your trip been, B? Tsuchikage-sama? I hear the Mizukage has already arrived in Konoha."

"She wanted her licks in early, most like," Onoki offered Gaara a perfunctory nod. "You need a haircut, kid."

"Perhaps," Gaara's voice gave the indication of a shrug, though he didn't move. Sand undulated quietly at his feet, which Kurotsuchi found herself watching without wanting to, mesmerized. When she realized she was doing it, she shook her head a little and swallowed with a dry mouth. Gaara had certainly become more personable as he grew older - one might even say friendly, kind. But one had to wonder what part of that kind, sweet boy used to listen to the beast inside howling for blood, hissing for vengeance. Shukaku may have redeemed himself - he wasn't even around anymore… but Gaara retained his abilities. What did that mean, exactly? Did Gaara still remember his bloodlust? Or was that all simply compartmentalized as a bad dream?

She may have pondered on it a few moments more, however A's voice cut through the air, loud as a thunderclap broke Kurotsuchi's reverie almost audibly. Blanching in every possible direction, she pushed to her feet and stepped aside as the Raikage marched past her, his neat moustache twitching in annoyance.

"What are you all sitting around for? Aren't we supposed to be moving? What the hell's he doing here?" A jerked his chin in Gaara's direction, to which the Kazekage merely raised a brow.

"I was already travelling North East of my village," he said, smoothly. "I thought I would accompany you the rest of the way to Konoha."

"Seems pretty redundant," A grumbled.

"Haven't you come rather far West?" Gaara countered. "After all, Kumo is really the closest to Konoha, geographically speaking."

"We had a couple of things to take care of," A muttered, dropping the matter in favor of throwing orders toward Darui and C, who immediately began packing down camp. Onoki sighed, despondent at the now bypassed offer of tea and rose to his feet, signalling for Kurotsuchi to gather their things and summon Akatsuchi. Within fifteen minutes, and a scant greeting between the three countries, the group was on their way, moving carefully down through the lower foothills that led
down into the Forbidden Forest. The party was silent for most of the way, with Onoki and A keeping the lead and Temari and Kankuro at the flank. Gaara fell in step with B, ignoring his grumbling peers and kept his voice low as he spoke.

"Your brother is still upset, isn't he?" He said. "With Sasuke?"

B shrugged. "Maybe."

"Seems that way. It must be nice to have someone care about you so much. As I recall, he was mad with anger when he heard about your supposed abduction. He wouldn't have stopped fighting until Sasuke was practically emulsified."

"He talks with his fists. We all like that sometimes."

"Is that what you were doing when you put your fist through Sasuke's chest?" Gaara said. Were he anyone else the comment might have come off as somewhat accusatory - pointed, perhaps. But Gaara's voice was smooth and even and held no note of criticism. B slowed a little suddenly, his eyes narrowing behind his dark glasses.

"How'd y-"

"Konoha retrieved some very helpful information out of one of Sasuke's discarded lackeys." Gaara answered, quietly. "They shared the information with us, hoping it might prove useful if we had the chance to detain him. An injury of that degree may have needed more than a bit of first aid and a few day's rest. If he had developed a weak spot, we needed to know about it."

"Kid was barely more than a fly. No problem." B shrugged again, shoving his hands in his pockets. "And A's prob'ly just pissed that he got all riled up when I was trickin' him. Prob'ly just wants to put that kid in his place jus' cause he went and got his damn hand lopped off."

"And you want to put Sasuke in his place because?"

The question hung in the air. B looked at Gaara then, who only regarded him soberly.

"You're not locked up any more, B-sama," the Kazekage continued. "You may wander the world and train as you like. Visit whom you please. I know you've been to see Shukaku on a few occasions - my border guards watched you travel across the Sand."

"You been spying on me?"

"You're very welcome to stay in Suna, if you like," Gaara bypassed, smoothly. "Perhaps on your way to Konoha. When you visit Naruto?"

"You been spyn on me," B confirmed, not entirely surprised. "My brother set you up or what?"

"Naruto told me," Gaara replied with a smile. "We talk. A lot. Are you that surprised?"

"Just talk?" This time it was B's turn to grin and Gaara's to shrug.

"We're good friends," he summarized. "We always will be. I owe him a great debt. As do we all." He licked his lips, linking his arms in front of him in a manner that was almost childish. "Tell me, B, as a friend: you're not on this trip to stretch your legs, are you? You have a purpose here besides visiting Naruto."

B took in a decisive breath, suddenly agitated. "It ain't important."
"I don't believe you," Gaara spoke even more quietly now. It was possible B seemed to sense his words rather than hear them. "When a jinchuuriki seeks out other Bijuu to speak with - and with some urgency, I might add, those of us who know what it is like to hear the language of the tailed beasts in our heads and hearts… worry." Sand tumbled at their feet as they walked, shuffling quietly beside them both. B hadn't noticed it before, but it followed Gaara as though it had a mind of its own. Or was, perhaps, awaiting a command. "I do not have Shukaku with me any more, B, but I still hear them. And thanks to Naruto, sometimes I hear the others as well."

"Must be annoying."

"It's a feat that can only be accomplished through deep meditation," Gaara explained. "I wasn't spying, I assure you. Only meditation is something of a habit for me, I couldn't help tuning in as it were. Why are you worried about Sasuke?"

"Who's worried?" B snorted, remarkably cavalier. "Why'd I be worried about that little shit?"

"He tried to kill you once."

"Yeah, and he failed. Big time. Only got away because I didn't quite tear him in half when I had the chance."

Gaara's expression clouded briefly, but it was enough. The sand at his feet shivered and grains of it dusted B's toes like a gust of warm breath. "Naruto is very dear to me, you know." Gaara breathed. "And whatever Naruto considers important, so do I. That includes the 'little shit', as you so eloquently put it."

B walked in silence for a moment. Gaara rarely raised his temper any more, it was strange to hear him speak so firmly. But he was right, Naruto still cared for Sasuke, even if he tried so hard not to admit it. Even if Sasuke had... "M'not gonna hurt the Uchiha." He surrendered. "Y'get bit by a mosquito, y'don't go out smooshing every single one outta spite, yanno? I got pride, but it ain't bruised that easy. I ain't gonna touch, Sasuke. I'm just delivering a message."

"A message?" Gaara was intrigued. "From who? The Bijuu?"

B tapped his chest. "Just one."

"Gyuki?" Gaara looked toward B's clavicle, as though expecting to see the beast, then shook his head, realizing the foolishness of this action. "What kind of message?"

"Dunno, he wouldn't tell me," B said. "Kept it top secret. Just said he saw something, once. Something at the end of the war. Something no one else did. Maybe he thinks Sasuke saw it too?"

Gaara nodded slowly, trying hard not to let the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach show in his face. Something at the end of the war... Something Sasuke might have said, or done? His proclamation, perhaps? His intent to kill the Kage. Naruto had only told him so much and Gaara had promised to keep it silent on the understanding that Naruto had needed him to know and to listen with a neutral ear. But... if the others found out. If A knew? Sasuke's charges could escalate. He was already in danger of high treason. If the Kage knew that he meant to kill them? To enslave the tailed beasts and force the world to live up to his ideals? Any other nin would be strung for such an offence. Sasuke had been in the village's black books from birth, for them to find out that he was indeed what they always projected him to be, he'd never recover.

"And he hasn't elaborated?" He asked, carefully, wondering if there was a way he could speak to Gyuki without B knowing. If he could persuade him, perhaps…
"Nah," B said dismissively. "But he's not really one to elaborate, like ya say. Like our buddy, yanno? Straight to the point n' whatnot."

"Like our buddy. Yeah." Gaara agreed as they made their way closer to Konoha. He could only hope that, like their 'buddy', Gyuki might have some empathy and spare the Uchiha his horns.

"What do you mean 'it won't work'?"

Caliga's tone was low and dark as a stormcloud. His face seemed thinner, as though shaved into facets by the sharp edges of his ire simmering just beneath skin. Yukimura stepped back a little, glancing at the closed door behind him - the barrier between them and Shisui, who lay in a medicated rest in his room. He licked his lips.

"He's too weak, m'lord," he explained, shakily. "For the... uh... procedure you suggest. You see I had thought that the relic might have been less... literal in the sense that it was a gem-"

"You thought I was carrying around a living eye?" Caliga replied flatly.

"Well, your people tend to make that kind of thing work." Yukimura quivered, looking down at the small stone in Caliga's hand, now somewhat opalescent in the dim candlelight, rather than the clear crystal it seemed to have been when he'd examined it earlier. Yukimura swallowed around his nerves. He was a medic, sure, but he was a civilian. Most of his employment history had been under Kawaguchi's roof, looking after the Daimyo and his family and later the bodies they prepped and sold. He knew Clans, he knew blood types. He understood Kekkei Genkai. But he couldn't mend a person the way a ninja could. He couldn't mend chakra. "It would be a handsome substitute, I'm sure, but it would not be an eye. Not a living eye, you understand?"

"Have you not been listening?" Caliga growled. "It is not a stone, it is power. Power that has found a tangible form for itself. Matched with our candidate's chakra, it will take its true form. I've explained this. You assured me you could assist in the operation."

"That's all well and good," Yukimura persisted, hopelessly. "But even so, even if the eye were flesh, the boy has no chakra to bond with anything."

"Then we attend to him until he does."

"But you say he bears a strain of ocular proficiency? A Kekkei Genkai? And not just any strain - this man is Uchiha - the rarest of the rare. Their clan did not spread out of the Fire Country - very few have ever been studied and little is known of the nature of the Sharingan," Yukimura shook his head, pressing his handkerchief fretfully between his fingers. "If the ability is gone with the eyes, giving him a new set may not guarantee if his expertise would be the same-

"I fail to see how this affects your compliance."

"Well, i-if it doesn't work, which is a high possibility-"

"But it will work." Caliga cut in, impatiently. "You will make it work. That is what you are paid for. We both understand the nature of chakra and I have assured you my clans abilities will be able to accept the varied strain. It is not a difficult concept."

"In general, yes, but-"

"You can continue to build his strength of body? Regardless of his current confusion?"
"Er, yes of course, but-"

"Then what is the problem?"

Yukimura mopped his brow with the kerchief, unsure as to whether Caliga fully understood the implications of such an operation. The healing time alone would be several weeks. And the poor boy had been without sight for… well… he couldn't say. Years, by the looks of him. He'd need to get used to seeing again - he might struggle to regain his vision for several weeks more, it wasn't a clean process from what he'd read. The foreigner, it seemed, thought that he could simply pop in an eye and it was fixed - like mending a button or weaving on a new strap to a sandal. It was then that Yukimura began to wonder if their physiology differed quite radically after all.

"I'm not sure how your abilities generate, Mr Caliga,' he began. "Perhaps I missed something in the explanation of your methods. For you see, chakra is a living organism - it flees from those who are close to death, bleeding back into the world as it does not wish to perish with the body. Most shinobi can gradually call it back if they are reasonably quick to recover, but this boy-" Yukimura gestured toward the door to Shisui's room. 

"has been near death for far too long. Trapped between worlds for…. I couldn't say. Years? If he were to heal, he'd need more than just his own strength. He'd need artificial aid. From another ninja - a medic or something of the like."

"You need a shinobi medic?" Caliga said, mildly displeased. "You've had him in your care for this long and you only decided to mention this setback now?"

"I had thought your donation might have been another Uchiha eye." Yukimura explained. "An eye from one of his clansman. Familiar chakra like that could have been reintroduced back into the body with more ease - bloodline chakra can be almost instantly useable, even to the most destitute of systems. This relic you have provided, while powerful I'm sure-" he added briskly, trying not to notice the dark look Caliga was aiming at him. "Is…uh... not quite as... viable."

"How not viable?"

"I have tested it a few times. It does not react near his body, nor resting in the cavity. It… does not appear to...uh… perform."

Caliga sucked on his teeth in annoyance. "Is that so?"

"Yes. I'm afraid that, without the healing the chakra, there is no hope in a full recovery." Yukimura persisted. "I can maintain his body, Mr Caliga. I can nurse him back to health as well as any civilian. But I cannot replenish his abilities."

"Interesting," There was a light in those murky eyes and it wasn't favourable. Caliga leaned backward a little then, rising to his full height. Yukimura hadn't even noticed the foreigner had been hunched over him, bending down so that he could speak quietly in hushed, urgent tones, but now that he was standing straight he towered over the smaller man. It cut a foreboding tableau. Yukimura swallowed forcibly. "Very interesting. I do recall that upon delivering him into your possession, you would be able to heal him fully. You proceeded to assure me that he would be whole, even without his eyes, by the time I returned with replacements for him, but you did so without the assuredness that you could certainly complete the task?"

"Chakra can develop over time." Yukimura admitted. "I had thought that, with care, he might recover enough to receive a donor eye. But as his progress was slow and reluctant, I feared there may have been underlying factors - the injuries he sustained years beforehand, perhaps his mistreatment in the Mist's prisons - may be adding to the problem. I would have called for more aid, but since we had agreed to keep his identity a secret between us-"
A bold strategy. It had been difficult to get Kawaguchi to agree to keep Caliga's little pet project without letting him know the value of his charge, but had they done so, the old man would have surely smuggled the boy onto the market to sell to the highest bidder. He was only as good as the money offered him, despite his many years involved with the Kakkou's trades. He would also question why Shisui wasn't being used in the Kakkou's projects themselves - being from a bloodline so rare and to tell him the truth would only cement his decision to sell the body. Without eyes, an Uchiha was useless to a renegade faction. Without breeding abilities, an Uchiha was useless to the Kakkou. The blood might be worth something, perhaps. The name was worth more, perhaps, if someone were brave enough to offer his freedom as a barter for power with the last Uchiha left alive. But that was another can of worms in itself - no one was stupid enough to attempt any sort of deal with the boy rumored to be the second most powerful ninja in the world. Up until recently, no one even knew where Sasuke was.

Caliga gave his lackey a calculating glare. The man wasn't stupid, nor was he particularly greedy. He was more interested in knowledge than finance, thus Caliga had instead made sure to pique his interest in the nature of the Kakkou's druids for a number of months before his plan was executed. This played the old fool directly into his trust - even so much as to hide a veritable goldmine of power - Uchiha Shisui of the Body Flicker, no less - from his clueless employer. To sweeten the deal, Caliga had proudly announced that several of the druids had lineage with the Dobunni, which meant nothing to Yukimura, or course, but it sounded good. And had he ever the opportunity to ask another member of the organisation, they would quickly agree that much was true, and that the Dobunni were certainly prized among the remaining Prettanoi. That fact had made Yukimura eager enough to hide certain small details from his employer, granted that a) Yukimura himself was promised a personal audience with the Druids and b) Kawaguchi was compensated handsomely enough to distract him from any extended prying. Caliga agreed to both terms. He intended to honor neither.

"Very well," he said, after a terse moment. "It appears our contract can proceed no further. For I was under the impression you were able to carry the job through to completion - this… well… this may well void our arrangement."

"Our… b-but-"

"Which I'm sure your employer won't appreciate," the foreigner continued. "After all, your failure… well, it affects him very much, doesn't it? Firstly, if he knew you had kept valuable information from him? I have not known him as long as you, I'm sure, but I would imagine his punitive measures are somewhat permanent."

"Mr Caliga, please-"

"And if word were to get back to the Kakkou that Lord Kawaguchi and his subordinate were no longer trustworthy?" Caliga's smile was uglier than it had ever been. "The Kakkou does not just break off partnerships with a handshake, I'm sure you understa-"

"Orochimaru!" Yukimura blurted out. His gnarled hands shook as he raised them, eager not to fan the flames of Caliga's ire. It was a long shot, and it wasn't an option he preferred, but he had no choice. Orochimaru, the famous Sannin of Konohagakure, the criminal, the Missing Nin of many, many years was about as sly and self-serving as he was talented. Yukimura had never liked to deal with the Snake so much, but they had a distant rapport - as most illegal traders tended to, north of the Fire Country. Kawaguchi had dealt with him from time to time, and he'd often spoken to the man's subordinates and traded information. He would be surprised if Caliga's people hadn't heard of him, he certainly had his fingers - or scales, as it were - in many of the illegal activities across several countries. But Caliga merely frowned at the mention of his name.
"Is that supposed to mean something?" he said after a moment. Yukimura nodded.

"Orochimaru. He's, well, he's a medical nin of great talent," he explained. "Well… more of a… biological craftsman, I suppose. You don't know of him?"

"No."

"Oh. I'm surprised you haven't heard of him, he's certainly infamous within our kind of circles." It was a nod-nod-wink-wink sort of moment, though Yukimura did neither. Caliga, for all his contacts and affiliates, really didn't seem to know of him. However the medic noticed how his guest's posture stiffened slightly and how those odd green eyes narrowed. "He would certainly be able to help you. I'm sure if we-"

"Infamous? Really." Caliga pursed his lips. "And you think it would be wise to entrust our Uchiha with to such man?"

"He has subordinates we may be able to bribe?" Yukimura offered, desperately. "He has a small laboratory nearby - a few hours west. I believe a young lady is currently overseeing operations there."

"A young lady?"

"Yes. Uzumaki clan, I think. We have bumped into each other occasionally. I used to offer her my newspapers when we'd receive them from our mainland contacts. Apparently she didn't have much in the way to read out there. I met her again recently when I was surveying the forests for herbs. She'd developed quite a lucrative little business selling... er... enhancement products for men."

Caliga raised his brows at that. Yukimura gave a nervous laugh.

"Yes well... we tend to be a bit of an ageing population around here. I suppose she saw a gap in the market? She offered me some - I think it was meant to be a joke..."

"Did she offer you her personal services as well?" Caliga said in a voice grit with sarcasm. "You should test the product after all."

"Er... no. No I'm... Not really interested in that." Yukimura conceded. "Actually I suggested she add willowbark to her compound. After all, it's mostly just the bodily aches and pains that are the hindrance for most old fellows, you see. Apparently it was quite effective."

"And you think that because she runs some kind of illicit operation underneath her employer's nose she would turn against him? Because you gave her a tip?"

"She's a smart lass, she would make it worth her while. As far as I'm aware, Orochimaru's trading capabilities have been vastly reduced since the war. Many of his acolytes have disbanded, leaving few to care for his locations. Up until now I've only ever seen her in the company of her colleagues - Orochimaru twice, then a few times with that Uchiha boy. But now she appears to be alone and rather obstinate about it."

There was a sudden spike in Caliga's attention at that. He leaned in again slightly.

"Uchiha boy?"

"Yes... Sasuke. You must have heard of him."

Caliga grinned then. Yukimura wasn't sure why. "Do tell."
"He was Orochimaru's favourite until, as I understand, he defected. There was a bounty on him for some time - it seemed he'd joined a rival organisation called the Akatsuki, who were the instigators behind the Fourth War. Apparently he'd had much to do with the final battle and the Alliance's triumph at the outcome, but it seems he disappeared soon after the final declarations." Yukimura shook his head. "I had been worried that keeping another Uchiha imprisoned might have summoned his wrath, but it's unlikely he realized one of his clansmen was still alive."

"Now I remember. I'd read of an Uchiha Sasuke returning to Konoha," Caliga mused. "I had wondered what all the fuss was about. I don't believe we need to worry about him, not yet anyway." He paused for a moment, theatrically stroking his chin. No, he definitely didn't need to worry about Sasuke. Not for another few months at least. "About his relationship to this girl… What was her name?"

"Karin, I believe." Yukimura said with a nod. "Yes. Er, well, he's a good-looking lad, she seemed quite sweet on him, really. Unsurprising for a girl her age I suppose, but she'd always seemed quite serious otherwise. Beyond her years, as they say."

"Karin." Caliga repeated. "You'd say she had a soft spot for her colleague?"

"I don't think I'd ever seen anyone change their tune so drastically. With Orochimaru and by herself? Butter wouldn't melt. But throw that boy in the mix and she became all giggles and sunshine. I'm not sure how that helps you, but-"

"Thank you, Yukimura," Caliga interrupted with a dismissive wave of his hand. He straightened, cast a look at Shisui's door before nodding. "I'll forget your impudence for now. In exchange for a little renovation work."

"I don't follow." Yukimura frowned.

"I'll need two rooms," Caliga explained. "And a few… accessories. I'm sure you'll have no trouble finding them about this place. You'll say nothing of your mistake to your employer and you'll make no mention of our arrangement. The less he knows, the better."

"Of course. I've always used the alias you had given me," Yukimura told him. "Aodh. He hasn't questioned it. It's rare for him to take note of other's desires when the object itself is imperfect."

"Good. See that it stays that way." Caliga smiled then, reaching for his jacket that he'd rested on the door handle. "As soon as I am able to deliver my merchandise, I will return for you. You still wish to study with the Dobunni? Then play your part."

He left Yukimura nodded and bowing in the hallway, the old man tickled with excitement that he would soon be free from Kawaguchi's service, joining what he considered a far nobler occupation. Kawaguchi, as far as he knew, still had no idea he sat on such a gem - he'd rarely bother to check merchandise that was damaged to such a degree and he'd barely had a chance to inspect this new delivery before he was forced to shift operations. Even if he did know, he was have to be careful if he were to double-cross Caliga. Now that Sasuke's position had been verified (by gossip magazines, but still, information was information), it would be harder to shift an Uchiha than it would have been were the threat of Sasuke and Konoha's wrath less immediate. Kawaguchi was covetous, but he wasn't a gambling man. He knew where his power was and he was smart enough to remain content with his share. Only Caliga knew that men of power - no matter how great the amount - were easy to manipulate if they were given the illusion of control. Kawaguchi boasted of his patience and his slow-burn tactics to win a rather high position within the Northern black markets, but Caliga had time and maneuverability on his side. The Western Trade had been influenced by the Kakkou incrementally for years and Caliga had the benefit of safely observing its
fluctuations through the eyes of many experienced clients. He knew when to run and where. He knew how to hide and whom to take refuge with. And, more than anything, he knew where to find the plug on the whole system and could easily take cover when the alliance finally, after so many months of diligent policing, yanked it out, letting the underworld drain for all to see.

More important than anything, Caliga knew the ocean. He knew it better than the man who had watched it with calculating eyes for years atop his mountain palace. He knew it as well as he knew his own feet on land or his hand on his sword. He knew it as well as the people who had stolen his home and branded him with a name that was neither part of his tongue nor his heritage.

There was only one other person in this strange world of chakra and shinobi who could run across the ocean as easily as Caliga could and Caliga had plans for them too. In time. All in good time.

Alone in his room, Caliga shed his clothes slowly, peeling off layer by layer until he stood naked before the large shaving mirror that stood on his bureau. He stared at the impassive face before him, at three-day old stubble and dusty, travel mussed hair. Then he let out a breath, relaxing his muscles and brought his target image into mind, letting his form shift and change as he traded it for another: a boy of around sixteen or seventeen with short dark hair, pale skin and cold, dark eyes.

The face was easy. It was angular and handsome. It had a narrow jaw, cheekbones like razors and brows crafted purely out of indignation. He remembered the face the most clearly, it was the body that needed a little artistic license. The last time Caliga had seen it fully male, it was diseased and starved, half-dead. He needed to be a little more creative. He began with a muscular form - lithe and sinewy, not brawny as he was - and imagined it a little shorter than the boys of his clan around that age, narrowing the hips and ribcage into something more graceful. He added the scars and the tattoos as he remembered them, the minor skin aberrations from old burns and injuries he placed carefully about the milky skin. He let the left forearm curve ever so slightly inward (a product from some earlier fracture) and there had to be a minor discolouration in the skin about his chest - a smoothness that had resulted from some kind of external chakra treatment. He reduced the body fat a little - giving the body a slightly more weathered appearance - but he made sure to enhance the genitalia a little. After all, this girl Karin had probably never seen it. And even if she had, the memory served more kindly to embellishment. Better to play it safe.

Caliga looked up at his reflection again and Uchiha Sasuke grinned back.

"Hello Karin," he said in a voice that seemed to slide over the skin like cold silk. "Long time no see."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Boy, Gaara's going to get a bit of a surprise next chapter! Sasuke's really going out on a limb now... It'll be interesting to see how this might divide Konoha's opinion of him. We'll have to see how well Naoko takes the information and what kind of picture she can paint with it.

Also, describing Caliga's transformation just kept reminding me of Thomas Harris' "Buffalo Bill".

It puts the lotion in the basket...
"It's… detailed, certainly," Naoko said of Sasuke's Magnum Opus as she thumbed through it a third time, red polished fingernails hooking between the pages and occasionally adjusting her reading glasses when they slipped down her nose. "Grim…"

"It's my life," Sasuke said, tersely, his eyes never leaving her face. Mikoto sat in his lap, happily devouring her second bottle, which was fortunate as the entirety of Sasuke's attention was focused on his former employer: the woman who had the power to make him the most infamous person living in Konoha. Several times he considered attempting a katon to burn the document in her hands as she studied it, but able or no, he knew better. Trusting someone else with the truth wasn't comfortable, but it felt right. Sasuke had many years practice in going with what felt right - instincts weren't something he readily ignored.

Naruto observed them both from his perch on the back of the recliner as he set about chewing off whatever was left of his fingernails. He hadn't read the document. He wasn't sure he wanted to. He'd rather Sasuke just tell him whatever was in it, the reading part diluted the potency of the information in his opinion. He'd suggested a press conference instead - something he was used to and had found particularly inspiring and effective. Only Sasuke had reminded him that he wasn't the best public speaker and that his experiences weren't something to be inspired by, nor were they particularly uplifting. Then he'd been sent to fetch Naoko and the pair had settled on the couch for the better part of the morning, studying the document so intently it may as well have been written in another language. Naoko pursed her lips and turned over another page.

"Yes," she said, scanning the words with quick, violet eyes. "It's your life. But it's not you."

"What?"

"It's as Naruto has said," Naoko told him. "Spoken word is often more persuasive. This is all the information, but it lacks your voice, you see. I don't mean for you to recite it-" this was added swiftly when Sasuke opened his mouth to retort. "But I think it may require a little… tweaking."

"Tweaking?" Sasuke had never liked the word tweaking. It had too close a relationship with words like meddling, and those always seemed too Orochimaru for his taste. "You said I should write the truth."

"I did. And while I wasn't sure what I was to expect, I can't say I'm surprised by what you've given me." Naoko laid the chapter down on the table, slid her glasses off her nose and collapsed them in her hand with a hollow plastic clack. "The fact that I'm not surprised doesn't make it any less terrible though, I want you to know that."

Sasuke swallowed firmly. "I stand by my decisions. You asked for honesty, I provided it. I understand treason isn't as palatable as a sob story but-

"No, the treason is fine," Naoko intervened with a shake of her head. "It's understandable. In a kind of twisted way, it's almost sensible, really. You're not a man to sit and complain if something is
wrong, you're one who will take measures to make it right. You've done exactly that ever since you were a boy which, I might point out, wasn't that long ago."

"Why's that worth pointing out?"

"You're not a war grizzled veteran," Naoko explained. "You're not an experienced captain, you're not even Jounin for goodness' sake-"

"He coulda been!" Naruto was quick to point out. Naoko just rubbed the bridge of her nose.

"Sasuke, you were a kid with a lot of power and a lot of anger. You've only done what's suited you because honestly, that's the example you've been given. The desire to correct such fallacies and heartless logic by destroying the source - the collective Kage and the tailed beasts - is... Well, I'm not saying it's not wrong, of course, there isn't really that much right about murder. But your intention was to help others. It wasn't for yourself."


"The deity, however... she was... Um..."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Sasuke remarked, glaring at his knees. "She's too much like fable. She doesn't sound convincing, even when you put her in context. The Shinobi world can be strange-"

"-but not that strange," Naoko finished, nodding slowly. "I'll admit, she's a hard sell. I believe you, of course, but that's with fifteen years of my family's research and sociocultural anthropology under my belt. You could have said she's been a giant toad demon who wanted to turn everyone into flies and I'd still believe you."

"Gamabunta's a giant toad," Naruto supplied from his rather overlooked area of the lounge. The other two glanced at him, and he almost flinched - his was more side commentary than factual conversation. "Er, that is... I mean. I guess I wouldn't find it weird either?"

Naoko raised her brows. "You see? Not quite as strange as you think."

"I wasn't thinking strange, I was thinking convenient." Sasuke replied, grimly. "Madara was Uchiha, it's natural that he sours any claim that the Uchiha weren't troublemakers. To turn around and say that an evil Goddess whose puppet child remained an immortal in the Shinobi world in order to pull strings and bring about her reincarnation-"

"But it happened. Ol' man Hagoromo would vouch for us," Naruto cut in, feeling a little more resourceful. "It'd... just be a bit hard to ask him cos' he's dead and all, but... I mean... there might be a way? And Kurama remembers her!"

"As does the Head of Surgery for Konoha Central and the Hokage," Naoko added. "Your claim is far fetched in theory, but you have witnesses. That's something."

"Hn," Sasuke relinquished, leaning back in his chair. "Fine. When are you going to run it?"

"Run what?" Naoko blinked, then motioned to the pages. "This? I'm not going to run this!"

Sasuke's glare ground across the room as though the air itself was a whetstone. "What."

"I'm not going to run this," Naoko shook her head to emphasize her point. "This is research. Now I'm going to write a piece based on this."

"Fiction."

"Hardly." Naoko pushed her glasses up her nose and leaned over, fishing in her leather tote for a palm-sized legal pad and a pen. "There's fiction, there's dressing the truth… Then there's… landscaping facts. Autobiographical accounts are powerful, but they also work better towards a sympathetic audience. You've gained curiosity, not sympathy - not yet. At least not from the masses."

"So you're going to lie." Sasuke said, a muscle tightening in his jaw. Naoko, though she felt the tension in his voice, didn't look up as she began to write - shorthand spilling like an exhaust trail behind her scribbling pen.

"Nope, I'm just going to put you through a lens," she explained. "Same one you've been under your entire life. Only we're going to magnify it a bit."

"We're putting him in a magnifying glass?" Naruto looked mystified. Naoko nodded.

"You bet. And we'll give Konoha every detail," she tapped her finger against the paper, wiggling in her seat - eagerly taken by her idea. "So they know exactly what they've done."

Tsuchi no Kuni
Year of the Ox

"They call these ones Sensors."

Dubnoreix, Chief Dobunni of the Eastern Operation, aimed a misshapen finger toward a page in a small black book, prodding the coloured picture of a young man with earrings and blue hair. He stroked his mustaches, a mannerism typical of most Druids to smooth the hair and free and pipe-weed debris or herbs, and studied the kana before him with sharp, black eyes.

"Or 'Sensor Types'," he continued. "They are trained to seek out chakra. The degree of what they can evaluate tends to vary depending on the tribe and the ability of the individual."

"Like Jitan," Caliga said, leaning in a little closer from his position at the tall table. Jitan had been the Kakkou's resident shinobi, a brigand for hire who had been happy to sell out his countrymen for a fee. It was his type of character that was still frighteningly and surprisingly popular in the supposedly peaceful Eastern lands and it was men and women such as he who had benefited exponentially from the Fourth War. The Kakkou had found him on one of their scouting expeditions and had quickly developed a working relationship with the man after presenting him with proof of their resources in the form of monetary compensation. Gold, it seemed, while abundant on the Kakkou's native isles was not commonplace in this country. Jitan was happy to lend his services for raw chunks of ore and had been helpful up until the moment the Dobunni Druids themselves began to develop their own methods for chakra detections. After that, he was rather quickly relieved of his position. And his gold. And, ultimately, his remaining years. "They're the scouts."

"Or, depending on their ability, they're kept close within the group, sensing enemies before they have the chance to attack. Not particularly useful in our case, but something to be aware of nonetheless."

"Why? They pose little threat to us."

"We may seem invisible to most Shinobi," Dubnoreix began, flicking through a few more pages of
the stolen bingo book as he searched through the entries for another example. The Dobunni owned three books, all acquired from shady alliances across the Eastern Black Market. One was almost twenty years old. The others were reasonably current - at least enough to be salvageable. "But we should not lean on our abilities. We are only as unseen as any other civilian here. And just as vulnerable if we do not continue our study of these clans and their skills."

"We have ways of stopping them," Caliga said, his eyes dropping to the to Druid's belt, where his ceremonial dagger rested in an unadorned hilt; priceless, yet plain enough to be mistaken for an ordinary blade. Dubnoreix frowned and tugged at his outer robe, stealing the dagger from sight.

"A weapon is only as good as the hand that yields it, Caligula." He said. "We try not to promote the fact that we have ways to fight them. Cron's gifts were plenty during his time ruling our lands, but many have been lost to raids and to wars, to hands who do not understand their value. We do not wish to relinquish the few we have left."

Caliga sneered at the mention of his full name. "Promote? The moment we fight one of these Shinobi we will 'promote' what abilities we have. It's an easy problem to address: we just don't leave them alive."

"You boast like a child looking for a fight. We are not here to engage with the Shinobi."

"No, just to steal from them." Caliga muttered. "They don't tend to like that, you know. It's stupid to assume we won't encounter resistance at some point or another."

"You were brought here for your pedigree, Caligula, not for your warrior's prowess."

Dubnoreix returned, curtly. "You fight well, this is certain, but these people are not Legionnaires, nor are they the Picts or Scaths. Your position in reconnaissance is a benefit, not a right."

"I suppose the alternative is locking me back in my kennel."

"Punitive measures will be taken for those that seek to endanger our mission," the Druid warned. "We appreciate your candor and there is no denying your intelligence is not valued. But yours is a rare bloodline. You and the few members of your kin we risked taking were chosen because you had the skills to defend yourselves. The rest of your tribe does not. We have our boundaries, we operate within them. Stray, or worse, attract attention, and you jeopardize the entire operation."

"Jeopardize?" Caliga let out a mirthless bark. "You're already in jeopardy if he knows you're here, my Lord. You should have killed him when you had the chance."

"You speak of the Gnadir?"

"I suppose if you want to crown a worm, you'd give it title like that."

Dubnoreix set the book down and glared at his subordinate with his small, fierce eyes.

"The Gnadir is dubious, but more of a threat dead than alive. We do not know the extent of his operations, but I can be sure that if he were gone, his absence would not go unmarked. We have presented our enterprise as merely theoretical - a practice, not a business. He knows little else, even less of our methods. A contained operation such as ours does not threaten likes of him. Not in his own land."

"Don't hold your breath." Caliga shot back. "He'll know what you're doing soon enough, Dobunni. He'll do the math. So many candidates taken, yet so few thoroughbred examples placed back into the hands of the men you'd promised results. He's may not be the type to champ at bit for one war, but he might not take kindly to our pilfering their prodigies for the sake of another."
"His curiosity will remain, but it will not flower as long as we stay in his periphery. He respects, or perhaps disrespects equally, both sides of the ethical coin."

"He'll be interested soon enough, if he isn't already. He is boastful and proud, but he isn't stupid. He knows you kept things from him."

"And whose fault was that?" Dubnoreix said, darkly. The skin of his forehead undulated like rolling mud as his frown deepened. Caliga snorted and yanked the bingo book out of the older man's hands, flipping through the pages irritably.

"I am dead now. That's what he knows. If he had suspected anything, he wouldn't have allowed you here."

"You created an opening for questions. If you had been successful-"

"Well I wasn't, was I, my Lord." Caliga snarled. "In fact, my efforts proved rather painful. I enjoy poison in my veins just as much as the next man, you know. You could say I even helped you out: he wasn't so keen to hang around after that. It was clear our methods weren't 'scientific' enough for him."

"If you had wanted to kill him, you should have thrust Tibernas into his belly and slit his generous throat." Dubnoreix pointed out. "The opening was available: he was low on his power - you could have been done with him."

That earned a glare. At least, a darker one than he had ever seen on the younger man. Caliga's blade - the fabled Sword of Tibernas - was particularly successful against the Shinobi's abilities, even more so than Dubnoreix's dagger. Yet the boy had not thought to draw it and instead had let the snake escape.

"Crom did not call for his blood," Caliga said, quietly. "Besides, hasn't my folly worked to your advantage?"

"By some dubious fortune, yes." Dubnoreix mumbled. "Still, you are a liability. For if he were to discover your involvement-"

"I have stood before him as another and he didn't even hiss. He doesn't know; he won't know. He has other pretty little things he's keeping those rancid eyes on."

"Perhaps you do not consider the fact that he simply does not fear you."

"He doesn't fear what he doesn't understand." Caliga retorted, opening a page to a picture of a red-haired, grey-eyed woman. Strange, crescent-shaped scars - like teeth marks - decorated her skin in lace-like patterns. "I never told him what I can do - what any of my tribe can do, for that matter. He thinks we breed fae simply through your fire and brimstone methods alone, not from the abilities of my people. I thought he was devoted to our cause."

"He was, in his own way. Now had we monitored your experiment, we would h-"

"No monitoring was necessary," Caliga interrupted. "It failed. And through that failure he showed us the colour of his scales. That's all. Now tell me about this one."

"We are not finished with this, Caligula."

"I'm aware of that," Caliga said. "But to save myself from a month of jerking off into little cups, I'll promise to be good, how is that? And in return, you retain your best hound to sniff out those
"You are not the best. But if you deign to refer to yourself as a dog, then you shall be treated as one. Consider your leash shortened for now, you will be working only in our immediate sectors near the Earth capital - we know he rarely moves through this kingdom, it will keep you out of his way. As for that one?" Dubnoreix studied the page under Caliga's finger for a moment, then rolled his sizable shoulders. "Another sensor-type. A Healer, I believe, through a type of oral technique. Deceased. Her clan is from the Fire country; nearly extinct. You'll not find one of those around here."

"It says she's the property of Kusagakure." Caliga noted. "Perhaps she bred?"

"Perhaps she did, perhaps she did not. Regardless, no one has asked for an Uzumaki," Dubnoreix snorted. "After all, it seems that one from Konoha is about as much as anyone will ever need."

"Something we learn very quickly, isn't it?" Caliga's mottled eyes scanned the writing on the page, picking out words here and there that he recognized. "How sometimes one is all that is ever needed."

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**Oto no Kuni, 16th March**  
**Year of the Hare**

Ona was bent at the waist, one hand on her knee, the other around a rambling gale weed, muttering to herself as she yanked it out of the ground. She might have lost a lot of business after the fourth war due to construction of the new highway that crowned the top of Konoha from coast to coast, but that didn't mean she'd let the gardening slide. And it was nice to get some time out of the house while the weather was good, especially since it appeared her one and only guest tended to bore very easily. Ona had hoped that Menma might offer to help as recompense for his lodging and meals, but the boy didn't seem to think that way. Tugging weeds out of the ground had been fun for about two minutes however, like a child, his respect for manual labor had run out all too quickly.

Currently he sat near her with his back to the world, squatting like a hermit with his hands in the earth as he appeared to hunt for worms. He was dressed in a grey t-shirt and green shorts and although Ona had tried to coax him into something warmer, he refused. It seemed that Menma didn't feel the cold. Nor did he really like clothes all that much either. Pants he'd agreed without much protest - perhaps there were a few parts of him that felt the chill, or maybe he'd finally realized his nakedness was something of an oddity if he wasn't in the bath. The shirt, however, had been a terrible battle of hisses and howls as it went over his head. Even now he tugged at the collar ever so often. He may have calmed, but it was clear he wasn't impressed.

And he wasn't. He knew he wasn't. He'd come so far - he had a name now, he had clothes whether he liked them or not. He could get food without having to hunt for it and he had a place to sleep that was warm and dry. But he didn't have Sasuke. There was no Sasuke here. No mention of him, no knowledge of him. The closest he'd come was to Ona's recollection of an ancient legend and a hero and something called the Sarutobi clan, but that wasn't what he wanted. Sasuke was a thing, Sasuke was... some...thing. He was sure of it. He didn't know why, but he felt like it was something to behold, not something to remember. Sasuke wasn't a story; what was he supposed to do with a story? How could he gain any answers from something that didn't even exist?

Frustrated, Menma buried his hands in the damp, mineral rich soil of the flowerbed and made a face. This, he knew. The earth. The coolness of it, the damp. He remembered the earth; he felt its heat and its pulse within him. Once, he'd been part of it, lain it it, asleep, but awake at the same time, slowly developing into this creature he'd become. He'd liked that time. There were no
questions in that time, no Sasuke. Only peace, the scent of the earth around him in that warm, dark embrace of the growing world.

The air turned chilly again, and while the cold still failed to affect him per say, his body still reacted to it and his nose, pinched by the sharpness of the air, began to run. Menma gave a loud snort, wiped the offending orifice with the back of his arm, and sniffed again - taking in a long draught of fresh air that had, up until now, been tainted by the scent of mud around him.

That was when he noticed it, the scent. His nose was a fine instrument - probably finer than most which explained his reliance on it - and while he'd quickly become accustomed to the plethora of olfactory information surrounding him: the sour, mineral-rich soil, the chalky whiff of the hot stones and pique of the moss that lay around the pools, he hadn't let himself become complacent. The new scent in the air was faint - it must have been a fair distance away to have become this diluted, but it was there, as real as the woman standing near him and as solid as meat and bone. It was a human smell, that he was picking up, but it wasn't whole. It wasn't a person. It was the idea of one, an imprint, a watermark. It was the raw stuff, the sweat, the blood, hair, come and saliva. It went past skin, it was the perfume of bone marrow and pulsing blood.

And Menma knew it. He wasn't sure what it was or who, but he knew it. And whoever it was, it was getting closer.

It was still early when Caliga crossed the border from Yu no Kuni to Oto no Kuni and he smiled to himself a little as the sun began to peek through the grey winter clouds, giving them a jaundiced tinge. Several hours indeed - Yukimura had vastly underestimated Caliga's speed, especially as he was both used to traveling and possessed a great frame with long legs and lean muscles, allowing him a natural advantage over the shorter indigenous people of the land.

He appeared as a tall, bearded laborer - a woodcutter, perhaps, something like that - which made sense given the nature of the area. And rather than bush-crash the hideout from the East, he left the forest trail and continued further West, figuring that it would be logical for him to approach from the direction of the old highway. He wondered if this Karin woman would take note of things like that, after all, she was one of Orochimaru's subordinates and that worm tended to instill his fetish for detail in others, whether they liked it or not.

Orochimaru. Oh yes, him. The lie to Yukimura was automatic and well practiced to the point that Caliga almost believed it himself. Of course the Kakkou knew about Orochimaru - no one could have entered the Eastern Black Market without encountering either the man or his legend or (if you were really unlucky) both. He wasn't a dominating factor between gangs - the Sannin rarely dirtied his hands when he didn't have to. And while that should have been enough to keep the Kakkou away from the Shinobi shores, it seemed that time had acted as appropriately as a balm to soothe the Sannin's ire and, in some blessed persistence of fortune, Orochimaru never bothered to seek out the foreigners squatting in his own country. Perhaps, as the Dubnoreix proposed, it was out of sheer curiosity that he let them continue with their research. After all, their methods did not rival his, they merely ran parallel: cloning versus breeding - either form of eugenics as wildly inappropriate as the other. He
may have even doubted the Kakkou's success, figuring that if they were able to breed the perfect Shinobi bloodlines with flawless accuracy, it would be a chance worth taking for him to allow them to try. After all, as far as Orochimaru was concerned, they couldn't fight him and they couldn't hide from him. Why abolish something that didn't pose a threat so much as an equal opportunity?

The Kakkou knew this. Caliga knew this. And he reveled in it. Hatred only deepened and sweetened with age and his was honey over the bitterest memories. Thus as Orochimaru's operations grew and thrived, Caliga watched. As Orochimaru flexed his power in the darker corners of society, Caliga watched. And while the snake, distracted by so many pretty subordinates, dough-boys and trophies, began to show the smooth, vulnerable scales of his underbelly, Caliga watched and waited and knew that at some moment, at some minuscule, pinprick of an opening, someone would make a mistake. Vengeance knew of no timepiece nor season. Only of moments. Only of opportunities.

He'd seen the woman from Konoha with the spiked hair. He'd seen the little white stoat with the spectacles. He'd certainly seen the Uchiha - after all, Orochimaru liked to parade that particular toy with the kind of blind pride of someone far too invested in their own greed to be sensible. Karin, he had never met, nor heard of until Yukimura had mentioned her, but as with all of Orochimaru's lackeys, he expected her to be as talented as she was shrewd. He and his team had stalked two of Orochimaru's hideouts in the past (both locations acquired from a number of sources, compiled rather expertly into a much narrower search base, though Caliga would have easily admitted that luck was also a prevailing factor in the success of their search) and while they'd never been reckless enough to venture inside, they had managed to witness the comings and goings of the inhabitants. If this Karin was running the show - which, likely, she was given the extensive downsizing in the Oto Nin's operations after the war - to keep such a vast amount of prisoners secure and quiet for so long? Well, Orochimaru wouldn't leave just anyone in charge. She would be difficult.

Yukimura's information, though interesting, was ultimately useless. Caliga's Sasuke guise might have been perfect in looks (and possibly, from external study, attitude), but he lacked the chakra to back it up. If this woman were a sensor-type nin, she'd notice such an immediate discrepancy. Even if she weren't blessed with sensory talents, Caliga understood most Shinobi could detect chakra in one another, which was why posing as a civilian was always preferable to a military disguise. His glamour was helpful, yet best saved as a shock tactic, and with that out of the equation there was still so much left chance. It was unlikely he'd have a crowd to disappear into as he had in the coastal taverns and meeting houses. He could try bribery, but he'd need an out in case she didn't accept. And if it turned to violence, well... He was strong, but she was a shinobi. He would probably outweigh her but that meant zilch if he couldn't out-fight her. There was also the fact that others might still be present in the hideout - being outnumbered wouldn't serve him at all. He could quite clearly be walking into a deathtrap, the risk was so high. The nonsense of it stiffened his cock like nothing else.

But he wasn't completely without defense. He had his sword and, at least for a few moments, the element of surprise. For some situations, that had been good enough. Consequently it was often that kind of narrow margin that served him best. Caliga patted his pocket where the God's eye rested, close to his heart, and smiled as crested another of the low hills that marked his crossing from the Land of Hot Water, to the Land of Grass and past a small, broken-down onsen - a relic from the country's pre-war tranquility. He paused for a moment, studying the inn for options in case they were necessary: what facilities the place had to offer, who was there and how easy they'd be to kill, and quickly determined that there was little here to interest him. Thre was just an old woman who waved at him cordially from her garden and a dark-haired youth who had his back to the path and was squeezing mud between his fingers with simple fascination. Neither were a threat. Caliga waved back, remembering to smile with his eyes, before he returned to his usual pace, heading...
Northeast in the direction of the highway. He still had ground to cover if he wanted to reach the hideout by early afternoon and return in time for dusk with a solution, or the girl, or both.

What he failed to notice, however, was the sudden movement in the youth after he had passed by. How the boy jerked to attention, how he cocked his head to one side like an animal scenting wind. He did not hear the eager whisper of a name he knew and coveted, nor did he notice when two wide, grey eyes turned toward him, in sluggish but wondrous recollection.

Karin was good at her job, no one would argue that.

As Warden of Orochimaru's Southern hideout it was her sole responsibility to keep his test subjects under control, to keep the records up to date and to manage the guard schedules and rosters under control. She was both manager and scientist. She'd keep the subjects fed, watered and docile. She'd order food, medication and entertainment. She would pull terrible hours keeping the long list of experiments updated and tidy, monitor and repair equipment and even occasionally work on a project of her own if she had time. Karin was good at her job. Whether she liked it or not was irrelevant. She liked being good at it and that, she figured, was good enough. That was enough.

Then Uchiha Sasuke came along and suddenly 'enough' didn't quite cut it. Karin followed Taka primarily out of obsession, but ultimately, from boredom. Orochimaru had been declared dead. The guards had fled and the test subjects, despite her numerous threats, were just killing themselves anyway. Something had to change, something had to be different or she'd end up just the same. Now, two years later, she was almost back where she started. Only the location had changed. She told herself she was happy, but... well, happiness was subjective, wasn't it? After all, it was hard to be happy in a job where people died horribly all the time, mainly from methods you had been instructed to maintain. You could get used to it, sure - perhaps, after a while, you might even numb to it. But it was never easy, not even for her. She was a scientist. She was a ninja. She understood death - it was part of the job, really. People died in battle and people died from Orochimaru veritably fucking with their insides. That was just the way things went. But after the war, Orochimaru's ancillary hideouts had become less like established laboratories and more like hospices for his rapidly deteriorating test subjects. While in the past it had been difficult to keep the candidates under control, Karin found it was even harder now to watch them suffer and die. Especially when they had a face that was a little too familiar to be comfortable.

Karin had always hated Suigetsu. He was rough, drab and stupid and nothing gave the Uzumaki more pleasure than smashing his face into a watery pulp. Suigetsu's clone, however, was soft spoken, sweet and intelligent. Though only about thirty per cent person - the rest of him hadn't developed past a liquid state and thus he remained in a water tank, unable to hold a physical form long enough survive outside as evaporation was a constant problem - he rarely failed to enjoy his strict and limited world and his outlook on life was one of strangely honest optimism. His name was Number 572, but he called himself Kyoka as a bit of a tribute toward his donor. Kyoka was fond of poetry and fables and would distract himself by creating his own, writing them down in the few short hours that he was allowed to surface from his tank. Karin would find excuses to visit, often bringing the odd gift or two - simple things like notebooks or pencils and all delivered with the same gruff explanation that they were spare and she had nowhere to keep them - and found that she enjoyed spending time with him. The days passed uneventfully, but sweetly. Sasuke was a distant memory. Taka was nothing more than an hawk's drone on the wind. For a time, she found she could forget. And somehow, she felt she might actually be happy.

All too soon however, inevitability stepped in and the clone began to disintegrate - slowly diminishing from a solid water form back into a liquid state. Orochimaru had success with plenty of Earth and Wood replication techniques, but water was one he'd never quite managed to master.
Kyoka had sensed it before it really started, likening the sensation to the loss of sensation in a limb, or pins and needles. He figured he had a few days and would dutifully report the rapid deterioration of his body as it happened, rarely stopping to consider just how morbid such a report might be. As a favor, he'd asked Karin for a small, stoppered vial, which he returned a few hours later, full of water. He informed her that it was a gift and, off her expression, jokingly noted that it wasn't pee. It was simply the last sample he could offer that wasn't spoiled by his containment fluid and that he hoped it would bring her luck. Karin had smiled wanly, explaining that she'd received far worse favors before, and while the gift was pretty damn weird, she'd accept it. Who knew, good luck tended to come from all sorts of places.

A day later his mind started to fail him. Then his speech began to stumble. Soon he was little more than a smile in the water, a voice that was only a swell of bubbles - no words, no poems. Not anymore. Karin had stayed with him until the end, one hand pressed against the glass, the other curled around her pen as she pretended to make notes. She'd said it was her responsibility to remain, to take note of the experiment's failure, but the clone only smiled as she repeatedly glanced down at her ledger, pretending that she was adjusting her glasses, not wiping her eyes. Her nose and cheeks were pink because she had a cold, that was all. And she wore the little vial around her neck because she'd be damned if she had any pockets in this outfit. Kyoka laughed - at least, she thought he did. Then he thanked her. It was just after sunrise that his shape disappeared completely, like ink spreading and diluting in water. He was gone. Karin marked experiment failed in her notes, then added the time and quietly set her pen aside. Kyoka had been one year and four months old. He'd been the only one to ever thank her for staying, but she stayed with them all. Death had rarely bothered Karin, but perhaps it was more that Kyoka hadn't died so much as ceased existing that was so woeful. For someone who had been so little person, he was more human than most she'd ever met.

Several hours later, after four attempts at resting and two full rounds of her remaining patients, Karin was outside the compound in the cool shade of the forest, turning her frustrations toward a large furze bush which had grown over a patch of particularly hard-to-find dovetail thyme. Most herbs were easy to come by in the woods, given that the area was rarely patrolled by healers and medicine merchants, but this thyme - which was great for all sorts of things, including the bouts of stress-related insomnia she'd begun to develop as a result of her time within the Infinite Tsukiyomi - was a job for elbow-grease, expletives and an extremely sharp sickle. She'd finally managed to secure the herb (and a multitude of scratches to her bare arms and shoulders as a result of sparing her jacket the horrors of the dense bracken) when her hackles pinched and she shot up out of the hedge, sickle in firmly in hand, her precious bounty in the other. Her hair had back-combed into a fiery mess, her little necklace tangled in her mesh singlet and her glasses hung limp off the end of her nose.

"Who's there?" She called out, peering into the gloom of the forest through a myopic haze. Karin was rarely harassed this close to the hideout as the area was considered to be quite dangerous. The close proximity to Yu no Kuni's borders made it haven for bandits - and only the elderly who maintained the local shrines and ruins bothered to stay and they would rarely totter this far into the woods. As she spoke she reached out with her chakra, searching for any answering signature or perhaps the outline of a life force. She saw birds, squirrels - a vole or two about twenty feet away. Somewhere, dully, she took in the tang of chakra. It was odd. It felt strong and very, very raw, but at the same time it was faint. Ethereal. Almost like an afterthought. It could have been coming from the hideout, after all, there were still a few experiments remaining. And she was tired. It was easy to make mistakes when chronic fatigue played a major factor.

"Er," came a voice from a decidedly blobby shadow from somewhere to her right. Karin flinched and blushed. "You Karin?"
"Show yourself!" She hissed, adjusting her grip on the sickle. "What're you doing, hiding in the shadows like that? Are you spying on me? Were you watching me, pervert?"

"I'm... I'm right in front ya!" The voice protested, with some confusion. Karin frowned, then pushed her glasses back up her nose with the back of her hand, revealing the generously rumpled face of a veritably perplexed octogenarian. He held a cane in one hand. The other was stretched before him, questioningly, as though he'd tried to step in and help her, but thought the better of it. "You... are Karin, ain'cha?"

"What if I am?" Karin replied, keeping her distance. He might be geriatric, but Karin knew better than to trust anyone or anything at face value. Besides, if he was standing right in front of her, how was it she hadn't sensed him right away? Sure, he was a civilian, she didn't note a lick of chakra in his body, but she should have felt his presence at the very least. Even now, standing just a few feet apart from one another, she still found his... well his subsistence somewhat watery. It felt like she was addressing a shadow. And then there was that chakra in the distance. Something about it seemed wrong. "What do you want?"

"Er.. well, y'see... I heard from a coupla folk back yonder that you sell a certain... herbal supplement?" The man began, awkwardly. "Said to be good for...uh...You know..."

"Hn." Karin didn't move. Neither did the man. She wondered if it was her fatigue that was causing her to worry, but she didn't like him. Her clients were old and she tended to find them as quaint as they were mildly exasperating, but this guy? This guy seemed different. Sure, his hands shook like an old man's would, and he leaned on that cane in just the way someone would if their back was giving out as their posture began to landslide. He smelled like an old man and he spoke like an old man, only... there was something about him that bothered her. Something that seemed to be very, very aware of her, taking note of every move, watching her blink, breathe. And what was that accent? That was the strangest part. He sounded as though he hadn't spoken to another person in years. "Good for what?"

"Er... you know..."

"Do I?"

"Marriage," the old man finished with a cough. "Er, but if you're not-"

"Sales are from the Sunrise Shrine at on the interchange between the Kusa highway and the saddle track." Karin interrupted, curtly. "On Fridays. Those 'coupla folk' should have mentioned that."

"Er... well they did, ma'am," he gestured in an abstract fashion with his free hand. "Only... bit of an 'mergency, if ya catch my drift. Hoped ya might have some-a those... pick me ups on ya."

"I don't carry stock," Karin told him. "If you want something, you'll have to wait until Friday. Is that all?"

"Are you sure?" The man was persistent. Old people generally weren't persistent. This one had stated a motive, but Karin still didn't like it. C'mon, I'll pay double."

"I told you, I don't carry stock. What do I look like, a walking pharmacy?" Karin snapped, waving the thyme about belligerently. "Friday. Shrine. That's it. Now if you're going to continue to bug me, I'm will have to make you leave. I'm not saying I want to, but that doesn't mean I can't or won't."

"So sorry... so sorry Ma'am," the old fool muttered, waving a hand, worriedly. "Didn't mean to upset ya. Jes' being a hopeful old lout, that's all. I'll git me carcass outta here."
"Friday," Karin repeated, not taking her eyes off him as he began to back up, somewhat shaken. In the back of her mind she felt that chakra again, pulsing with her heartbeat, throbbing, churning. Not wanting to seem distracted, she tried reaching out again in a tentative attempt to pinpoint the source but it was all around her. Human. Animal. It was strong for a moment, then it was gone. Karin swallowed heavily, feeling the hairs at the back of her neck prickle to attention. "I-I'll see you Friday."

"You alright, Ma'am?"

Great. Now he wasn't going to leave Karin swallowed again, coughing immediately as her tongue rasped against the dryness of her throat. The feeling returned. Closer this time. It was moving forward, but backward. Growing and receding at the same time. It was one signature, only it was two. It was familiar and yet she'd never sensed it before.

"Yeah, fine. You ought to go." She said offhand, glancing behind him. "Shouldn't be in the woods this late."

"At 2 o'clock?"

"I'm… yeah." Karin shivered. She heard it now. It was droning. She wanted to run, but she didn't know which direction it was coming from - it was so loud it was all around her. "D-do you have someone with you?"

"No it's just me," he said, taking a step closer. This time Karin didn't think to move away, she was far too invested in the approaching stranger. What was that noise? What was that feeling? Where was it coming from? And why was it rushing at them so damn fast...

"Just you," she gasped, feeling overwhelmed. "Really?"

"Yes," he frowned. "Are you sure you're ok, lass?"

"I'm…No." Karin said, more to herself than to her company. In fact, she'd almost forgotten he was there. She swung around to face the forest, feeling the breath in her body flatten and press from her in sheets. That chakra. That strange chakra she could sense; deathly cold but bright and brilliant at the same time. It was hissing, it was weeping, laughing all at once. It was so warm she felt it hugging her close, like an embrace, but its tendrils were cold enough they left goose-pimples on her skin. "What is that? What the hell is that?"

Beyond mystified now, Karin poised to run, flee. Fight if she had to, but as she couldn't seem to understand what this impending entity was, she preferred the former options indubitably. She swallowed hard, rallied her nerves and, just as she was primed to sprint in any viable direction, regardless of where this disruption was emanating, the source was upon them. That was when Karin froze. That chakra. She knew that chakra. She knew it so well, she could have sensed it through death.

"Sasuke-" Karin began to say, only she found the name dying on her throat as another figure burst through the bracken, startled and eager. A figure that may have been dark haired and of the same age, but certainly wasn't Sasuke. Birds shrieked and scattered at the disturbance. Branches snapped and splintered. Karin gaped in surprise. Wasn't that… "Wait…Naruto?"

If the boy had any inkling to answer, he certainly didn't bother to act upon it. Rather, it was the sound of a heavy, metal object smashing against flesh and bone and the resulting soft thud of a small body hitting the damp earth that filled the air. Caliga raised his brows as he shifted his weight, eyes narrowing as he looked over Karin's prone form, waiting for any sign of movement.
that might constitute a second club to the temple. There was nothing. A gust of chilly winter air
trickled over the tableau, making Karin's scars stand out more than usual on her pale skin, but that
was all. Caliga digested this information with mounting interest, then sniffed loudly, and glanced
over at the boy watching them, his grip tightening on his sword.

"Something you want?" He asked, keeping his stance fluid. He was still wearing the old man's
guise, though his posture was straight and unhindered and his cane was free from the glamour,
turning it back into Tibernas. Karin was out for the count, that was certain. Ninja or no, a good
clout to the head would put anyone out of action for a few hours at least. The interruption had a
been a boon of great magnitude - Caliga would be the first to admit, he was struggling a little
before the kid came and crashed the party. He'd thought, given Yukimura's anecdote, a randy old
fool looking for herbal refreshment might have been the best option, But then she'd gone and
sensed something else about him. It wasn't just paranoia, or their impromptu guest, she'd seen
something weird about him too. Dubnoreix had been right; he did have to be more careful.

Then there was… this guy. Caliga had never seen Naruto in the flesh, but he had to admit, the kid
did look eerily like him. Same face, same facial markings, same body shape. The hair was darker
and longer though, and those eyes were quite the seraphic blue - more of a grey, really. He didn't
seem particularly coherent, nor did he seem to notice or care that Caliga had brutally attacked the
poor woman at his feet. Instead he ignored her and stayed crouched at the edge of the bracken,
tensed on all fours, like an animal. He nosed the air, sensing, searching for danger and when he
spoke his voice was oddly guttural, as though he hadn't worked the grease of conversation over his
vocal chords yet. He looked at Caliga, owl-eyed and confused, sniffed again and said,

"Sasuke?"

The anticipation was all-consuming, as though Sasuke would simply step out from behind him and
wave, or whatever he was expecting. Caliga blinked.

"Come again?"

"Sasuke?" The Naruto-animal repeated. It was the same word; the same tone. It was as though the
kid had scented out the question, all he needed was the answer to be confirmed. That strange,
pewter stare did not waver.

"Sasuke," Caliga mimicked, carefully, lowering his sword just enough to look less threatening, but
not so much that he couldn't manage a good strike if he needed to. The kid had never even glanced
toward the weapon, but at the mention of the name he perked to attention immediately.

"Sasuke!"

Now it could have been that he meant another Sasuke, sure. There were probably a few wandering
around - probably changing their names to lessen the likelihood of association. Yet Caliga
wondered what the chances of a young man who was the splitting image of the Konoha war hero
knowing someone else by the name of Sasuke could have been? How likely was it that a Naruto
lookalike would be searching for some other Sasuke? Not high, the Shinobi world was sizable, but
it wasn't that big. Besides, there was something beyond just the mannerisms and appearance of this
little weirdo that Caliga couldn't ignore - something about him that Karin had sensed, and she had
sensed it too - she looked just like Jitan had when he was distracted by a lead: split attention, eyes
and ears focused on several places at once. She'd been far more subtle about it, but when the kid
turned up all bets were off. That was a surprise. A surprise that worked in Caliga's favour; those
were best kind.

"You know Sasuke, huh kid?" He asked after a moment. The boy cocked his head to one side,
balking. An animal. Yes. Just like an animal. He may as well have been holding out a pelt to get the blood scent riling in the nose of his hunting dogs. It was that aside that had Caliga narrowing his eyes, suddenly feeling the loose ends start to click together. Blood scent? Was that what it was? Could it be that this guy was picking up Sasuke's scent on him? His people had never been conscientious bathers unless there was a necessity for it and while he had washed the sweat and dirt from his body from time to time after leaving the mountains, it could be very likely that some part of him still carried that scent. Perhaps, because he'd forced their closeness so many times, Sasuke had just become part of him - not enough that a human would notice, but for someone who wasn't quite so human…?

Caliga glanced at his sword again, wondering if it were best to slice the kid's throat. He didn't play well with others; his plan certainly didn't include a third party to come tagging along, but at the same time the resemblance to Sasuke's former friend (and lover, possibly, Caliga had never ruled that out after the found using Naruto's face to be particularly effective when persuading Sasuke into something) was also too glaringly obvious to ignore. If attacking Karin hadn't bothered the kid nor the fact that Caliga didn't look like the person he could obviously smell or sense didn't appear phase him, then he would probably be alright just to follow along. He was far too interesting to leave alone and if he did end up being a nuisance, well, his sleeping God was soon to awaken. Perhaps he might be hungry? Sheathing his weapon, Caliga eased down, pocketed Karin's glasses that had fallen from her nose after he'd struck her and slung her limp body over his shoulder.

"You're in luck, kiddo, turns out I know him too. Swell guy, isn't he? Great sense of humor." The sarcasm was lost, predictably, but the boy got to his feet, clearly all ears. "You want Sasuke? I know where he is."

"Sasuke."

"Heard you the first time." Caliga turned shifting his form from the decrepit old man to the tall, grizzled traveler once again. He hadn't revealed his shape-shifting abilities to any other shinobi besides the Kakkou's short-lived brigand allies, Yukimura and Sasuke himself. This one just continued to stare, completely oblivious. "If you want to see Sasuke, you'd better tag along. Coming?"

It appeared the invitation was understood and the boy trotted over to him, eyes bright. Then stopped, seemingly considering something before he patted his chest and said.

"Menma."

"Menma," Caliga repeated with a nod. "Well, hey there, Menma, I'm-"

"Is name."

"Yeah I got that." Caliga grinned. "So you do know more than one word, do ya Menma?"

"What name." The boy motioned to him. It didn't escape Caliga's attention that his tee-shirt clad arm was about as ripped as a boy his age could be. He was tanned and strong - seemed like he'd been outside for a long time. Those nails were ragged and dirty, as though he ran on all fours. His feet were bare, toenails long and sharp-looking. Claws. Interesting. Very interesting.

"Caliga," said Caliga.

"Kari-ga?"

"Close enough."
"We go Sasuke?"

"Yeah," Caliga said turning back toward the East. "We go Sasuke."

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**Konoha.**

"It's… Very different." Sasuke said, staring at the ink-laden legal pad in his lap. He flipped a page, skimmed it, then flipped back again. It's… Don't you think it's a bit-

"It's perfect," Naruto said, still draped over end of the couch. He'd been reading over Sasuke's shoulder the entire time, and had remained completely silent until Sasuke spoke, not even complaining once when a page was turned faster than he could finish. "It's like a story. But it's real. I mean… all the facts are real but it really makes you pay attention to them."

"It's called journalism, I'm pretty sure you're familiar with it. This is why an angle is important," Naoko explained. "People respond to stories that are more akin to the spoken word than a list of hard evidence. After all, most information was delivered orally before we figured out a writing system. Now, while it's better to have things written down, there are ways of treating that information so that it reads more comfortable. That's why I chose to write this way - first person - observing Sasuke through my eyes. Relaying this information through my knowledge."

"Isn't that what the government does anyway?" Sasuke said, carefully. "I'd don't want to be like them."

"No, they filter. I'm only supplementing. Everything you wrote is still in there, I'm just adding context. Now I know I have some fact-checking to do, trust me, I'll be pulling an all-nighter on this one, but I will be publishing first thing in the morning. If you still agree, that is."

"Fact checking? That means interviewing some of the people I've mentioned in there?" Sasuke frowned. "Sakura? Kakashi? And what about all the officials? Surely you need to get their permission or something?"

"I will speak to Dr Haruno," Naoko nodded. "Other than that, we haven't put any words in anyone's mouth, we've only stressed issues that were already well-established and placed them against instances that involve you. From memory, I have references for most of what I have mentioned. Anything I cannot prove lies in your claims, and some of those involve persons who are either dead or missing, or would press the government to make a statement. What we're doing is creating a current picture of you by using examples from the past - culminating in a kind of scrapbook fashion, if you'll excuse the metaphor. The idea is to give our readers something they already know, ground them, then apply that knowledge to your story."

Sasuke nodded again, slowly. Naoko offered him a gentle smile.

"I can't know how you're feeling right now, I'm not someone as high-profile as you are. But I understand reading something like this is very… revealing. You're a private person. And this is everything about you on show, for all to see. We may as well have opened your apartment and let people traipse on through it. But the privacy of your past is something that the court will not honor, you'll have to get used to that.

"Privacy," Sasuke snorted. "That's a good one."

"Yes, well If you're to stand trial, you'll find someone has already pasted stories about you everywhere, some true, some fake. The trouble is, no one will care. The best you could hope for then is an exclusive, betting on damage control, rather than setting the truth in people's minds to
begin with."

"We make the first move."

"We make the first move," Naoko confirmed. "We give them everything now. We don't let them corral you. It's an odd move because most of the time custody arrangement and arrest warrants don't permit leaked information before a trial. But you're not exactly under arrest. And although you're in custody, there have been no cease and desist letters sent to any of the establishments currently circulating your supposed story and whereabouts. No one from the Hokage offices has issued a media blackout."

"And you think Kakashi is also behind this." Sasuke said, studying the strings as he attempted to draw them together.

"I think he wants to help you."

"Hn."

"Well, if you're going to visit Sakura-chan, maybe I should come too?" Naruto offered. "Then she'll know you're legit and not one of those gossip newspaper things."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Naoko said, wryly. "Alright, that's a good idea. Do you know when might be a good time to approach her?"

"Yeah maybe. It she-"

"Wait." Sasuke interrupted, holding up a hand. "Wait. I have… Well… I think we can do this a better way." He paused, feeling the eyes of his guests upon him, then held the notepad out to Naoko. "Could you make copies of this? We'll need nine. Ten, I suppose, if Kiba wants to turn up."

"Kiba?" Naruto almost choked on his own surprise. "But wasn't Kiba the one who-"

"Probably. Maybe. I don't care. I'm not playing favorites. If Kiba doesn't feel like he can trust me, he won't come."

"C-come?" Naruto stared. "You mean… you want him here?"

"Everyone if possible."

"Why?"

"A peer review." Naoko interpreted, raised her brows. "That's bold. You sure this is what you want? They might not like what they read."

"Then I want them to say it to my face." Sasuke said. "So I know what I'm dealing with and… I guess who still supports me. There's a lot in this document that stands against Konoha and I've caused enough unrest as it is. Factors and history aside, treason is treason. I need to know what'll happen when people read this. I think the nine are as good a place to start as any."

"Ten copies," Naoko said, getting to her feet. "And we'll rendezvous back here… when? How long will it take to gather the others, Naruto?"

"Depends if people are on missions," Naruto said. "Ino might be able to take time off if her Mom can cover her. Hopefully Sakura-chan's not in theatre. Hard to say, but I can check in with the office and let you know."
"Give me an ETA if you'll be longer than an hour." Sasuke said, reaching to pick up his daughter. "We work to that."

Naruto paused, biting his lip, then reached out to touch Mikoto's back softly. His expression was troubled.

"Are you… sure? I mean, I know most of 'em are on your side but-"

"Then we cement that once and for all." Sasuke finished. "You've vouched for me long enough, dobe. It's time I asked these guys myself if they really trust me or not."

"'Kay." Naruto brightened at the mention of his nickname (hated or no, that was the old Sasuke returning, little by little). "Let's go then! Operation: Story time."

"Don't call it that."

"Operation: Sasuke time!"

"Do you really need to give it a name?" Sasuke sighed as Naoko left the room, smirking to herself. "Can't you just go and run an errand?"

"Yeah, yeah," Naruto sulked. He trudged over to the door and slid on his sandals, turning up his collar against the chill in the air before he turned back to Sasuke, beaming as he whispered. "Operation: Untitled!" before disappearing out the door.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Sorry about Karin. Really there was no other way to beat her than to hit her with something really heavy when she A) Was sleep deprived, probably to the point of hallucination, B) Completely overworked, C) Mourning and D) Freaking out over some weird ultra chakra Menma was accidentally throwing her way. I'm not sure what else Caliga had up his sleeve, but it probably wasn't far off "hit her in the head". Anyone else hear Izma there?

Caliga can fight Shinobi, he's not entirely useless - he can't be. But as we've learned, he's really better off not risking it. This might happen a couple of times, but I promise she'll get her own back. As for Orochimaru, well... naturally he'd fit in there one way or another. Just how he does is the current question. Wonder how he'll react to Sasuke's expose? And Menma, darling! What are you doing? Caliga may as well have just driven up in a van that said "Candy" on the side of it. Sheesh.

Oh well. This went a bit farther than usual, but look forward to a peer review, a truth bomb on Konoha and a very, very different Shisui. Don't hate me.
"You should come in, it's freezing."

Sasuke shouldered the door, wincing against the temperature while he addressed a large, fluffy white lump of fur and paws that was lying canted against the side of the house. It was only two in the afternoon, but the daylight was already beginning to wither in the sky and the meager heat offered by the sun was evaporating faster than ice on a lit burner. The lump in question, a large, shaggy white dog, shifted slightly and flicked its tail.

"It's cold." Sasuke restated, pushing the door open a little more. The hot tea he was holding threw small, decorative plumes of steam into the air and he clutched the small cup possessively, claiming as much heat from it as possible. "And don't pretend you don't feel it; you're ancient."

Akamaru raised his head at that, his expression bearing some semblance of canine disgruntlement. At Sasuke's wry smile, he rolled his eyes and chuffed peevishly.

"Not so ancient." He said as he clambered to his feet, following his charge inside with slow, heavy steps. When he reached the lounge carpet he yawned. Is only afternoon. Sun will be out a while longer, if Uchiha need privacy."

"Privacy? Seems you're the only one who cares about that." Sasuke said, motioning to the kettle. Sometimes the nin-dog liked a little lukewarm tea in the afternoon, weak, green, no sugar. Sasuke had no idea if it was any good for him or not, but he figured that was Akamaru's business, not his. As it was Akamaru merely tossed his head then gleefully let the tremor continue down his spine until he was in full shake.

"I can't understand you when you do that and talk at the same time"

Akamaru stopped after a moment, letting the cloud of loose hair drift around him as he watched it. He looked pleased with himself. Then he sneezed.

"Newspaper woman was here a long time."

"She was." Sasuke said to the counter. He sipped at his tea, thoughtfully. "There was something I had to do."

"Had to? Or wanted to."

"Both." Sasuke rested his cup on the counter. "We've created a document. That woman and me - er, Naoko and I. It's... a story, I guess - called an "expose" or something. It... It um..." He licked his lips. He never thought he'd feel this nervous talking to a dog. "It's the truth."
"About my clan. About the Uchiha tragedy. About the war. It's everything."

Akamaru watched with quick, dark eyes as Sasuke spoke and the little spots that formed his eyebrows held only the slightest tension. Sasuke paused and tapped the side of his cup, trying not to notice the way his hands felt light and his wrists buzzed with an odd, cold sensation.

"It'll be published tomorrow," he went on. "Then it'll go public. All of it. Everything. It's meant to. It... has to. But I'm... I'm going to have the nine come around and read it first though. I want them to find out first."

He was looking at the floor as he spoke and though he heard the words coming out of his mouth was through the thick pulsing of the blood in his ears. He felt his heart shiver once, twice, before he drew in another breath. Besides Naruto and Naoko, Akamaru was the first to hear those words said aloud. That the secret tied to his hatred and heartbreak would soon be known by everyone. That he had admitted to treason, plotted to kill the Kage - even destroy the village at one point - thanks to a series of misplaced pride, poor decisions and an inability to accept how deeply the loss of his clan had destroyed him. Sasuke's past, his story, would be printed in black and white, placed on the kitchen table next to the natto and the coffee for all to see. Konoha's dirt would be the start to someone's morning and he would have no secrets to hide behind anymore.

For Sasuke, who had spent most of his life dealing with his affairs on his own - completely unaware and uneducated on the dangers of letting such trauma lie untended - it was a more drastic action than announcing his revolution. He had no weapons here. He had no defense of his own, only a nubile sense of trust that others would stand with him. The kind of trust he'd turned his back on long ago, pretending that the bridges he burned left no foundations behind to prove that once those waters had been crossed.

Akamaru watched as the emotions conflicted across Sasuke's features and drew himself into a sitting position.

You ask Nine?

"Well, ten. However many there are now. Kiba too." Sasuke looked up then, wondering what his companion might think of that. After all, Kiba was the reason Akamaru had been guarding him in the first place. "Are you guys?"

Kiba will not be problem. Akamaru responded, confidently.

"But does he know you've been here? Every since he... Well, we only think that he-"

Kiba have own reasons for bark. He will not bite wounded prey, pardon expression. Akamaru said. He understand the hardship he has created.

"Hardship, huh?" Sasuke said, bitterly. "I don't think his contribution really counts for much in the scheme of things."

Uchiha keep looking at underside of bowl. Look at top; there is food. If no food, still promise of more.

"That is the weirdest expression I've ever heard. I thought it was something like 'The whitest side of the bone isn't always the tastiest.'"

There was a strange, snorting grunt - Akamaru's attempt at a laugh. When he looked up again, he
was smiling.

*For this reason I like you. Not many know NinKen sayings.*

"Hang with Kakashi long enough and you could write a book." Sasuke replied.

*Four paws win wars,* Akamaru quoted.

"But six is home and hearth. Two and two will bring a few, while eight will fill the bath."

They finished the proverb together and Akamaru grunted again, chuckling.

*True, sayings not always make the most sense.* He said as he turned and padded back into the lounge, his tail flicking this way and that in a gentle arc. *So... you think Akamaru not your story?*

"There's... a lot in it. A lot of... difficult information in it."

*Information not difficult, only delivery and reception that can be problem.*

"Don't oversimplify. I've said and done a lot of things that people will question, Akamaru. People know that. Now they'll know why and some of the reasons aren't much better."

*If NinKen pup not trained, if partner is bad, is ninKen bad when he misbehaves?* Akamaru asked, sitting himself down on the mat. *Ninen learn from world around them and from partner. If world is not good, if partner is not good human, what you think ninKen pup learn? Same for you."

"Yeah, but humans aren't trained the same way ninKen are."

*No? Mother teach. Father teach... For you, Kakashi teach. All good teachers, yes. Maybe a bad lesson here and there. Maybe sometime teaching is not so good, yes?*


*Many places to learn for humans; biggest of those is life. If life bad, too many bad lessons, you think good lessons get through?* Akamaru pawed the ground a couple of times then lay down, curling his tail around his toes. *Perhaps you think we ninKen do not watch, but we do. Maybe you think we do not learn; we do. Akamaru will read story, but Akamaru knows Uchiha some. Have good lessons. All that is needed.*

Trust a dog to be able to speak plainly without the usual social roadblocks that further complicated human conversation. Sasuke stared at Akamaru for a few conservative moments, unsure of what to say in light of such altruism, before he moved slowly behind the counter, searching for cups and snacks - finding something for his hands to do.

"I guess," he said at length.

*Good. And Sasuke?*

Sasuke. Akamaru rarely called him by his name. Sasuke blinked, his hand curling around the teapot.

"Yeah?"

*Pack will help you. They are good humans.*

His pack. His people. He didn't have a clan anymore - or at least, not a very big one - but he had his
classmates, his "friends" as Tsunade had called them. He had Naruto - who had always believed in
him, even during the worst times. There were others who, despite his spikey nature, still wanted to
be around him. His talents were lost; his skills had vanished and he had no power to speak of, yet
they remained. It made Sasuke wonder if his classmates had seen him less as entertainment and
more as a person the whole time.

He arranged the cups on the counter, checking each to ensure they were scrupulously clean, before
he left the kitchen to check on his napping daughter and to change. Whilst the snug, body-
skimming jersey was comfortable to wear, it made him look far more feminine than he may have
wanted to seem in front of the Nine. The stomach was now undeniable, the rest, well, there was
much that could be said for the anonymity of a heavy, all-encompassing sweatshirt. It was early
days yet and Sasuke wasn't used to defending his appearance on top of his actions.

 Barely an hour had passed before a knock sounded at the door and Naruto entered with Shikamaru
and Chouji in tow. Both had brought snacks (though Chouji's bag was considerably well stuffed)
and greeted Sasuke politely before padding into the lounge. Shikamaru commented on the weather,
then found himself a perch on the couch as he said a few words to Akamaru. Chouji advanced into
the kitchen and began unpacking the plentiful contents of his duffel. Neither seemed curious about
the situation at all, nor made any mention of the pile of manuscripts Sasuke had placed on the
coffee table. It was an ordinary day as any other before it.

 A few minutes later, Ino arrived with Hinata. Both delivered more presents for Mikoto and of
which Sasuke accepted with little more grace than surprise this time, though he was infinitely
curious as to how prepared the girls actually were with their gift giving. Did they buy them on the
way? Did they have a stockpile? How did they even know what he had for Mikoto already? Their
accuracy for producing new and necessary items was impressive.

 Rock Lee was next, quickly followed by Sai. Both tried very hard not to stare and Sasuke's
pronounced middle, though inadvertently ended up blatantly gawking. When caught in the act, Sai
proceeded to offer a rather well-practiced, though somewhat synthetic, smile and told him he wore
the weight well. Rock Lee, bouncing off the mistake that they could openly discuss the situation,
told Sasuke he looked 'glowing' - whatever the hell that meant. His first move was to reach over in
attempt to touch Sasuke's belly, an action that, even as a pregnant woman, Sasuke had never the
mischance to endure. The swipe was almost unconscious, instinctive (as was the annoyance),
though Sasuke never had a chance to connect. Naruto had already intervened and was standing
between them, arms folded tightly. The look on his face could have melted steel; Sasuke could
have sworn he imagined a growl rumbling under his breath.

 The final four arrived together, which was certainly the best option as none of them besides Sakura
had seen much of Sasuke at all since his return. His ex-team mate, still very much unwilling to test
Sasuke's tolerance of her, just smiled a little as she entered the house, tugging Tenten along who
simply stared. Then there was Shino and Kiba, both of whom passed the threshold of the room
with little more than a mumble - the former more polite than the latter. Kiba had a wariness about
him that seemed more feline than canine and Sasuke had known well enough to anticipate mistrust,
however, and merely nodded as Kiba eyeballed him, knowing immediately who would question his
motives.

 After a brief round of chatter with one another, the group settled in the lounge, some seated on the
furniture, some on the floor. Hinata made space for Sasuke on the futon beside her, though he
declined her offer. He felt better standing. He always felt better standing - he could think more
easily on his feet and thinking was certainly something he needed to do now more than ever
because he was there, swollen with child, chakra-less and serving tea to his powerful
contemporaries while they relaxed in his house. His house. He'd never had this many people in his
residence before; it was unnerving. He had no idea what to say, so he tried:

"Uh. You made it."

The others stared at him, offering an array of bewilderment. The room fell into a strange silence, which Sasuke fractured with an awkward cough. *You made it?* What the hell? Was that… congratulatory? A statement of fact? He had to do better than that:

"I… uh… I apologize for the short notice. I just… need to get this over and done with."

The words had left his mouth before he even realized he'd said them. They seemed natural to him, but they were so foreign and felt like cardboard on his tongue. Had he always spoken like that, so… disassociated and formal? He sounded like… Well, he almost sounded like his father. Swallowing hard, Sasuke took a moment to gather his thoughts. He'd spoken to people before. Civilians. Farmers. Other… people. Rarely without needing something from the exchange, but still, he spoke to them and spoke with them normally at that. Was it really so different being in front of the Nine? Because he was asking for, what, acceptance? Their approval? Their *help*? All things he'd never needed, nor wanted before. Sasuke blanched, before he took a breath. He couldn't think that way anymore. He needed to own this. He needed to stick by his decision.

"I mean. Thanks. For coming. I understand you're all busy-"

There was a chorus of phatic expressions that blurred into a general buzz of goodwill. Hinata smiled warmly, tiding the little bows on the small woolen hat she'd bought Mikoto as a present.

"We're happy to, Sasuke. Thank you for inviting us."

"You're looking well," Sakura added, confidently. "Colour. You have more colour in your cheeks and-"

"You are….reaaaaally starting to show. I can't believe it," Tenten interrupted, eyes round and sparkling as Catherine Wheels. She'd been practically sitting on her amazement the entire four minutes she'd been in the room. For a well-practiced social magpie like Tenten, that was an achievement. "I mean… I saw you that day at the hearing. And Sakura said but… whoa. That's a belly and a half. You really are, aren'cha?"

In that moment, Sasuke was achingly glad that he'd worn the hoodie. He couldn't imagine what she'd say if she noticed some of the other assets swathed beneath the voluminous fleece. Chagrin gnawed at him and for a moment the regret for his brash decision to invite the Nine into his slowly dissolving personal space burned deeply in his chest and on his cheeks. Yet, before Sasuke even had the chance to blush, Naruto said:

"So?"

Tenten blinked. "Um… what-"

"So what?" Naruto shrugged. "You knew. You all knew what the truth was, so what did you expect?"

"I didn't mean-"

"No, ya didn't." Naruto continued. The look he shot his classmate was grey as granite and twice as heavy. "So why point out the obvious?"

"It's fine." Sasuke said, watching Tenten turn the same shade of crimson he'd been about to sport a
few seconds earlier. "She's right. It's weird. I look weird. I'm not gonna deny that. The whole thing is crazy."

"Not crazy," Hinata said, twirling her hands in her lap. "Strange, but not crazy. A-and hard too. It must be very stressful, being in the wrong body. Having a child to care for as well has having one on the way. I don't think anyone could appreciate how difficult that must be."

"Yeah… I guess. And then there's this; having you all here for a discussion. It's-" Sasuke tried to unfurl his hands. For some reason they'd clasped into fists and refused to relax. He felt like he was six years old and delivering some school paper in front of his class. "It's not… It's not my way of doing things."

"No shit." Kiba grumbled. One by one the others turned to acknowledge him. Most frowned, yet Sasuke raised his chin and nodded. He'd expected no less from the one vocally unsupportive party.

"Only my way of doing things has had to change pretty drastically in the past eighteen months. All this-" He motioned to himself then, then waved toward the room where Mikoto was sleeping. "wasn't exactly part of the standard shinobi training modules."

"And we're supposed to feel sorry for you?" Kiba said, scowling. "Cos you and got yourself in trouble and now you need a bail out?"

"How about we let him speak?" Sakura shot back, narrowing her eyes. "Wouldn't you want that, if you were in the same position as him?"

"I wouldn't let myself get in the same position as him."

"Back off Kiba!" Naruto growled, at the same time Shikamaru hissed:

"Get over yourself, man. Let him speak."

"I'm just saying, if he wasn't such a damn diva in the first place-"

"Well you're the diva now."

"Don't be such an asshole."

"Really? With all this guy's done, you're calling me the asshole?"

"Damn straight we are-"

"I would like to hear what Sasuke has to say." Sai's voice was level, quiet, but it had a certain edge to it that could lever its way into a conversation, prying the arguing parties apart to let a few choice words in. He glanced at Kiba with an expression was so flat and calm it had somehow achieved the effectiveness of parental disappointment. "I came to hear Sasuke, not you. If you want to speak, perhaps you should wait until it is polite to do so."

"Or not at all," Ino added, then turned back to Sasuke with an encouraging nod. "Sorry."

"Um… It's uh… Well, look, when I asked you here today, I did so knowing that invitation included all opinions and criticisms." Sasuke explained. "I'm not stupid and I'm not gunning for popularity. I just need you to read something I've written. A document. It's not long."

The last part he added as a disclaimer: most of the kids in his class hadn't been fond of the theory side of things. Studying scrolls was for scholars, not ninja. Only Sakura seemed to enjoy the
"What kind of document is it?" Rock Lee asked. "Something to do with the trial?"

"In a way." Sasuke replied. "It's mostly… uh… For my clan, I guess. The ones that had gone… and the new ones. Pretty sure you might have heard or read parts of it before, maybe in mission dossiers or in the bingo book something. But this is all of it."

"All of what?"

"Everything. The truth."

"You mean about," Ino bit her lip. She looked at Sakura, who had seemed to have paled slightly, then glanced back toward Sasuke, her pale brows knit. "The massacre? I thought that was… an internal situation. I mean… Isn't this… quite personal?"

"It is and it isn't." Sasuke shrugged. She was being kind, but there was an eagerness to her voice that he recognized; something that was very hard to hide. It was no secret most people thought of the Uchiha tragedy as a terrible mystery and that made it a spectacle. Something cryptic and entertaining - a puzzle to be solved. From the beginning Sasuke had been keenly aware that although the general public may not have approved of his opinion, they would still seek the truth - if only to satisfy their curiosity. "It has a lot more to do with Konoha than you think or probably would have liked to have known. This document - 'expose' as my collaborative called it - is the truth about the Uchiha. The truth about what happened to us and why. The truth about the war and what happened after it ended. Like I said: it's everything."

"Everything you probably would have said in the trial anyway," Kiba snorted, leaning forward a little. "What's the point in blabbing now? Or have you just made it work a bit more to your favor? You know… tweaked the facts a bit."

"I don't lie. I don't see the point in it. It's a hapless waste of time and it favours few besides those who have made it their life." Sasuke told him. Kiba was being rude as all hell, sure, but it seemed that his question was more probing than accusatory. Sasuke tried not to smile when he noticed Akamaru lift his head and bare his teeth disapprovingly. Kiba glanced at his companion, then shrugged, irked.

"What, like Orochimaru? You hung out with him for years, you know. Doesn't look good."

"I trained under him. Yes. With full knowledge that he was going to take my body as his replacement after I had achieved my goals. There were few lies between us. He knew I could see through most of his tricks."

"Didn't you kill him?" Tenten asked. Sasuke thought for a moment.

"Yeah. Briefly."

"What does that mean?"

"It means try and kill Orochimaru and see what happens," Naruto said, stonily. "Anyway, Sasuke's a shitty liar, so he doesn't do it. Never did. Right?"

Sasuke caught the look Naruto was aiming at him - the kind of look they used to share as a team, the one that said 'tagged you out, man, I got your back' - and raised his brows. "Pretty much. Probably due to having an older brother can all but read your mind."
It was a brave tactic, letting out that little personal detail. It wasn't like Sasuke to share such information with anyone; his memories, his past, they were all his own. But Sasuke knew what he was doing and even if the pain was old and deep, a calculated effort went a long way. The others sat up a little more, compelled. Kiba's mouth closed with a snap. Sakura's eyes bored holes into the side of his head.

"Besides," Sasuke continued. "This isn't for me. It's for the Uchiha. It's for my... my children. I don't know if they'll stay with me, I don't know what's going to happen. But whether I raise them or never see them again, I want them to know the truth. I want them to know it the same as everyone else does, not keeping it behind the Uchiha fan, hiding it away like... like some festering..." He stopped for a moment, considering his words. Festering indeed. Ingrained. Carnal. Hatred. That's what it was, wasn't it? The anger at being misunderstood. The fear at being left alone. The betrayal of his brother... It was a sinuous, pox of an emotion and, if left untreated, if kept in the shadows, it would only grow. It was dangerous... and it was stupid. Sasuke breathed resolve, then said:

"Two weeks ago Shikamaru came to the apartment to offer me some of his clan's medication. A few years back, I was responsible for the near-loss of his entire team - most of you guys - when you tried to get me to return to Konoha. But he never mentioned that, never said a word about it. Chouji-" Sasuke turned and motioned toward the Akimichi. "-Chouji has taken charge of all my meals - and not just me, my daughter and Tsunade as well. I almost got him killed but he just turned up and started helping as though it had never happened. Ino and Hinata both come over regularly to give me a break. Thanks to the actions of two highly misguided Uchiha, two of my own clan, they lost family. Permanently. But they came. I didn't ask, but they came. Sakura..." Sasuke paused for a second. That one was still so raw. "Helped. And Naruto..." Another pause. Sasuke looked at his feet as he swallowed, knowing the dobe was watching him. Worried. Protective. Involved. "Naruto is Naruto."

"We're a team, Sasuke," Sakura said, quietly. "We'll always be Team Seven. And we'll always be the Rookie Nine."

"I don't understand it." Sasuke muttered. "I don't understand any of you or your motives. Honestly, Kiba's reaction makes the most sense."

"We said we'd help. We meant it," Rock Lee added.

"Retrospect has a very unique tint. Kinda helps you see things you might have missed as a kid." Shikamaru said, while Shino coaxed a small ladybird onto his finger and examined her furtively.

"That is correct. Actions we may have performed as a younger generation may not have been conducive to a healthy adulthood. Had we studied our social sphere and surroundings more closely and followed our instincts, rather than our parents, Naruto would not have been left alone. You would not have been left alone. Research in grasshoppers have shown they too can work best as a family unit. Orphaned, they are more prone to wandering lost, or attacking others."

"Grasshoppers, huh?" said Tenten. Shino nodded sagely. "Grasshoppers. And several other Katydids as well."

The room fell into a strange, thick contemplative silence as the others tried to mull over Shino's analogy. Then Hinata let out a loud snort as she tried to stifle a laugh and flushed wildly when she was less than successful.

"S-sorry," she said, her voice wobbling as she fought a giggle. "It's... I know it's not funny. But... grasshoppers?"
"Yeah man, what the hell?" Tenten snickered.

"I suppose," Sasuke added as the others tried desperately to hide their smiles. "It's better than dung beetles."

"Dung beetles have a strong family sensibility and would not find themselves in such a situation as their adoptive- ah… I see," Shino stopped himself as it began to sink in. "You are joking."

Naruto grunted. Shikamaru chuckled. Then Lee broke into a loud and braying laugh that set the rest of the room off and even inspired a little smirk to curl in the corner of Kiba's mouth.

"Didn't think Uchiha made jokes," he said, easing forward to rest his elbows on his knees. Sasuke shrugged.

"We surprise even ourselves sometimes."

"Ok, look. I don't trust you." Kiba admitted. "I don't care how you look or how you act; I don't trust you. I think that's pretty damn obvious. You've burned us way too many times for this to be so straight-forward and I don't care how the others see it."

*Can't teach old dog new trick,* Akamaru cut in. Kiba pursed his lips sourly.

"But I'm willing-" he continued. "-to join in with the others for this. After all, you've got them around your finger, I'm gonna need to know what I'm going against my friends for. I've just got one proviso."

"Oh for goodness sake, Kiba!" Ino growled, although Sasuke ignored her. There was something in the way Kiba had asked, something in that tentative truce he felt he recognized. A searching; a need for something. Sasuke could relate to that.

"What?"

"Tell us…” Kiba paused and chewed his lower lip for a moment. When he spoke again, the bravado had left his tone and the steel had gone from his eyes. "Tell us why you came back to Konoha. The real reason, not just 'I had no other choice' or your kid was sick or something. Tell us what really made you come back."

"Are you dense?" Sakura hissed. "He's got a reason right there - right in front of you! Geez Kiba, if you'd just think for a minute-"

"She did get sick, but that wasn't it." Sasuke said, effectively pruning Sakura's diatribe. He knew this question had been coming, ever since he set foot in the village it had been riding in the back of his mind - an unwanted hitchhiker, jabbing a finger at every wrong decision, every thrill of Sasuke's pride. The others had looked at Sasuke's predicament and put two and two together - perhaps they questioned, but felt they knew the answer already. Sasuke accepted that. He didn't like it, but he let them unpack him blindly because it was the easiest thing to do. And it was a half truth, sure. He'd come back to Konoha because he'd needed to. He'd never actually said why.

"Well?" Kiba pressed. "What then? Cos, y'know, must have been a pretty big deal for you face the music. Considering you knew what could happen if you did."

"Yeah." Sasuke scanned the room slowly as his guests fell silent, too enthralled in the mystery to tell Kiba to shove his proviso up his ass. Naruto looked as though he might want snap the Inuzuka in two, but even he glanced back at Sasuke, curious. "I knew what could happen. I knew what I expected would happen, sure. I prepared for that."
"So… Why?" This time it was Sai who asked, caught in the mystery, his dark brows sinking low beneath that breath of a fringe.

"It was… That holiday. The one they celebrate in the South. Family day or something. The weather had turned and the rain had come early. Sleet. Storms. River country weather - the kind that lasts for weeks at a time. Roads were flooded or iced up bad enough that I had to find shelter elsewhere."


"Yeah."

"That's where the last team on the river restoration project ended up after we were rained out."

"I know." Sasuke said, pointedly.

"In fact, the only place that was open was this broken down old roadside tavern and."

"I know."

Shikamaru looked at him questioningly, but Sasuke merely shrugged.

"I preferred to keep away from crowds as much as possible," he explained. "Most of the time, shrines and way-stations were good enough to sleep in or stay until the rain passed. But I'd forgotten how rough the weather could be further south and I didn't anticipate the flooding. We were tired and low on food so the inn was the obvious solution. It was full of Konoha nin waiting out the storm. Your team-" Sasuke nodded to Shikamaru then. ":was there. A few others from Suna. A handful returning to the South. Seemed like you'd all been working together."

"Yeah. We were on a canal building mission in the Kusa rice fields. After Pein kind of bombed Konoha, the weather patterns close to the border got all out of synch and the yearly rains began completely drowning the crops rather than feeding them. We'd just finished and were on our way home when the flooding started. We had to rush to find a place to stay - there's no one around on that highway anymore." Shikamaru frowned thoughtfully. "So you were there?"

"That night was the first time in almost two years that I'd seen another Konoha-nin." Sasuke said. "I found that I couldn't help listening the the conversation - as liquor-drowned as it was. I heard you all talk of the alliance, the camaraderie between countries, the changing system. And I listened to you all talk about home. That's when I knew."

"What, a few drunk nin start blathering and reminiscing and that makes you homesick?" Kiba frowned. "You'd been gone for years! You chose to leave."

"I left a Konoha that was so self-involved it barely registered the other countries existed, let alone saw them as anything more than the opposition." Sasuke reminded him. "All around me, all around us, our teachers, our classmates, our leaders - they were all praising a system I knew was broken in some way. I couldn't put it into words then; it was only after I left that I really saw the cracks. Then the truth. And the lies." Sasuke shook his head, slowly. "I thought you were all insane to support a scheme like that. Mindless puppets letting yourselves fall into the scam."

"That's why you wouldn't listen, no matter what we said." Sakura added. "And why your were so…. So against Naruto."

"There isn't anyone in Konoha more nationalistic," Tenten agreed, shooting their ambassador a dry smile. Naruto himself just remained somber and uncomfortable-looking. "So you learned more
about the alliance? Was that it?"

"Some." Sasuke said. "I stayed, knowing I was probably safe from prying eyes - no one paid me much attention. I stayed and I listened. I heard things I didn't think I'd ever hear from Leaf nin. Rather than the usual patriotic rambling, there was concern. There were questions. The Leaf were swapping stories with the Sand on the benefits of emigrating to other countries for work and family. The entire room was full of discussion for the future, not for the glory of the past and present. It was all slurred and inebriated of course, but it was there."

"What… you were happy people were worried?" Kiba frowned. "How sadistic are you, exactly?"

"You misunderstand." Sasuke went on. "It's not the concern that sated me. Not the uncertainty or the fear that the Shinobi were discussing. It was the fact they were voicing their problems in the first place. That they openly shared with one another and agreed that the ninja world was as full of the same shit that has been present from day one. Hashirama acknowledged that there were issues in forming settled villages, but he forced… no… He inspired his followers with his version of peace onto his followers because that was the best option anyone had at that point. Tobirama took that peace and militarized it, forming an aggressive sense of patriotism. Hiruzen adopted that pride as a blanket mantra that would only muffle out any opposition that spoke against the Will of Fire. The Kage system is well meaning, but it is not perfect and that fact has been covered by years of jingoistic bullshit. What inspired me that day was to hear others finally speak of its flaws. I heard several of the Sand offering their homes to Leaf nin whose clans were on the verge of kicking them out for fear that their nonconformities might shame the family name. I heard Leaf nin discussing the growing technology in the civilian sectors and lamenting the changes these might bring to the world in a few years. It was a group that was thinking and learning. They knew that the old system was flawed and rather than ignore it, they chose to focus on change. I felt that if Konoha was now producing ninja that would question coherently rather than follow behind their Kage like sheep, then perhaps it would finally listen, as I was listening then."

Sasuke shifted then, moving forward to place the copies of his manuscript on the table in front of the others.

"I don't like talking much. But I will when I think something needs to be said. Before, I fought for vengeance - to reclaim the honor of my clan. Then I fought for justice, or at least, what I thought was justice - you kind of forget, when you have the ability to do anything, how much louder you are than everyone else. You don't notice how much your attention lapses. In the tavern that night I saw something that I hadn't seen in a long time. I saw ninja who had put down their masks and their patriotism. I saw fathers who were members of clans that still arranged marriages. I saw women who were still battling for equality despite the changes after the alliance was founded. I saw people who were more concerned that their children were home alone or in paid care than they were about their incomplete mission. I heard problems being shared and solutions being offered. I didn't once hear someone say that the Hokage would take care of it, or that the state would deal with the situation. I saw people helping each other. And it made me wonder: if people were listening now, really listening, then perhaps they might listen to me. To my brother. To all the Uchiha who didn't support the coup and only wanted to remain in Konoha peacefully living their lives just like everyone else."

Kiba let this sink in a moment as he gazed at his hands. Then, without a word, he picked up the small stack of paper in front of him and began to read. The rest of the nine glanced at each other dubiously before slowly, hesitantly reaching for their copies. Naruto watched them for a few moments, before he left the couch and moved over to stand by Sasuke, worrying his nailbeds as he always did when he was nervous. There was a cacophony of turning pages, a few coughs, someone blew their nose and then suddenly, terribly, the room fell into silence. Sasuke could hear the spit
sliding down his throat as he swallowed and he drew in a breath that rattled in his chest. They'd all been the picture of congeniality for now, but after really the article, would they still feel the same? Was it too much? Too little? Should he stay, watching them, hawking over them like some teacher in an exam; should he offer tea? Sasuke was slowly shrinking into a ball of anxiety - thoroughly unwilling to make a decision lest it steer him down the wrong course of action - when suddenly a warm hand cupped the curve of his elbow and Naruto's body pushed close to his. For a single, ridiculous, breathtaking moment, Sasuke thought that Naruto was embracing him and he froze into an awkward position, thrown by the intimacy. Then Naruto hissed:

"C'mon, let's let 'em read in peace," herding the stunned Uchiha out of the room with soundless success. Once in the bedroom, he let out a breath, closing the door behind him. "That was heavy. Didn't think they'd all be so tense about it."

"They weren't," Sasuke said, drifting toward Mikoto's cot with soft steps. "Just Kiba."

"Yeah but-"

"I did threaten their village, Naruto. Your village. No matter how helpful they want to be, they still have to accept that."

"Well," Naruto scratched at his elbow. "I mean… Don't you think that was… kinda… um….wrong?"

"No. I don't." Sasuke murmured. "And I told you that before, dobe. I'm not about to change my story just because I'm in deep shit. I'm not going to lie just because it's acceptable around here."

"Ok, Ok… I said that in a weird way, sorry. I dunno. You seemed kinda worried in there. Just trying to think of things to make it easier on you."

"You want to make it easier? Keep advocating for me. Like you said the other night. Like you did just before when Kiba was giving me grief. You said you'd stand by me; do it. If you can't-"

"I can. No. I can. Don't even…. Don't even think that. I'm wigging out, that's all."

"You are?"

"I." Naruto sighed, browbeaten. Sasuke was right of course, he'd said those things. He meant them. Somewhere deep inside Kurama grumbled something about chickens, and at which Naruto cursed his half-assed pep squad and rolled his shoulders purposefully. " So um-" he began after a moment (and several more rolls. Sasuke tried hard not to look confused). "That's really why you came back? What those soldiers were saying? That as the real reason?"

"Yeah. Mostly," Sasuke replied. "I haven't had a home here for a long time, but I remembered it then. I felt like I could remember it if I came back."

"Nostalgia, huh?"

"Desperation, more like." Sasuke said, blandly. "Every part of me knew that I needed help. Even if I chose to travel further, there is only so much that I can explain about my situation before someone decides to intervene." Or someone else catches up with you Sasuk'se imagination taunted him with a vicious swipe at his nerves. Sasuke ignored it, but drew in a breath at the chill settling in the base of his spine. "I suppose learning that there was an element of change happening in Konoha gave me… hope. I guess."

Naruto nodded and smiled. It was something bright and warm and it melted Sasuke's apprehension
within an instant.

"That's good," he said. "I mean… It's like… what's the word? Progressive? Cos you were a real good guy, back in the day. You could be nice when you didn't think anyone was looking. Sometimes it even seemed like you cared."

Progressive wasn't the word he was looking for, but Sasuke understood him all the same. He sighed heavily, lifting a hand to rub the bridge of his nose. And here came the reminiscence, again. Perfect timing as ever. He wasn't surprised - Naruto was unbelievably susceptible to regurgitation, to the point where Sasuke wondered if the he ever lived in the present moment at all. It wasn't annoying, not really. It was just… him.

"I did care, idiot. I had to leave because I cared."

"Wasn't that because we were holding you back or something?" Naruto said, cocking his head to one side. "You needed to get stronger? Or you thought you had to, because hell, you were pretty damn tough even then!"

"I didn't-" Sasuke shook his head and crossed his arms over his chest in attempt to stop himself saying something he shouldn't. Naruto, for all his cleverness, was still so dense sometimes, it was maddening. But before he could open his mouth, Naruto continued:

"I tried to think about it. I tried to work it out. I always tried; I couldn't get it out of my head. I could never understand how the two of us could be so different. You know, you said that I didn't have a family so I wouldn't know what it was like to lose one and you were right. Then I lost Jiraiya and I thought, 'ok, here we go. Now I will understand'. But I didn't. I still didn't get you."

"Naruto, it doesn't work like that," Sasuke began, but he stopped when the other shook his head, gesturing absently toward the wall.

"I know. I know that. And I get it now. Reading what you and Ms Naoko wrote, hearing you talk…" Naruto licked his lips and looked up. "I get it. And I wanted to punch myself because it… it really was so obvious."

"What was?" Sasuke asked, carefully. Naruto wanted to punch himself? Sasuke could oblige if he wanted. After all, Naruto wasn't known for his smarts, that much was true. But he knew better than anyone that the idiot saw things in a strange, oblique way - a perspective lost on most. He would catch the little differences, occasionally - point out the smallest details when no one else knew where to look and have them mean something, really mean something to him. That was why Sasuke needed his answer, and the sarcasm could wait. He needed to know. "What was obvious?"

"It's like… maybe you just didn't know how to process what happened? After such a thing, after… everyone you knew was gone… and the Village just kinda just tiptoed around you, treating you like you were some kind of monument, like some prized relic left behind. I couldn't get that; they all hated me. But they kinda hated you too, only you were no longer a threat to them so they just… left you alone. And you knew it. You picked up on it. That's why I didn't understand - even though I thought we were the same. I wanted to make people care about me because I didn't understand what I'd done wrong. But you… You knew that there were problems with your clan and the council. You knew there was static. And after… after that night, after everything was gone and the village tried to tuck you away somewhere like a bad report card… It was like you had a hard time believing anybody cared at all, or even wanted to. Right?"

Naruto petered off as he padded closer to Sasuke, not taking those hypnotic eyes off his face for a second. "I had this ongoing hope that people would like me - this dream that one day I'd make it;
I'd have friends and people wouldn't look at me like I was shit. But you knew what people could be like. You saw them turn their backs on you… People who were supposed to help you. The village was meant to be a family, that's what the ol' geezer always said but-"

"But I used to stand there, listening to his speeches; listening to him drone on about values and ethics while the council burned my old street to the ground and threw away almost every relic, every precious thing they could get their hands on before I was old enough to know to hide them. That was Konoha to me."

"I'm…" Naruto looked away then. He seemed at loss for words, or at least the right words to say. Sasuke wondered if he was going to end up unintentionally offended. Luckily Naruto just went with: "I'm sorry."

"You didn't know. Probably better that way." Sasuke sniffed. He took a step forward, allowing Naruto to stand a little closer than he normally would. He could feel the heat of Naruto's body near his, sensed his strength, the tension in his muscles, the power channeling through him. The curve of his pronounced stomach was all that sat between them and for a moment Sasuke felt the strongest urge to close that gap, let Naruto touch his shame and his weakness and just hold him until that feeling went away. "Still. Took you long enough, dobe."

"Feel like an idiot."

"You are an idiot."

"Yeah well, it's the journey, isn't it? Not the destination?" Naruto sounded like he was quoting something - he even spoke as though he were reciting from a textbook. Despite the tension that still clung to the back of Sasuke's spine he snorted, rolling his eyes.

"Not sure if that's a compliment."

"Guess not. And I can be pretty complimentary." Naruto smiled, turning the charm on so brilliantly, Sasuke was almost knocked for six. Dark eyes stared at him, watching the idiot's face brighten up, eclipsing everything else in his luminescence. One minute he was berating himself, the next he was beaming like a damn torch. It was like the sun peeking out from behind a raincloud - a sudden, drastic change of weather and Sasuke hadn't the accoutrements to deal with it.

"Whatever," Sasuke said, currently sun-stricken. "They'll be finished soon, so we should-" Do something else. "Check or something. I don't know."

"I don't think they read that fast. Kinda shouldn't with that material, right?" Naruto scuffed a hand through his hair, unaware of how pleasant the pale strands looked on his tanned skin. "Should really wait a bit longer."

"Yeah."

Sasuke didn't know if he wanted to make out or throw Naruto out. He didn't know if they should talk or if they should wait in silence, listening to the sound of Mikoto sleeping in her crib. He didn't know if he still feared Naruto, didn't know what he wanted from him only that he was beginning to feel comfortable in his presence. That just by having his strange, scruffy figure in the room seemed… comforting. Stable. It was as though someone had added the last brushstroke to a painting, or a period at the end of a long, emotional message. Naruto was the little sigh at the end of a string of laughter, the tangy sweetness on the end of the tongue after finishing a mouthful of blueberries. Naruto was-
"Sasuke?"

The word broke him out of his reverie and he glanced up with confusion, wondering how he'd suddenly moved from the crib to the bed without noticing. Naruto was kneeling on the mat by the crib, his face pressed against the bars as he watched Sasuke's daughter sleeping. He looked up when Hinata stuck her head around the door and was on his feet as quick as he was silent.

"You guys done already?" He asked, sliding his hands into his pocket. "That was fast."

"Well… it's been nearly an hour."

"An hour?" Sasuke parroted without meaning to. He glanced at Naruto and Naruto shrugged.

"You sorta just sat down and thought for a while. I didn't wanna bother you."

"I-is… um… Do you need longer?" Hinata asked. "I mean, no one rushed or anything but we kinda thought it was time that we-"

"Yes." Sasuke said, pushing to his feet in a strange daze of determination. He padded into the lounge ahead of Naruto and Hinata, not saying another word until he was standing in front of his peers. No one seemed concerned that he'd taken his time, nor did anyone seem particularly shaken by the material they'd read. Some had changed positions and were sitting closer to one another, their fingers tracing lines of text as restated, quoted and unpacked them. Shikamaru was leaning one hip against the couch, the manuscript curved in his hand as he held it in one and stroked his chin with the other. Chouji hadn't touched a single snack that was on the table in front of him, he merely looked up as Sasuke entered the room, his countenance serene. So much so, it was his face Sasuke focused on as he spoke, breaking the silence with a strange, nervous cough.

"I know it's-"

"It all happened." Naruto blurted out. "All of it. The whole thing with the God Lady; the weird plant guy; the lies that've been around for ages, it's all true. I can vouch for it. I know I didn't before but things were different and… and stuff happened and that was my fault but if you don't believe Sasuke then you're sayin' I'm a liar and-"

"Of course we believe it, Naruto-kun," Hinata interrupted, gently.

"Sakura confirmed it too," Tenten added. "She was there as well."

Sakura half-smiled then, raising her hand as if to say 'Remember me?'

"Y-yeah, Sakura… Um…" Naruto looked at her, sheepishly. "I um…"

"I filled in the gaps," she explained. "Not that there were many. Just a few bits and pieces; stuff Sasuke didn't know. Like how what happened after you lifted the genjutsu on all of us, how you reacted… and what Kakashi told us after… after everything. What we agreed to do."

"Sakura…"

"We can understand why it wasn't made public," said Sai. "I mean… People were shaken enough as it was. Saying the whole thing was part of some supernatural drama that spanned hundreds of years… well…"

"But lying about it doesn't help either," Naruto said, glumly. "Certainly doesn't help Sasuke."
"No, it doesn't," Shikamaru said. "Nor does his actions before or after the battle with Madara." He cast a look toward the Uchiha, still stroking his chin, thoughtfully. "But we can't stand here knowing what we now know and say it wasn't plausible to think that way. After all, the deeper you go, the less sense everything makes when it's one lie standing on another. How much did you find out before you left?"

"I knew my father was behind the coup." Sasuke said, pushing his hands into his pockets. "I knew that there was tension within our own ranks too; we weren't all against Konoha. Pacifist factions still existed here and there, hidden away from the ire of the rest of the clan. I knew that most of the militia had suspected my brother of treason - even my father did. As for the 'tragedy', well, back then the world was aching for war. International relations had reached breaking point - each of the five villages were toeing toward some kind of catalyst that would tip the scale. Konoha had the double jeopardy of their internal unrest - including, but not limited to, my clan's dissonance. The council just tried to tie up all the loose threads by claiming that the threat of civil war forced their hand, when it was likely they were worried the Uchiha would defect and leave Konoha to form alliances elsewhere."

"I… I thought it was because of…" Naruto frowned. "Wait, what?"

"Hiruzen had a point - civil war would have weakened Konoha, certainly," Sasuke explained. "But the Land of Fire is the largest and most populated Shinobi sector. We aren't that helpless against external threats. It hasn't even been a century since we were all separate clans acting as singular units to protect and control our land; it's not hard, especially not for the elders, to recall that mindset. The real problem was in one of Konoha's strongest dojutsu masters exporting their talents - selling off their skills to the enemy."

"Which is why Danzo made such a big deal about it," Shikamaru nodded. "He knew your jutsu could be… converted? Forcibly… uh… inherited?"

"He knew the dangers of being on the wrong side of us and yes, he knew that if I failed, someone could and would make use of my eyes. Someone stronger. Someone with more political capability than me."

"Like Kumo," Sai said, frowning. "Or Tsuchi. Either of those two."

"Seemed he had the most beef with Kumo," Tenten added. "Either way, it's clear that he had plans for Konoha behind the Hokage's back. Both of them. Sasuke wasn't the only one who wanted to fix things through force."

"No. It's like you say, here-" Shikamaru unfurled the manuscript and flicked through a few pages before he found the paragraph he was looking for. "- we have a system that is broken. You saw it before most of us, but now the holes are really beginning to show. You wanted to fix that system-"

"-I want to change the system."

"- trouble is, you're not a leader. You've never been a leader, not even back at the academy."

That earned the Nara a sour look. Sasuke removed his hands from his pockets and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Oh?"

"You're actually a better teacher," Ino said, leaning forward a little to collect her now-cold tea. "Sort of. If you look at it that way. You're kind of all about examples."
"I don't think I-" Sasuke began to say, but closed his mouth as Chouji pointed at the paper.

"Said you wanted to get revenge on the elders for setting your brother up? That's making an example. Said you wanted to teach Konoha how it felt to have everything in your world destroyed, that's an example too. Said you wanted to change the Will of Fire by becoming the thing that we would all hate -"

"-pretty much forcing the entire Shinobi world to come together in order to keep you in line. You were making an example of the instability we'd built our lives around. You wanted to show people how the system didn't work." Sakura finished. "You bought your children home because you knew they belonged here. You needed to show them they were Uchiha, that they were part of Konoha no matter what anyone said. And you bought us here today because you wanted to show us that you can still fight. You're still willing to stand up for your clan. You've trusted us to weigh in our opinions, no matter what we thought. That's worth a lot to us, Sasuke."

"I.." Sasuke began to protest. But Sakura was right, that was how he'd seen it, at first anyway. The children who hadn't understood him, the classmates who fed blindly into the state system. He'd left Konoha without a second thought for all of them, save Sakura and Naruto and now, even now the part of him that was still twelve years old wondered why he was giving them the time of day. But then reality sank in. And he remembered he was seventeen, not a child any more, and these people were here and they were kind and they would listen. They were listening. He'd learned and so had they. "Yeah well, they weren't exactly good examples. And the trust thing… It goes both ways."

"That's how conversations work," Shikamaru said. "Seems like we should have had plenty more of them long ago."

"Sometimes it's just as hard to ask as it is to answer." Ino supplemented. "When you're a kid, you don't know. You see people through the eyes of your parents, your friends, your village even, for so long, sometimes finding out that you're free to make up your own mind doesn't happen until much later." Ino smiled then, pushing slowly to her feet. "I said it before, Sasuke, but I think it's worth repeating. I can't imagine what you've been through. I can't even begin to process it - I don't know how anyone could. Which is why, when I say that I can't agree with some of your actions, the sentence always falls short and feels hollow. It doesn't seem right to say that, it never did. I don't think it did for any of us, even though we convinced ourselves otherwise. You were… intangible in a world that was so full of absolutes. We are ninja, we are supposed to know right from wrong, strong from weak, good from bad. But the more experience we gained and the more we learned, the more we realized the world isn't like that. The Hokage, our teachers…. the village…. They were wrong."

The others looked at her then. Ino acknowledged them all, not slowly, but defiantly. Hesitation slipped from her like petals from the very flowers of which she was so often associated.

"The Yamanaka offer their support for the Uchiha," she said, bowing respectfully. "I'm happy to help in any way I can."

There was silence, then:

"The Nara offer their support for the Uchiha," Shikamaru said. "And don't look so damn surprised about it."

"The Akimichi offer their support for the Uchiha," Chouji nodded and smiled warmly. "Comes with meals too, so, not a bad deal, right?"

"You can count on me, Sasuke." Tenten grinned. "Anytime."
"Me too," Hinata added, swiftly. "Er, I mean, the Hyuuga offer their support and protection for the Uchiha."

"Same goes, plus the added benefit of the power of Youth!" Rock Lee announced and at which the others shared a confused look, wondering how Sasuke was supposed to activate said auxiliary souvenir. Shino coughed to try and dilute the embarrassment.

"The Aburame are at your service. Of course, I cannot speak for the entirety of my clan, but as for myself, I am at your disposal."

"I'm in," Sai shrugged. "It seems it was my commander who had caused a large portion of your troubles; I feel somewhat obligated to help smooth things over a little."

Sakura opened her mouth to speak, her eyes bright with fortitude and smiles, but Kiba bet her to it.

"We all agreed to kill you once, you know," he said, linking his hands in the space between his knees. The glare Tenten shot toward him was murderous, but he only shrugged as he continued. "We called ourselves the Konoha Eleven. Had the mission of tracking you and that Madara dude down before you made even more of a mess in Konoha's name. We were told that you were still our problem, even though you still defected. You were still considered ours and we had to deal with you."

"Kiba," Rock Lee said, his face a pale mask of shock. "That's not-"

"I didn't say anything at the time. Didn't seem like anyone wanted to hear it. But hell, if you wanted to leave that bad, I didn't see why you couldn't. I mean, you kinda made your point - you weren't gonna just let us take you without a fight. Naruto couldn't see it - he never did - but most of us were resigned by that point. You were a lost cause. Hell, even if we did manage to get you and lock you up or whatever," Kiba went on. "You wouldn't be back. You'd still be somewhere else in your head. You'd still jump at any chance to get away if you could. So I didn't see the point. I didn't see why we couldn't just wash our hands of you and just treat you like any other guys in the bingo book."

"Well, technically we still have to contact the country of an apprehended villain," Shino pointed out. "It is the correct protocol to-"

"That's not what I meant." Kiba rolled his eyes. "I mean, we were all making this huge deal over some kid we didn't even know that well for up and leaving home… and he didn't even really have a home here! Y'know, everyone he knew was dead and all-"

"Not everyone," Sakura cut in, icily. "Where are you going with this, exactly?"

"I told you, I didn't get it." Kiba said, before he motioned to the pile of papers on the table. "He was just some guy from some murdering clan, who just kept giving everyone that actually mattered a freaking hard time. I didn't get that. I don't get it."

"Murdering?" Sai blinked. "Don't you mean murdered?"

"He's talking about the Canine Implementation Act. The one the Third had trialled for a few years after the Kyuubi attack," Hinata said, quietly. "That's it, right Kiba? That's why you're so angry. That's why your Mom won't budge on her opinion."

Kiba looked at his hands. Hinata pressed her lips into a thin line before she continued.

"One of my cousins mentioned it the other day - she was on the team who wrote the approval process for the applicants. The Hokage had decided that it wasn't enough just to place three-person
shinobi cells together for training and missions, there should be a fourth comrade as well. A non-
human member of the team to help counterweight some of the imbalances in loyalty and assiduity
that were beginning to emerge. Inuzuka-trained Ninke were stationed in certain clans and in
certain sectors of the village and used as surveillance, which was usually a job for the police. I
guess that didn't go down well with the Uchiha because after the next council meeting, thirteen
elite ninke were sent to the northern compound to be trained as police dogs."

"And were never seen again," Kiba concluded. "Couldn't even catch a scent of them; it was like
they vanished. So either they were killed on a mission or they were-"

"Wait. Is he just pissed because some d-

"They aren't 'some dogs'," Sasuke cut in before Sai earned a nip to the ankle (or shit in his shoe,
depending on how vindictive Akamaru was feeling). "They're part of the Inuzuka clan. They're
clan members just as Shino's bugs are considered Aburame."

"Well, some work on private contracts, but-"

"Kiba, if I knew where those Ninke had gone, I'd tell you." Sasuke continued, sensing derailment.
"Fact is, I never knew about them, never heard about the exchange until Naoko found the reports
and showed me."

"Not one? They aren't exactly small, you know."

"We looked after a neighbor's puppy once, me and Itachi. That's about as close as I got to a dog
until I met Kakashi's unit. But that was one of the best weekends I can remember." Sasuke shook
his head. "Look, I like animals, Kiba. I wouldn't sit on something like that; I would have told you."

Kiba thought about this for a moment. "Well," he said, glancing down at Akamaru, who seemed to
be looking back at him with an expressions of I told you so written across his doggy features.
"Well, you'd better tell my mom that." He said with a sigh, before he scratched at his neck. "Then
at least you got one point in your favor. Cos she's gonna hate this."

He was pointing at the article when he spoke. Naruto looked it over, licked his lips and nodded.

"Yeah but a lot of people are gonna hate it," Naruto said. "Why do you think Sasuke asked us here
in the first place? He needed to gauge what kind of reactions to expect and what kinds questions
might come up. To be honest, it felt weird when I read that thing the first time. It felt… shameful. I
felt shameful. Konoha is my home, I fought for this place, I put my life on the line to save it. And
here's a evidence that pretty much shits on everything we've ever stood for; everything we've ever
learned. Only… it doesn't. It just shows us what happens when people refuse to change. When a
government tries to keep things running the same way they have for years and ignore the world
around them. They pretend that nothing is different, that the ninja world is still the same, but it
isn't. The Academy attendance is lighter than its ever been. So many ninja have applied to work in
sister villages, we’re recruiting younger than we ever have, and less skilled than we probably ever
should. And for what? There are no wars. There's no friction. We've had to make it legal for clans
to cross pollinate to other countries, because we've had no other choice. People want to go. All
Sasuke's story proves is that this was happening much earlier than our government wants to admit.
And what we're doing by supporting him, is paving the way for this change. You guys already
know that I'm with him, there was never any other answer for me. I love my home; I'm proud of it.
But I'm not going to stand by and watch all the life just bleed out of it when we have the chance to
take charge of this and change things for the better. And that starts with the truth. It starts with
admitting our flaws and moving on. So yeah, I'm with the Uchiha. Uzumaki's with the Uchiha.
Always."
What? When the hell did that happen? When did Naruto suddenly become so eloquent, so… so fucking articulate? Had someone swapped him out with a double? Did one of his clones decide to go and take classes in his spare time for the benefit of the others? What the hell? Sasuke stared at his classmate with a true sense of awe that he hadn't felt since he'd fought for his freedom at the Valley of the End when they were children - when he didn't understand what Naruto hosted inside of him. When he was so angry and so confused and yet still so impressed by the boy who'd all but surpassed him in speed, in strength and above all in determination. That boy was honest and truthful and frankly kind of annoying but… but that boy had gone. This wasn't the jingoistic tirades of some kid who seasoned his bull-headed enthusiasm with a loaned power he didn't truly understand. This was a man who understood himself. Who understood his nation and the people within it. Whether he was Hokage material or not, Naruto's gift for rhetoric hadn't just become louder as he'd grown older. It had evolved into something sophisticated and sincere and it was impressive.

"We shouldn't be inheriting problems; we should be making solutions." Sakura chimed in. "We can't just stick our head in the sand and pretend everything is ok when it isn't. I want Konoha to clear the air just as much as anyone else. So I'm with Sasuke too."

"Yeah," Kiba said, finally. "Guess we'll just have to see what the backlash is. If the Hokage's keen on weathering it."

"If anyone will feel the brunt of this, Kakashi will," Sai added, glancing at Naruto and Sasuke. Naruto looked skeptical but Sasuke merely shrugged.
"I wouldn't worry about Kakashi," he said. "He's the Rokudaime. Something tells me he's already planned six ways out of this and then some. And if he hasn't," Sasuke smiled wickedly. "He'd better think quick."

Dusk had settled in by the time the last of Sasuke's guests had said their farewells and donned their coats before stepping out into the chill of the evening air. Sasuke closed the door behind them, setting free a heavy sigh that had been squatting unnoticed in the back of his throat. He felt… strange. He knew he should have been experiencing relief or the sensation of a weight lifted by the strange and undeniably baffling support of his small cohort. But Sasuke felt oddly heavy, as though his bones were filled with syrup and his head was stuffed with fibreglass. He didn't even register Naruto was talking to him until he sensed questions congealing in the air and he turned, somewhat dazed, to meet his friend's consternation.

"What?"

"I said I'll wait until Tsunade gets back before I go grab some dinner," Naruto repeated, speaking slowly and more clearly than usual. He had his coat in his hands and one of the manuscripts under his arm which he motioned to, awkwardly. "Shika made a few notes, so I'll take this down to Naoko. She said she'd be working late. Akamaru's gone with Kiba - for support of something, I guess."

"Oh."

"Did you want me to pick up anything for you guys to eat? The night market's usually open on Tuesday, you want some dumplings or something? I could get dumplings? They do 'em by the dozen."

Sasuke didn't seem to know what to do with the information. He shrugged.
"Or… ramen? I mean, I'm going for ramen, obviously, but I could get you some too if you want?" Naruto droned. Sasuke just stared at him, wondering if Naruto even realized how efficient he sounded now. He used to forget which foot went in which trouser leg, would struggle how to tell the time on an analogue clock and would beg for freebies at every given chance. Now he was offering dinner and running errands with the kind of mental organization Sasuke hadn't thought was available to someone like Uzumaki Naruto. All the stuttering he'd exhibited before, that was gone. The nervous trotting, hanging back a step, the hands in pockets and downcast eyes were gone - swallowed by some instant shower of confidence that had, at some point in the day, pelted the idiot with enlightenment. It was too weird.

A shuffle sounded as the coat was set aside and the floorboards creaked when Naruto took a step closer.

"Hey, um… You ok?"

"Yeah," Sasuke lied and Naruto, despite all the Sasuke-alerts he appeared to have internally installed, just gave him a suspicious look.

"Sure?"

"Go get your food, Naruto."

There came another shrug, then Naruto threw on his jacket, zipping it all the way up. Either he was yet to become as discerning to Sasuke's behavioural quirks as Tsunade was, or he finally respected the boundaries of personal space - the latter seemed to have gained a little more credence in the last twenty-four hours then Sasuke could have ever thought possible.

"Well, that's Tsunade at the door so… I guess I'll go eat." Naruto said, his head cocked to one side as he listened for the familiar high-heeled footfalls on the concrete stairs. "Been a pretty good day though, right? Successful, I mean. Told ya the nine weren't gonna be dicks about it. You even got Kiba."

"I'm not collecting a set." Sasuke muttered under his breath. Naruto wilted a little, but before he could comment Tsunade had opened the door and was kicking off her shoes.

"Damn that temperature's dropped! I think it's actually colder than yesterday! Hope you boys've had the heat on this afternoon, it's like seal balls out there!"

"What, wet, squishy and smelling of fish?" Naruto couldn't help himself. Tsunade rolled her eyes with a grimace, which only made him laugh harder. "Anyway," he went on, reaching for the doorknob. "I'm gonna go get Ichiraku. You want, Tsunade-ba?"

"Nah, I ate the office," Tsunade said, and raised her brows when Sasuke shook his head again. "Guess they're all yours."

"Yeah. Well, see ya then," Naruto was out of the door like a golden bullet, taking the steps three at a time - if he even counted them at all. In truth he was loathe to leave Sasuke's side after everything that had happened, but if he was honestly glad for the distraction. Sasuke seemed to need some time to process and, consequently, so did he. There had been many facts revealed in the past two days and several of those were not part of Sasuke and Naoko's document. They were truths spoken between words, they were moments. Touches. Understanding. Truths that had an impact on everything he ever stood for. And they seemed too good to be real. He'd need to take some time to let them sink in and a good bowl of ramen or three would help with that.
Sorting things out in the Uchiha household was something different entirely, however, as it was something that Sasuke hadn't discovered he needed to do until his caregiver returned. He'd showed the nine his story. He'd discussed his fears with Akamaru. But now it was Tsunade's turn and Sasuke found that he had mixed feelings over sharing the information with her. Feelings that were slowly, insidiously, mutating into fear. It wasn't until Tsunade began asking Sasuke about his day while she padded into the kitchen to put the kettle on that he felt that chill begin to crawl over his flesh. The nervousness only multiplied as she helped herself to some of the leftover cookies still sitting on the table and asked.

"So you had some people over, huh? Was it Shikamaru?"

Sasuke nodded numbly, watching as she flopped onto the couch, biscuit in hand, a pile of manila folders in the other.

"Chess again? I need to get you boys some other games, you must be bored of that by now. Anything else you like to play? Cards?"

She was talking to him, but the words were hollow and far away. Sasuke licked his lips, spying the heap of manuscripts he had placed on the breakfast bar by the stacked dishes. With a noncommittal shrug he drifted over to the pile, slowly pulling a copy off the top. It felt heavy as lead. It felt cold. It felt like the words he'd uttered so long ago in his promise to kill the Kage in order to attain peace. His revolution. They were cold words. Unfeeling words.

(And Tsunade had been Kage then.)

"The Nine were here. Ten, really, with that Sai guy. And Kiba."

"Kiba came?" Tsunade sounded impressed. "Was that Akamaru's doing?"

"Maybe."

"Colour me surprised. I figured he'd come round sooner or later; that was record time." She munched on the cookie, flicking the crumbs from her fingers. "Is that why you had a get-together?"

"No."

"No? Were they visiting Mikoto? Where is she anyway?"

"Napping. I put her down a couple of hours ago. I… Tsunade, I um-" Sasuke began, taking a step forward. He wanted to be confident, but his courage waning. His feet felt like they were cemented to the floor. "I called them around for a reason. 'Cos I… I wrote…something."

He didn't hold the papers out. He didn't move closer. Though he could hear Tsunade sit up when she sensed his hesitation, he couldn't bring himself to look at her. While he found that he could handle the opinion of his peers, however they fell, this was different. This was so different and suddenly he knew he wasn't prepared for it.

"Wrote what?" There was concern in her voice now. He could almost see the expression on her face as he looked down and his heart thudded painfully in his chest. He imagined that little dart in her eyebrows, the way the seal on her forehead changed shape, lengthened, when she frowned. He could feel those chestnut eyes upon him, deep and dark with worry. When he heard a weighty shift of fabric, he imagined Tsunade turning up the sleeves of her haori as she always did when confronted with something difficult - an unconscious layover from her gambling days where the art of distraction had been of great importance. He drew in all these little idiosyncrasies - all these little nuances he remembered about her and held them close. They were what made their conversation
important. They were also the things that made his information so much harder to deliver.

"The truth," Sasuke said. "All of it. I wrote it down. I thought… I thought it was time. Naoko helped, she's the woman I worked with at the paper. Well, she more than helped, she made it readable - turned it into something that people might… I don't know… Might find easier to digest or something. But it's there. It's everything. The plots, the massacre, the time after. Orochimaru. Obito and Madara and the Tsuki no me." He was rambling now; he never rambled. But filling the empty space between facts, leaving little room for interjection or even acknowledgment was all he could do. "And what happened after. Some of it."

"Sasuke," Tsunade said, carefully navigating around the sea of words before her. "What's this for?"

"It's the truth." Sasuke said again. "I thought about it for a while. I thought about the way that everyone here has been. I thought about the nine and Naruto. I thought about what might happen with Mikoto and… and I figured I needed to. This… This is where I still have some power. I-its where I can state my case without the courtroom context."

"That woman didn't talk you into this, did she?" Her voice was protective now. Sasuke could almost sense her hackles raising and he gripped the paper more tightly in front of him.

"No. It was my decision. She offered to help, that's all. She put it in perspective. The words are mine."

"And you're ok with her 'perspective'?" Tsunade asked. When Sasuke nodded mutely, she pursed her lips, unconvinced. "So your friends were over to proofread it?"

"Sort of."

"Do I get to read it?" Tsunade asked, remaining in her seat. She reached out a hand, waiting for Sasuke to step forward and offer her the document. He still hadn't moved. "Sasuke?"

"Yes." Sasuke replied.

There was a long pause. It rendered the room quiet enough Tsunade could hear the electricity ticking in the ceiling bulb above. There was also another sound that also entered the sphere of near silence: the rasp of paper rubbing against itself, a sort of short, bushy sound that seemed completely harmless until Tsunade noticed it was coming from the small stack of paper in Sasuke was being holding. His hands, gripping the pages so tightly his knuckles had turned bulbous and white were shaking so badly he could barely hold the pages.

Carefully, purposefully she rose to stand and, moving only a few small steps, shortening the distance between them. It was close enough that he would know he had her full attention, but still gave him space if he needed it.

"Perhaps you could read it to me instead?"

"No. Maybe." Sasuke's face was hidden in his bangs by now, and when he shook his head they swayed like willow branches in the wind. "I don't know."

"Or, maybe you could tell me what you're thinking right now?" Tsunade tried instead. "Would that help?"

"You said you'd kill the Kage to force the world to change."

"And you're ok with her 'perspective'?" Tsunade asked. When Sasuke nodded mutely, she pursed her lips, unconvinced. "So your friends were over to proofread it?"

"Sort of."

"Do I get to read it?" Tsunade asked, remaining in her seat. She reached out a hand, waiting for Sasuke to step forward and offer her the document. He still hadn't moved. "Sasuke?"

"Yes." Sasuke replied.

There was a long pause. It rendered the room quiet enough Tsunade could hear the electricity ticking in the ceiling bulb above. There was also another sound that also entered the sphere of near silence: the rasp of paper rubbing against itself, a sort of short, bushy sound that seemed completely harmless until Tsunade noticed it was coming from the small stack of paper in Sasuke was being holding. His hands, gripping the pages so tightly his knuckles had turned bulbous and white were shaking so badly he could barely hold the pages.

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"Or, maybe you could tell me what you're thinking right now?" Tsunade tried instead. "Would that help?"

"You would have killed her."
Sasuke did not look up, but Tsunade could sense the tension in his jaw, the weight of anxiety preying on his body. He seemed to be counting his breath, measuring each with a strong meditative focus - the same kind of concentration designed to hold extreme emotion in check. The selfsame he had probably left in place all his life. Sasuke exhaled, then said:

"What's in here… What I wrote… Tsunade…I didn't know you then. I didn't…. I'd forgotten what it was like to have someone like you in…. in my… around me. I didn't… couldn't remember."

(You would have killed her.

You would have murdered her and you wouldn 't have looked back.

That 's what your version of revolution was.

That 's what you believed in.

That 's what you believe in.)

"Do you regret something you've said?" Tsunade asked, knowing full well she was pointing out the obvious. But she had a hunch it wasn't regret that was the problem. And if perhaps the problem wasn't a problem at all.

"No," Sasuke said quietly. "The world needs to change. The system remains broken. I believe that. I'll always believe that."

(That 's how revolutions work.

Wash the slate clean.

With the blood of the past.)

"People might hate my opinion," he continued over rocky footing. "And I know that. Some people will hate that I've brought up the past. Some people probably won't support me because of my crimes. Some people might think I'm only out to sell a sob story so that I won't land in jail. I know that. I don't care about that. People don't surprise me when they act like that. But I…don't… I don't want you to…"

"Sasuke, I'm not going to blame you for things you said through so much anger and pain. You were inconsolable back then. You were dragging around other people's problems and dealing with them on your own when you were far too young to understand that situation was very, very wrong-

"I said I'd kill you. You. The Raikage, Tsuchikage, Mizukage… Gaara. I was going to kill you all to give the world a… a-" clean slate. "I was going to restart everything and you would… you were just… baggage."

There was the sound of water hitting something firm, something like paper. The print on the cover of Sasuke's document began to bloom a small, feathery flower of water and salt.

"I want the world to change." Sasuke whispered. "But… I don't… want things to change here. I don't want you to look at me the way they do."

Tsunade eased down to her knees so that Sasuke need not look up to see her. He felt small enough already, it seemed, and she didn't want to emphasize that. Peering under that sheet of thick, dark hair, she held up a hand. "I think we both know quite a lot about baggage, don't we, Sasuke? We
both let it change out life irrevocably. You set yourself on a path for vengeance to make the tragedies of your past mean something, but me?" She moved her fingers slightly as though counting. "I lost my younger brother when he was twelve years old and my lover just after his twenty-seventh birthday. I did all I could to save them, but it wasn't enough. I couldn't do enough. And after they were gone I wallowed in that, thinking that because I had believed in their dreams and pushed them to reach for their goals it was my fault they had perished. I convinced myself that the desire to change and better oneself was a fool's mission and I ran away from everything that reminded me of them."

"While you treated your misfortune as a measure, mine became a roadblock. I couldn't move past it. I couldn't imagine a future without them and so I gave myself no future. Yours, you had written for yourself; mine, I hid from. I stopped aging at thirty-nine and stayed young because I couldn't stomach the fact that I was growing older but my loved ones never had the chance to grow at all. I abused the beauty that age puts on the human body; wrinkles became nothing more than tally marks for every day I was without them. The strands of white in my hair were little more than the threads of their funeral gowns. I feared changing because I was afraid that I was dishonoring their memory; I saw death in everything. And I was afraid.

"So when Naruto found me and convinced me to return I did - but only because he wouldn't take no for an answer. And while there was something inside that rekindled my strength - maybe the fact that he looked so much like Nawaki, or sounded like Dan - I still couldn't look at myself for what I truly was. I'd become what they'd always dreamed to be, I was Hokage, and yet I couldn't change anything. I saw the broken system just as you did, but all I did was cover it with a placebo of that old hope I'd left behind and sat waiting for someone else to heal it. If you had killed me that day, Sasuke, some part of me would have probably said you'd done me a favor."

"Tsunade."

"I am a coward. I lost the two people I loved most in the world, and I let that kill me too. I leaned on cynicism and ignorance because that was so much easier than facing up to the truth that the world was no longer my Grandfather's utopia. I stayed young because it was easier. I shaped my body in a way that would make people look, but never really see, because then I wouldn't have to see either. And I couldn't summon the courage to believe in their dream, in Nawaki and Dan's and everyone's dreams for peace, because I forgot how to fight for it. I criticized the Council for their lack of faith, but deep down I am no better. That is my truth, Uchiha Sasuke. Now will you look at me differently?"

Sasuke was staring at her, his dark eyes round and wide and sheened by the slightest membrane tears, his cheeks devoid of colour. But it was clear to Tsunade that he didn't regret his anger or his proclamations, instead he was thrown by his need of Tsunade's kindness. Perhaps he didn't quite know how to acknowledge his love for her as a friend, a mentor - someone he could count on. But it was the realization of that need, and of the answering acceptance that slowly coaxed his smile to into bloom as he let the papers fall to the floor. And it was love when Sasuke said-

"No. I won't."

"No. And you're more important than a few words said in in anger a long time ago. I don't condemn people so easily, understand?"

"Yeah."

"I'll read this tonight," she continued, picking up the papers by his feet. "And I'll read it because in order to defend you, I must be on the same page as everyone else. To be honest, I'd rather just talk to you than study a Sasuke 101, but if this is going to print-"
"You need to know it inside out. I get it." Sasuke said. Tsunade nodded.

"But it's a framework, Sasuke. It's not you."

Sasuke gave her an odd look then and slowly moved his hands to Tsunade's brow, brushing off a couple of errant, straw-coloured strands from her face. "Funny," he said, tucking her hair behind her ears in an oddly intimate gesture, something he seemed to reserve only for Mikoto and frugally at that. "When you look at people, it's all just framework that you see. All the real stuff is kept on the inside. No one likes to show who they really are."

"Except Naruto," Tsunade smiled. "It's all or nothing with him."

"Same with Nawaki and… Dan, right?" Sasuke ventured. "That's why you gelled so well with the id- with Uzumaki? He reminded you of them."

"Yeah," Tsunade admitted. "He did. I guess I resented that to begin with, but after awhile, it grew on me."

"He grows on people whether they like it or not." Sasuke said. "It takes some getting used to. But it helps. And the more it happens, the more you find you can deal with it."

"Thought you didn't like getting mushy?"

Sasuke laughed then, a low, gentle chuckle before he proceeded to lean in to rest his forehead on his mentor's. He would have had no idea what that small token meant to her; nor could Tsunade understand what a touch to the forehead meant to Sasuke. It wasn't Itachi's gesture, but it was something that just… felt right. "Those two… You know you won't forget them, right? You don't forget people like that….

"Sasuke-"

"… and you could be a wrinkled, toothless old husk; I'll still respect you."

"And I love you too," Tsunade grunted, smiling. "You stand-offish, bristly little know-it-all."

"Fat too. You forgot fat."

"The heavens would only bless me if you were," Tsunade rolled her eyes. "You're positively allergic to calories."

"Ok then, we'll make a deal." Sasuke smirked. "Give up on the nightcaps and I'll eat twice the rice at dinner."

"This an intervention?"

"Trust exercise." Sasuke explained. "Something we owe each other. It…. It used to be something Itachi and I did when he started to go on longer missions. I'd promise him I'd stick to something and he'd do the same. You had to be honest about it or it was bad luck."

"And were you honest about it?"

"Of course I was." Sasuke grinned. "But he used to go easy on me. I'd tell him he had to count every grain of rice before he ate it, that kind of dumb thing. He probably did it too."

"Well, he had to say, right? He had to tell the truth."
"Yeah, he did. Trouble was, I could never tell if he was lying anyway." Sasuke's smile wavered for a second, then dropped. But the lightness remained in his tone, despite the bittersweet memory. "You didn't eat at the office did you."

"I had a beer," Tsunade admitted. "Or two. Ok, three. And you are hungry, aren't you. Really."

"Enough to eat a horse." Sasuke said. "I could give Naruto a run for his money."

"Then why don't you heat up those dumplings I saw in the fridge and I'll tip the Sake down the drain."

"And we don't tell Naruto."

"Nope," Tsunade smiled wryly. "This is just between us. We don't ever want to give him the ammunition for an 'I told you so'."

"Interestingly enough," Sasuke said as he let Tsunade climb to her feet and stretch her spine. "He probably wouldn't say anything at all."

"Sometimes it's not the saying," Tsunade said, reaching into the cupboard to pull out two rather large bottles of low-end rice wine. "It's the knowing. It's that twinkle in his eye; that smug look on his little whiskered mug that makes you think twice."

"Hn," Sasuke agreed. "Well, if I could drink, I'd drink to that."

"So would I." Tsunade twisted the cap off the bottle and, with a hint of sadness - possibly more comical than anything - began to tip the contents down the drain. "So would I."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Uh... yes, so this is a part one. This is about three-quarters of what I'd put to paper for chapter 47 and even after I pruned it within an inch of its life, it still turned out a monster. Brevity eludes me, but I can't help enjoying the banter when the Nine get together, or throwing in a few moments for Akamaru's wisdom or Naruto's earnestness. What mattered most though, was Sasuke's interaction with Tsunade. Having him know that what she would read might hurt her - having that guilt over something she would ultimately understand, just eating at him because he feared it would turn her away - gave me the opportunity to really push their relationship. He felt that he needed to reiterate the trust between them; she knew she wasn't as flawless as he thought she was.

Father figures may have been an important element in the Naruto series, but I felt like Sasuke's link with his father was much weaker than that of his mother and brother. Tsunade just works, she feels right. And since no one could ever replace Itachi, Tsunade's now become mother, his friend, his sister and his mentor all rolled into one and for that she's honored by the gift of his trust.

Next time we'll have a bit of a moment again with Naruto and Sasuke (because, let's face it, Naruto's popularity might just take a bit of hit with all these revelations) then to
Caliga to see what's going on there. As always, thankyou all for your support and patience. It's still increasingly hard to find the time to write, especially with so many personal projects to complete for events mid-year, but I keep trucking on. Any questions, feel free to message me on tumblr - link is in my profile.

Cheers!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Konoha, 16th March,

Year of the Hare

It was late when Sasuke heard the familiar sound of Naruto's feet sliding on the tiles above his window, ungraceful as ever. A familial snort rolled in the back of this throat as he sat up, letting the book that he wasn't reading slide into his lap. He never worried that it might be someone else approaching - someone that meant him harm - for that person would at least aim for stealth and silence. Naruto just tried to be quiet and failed, impressively.

"Window's open," Sasuke said to the curtains, watching his visitor circumnavigate the drapes and the window frame, slip on the thin coating of ice that Sasuke may have encouraged to develop on the outer stool and end up a rather surprised heap on the floor in among a healthy pile of blankets and pillows. Naruto blinked.

"What's all this?"

"It's too cold to sleep on the roof," Sasuke told him, blithely. "There's a pillow, I think; a few blankets. Even a futon - apparently Tsunade borrowed it off a friend or a cousin or something - I don't know," he waved a hand absently toward the pile, trying to downplay the fact that he knew. "Just… do what you want with it."

"Blankets?" Naruto studied the array of bed linen before him as the realization slowly dawned. "Wait, you mean..? You're gonna let-"

"If you snore, you're going back home and staying there."

"I don't snore." Naruto said quickly. "Promise."

"And you can't wear that dumb hat-"

"Haven't worn Mr Toothy since I was twelve." Naruto grinned. If by "twelve" he meant "yesterday", Sasuke wouldn't have been surprised. "So… so you're saying I can stay? Here? Inside? Inside with you?"

"Mikoto wakes at five am." Sasuke continued. "Sometimes she wants a bottle at two or three. She might be disrupted for the first couple of nights since-"

"I'll be super quiet." Naruto whispered as though to demonstrate. Sasuke rolled his eyes.

"Don't make promises you can't keep. Now keep an eye on her, I'll be back in a second."

"Sure, sure." Naruto bounced his feet, eagerly, before his smile dropped. "Wait, look after her? Where are you going? What if-"

"I'm going to the bathroom. You have, literally, two minutes to fuck anything up."

With that thinly veiled threat, Sasuke walked out of the room. He tried not to notice how his heart was racing as he made his way to the toilet and, while he did have to relieve himself, he tried to be
as quiet as possible, listening out for any sense of discomfort from Mikoto, or stupidness on Naruto's behalf. It was another trust exercise, something that would go on to greater bridges Sasuke knew they would one day have to cross. He'd planned to count to ten before he went back into the room, but nerves intervened and Sasuke found himself walking in on the blond as he was attempting to undress as quietly as he could while hawkishly monitoring the crib.

"I'm watching her," he confirmed hoarsely as he tugged his jeans over his ankles. He'd already set out his bed on the floor and was standing on the comforter as he fought with his outfit. "Um… Is boxers and a shirt ok? Don't have pajamas."

"Whatever," Sasuke said, observing with masked appreciation, the pinstriped boxers and the plain, fitted white tee that seemed to laminate itself across Naruto's abdomen. Whatever, indeed. He could stand there like that all night if he wanted to. "You don't need to whisper; she's asleep."

"Yeah but," Naruto grunted, finally freeing himself, "I'm loud."

"Tell me something I don't know." Sasuke shrugged. "Anyway, she'll let you know if you're too loud. Then I'll hit you and Tsunade will kill you and you'll know not to do it again."

Naruto sniffed. "Sounds fair."

"Pretty much."

Sasuke rubbed his stomach, caught in an odd dichotomy of anxious and satisfied. The tension bothering him earlier had finally dissipated after his talk with Tsunade and the long, hearty dinner that had begun with dumplings and graduated to a three-course meal had helped. He hadn't eaten so much since the time he and his brother had been home alone and Itachi hadn't known how much to feed a six year old, or the times he and Naruto used to gorge themselves before training until they dropped, but he had to admit it felt good to be full. Then Naruto had turned up and even though he expected him; even though he had planned for the other to stay, he was still half-convinced he should just turf the Jinchuuriki outside and deal with him in the morning. He wanted the worry to leave him, he wanted to feel safe around Naruto - he needed to. It was just hard being frightened in a space he'd finally settled in as his own. He needed to be safe, but at the same time, he needed Naruto to be there as well. Easing into bed, Sasuke watched Naruto glance toward the cot one last time, stretch, turn around three times before he settled under the sheets. Sasuke frowned.

"Is that a-"

"Fox thing? Yeah." Naruto said, then grinned. "Nah, joking. I just jump on in like everyone else. Got you though!"

"We've camped together plenty of times. I know how you sleep, idiot."

"Just a joke… Y'know, to lighten the mood." Naruto chuckled. Suddenly he paused, frowned, then: "Kurama wants it noted that he thinks my jokes are stupid."

"Kurama is right," Sasuke raised a brow.

"Everyone's a critic."

"Hn," Sasuke fought the urge to smirk as Naruto picked at the comforter, despondently. "Is he always listening? The Biju?"

"Kurama? Nah, he's asleep a lot of the time. Or meditating. It's kinda muffled in there and he can't hear so well if I'm not talking to him directly." Naruto shrugged. "Sometimes he pays attention
when I'm nervous, but he doesn't listen in if that's what you're worried about."

"I'm not worried." Sasuke negated, briskly. "And that's pretty weird, having him just... there."

"Yeah," Naruto rolled on his side and propped his head up on the heel of his hand. "But we've kinda figured out our privacy issues."

"I don't want to know."

"Well what about you?" Naruto pointed at Sasuke's middle, hidden mostly by blankets. "Does the baby tell you anything? Or, y'know, communicate sorta?"

Sasuke looked down and pursed his lips thoughtfully. He hadn't thought about it much, but now that he did he could certainly recount times when the kid became extra wiggly when he was anxious. And how he'd often receive a punt to the kidneys when his voice rose. Mikoto had despised some of the herbs the Kakkou put in their food and told him as much by pummeling his bladder.

"Sort of. Guess it's to do with how much I move about or the rate of my heartbeat or something," he mused. "If I had chakra, he might respond to that as well, but I don't know. I don't even know if he has chakra himself."

"He does," Naruto said. "Lots. So does Mikoto. They're really strong, you don't need to worry about that."

Sasuke knew this, of course. He knew that Mikoto practically oozed the stuff (along with everything else that came out of her) and that his boy had the fruit of his pedigree coursing through his veins. He knew that his chakra was low and strongly suspected that the Kakkou may have crippled his ability to gain more even after he gave birth. But hearing the truth from Naruto's mouth only served to steep the otherwise joyful information in a well of jealousy. Naruto could sense something about his children that he couldn't. Naruto knew something about his own flesh and blood that he didn't. It wasn't fair. And yet, as maddening a thought as it was, Sasuke let it slide. Naruto could best him at a lot of things right now, it didn't matter if there was one more to add to the list. His children had power. They could be taught to protect themselves. That was all he should care about.

"I don't," Sasuke said at length. Naruto shrugged again, nonplussed.

"Yeah. Well... I'm sure we'll get your chakra back too, Sasuke. Just have to figure it out, right? Then you'll be back to the way you were in no time."

"The way I was..." Sasuke thought about that for a moment. He knew what Naruto meant and if he were honest with himself, he was champing at the bit to get his own form back and feel even the smallest spark of power coursing through his veins again. He'd even be happy even if all he could summon were a couple of Naruto's half-formed henge attempts from his pre-genin days - the ones that could only pass as human if they were seen under very thin moonlight, during a hailstorm by someone in a very late stage of drunkenness. That would be something at least. But-

"I'm not worried about that right now," he concluded. The dream of his former self was best left locked away until he had a spare thought to deal with it.

"Guess you can't really, huh." Naruto said, almost as ruefully. "So how much longer until the baby's done?"

"He's not a cake." Sasuke grunted. "And three months. Round about." He punched a nearby pillow
a few times to revitalize the stuffing, then shoved it under the blanket to prop up his knee - an trick Nuja had taught him to sleep more comfortably. It worked wonders on his damaged ligaments as well.

"Look," he said as he lay down. "I get the feeling you haven't thought all this through, Dobe."

"Thought what through?"

"You know that being associated with me looks bad. Especially since our past is so…"

"Involved? Complicated?"

"Public." Sasuke brushed a few dangling pieces of hair out of his eyes. "With me out of the picture, you're a hero. When I'm in it... Use your head, idiot, you can't expect to retain the same type of support from the village when you're speaking out for someone like me. I'm still referred to as a criminal."

"We all said it before, Sasuke; we know what we're doing. You just gotta let us do it."

"Do what?" Sasuke hissed. "Help me... what? Fight against the system? Criticize the work of four generations of beloved leaders? There could be serious repercussions for you all! It's bound to affect your shot at becoming Hokage. Some of those guys could be disowned for choosing the wrong side! You don't know what clans are like, you were never part of one."

"And you were only part of one," Naruto replied, coolly. "Pretty sure not everyone hated the Uchiha. And same the other way."

"It's not that simple."

"Maybe it is? Maybe that's why having you let Miss Naoko publish that story is so important. Maybe everyone is so busy looking through the eyes of their own clan, they don't realize what's going on either. So if they did, they might change their mind. Might even want to help. When I'm Hokage, I'm gonna make sure everyone knows the truth too, so that everyone can make their own decisions. I think it'll make our village stronger."

"Stronger?" Sasuke sighed. "But if you become Hokage through some horrific lapse in judgment-"

"Hey!"

"- what happens if you're pushed into reinstating the same system we have now? I can't support you if that happens, Naruto. I won't."

It was then that Naruto suddenly became very aware of a wrinkle in the sheet by his elbow. He batted at it, trying to knock it smooth. "It doesn't matter. Anyway, who said I would?" He muttered. "I'd change it. I'd make it better. I'm not a liar, Sasuke. I can be Hokage and change things too."

"Try saying that with the damn hat on your head."

"I say it now, I say it always. Hat or no. Why wouldn't I? I said I loved you, dummy. I said I'd stand for you. You know that when I say things, I mean them."

Sasuke glanced at his fingers, studying his nails. He'd said things too, once. He'd meant them. He still meant them, only-
"Sometimes things change."

"I know." Naruto said, pulling his blankets up over his shoulder as he rolled to face the wall. "And some things stay the same." There was a pause. Heavy. Contemplative. When Naruto spoke again, his voice had lost its humor. It had dropped low, deep and resolute and his words hung in the air, too large to be considered in one conversation, but too poignant to remain unsaid. "Some things must always be the same, Sasuke. Even if they die. Even if the stars burn out and the world crumbles away. There are some things that can never be anything else."

Naruto could fall asleep at the drop of a hat and could remain unconscious through anything from fire alarms to major cataclysms, but Sasuke wondered, after a comment as emotionally convicted as that, whether sleep would be on the cards for either of them. He wondered how often Naruto thought about the tsukiyomi - the life that he'd fabricated for the both of them. His lie. His trap. Did he wake at night, convinced he'd watched his lover dying in his arms, unable to be saved through any of his many, many talents and means? Was he sickened by the memory of his rampage; the lives he took, the earth he scorched as he sought to throw the world into a level of despair that could only match his own.

Could he still look at Sasuke, knowing that the man he said he loved had forced him to destroy everything he ever stood for. The man who drove him past sense and meaning. Sasuke, who was the only one to turn Naruto into the beast he'd spent his life rejecting. As much as Naruto said he loved him, Sasuke wondered how much of that might have been pure or simply worn down obligation.

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**Kusagakure**

"What in the fresh hell is this?" Kawaguchi Hisao snarled at the small collective on his doorstep while he eyed them suspiciously. The nose of a crossbow, heavy and utilitarian leered at Caliga's chest. "Leave your damn entertainment in town, foreigner. Never said you could have guests."

Caliga, with Karin still slung over his shoulder and Menma toeing a few cagey steps behind, glanced at his companions breezily.

"Who? These two? I need them."

"For what?" The hollow shift of armor sounded behind the door - heavy, lacquered plates against cord and leather. So, the old man had the armored guards out this time? Something must have flown pretty high up that cantankerous old ass to wig him out that much. Or maybe it was just a Tuesday.

"Spare parts." Caliga replied, after a moment. "My project is lacking a few integral elements, you see, he-"

"I know he doesn't have eyes, you idiot." Kawaguchi hissed. "Could you not have pulled them out of their sockets rather than bring the whole package here? He's still alive!"

"They last better this way."

"And what's the whore for?"

"Whoring."

"Get her the hell out of here!"
"Also, she's a healer." Caliga cut in over the resounding disgust. "Thought she might be of use."

"I have a healer, you fool," Kawaguchi shot back. "Why would I need another?"

"Indeed, you have a perfectly adequate physician, my Lord. But I need a chakra healer; a Shinobi medic." Caliga explained. "My patient is, well, was a ninja. One must rely on the right tools to fix the right things."

"Your patient? You mean the half-dead blind kid you dragged out of a Mist prison." The old man backed up a little, jostling his guards as he opened the door a fraction wider. "The one whose care is coming out of my pocket."

"Our gold does not please you, my Lord?"

"He's a cripple. Should be double," Kawaguchi said, aiming a calculating look toward the party. "What's this about Shinobi? Bit quiet on that one, weren't you, boy?"

"Oh," Caliga said in mock surprise. "I thought it was obvious."

"Brought him in alone, none of your buddies around." Kawaguchi frowned. "Said he was the last one from the Northern dungeons. Said you had a hunch he might be worth something if he were kept alive. Thought he was a Daimyo's bastard or something of the like." The old man pursed his lips, thoughtfully. "Course they're common as rats, just like any regular nin. Why's this one so special, mmm? You'd better have an explain yourself, outlander. In very few words."

Caliga sighed, glancing back at Menma who only returned his constant expression of befuddlement, and scratched at his neck.

"I guess it can't be helped. Fine. The kid's an Uchiha."

"Horse shit."

"I speak the truth, my Lord."

"You speak lies. Besides the little cunt-belch who got Kumo's nutsack in a twist and the lunatic with the giant houseplant, they've all been mulch for years." Kawaguchi sneered. "Even if he had the blood, he has no eyes. What use is an Uchiha without his eyes?"

"Not sure, never seen one before. And as we established, finding one with eyes is hard enough-" At Kawaguchi's look of seething rage and the anxious sound of tension in the crossbow string, Caliga held up a hand, waving it dismissively before he motioned to Karin. "Forgive me, my Lord. It has been a long journey. Surely you understand when the help, well, doesn't want to help."

"I couldn't care less if she bit your dick off. Run your mouth at me again and you'll find out how far my empathy stretches. There's something you're not telling me, I can smell it. Why didn't you fetch one of your own quacks, hm? The Kakkou have been running up and down the country seeking rare bloodlines and an Uchiha male or female is like a fucking unicorn."

"Alas, his weapon is blunt," Caliga explained. "I mean, we'd thought about it when we found him, but rotten seed and barren soil is of no use to us. Though I have to say, it's handy that the Mizu-nin keep such complex medical notes on their inmates. In fact, from the records we obtained, it seems almost as if someone had been studying him for some time. Really mapped him out. That's a lot more work than one would expect from a mere prison medic, don't you think?"

There was a moment of threadbare silence, before Kawaguchi slowly opened the door. Caliga
smiled at his down turned expression.

"How long have Mizugakure been vying for an Uchiha, hmm? More importantly, what did Shimura promise you for one of them?"

"Danzo? That oily prick?" Kawaguchi nodded at his guards, sending them back further a step so that Caliga could cross the threshold. He'd lowered his crossbow but still held it tightly in his hand. Though his bones shook, Caliga knew he'd have no problem aiming and shooting with the ease of someone half his age. "Fool got himself killed by the very bloodline he coveted. There's nothing else to know."

"Except that either you or your charming psychopath of a Fourth Hokage found the matted remains of an Uchiha in their estuary and decided to keep him alive for... well, let's see-" Caliga reached into his pocket, pulling out a small, leather-bound volume which he flicked through and presented. On the page was glued an image of Shisui Uchiha as around ten or twelve years old, and beside it, in meticulous handwriting was a full compendium of his whereabouts, his statistics and his medical history. "-oh, just over a decade? Seems like a long time to keep something so useless. Unless, perhaps, the Mist were also a little interested in shinobi husbandry themselves? And here I thought you were just into shifting corpses. Were the ruthless mist so dissatisfied with their own ranks?"

"Shinobi are flies." Kawaguchi proclaimed, corrosively. "Swarming flies attracted to the very shit they spout. Community values. The sanctity of clan honor. These Hokage were shoving swords in each others guts less than a century ago and now they sit at desks and file papers, pissing and moaning over a lost dog or a sniveling child. There's war in their blood but they're as impotent to act upon it, just happy to sit and fester in their reminiscing. Certainly never figured out that their damn values just die along with 'em. You want to get on in this world, you either own the Shinobi like the damn Daimyo, or you operate outside their boundaries."

"You knew this whole time that you had an Uchiha in your possession?"

"The infirmary holding cells were Yagura's sorting facility. The little snot had some questionable obsessions. I figured he might have something of worth down there. That's his log book, I imagine."

"Yes. But that's all we have of these broken treasures the man was hoarding. We didn't leave anything behind when it was cleared," Caliga lied. "I suppose I was too curious about him to let the him burn with the others."

"You're more canny than you appear," Kawaguchi observed. "So, your clan deems him worthless too, do they?"

"As he is, he won't work for their methods," Caliga said. "I have other plans."

Kawaguchi considered that for a moment. "Hn," he snorted. "A barren, sightless Uchiha. You think you can fix this boy? Your coin might be sound, foreigner, but all this sneaking around behind my back? Not exactly reinforcing my favor." With a single motion from his gnarled hand, Kawaguchi's guards bristled to attention. The sound of thickly woven sandals scuffing against the floor and the odd metallic shunk as a sword tang knocked against the knuckle dusters on a gauntlet filled the taut silence. Kawaguchi sucked his yellowed teeth before he spoke again. "You're a bottom feeder, Caliga. You're smart enough to know it, but that don't change a damn thing. I've watched kids like you - little upstarts who think they're so smart. Get mouthy when they develop misplaced illusions of grandeur. Say the wrong thing at the wrong time to the wrong person. Turns out they're not so bright anymore. And you? You'll say the wrong thing and some point. Whether it's to me or to your cohort, of whom I suspect have no idea about your little side project. Doesn't matter. You will go
down. And I ain't losing out, understand? The Uchiha, and whatever you make him, belongs to me now."

"Sure." Caliga didn't miss a beat. "But he comes at a price."

"Are you an idiot or do you just look like one?" Kawaguchi snarled. "He comes at my sparing your life. Or at least thinking about it. You're a worm, Northerner. Slimy like that foul creature Orochimaru, only with half the charisma."

Caliga's smile flickered ever so slightly at that. He looked over his client's small force once again, watching Kawaguchi's guards as they edged ever closer, their faces flattened with mindless obeisance before he glanced backward toward Menma. The kid hadn't said a word up to this point and had stood motionless and ridiculously expendable at his side. Now it seemed he'd perked up a little and was peering at the picket of raised blades before them in avid fascination. Something smoldered in those strange grey eyes of his; something dark, fiery and red. Lips opened just a little, flashing teeth Caliga raised a brow. "Then, I suppose it's best that I offer my spoils gladly hm?" He said. "Tell me though, what happens if, after all our efforts, it turns out he's beyond fixing?"

"Then he's food for the dogs and the pigs. And you, you mouthy little twat, might just join him if you and your accursed clan fail to pull something more profitable out of your arse."

"You do have a lot of pigs out there." Caliga remarked, backing up a little so that he was level with his comrade. The air was thick with the electrical charge of aggression - a fight was imminent, regardless of the deal. It was four against two - five if he counted the old man - and those odds were always dangerous when dealing with shinobi. However, Caliga had taken stock of Kawaguchi's men the moment he'd met the man and he knew full well the bored henchmen who spent as much time polishing their cocks as they did their adolescent blades were far less of a problem than they seemed. Then there was Menma, who Caliga figured could either prove himself useful and fight or at least act as a distraction. He must have had some kind of power, the Uzumaki whore had picked up on something. The question was, could he use it? There was violence in those eyes, he could see it. Violence that was just waiting for an outlet. A trigger.

Caliga seized the boy's shoulder, both arresting his attention and testing the level of tension in his body before he dropped his smile and let his expression twist into pure, faux shock.

"Wait. Wait!" He cried, theatrically. "Forgive me, my Lord. I'll cooperate! Don't hurt me… like you hurt Sasuke…"

There was a glance toward Menma then, a look of pure fear - something that translated through any culture, through any level of understanding. Fright was fright. Fear was universal. As was rage.

"Sasuke?" Menma hissed, his eyes widening, pupils thinning, stretching into strange flat lines while the flesh of his lips pulled away from his teeth. "Hurt… Sasuke?"

"What are you on about, you rancid little turd?" Kawaguchi began, but Caliga ignored him. He'd flipped the switch. It was time to see just how hot this engine ran.

"They hurt him real bad, Menma! He was screaming: I could hear him. Sasuke was screaming for them to stop!"

"Hurt Menma?!

"He was screaming," Caliga repeated, his focus entirely on Menma now as the other stared at him. He could feel the heat of the guards as they raised their weapons, waiting on a command, any
command, from their master, but it was of no concern to him. The air between them began to fizz with energy while a slowly-building fount of power quietly tousled the dark locks of Menma's hair and the hem of his t-shirt. "Menma," Caliga licked his lips, hungrily. "He was screaming for you."

It was like goading a puppy. Menma's eyes flashed. Something deep and unsettling bubbled low in his throat. A growl so deep and so low it could not possibly have been made by human vocal chords. White teeth glinted between pale lips. Then he pounced.

Kawaguchi had been primed to shout something in retaliation, but was knocked back as Menma launched himself at the closest guard, digging his claws through thick armor plate and into flesh. In a fluid movement his jaws were latched onto the man's face and with one quick, violent jerk he'd torn his nose clean off, letting it fall to the floor with a sickening wet thud. Crimson painted his maw in oily swatches and Menma snarled as he eyed the other three, silencing the screaming man beneath him, like the distortion of light through intense heat, flickering and twitching. Sharp, pointed ears - stuff of the same apparition - pressed flat against his head and he let out another strange, vicious bark as he charged forward, cutting a second guard down before the man could even raise his sword and sending the others scrambling. A flurry of low-level water justu barreled toward him, to no effect, then the guards fled, catapulting back down the entrance corridor and through an adjoining hallway. Menma pursued them, hot on their heels. Something told Caliga the remaining eight guards weren't going to stand much of a chance against his savage new plaything.

Slowly thawing from his shock, Kawaguchi eased to his feet and was carefully backing away toward the wall when Caliga dumped Karin's body onto the stairs and strode over to seize the man, crossing the room in fewer strides than the Mizugakure Lord could care to count. He raised his bow, but the foreigner stepped aside, dodging the bolt before he tore the weapon away, tossing it to the floor. Twisting the collar of Kawaguchi's thickly embroidered Haori in one hand, while the other clutched his sword, Caliga contemplated the turn of events that had tumbled into his favor, his lips wringing out a smile. Kawaguchi caught the look, and hissed, enraged.

"You. You think this will end well for you? Huh? The East answers only to me, you flat-headed fool! You've signed your own death sentence, boy and your clan will be slaughtered the moment they set foot on our shores!"

"My… clan?" Caliga raised a brow. Stepping backwards, he twisted the man around, shoving him against the door. Momentarily freed, Kawaguchi struck out with a dagger, slicing the air between them. But Caliga was quicker and caught the old man's wrist, twisting it as though wringing a cloth. The resulting snap was sharp and loud and preceded another yell from his patron. "You mean the Kakkou?" Caliga continued over the racket, vaguely listening to the grisly sounds echoing from down the hall in the direction Menma had chased the guards. Sounded like he'd reached the dining hall. "I don't care what happens to them."

"You'll let your comrades fall - and they will fall, let me tell you - to the hands of the Shinobi?"

"I suppose."

"Are you mad?"

"Yes." Caliga thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "Maybe? It's subjective."

"You rancid shit." Kawaguchi growled. "You're a gutless weakling like the rest of your foreign dogs. Content to diddle Shinobi bitches, growing in the shadows like mould. You're useless. Inept. Worthless!"
“Finished?” Caliga said, apathetically. When the noble snarled at him, spitting like leathery crackling over a fire, Caliga flicked his wrist and drove Tibernas upwards under Kawaguchi’s ribs, letting the blade tear through soft tissue until it protruded from the opposite collarbone. The old man’s yell drowned into a bloodied gurgle and Caliga pressed close, ensuring that his face would be the last Hisao Kawaguchi would ever see. "The Kakkou are dead, Mr Kawaguchi. My Lord. Your product is dead. The only remaining evidence of those feckless Dobunni clods is the bones they’ve left beneath the mountains. You see, the Kakkou are not my clan. And in fact, if the earthshake hadn't demolished them in such a timely manner, I'd have had you do it for me. Exactly as you've stated. And while you skirmish, making noise, attracting attention - drawing out certain slimy individuals who think they have slithered out of my notice - I will simply take back what is mine. Well, now the plan has changed a little and all, but it's something I can definitely work with.” Kawaguchi stared at him, the blood from his pierced lung hanging in thick, saliva clotted threads from his lips. Caliga smiled again. Long. Slow. It was like watching a house catch fire and burn, slowly but surely, to the ground. "Pleasure doing business with you."

Caliga yanked his sword free, letting the man's body crash unceremoniously to the ground. Menma hadn’t returned yet, but the noise had slackened so that meant he was either eating the unfortunate squadron, or he'd run off to search for more. Regardless, he was out of the way and he'd bought Caliga plenty of time. Kawaguchi didn't keep many guards about him, he was too miserly for that. Low, yawning moans sounded from the vicinity of the stairs and Kaliga pursed his lips as he cleaned his sword on the ruined silk of Kawaguchi's kimono. The bitch was starting to come around, and didn't seem please at finding her hands and feet bound by taut leather thongs, or that from the angle she was lying, could see the remains of Kawaguchi splattered against the wall. Whilst he had to admit, he enjoyed the small, abstract choking noises she was making in the back of her throat - the ones that grew louder and angrier as he approached - it really was better if she were silent for a while. With a swift blow to the solar plexus, Caliga knocked her back into pliability. The less she had to say or understand about her role, the better. Afterward, well. She could make as many noises as she liked.

He descended the stairs two at a time, Karin dangling bonelessly from his shoulder. Yukimura met him at the doorway, hooded eyes pale with fear.

"What's going on? Are we under attack?"

The rumpled old throat hitched as he swallowed and while Caliga desired nothing more than to score that wizened flesh with his dagger, he simply breezed past the medic, dumping Karin unceremoniously on the floor beside Shisui’s bed.

"Target practice," he replied, casually. "Have you done as I asked?"

"Targ-?" Yukimura blinked, pivoting. "Er, oh yes. The eye. But my Lord, it does not sit tidily - I don't think it was meant to be a substitute. The surface is too rough and well…. It's a rock. Simply a rock sitting in the socket."

"I never said this was about cosmetics." Caliga snorted, fighting a rousing Karin for the use of her arm. Winding her worked well enough as a momentary measure, but she'd come around quickly this time and was like a cat before water, hissing and scratching. "I imagine by the marks on this bitch, the patient is meant to bite her?"

"On..? Oh, Indeed," Yukimura said, shuffling forward a little to peer at Karin's arm. It was as if he'd only just noticed her. "Shouldn't you be gentler with the lady, my Lord?"

"As gently as one handles a squirming viper?" Caliga evaded an elbow to his throat, yet took a boot to the stomach before he managed to snare Karin's bangs in one hand, forcing her head back and
seized her jaw in the other. Two fingers, thick, strong and bloodied, forced their way into her throat and she gagged around them. "I see no need to be gentle with this whore, Yukimura. After all, she is just a tool, aren't you, lovely?" Caliga leaned in close, his lips by her temple as he pulled her upwards onto the mattress, ignoring her feet scuffing madly, trying to find purchase. "Just a tool. Just a hole to fill. A mouth. A cunt. An ass… A few more, if one feels like getting creative. In fact, it's fun to make a few holes first too. People don't think of that, but it's so much more enjoyable when you have more to choose from."

"Yfff kking bshtatid." Karin hissed from around her gag. Her eyes watered, but they were full of poison and ire. Caliga blew into the shell of her ear.

"That's what your friend Sasuke said to me too," he purred. "When I made a new hole in him."

The tension balled in her and while she settled into a farce of congeniality those crimson eyes offered no less rage. And while he watched her, close as a hound tracks its game, Caliga could see a shape building slowly slowly behind her. A mass of dark hair and teeth and one white, unseeing eye. A shell that once knew great power sought it again, pined to take its fill from the before it. Caliga wasn't quite sure why the woman had such an effect on his emancipated captive, but whatever magic she inspired, it was clearly compatible.

"Perhaps, if you're good, I'll take you to him," Caliga continued, slowly removing his fingers. Karin narrowed her eyes, snorted, and spat in his face.

"And if you're good, I'll use a knife when I cut your dick off and make you choke on it!" She snarled. "Like hell some chakra-less thug like you would have captured Sasuke. You're a lying asshole!"

"I didn't say that had him," Caliga reasoned. "I just said I'd take you to him."

"And why the hell should I believe you?" Karin snarled, pushing up on one elbow, her hand aiming for Caliga's trachea. She was fast. He hadn't expected her to be quite so fast and while she missed his throat, she caught the fist that he'd thrown up to parry her attack and held it in fingers that could have crushed steel. A little saliva bubbled in the corner of her mouth giving her a wild look, but her countenance was expertly honed fury.

"To catch the right fish you have to use the right bait. You were once part of his team, weren't you?"

"The right-?" Karin laughed then. "You have no idea, do you? You're so damn wrong it's hilarious. Sasuke wouldn't come for me, idiot! He'd put another hole through my chest before he'd come to my rescue. Was this your plan? Was this really your plan?"

"Yes," Caliga said through gritted teeth. Karin was close to breaking several of his knuckles, but he couldn't wipe the smile from his face if he tried. "I was told, in your case, Sasuke has always been something of a powerful distraction."

"Yeah. So?"

"So you've been distracted enough that you didn't notice the real reason for why you are here." Caliga said and pointed to the right of the young woman's head. Karin's eyes followed the line of his finger, as the sense of a presence behind her shorted out the accusation that he was a lying scumbag and lifted the pressure of her fingers around his tendons. Something brushed away the hair at the nape of her neck and pressed rough, parted lips press against the meat of her shoulder. Karin's face began working, muscles twitching through a multitude of practiced reactions to reveal
the deep abyss of fear below. Bravado sucked out of her like an emptying drain. It wasn't so much
the grating sound the thing made - pebbling like rocks turning underwater. Nor was it the sight of
the haggard spectre itself hanging off her arm, one eye missing, a nugget of quartz rolling about in
the other. It was the intense feeling of dread that circled the creature like an aura. Something dark.
Something old. Something so alien and yet so familiar it swept her breath away.

She managed a breathless what? Before the creature bit down, teeth denting and piercing her skin
in thick, blunt tracks. Karin had experienced worse pain before. She'd been beaten, tortured.
Orochimaru had been careless at times in his experiments and Sasuke's chidori sword through her
heart hadn't been much of a picnic either. Karin didn't scream from the pain, not this time. Karin
screamed because she had never experienced her chakra being stripped from her as viciously.
Usually chakra transference was something of a good pain, an itch over a mosquito bite, the
thumbing of a bruise. Even from those close to death, Karin was simply left feeling weak,
lightheaded. Somewhat drunk. But this was different. This man, this creature, drained her - tore the
living energy from her as a torchlight burns through darkness. Her chakra burned, splitting like the
skin of an overripe fruit. It wasn't being absorbed, it was being peeled from her. Eaten alive. She
didn't notice Caliga move away, watching the spectacle with eager eyes. She didn't react as thin
hands grappled her body, pulling her closer. But she felt that breath like ice on her skin and she felt
the teeth sharpen, lengthen and pierce deeper and crueller still.

The world spun. Dark spots wheeled over her vision, becoming wider, darker, smudging the light
into pinpricks before her body sank and collapsed on the bed. Behind her, a much-revived Uchiha
Shisui rose into a sitting position, his blankets sighing around him like penitent acolytes. The
greyness in his pallor had faded away, as had the deep angles and ridges caused by fatigue, leaving
his skin luminescent. His long hair curled in thick inky waves. Lips, pink and red and plump with
blood, pursed as one bright pale eye gazed upon the remains of the woman at his side, then up to
the tall man standing before him. That man, with the dull green eyes and the blood smeared across
his face and jerkin, smiled.

"My Lord Aodh." Caliga gave a cursory nod of acknowledgment. "You are revived. How do you
feel?"

There was a pause. The man who had been rewritten as 'Aodh' blinked in mild confusion, frowning
slightly.

"…Aodh?" He said. He was looking at Caliga as though he'd never seen him before in his life.
Caliga licked his lips, momentarily thrown.

"Yes? That is your name, is it not?"

"It is not." One of the elegant eyebrows twitched and the man who was meant to be Aodh but
clearly wasn't looked over his hands. His single, snowy eye regarded Caliga with a chilly
expression, framed by long dark tendrils of hair. It wasn't the same expression Caliga had come to
expect from the nervous young man he'd - there was something else at play: confidence, self-
certainty. All things a weapon shouldn't have. "You'd mistake me for that Lir-child? A mere sidhe?
I'd try a little harder if I were you."

Caliga took a moment to digest the sudden lurch of events. Had the Uchiha boy found his
memories? It didn't seem likely, not only had his amnesia had been deep and acerbic, but this man
had just mentioned Lir and sidhe - two names that would clearly have meant little to a shinobi from
the South. "My apologies," he mumbled, shifting his weight uncomfortably. "I beg forgiveness, my
Lord, you had not been well. Perhaps in your sickness you muttered stories of the fair folk and-
"

"You lie smoothly, but badly." Not-Aodh interrupted, considering his chaperon with a
disapproving look. "Which is about as insulting as your paltry offerings." There was a glance

Caliga didn't need to follow the line of Not Aodh's finger to know that it was pointed at Yukimura.

"The air stinks of blood; clearly there has been some sort of disruption." Not-Aodh went on. "I

As though conducting music, the hand moved again, this time, the hand motioned to Caliga's hip

Crom snorted, clearly more amused than he made out. [Who else? Aodh? Honestly.]

[Forgive me, Great One. He is one of the lesser known tales, I had thought-]

[Lesser known? He's barely a syllable in most ballads. You know you're in trouble when they write

[Thank you, my Lord.]

[And it has power.] Crom continued, pressing his hands to his chest as though to feel his skin

[A Shinobi, my Lord. We reside in the Southern Isles.]

[I know of them. Which clan is this Shinobi from then?]

[Uchiha, my Lord.]

That eye, whiter than new bone, seemed to glow and the smile that cut through the young man's

[You are a good lad. And what might I call my summoner, mm? The one who gives me such toys
to play with?]

[Caligula, my Lord.]

[Caligula what?]

[Of Albion, my Lord]
Hn, I thought I heard an accent.] Crom looked over his acolyte curiously. [Caligula, eh? That name is not Albionoi]

[Imperial, actually. In their tongue in means "Little Boot"] Caliga replied with some distaste. Crom observed this with vague mirth.

[I'm afraid your name doesn't live up to you.] He said. [Strange that you'd keep the moniker of a slave. Why not change it?]

[I make use of what I have, my Lord. After all, any boot may crush a throat, or a skull, no matter how small. I was told I shared the namesake with an Emperor - one whose psychological climate matched my own. So I shortened it to Caliga. To be less ostentatious.] Caliga eased up then, smiling darkly. Yukimura shuffled a few footsteps behind him, looking on with wonder at the pair as they spoke, almost mesmerized by their strange language - lyrical, almost, yet at times oddly grating. He had to admit, he hadn't much faith in the foreigner's claims that a magic stone would revive the power within the Uchiha, but he played along, hoping that at the very least Caliga would be true to his word and grant him an audience with the brilliant Kakkou Druids. He still wasn't entirely convinced of the miracle, yet… the stone had become an eye. No one had swapped it out, no body part had been suddenly transplanted. Something had happened of which the Uzumaki girl's power must have acted as a catalyst.

And now the boy seemed different. He'd been amnesiac. Lost. Quiet and restrained out of confusion and fear. He'd spoken softly, when he ever spoke, and had been polite - no more a presence in the room than the door stop, or the small square of paper propping up the shorter leg of the nightstand. The boy who had arisen from his blind coma was confident. Powerful. And when he looked at Yukimura with that one, bright eye, the old man felt a chill like death channel through him colder than the Northern mountains and cutting as the wind that sheared against them. Yukimura wasn't sure why, but he felt drawn to that boy, to the power within that eye and found himself tottering forward a few steps, making his presence known with an insignificant cough into his closed fist. He bowed low, respectfully.

"My lords," he began, then offered another bow. "I am relieved to see that your efforts have produced results - and… far exceeding any that this humble servant could have predicted. Forgive me for doubting you."

Unseen by the old man, for he stood with his back to him, Caliga rolled his eyes. Crom glanced between the two.

[Did that desiccated creature just call me a result?]

"That is Yukimura, my Lord," Caliga said, stepping back to acknowledge his helper. "He was helpful in returning your strength, if skeptical about the practice."

"W-well, my Lords, I only-"

"Oh I'm not surprised," Crom grinned, shifting a little before he stepped off the bed. His eye flashed with something dark and unsettling and that smile. It just seemed wrong on the boy's face. Too wide. Too much. Yukimura swallowed forcibly as the man approached him, suddenly appearing so much taller and larger than before. "After all, who would have believed that a spirit could reside in a rock? A scroll perhaps, yes, but an unmarked hunk of stone-"

"Spirit?" Yukimura looked confused. "I'm not sure I understand."

"I told you the eye of Crom was power. I told you it would take a true form," Caliga chided, clearly
enjoying it. "And now it has."

"But the Uchiha boy-

"Is me. As I am me," Crom explained, rolling his eye heavenward as though listening for something. Concentrating. "Yes… it's a little harder to remove something as… adhesive as human spirits. Sometimes they just don't know when to leave. However, put a thing of stronger stuff inside their little mortal shells and they get less of a choice as to whom stays in control. I feel him still, somewhere in the back of my thoughts. He itches."

"You've taken his body," Yukimura seemed highly impressed. Crom preened, despite himself.

"And his power."

"Power? You mean… the Uchiha abilities?" Yukimura frowned. "You are mistaken, my Lord. I'm afraid this boy has been blind for many years and that dojutsu relies on the accumulated chakra within the eyes. A shame they had already been harvested, his power would have left him the moment they were removed."

"In the eyes?" Crom laughed. "Are you dense? You think that in removing an Uchiha's eyes he loses his grasp on the Sharingan, the Mangekyou - all the abilities accessible to him? The power is in the blood, why else do you think it is linked to the mother so? The eye may retain his abilities - it might even be transferable were the medic skilled enough - but that does not mean the process cannot work the other way."

"You postulate that- that a pair of ordinary eyes might inherit Uchiha attributes, if placed in the body of one of their clan? Ordinary eyes-"

"Or the eye of a God," Crom finished, easing up to his full height. Shisui wasn't particularly tall - nothing on Caliga, certainly. But he did exhume an air of prominence which bolstered his meager frame, acting as a cantilever to his claim of divinity. It was hard to look past such raw aplomb, no matter how mortal the man may have been. "Something with such potential. His power is still here, it is like a storm in his mind; it rumbles like thunder in his veins, quickening in this eye of mine as though it had always been part of him."

"Y-you mean to say-" Yukimura breathed, mesmerized as a rat before a snake. "You can wield the sharingan? The Uchiha's unique abilities?"

Crom had closed his eye at that point, his face pressed into a caricature of concentration. "There are so many rumors about the famed Sharingan of the Uchiha," he said. "Some say even the bearing clan themselves do not understand how it works, that it is a minor cousin to something greater still - a power accessible to all shinobi. Chakra is a funny beast that way. Humans think that it is exclusive to them, when in reality it runs through everyone and everything as freely as the air we breathe. It is simply a matter of harnessing it."

He opened his eye then, revealing three tomoe that sat in stark contrast to the pale iris they rested upon. They were moving, circling each other slowly, like black snakes swimming in milk. Then they began to merge - bleeding into the strange geometric pattern that comprised Shisui's characteristic Mangekyou.

"-and after that, it is simply muscle memory. This boy had already developed his abilities to the point of pure mastery. To this body, using the Sharingan is instinctive as a heartbeat."

"There were rules," Yukimura found himself mumbling, beseeching through his quandary of
misinformation. "The eyes are activated by the witness of great tragedy. The death of a loved one, the cruelty of war-

"Oh rules," Crom snorted, disdainfully. "Rules are just barriers, that's all. Little gates that humans sift between layers of power just so they don't take the whole draught at once and blow their own heads off. Precedents for the weak, that's all. Consider these "great tragedies" as the so-called birth of the Sharingan. Supposedly over moments of severe personal upset? The very same that thrust the heart into a great, galloping pace, that sends the nerves throughout the body into an electrified frenzy. A state that heightens the senses, inspires a level of strength and courage that might have once been unknown in their holding cell? A surge of extreme adrenaline you might say, offers exactly the same effect - especially in such grueling circumstances. The power is in the blood, Yukimura. However, if you are still so circumspect, perhaps I could demonstrate-"

"M-my Lord," Yukimura said in a perforated warble - still caught in the terrible stalemate of abject horror and complete fascination. "You would force me to comply? I am already at your service, there is no need to-"

"Oh I'm not worried about you, you're clearly no shinobi to contend with" Crom laughed. He folded his arms over his chest and glanced at Caliga, who had, for most of the conversation, never taken his eyes away from the pair. "Come to think of it, has he any use at all?"

"None whatsoever," Caliga replied, moving with premeditated efficiency. His sword was already in his hand as he closed the gap between himself and Yukimura, but it was a dagger that found its home between the old man's ribs. Thin and sleek, the blade drove in deep, letting the blood billow and cascade quickly, forcing shock to set in before the pain registered. Though the expression of sheer betrayal blighted Yukimura's face, Caliga said nothing. A painless death was the closest to kindness a thing like Caliga could ever get. Yukimura burbled a few times before his old heart gave out and he collapsed, his old heart unable to withstand the strain of such sudden blood loss. Caliga yanked the dagger from his body as he fell and secluded it back within his jacket. "An offering, my Lord."

"I gathered that."

"And the whore-" Caliga nodded toward the still unconscious Karin. Crom watched carefully as his fingers tightened around the hilt of his sword and a muscle tensed ever so slightly in his forearm while his face remained composed and relaxed as though he were merely proposing to shut a door against a draft. He *wanted* to kill; he was happy to do so. Crom watched him for a few considering seconds before he cleared his throat.

"So eager aren't you?"

"And you are not? Forgive me, my Lord, but I thought your appetite for blood was limitless."

"A little impertinent?" Crom said shrewdly, taking a few steps back toward the bed to sit down on the mattress near the sleeping girl. "It is not altogether unheard of for God - even a God of sacrifice, such as I - to stop and think for a moment, you know. I *have* been trapped in a space the size of a marble for some years, I feel like I need a little time to air out. Besides, *you're* the one who called me forth, are you not? The man with the plan."

"I wish for nothing more than to serve the glory of Crom, my Lord." Caliga replied, quietly. "To cleanse the world of those unfit to stand in your presence."

"That's it?"
"Most of it," Caliga admitted, contritely. "The rest simply concerns a little payback."

Crom looked distinctly unimpressed. "You went to all that trouble to get revenge? On whom? A traitorous friend? Colleague? Perhaps a slighted lover?"

"A nation." Caliga's eyes sparkled like lamplights caught in the reflection of a dirty puddle. "Or two. And also yes to the above."

"Curious. I'll bite." Crom warmed again. "If anything, I do enjoy a touch of mystery with my smiting and sacrifice. Well, Albiona, we've lost one of your company already. Is this insurgency to be a party of two?"

"Perhaps. I do have one more…" Caliga thought for a moment. "Acquisition. He's not the brightest, but he's resilient. He's made himself useful keeping the sentries away from us. I think. If he still lives."

"So there is another? Well, he certainly sounds effective." Crom said. "Very well. Only don't forget the whore. After all, she's been lying here listening to us so quietly and respectfully for such a long time."

Unwilling to remain the object of attention now that she'd been caught out Karin turned slowly to face the others, propping herself up on her elbow.

"Call me a whore again," she rumbled, albeit bloodlessly. "And I'll harpoon that weird-as-fuck eye of yours outta your face and shove your balls back in those empty sockets instead."

"I suppose then I'd match at least," Crom snorted, waving away Caliga's retaliating snarl. "For someone who played dead so well, you've not a strong sense of self preservation, do you? Or perhaps your mouth wages more than your strength can recompense. You do look tired."

"Try me," Karin replied, valiantly. In truth, she was bone-tired - having had nearly all but a spark of chakra left to rely on. Her head was ringing, clamoring, her diaphragm pinched with pain at hours worth of being carried on Caliga's shoulder - not to mention the slug to her breastbone - and she couldn't see more than two feet in front of her nose without her glasses. "Anyway, I'd rather play dead than be dead. Though I guess it's pretty much all over now."

"All over? You think we're going to kill you?" Crom purred while Caliga's expression muddied.

"I hadn't planned on leaving her alive."

"Why not? A healer of her caliber, she's perfectly useful."

"She is not to be trusted." Caliga explained, tightly, watching as Crom began threading a long tendril of Karin's red hair between his fingers. "She works with and for a number of enemies."

"You're afraid of a little girl?"

"With respect, my Lord, I am still alive because I was quick to withhold my judgment over Shinobi." Caliga said, eyeing Karin with veteran watchfulness. She was Uzumaki who apparently, his books had reported, retained an amazing reservoir of stamina. She could possibly be of use as a battery, perhaps bait if need be. However that mouth was something he wouldn't put up with. "If we are to take her, we should remove her tongue. Her eyes too, for good measure. And her hands; Ninja are troublesome when they have hands."

Karin glared at him. "Is… that what you did to Sasuke?" She said, wondering if she were able to
decipher just how much of the tall bastard's boasting was bullshit and how much might have been true; that perhaps the only aforementioned hole Tall, Dark and Horrible had made in her ex-team mate was a pinprick. Or by the way Caliga had been threatening her, that he literally was a pinprick. She could feel the sweat cold on her back and chilling, but her poker face firmly cemented over her fear. She couldn't foresee any great outlook to her situation: the tall guy was a complete maniac, and the pretty one seemed stabler but had cruel smile and a strange, vacuous chakra that made her nervous. He didn't seem quite so eager for grievous bodily harm, but that didn't automatically make him prone to mercy either."

"Back to the Uchiha now, is it?" Caliga teased. "You care so much for your old comrade?"

"Don't pretend like you give a shit one way or the other," Karin shot back, acidly. "Did you kill Sasuke?"

"Would you feel better if I said no?"

"I'd still feel like smashing your face in."

"Keep picking at a scab, it won't heal. He's a sore spot, isn't he? Did he rebuff you one too many times? Or did he fuck you then spurn you? Was that it? Are you not good enough for him, but you desperately dream to be so?"

"You're a pig."

"I'm just calling a fruitless endeavor when I see one. He doesn't appreciate the geography between your legs, I'm afraid. Unless you do have a cock we don't know about."

"No need to be so vulgar, Caliga," Crom watched the exchange with amusement. Looking at Karin he smiled. Not kindly. Knowingly. "Who is this Sasuke, my dear? An old team mate, so I understand?"

"No one important." Karin replied instantly. One hand moved to push her glasses up her nose and when she realized they weren't there, tucked a strand of hair behind her ear instead. "We worked for the same guy, that's all."

"He's the last pureblood Uchiha capable of breeding," Caliga added, enjoying the sneer Karin fired toward him. It was perverse of her, thinking she could sweep the truth away so easily. Sasuke may have been able to disappear like a breath into the wind; his name lay in deep tracks across the earth.

"Breeding?" Crom blinked. "What does that mean? We're going to fuck ourselves out an army of Uchiha?"

"That was the goal of my previous employer," Caliga went on. "A slow moving, but surefire incursion. The offspring become-"

"Sleeper agents," Karin cottoned on quickly. "Right? They're sleeper agents under long term activation. But that's some feat - you'd have to implement a trigger somehow, otherwise they'd remain benign and the brain has to understand the trigger. Jutsu might work, but it tends to fade over time." She was no Kabuto, nor had she shared the interest her employer had for studying and replicating the blueprints of humans, but she'd learned a thing or two over time. If genetics was this asshole's game, perhaps she could tease them into her favour until the opportunity to seek help presented itself. "You understand the problem, surely?"

"Seems like the problem would be the incredible time frame," Crom looked dubious. "Unless
you're envisioning a brigade of guerrilla toddlers?"

Caliga looked at Karin like he wanted to skin her. "As I was saying," he continued, patiently," that was the goal of my previous employer. The Kakkou have already harvested a strong number of shinobi children over the years. They could be useful."

Karin narrowed her eyes. That didn't seem like all of it. Either that or this Caliga guy didn't have a plan at all and was trying to keep his dangerous new business partner interested. The Kakkou name rang a bell, but it was distant and dull and if Orochimaru had ever mentioned it, he certainly hadn't lost any sleep over their apparent success. Which was strange in itself seeing that would mean he'd allowed a bunch of foreigners to pluck from the Shinobi gene pool unchecked. There must have been a deal in there somewhere. Karin wondered if she couldn't tap into that - at least to get her out of there. "You're developing an army of strong shinobi, all chosen for their particular abilities? The more rare and powerful the better? I know someone who can help you with that."

"That's unnecessary," Caliga told her. "We have what we need."

"You don't have an Uchiha," Karin countered. "That's what you're after, right? Hard to come by, considering there's only one left. But I'm sure Orochimaru-"

"I told you, we have what we need." Caliga gave his sword an expert twist before sliding it back into its sheath. He looked up at Crom, levelly. "But we don't need her, my Lord. Or her help. I suggest-"

"No no." Crom waved a hand, dismissively, though a little too swiftly to read as true nonchalance. When he looked at Karin again, it seemed that there was something else behind his gaze. Something of an animal sensing danger on the air. Something that seemed very off about a guy who was proclaiming himself a God, yet treated his audience more like companions, than lowly humans. He could have been low on power, but Karin was fairly sure a God would be more….

And Caliga, who she was sure had been the old man in the forest; who had been able to change his shape without jutsu, without the same panacea that coursed through all shinobi veins. Two very different creatures; whether both were aware of that fact was uncertain, but Karin was starting to suspect otherwise. She was also sure, in that very moment, "Crom" scented that doubt on her thoughts. He smiled as he continued.

"I like her. She reminds me of home, you know. The red hair. The pale skin. The attitude. She's like a Goddess."

"Sweet-talker" Karin muttered, through drying lips. Her urge to flee was blinding and while she wasn't stupid enough to fall for such a line, she still had few options in the situation. When Crom pinched her chin gently, however, she had the sense to look away. Though she hadn't seen Shisui's sharingan with her own eyes as the ill-fated medic had, she wasn't about to tempt fate. He'd certainly seemed convinced.

"A Goddess. Or a Muse, perhaps," Crom continued, smoothly. "Look at me, child."

"Sorry to disappoint," Karin said. "But I'm not stupid."
"You're either stupid or dead, pick one," Crom elaborated. "You sense my chakra, you know I can best you ten times over."

"The Uchiha chakra, or the other chakra?" Karin breathed, squeezing her eyes shut as she took a breath. "I don't know what you are, but you're not what you say you are. You're lying to your bastard friend there, the one sniveling over you like a sick dog. He's lying to you-"

She raised her voice then, risking a glance toward Caliga, just to see the fleeting bewilderment on his face before she blindly struck out, hoping to find some vulnerable part to connect with. If she was going down, parts of him were coming with her. Only her wrist was caught in Crom's hand, and her fingers were kissed by a mouth that was both warm and freezing at the same time. That vile chakra radiated from him, like the breeze from inside a tomb, the rank from a putrefying corpse. The potency of extreme power. "'the hell are you?" Karin gasped, before she was overcome. The smell and the sense crowded around her like miasma, pressing toxic fog into her mind. Then the world bulged and sucked inward and there was nothing left but the swirling monochromatic depths of Godly powered mangekyou,

Crom let the spell drift away, closing his eyes as he rolled his shoulders with a dull click of starved muscle. "Well," he said at length, allowing his lips to curl as Karin opened her eyes. "You were saying?"

Uzumaki Karin relaxed, returned the smile and nodded genially. "I do not remember, my Lord."

"Just as well," said Crom, stroking Karin's cheek briefly before he took her hand, helping her to her feet. "Now. Where is the other one?"

---

_Konoha_

"So... I know we've only just met and all," he said - his voice barely a rasp over the stillness of the room. "And we've only hung out a few times. And I know it's 3am and you're probably used to seeing Mom at this point. Or Dad. Is he Dad? Should I call him Dad? Anyway, I'm not Mom or Dad, I'm Naruto. And... And I'm the one who's gonna get your bottle this morning so just please don't cry. Ok? Don't cry."

Naruto leaned the edge of the crib bars, looking down at Mikoto's small face ruched with unhappiness. She kicked out at him angrily, her cheeks reddening with frustration. One last, fretful glance was thrown toward Sasuke (who lay curled on his side, thoroughly unconscious, or so it seemed. With Sasuke, it was hard to tell.) then Naruto took a deep breath, reached down and with his eyes closed and a "pleeeeeease don't cry" wedged between his teeth, he lifted Uchiha Mikoto, Sasuke's precious firstborn out of the crib and into his arms.

For a moment he just stood still, getting used to the weight of her in his arms, the feel of her warm little body against his. It was like holding a large puppy or a... a...

_Kit? She's like a kit isn't she?_

Kurama spoke in hushed tones and sounded somewhere between mystified and enchanted. Naruto could feel him pushing close to the seal, wanting to sense the girl some more, perhaps catch her scent. He snorted inwardly.

"I don't know, I've never met a baby fox." he whispered through clenched teeth. "Neither have you."

_Doesn't mean I can't imagine what one'd be like!_ Kurama retorted, flicking his many tails irritably.
Are you going to just stand there holding her or what? You can open your eyes, idiot.

"How do you know I've got them closed?"

Because I know you. And just the same, Naruto could have sworn Kurama rolled his own in despair. Now move, paws-for-brains or she'll start to howl. She's hungry.

"This is petrifying, just so you know."

Naruto licked his lips before opening his eyes, slowly. First the left, then the right. Mikoto stared at him with an inherited dark intelligence - currently torn between accepting the embrace and sounding the alarm to summon her mother. Naruto grinned weakly.

"Good baby. Gooood baby."

Now go into the kitchen-

"Ok, ok mom, I'm going," Naruto hissed, his smile still painfully fragile as he trotted into the kitchen. He began mapping the counter top with his fingers, searching for the smallest saucepan to heat the milk. Mikoto was balanced on his hip, furtively, her face becoming a wobbling mill pond of uncertainty. Kurama sighed in his host's ear.

It's on the draining rack, you washed it this afternoon.

"Thanks for the tip, maybe you could come out and y'know help or something? Since you're the one who woke me and all."

Woke was one word to call the literal pouncing Kurama had performed on his subconscious. One moment he'd been happily dreaming about ramen, Sasuke and Sasuke covered in ramen (and a fig tree, for no apparent reason), then he was catapulted into wakefulness by a maelstrom of teeth, claws and unbelievably crack-shot elbows that aimed for all the soft spots in his synapses. It was as if Kurama had caught Naruto's dream self sleeping beneath one of the trees in his inner-world meadow and leapt on his dream-testicles out of spite.

As it was, Kurama just shrugged, listening as Naruto filled the pot half-way and set it on the stove.

I heard her calling. We foxes have much better senses than humans after all. Besides- And there was a grin forming as he spoke, Naruto could hear it. -you wanted to do this didn't you?

Wanted to do this? Wanted to wake up at three am, risking life, limb and other vital organs to prove to Sasuke that he was capable of caring for the smallest and most important thing currently in his life? To hold a child that had only met him once or twice and still only knew him as an occasional distraction and tempt fate by removing her from her mother? In the dark?

Yes. Yes he wanted to very much. Mikoto was Sasuke's and that meant Mikoto was Naruto's. Naruto loved Sasuke ergo Naruto loved Mikoto. Ergo, ergo, Naruto would work at playing the babysitter, uncle, godfather whatever part so that it was obvious he was completely essential to the household. No more sleeping on the roof, no more worried pussyfooting around. He would fix bottles. He would change diapers. He would be relied upon, damnit, he would be everything Sasuke needed him to be and more.

"There, see Miki?" Naruto whispered, ignoring his passenger as he juggled the bottle parts into formation, bouncing the baby experimentally on his hip. "Not so bad, right? I can be- oh god don't!"
Mikoto, as with all babies at despicably early hours, was a multipolarity of emotions - unsure of whether she was, sleepy, hungry or cold or a mixture of the three. Teamed with her current capture by someone who did not look like Mom, smell like Mom, nor speak like Mom at all, Mikoto found herself at a loss. She didn't like the dark. She didn't like being where Sasuke wasn't. Her lower lip trembled precariously as her entire expression plummeted into despair.

"-no, no, no!" Naruto panicked. "Shit. Kurama, help!"

*What? What's she doing? Did you drop her?*

"Are you insane? Of course I didn't!" Naruto hissed, frantically trying to speed up the formula making process, while calming the baby and muttering to Kurama all at the same time. "She's gonna cry!"

*Feed her, then, dumbass!*

"I don't have the food ready yet!"

*Crap ....Sing to her?*

"Tsunade is asleep like, three feet away from me and Sasuke's in the other room. No way!"

*Rocking?*

"I don't have enough hands!"

*How the h- no, doesn't matter. Have you tried a Henge? You could pretend to be the Uchiha?*

"Henge?" The frantic storm that was a babysitting jinchuuriki drew to an immediate halt as sense suddenly filtered in between the barricades of pride, excitement and sheer nincompoopery. Naruto blinked. "Of course, why didn't I think of that in the first place?"

Dumping the scoopful of formula on the counter and ignoring his passengers retort of _because you're an idiot_, Naruto raised his hand, closed his eyes, readied the kata then:

"UAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

The cry was sudden.

Shrill.

And had the tremendous ability to break his heart and his confidence into a thousand tiny pieces. Naruto froze, feeling decidedly obliterated. He'd heard babies cry before, of course - they'd been plenty of opportunities to meet tiny people on his travels as Konoha's ambassador. But he'd never been so close when one had gone off. Not one that he was currently so invested in. The sound was soul-burning. Naruto felt his own lip wobbling and his eyes watering in response.

"Shh! Shh-shh-shhh!" He hushed Mikoto, desperately. "Nonono… shh! It's ok. Oh my god how does he deal with this?" Naruto shifted the crying girl around to rest on his chest, biting his lip as he pressed her close, bouncing her a little. All that it did was form her cry into an odd, bounding staccato. "Please, Miki? Please? I was so close? Give me two minutes and I-"

He sensed the attack before it had even come to fruition, yet still one of the small, deceptively evil senbon still thudded into his shoulder. Another buried itself in the thick muscle of his neck - millimetres away from a mortal strike. Naruto swallowed hard, heart galloping in his chest as he
turned, knowing without seeing, just who his attacker was.

"I-It's ok Sasuke," he said, preparing a fully amped smile as Mikoto continued to wail in his arms. "I just… I was only trying to-"

Another needle whizzed past his ear. Sasuke was silhouetted against the moonlight, all deep shadow and angles, his hand, loaded with a third round, was poised ready to strike.

"Sasuke? Hey-"

"Get away from her," Sasuke said in a low voice, something deeper than Naruto remembered. "Get the hell away from her."

"G-geez Sasuke, I'm sorry we woke you, but-" Naruto took a step backwards as Sasuke advanced, his posture, albeit juxtaposed by his jutting belly, as perfect as though he were practicing for an exam. "I-I'll hand her back, ok? C-can you put down the weapons?"

"Get the hell away from her you murderer, you fucking raping… s-shit!" Sasuke spat. "I will kill you if you touch her-"

"S-Sasuke?"

"Stay still, Naruto." Tsunade's said, suddenly an inappropriately dressed but amazingly calm and solid presence at Sasuke's elbow. Sasuke did not register her - his eyes were black fire locked on the offender who was holding his daughter. The intruder. The threat. "He's still asleep, I think."

"What?"

"Dreaming. He's sleepwalking."

"Looks pretty awake to me. His aim's awake, that's for sure."

"Give her to me," Sasuke was saying, approaching Naruto like a cat stalking a startled bird. Tsunade sidled up beside him, her hands shadowing his throwing arm, ready to prevent the next onslaught if need be. "Give her to me, asshole."

"Giving, giving… here - " Neither Senju knew whether it was a good idea to hand Mikoto over, but Sasuke wasn't psychotic or unhinged, just radically protective. As the girl was placed close to his chest he began to relax, blinking rapidly, his pulse settling. Tsunade hovered, her hands navigating slowly toward the slim blades still locked in his fingers.

"Sasuke? I'm just taking these, alright? Just gonna take these outta the way-"

He let her, still vaguely catatonic, still curling around his daughter as she complained, pressing her face against his chest, fretfully before rocking her head back, communicating her need to eat.

"Stop using that face," Sasuke breathed, seemingly to no one. "That face. Take it off. It's not yours, take it off."

"Face? My face?" Naruto frowned. "What?"

"Give him room, Naruto," Tsunade said, offloading the needles to a safe spot on the counter. "Just let him come around on his own."

"Does he do this a lot?" Naruto backed away a little, palms up as through tracing Sasuke's aura. Tsunade shook her head.
"Once or twice when he lets the pressure get the better of him. It's easy to forget someone is wounded when they cover the scars so well." Tsunade explained, gently resting her hand on her charges' shoulder. "Come on, Sasuke, let's get you and Mikoto comfortable so we can all get back to sleep."

Sasuke turned and shuffled forward with alien compliance, his hand disappearing into his shirt as he began to prepare himself to feed his daughter. Tsunade managed to steer him back into the bedroom and settle him on the bed just as he'd maneuvered Mikoto into an optimum position and let her latch without fuss or further complaint. Tsunade stepped back for a moment making sure Sasuke was, if not terrible cohesive, at least safe in his nursing. Then she moved back a couple of steps and poked her head out the door.

"You just going to stand there?"

Naruto hadn't moved from his position by the sink. His hands were still raised, as though Sasuke was still in front of him; there was spilled formula dusting his teeshirt and the marks across his cheeks drooped like sad whiskers.

"Huh?"

"I said: Are you just going to stand there?" Tsunade repeated, waving him back. "You have to sleep too."

"Well," Naruto hesitated. "But didn't I-"

"No, you didn't," Tsunade backed into the room as Naruto picked his way around the furniture and sheepishly halted in the doorway. "Whatever you think you did, you didn't. It it's in Sasuke's mind to be defensive, you're as much of a threat lying on the floor snoring as you are holding his kid, trying to bash together a late-night snack. He sees what he wants to see when he's like this, it's all instinct and repressed memories. Best to calm him out of it and get him back to sleep."

"I don't think," Naruto said as he padded into the room, approaching his decimated bedding, gingerly. "I don't think he'd want me to see him like that, Tsunade-ba. I mean, you know what he's like."

Tsunade raised a brow at the strange at the sudden and strange display of consideration. "I know what you're like." She whispered, tugging her yukata into a better position. "So does he. To be honest, I think that's why he's let you in so close, Naruto. It's a brave thing, letting people see the underside of your pride. Perhaps you've never been so worried about it, but for Sasuke, it's difficult. He must trust you a lot."

"Trust me? Sasuke?" Naruto murmured in disbelief. When he found himself staring at the pair on the bed and, relatedly, Sasuke's bared, female chest, he dropped his head fast enough to make his neck crack. "He's going to kill me."

"Then I'll be sure to seek out a shovel in the morning," Tsunade said, easing slowly out of the room. If there was a second wave, she was just next door - she knew how to listen for it now. But Naruto was with him and even if he didn't know the right things to say or the best way to act, he was there for Sasuke. And Sasuke was obviously trying to accept that. Sometimes the best healing was performed without drugs or dressing.

It took another ten minutes of silence and the rhythmic sound of Mikoto's nursing before Sasuke finally roused into full awareness. He felt the bed firm and warm beneath him, the tug of Mikoto on his skin and the chill of the air around the open neck of his nightshirt. He also sensed the
alarmingly turgid sensation of awkwardness and chagrin that emanated from the third figure in the room. The one who was still standing by the bed, hands inefficiently dangling at his sides, head down, eyes aimed toward the floor. Naruto must have noticed Sasuke's study of him as he cleared his throat and muttered.

"Sorry."

"What?" Sasuke looked him over, critically, taking note of the senbon still stuck in his arm and neck. His work, naturally. By the angle of darts, Naruto had had the ability to dodge his strike, but only just. Pride and guilt painted a crude tide over Sasuke's temper and he offered a minimal shrug. "I told you I'd hit you."

"Just trying to help." Naruto explained to the floor. "Thought she might have been too tired to notice I wasn't you."

"Stupid. She's Uchiha, of course she'd notice," Sasuke told him, flatly. But there was no venom in it. Secretly, he was relieved he hadn't taken the Dobe's head off. "Sit down," he said after a moment. "You're making me feel like Iruka the way you're standing there, looking scolded and pathetic like that."

"Yep."

Whether the agreement was acquiescence or something else, Sasuke couldn't confirm, but Naruto moved finally, easing down to sit on the bed about as awkwardly as he could, his blue eyes still shaded by his blond lashes. It took a moment for Sasuke to realize why and when he did he sighed, uncaring that his decolletage was on full display to the room.

"They're just tools, Dobe. They have a job to do and that's all. Pretty much like everything else about this body."

"Yeah but..." Naruto rubbed at his elbow, blushing and feeling stupid for blushing. "But you know..."

"You've seen a lot more of me than this. And you're not twelve anymore. Get over it."

He was gruff because he too was just as embarrassed as his partner but would in no way admit it. Sasuke had fed Mikoto in all kinds of places - Izakaya, Northern-style bars, shrines, rest areas, when a baby was hungry, she was hungry. He made less of a scene sitting nursing quietly than he did trying to fumble a screaming baby into obedience. But with Naruto, the effigy of the man he'd been refused to leave and the dobe's embarrassment made him far more aware of his altered form, despite having lived with it for over a year. He licked his lips and moved closer, forcing himself not to think about the way his nightshirt fell or how much skin was exposed or how he smelled of sweat and milk and that beneath the exterior he tried so hard to polish there was every strange seepage, groan and creak that anyone might have.

"Take off your shirt," he said instead, carefully easing his tired daughter upright.

"My shir-"

"Just do it," Sasuke sighed, nosediving into familial exasperation. Naruto did as he was told.

"Why?"

"I was told by... by a friend that they like skin contact," Sasuke explained, easing Mikoto into Naruto's arms. With a little unspoken shuffling, they managed to get her positioned upright, her
head resting on his shoulder. Sasuke patted her back gently, as though demonstrating Naruto should do the same. "She'll get to know you better this way."

"How?"

"I don't know. She… senses you or something."

"Senses." Naruto smiled, weakly. "Like seeking chakra."

"Something like that."

"Surely she doesn't wanna sleep like this though?"

"She sucks in a lot of air when she eats. Can't seem to release it by herself yet," Sasuke rubbed Mikoto's back, gently. "Do this for a while, she'll spit up then she'll go to sleep."

"You say that like it's nothing." Naruto murmured, not bothering to react over the realization he was going to get gummed on. If that was what Sasuke's baby did, then that was what she did. He could deal with it, just like Sasuke could. "Guess you… learned a lot of this by yourself, huh?"

Sasuke paused for a moment, fingers tensed on Mikoto's back. "Yes and no. I paid attention through most of the… daily activities. My friend had explained a lot."

"How old was she when you got out of there?"

"I don't know. Two months, three?"

"So little," Naruto marveled, following Sasuke's movements, patting and rubbing the baby's back in small circles. "Wait, but that means… Were you already-"

"They didn't waste time. There's not much more to say," Sasuke finished. He let his hand fall away from his daughter and rested it on his knee. "I don't really want to talk about this right now."

"Sure, I get it." Naruto continued to pat Mikoto's back, idly wondering what it was he was meant to expect. "But um… Sasuke?"

"Yeah?"

"Why don't you like my face?"

There was a sudden, horrible plummeting sensation as the air in Sasuke's lungs seemed to solidify and he imagined the heavy lumps of tissue dropping in his chest like stone weights. Unsuccessfully he tried to whet his dry tongue, and when he failed only managed to reply:

"Huh?"

"My face. You were telling me to take off my face. 'Stop using it', you said."

"I was… I don't know what I was saying," Sasuke said. "It was probably just a dream. Maybe I thought I was talking to someone else."

"Maybe," For some reason, Naruto didn't look convinced. Sasuke glanced at the senbon needles still embedded in his in his arm and reached up to tug it out, gentler than perhaps he might have ever been. "You ever attacked Tsunade?"

"Does it matter?" Sasuke turned the needles over in his fingers. "It's better than it was."
A million questions ran laps through Naruto’s mind, Sasuke could tell. They were speaking more than they ever had, sharing moments that were focused on their union alone, not on missions, not on training nor recovery. When he thought about it, Team Seven had rarely met as friends, there had always been an underlying ultimatum: an activity or a challenge of some sort. The amount of times they had simply sat together and talked - just for the sake of it - Sasuke could have counted on one hand. They knew so much about each other, and yet they were both as much of a mystery to one another as the day they first met.

But, as pushy and tactless as Naruto could be in such a situation, he only smiled a little and reached down, touching the back of Sasuke's hand lightly.

"Tell me sometime?" He said. Sasuke paused, unsure of how to formulate a response that was a lie, the truth and nothing all at the same time, then Mikoto burped and the tension deflated - the moment lost in a scramble to find a towel and calm Naruto’s initial surprise and mild disgust that he’d been - as he put it - puked on. With the clean, sleepy child still cradled against his chest and looking about as adorably dumbfounded as a teenaged boy could look around a baby, Naruto motioned to the crib behind him.

"Should I put her back in there?"

"No." And there was something different about Sasuke's eyes now. Something softer. Something that might possibly have been mistaken for pleasure. Sasuke motioned to the bed. "Just lay down with her here."

"On your bed?"

"Yes."

"Shouldn't I give her to you?" Naruto asked, warily. "I mean, if I fall asleep, I could roll on her or-"

"Don't be stupid, you've slept in trees before, dobe. If there's anything you actually did master from our junior classes it was spacial awareness during recovery - probably because it suited you to be able to nap anywhere you wanted."

"And hide from Iruka," Naruto grinned. "But are you sure I shouldn't just… I mean you're her… You know. She doesn't know me and if she wakes up again she might cry and-"

"I'll be close enough." Sasuke finished. He pushed the covers back a little before he leaned over and lay on his side. "She will cry if you don't lay down though," he lied. "She won't sleep upright like that."

Naruto couldn't have moved more swiftly nor effortlessly. In seconds, he had re-positioned himself on his side and, with Sasuke’s guidance, had Mikoto lying on her back between them. Naruto wasn't sure how this differed from placing her back in her cot, but he wasn't complaining. Sasuke ran his fingers through her hair, toying with it gently. Naruto's uncertainty chewed at the silence, but Sasuke merely snorted.

"Go to sleep."

"Yeah," Naruto affirmed, stiffly. "You gonna be ok?"

"I'm fine," Sasuke replied. He watched as Naruto nodded, then closed his brilliant eyes, his body falling slack, surrendering to sleep thereafter. Though his own consciousness felt heavy and the skin under his eyes swelled with tiredness, sleep was still far from Sasuke's grasp. Anxiety tugged at him with every breath of Naruto's that dusted past the back of his hand. Having the Uzumaki so
close felt like torture - an open wound that stung against the air. The dream walk had upset his resolve. He'd slipped back down the wall he'd been building around himself and let his fear show again. He didn't understand why it was so hard - why it had to be so damn hard to forget. Why such terrors had to stay as though calcified in his bones. But it was. But they did.

Sasuke closed his eyes, breathing unevenly. He had to forget. He had to move on. Naruto was here. He was Naruto. Naruto. No one else. He was Naruto. He was safe. Repeating this mantra, the same way he, as a child, had turned the image of his parents' death masks into fuel for revenge rather than madness, Sasuke fell into a meditative doze. He was safe. He knew he was safe.

He also knew that, stashed between the fabric of the mattress and the slats of the bed, he had another twelve senbon and six kunai within a moments reach. Just in case.

Kusagakure.

They found him at the back of the canteen, crouched beside an overturned table with half of someone's arm clutched between his claws and a look of death cemented across his face. The mess hall had indeed lived up to it's namesake - even Caliga was impressed by the sheer volume of decimation that had occurred in such a short time. It was as if Menma had taken out the guards, then decided to kill them over again six or seven times, just to make sure they weren't going to get up again. That kind of thinking was useful.

Though it was stone slab and solid as a mountain, their boots squelched on the floor, making vile, sucking sounds as they slowly approached the hunkering figure. Menma stared at them, through them. One hand rested on the leg of an upturned chair, supporting him. Blood ran down the side of his face in dark ribbons. None of it was his.

"Good boy, Menma," Caliga said, slowly dropping into a squat to meet his companion's eyes. "You've done a good job. You've made Sasuke safe doing this, understand? He's safe now."

Menma continued to stare for several moments before he looked up. His grey eyes were no longer tinged with red and instead remained blank. Incoherent. "Safe?" He asked, unsure of why he was asking it. He didn't see the massacre around him - he hadn't when he'd created it. But he did smell the overpowering reek of blood permeating the room. He scented the violence. He felt the mass of broken chakra in the air, felt the imprint of death around him - of lives cut short in an instant - and he knew that something terrible had happened. "Safe..." he said again, unsure of what the word meant. It was just a word.

"What a shattered little thing," Crom said, standing to the right of Caliga. Karin gazed at the violence mutely, as unmoved by the damage as Menma was. "This is how you found him?"

"He recognized a scent on me." Caliga explained. "Sasuke's scent."

"Sasuke's scent, mmm?" Crom pursed his lips. "Perhaps you know this Sasuke better than you've let on. Better, perhaps, than his dear old colleague?"

Caliga smiled. "I told you we didn't need the bitch's help." He said by way of explanation. Crom seemed content to leave it at that, content with the nature of this unfolding mystery he'd been introduced to. He nodded at Menma.

"And what of this?"

"He seeks him for reasons I cannot say, but something about him is wrong. He looks exactly like the Fire Country mouthpiece Uzumaki Naruto - so much that the whore had mistaken him for the
same boy."

"He is not?"

"The other is towheaded with blue eyes. I had considered the change in hue as some kind of disguise, but as a shinobi, the child could have made himself as different as he liked. Why wear one of the most recognizable faces in the world when you mean to disappear?" Caliga tapped at the limb in Menma's hand. "Besides, all media reports account for the war hero to be resting in his homeland. There is no reason for him to be hiding out here when it's possible his old team mate might have returned to him." At Crom's confused look, Caliga added: "It seems the War Hero and the Uchiha were lovers, or were involved in some kind of tryst at least. I found out as much after some gentle persuasion."

"Poor Sasuke," Crom stated, derisively. He knelt before the copy, reaching out to touch Menma's hair. Menma's head tipped slowly to one side, blinking disjointedly. Crom pushed his hair out of his face. "Well now. He's quite a powerhouse…"

"He is a Jinchuuriki, my Lord," Karin said. "He holds the soul of a chakra beast inside of him." She frowned then, readjusting her glasses Caliga had grudgingly returned and stepped forward, scrutinizing the boy before her. "At least, Uzumaki Naruto was, this copy is something different. There is a dichotomy of chakra present; a light and a dark. They combine into something I've never seen before. Power, but on a level that is neither human nor tailed beast."

"A perfect balance?" Crom asked. Karin shook her head.

"It's not so easy to weigh up chakra like that. It depends on the individual. Their mood. Their control. It may be that there is little resonance here. You, the dirty one-" She turned to Caliga, sizing him up fearlessly. It seemed whatever lie Crom stuffed inside Karin's head had overwritten any previous memories of her kidnappers and the animosity she'd felt towards them. Caliga glowered at her. "Tell me about this boy."

"There's not much else to tell. He's not pulling a full wagon, that's for sure." Caliga said, ignoring the pointed (but certainly accurate) insult. "As I said he was responsive to the name and scent of Uchiha Sasuke. Got all excited about it. Figured he might have been like one the bear-shirts - certainly acted like one. But it looks like he broke." Clicking his fingers a few times in front of Menma's face. "Sasuke? Sasuke? No? Hn… Pity. He was quite helpful."

"He might still be of use. Why let such a powerful shell go to waste?" Crom said, scooping Menma's jaw into his hand with graceful fingers. Menma just gazed up at him like a dog, incoherence milky in his eyes, his pupils blown into bold pools of pure black. Crom blinked once, twice, then the world quivered and spun and then he was inside, standing in the strange, congested static that was Menma's mindscape. Chakra filled the atmosphere, colouring it a fleshy pink while the edges of the inner world slipped off into dark fog. Cognizance sparked here and there, twisting into strange, semi-complete ideas like cloud forms. Some contained the muffled remains of sounds, some rung and buzzed while others were silent. Most flickered and wilted within a few moments, unable to stabilize - the true cause of Menma's disconnect. Crom scanned the undulating horizon, searching stronger shapes - for those that were not receding and could be something to which he could apply his genjutsu. A short distance away, one of the shapes shivered, sensitive, but solid enough to be tangible. Crom smiled, long and lasciviously as he walked through the forest of stumpy, amorphous shapes like so many misshapen shadows under diffuse moonlight and stopped before his chosen target. It was around the size of Menma himself and strung with power like varicose veins - rivers and chasms of shimmering gold and purple. Listening close, Crom could hear voices calling each other, faint but desperate. Lost memories of a union that was never to
happen - not in this mind, anyway. Pain threaded through it in pulsing channels; happiness formed in puckered blotches here and there. And anger? Well, that Crom had interpreted was the undulating waves of deep red colour that bled over the surface, radiating heat and pressure. Anger. Rage.

Good.

Baring his fangs, Crom let himself shift into the form Caliga had only heard about in tales and songs, a form that was pure power in this realm - one that helped balance the Uchiha's chakra like it had always been his own. He reared back on a spine that seemed endless, his face slid, features elongating and bleeding like warm wax as he let his enormous maw yawn into a terrifying dark abyss. He bit down, puncturing the amoeba in two deep, evil wounds, pouring venom infused chakra into the pits, filling the broken spaces, spanning the incomplete circuits. Then the mind wheeled, the chakra pulsed and Crom was back in the dining hall again, grinning as Menma began to rouse.

"Good morning," he said, when the grey eyes rested upon him and narrowed. "Welcome to sentiency. How do you feel?"

Menma blinked, gazing over the small group of people in front of him. He felt strange. It was as through some part of him had been shaken awake, like a sleeping limb, and now the fuzz of sensation rushed through him - information coursing through his unused synapses like oil. These people, his mind seemed to whisper to him, were comrades. He wasn't sure how; he didn't remember meeting them. But when he glared at the tall, dark haired one with the cruel mouth, he knew that was Caliga. The woman with the dazzling red hair and cold expression was his companion, and a healer. And the one who knelt before him, his white yukata drinking up the blood from the floor to paint the hem in sanguine. The one with the eye like moonstone. That was-

"Crom."

"'My Lord Crom, if you know what's good for you," Karin corrected him, sharply. Menma raised a dark brow and snorted in response.

"No one is my Lord. Not some girly-looking cyclops anyway." Menma didn't ever remember talking before, but it seemed so natural now. His voice was husky, gruff, but young. Nothing as grit with hatred as Caliga's tone. There was the scraping sound as a sword blade slid from a scabbard and within seconds the Albionite was aiming Tibernas at the boy's throat.

"Watch your tongue," Caliga warned him. "Or you will lose it."

The glare was returned, but Menma seemed to back down after that, simmering under a decidedly vulpine shrug. Crom only watched him, wondering whether it was worth testing this hair-trigger of a child on his acolytes or if he would have better and cheaper results on some unsuspecting travelers. He decided on the latter, merely because, if anything, Crom hated wasting good fodder.

"You mock me, child?" He said, quietly. "When I give you your life and your name?"

"So? You've given it." Menma shot back, with sullen petulance. "That means it's mine. You want a medal or something?"

"Son of a-

"It's alright, Caliga. It's alright." Crom laughed, pushing the sword blade away from his little fox's neck. "I'll suffer his insolence for now. After all, he's only woken up." He regarded the boy for a
moment, before he pushed up to his feet and crossed his arms over his chest. Warily, the construct did the same. "You have a name, boy. You remember it?"

"Menma."

"And mine?"

"You are the God Cenncroith: Crom Cruach the Bloody One," Menma repeated, unsure quite how he knew the name, but the words were there, strange and exotic on his tongue. "The Great Wyrm of Mag Slecht." For a moment, Menma considered the words. Then, stifling the urge to scowl at Caliga, added. "My Lord."

"Yes, well. The last bit will do, otherwise we'll never get anywhere." Crom said, clearly pleased with himself. "We have a mission, Menma. Caliga here has a mission for us. We're going to leave this bloodbath here and we're going to go and find ourselves a little army. Would you like to join our little army?"

Menma looked at him skeptically. "What's in it for me?"


"Uchiha Sasuke," Caliga added, out of the blue. Crom frowned at him, but stopped as he noticed Menma's attention was piqued. He stood a little straighter, something flashed in those flat grey eyes and his lips curved ever so slightly, showing a scrape of teeth.

"When do we start?"

Konoha, 17th March

Kakashi sat in his office alone, watching as the packed grey clouds of dawn began to thread here and there with patches of gold, embellishing the progress of a new day. The Konoha Herald sat on his desk. Sasuke's words stared back at him, passive, potent and damning. The accompanying image showed Sasuke perched on his windowsill, looking out at Konoha - proof that the article was indeed verified by him and that he most certainly was home in Konoha. His face looked younger somehow, perhaps an illusion of the lens or trick of the light. His hair was arranged so that he was more recognizably himself. His pregnancy was covered by the angle by which he held his knees - drawn up as far as they would go, probably, but the telltale silhouette was there if you knew to look.

There were sounds of footsteps outside his door. Slippered feet. Two of them. Koharu and Homura. He already knew what they were going to tell him. He'd been careless. He shouldn't have let it happen. This was treason! Scandal! Slander! The boy was deliberately trying to gain sympathy by airing his misfortunes at the expense of Konoha's peace! What he'd done was illegal, convicted or not, Sasuke had no right to speak to the press. How did she even get through to him anyway?

The Elders hurried into his office, faces ashen and more creased than ever - as though their irritation had balled up their skin like paper - while their hands wrung and their toes tapped. Kakashi let their complaints drift over him, watching their puckered mouths move and their angry eyes glint under folds upon folds of tissuey flesh. His expression was docile, even when they began to challenge him for answers, knowing somewhere deep and ingrained that they feared his decision making was compromised. That he couldn't convict Sasuke due to his emotional ties to the boy. He should have left it to them. They would have taken care of it. They could still take care of it, if he'd grant them permission to do so.
Kakashi let the silence erase the noise the pair had made, linking his fingers slowly and deliberately in front of him. When he spoke, his voice was strange. Deep and rumbling - something belonging to the same beast with the white fang of his father's namesake. Kakashi looked up.

"We move the trial to today," he said, not bothering to answer his council's nagging questions or even address their concern. "We don't give this time to sink in. The faster we get Sasuke in front of the Kage, the more time we have to avert some of the damage."

"Damage indeed," Koharu remarked, shrilly. "The accusations are well-researched. We're going to have to do a lot of careful patching to fix this. It's times like these I wish Shimura were still with us."

"Accusations," Kakashi turned the word over as though inspecting it. Then he rose from his desk, breezing past the pair in his usual long-legged gait. He was already dressed in his robes. He smelled strongly of coffee and starched linen. "Issue a statement: Uchiha Sasuke will be detained and his trial will begin today. That's all. We don't need to mention the article - don't give it credit."

"But Sixth," Homura entreated. "This will take time. The Clan Leaders will need to be arranged. The Kage have only just arrived and-"

"Let accusations sit and they grow. They become something bigger and harder to stamp out. You want the Sasuke situation to go away? Then we deal with it now." Kakashi turned in the doorway, his Kage's hat in his hand, like a shield. "There have been too many accusations lying dormant in this village; it's time we buried them for good. After all-" he paused, lifting the hat to place it, almost lovingly, on his snowy hair. "- a Shinobi must always put the mission first."

Chapter End Notes

Marty: Giant evil gods.
Dana: I wish I could have seen them.
Marty: I know. That would have been a fun weekend.

- Cabin in the Woods

If you think this has a happy ending, you haven't been paying attention.

- Ramsay Snow

A/N: When Caliga says "Bear shirts" he means "Berserkers", referring to a specific class of rage-warriors in Viking hordes. He is using the literal translation as a noun. Thank you all kindly for the comments and words of support. They always keep me going and they're greatly appreciated.
The Trial pt 1

Konoha, 17th March
Year of the Hare

It was different the moment he opened his eyes. Different, the room, the air, the sound; everything. The change was almost tangible, the way cartilage might stiffen in cold weather, the ability to feel it in the bones. He sensed it like the crowding heat before a thunderhead. It was the birth of a paradigm shift, the early gathering of waves before they crest and while was slight, it was growing, fighting against the cloying stodge of tradition that was Konoha's mortar. Sasuke had, in a sense, cast the first stone. Contrary to the idiom, however, he resisted the urge to swing hard and fast and let the missile tear through the air, crashing through whatever objects it found before it landed. His stone he'd simply set upon the earth, calm and cautious, and stood back, waiting for others to join the construction. Sasuke lay his truth upon the ground. Let it be for others to decide what would become of it.

Another difference was the sight of a young man lying peacefully on his side, one arm curled up by his chest as a cat will curl her tail around herself, personifying the very core of sleepiness. Sasuke had opened his eyes to many strange things before, some he would rather not remember, but Naruto tucked up in bed with him? That was different. Not terrible, just different. The last time they'd been this close in bed was on a mission in an alpine country and Naruto had whined so much about the cold, Sasuke had allow him to join their sleeping bags together to share their combined warmth. The night had begun with the pair lying back to back, neither willing to endure even the smallest scrap of skin from touching the other, and ended with Naruto clinging to him like a limpet, murmuring sleepy tales of all the Ramen he intended to eat before Sasuke finally broke down and clocked him.

But that was years ago. Now, Mikoto lay between them, burbling and kicking, lulled into and extended doze by Naruto's strong, warm chakra and the milk in her belly from her early breakfast. Sasuke reached out, quietly tousling her hair with his fingers as he liked to when she slept. It reminded him that she was real. Sometimes he needed to be reminded that anything was real, that he was home in Konoha. Safe. He wondered if Naruto needed to be reminded of the same thing sometimes and he considered this as he dusted the fronds of blond fringe out of Naruto's eyes, feeling odd to see them shut. He almost expected to see an after image as one does after looking at a light for too long - those blueish purple ghosts dancing in front of his vision.

Without touching his skin, Sasuke traced the whisker-like birthmarks on Naruto's cheeks, frowning when he noticed the white hairline of a scar across the left. A healing wound, slowly fading thanks to the Kyuubi's power. A wound he'd made in his fear-drunk state, the vulnerable throes of his memories and nightmares - which were, as they'd been for years, one and the same. Sasuke felt a twist of guilt in his chest, but he pushed it down and away, knowing that he'd expected as much. He used to know what he was capable of - that was why he'd been able to push himself so hard. Now he was comprised of surprises and second guesses. Now that the blueprints had thoroughly been reworked he read himself through anticipation and instinct, no longer sure of how he might react to anything, only that he would react and that he'd always need to mind whatever the outcome might be. He didn't feel guilt, so much as a strange personal satisfaction. He'd overcome himself
this time; he'd let Naruto in. Just that little bit, but he'd let him in. The boy that he'd been two years ago would be so mad at him.

Awkwardly, though with a soundlessness that Sasuke found endlessly pleasing, he eased up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Rolling upright was becoming something of a chore now that his body was less agreeable to bend at the waist but he managed, wincing as his right knee barked at him, the tendons stiff and sensitive against the cold. It spoke to him from time to time - it might do it forever, given the kind of injury it was, but Sasuke, being Sasuke, ignored it. Straightening the covers, he ensured that both Mikoto and Naruto were warm before padding to the window, throwing an arm up and over his head to stretch his triceps. His knee growled again, but it wasn't bad enough for a limp - it hadn't been too bad for a while, not in this temperate little house with its firm bed, hot bath and live-in muscular therapist. Sasuke swapped arms and stared out toward the brooding clouds as dawn broke over the tiles and slates, making Konoha's skyline look like a strange, crooked smile.

The village seemed quieter somehow, hushed. Strange, as dawn was not a quiet time for a hidden village as most nin would be up and training or starting missions at this hour, the canal and main street eateries would be organizing their kitchens over strong cups of coffee or barley tea. Fishermen would be heading out the village gates to the main river that crossed the northeast border of the Fire Country like a long, flat tongue. And of course, the newspapers were being delivered to every door in Konoha. The redlines, the Mirrors, the Standards…

…and the Tribune. The truth. The story of the Uchiha Massacre. The lies of the Council and the village Elders. Sasuke's life, his very own story and suffering, would be leaning against someone's doorframe, wedged in their letter box, perhaps dampening slowly in a puddle of half-melted snow were the household so unlucky.

It was then that Sasuke realized what the strange quietness was, for it wasn't quietness at all. It was a lack of noise. The silence after a scream when the ears are still ringing with the residual strains, the mind is thick and reverberating with adrenalin. Sasuke had screamed. Sasuke had yelled and cried and hurled his pain into Naoko's loom of words and she'd spun it into something that would carry his story further than his voice ever could. Further than even his actions, perhaps. Sasuke had screamed into a crowded room this time, not the inward space of his own angry mind. And, as with any cry, he waited, anticipating a response. For there would be a response His ears pricked against the morning air, feeling empty and drawn. And light. So oddly light.

He heard the footsteps before they reached the door and had already turned away from the window when Tsunade appeared at the threshold, a thin manila envelope clasped in her hand. Sasuke didn't need to look at her face to know her expression; he could guess already that it was as grey as the paper on which the subpoena was printed. The summons that lay in the mouth of that envelope. His duty. His fate. Even so, he registered the pause as Tsunade licked her lips. He felt it weigh heavily in the pit of his stomach.

"Today," she all but whispered. "They want you today."

Sasuke looked at her, feeling his body start to numb. If this was what relief felt like, then it wasn't pleasant. He had no qualms over arguing for his rights, nor was he afraid to speak his mind. But he thought that he would feel…. Better about it.

Sasuke found himself nodding slowly, with finality.

"Ok."

Naruto woke to the sound of Mikoto's strange snuffling - the odd, noisy way babies tended to sleep
before they had their breathing and swallowing sorted out - and watched her soundlessly for a moment, easing one tanned, rough finger into her ridiculously smooth little palm. Her fingers curled around his finger reflexively and he marveled at the softness of them. It was like being embraced by a flower, a soft, sun-warmed little bloom. When she released him after a few moments, he stroked her pudgy cheek, leaning in to catch the scent of her hair. He didn't even know why he did it, but it smelled nice. She smelled nice. Most babies he'd met just smelled like their diapers needed changing, but in context, Naruto hadn't met many babies.

Mikoto stirred a little more, her eyes blinking open, dark irises rolling a few times before she looked up at him. Not hungry at the present moment, but cognizant. Reading. Quantifying. There was no rumple in her expression this time, no degeneration into misunderstanding and fear, Mikoto simply studied her companion with her large dark eyes forming her own conclusions and belying no formal opinion save for, after a moment, a wide, gappy smile. Considering she had just woken up, Naruto chalked this one as a win.

"Hey. Morning Miki-toes," he said, employing another pet name with remarkable facility. "Where's Sasuke? On the bog? Should we go find him?"

Miki kicked her feet vigorously as a sign of appreciation. Naruto touched her nose and she squealed at him. Though he would have been more comfortable waiting until Sasuke returned before he moved the infant, Naruto was determined to get used to looking after her. And with Kurama barking orders in his ear (hand behind her head, then you… no, her head. Head! Behind her head, dumbass!), he managed to scoop the girl into his arms and righted himself, swaying slightly as he padded barefoot across the room to the door.

Sasuke was sitting on the couch, a cup of tea forming low curls of steam in his hands. He was staring out the window, contemplating the grey sky beyond the jutting roof tiles.

"It's going to snow," he said, did not look up as Naruto entered, but that was typical Sasuke demeanor. Naruto was convinced he had not only eyes in the back of his head, but satellites suspended somehow throughout the room, cloaked and constantly watching every move.

"Yeah? Guess it might." Naruto began to elaborate. He stopped when he noticed Sasuke's hands as they gripped the small pottery cup. They were trembling slightly, not enough to spill, but enough that the tea shuddered and the surface rippled constantly, disrupting the light. His palms were stained a cruel shade of pink from the heat. Too pink to be comfortable. Naruto swallowed and looked about nervously for Tsunade as he stepped closer to the couch. Was Sasuke still suffering from last night?

"Sasuke," Naruto began. "Your hands…"

"I grew up learning fire jutsu," Sasuke told him, not bothering to acknowledge the damage. "I fucked up more than I'd probably ever want you to know, but it makes for strong hands, I guess."

"Yeah, but-"

"Funny how our parents thought it was ok for us to slice our hands open, burn our skin or tattoo our foreheads for the sake of our training." Sasuke looked up then, stonily. "That's a long way from skinned knees and the occasional case of poison oak."

"What?"

"Grazes and stuff. That's all civilians have to worry about with their kids. A cut here and there, maybe a bump on the head. Maybe a broken bone if the kid is clumsy, you know. Ordinary things."
"So Ninja kids are tougher?"

"Are they? Maybe." Sasuke pursed his lips. "Most of us probably start out the same though, with a few exceptions. But we're all still kids. We were all still children."

"Yeah, but no one has to become a ninja." Naruto replied, trying to compute. And as he spoke, he realized that was exactly what Sasuke knew he was going to say. But there was no sense of aggrandizement. Sasuke wasn't known for gloating in the first place, but he would have usually responded with a smug "hn" or two. Instead he watched mutely as Naruto patted Mikoto's back, his gaze dropping away when it seemed he'd made his point.

"It's today," he said after a moment. "They want it to happen today."

"Want it to..." Naruto swallowed. "What? The trial? Today?"

"You need to go find the others. Let them know. Dunno how conscientious they're going to be about bringing in possible sympathizers-"

"But we aren't ready! Don't you need, I don't know, something written down? Or... Or like, four letters with instructions? Or-"

Sasuke shifted his cup into one hand and reached over to hold up the subpoena that was resting like an unwanted guest beside him.

"It's official. I have an hour before I'm scheduled to stand before the Kage and their council."

"An hour- what? Are they even all here yet?" Naruto protested. "What if they're not all here? They can't start without the others, can they? Did they even have time to read the article?"

Sasuke chuckled and shook his head. "I'd say this acceleration was because they did. They want to move before anyone else has a chance to change their minds. We're fighting beauracracy here, Naruto. Kagura was a training drill by comparison. The more they can bury me in accusation and sanctions, the more power they have."

"But... the other Kage-"

"-Might not even be involved until they get to the part of my case which includes them. Remember, I defected first. That's a Konoha issue."

"Actually it's not, a missing nin status becomes an international issue once the fugitive has passed fifty kilometers outside the boundary of their village." Naruto amended, hopefully. "It doesn't take a lot for the whole council to get involved these days."

"These days," Sasuke repeated. "I went rogue before these days!"

"We don't have to sit back and take this, do we? We don't, right?" Naruto was crestfallen - surely this wasn't right! Yes, the trial was coming, yes Sasuke had a lot of explaining to do and the whole situation needed some pretty heavy decontamination. But today? Now? Sasuke didn't say anything, only let his gaze drop to the cup in his hands again, watching the steam dance carelessly around the lip. They did have to sit back and take it. They did have to comply. Sasuke had to play by the rules now, there was no disappearing into wanderlust anymore.

As the fact sank in, absorbing slowly as a grease antiseptic over a wound, Naruto took a breath and nodded, padding over slowly to seat himself on the coffee table, not caring whether Sasuke found it rude or not. He reached out and gently plucked the now dangerously tilting cup of tea in Sasuke's
hand, placed it on the tabletop beside him. He smiled, wanly.

"We'll be there, don't worry. I'll get the others. We'll come even if they say we're not allowed to. Who's taking Mikoto? Tsu-baba?"

"Tsunade," Sasuke confirmed in a laminated voice. When Naruto slid his hand forward to cup Sasuke's fingers, he watched with a withdrawn expression as the trembling began to cease and the numbness he'd been experiencing in his fingertips slowly evaporated. Naruto was still talking, still reassuring him, but Sasuke wasn't sure he really needed to listen. This was enough, just having him near. Having Mikoto near. Both of them. It was enough.

"Whatever happens," he said, unaware if he was interrupting or not. "I want her to know. She should know. What I did and why, what I was and am. I don't want anything hidden from her, got it?"

Naruto blinked as he was cut off in mid supportive ramble, his mouth closing slowly as Sasuke spoke. "You mean Miki? What? Everything?" He said at length.

"Yeah," Sasuke confirmed. "Then she can be sure that every decision she makes is her own. She has a right to choose what she thinks. That's a confidence no one can take away from her. It's all I've got, so it'll have to do."

"It's not-" Naruto began to say, but Mikoto called for her mother then, the preface to an awkward performance of bouncing and juggling as Naruto maneuvered the baby into Sasuke's arms. She grinned and cooed, digging her hypodermic little nails into Sasuke's pale white neck. Sasuke was unaffected.

"Forty-five minutes," he said, apparently to no one. Naruto licked his lips, feeling something cold dig at the bottom of his stomach, like carving a grave into dead, icy dirt. It wasn't fear. It was older than that.

"Forty-five minutes," he repeated, before heading toward the door.

The press buzzed around courthouse steps like blowflies, circling the heavy, reinforced doors as they readied their cameras and briefed their assistants. Some were gazing into their viewfinders, fixing their hair. Others were studying their notebooks or held copies of the Herald's article, twisted in their hands almost like batons. By the time the gates opened and the officials began to filter in, there had gathered a generous number of them and they swarmed to attention in sea of flashing bulbs and strange clicking noises. Though several guards stood beside the courtroom doors, they only watched the frenzied display and made no attempt to stop the journalists from sandwiching the officials in two harried lines, firing endless regurgitated questions toward the bewildered bureaucrats:

*Have they seen Sasuke 's article?, How had this been allowed out of Shinobi jurisdiction?, What did the Daimyo and his senate have to say about this?*

The Konohagakure Daimyo himself, surrounded by a protective barrier of his own guards, shuffled in tortoise formation toward the door in a haze of perfume oils, garlic, and a rather low level of understanding about the whole situation. The Sasuke situation, he knew, the whole return to Konoha to pay for his crimes or whatever, sure. Someone had said something about that at some point. But right now it was early. The Daimyo didn't do early. Neither did most of his convoy who were currently doing their best to pat their yawns with their fans and decorated sleeves, their watering eyes blotted out by dark sunglasses. But when pressed to admit, the Fire Daimyo was
quick to admit one should always appear one's best in public and though he longed for his bed and his sheets with a thread count that seemed mathematically impossible, he turned on his heel, smiled, opened his mouth and said:

"Oh. Is that the boy?"

The wave of questions, still channeling thick and fast down the gully of reporters suddenly petered to a halt. Like some element of theatre, two dozen heads turned at the same time, away from the officials and toward the gate where a new group of people had appeared out of the morning mist. The ghost of a sun beat down for a moment, unhindered by clouds. A crow rasped overhead. Then someone yelled:

"Sasuke! It's Uchiha Sasuke!"

Indeed it was. Escorted by Tsunade and flanked by Akamichi Choza, Sasuke walked into the courtyard, his expression mute. Some read confidence, some read wariness, most were confused though if anything, Sasuke possessed a veteran's poker face years before his time, unreadable and unreachable to almost anyone regarding it. Amid the silence his footsteps were like explosives on the loose gravel, the grinding sound echoing over the open space. Then the open, staring faces aimed at him suddenly broke into a cloud of noise - a mixture of statement and question like a wall of sound. Some spoke to him directly, some commented to their assistants, scanning him with their sharp eyes as they searched for scoops, hooks and taglines.

- traitor, Uchiha Sasuke arrives with former Hokage Tsunade-

-as the Herald states, there is indeed a child. It's hard to say at this distance, but she could well be another Uchiha-

- hair looks amazing. He's wearing a long black tunic and dark blue pants and oh my god either he ate way too many pork buns in his absence or he really is pregnant. We have confirmation of a belly-

- Sasuke! Over here! -

- Uchiha-san, you claim that the Government were responsible for the slaughter of your clan, how do you intend to act on this accusation? Are you prepared to open a lawsuit against Konoha? -

- It is clear the Sixth Hokage intends to let Uchiha Sasuke fight his own battles as he allows the accused to enter the courthouse through the main doors-

"Shouldn't we have gone around the back?" Tsunade asked Choza, moving instinctively closer to her ward as they navigated the barrage, her eyes fixed on the heavy doors at the top of the courthouse steps. Choza shook his head.

"Haven't orders heard of putting a sheep amongst the wolves?" Tsunade grumbled, now placing a hand on Sasuke's shoulder, glaring daggers at anyone who tried to venture too close to him or his daughter. Sasuke, however, did not appear particularly affected by the attention nor the noise. He studied the crowd with practiced patience from under his dark bangs, shifting Mikoto in his arms as she stared in confusion at the mass of faces around her. When the growing rabble began to escalate, enraptured by their own inflated sense of purpose, the little girl's face drooped and, lip wobbling precariously, she gave a bleat of complaint. At once, Sasuke stopped.
So did the crowd.

A few curious glances were exchanged, mutterings pattered about the silence here and there, but when Sasuke patted his daughter's back, whispering something calming in her ear, the entire collective was spellbound; struck dumb.

"Sorry," Sasuke said in a voice that was low and even and almost, *almost* apologetic. "She hasn't been around this many people before. Would you all mind-"

The effect was unbelievable. Without even requiring the end of his sentence and with an immense shuffling noise and a loud scrape of gravel, the sea of bodies parted, revealing the stairs. Like dominoes falling, the words "sorry" and "pardon me" fell one after the other, over and over again while the press backed out of the way. Some of the journalists offered Sasuke a polite bow in apology as he passed. One of the thunderstruck officials even got the door for him.

Once inside, and out of the crowd Tsunade made to take the child, clicking her tongue as she always did when Mikoto was upset.

"Poor thing, I didn't know-"

"We've been in taverns and flop houses countless times on the way down here," Sasuke replied, picking Mikoto's pacifier out of his pocket and handing it to her. Immediately she silenced, sucking on the teat with a docile expression. "She's fine."

Tsunade blinked. "Oh. I thought she was upset at the noise."

"And so did they." Sasuke paused as their escort made a motion for them to stop. He took the moment to smooth Mikoto's thick hair. "Full of surprises, we Uchiha."

"Aren't you just," Tsunade replied, gazing about the dark wood of the entranceway, letting her eyes adjust in the gloom. She'd never been in the formal courthouse before. As Hokage she'd a preference to take care of legal disputes somewhere familiar or at the very least, recognizable. The grand legal houses were old and dark and smelled like the ancient scrolls section of the library. Pine green carpet, short enough to be practical, but plush enough to be expensive muffled her footsteps. On the wall around her, framed in equally dreary, solid oak were the original laws of Konoha, those penned by both Hashirama and Madara over a hundred years ago. Tsunade stared at them a moment, tucked safe and secure behind their frames and their glass and wondered if how many of those rules her Grandfather had made. How many Sasuke's forefather had made. And if, at any time, anyone had ever thought to add:

*Don't send children into war zones. It will fuck them up.*

"It's time."

It could have been Sasuke or the official that spoke, Tsunade wasn't sure, nor had she been paying attention, but they were both looking at her expectantly when she drew her wandering gaze away from the door.

"Tsunade-sama..." The bailiff was another Akimichi. Huge, solid and with a kinda face and soft voice. She was glad it was he and not Ibiki, though the interrogations officer was likely to be inside the courthouse already, darkening the room with his presence. Tsunade nodded and reached for Mikoto.

"I can take her now, Sasuke."
"Yeah," Sasuke replied, though he moved very slowly as he eased the child over into Tsunade's arms, his fingers catching in the cloth of her babygro. He stopped for a moment, his arms and Tsunade's trapped in a messy link as they passed Mikoto between them. He pushed in slightly, taking a breath before he carefully pulled away, letting his hands fall to his sides. Tsunade smoothed the back of the baby's head, calming her a little as Sasuke looked on.

"We'll be in the seating to your right, I think," she said. "I've only been in here once, but right is where they usually place the defense."

"If they're allowing a defense," Sasuke glanced behind him, perhaps to see if Naruto and the others may have been coming through the same entrance. "Doubt it."

"They have to allow you some response, even if it is a closed trial," Tsunade reasoned. "I'm sure-"

"You're not. You said you'd only been here once, how can you be sure of anything in this system?"

"I'm reasonably familiar with the legal process; it's part of the Hokage training." Tsunade continued, gently. "Mine was a little rushed, but I studied the books as well as I could to fill in the gaps. You're not in there alone, Sasuke, you can't be. There's too much to your story. You have witnesses."

"Yeah," Sasuke said, still sounding unsure. Tsunade balanced Mikoto on her hip and reached out to pluck a few invisible hairs from Sasuke's shirt.

"We'll be close, don't worry."

"I'm not," Sasuke replied. His expression momentarily spoke otherwise, but he soon clouded that over with his usual air of complacency. Tsunade couldn't help but feel a little awed. She hadn't expected Sasuke to turn into a bawling mass of tears and resentment over the impending trial but she hadn't known he would take it so well.

"You'll be fine."

"I know."

"Well. Good."

Tsunade took a step back, though every fibre in her body rejected the idea of leaving. Passing through that door would finally separate them back into their born categories: Uchiha and Senju. The successors and the succeeded. The righteous and the guilty. Though she knew the trial was going to end up far more complicated than a simple open/closed case of good versus evil, that's how it would seem. That's how it had always been. And what if they didn't sympathize? What if, despite the horrors Sasuke had suffered, they still wouldn't budge on their ruling? She'd been confident before, assured of Sasuke's standing by her own observations and by the support from his friends. Even Kakashi seemed to have some kind of plan.

But Kakashi and the Rookie Nine weren't the Daimyo. They weren't the Alliance. They weren't the combined conscious of the Leaf Village. They weren't the people who firmly believed that two wrongs could never make a right. And Sasuke was in excess of wrongs.

"Lady Tsunade-"

"Just a second!" The once-Hokage spat, glaring at the bailiff, who still stood with his hand redundantly on the doorknob. Taking a long breath, she let gaze drop to the floor, her hand tightening around Mikoto's back. Katsuyu could take them. He was faster than people expected and with everyone at the courthouse, distracted by the trial and by Sasuke's story, they'd have time to play a simple henge trick. Easy. Kakashi'd been light on the guards, that was obvious. The way
they were stationed, the way Sasuke had been escorted by a sympathetic party, an Akimichi, it all reeked of a set up. Perhaps Kakashi had anticipated she'd notice his play? Maybe she was meant to start the ball rolling. Maybe-

"Tsunade?" It wasn't Sasuke's voice that broke her treacherous reverie, but more the presence of his hand on her arm; Sasuke rarely touched anyone without reason. "Let me get this done."

A familiar thread of guilt sparked at his words - it was clear Sasuke realized she was stalling on her behalf as much as his - he probably guessed what she was thinking and that made her cheeks heat slightly. But he was right. It was time. Was it better this way? Offering himself up to a system that rarely bothered to look past the ledge of conformity? Probably not. But he had no other choice. They had no other choice. Nodding slowly, Tsunade turned and walked towards the door, smirking a little when Sasuke continued, somewhat ironically:

"Don't worry, you'll be fine."

Kakashi sat at the centre of the judge's bench, in tribunal with Homura and Koharu. They'd changed into their formal attire and were studying the attendees of the court with narrow, calculating gazes. The Kage, looking a little travel worn and bleary-eyed, were seated in what would normally serve as the jury box to one side and behind them were their lieutenants and assistants. Gaara caught Kakashi's eye and offered him a slight nod. The others followed suit in their own time, though A's was particularly curt. His mustaches drooped where his face had carved a particularly belligerent grimace, though rather than the unfortunate hour of the trial or the basis of it, his displeasure may have been caused by the fact that B had somehow managed to smuggle in a bag of shrimp crackers into the courthouse and was currently stuffing them noisily into his face, one by one.

Behind the bar, the public seating was completely full, comprising mostly of the Clan Leaders and their seconds. Above them, the gallery seating was woefully empty. As Homura had insisted on a closed trial, the press had not been invited and their usual placement was taken up instead by an overflow from the pews below. Kakashi noted Naoko had been allowed to enter the trial, despite her recent publication. Beside her were most of the Rookie Nine, sans Naruto and Sakura, who were both placed beside Tsunade at the defense's table. The plaintiff's was filled once again by Konoha: Hyuuga, Aburame and Inuzuka were at the front while the Akimichi and the Nara were seated behind them. Angry in the front, zen in the back. Well that certainly wasn't accidental.

A podium waited in the centre of the room for Sasuke, positioned slightly forward of the benches and in clear view of the Kage and the Council. It was a solitary little structure, sturdy and unassuming. A plastic tumbler of water was placed in the right hand corner of its table. Plastic for safety. No one had supplied paper or a pencil for notes. Either the court secretary hadn't thought he required any or some shrewd individual had, at some time, learned a hard lesson that any object could be considered a weapon in the hands of a shinobi. Even a single 2B softlead.

Mikoto was sitting on Tsunade's lap, looking about the room with a beguiled expression and both pudgy hands planted firmly on the table as though commanding attention. Several of the clans were sneaking glances at her, perhaps trying to see some kind of flaw - something that would reveal Sasuke's story as a falsity and dissolve his defense so that they could put him away for good.

Sasuke alone, well, his was a tragic tale but in the end he'd done wrong and those who had done wrong needed to be punished. That truth was a little harder to swallow once a small child was mixed up in the equation.

The sound of heavy doors closing piqued the attention of the small gathering, and Kakashi took that moment to test out his gavel - something Koharu tutted at irritably, having only just explained
that the gavel wasn't commonly used to control the room by bashing it about - two taps ought to suffice. Kakashi ignored her, and smashed the desk a final time for good measure. He then greeted the very silent and mildly shocked courtroom, introduced the Kage and the plaintiff parties just as Koharu had instructed. He outlined the expectations of the Judge and Jury - pointing out that the seated parties both in the plaintiff's box and in the stalls were not present to call witnesses nor act as solicitors themselves. There would be time for them to pose their questions in writing after the first segment of the trial.

When he had finished speaking, when the secretary's keys on his shorthand typewriter fell into plastic soundlessness, the bailiff was summoned and the door opened one more time.

Sasuke walked into the room.

Although many present at the trial had seen Sasuke at his hearing and were well aware his appearance had changed, it was clear that the general consensus expected a short, brooding boy in a blue shirt and white shorts to come trudging through the door, all glares and sullenness behind a curtain of dangerously straight black hair.

What they received was a shadow. A long, thin, inverted shadow, pale as bone and slight as a rake. There was no surly temper and though Sasuke held his chin high, his vision set on a spot just left of Kakashi's head and just above Koharu's, his expression was solemn more than anything. His bangs were still long, but they tumbled listlessly on either side of his face, revealing his eyes and the dark circles tattooed beneath them, the hollows eroded in his cheeks. He wasn't big enough yet that he had developed a waddle - that would come in time when his impostor womb sank treacherously lower in his narrow pelvis - but his stride was certainly slower and more careful than it had ever been. The outfit he'd chosen was, by intention, designed to hide no secrets and though many had seen on the day of the hearing what his body was capable of, it seemed Sasuke felt no shame nor embarrassment in reminding them. In the Kage's boxes, Gaara merely uncrossed his arms and rested them on the railing in front of him, his green eyes following Sasuke with shrouded amazement. A gave a strange snort, thought it was clear he hadn't expected the Uchiha's lies to be so... multimedia. Ohnoki kept looking from Sasuke to Kakashi to Naruto; he was prudent enough to search for some kind of connection between the three. Though the two war heroes he trusted, he wasn't sure how far their civil loyalty stretched when it came to their estranged comrade. Mei just let her eyes work the room. It was clear the success of the trial would depend on more than just the facts Koharu had presented the Kages with upon their arrival and Sasuke had only helped instigate that. Whatever happened next could be disastrous or a new point in Konoha history.

There was a tense, radiant silence about the audience as Sasuke passed. It was clear almost everyone was swallowing the urge to whisper. A few knees were clasped, a chair squeaked as someone tried to shuffle to a different position to get a better look, but ultimately the courtroom stayed painfully still, letting Sasuke reach the podium without a word. Daimaru Genro, the court official, approached and held out a scroll for Sasuke to rest his hand on - the very scroll that bound the clans of Konoha together as a whole, promising peace and prosperity and respect for all. Sasuke glared at it darkly.

*Will you, Uchiha Sasuke, speak the truth and only the truth in the presence of Konohagakure and of her allied nations: Mizugakure, Raigakure, Sunagakure and Iwagakure?*

"I will," Sasuke said, though he looked as though he might have set the scroll on fire, if given the chance. As the court official backed away, he rested his hands on the podium in front of him. He looked at Kakashi, Kakashi looked at him. Kakashi looked to the left of him. Then the Hokage of Konoha spoke.
"Akimichi-san? You have a question?"

Chie Akimichi, Chouji's mother, slowly rose to her feet as she lowered her hand, gesturing toward the podium where Sasuke was standing.

"I apologize for interrupting so soon, Sixth, Kages-" There was a nod to the prevailing audience of leaders. Chie had attended countless formal meetings before and knew the language of the court rather well. "But shouldn't he have a chair?"

At least sixty pairs of eyes moved from the round, fashionable woman to the pregnant boy standing in the middle of the room. Sasuke didn't make a sound, but Chie continued regardless.

"I mean, this might take some time-"

"No felon that has ever stood before this bar has been offered a chair," Koharu spoke the last word as though it were markedly distasteful. Chie linked her hands in front of her politely, though to watch her expression was to witness a time-bomb being carefully obscured from view.

"Certainly Koharu-san," she replied. "But have any of them ever been pregnant?"

"Prove this apparent pregnancy," Koharu parried. "Prove that it is not some farcical pity vote conjured by some journalist hack who clearly benefits from the ratings by selling such trash and I'll gladly offer the accused a chair."

She seemed to twist the word accused around her teeth, stretching the syllables as though they were tied to a rack. Kakashi waved off the tension as he removed his hat and hung it on the chair behind him, disturbing protocol yet again.

"Koharu-san, if you don't mind, I think that could get a bit..." He considered the right word. "Er... revealing. For Sasuke. A chair is a chair, we have plenty of them here."

The other members of the Allied Mother's Force murmured a little then, and there were a few nodding heads to accompany the chatter. Koharu, it seemed, was also fighting the urge to lift her chin or narrow her eyes, but she made a slight motion toward the bailiff, and within a few seconds he had fetched the tall stool that was generally stationed behind the similarly-sized evidence bench at the side of the room. Sasuke set it to one side for the moment, but thanked the Akimichi under his breath. Koharu pursed her lips.

"Is that to your satisfaction, Akimichi-san?"

Chie nodded and sat down, triumphant. She didn't bother to acknowledge Koharu's snide remark, however justly it was presented. Kakashi cleared his throat.

"Thanks for that, very good." Kakashi surveyed the room a little, noting the mixture of expressions peppered through the crowd and patted the top of the desk with the pads of his fingers. "I believe we are now ready to begin. Uchiha Sasuke, I am sure there is no confusion as to why you are here. Am I correct?"

"Yes," Sasuke replied.

"Then in a moment the registrar will read out the list of charges against you. These charges have been, as of a fortnight before the Fourth Great Ninja War, permanent in your record. Given the nature by which the kill-order against you was conceived, your participation during the war, your disappearance afterward and your optional return and diligence to our rules we are here today to revisit, possibly revise these charges. You are also expected to answer for your crimes toward the
Allied countries, in particular, the Land of Lightning and the Land of Iron. Do you object?"

"No."

"Very well. Sasuke of the Uchiha Clan, son of Fugaku and Mikoto, please observe that you are due to be charged for the following felonies. Daimaru-san, if you wouldn't mind…”

Daimaru took a step forward from the registrar's box at the side of the room, held a small scroll out in front of him and placidly listed the charges one by one.

"Two counts of desertion. Two counts of conspiring with known international criminals. One count of attacking foreign soil. One count of kidnapping. One count of murder. One count of manslaughter en masse. Eight recorded counts of sedition or slander. It should be noted that in abidance of the laws in Sunagakure and Iwagakure that desertion is not considered a felony for minors under the age of eighteen. In Konoha desertion for minors is counted as a misdemeanor and re-evaluated once the deserter comes of age."

Daimaru took his seat again. Kakashi pursed his lips, nodded, then to Sasuke he said,

"Anything you want to add?"

Sasuke continued to stare to the left of his teacher's snowy head. "No."

"Then we shall begin with the desertion charges. In March, Year of the Dragon, you willingly left Konoha to join Orochimaru's Sound Village, Otogakure. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"And eight hours later you were seen with Orochimaru's Sound Four, heading toward his sanctuary."

"Yes."

"You were aware of the penalties you would incur for leaving the village without permission?"

Of course he was. Nationalism was drilled into the young shinobi the moment they picked up their first kunai. Their path was paved and well worn and they were well aware of the consequences were they to step out of line. Sasuke fought the urge to roll his eyes.

"I was, yes." A breeze of whispers sailed about the courtroom after his response, many of them coloured with words like traitor, treason, turncoat. Sasuke pretended not to hear them. Kakashi glanced at the papers on his desk.

"Yes," he repeated, thumbing a page. "Right. Did you know that a team of five Konoha genin were sent to retrieve you?"

Sasuke stalled for a moment, probing the question. "No," he said, carefully. "I didn't know they were sent to fetch me."

"But you knew you were pursued?"

"Naruto turned up after we'd reached the valley of the end." Sasuke replied. "He mentioned something about my friends and how they almost died trying to get me to go back to Konoha."

"Most were injured. Two were in critical condition."
"I'm…" Sasuke paused, letting his attention drift over his teacher's expression. He sensed a trap, but this was too obvious to be a Kakashi-trap. Unless Kakashi wanted it to seem obvious. He was frustratingly good at that sort of thing. "I'm sorry to hear that…"

"Sorry to hear that? Sorry? What did you think would happen?" Hyuuga Hiashi interjected, his ghostly eyes drumming points into the back of Sasuke's head. "I almost lost my nephew that day thanks to your actions! For all these self righteous statements you've made; you didn't want anyone to get hurt, you didn't want anyone else involved! What did you think would happen when you desert your friends, your village!? Were you thinking at all, past your own selfish problems?"

"Hyuuga-san, this isn't the time." Homura attempted, but Kakashi held up a hand.

"Statements? You're referring to the document published in the Herald this morning?" The Hokage shuffled the papers on his desk, holding up a thin, rumpled copy of Naoko's newspaper - clearly well studied front to back. "I'd like to make this perfectly clear: the statements provided in the Herald this morning are not to be used as reference material, nor the basis for any statement of fact. If called, Sasuke may make a statement again, here in court, but we are not relying on the article as a substitute for spoken truth."

"What?" Sakura whispered loudly. She turned to Naruto, crestfallen as the other sat biting his nails in dismay. "But that's all the truth! And if he's not allowed witnesses or a defense…"

"It's just how they run things," Naruto replied under his breath. "Thought they might have allowed it as evidence but all that kind of stuff comes later after the charges have been announced and the Hokage's questioned the accused. And that's if they decide they'll allow evidence."

"How do you know that?"

"I sat in on a few trials, Kabuto's 'specially. Wanted to know if he knew anything else about Sasuke. It was boring as hell but I learned a couple things about how it all runs here. Basically someone lists off all the shit you did, you pretty much have to stand there and agree and then Kakashi makes a ruling."

"But what about defense? Lawyers? Someone who can speak for you?"

"Trials with lawyers and that are more of a civilian thing."

"Oh." Sakura said, feeling her cheeks redden. It wasn't just a civilian thing, it was also an afternoon television thing; a part of the terrible soap operas the hospital candy strippers had introduced her to, and continuously fed her addiction every 3 o'clock smoko. Clearly she ought to find better things to do in her spare time.

"But I would like to honor the question," Kakashi had continued. "Sasuke, what did you think would happen? What else would you have expected your friends to do?"

"They weren't my friends," Sasuke answered. "They were people in my class."

The climate in the room seemed to drop a little. Hiashi gritted his teeth as he hissed.

"What a thing to say! How typical of an Uchiha to view everyone as an enemy!"

"Oh Hyuuga-sama, please do not resort to slander," Koharu tittered, ineffectively. "The court will not abide slander."

"All he's said is slander," Hiashi shot back.
"Yes," Kakashi cut in, casually. "And that's why he's in court. On the wrong side of the bar."
Letting the point sink in for a few seconds, Kakashi linked his fingers in front of him and nodded at the podium. "Sasuke? Is that your answer? Perhaps you'd like to elaborate?"

Sasuke thought for a moment, considering how to frame his prior understanding of what boundaries separated friends and mere acquaintances. Friends he didn't appear to have. Classmates he had in abundance. "The kids in my year I'd known since I was five - we'd all known each other. I didn't particularly like anyone and I didn't really hate anyone either. I thought the feeling was mutual."

"What do you mean?"

"I left everyone alone; everyone left me alone." Sasuke replied. "It wasn't until we were sorted into our Genin teams that I actually had to consider anyone else around me as part of... anything. We were taught to work as a team in our cells. That was the point. That's how ninja are meant to operate; through teamwork. That's what we were told. Then the Chuunin exams started and we were told we were all against each other. Everyone else was the enemy and we should aim to win no matter what."

"The Chuunin exam is a time-honored tradition." Homura pointed out, grandly. "It is a seamlessly run, ordered event to safely test the skills of up and coming Shinobi. It is intended to build camaraderie between young ninja as they navigate a series of heavily monitored trials."

"Safely?" Sasuke almost snorted. He stopped himself at the last minute, but a bubble rose and fell in his throat. "Two genin teams died in those exams, several teams were wounded. Gaara pretty much ate someone." He knew the Kazekage blanched at that statement, but it couldn't be helped. Gaara may have been granted absolution by his village; it didn't mean he hadn't torn several people in half over the forty-eight hour school trip. "Two of our own almost died, myself included. I stabbed a Mist-nin in the throat, no one batted an eye. No one penalized me. I stabbed him in the throat for a scroll."

There was silence as Sasuke spoke, it dropped even quieter when he paused. Sasuke's chuunin exam year had been messy, certainly, especially when it had ended in what the papers dubbed the "Konoha Crush" and the tragic death of the Third Hokage. But at that point, the second wave of tests in the Forest of Death, the wheels hadn't quite fallen off and, thanks to Orochimaru's involvement, no one had reported anything out of the ordinary. It wasn't until later, when the moles had been flushed out and the traitors locked away that the Exam committee found out just how very disastrous the whole event had been. Ibiki, stationed in his corner by the door, glowered at the mention of it. Sasuke sensed a cue on the silence and continued.

"Team Seven were my comrades because they had to be. The others, as per the rules set by our examiners and our school system, were rivals. To answer your question though, Hyuuga-sama," Sasuke turned a little to face the box behind him, "I hoped no one would come after me. I didn't want them to. I thought I made myself clear. I expected Jounin to embark on a retrieval, given the fact that Orochimaru, an S-class criminal, had marked me as a target. Jounin. Not kids. Not some who hadn't even passed their Chuunin exams."

"Well..." Hiashi said. He cleared his throat. "Well..." Pushing his hair back from over his shoulder, tugging at the bottom of his kimono to straighten it, Hyuuga Hiashi sat down. "I suppose, given the circumstances, that's understandable."

"Indeed," Kakashi replied, levelly. Both Tsunade and Shikamaru felt their hairs on the backs of their necks prickle to attention. They'd chosen the team out of necessity; there had been so few Jounin and Chuunin available after Orochimaru's attack. But that didn't make him less right, not
when they knew where he was going and who might be waiting for him. Murmurs sounded amongst the members of the Mother's Alliance, louder this time. Chie's eyes were glued to the back of Tsunade's head, narrowed in a disapproving glare. In the plaintiff's seats, Hiashi pressed his lips into a thin line though he offered a resolute nod.

"Now I'll allow that objection as it seems we had not clearly outlined the use of Sasuke's expose in this trial. Any future interruptions from the audience will be sustained. Only myself, the council and the Kage may address the accused. Understood?"

Most of the crowd were unsure, though there were a few muttered counts of *yessir*, and a couple of bobbing heads. Koharu unlinked and re-linked her fingers before her. It was clear the Sixth had already begun running the trial off the rails, she'd laid so carefully, but she had expected as much. It wouldn't matter; the law was the law. She would keep the trial regimented to the facts and that would be what served justice today, not the ramblings of their well-meaning, yet somewhat incapable Hokage. She watched as Kakashi set the paper back down on his desk and shuffled it into the few loose sheets he had before him as though dealing a deck of cards. He scratched at his chin, lackadaisically.

"Well that covers one of the desertion counts, we'll get to the other later. Only I'd challenge the legitimacy of that particular charge, given that you hadn't *officially* been pardoned when you rejoined Konoha for the war. Technically, if you hadn't been pardoned, you couldn't have deserted." Kakashi glanced at Homura, who seemed to be calculating the turn of events. He heard Koharu's rings click as she shifted her fingers again. He didn't need to look at her to know she disagreed. "Let's see. Two counts of conspiring with known international criminals, namely Orochimaru and Uchiha Obito of the Akatsuki."

"What of the traitor Uchiha Madara?" A said, leaning over the desk that separated the Kage from the rest of the courtroom. "Didn't the Uchiha work for him as well?"

"No, Sasuke was in league with the Akatsuki, but Madara did not appear until after Yakushi Kabuto summoned him. It was Obito who wore Madara's name as the leader of the Akatsuki until his predecessor was reincarnated." Kakashi glanced at Sasuke, who nodded in confirmation. "We are following something of a chronology here, so I suppose we begin with Orochimaru. He came after you for your pedigree, correct? During the Chuunin exams?"

"Yes," Sasuke replied.

"Had he ever tried to abduct you before?"

"No. He'd been planning his attack on the Village for a long time, getting his people in order. I hadn't been on his radar until Sakura, Naruto and I fought him in the exam."

"You fought Orochimaru?" Even Koharu seemed surprised at that. Her lined face crumpled in disbelief. "Impossible. He would have killed you where you stood."

"He would have, *if* he didn't have another purpose for Sasuke," Kakashi stated. "It was clear that Orochimaru had marked him, I submitted the report on the incident at the trials myself."

"It *is* well documented," Homura chimed in, leaning forward a little to address his colleague. "Orochimaru's Heaven seal. Kakashi's counter seal and Yakushi's assassination attempt. The snake sannin wasted no time in testing every method to secure Sasuke's allegiance."

"Which he inevitably won." Koharu finished, coolly. "Despite our best efforts to stop him."
"According to your reports, he simply walked out of the village one evening," Gaara said, evenly. "What part of your best efforts was that?"

"I have several recorded statements," Kakashi interjected quickly before anyone else decided to detonate. "That suggest you were fully aware Orochimaru wished to transfer his consciousness into your body, Sasuke. Using a kinjutsu he has perfected over many years. Is that correct?"

"Yes," Sasuke said. He'd caught Gaara's comment and it quickened in his chest a little. Could Gaara possibly be on his side? Naruto had mentioned his support, but Gaara was Gaara - it was almost as difficult to tell what he was thinking as it was Sasuke himself.

"Orochimaru had anticipated for you to become his host? A new body to house his…" Kakashi paused for a moment, searching for a fitting term. "Spirit? Essence?"

"Orochimaru has a way of surviving as something and as nothing," Sasuke explained. "In a sense, that's his immortality. He just needs a new body to inhabit when the old one begins to reject him. Apparently I was his primary choice."

"He told you this himself?"

"Many times. Once his hands were damaged by the Third, he mentioned it a lot more."

"But you managed to deny him this opportunity for three years?"

"Our agreement was that I killed my brother first. After that he was free to do what he wanted."

"Free to do what he wanted. Free to take your body as his own. Become you." Kakashi could see a few worried glances about the court. Several people sat up a little straighter. If Sasuke noticed, he didn't seem surprised. "And what would have happened after that? To you, I mean? Where would you have gone?"

Sasuke gave a near imperceptible shrug. "I don't know."

"You didn't ask?"

"I didn't care. Orochimaru skimped on details when it suited him. I didn't need details."

Kakashi blinked. "Why not?"

"Because all I wanted was power. I needed more power to face my brother; to kill him. Orochimaru promised me power. He was the most logical option."

"You needed more power to face Itachi. And you knew this because-" Kakashi flicked through the papers that sat in front of him. "-you inadvertently ran into your brother and his Akatsuki colleague a few weeks beforehand?"

Sasuke watched the shuffling cautiously. "Yes."

"Was Itachi in town for you?"

"No."

"Do you know what he was in Konoha for?"

"The Akatsuki were hunting Jinchuuriki so I guess if they were in Konoha, he was searching for Uzumaki."
"And you were with Naruto Uzumaki that day?"

Sasuke paused a beat. "Not at first. I was supposed to be meeting with you, but one of the Chuunin at the teahouse let it slip that they'd seen my brother in town. I put two and two together, tracked him down to the hotel where he'd found Naruto and challenged him."

"Naruto was there?"

"Yes."

"And Itachi was there?"

Sasuke frowned. "And his partner, the shark guy, and me. Yes."

Kakashi nodded. "So two Akatsuki and just you two genin?" He rubbed his chin. "Was Naruto fighting them when you got there?"

"No. I doubt he knew who they were. Might have recognized Itachi, maybe, I don't know." Sasuke said. "All I know is, I sprinted up to the hallway, the Shark guy had drawn his weird sword and was looking like he was going to grate Naruto with it or something, then I saw my brother and that was it."

"That was it?"

"We fought," Sasuke clarified. "I wasn't going to miss the opportunity."

"Did you fight both Kisame and Itachi?" asked Kakashi, watching closely as recollection bloomed in Sasuke's eyes. They were then downcast toward the podium surface, shaded by his hair as he shook his dark head.

"No, he stood down. It was just me and my brother. We were the ones who fought."

"A fight which resolved in the criminal's escape and you being left comatose with a fractured arm and cracked ribs," Kakashi went on. "I understand Itachi also sedated you with Genjutsu, his own particular Mangekyou style. That would be the second time you've experienced this, correct?"

Sasuke swallowed. "Yes."

"And the first time?"

"After the…" The pause had seemed to last an age. Everyone experienced the tipping point as Sasuke found the words to move on. "-massacre. When I was a kid."

"Quite the punishment for a child. He feared you would challenge him?"

The questioned encouraged a little colour into Sasuke's cheeks and when he looked up, the flat look in his eyes had sharpened somewhat. "He used it as a catalyst to strengthen my resolve. To protect Konoha. I couldn't have taken him at seven years old; I'd barely started at the Academy."

"But at thirteen, you'd clocked in hundreds of hours of self directed training," Kakashi said. "Surpassing most Chuunin and some Jounin in that respect."

"Still wasn't good enough," Sasuke confessed, darkly. Kakashi pursed his lips a little.

"Indeed. And that baffles me some. For, as a precursor to his taking you, I understood Orochimaru himself had given you some of his chakra during the Chuunin exam, yes?"
"You know that, you just said you submitted the report."

"Sasuke, please answer the question," Koharu was scowling at the break in decorum, but Sasuke only blinked, bewildered.

"Fine. Yes."

"As Homura has explained: The legendary Heaven's Seal?" Kakashi continued as though he'd never stopped for a response. "A set of predatory signs which forms a link between the subject and the caster, discharging a boost of extraordinary power teamed with heightened senses and adrenalin?"

"You make it sound better than it was," Sasuke said, his face twisting a little at the memory of it. "But yes, that was it."

"Why do I make it sound better?" Kakashi pressed, much to the confusion of most of the court. "Can you explain?"

"It had a kind of initial stage, a type of poison that was designed to single out worthy candidates," Sasuke said, rubbing the crook of his neck instinctively. "Later on I learned it was a chakra-altering jutsu that had several stages. I was at stage one then. I had to die to get to stage two."

The quiet of the courtroom suddenly took on a unanimous, unspoken protest of Sorry, what? Sasuke could feel it in the eyes around him. Only Naruto knew that Sasuke had put himself to death, or at least near-death, in the hands of the Sound Four.

"Indeed." Kakashi said. Whether he'd known or guessed the nature of the Heaven Seal's evolution was unclear. "But this power that you gained, the initial stage of the curse before you activated its second stage, could you control it?"

"Not really." Sasuke considered. "You saw it at the Chuunin exam, it just kind of spilled out of me."

"Did you use it to fight your brother? Or did you hold back, wanting to best Itachi yourself."

"Pardon me, Sixth," Koharu whispered loudly. "But how is all this-

"It's relevant." Kakashi cut in. "Sasuke, can you attest that you were in control when you faced your brother?"

"Yes. Yeah. I guess," Sasuke managed, vaguely. He was becoming increasingly wary as to why Kakashi decided to hang on such a particular detail. Despite himself, he followed with: "So?"

"You wanted to beat Itachi yourself. You still had enough confidence in your abilities that you were certain you could do it on your own. That was what you had trained your life for."

"Is that a question?"

"Two weeks later you had defected to Orochimaru, in agreement with his terms." Kakashi was a train navigating a steep, downhill track. His statements were fast and factual. It didn't even seem to matter if Sasuke attested to them or not, that wasn't the point. What mattered was his destination and at present, no one seemed to know which direction that was facing. "You gave up."

"I didn't give up!" Sasuke protested. "I just-

"-couldn't beat him?"
Was that bastard raising a brow? Sasuke grit his teeth, desperately fighting the urge to narrow his eyes.

"It was clear he was far stronger than I'd anticipated. I needed to stop him."

"Why is that?"

"Is that a joke? He was a danger to the village. He put you out of commission in one fight." Sasuke shot back, though Kakashi refused to offer any sense of shame at his failure.

"While that's true, Itachi was the village's problem, not yours. No one expected you to face him."

"Have you actually been listening to me?" Sasuke hissed, incredulously. "Ever? If I didn't think he was my problem, I'd never have ended up here at all!"

"But up until that point you were adamant you were able to stop him yourself." Kakashi reasoned. "You turned down any opportunity for a faster result; you neglected any offer to help, you never filed a report at the station concerning his attack nor applied for protection for which was perfectly understandable-

"I am a trained shinobi, Kakashi," Sasuke's voice had iced over, though the glare he leveled rudely toward his once-teacher could have melted it in an instant. "I didn't need protection."

He didn't, of course. Even Kakashi knew that. Itachi's incursion back to his birth village was for reconnaissance directly related to the Kyuubi's vessel and nothing to do with his estranged sibling. And since he'd made it predominantly clear that Sasuke would have proved no obstacle in obtaining said jinchuuriki, it was unlikely he would have ever bothered his brother again. Poking at Sasuke's pride, however, was a well-proven method of getting him to talk, thus to follow the artful jab at Sasuke's security, Kakashi added:

"No. You needed a dangerous fugitive to offer you a death wish clumsily disguised as a cheap out."

Sasuke had nothing for that. Though the glare dialed back a little and his shoulders lost a little of their tension, Sasuke's mouth simply pressed into a thin, unhappy line. "One thing I picked up on very quickly was the similarities between you and your brother." Kakashi continued, somewhat tenderly. Koharu, disturbed by the sensitive tone, ruffled a little. The room ignored her. "You were both planners, both considering each action, each move with intense scrutiny. Where you had less patience, you made up for with ferocity - a level of passion that seemed lost on Itachi, at least, as far as I knew. But I don't believe it was just that passion that sent you to Orochimaru, not after the fight that left you incapacitated for so long. I also do not believe that the taunts of the Sound Four, who had come to challenge you for your position as Orochimaru's favourite, had much to do with your decision either, did it?"

"They were idiots," Sasuke confirmed, quietly. Kakashi nodded.

"Then what made you change your mind?"

Sasuke was picking at his nails now, a habit his mother used to scold him for, threatening to use rope binding jutsu to secure his fingers together. Without looking up, he said: "He showed me their deaths again. He showed me how he killed them. He let me watch them die."

"Pardon?"

"Itachi. In that Tsukiyomi. That was his thing to stop me: he took me back to that day. He showed me how he killed them. He let me watch them die."
"Your family," Kakashi said and Sasuke nodded.

"Over and over. For hours. Days maybe. I don't know how long I was out for. It was a farce, turns out he'd been nowhere near as brutal as he'd made it seem, but I didn't know he'd had that good an imagination."

It was obvious Kakashi had something else to comment, but seemed content to hold back for the moment, "And that made you want to seek out Orochimaru?"

Sasuke stared at his hands, trying hard not to find something personal to latch on to and seethe against. It hadn't been that simple a decision and it certainly wasn't just Itachi's contribution that had sent him over the edge. Genjutsu could well enough damage a sound mind, but to one that had been shattered before and had barely repaired the damage it was catastrophic. To play upon an individuals' weaknesses and insecurities was one thing, to lay a new foundation of anxiety over such shaky, unreliable supports as those in Sasuke's scarred psyche was to bring a whole new level of depression and resentment into the fray. Itachi's clever, evil mind trick wasn't a simple club over the unconscious, it was a raping of the mind, insidiousness at its core. And the others wouldn't know this - those who had never been under even the simplest genjutsu wouldn't have a clue. It almost couldn't be explained.

Someone in the audience whispered weak. Or at least Sasuke thought they did. He felt the eyes of the courtroom on his shoulders, heavy, cold, gravid with questions. He was already weighing up their judgments in his head. Weak. Guilty. They said. Useless failure. Sasuke lifted his chin. Genjutsu was personal; cast by his brother, doubly so. But it was pertinent that the court should understand. They needed to understand. Then at least they might start to fathom why he'd made such a decision and many others like it.

"The Tsukiyomi was like… like..." He licked his lips that were somehow drier than the air around him and felt his saliva gum a the corners of his mouth. His chest felt constricted and the breath in his lungs seemed insufficient. "It was two-fold. It was my family's death again, it was finding my clan slaughtered in the moonlight. It was that fear or turning a corner and finding who was responsible directly in my path when I was too young and too scared to do anything about them. It was confronting my brother with blood on his sword and lies in his mouth and all the disappointment and confusion that followed for years after that. At the same time it was a manifestation of my own disappointment in myself. It was the voice that spoke to me when I was a kid, watching my celebrity of a brother perform all sorts of feats that I thought, when I was his age, I'd be able to do too, and it told me I could never be like him. Something inside him had just turned on, a kind of ability that was one in a million. I was simply one of a million. I didn't even have a switch. It was a voice I began hearing everywhere, seeing everywhere. It was with me in the training grounds; it sat next to me in kindergarten. Hogged the swing in the playground and hung above my father's frown. When I faced my brother in that shit-house of a hotel, I heard it again and I knew he did too. I'd trained for years to face him. I was top of my class; I'd survived Orochimaru's attack; fought a rampaging Biju. But I was about as close to Itachi's level as I was when I was a little kid."

Sasuke stopped then, blanching as the awkwardness closed in. He felt open, exposed. He'd written these things down for Naoko to publish, hoping that perhaps it would save him having to voice them in court, but it seemed Kakashi had other plans for his honesty. For a moment Sasuke wondered why he'd let him publish the article in the first place. Maybe it was to gather his thoughts - to realize that the truth would be his defense - his only defense. After all, the truth was all he had now. The time for weapons and power were long gone and part of a Sasuke that probably didn't exist anymore, perhaps even long past rescuing. Sasuke swallowed hard, almost wishing for Ibiki's torture over all this… talking. These facts were deeper and more painful than any wound and in
addition to that, were things he hadn't had to face about himself for a long time.

"It's not just the memories though. It's more than that. It's internal damage. It's pain that doesn't go away and morphs into…" The words were hard to find. Even with the help of his councillor, Sasuke still didn't understand depression, nor the ways in which he could begin to heal. "I'm… I don't know why no one else seems to get it. I never did. I'm not the only person who has been betrayed; I wasn't the only kid to lose a family. Those who have, perhaps you do know what it felt like when you realized… no, you talked yourself into believing that nothing you do matters. That no one you know matters. That's what Tsukiyoimi does. It's just this endless nothing and unless you find yourself some kind of task to dedicate yourself to, then you're pretty much nothing just the same. Nothing anyone said, nothing Naruto or Sakura said… nothing was as important as trying to feel like I'd gotten somewhere. That I hadn't failed. Orochimaru's seal was immediate and easy and I found myself liking it. It made me feel as though I'd actually progressed. I left because that was better than having someone with abilities like Naruto looming over my head the entire time. It was like being constantly reminded how far behind I was; it was like watching Itachi. And by then I'd forgotten how to suck it up and look at Naruto's successes as goals for myself, I just saw handholds I'd missed, things I'd never be able to do. I didn't aspire, I despaired."

"So you went to Orochimaru as means to an end?" Kakashi reconfirmed. "You must have known he'd turn the deal to his advantage. He might have killed you before you even had a chance to go after your brother."

"He could have, but I learned pretty quickly how to play on his vices as much as he exploited mine. Orochimaru wanted my eyes and pretty badly at that. Only he was also a scientist and a driven one. My quest to gain power was too interesting for him to give up immediately. He was also incredibly pragmatic and knew that if I kept working as hard as I was, the time, exhaustion and pain that followed my development was all mine: if he waited until I was ready, he'd take me at the top of my game and I'd have done all the work myself. He was convinced right up until the end that he was stronger than me. He was half-right, I'll give him credit for that, he just had no idea I wasn't such a blunt instrument in the wits department as I let him believe."

"You outsmarted him?"

"I out-planned him. The rest was just good fortune. Then again, if I'd lost, I probably wouldn't have cared either. He might have taken Itachi on for me and that's all that really mattered."

Kakashi nodded slowly, as if letting the facts he already knew sink in. "So you were just living to win this fight with your brother?"

"'Winning' had nothing to do with it. It wasn't about winning anything. I needed it to be over. I needed it all to be over. I would kill Itachi. I would kill the man who destroyed my clan. Then it would be done."

Homura, quiet up until that point suddenly cleared his throat. He'd been watching Kakashi carefully as Sasuke spoke.

"It?" He asked. "It would be over?"

"Everything," Sasuke replied, hollowly.

"Your feud? Your need to be nukenin? Your quest for revenge?"

"Everything. If you've never been the last one standing, you won't know how it feels. I didn't long for death, I wanted closure. I needed that peace. After that…" Sasuke shrugged. "I could have been
in the ground for all I cared. If that helps you understand why I would let Orochimaru wipe me from existence as you say, then so be it."

The room was silent then. Soundless. As though no one wanted to breathe or even could after such a confession. Naruto bit the inside of his cheek so hard a fount of blood gushed into his mouth and his eyes watered at the sudden, sharp pain. Sakura's hand was on his knee, digging into the kneecap with such force if he moved she would probably have torn his leg in half. Kakashi, still a picture of nonchalance, nodded again slowly before he picked up a pen and appeared to mark something down. Sasuke's answer must have been satisfactory enough not to pursue the subject for when he spoke again, Orochimaru and Itachi were forgotten.

"The Akatsuki, Namely Uchiha Obito. Tell me, what made you decide to join the Akatsuki and follow him."

"I didn't join them, I worked with them. We had similar goals."

"To destroy Konoha." Kakashi said and Sasuke nodded. "Eye for an eye, was it? A whole village pays for one clan."

"Sort of."

"What do you mean 'sort of'? We have written statements from several witnesses on several different occasions who have heard you describe such a fate for Konoha."

"Alright, sure. I expected Konoha to pay for the persecution and destruction of the Uchiha. I figured since Konoha was responsible for destroying my world, I'd wipe theirs out in return."

The whispers resurface. Kakashi silenced them by picking up his gavel and weighing it menacingly in his hand. "I'm sure you know by now, you're describing a far more convoluted situation than you realized."

"Than anyone realized, no doubt." Sasuke agreed. "I'll be the first to admit I was wrong in thinking it was merely Konoha and the elders who were responsible. Throwing the village into revolt was an idea much older than them, Obito or even Madara for that matter. If you really dig out the truth of it."

"The truth?" Homura looked mystified. Koharu snorted.

"I object. Sixth, I believe we weren't referring directly to the defendant's fables."

Kakashi looked at her finally - something he hadn't done since he'd sat down. His expression was half-covered as always, his mask perpetually stretched across the lower half of his face, but his eyes told her Sasuke was right and unfortunately fables were the least of their worries.

"We will address the Moon's Eye Plan and Ootsutsuki Kagura at a later date," he replied, cognizant of the sea of confused looks surrounding him. "But your point is noted, Sasuke. Let me reiterate: Once you had succeeded in killing your brother, your vengeance shifted to Konoha? Why?"

"Obito told me Itachi had been part of a greater plan devised by the elders of Konoha to keep the Uchiha under control."

"Hearsay!" Someone roared.

"Bullshit," someone else, less refined, retorted. The courtroom adjitated around the statement, even the Kage, silent until now, were hissing ardently to one another. Koharu sniffed, irritably, leaning
forward in her seat to make herself more visible as she objected yet again:

"Sixth! That is hearsay! Lies! There is no evidence this plan had ever taken place and clearly-

"Disregarding Sasuke's document," Kakashi spoke loud enough to match Koharu, but not so much as to drown her out. "There have been several instances mentioned of this particular plot by a variety of people along with witnesses. The Kazekage, for instance. In fact several of the Kage at the summit. Naruto and his Squad leader Yamato, Myself and Haruno Sakura. We have all heard in one form or another that there was more to Sasuke's story than even he knew. Hearsay or no, and I'm sure you would know, Koharu-san, I'm afraid this particular rumor must be addressed as it was instrumental to Sasuke's change of heart."

"The Third admitted to it as well," Sasuke said, quietly. "When I bought them back. He claimed responsibility as he claimed his own failure."

"And yet you were still going to punish Konoha for it?" Kakashi asked. Sasuke shrugged.

"Yeah. At first yes. Maybe. When Itachi fell, I thought that would be it. I waited to die along with my brother. I guess I was happy. I felt like I should be happy although it didn't really feel like that. Then the next thing I knew I was waking up in a cave and my head was shouting at me and it was hard to breathe and this guy just turned up out of nowhere and began spouting crap about the Uchiha and Madara and how now that Itachi was gone he could begin his plan unhindered."

"Obito?"

"Yeah, but he called himself Madara then. I knew the name from the statues at the valley of the end and the Nakano shrine, but I didn't think he was the real thing. Madara died nearly a hundred years ago."

"So what made you believe him?"

"Nothing." Sasuke said. "Absolutely nothing. He had Sharingan, sure. He talked the way some of the Uchiha used to, the ones who had secret meetings, who muttered under their breath when people from other clans visited the compound. They're the ones who stood outside our house with their sons and their weapons and called my father to their meetings. Those people aren't trustworthy. No matter how pure blood he claimed to be, I could tell he was one of them. I only agreed to join him because he was against Konoha and I felt at that time that even if everything he said was a lie, it was was closer to the truth than any other explanation anyone offered me."

"So you mean to tell me you joined an international criminal organization, because you weren't sure if your obviously guilty brother was guilty or not?" A spoke in measured tones, but his hand gripped the edge of the seating box so firmly the wood had begun to splinter beneath it. "And you didn't even trust them to begin with? What kind of idiot are you?!

Sasuke bristled, but his gaze remained steeled back on the spot to the side of Kakashi's head. "I don't know," he answered. "The kind of idiot who didn't know what the truth was? I had two versions of it by that point. By the time I got to the war, I had four: Mine, Itachi's, Obito's and that of the Four Great Hokages. I spent years thinking my brother was out there waiting for a rematch. That he would come back, take away anything I'd gained myself and let the whole process roll over again. He lied to me up until his last breath, told me wanted my eyes to complete his imperfect mangekyou, took the blame over and over for the destruction of our clan - laughed at it. Then the moment came to end him and when I failed-" Those eyes, those hands coming toward me, coming for my eyes. I wasn't a person, a beloved brother, I was a containment unit- "-He didn't kill me. He didn't even want to."
"How do you know that?"

"I just do." Sasuke muttered. At the firm look he received from the judge's bench he sighed. "He used to do this thing when I was a kid, kind of a sorry without being sorry sort of thing. Kind of-" Sasuke touched the back of his head. "-ruffled my hair up at the back because he knew I hated it." It was a lie, but it was close enough. There were some things Sasuke couldn't share out of respect for his brother. Itachi's strange little apology was one of them. "He used to do it and say 'maybe another time.' That day, he told me it was the last time - the last time I'd see him, I guess. I don't know. He was supposed to take my eyes, they would have made his mangekyou complete, probably would have saved his life. But he didn't. He just grinned at me like an idiot, like we were playing a game. Then he died at my feet."

"And after that?"

"I was in the cave. Apparently Obito, masquerading as Madara, found me and started spinning his own story: Itachi had been protecting Konoha the whole time. His leaving me alive was a failsafe, his way of leaving the Uchiha legacy clean while building in a self destruct button at the same time. Me."

"Thus Konoha became the object of your revenge," Kakashi concluded. "They were, supposedly, the conspirators who gave the kill order to Itachi."

"Are we really supposed to believe this?!!" A snarled, waving a pylon of an arm toward Sasuke. "This little shit illegally crossed international territories, fought and kidnapped my brother and he stands here trying to blame his own damn village for it all?! Utter bullshit!"

"Raikage, you may question the accused directly if you like," Kakashi offered, calmly. A snorted hard enough his whiskers blew straight beneath his nose.

"What point is there? The little rat's just going to lie about it."

"Securing the Hachibi was instrumental in Madara's plan. I was doing it for revenge on Konoha, not for any ill will against Raigakure," Sasuke stated. This time he turned little, awkwardly shifting his weight in the small space. "We weren't there to kill the jinchuuriki-"

"The jinchuuriki he says. Doesn't even know his damn name!"

"Killer Bee. I do," Sasuke corrected him. "And your brother beat the snot out of my team. Two of us nearly died, one being myself. We went in for capture, not kill. And we failed anyway."

"That doesn't excuse your actions," A growled. "You also went up against us at the Kage Summit, don't forget…"

"Yes. To kill Shimura Danzou. The man who sentenced my clan to death. Whether you were there or not made little difference. I only fought you because you attacked me and got in my way."

"You arrogant little-"

"Well we did jump to conclusions somewhat," Ohnoki reasoned, pinching his nose a couple of times to clear the travel dust from his nostrils. "But it didn't help your case much when you started cutting down Iron samurai left, right and centre, Sasuke."

"I didn't have time for negotiations," Sasuke replied. "I needed to get to Danzou."

"See?" A sneered. "Champing at the damn bit. Didn't even bat an eye when the sand kid-"

"-Kazekage tried to reason-"

"I do seem to remember that before the alarm sounded we had almost drawn arms against each other anyway," Ohnoki went on. "And Shimura had already tested our trust by attempting to influence his way into a higher position of power within the Alliance."

"That was also when you declared you would never form an alliance with any of us, Raikage." Mei added. "Not one of us trusted one another, we can all attest to that."

"Your point being?" A simmered. Mei folded her hands demurely in her lap.

"Let Sasuke speak. At least he wants to tell us the truth."

"Who says it's the truth?" A retorted, albeit cooling a little. "Who says he's powerless? Who says that kid is his and he's... he's..." There was a pause, a stutter in A's tirade as though he were trying hard to make sense of, or possibly even stomach, Sasuke's apparent pregnancy. "He's a man for God's sake. What the hell is all this?"

There was a decidedly gravid pause in the courtroom. Everyone seemed to swallow at the same time.

"All that," Kakashi said, patiently. "Is what we're here to find out."

"I thought this was meant to be a trial for the little bastard's crimes, not a showcase of what he does in his spare time." A grumbled, viciously. "For all we know, this is how he pays back that damn snake for his services."

Sasuke shifted his weight, standing up straighter at that comment. Suddenly every part of him seemed hard, brittle, like porcelain. He had been trying not to look at the Kage as he answered Kakashi's questions, but this time he couldn't help himself. "What?"

A narrowed his eyes. "He wanted a body, didn't he? Looks like he found a way to manufacture himself a little Uchiha without having to settle for the damaged original."

There was a fight in Sasuke's eyes. They all saw it there. A fire that settles in shinobi the first time they spar a classmate which never quite burns out. It was still there, still in Sasuke's soul, but it wasn't a fight many could understand. It wasn't jutsu, it wasn't kata and skill, swordsmanship and honor. It was teeth and nails. It was the pure, wild frenzy of survival. Pain and panicked desperation. It was a fight only few could understand and even fewer would recognize. Gaara watched as Sasuke's jaw tightened and felt (because he knew he was doing it. He knew this feeling) his fingernails dig crescents into the palm of his hands. For a moment he let that pure rage simmer, then he spoke.

"We all knew eventually that Sasuke had not captured your brother, Raikage," he said softly. "Yet you still harbor a grudge? As I see it, Bee seems to fear your own right hand more than he did Sasuke."

Bee who was sitting behind his brother made a strange noise, as though he was clearing his throat but changed his mind at the last minute. It resulted in a kind of feeble choking noise that seemed to capture the attention of the court anyway and once Bee felt the eyes of the room on him, he gave an apologetic shrug.

"Well, yanno... Kid put up a pretty good fight."
"I believe it is important," Gaara continued, "to let the Hokage and the accused outline the facts before we interrupt with our own opinions."

"The Hokage invited us," A began, but Mei spoke over him.

"To ask questions, Raikage. Not throw stones. Provocation serves little purpose; Sasuke's here of his own will as far as we understand."

A simmered at that, but said nothing further.

"Well, I suppose we've already covered the kidnapping," Kakashi said, breaking the silence. "Considering it was more of a misplaced person than an international insult. Is that acceptable, Raikage?"

"Fine," A conceded quietly. Kakashi gave him a second more for any lasting protests before he continued.

"The manslaughter charges from the Land of Iron come from the deaths of twelve Samurai, however Mifune has already informed us that he wishes to revoke these charges on the understanding that the event be classified as justifiable homicide in a time of war and not a slight against their nation. Considering Uchiha Obito waged said war against the five nations a mere twenty minutes later, I believe it is legally acceptable for the Alliance to honor this request."

"What about the death of the acting Hokage, Shimura Danzou?" Koharu said, carefully. Kakashi recognized the look on her face. It was the same look any squad leader might wear from time to time; the look that had seen all the possibilities whittle down to zero and all the plans dovetail into the same outcome. Without evidence Danzou's death was a grey area and could not be proved as murder, manslaughter or otherwise. Sasuke had admitted to killing him, however his accomplice Uzumaki Karin had made a statement that deviated slightly from Sasuke's proclamation.

"Indeed, what of Danzou?" Kakashi agreed. "As far as it was understood, he was your first target in your quest for retribution. You've already said you tracked down and infiltrated the Kage summit in order to attain this man. Did you kill him?"

Sasuke took a moment to find his answer. When it did, it seemed he spoke with some resignation, as though he was irresolute with the outcome.

"I fought him to the point of death," he said. "If he hadn't performed his sealing technique that finished him off and was supposed to take me with it, he probably would have died anyway. So I guess that's a yes."

The crowd mumbled again. Danzo hadn't been popular, but he had been respected. Most people outside the Shinobi ranks and the government buildings knew nothing at all of him. Those inside knew to stay out of his way. Kakashi nodded slowly.

"Then you'd attained two goals, hadn't you. Firstly to kill your brother who murdered your clan, secondly, to kill the man who allegedly forced Itachi's hand. Why did you continue after that? The people responsible for slighting you were gone. Rumor had it you'd even managed to take care of Orochimaru as well..."

Kakshi halted there, offering Sasuke space to comment. Sasuke took it, nonchalant.

"I thought I had, but that was stupid. Orochimaru doesn't get killed, he gets derailed. Shelved. He finds a way back no matter what. I summoned him before the war to help me resurrect the four Great Kage. I wanted them to help me find a purpose."
"A purpose?" Homura frowned. "Weren't you still trying to destroy Konoha?"

"Up until Kabuto created his undead army, yes, I was. I'd killed my brother under the false perception that he'd destroyed my clan as an act of madness and defiance. I'd killed the man who set my brother on this course, forcing the government's hands to legitimize this action and hide the truth." There were more mutters at this point. Koharu started to protest again, only most of the crowd were leaning forward to hear Sasuke's words, searching for a break in the truth where his story deviated from his written statement in the Herald. They ached for a seam, for a scar - something. Governments could be wrong. The Shinobi were meant to keep their secrets within their ranks. But the persecution of the Uchiha was something else entirely. It was on the level of the Mist and their Fourth Hokage's blood-soaked rituals. It was persecution of the Third Caste. It was something so much bigger and uglier. It was a scar that everyone wore. "-and I had yet to determine my own opinion." Sasuke continued. "As I've made clear, everything I knew until then had been one lie upon another. My own perceptions had been shaped to benefit the plans of others, something I couldn't accept at first but once I did I knew it was up to me to find my own truth. It was Kabuto's mistake in bringing back Itachi that influenced this: he let me help him, but only after some time. First and foremost, once Itachi had freed himself from Kabuto's control, he sought only to stop him. I was secondary in his list of problems. I was behind Konoha's safety. If anything was proved that day, it was my brother's unending love for our village."

"And that's what changed your mind." Kakashi filled in. "That's what made you choose to help Konoha during the war."

"No. I still wasn't convinced," Sasuke said. "I still felt that Konoha was getting away lightly, no matter how ardently Itachi fought for them. What I wanted to understand was why. Why this place meant so much to him. Why he'd choose to destroy his family to avoid the alleged war Danzou was promising. Why he still saw himself as Konoha's protector."

"Why, even though he knew you'd discovered the reasons behind his actions, he still saw you as secndory to Konoha," Kakashi ventured. "Second best."

"Yes," Sasuke said after a moment. "When he did that… I guess the truth began to matter more than retribution."

"And that truth," Kakashi continued. "Is that what drove you to protect your village? As your brother had done, even in death? Is that what he asked of you?"

"No," Sasuke replied. "After Itachi disappeared for the final time, there were still too many questions that needed answers. I needed to know why, understand why, a village was so important so I summoned those I felt would be able to give me a clearer understanding."


"Shouldn't you have been concerned that their answered may have been biased?" Gaara added. "After all, they were the Kage of your Village. It was their primary position to care for and protect their people."

"I considered bias, yes." Sasuke said. "I had a plan for that. As I've stated already, I resurrected - though it was more like reconstituted - Orochimaru to perform the impure world resurrection on the Kage. I might have been able to do it myself, but I needed him to bind them and hold them for me to be able to concentrate on my questioning. I knew he was good at that."

"You trusted him?"
"Of course not. But once again, it was about making a deal. Orochimaru still wanted me as a successor. Keeping him on a short leash was as easy as dangling that opportunity in front of him again - however unspoken it was. We informed the Kage of the war and they wanted to participate. And they would get to after they answered my questions. It was all just a matter of exchange."

"A matter of exchange," Kakashi ghosted. He seemed to consider something for a moment, then said. "Did their answers satisfy you?"

Sasuke pursed his lips. "Yeah."

"Enough to participate in the war on Konoha's side, it seems," Kakashi continued. "Enough to fight for your village. So why the disappearing act after the jutsu had been lifted? Desertion, or so I have listed on your record, inaccurate as it is. That time you weren't a minor, Sasuke. You know what could happen."

"I always knew, but that's besides the point," Sasuke said. "It wasn't desertion. You know it wasn't."

"It wasn't," Kakashi nodded, glancing briefly at the other Kage. Their faces bore the same expression, one of mild distrust and, in A's case, contempt.

"Then why don't you tell them what's really on that paper?" Sasuke challenged. "Your legal documents or whatever. I've already done it. Confirm it. Confirm what I said I'd do."

It wasn't a challenge - not in so many words. Sasuke's story had indeed outlined his proposal and his intent for the world after the war, but it was a section that didn't sound like Sasuke - one Naoko had no end of trouble trying to fit within the flow of the article. It was wooden. Soulless. It was not the ramblings of a delusional despot, rather it read as means to an end. Not desperation exactly, but resignation.

"Regicide," Kakashi said, linking his hands in front of him forming tiny battlements with his fingers. "High Treason."

"High Treason," Sasuke repeated. "Twelve years ago Danzou and the Third sought to stop a military coup, consequentially a war, by executing the Uchiha. My decision was the same, only I was no longer against Konoha or her citizens. By the end of the war, after fighting alongside my comrades and classmates and the other countries, after receiving the Rinnegan from the Sage of the Six Paths, after I'd seen just what the Shinobi system had done to this world, I knew what the truth was. The system itself. The system had to be changed and I was the one to change it."

He hadn't explained it so much in his document, he'd mentioned change, a revolution and suchlike - the removal of those in power, but little else. Perhaps because he knew it was a question he was going to be asked. Speaking the words out loud again redefined their weight and, more importantly, Sasuke's belief in them. Sasuke looked Kakashi dead in the eye. His teacher had heard part of his manifesto before; the rest would have been filled in by Naruto, but all the same:

"I had the power of the Sage, as did Naruto. That was our gift from Ootsutsuki Hagoromo to win the war and restore balance to the world. But the world was still unbalanced to me. Even if we broke the Tsuki no Me, even if the Alliance would now protect the Five Nations, there was still discontent. Still a system that was biased, unjust and unfair. I wanted to destroy that system. I wanted to remove the need for Shinobi."

"And how were you going to do that?" A asked, his voice dropping a little, perhaps in morbid amazement or slow-boiling rage, it was hard to tell. "Kill all Shinobi? Leave that damn jutsu in
place and manipulate it yourself?"

"No. I know how it is to be manipulated. I couldn't do that," Sasuke said. "I proposed removing the Tailed Beasts from the world as well as the current Kage as the former had caused too many problems and the latter had failed so many times to solve them."

"You little sh-" A began to storm, only this time he stopped himself. Sasuke's plan would have spelled destruction for both himself and his brother, however the simplicity of the proposal was a little too curious to ignore. "Just the tailed beasts and the current Kage?" He went on, still glaring darkly toward the Uchiha. "Not the Daimyo? Or your contemporaries?"

"The Daimyo have a strong influence over the choice of Kage, this is true. And yes, perhaps the other Shinobi in my year or above me would still retain traces of what I felt was a failed system, but they weren't to blame. Removing the authority and power said only one thing: Revolution. Once those things were gone, I would use the Sage's gifts to take the decision-making for the shinobi system upon myself. I would remove all threats myself, thus remove the need for shinobi altogether."

"Where in the hell did you come to that conclusion?" asked Ohnoki, somewhat mystified. "That's nullifying everything it is to be Shinobi! It's-"

"It's peace," Sasuke said. "It's what all Kage want, isn't it? Peace? Only no one was able to do it until now. Even the Sage himself, who heard my idea, did not disagree. Long ago he chose to use his abilities to bring chakra and jutsu to the world as a gift, not knowing that it would eventually become twisted and reforged into a weapon. The tailed beasts themselves were exactly that: once gifts, they became weapons. Then security measures. Thinly-veiled threats. The Sage's way, the Shinobi way, did not work. So I chose the opposite."


"So is giving a human the ability to breathe fire. Or levitate. Or turn themselves into rock or wood. Look at the civilians, really look at them. We aren't meant to do that."

"We've always been able to do that!"

"Since Ootsutsuki gave us the gift of Chakra, yes. He gave us a gift because he thought it was the right thing to do. A gift that would allow us to grow and learn, protect ourselves and our world. A gift that, over time, turned us against each other and eventually put us in the path of a pissed-off Goddess and her own vengeance pact that saw thousands of humans die."

"What's he rambling about? What's this Goddess?"

"Some fable-creature he mentions in that article. A said to the confused Tsuchikage. "Pile of trash. Why's this even being allowed, Kakashi?"

"You realize," Gaara intervened, quietly. "That your actions would have made you one of the most hated men in the world. You would have instigated a lifetime of resentment towards you. No one would have let you rest, you would be hunted constantly for your crimes, no matter what good intentions you might have hidden in this mad idea, or what peace might come from it."

"I would keep Konoha safe. I would not be a threat," Sasuke said. "Effectively I would have achieved my brother's purpose as well as finding my own. I would become Kage. Not of one village alone; the world."

"A dictator?" Mei raised her artistic brows. "You'd have been despised. Globally despised. A Kage-
"-was a peacemaker to Hashirama; a Strategist to Tobirama. To Hiruzen, a Kage meant care and support and Minato furthered these ideals. But those ideals already exist in our communities, in Konoha, in your villages. The world, the people of the world, they have this ability. Looks at how all the shinobi banded together during the war, how everyone worked together. The Five Nations do not need guidance to demonstrate cooperation, they need someone to take the hard decisions away from them. To put a stop to deals made in shadows and secrets enlisted behind the gates of the Kage offices. Clarity. Truth. That is a Kage to me."

"It's still a dictatorship." Kakashi reasoned. "And you're only human yourself, you'd only be able to carry out this revolution for so long. You'd have to pass on your will at some point. Then who'd take that burden?" He looked down at Mikoto, raising his brows. "Your children?"

Sasuke's return was pure venom, slick and sour as about as poisonous as what Kakashi had implied. "Of course not! Madara had found a way to live for nearly a century. Both Orochimaru and Kabuto had almost cracked the secret of immortality. I would have found a way. I had the Sage's power, I knew something like that could be achieved."

Much to the crowd's amazement, Kakashi started to chuckle very lightly behind his mask.

"A be all and end all. Forever. Sasuke you would be committing yourself to an eternity of agonizing frustration and disappointment. No one would be willing to play ball, you know that-"

"It wouldn't matter," Sasuke shot back. "The need to be rivals, enemies? That would all be eliminated. If I was hated for that, I didn't care. I didn't care what anyone thought. I never cared."

"But Naruto did," Gaara mentioned, gently. Sasuke knew he would throw in something about the blond; it seemed Naruto was never far from Gaara's thoughts. "As I understand it, he was the last person to try to stop you before the Tsuki no Me was removed and your plan, had it been successful, was implemented."

"Naruto convinced you to stop?" Mei added, glancing first at her contemporary, then back at Sasuke. "It says in your story - sorry Rokudaime - that you'd run out of chakra. Was Naruto responsible for your final change of heart or was it simply a loss of ability?"

*Does it matter?* Sasuke seemed to want to say, yet he shook his head. "Naruto was my biggest problem mostly because I knew I couldn't kill him. Or maybe I could but I didn't know what would happen when I did."

"You mean what would happen when a Jinchuuriki died?" Gaara asked.

"No," Sasuke informed him, bluntly. "Not what would happen to him; what would happen to *me*. There are links that exist between people that are stronger than the gravity tethering us all to the ground. I knew that well before Naruto stood in front of the Sage, earning our place as his descendants and brothers in soul. I'd said I was going to kill him dozens of times; I even tried it and failed in our first fight before I left for Orochimaru. I could fight him until we were both husks, barely able to stand on our feet, but I couldn't land that final blow. There was a moment during that last fight where I wished he would so that I didn't have to."

There it was again, the hush that fell over the crowd. The strange, sympathetic silence which seemed to pity Sasuke as much as it condemned him. Countless criminals had stood before the bar, confessing their desire to kill freely without retribution. Few had admitted aspiring for their own deaths. Certainly none so young or so powerful.
A ripple of muttering broke the silence as Naruto stood up, his expression mute, face almost as pale as his sun-bleached hair. He linked his hands in front of him, felt awkward about that, rested them in his pockets before slowly letting them sink to his sides.

"Is that why you used the Tsukiyomi?" He asked.

"Naruto, please sit down," Kakashi ordered, ineffectively. Ohnoki batted a hand toward the Rokudaime as though he were a fly. Obviously the perceived conversation was far too riveting to ignore. It seemed most of the crowd had a similar preference.

"You knew it was pointless to use genjutsu on a jinchuuriki," Naruto went on. "We have an inbuilt failsafe system. You'd have to be pretty quick to catch me, then Kurama before he could break it, and you were all but out of chakra by the end of our fight."

Sasuke's slight brows hemmed a thin tail across his forehead and he smudged his lips together unhappily. "Figured the content would be enough to stop you."

"Really?"

Not really, no. Sasuke licked his lips again. Strangely, Itachi had been easy to talk about this time, perhaps because the guilt and shame Sasuke had previously linked to his actions was replaced with a type of understanding; Itachi had been just as fucked up as he was, he'd just been better at hiding it. Naruto, on the other hand. Naruto was in front of him. Naruto was honest and true and real and the things that Sasuke had done to him had never been deserved at all. Especially not the madness he'd inflicted. Not that type of pain.

"Drive a beast mad you can make it do whatever you want. Obito proved that," he answered, flatly. "You'd have taken care of the other beasts for me, the Kage, before you devoured yourself. That's what I'd planned."

He's lying. Kurama whispered in Naruto's ear. He'd felt his host's temperature rise, felt his heart shudder in his chest. Naruto had been on edge all morning, he didn't need the extra push. Besides, Kurama knew the truth as well as Naruto did, perhaps understood it even better than the both of them and now wasn't the time to be throwing that kind of information into the mix. The fox, listening to the drama through the trees surrounding his internal meadow, eased down to rest his chin on his forepaws, flicking an ear breezily. Let him lie. It's easier for the others to understand.

"Is that true, Naruto?" Kakashi was asking him. Naruto felt his chin bobbing in the affirmative before he'd even opened his mouth.

"Yeah but I can't really remember now," he replied with automation. Lying in court was bad, he knew that. But Sasuke had already done it and besides, Kakashi knew the truth (sort of, pretty much) anyway. This truth was too much to let anyone know. It was Sasuke's and Kurama's and his alone. "It was dark and... cold. It was me and Kurama being tortured or something, I don't know. It was good, though. Really good. I don't think I knew what was going on until I was somehow getting out of it. Maybe it was Kurama. Maybe we tore a hole in the jutsu - that's what it felt like."

"A tear in what? Your prison?" Kakashi asked, and Naruto was glad he did. If anyone understood space-time jutsu, it was Kakashi. "Or reality? As Obito did when he phased, if you remember that?"

"Yeah, like that. Ripped the... air, sort of." Naruto blinked, realizing one hand was slightly outstretched in the space before him - as though reaching forward to feel the seam where he'd scorched reality. "There was this light, it was bright and kinda dark at the same time. And this
growl that was like Kurama but it wasn’t. I thought I saw Sasuke off in the distance but when I called out for him, it was like my voice just fell outta my mouth and splattered on the ground. And there was this feeling, this draining feeling like someone’s like vacuuming out your jutsu then… Then we were back at the Valley of the End. I was yelling something at him and um…”

"We were rejected from the jutsu," Sasuke finished, his voice tight and strange. "Fell out of it, in a way. As soon as Naruto saw me he grabbed my hand and forced me to undo the Chibaku Tensei on the Tailed beasts and the Tsuki no me."

"Which you agree to because of your loss of power? You knew Naruto could now stop you?" Mei frowned. Sasuke stared at the desk a moment, thinking back to that collection of images that hiccuped through his mind in stuttering fragments. The light. The explosion. The Sun. Naruto's voice. His eyes. His rage. The sudden, sharp pain of his fractured hand, the dull, knife-like vortex of his depleted chakra. Whatever he had left, whatever he could scrape together, he gave. He made things right. He hadn't known then just how bad the drain on his reserves had been, how little he had left. But he knew the tank was empty.

And Naruto had scared him. Sasuke had seen his family die, seen a man seek to destroy his soul. He'd seen his brother, in a supposed fit of madness, reach for the sanctity of his eyes, seen a death God pull a man's arms from his belly and an evil Goddess split reality. But it was Naruto who scared him. Emotion in it's purest state could be the most terrifying thing of all.

"Naruto would have stopped me," Sasuke confirmed. "I knew that. I knew I needed time to regroup. So I released the jutsu, punched him in the face and fell back into the river. I was drifting out toward Kusa before I even realized I'd passed out." Sasuke looked at his hands as he rested them on the podium. Thin hands, striped with veins and scars and shaded a powdery violet from the cold. They still trembled a little. He dug his broken nails into wooden surface. "Is that my second count of desertion?" He asked. "Leaving after the war? Fine. Well that's the explanation. I guess you could say my plan backfired. Guess you could say I lost my nerve. I don't know what I'd say, to be honest."

"Were you planning to attack again?" Kakashi said. Sasuke shook his head. "Did you seek Orochimaru?" The dark head shook harder, hiding derision. "No, that would have been suicide. You're too smart for that now, far beyond the blindness of rage." Kakashi spoke softly, almost as though he were observing a bird in a cage, a beautiful, exotic bird that had, in spite of its great wingspan, its bright feathers and its speed, been caught by a human to be admired and peered at. "Smart enough that you would return to Konoha, hoping that your current condition might spark some form of empathy from your peers - Naruto especially. It is well documented that your bonds are something that sit on the edge of our understanding. Naruto, he'd be easy to start with, wouldn't he?"

Kakashi levelled his gaze at Sasuke. There was nothing in his eyes. For once, after so many snubbed lectures from the man, Sasuke found he could not turn away. It was surprising how cold the man could turn, like the weather on an island his temperament was just as inclement and undecided.

"Convince Naruto of your innocence and you have the greatest mouthpiece the world has ever heard, haven't you?" Kakashi went on. "With Naruto on your side, and you would have him on your side, you'd probably get most of the Nine too. They’re good kids. They're honorable and loyal to their village. But more than that, they're loyal to their friends. Even when that friend is little more than just… what was it you said? Peer? Cohort? Another number?"

Kakashi took a moment to study the crowd, taking in the spectrum of expression that animated the
room, so many colours from so few facets of the emotional prism. Levels of derision. Shades of spite. Hues of sentiment. Tones of anxiety, fear, sympathy. And Sasuke himself in the middle. A silent neutral indifference. Or so he thought he was. Every now and again Kakashi caught him turning a fraction of a degree to his right. Every time his daughter moved, or cooed or breathed he listened for her. Were he listening more closely Kakashi could have counted the rise in Sasuke's heartbeat every time he feigned a glance. There was a dampness under his palms, pressed so flat and heavy on the podium. The old wood sung from the sudden moisture. And Sasuke eyes; they ached for an ultimatum. They had for some time, Kakashi could see it. But the end was still a while away yet and there was much still unsaid that needed to be addressed.

"Uchiha Sasuke, you have returned to Konoha to stand trial for your crimes which include as recorded, High Treason, Desertion, Conspiracy, Sedition and Murder. You understand these crimes are, according to the laws of Konohagakure and the Greater Region of the Fire Country, punishable by death."

The pulse rose then; Kakashi almost heard it hammer on Sasuke's thin ribs. He watched his throat as the boy swallowed hard and paused a little longer. It was stupid and theatrical, but he did it anyway. There was always something a little bit stupid and theatrical about anything Kakashi did.

"And as Rokudaime of the Village Hidden in the Leaves, that is the sentence I would have been obligated to grant under judicial law. However-" And how the room waited on that however. How the air stilled and solidified in that small, calculated however. "-this is not the era of war. And your return, whether under duress or not, counts for some leniency in your sentence. Koharu-san-" Kakashi turned to his right where the elderly official seemed to shrink behind her small, delicate spectacles. It was the Kage's job to deliver the sentence, what was he- "Koharu-san. Could you please inform the court of the council's current standing in Uchiha Sasuke's case?"

"Maximum penalty is three life sentences on the counts of high treason, desertion and murder."

Kakashi, much to the court's amazement, nodded slowly in almost comical interest. "Mm, and the children he claims are his?"

"Fostered." Koharu announced. "With the opportunity for supervised visitation after five years."

"Three life sentences. Five years." Kakashi mused, artfully ignoring the rumblings of discontent filling the room around him:

- how it's done in Konoha-
- but he 's just a kid!-
- traitors get what traitors deserve -
- But isn 't he screwed up after all he's been through? The article-
- trying for a sympathy plea. Next he 'll be claiming insanity -
- Reckon he bought the kid? Killed the mother? -
- Orochimaru 's puppet-
- but the children-
The auxiliary didn't bother him. It was Naruto's face that Kakashi was watching without watching. The way those blue eyes deepened to purple. The way his seething rage stood behind a border of trust for Kakashi. There had to be a plan. Kakashi-sensei would never do this. Kakashi-sensei was better than this. Kakashi was Hokage; a Hokage was responsible for everyone in the village. Everyone. No matter who or what they were.

"The village comes first." Kakashi said, as though reading Naruto's mind. "The mission comes first. To a Kage, our mission is our village. Sasuke may have returned of his own volition, perhaps. He may have returned with his own children and, well, we already have proof that they are, blood doesn't lie. Yakushi-san will be bringing the evidence here for you to examine shortly, that with a certificate from the criminal investigation team, confirming the children's legitimacy."

More whispers. Kakashi spoke over them.

"The mission comes first," he repeated, slowly rising in his seat. "Shinobi objective number four. In Shinobi justice, the mission is simple: remove the threat to the village. For these purposes, and at the behest of the Council and Daimyo, we have a closed trial. We list the offenses, we convict the accused. End of story."

"Rokudaime," Ohnoki said, leaning in a little himself. "There is such a thing as a fair trial. No one has honestly just thrown the book at—"

"No, of course not." Kakashi agreed, quickly. "I'm following the Council's decree though, of course, and in the circumstances of high treason, a closed trial is mandatory to protect the state, isn't that right, Koharu-san."

The look in Ohnoki's eyes as he directed them toward the Konoha official must have been pure acid, but if Koharu blanched, she hid it well.

"That is correct, Rokudaime," she confirmed. "To protect the state."

"But we are in alliance," Ohnoki ventured, carefully. "This is no longer a state issue; Sasuke is an international criminal."

"You'd petition to lessen his sentence?"

"I think he came back here for more than he's letting on," Ohnoki said, rubbing his whiskers. "And I don't think he's stupid enough to do that hoping a sympathy vote will save him."

"Do you believe the article to be perfunctory?" Kakashi asked and there was something in his eye that told him it was. Ohnoki, pleased to be included in such a style of illicit nose-tapping gave a slow, considering nod.

"I think it's a whitewash. I'd like to know why."

"Why the hell would he censor himself?" A snorted. Mei, who was watching Sasuke closely, tapped her nails on the rail in front of her.

"Not censorship; a diversion. Sasuke's claims are sensational enough, few of you have noticed how little he has written and spoken of his current… situation. And who caused it."

"Well I understand you were here first, Mizukage," A replied, coolly. "Had your own meeting with the Uchiha before everyone else. What was that about? Something you'd like to share?"

"Sasuke has information that may help us in other charges," Gaara summarized, crossing his arms
over his chest. "I had actually thought to question him privately myself on matters regarding the whereabouts of Orochimaru, for example. The man killed the fourth Kazekage and is thought to have perhaps had some hand in the alleged manipulation of the fourth Mizukage's madness, isn't that right, Terumi-sama?"

"It was no secret the Akatsuki had something to do with our 4th's fall from grace," Mei answered. "I wanted to know if Sasuke had any further information."

"Something you could have asked at any point," Ohnoki pursed his lips, creating an odd bridge between his mustaches. "Forgive me, Mizukage, but that is rather curious."

Mei shook her head lightly. "It is. You're right, it looks suspicious, I can attest to that. I made a poor decision to move without the alliance's approval, not for secrecy, but because I was… concerned."

"About?" Ohnoki asked, leaning over a little in his seat. Mei wet her lips.

"That… That a rebel unit in the Mist still exists. And did this to Sasuke," she said. "I needed to know if it was our fault. I needed to know immediately. I apologize; I let my guilt guide me. But I couldn't wait. I needed to know if it was my village that was still hurting people-"

"Mizukage, we all have our dark pasts," the Tsuchikage offered, gently. "No village is innocent from the wars of old to the formation of the alliance-"

"Yes, but no one hurt people quite like the Mist has," Mei breathed. "And I won't let it continue. I can't."

"No," Kakashi said. "You can't. And indeed, neither can the greater council. Well this muddies things a bit considering Sasuke now knows he has information he could, say, barter with-" the inflection was so obvious it was farcical. Sakura stared at her former teacher, wondering what on earth could have been running through that rabbit-warren of a mind. He allowed Sasuke time to heal and to gather comrades, to even write an article that practically shat on Konoha and yet in court condemned Sasuke, yet he was giving him a chance to barter? What was going on?

"Homura…" This time Kakashi turned to his left, addressing his council who almost jumped in response. "Tell me, what happens now? With the… exchange of information. Things like that."

"Er, well if all are in agreement you might allow the accused to call witnesses," Homura warbled. "Which can, of course, have an impact on the convictions against the accused. It will also move the case into the public sphere…"

"And what does that mean?"

"Well, the court must provide the public with the trial record and make a statement regarding the nature of the change in the system."

"And allow him to call support. Representation," Koharu said the words rather stiffly and through taut lips. "It's a very… modern way of addressing a legal situation; far removed from the shinobi system."

"Considering his current position, perhaps a more civilian-style trial is more fitting," Kakashi stroked his chin. "It all goes public. Well that's-"

"No," Sasuke said, much to the amazement of almost everyone in the room. He was shaking his head slowly, dark bangs swaying. "No. You can't do that."
"Worried you might be caught out receiving the raw end of a deal?" A glowered. "Too much for your pride, Uchiha?"

This time, however, Sasuke did ignore him. His eyes were on Kakashi, somewhat enlivened amid their natural darkness. His concern was almost tangible.

"My vanity has nothing to do with it. The information I have… it's damaging. Moreover, it's even harder to believe than the truth about Obito, Kagura and those deadly pale creatures you all fought on the battleground." Sasuke's voice held a certain tone about it then; a kind of challenge to the censoring of his earlier claims on the effect Ootsutsuki and Black Zetsu had upon the Shinobi world. He'd explained enough in his story, he expected it to come up again later. "These people are not Shinobi, they're not even native to this continent. And while they didn't appear as strong or have the same abilities as us, they make up for in their ability to become invisible. To walk amongst us unnoticed, to slip into areas we never knew existed."

"So they're good spies?" Ohnoki asked, uncertainly. Sasuke nodded.

"And then some. Look, what these people did to me they've done to countless others. I've seen them. I have some proof - the Mizukage has more. The faction I had been kept with are dead, at least I think they are, but I'm concerned there is far more to their operation than what I could see."

"What of it?" A said, folding his meathooks across his broad chest, one over the other. "They're not Shinobi. So they can act like civilians and apparently impregnate men, why is that any of our concern. Sounds to me like I don't want to know."

"You probably won't," Sasuke replied. "But the Kakkou have graced all our villages at some point and might do so again. Especially those in the Land of Mist, Waves and the Earth Country."

"Earth Country?" Ohnoki frowned. Sasuke nodded.

"Yes. It's vast. Remote. These people seemed to be used to the cold climate so the alpine temperatures didn't bother them. Their base was in the mountains. That's where I was held."

"Codswallop." Ohnoki sniffed. "We have patrols who regularly search the area. We would have sensed their chakra. No one can hide from an Earth Shinobi in his own damn country under his own damn nose!"

"They couldn't, no. You'd find them." Sasuke agreed. "If you were looking for chakra."

"They didn't use chakra?" Akatsuchi said, scrubbing at his large chin with his fingers. "But then… how did they?.." He make a motion about Sasuke's altered figure. "I mean, you don't say much in the article, but it's implied."

"Implied. Thickly." A said, but for once he seemed to give a little, flicking one shrewd glance back at his brother, who was stared at Sasuke over the rims of his dark glasses, mouth prised open ever so slightly by his own curiosity. "You made it sound like a one off there. More like a dumb deal you'd made yourself and I'm still inclined to believe it."

"That was out of concern. As I said, this has been going on longer than most of us realize. The more that I've managed to put together over the past few weeks, the more this has started to shape into an international incident. I fear that if the information is released, the public might panic."

"Indeed," Kakashi said. "Then what do you propose?"

"I'll tell you what happened. After the war, after I ran. I'll tell exactly how I spent the next two
years of my life with a tribe of mass murdering fuck heads who called themselves the Kakkou. I'll tell you what I learned, unbiased, unabridged, everything."

"And in return for your honesty?" Ohnoki was looking at Sasuke over a mountain of suspicion. "How does this benefit you?"

"I just want you to listen," Sasuke told him. A sat back and crossed his arms.

"No time off your sentence? No deals?"

"No deals. Just your attention. And your stomachs." Sasuke looked down. "It's not a pleasant story."

"Then I suppose we'd better prepare ourselves," Kakashi said. "That is, if the Kage agree to your terms."

"Suna agrees," Gaara said, almost as Mei affirmed cooperation from the Mist. Both Ohnoki and A nodded.

"Fine," Kakashi said, motioning to Sasuke. "Take your time."

The courtroom shuffled into a kind of mesmerized attention as Sasuke eased back on his stool and set his hands in front of him. He would be facing his demons now, reliving a time in his life that was more harrowing than the lonely, resentful days he'd spent in Konoha hating Itachi, hating life and more importantly, hating himself. Part of him wanted nothing more than to throw in the towel, to agree to Konoha's terms and live out his days in a room smaller than a toilet cubicle, visiting his daughter and son from behind a glass wall, probably blinded by protective seals. He could have done that. It would have been easier than everything he needed to tell them about the Kakkou, everything they did, everything they ruined. But he'd come this far already and Sasuke knew there was no way he could turn back. He would tell them how he was tricked and tortured. And he would tell them how, after surviving a war, impalement and a battling a Jinchuuriki, the Great Uchiha Sasuke was vanquished by a mere bowl of soup.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Well that was long. Probably half of it was unnecessary, but never mind. I wasn't sure how it was going to come out, given that courtroom dramas are not my thing and never will be, but it's close enough to the confused shambles I envisaged would be Konoha Legal.

Thanks kindly for waiting. I thought I might have this out much sooner but alas, I could not. I understand this is frustrating and I apologize, but life comes first I'm afraid. I can confirm the start of the next chapter though, which I've been laying down fairly swiftly being that it's Sasuke whump and if there's anything I love it's unapologetic Sasuke whump. So if you don't like... descriptive details on icky things, you might want to be careful with that one. I'll be sure to tag for triggers as best I can. See you next time!
Sasuke cleared his throat, fighting unreservedly the desire to close his eyes, the darkness a vehicle of recollection as he filtered through his active memories to recover those he'd sealed away, entombed beneath a mound of self-loathing and carcinogenic obdurance. He did not need to do such a thing, however, locks were merely proxies in Sasuke's mind, barriers to nothing. A placebo. A folly. He could keep others out; he was, by birthright, the bourgeoisie of mental prowess (even if he wasn't Yamanaka-level, he was still less susceptible than most). Yet to himself, he was his worst enemy. The flight from Konoha was, and had been for over a year, cemented in his mind; a billboard mosaic of ugly, frightening images that adhered to his frontal lobe as reliably as his first ninja lessons in self preservation. Sasuke would have liked to have been more selective of the memories he chose to bank close at hand and as a rule, he was: most were there by choice, immediate reference for common situations. The remainder, unfortunately, stagnated in the same fashion arterial plaque might clog a vein. Glued by fear, and more recently, guilt, they were bad memories, terrible thoughts that would slowly build up over time, arresting attention away from the happier nuances while they plotted inevitable meltdown. Sasuke only had one fond memory that composed enough stickiness to remain among such a joyless group and that was, of course, Naruto. But sometimes even the sunny spectre himself could not extinguish the miasma of trauma and regret that lay so close to Sasuke's waking thoughts. Or were, most times, simply alive and screaming behind his eyes.

"I punched Naruto, then I fell backwards," Sasuke explained to the courtroom. Riveted silence met his absorbed his words like cream. "Dropped straight down the waterfall. I knew it was deep enough that I would survive the fall; I knew the area well.. But I must have lost consciousness half way down; I don't remember floating away from Konoha, or having to swim or anything in between. I don't think there was much to it anyway. The river carried me away and that was it. There was weightlessness. Then water around me. Rippling. Bubbles. Then-"

Birdsong, muted and thickened by the water in his ears, drifted above. Stones brushed his shoulder blades, mud against his crown. Water lapped at his cheeks, tickling. There was no Naruto. There were no imprisoned the Biju. The forsaking of his homeland in lieu of his own agenda was an odd and distant memory. There was only the immediate; only what he felt and experienced in that moment.
Sasuke remembered wondering if this was what death was like and if it was, then perhaps things worked out for the better after all.

He drifted.

He drifted.

It was some time before he came around and when he did he found his teeth were chattering like crazed castanets, almost chipping against one another. His body was heavy, numb; his pulse sluggish. His eyes felt cold in their chilly in their sockets and when he tried opening them, mucus tugged on his lashes, pinching the slip of membrane at his waterline as though it were glued. His vision swam in and out of focus until the big bright thing directly above him became sky and the thin blobby things stretching over it became branches, twigs and grass. He was on his back, he realized, floating in the river, moored somewhere, most likely, between Konoha and the Hot Water Country. The dangling marsh grass striping his vision was attached to the grassy bank and he reached up to touch it, still somewhat independent of his body, which slowly chilled in the bruisingly cold water around him. It was his sluggish pulse that reminded him he was in danger, a muffled throb against his temples that warned him of his plummeting body temperature, the risk of hypothermia, the need to move, to get warm. Dry.

With great effort, Sasuke managed to roll onto his belly, and, using the weeds and river grass, hauled himself up on the bank in a series of piteous, soggy attempts. His limbs were useless, wet noodles attached to a body that suddenly seemed far heavier than he could have conceived. His head rocked dangerously, his mind subdued by a thick, ringing fog that, sent stars dancing in front of his eyes at the slightest movement. Dazed and panting deeply from the exertion, Sasuke finally maneuvered himself onto the grass and sprawled there, ungracefully, soaked through to the bone and shivering in vigorously. His flesh felt numb to the core, and while that could be quite helpful when it was likely he'd damaged something on the way down the great falls - a sort of free painkiller - Sasuke was acutely aware that greater injuries might have been masked by the desensitization. He challenged his mind to provide evidence and was rewarded by a fragmented flurry of images: Naruto crushing his hand. The Tsuki-no-Me lifting. Naruto calling him; screaming for him. The Kyuubi's roar. The hideous pain as his broken knuckles collided sharply with Naruto's face. The sensation of falling. Bubbles. Weightlessness. Nothing.

Ah yes, his hand. With drunken care, Sasuke moved his poor hand against his body, inspecting the fingers as he wiggled into a comfortable position. They were purple at the tips and knuckles, but not black - blood was still circulating the joints so that was something. The palm was misshapen, no doubt it would start to swell as his temperature rose, but elevating the limb would stop the worst of that. He expected more injuries might reveal themselves in time (his fight with Naruto hadn't been an elegant exchange of skill against skill exactly, it was more a parade of wrestling desperation), but he doubted they were too life-threatening to worry about. Not over the very looming possibility of hypothermia. Sasuke had never been never been victim to such a condition, his metabolism was simply too efficient. Anyone with a slightly more pedestrian system would never have been able to complete an entire mission in the Snow Country in shorts, sandals and a scarf under their traveling cloak. Sasuke remembered only donning gloves because they kept his grip from slipping, nothing more. That was years ago though and right now he would have done anything for a scarf.

Left-handed, he tried to summon fire, though all he managed was a rasp of wet air through his tingling fingers. A second attempt yielded the same effect. Annoyed, but not short of ideas, Sasuke reached about him, scooping up a blanket of dank, fetid leaves to act as both insulation and camouflage while he rested. It wasn't ideal, but it would be enough to allow his body to heal a little, warm a little, and build the strength to keep moving. He curled himself into a ball as well as
he could, pulling his limbs into his chest to encourage any meager body heat to gather at his core. He'd rest, get warm, then keep moving. His fight with Naruto would have bought him some time but he doubted Kakashi would leave him off his leash for long; he'd made too big a mess to be dismissed so easily. The details of the fight, still so new and deep, were unclear and difficult to recall, as though the memory of them hadn't quite dried yet. It didn't matter. He'd rest now. He'd rest then move. One step at a time.

The light was fading when he woke on the forest floor, a leaf stuck to his cheek and the taste of dirt in his mouth. The woods had chilled down as the sun disappeared, leaving behind a feathering mist that dampened the gloaming air and hung like a net amongst the trees. Sasuke pushed himself up and, after a few experimental steps, began running. No sense in taking it slow when he needed to move. His legs worked, as did his lungs. He had no excuse. Running hard through ferns and brush, fending off branches one handed and near-blind in the dark, Sasuke made his way north, following the moon when he could see it, sometimes the stars, reflected in the river. He was still wet, but most of the water had seeped out of his clothes into the ground, leaving him cold and mostly just damp. He'd managed to gain most of the feeling back in his fingers and toes though his skin still felt clammy and dead; his flesh waterlogged as a sponge. His hand throbbed, he knew it would. He ignored the warning as he pressed on, wishing like hell he could have leapt into the trees and flown across the canopy as he might have with just a smidgen more chakra beneath his belt. As it was, his attempt to scale a nearby cypress had him flat on his back, even more redundantly than the very first time he'd attempted tree-walking with Team 7. His chakra was still a guttering flame and what little rest he'd managed to gain on the forest floor seemed to have done little to revive it. It felt brittle.

He never remembered it feeling that way before.

Morning was grey and bleak and Sasuke lumbered into it, exhaustion dragging on his features. He was dry now, though his prolonged dampness had cost him. His shorts and shirt had chafed quite severely, leaving ugly rashes stippled over his pale chest and between his thighs, while his sandals - usually reliable for their comfort - had sloughed backs of his heels raw. Lines of stout little blisters, firm bubbles that covered a stinging underlay of new skin, had formed top of the toes where the leather would press down as it bent. The wick that ran between his largest and his middle toes cut into the soft webbing between, leaving the ball of his foot sticky with blood. His damaged hand, which he'd forgotten to keep elevated by his heart, was swollen to nearly twice the size of its pair and sported a remarkable variegation of purple blotches, not unlike a topography map of a particularly hilly country. Sasuke staggered to a halt, wincing at his misfortunes as he pushed his sodden, mud-caked hair out of his eyes with his other hand. He'd need to find something to make a sling, young branches or river reeds, perhaps, he couldn't afford to sacrifice his shirt; brief as it was, the temperature would rebuke him for that in a heartbeat. He didn't seem to be warming up particularly well, he couldn't take chances.

But he couldn't stop for long either. That was far too risky. Throughout his trip Sasuke had made the occasional stop to search for signs of pursuit, taking care to note any reptiles, frogs or toads, anything that might have some ability to communicate with Naruto's summon of choice. Or Orochimaru's. Hawks were no problem if he stayed under the canopy and while there may have been the possibility Shino sending his bugs, Sasuke was fairly sure his insects didn't have much of a range. Aburame clan were often relied on for intelligence missions and reconnaissance, but their satellites didn't often fly far from their source for fear of losing reception.

Trudging in a vague diagonal line back toward the river, Sasuke noticed the sound of the water seemed to have doubled and as he drew nearer to thinning trees and the river bank, he understood why. Here the wide sash of water which traversed through Konoha in a dizzying, dog-legged journey from the ranges above Suna to the sea toward the east was joined by another, smaller
tributary, presumably one that he'd seen in the mountain's graveyard, skirting the edges of Kusa. A fork in the river; good place for a diversion. The question was, what would Konoha expect him to do? On one hand, he could move east towards the ocean and disappear among the sea-bound traffic, while on the other he could head north, back toward the Graveyard, over the ridge and through to the Mist's less popular trade routes. The east was certainly more secure in the long run, however he was none too familiar with the Hot Water Country. Doubtless he would risk exposure on its wide, flat marshlands that stretched for several hundred miles before they dried into sand and met the edge of the ocean. The mountain path posed the double-threat of running into Orochimaru or perhaps a squad of Mist or Lightning Scouts, but he also knew the area well. Company might have been worse out this way, but it was vastly preferable to surrendering before the authorities out in the open and with nowhere to run. The shelter of the trees and the darkness of the forest gave him some cover, however slight.

Decided, Sasuke turned north and followed the smaller river as it tumbled languidly through the woods, soon widening to become a more robust waterway. The current was lazy and the bank was marked by the occasional boulder, having once tumbled from the hills that gradually rose on either side. The air began to warm slightly. The smell of pine and camphor filled Sasuke's nose and while he spent much of his second day swatting mosquitoes as they careened by, whining for a taste of his blood, he was grateful for the fragrant forest air and the stable temperature. He stopped to make camp when the sky darkened, knowing full well he'd need some rest before he pressed on just before dawn. Crafting a small campfire from the twigs and leaves available, Sasuke made one lame attempt at another katon, and when he was predictably unsuccessful, took to the stream to find himself a fire lighter - a small, pocked piece of flint that would allow him to manually produce a flame. Sasuke had never traveled this far south by river, not this particular river anyhow, but the landscape and its feature were identical to that of Otoakure and its surrounding countries and he recognized the flint deposits with little effort. He selected a durable-looking strike-stone, as well as a few choice pieces of argillite, which could be hammered into an effective cutting blade with a mere choice taps. He returned to his fire pit and proceeded to light the grass and dried moss he'd arranged as a fire starter, adding kindling then a small, desiccated chunk of bark once the flame began to take hold. Iruka had taught him how to light a fire, Sasuke recalled as he eased to a squat, warming his hands. Outdoor education was the one class aside from sparring lessons that everyone enjoyed. Not all children could summon a flame with their fingertips, but anyone could learn to spark flint onto packing moss and while most parents argued that the children should have probably been learned more advanced practical skills, no one in the class minded. After all, what was better than running about bashing rocks together all afternoon?

Sasuke smiled wanly at the memory, but the smile drained into a wince as a dull ache passed through his side. Stitch? Or damage, perhaps? It seemed likely he'd pulled something after running for so long (it could happen when one was tired and the importance of posture became secondary to distance gained), or slept in an odd position under the leaves? Flexible though he was, Sasuke was not immune to a stiff neck after crashing out somewhere only a pretzel-shaped boy might fit. Reaching behind him, Sasuke added a log to the fire, sending filaments of burning ash into the air as the slice of bark he'd balanced it on detonated beneath its weight. Padding back to the stream, Sasuke stayed long enough to wash himself and his clothes, removing any final traces of Konoha from them, and catch a few fish to eat for supper. They were hopeless little greybullies, barely worth the trouble save that there were no decent fish to be found - certainly not at such a late hour. He'd hoped for an eel, but even they did not seem to want to make an appearance. Sasuke roasted the little morsels whole and sat, naked, spitting out their bones into the fire. When he'd eaten, he tore a few sparing strips of ruined hem from the bottom of his shirt to secure his wrist in an upward position and produced a few dock leaves he'd foraged to ease the pain of his chafed skin. They were better for stinging nettles or poison oak, but they would have to do. The aloe his angry flesh craved would not be found in the great eastern forests, they were a western luxury, more at home
Finally warmer than he'd been in a while, Sasuke waited until his clothes were dry before he donned them and curled up on the leaves by the embers. He hated to sleep on the ground but the idea of climbing without the aid of chakra and with the current condition his hand was in, he'd decided he was in no position to complain. Though fatigue ebbed behind his eyes, Sasuke slept on alert - never quite letting himself sink into true unconsciousness as most ninja on duty are trained to do. His lack of reserves were an issue for this practice, however and he left his camp the following dawn, tired and shaky.

Sasuke continued this schedule for another two days, his pace slowing considerably by the end of the second. The swelling in his hand had lessened a little, though he was fast running out of time to have it set by a country doctor and keep his anonymity. If he left it longer without treatment he'd have to resort to a false name and a hospital bed; it would take time to properly reshape and bind it. There would be questions. Sasuke didn't need questions. He did, however, need to get a safe distance from Konoha in order to rest properly and he knew he would have to force himself to stay put for a period of recuperation. The sore feeling in his side had not abated, instead it had slipped around to hug the middle of his belly and folded up beneath his ribs and while the pain was nominal, the fact that it refused to leave nagged at him some. Granted he hadn't given himself much time to rest having pushed himself beyond his limits less than a week ago, lethargy and ache were understandable, only Sasuke wasn't quite prepared to put it aside just yet. His body had been put through many strange changes before; history proved any unreported signs were likely to cause trouble if he didn't keep an eye on them.

Darkness was bleeding into the sky by the time he reached an abandoned camp in a clearing not far away from the rivers' edge. It was fairly well-camouflaged, as he almost didn't notice it, buried away in the trees up a slight incline from the bank. The footprints were the first clue; a trail of repetitive tracks that ran back and forth from the clearing to the water. They were faint; the ground was fairly dry and covered with pine needles as opposed to damp leaf mold, which left little evidence of disturbance, but enough to suggest someone had been coming and going fairly frequently. Sasuke scanned the area from a distance first, then again when he reach the edge of the small campground. It was deserted, left almost as though forgotten: tent, fire pit, billy and all. There were no signs of a forced exit, no harried footprints scuffing the area surrounding the campfire, it was just... there.

An inspection of the tent revealed a set of clothes folded on a carefully made up sleeping pad and a small clay teapot, its matching cup placed tidily atop its lid. Whomever had left the little sleep out obviously intended on coming back, yet by the deterioration of the billy contents and the rancid tea putrefying in the elegant little pot, Sasuke assumed they probably weren't. A misfortune for them, not so much for him. He exchanged clothes, dressing in the plain white shirt and serviceable pants that were left on the bed, while his own clothes he tore into bandages and fashioned a better sling for his arm. After hanging the bedding out to air, he returned to the river with the billy and cleaned out the pot as thoroughly as he could. He stayed long enough to catch a few lazy trout, deciding that while the ache in his gut had gotten worse, it was most likely hunger that plagued him. He'd had little more than three meals in four, maybe five days, it was a solid assessment. It didn't feel like hunger cramps, which gave his worry some credence, but practicality argued it was better to rule out the possibilities than fret unnecessarily. Fortune had provided him with a place to rest and real food to eat; he should concentrate on that, more than what wasn't.

Sasuke was no cook, but he had a reasonable lay of the land in the botanical sense - enough not to poison himself at the very least. He located a few swelling tubers by the rivers edge which he knew were safe to eat, and a handful of groundnuts close to one of the swaying, shedding pines provided an excellent thickener for what was essentially a type of stodgy fish soup. He used his slate blade
to scale, gut and messily chop the fish into pieces, then added the vegetables and sat for awhile, stirring the stew slowly, contemplating his next set of movements. He slept that night with soup digesting in his belly, in a borrowed bed under a warm tent. Somehow, despite his predicament, he felt almost safe. It was the best sleep he'd had in months. He would not sleep like this again for a number of years.

Morning hit him in the face with a fist of sheer granite and Sasuke groaned as he attempted to lift what appeared to be fifty-pound weights attached to each eyelid. His head throbbed remarkably, a nasty, grinding sensation that radiated through his skull and scoured his eye sockets. As he moved to right himself, his stomach, which had roused with a unique, wobbly feel inside of it, twisted in sudden, pitching convulsions and all too quickly Sasuke was staggering back towards the river, one hand clamped to his mouth, barely holding the mess at bay. He managed a good ten feet before doubling over, regurgitating most of the fish stew onto the forest floor. Eyes watering at the stench, head spinning, he waited until the nausea passed before toeing leaf matter over the puddle and slowly made his way back to camp. It had to have been the tubers, he told himself, rubbing his angry gut. They'd been unripe. Too green. That was all. It would pass.

But it didn't. He spent the next two hours lost in bouts of dizziness and vomiting and while he tried to clean up after himself after himself - erase any sense of his presence from around the campsite - he found that after brushing the same footprint over with pine needles for the twentieth time, he ought to call the job done. His vision was shivering at the edges and waves of sudden chilly sensations had begun back-combing his nerves with alarming tenacity. He needed to rest. Folding up near a tree at the edge of the campsite (he'd just cleaned the tent six times, he wasn't about to mess it up again), Sasuke let himself doze for another hour. He was annoyed he had to push so far into the morning before he pushed on, but the unexpected bout of illness made him uneasy. Sickness wasn't something he experienced often and while it vexed him, he knew he could afford to be patient. There was still no evidence anyone from Konoha was tailing him and even if someone was, he'd been careful to cover his tracks (sort of) - he'd doubled back and zig-zagged enough times to lead them astray. Slowing his progress, continuing a little more carefully would allow him to rebuild a little strength. He'd need it eventually. Sasuke waited a little longer until the sea-sick feeling had subsided to a slight, manageable queasiness before he was set and on his way again, pushing north east, deeper into the forest.

He'd only traveled a little way from the campsite when he noticed, hidden behind a clump of new ferns, a disturbed patch of dirt, narrow, trench-shaped, roughly eight feet by three. A grave. Couldn't be anything else. Sasuke looked about the area again. Some part of him - the part influenced by Orochimaru's professional curiosity, no doubt - considered digging up the body to find out who it was and why it was there, but sense invariably warned him against it. Not only was such an action extremely offensive, but worse, it was unnecessary. The environment was completely devoid of anything suspect: nothing seemed out of place, there was no sign of a fight, no struggle, not even a sense that a body had been dragged from the camp to the grave (and after all, would a murderer have bothered digging such a neat, precise grave over a simple hole in the ground?). The tent was tidy, not turned over, as was the usual fashion for a thief. No, this was something far more mundane, Sasuke decided as he turned on his heel, trudging north through the trees. Perhaps the burial of a loved one. Final rites. That would explain the clothes, kind of. Maybe the tea. But not the abandoned dinner? That was a little more curious. And who would leave a perfectly good tent out in the forest? It looked old, an antique. The canvas was carefully woven and treated with animal fat to waterproof it; the stitching was small and tight. It was a tent made by an expert and would probably last a lifetime, surely someone would have had it handed down, not left it in the wood for anyone to claim.

The mystery would remain with him until the following morning when, after a full day and night's hike punctuated by gastrointestinal distress (that had, to his dismay, invited frequent, watery
diarrhea to the party), headache and unending nausea, Sasuke stopped at the river's edge to drink and clean himself, washing the taste of his stomach juices out from between his teeth. He crouched low in a small pool that had formed before a series of large boulders, the same of which studded the river bank, shrouding much of the river's path from view as it wound up hill. He had just finished and was about to return to the woods, when he noticed the fish. Not one, but about fifteen of them gathered about the base of the rock, darting in and out, feeding. Large fish. Trout. His stomach sorely protested against the idea of breakfast, but he knew he should probably try to eat something. Fish flesh would be plain enough to deliver some protein without irritating his stomach, especially if it was well coo-

Sasuke froze the moment his fingers touched the water and the fish, disturbed by the ripples, wobbled a little and spread apart, revealing the source of their fascination.

It was a hand.

Pale as the moon and swollen purple with water and decay, the disembodied limb floated toward him, fingers curved as if beckoning. Sasuke spat the tainted water he'd been sloshing around in his mouth and scrubbed at his lips, feeling an oily sensation begin to seep between his ribs and travel up to tickle the base of his throat. Feeling his gut ice over, Sasuke waded further into the water, moving carefully as he eased himself around the jutting rock. A dead body didn't scare him, he'd seen enough of those in his lifetime. It was finding out how the individual had died that was more pressing; how and when.

The corpse bobbed quietly in the water on the north side of the boulder, wedged between another sizable rock and a sodden log. He'd been a young man, at least, that's all Sasuke could garner by his height; the rest of him was so badly swollen and misshapen by both the water and his own intestinal gases and he could have been any age from eighteen to forty. He was wrapped in rotting bandages, completely naked underneath, though some of his skin hung in shredded leaves around him, victim, it seemed to the appetites of the river trout. There were no apparent wounds on his body, nor were there any on his companion who was floating just as dazed-eyed and deteriorated a few paces farther up. The third figure Sasuke spotted was jutting out from beneath a small rocky overhang, where the fresh water cascaded over the atrophied face into a pool below. Then more, congregated on the hidden side of a natural weir. At least ten. All drifting lazily in the water, anchored by trapped appendages or what little clothing they had left on them. Their faces were either bandaged, or turgid with river water and their mouths, slackened by muscular deterioration, hung slack in sleeping screams. Their sightless gaze fixed upon nothing; their eyes opaque as the white of a egg.

Sasuke wandered slowly upstream, dazedly taking in one amorphous form after the next. Not just a single family, but a small community lay bobbing lifeless in the water. The scent of fuming decay, slight before, barely noticeable was now beginning to permeate his nose. He could see why. The bank above the river, the cause for the large, dislodged boulders had crumbled away, revealing several more bandaged cadavers jutting out of the side of the back like strange white roots and in various forms of putrefaction. It was a mass grave, disturbed, most likely, by the war in Konoha. The great tremors formed by various large-scale jutsu fallout (Naruto's, Obito's, Madara's and Hashirama's to name a few) must have shaken the earth loose, spilling the contents of the grave about the river. Sasuke pressed on, wading through the carnage, clocking the damage left and right while his belly flip-flopped and anxiety stung his wrists.

They weren't the product of a raid. They weren't the losing side of a battle. The bodies were in bad shape, but they weren't damaged or wounded in any way. They'd been treated with care, wrapped in cloth; a burial ritual. They'd been prepared respectfully after death, buried together because… because… so many had died at once. Died one after the other because they'd been sick. They'd
been sick. They'd died of sickness. They'd died of-

-disease. The area was diseased. The river was-

Sasuke hadn't moved so fast in a long time. He didn't even think it was possible in his poor state, but somehow he managed anyway. He propelled himself out of the tainted stream, wrenching his fractured hand from its sling as he scrambled over the bank, over the rubble and away from the dead zone as fast as he possibly could. The smell of the rot had infested his nose and the knowledge that he'd been drinking contaminated water for days, eating plants that had grown in the sick soil, fish that had lain, surrounded by bacteria, parasites, horrors that would have no effect on their systems (yet ravage those of any human who ingested them) would not leave his mind. His survival lessons, a series of lengthy modules in his preliminary ninja training flickered back and forth in his mind like television commercials, warning him of the dangers lurking in the great outdoors. Stagnant water could contain and number of horrors from flesh-eating parasites, to amoebic terrors: Giardia, Cholera, Dysentery and countless more. Mosquitoes, those which hung around the quieter parts of the river, they could carry illness. Even the earth itself, rife with the pollution of the dead, surely there was some kind of infestation through it now, like the rotting path of a worm through soft fruit flesh.

Sasuke's practical mind (the one of whom was usually in charge), reasoned that most of the water he'd consumed he'd boiled, so it was all right. It was fine. They'd been dead a while. The chance of him-

-But did you? His hysteria, now in full force as it had been the day his parents were murdered, interrupted. Did you though? Remember, boiling doesn't always kill the infection-

-Time might have lessened the effects. And surely the infection hadn't spread down as far as the other camp-

- the grave though, the clothes left behind. The other man didn't just leave he fled the camp he meant to burn the clothes he meant to burn it all but he fled and-

Sasuke hissed through his teeth, sweat stinging his eyes as began to sprint. He needed to find a doctor. He needed to get to medicine, antibiotics, freaking anti-venom, whatever would cleanse him of this rot in his system. Had Sasuke been thinking clearly, he would have reasoned that he was a strong young man with, as most ninja developed, an incredibly robust system, rarely enabling him to catch a cold, let alone a deadly parasite. But Sasuke wasn't thinking clearly. Sasuke was exhausted, strung-out from the anxiety he'd pushed well down, drained of chakra and left with a seemingly damaged system that refused to gain more. The rot was there. He knew it; he felt it. It was worse than Orochimaru's curse, worse than both the Snake and White Zetsu hanging about under skin. It was festering inside him, eating away at his insides, turning him slowly into a walking corpse. His brain refused to stop finding images of the decimated faces in the river, pummeling them up in his immediate vision so that he could revile them once more. He saw his parents' faces in them. Saw the death casts of his clan emerging out of those detached expressions, out of the ripped and ruined bodies. His clan in the water. The Uchiha was in the water, their blood staining the river crimson as the sky that night. Coppery blight crowded his nostrils, and throbbed red before his eyes. Sasuke let out a cry as he felt their fingers reaching for him, Itachi's fingers; his ragged nails catching on his skin.

No, the eye. It was reaching for his eye.

Sasuke ran on and on from clan he couldn't save; the family he'd failed. His lungs burned like raw sacks of exposed flesh against the stinging air, his feet throbbed, his knees screamed. Branches whipped his skin, roots curled about his feet. His ankle rolled dangerously on the uneven ground
but still he pushed further, desperate to somehow outrun his own memories. From images of the Uchiha, remnants of his battle with Naruto exploded to the forefront of his mind. He saw himself fighting, saw the disappointment and confusion on the idiot's face, saw him slack-jawed as he caught him in his tsukiyomi, felt the fox push against him—

But how could he fight? How could he fight when he gave Naruto what he wanted; everything he wanted? It wasn't an attack, it was a gift-

-then it went dark. Naruto spun out of control and the vortex that swallowed them opened up to dissolve everything within the wake of its huge, black, maw. Naruto yelled, only it wasn't for him, it was for, for-

Time and space lurched as the ground dropped from under Sasuke's feet, leaving his thoughts suspended in the air while his body careened down the slope of a steep gully. Blinded by disorientation, Sasuke tried to keep his balance as he plummeted, fighting the lashing vines and twigs as they sailed past. A low branch, hidden behind a spray of pine brush managed to strike his cheekbone, however, snapping his head back so viciously his throat might have torn open from the force of it. He was unconscious before he hit the ground.

It was hours later when he woke, though how much time had passed he could not say. It might have been a few hours, a day, a week from all he knew. He could barely tell if he was awake at all. His head clanged. His jaw felt as though it had been wrenched over his head and the right side of his face seemed to explode in pain. Dizzy, he tried to get to his feet, only to collapse again, full force into the mud. Darkness invaded. Then light. Then a kind of swarming, stippled grey. His senses reeled. Concussion soon opened the door to full-blown delirium as Sasuke's condition worsened, and his mind began to unravel almost as fast as his health deteriorated. There was only bile left in his stomach, but he rid himself of that as often as he breathed. He started relieving himself more frequently, too frequently and what came out was either discolored, foul smelling or dark with blood. His bones screamed.

Staggering, adrift in the forest and gravely ill, Sasuke's sense of self preservation soon vanished. He didn't give up as much as entirely forgot what his body needed in order to survive. He stopped searching for water. Forgot to keep himself warm or safe when the light left the trees. Finding food was a joke; occasionally he'd stuff a handful of leaves in his mouth out of some kind of primal habit, only to choke and spit them out moments later. His belly distended under the pressure of his swollen gut and grew so tight and painful he could barely breathe without feeling the burn and tear of his abscessed intestines. His head was thick with fever, tongue dry as leather, high-pitched noises buzzing in his ears. He trudged on, despairingly tenacious, yet no longer sure of where he was going or what he was supposed to do once he reached his destination.

At last he collapsed in the mud near a large rock somewhere so deep within the trees the light barely penetrated at all. Shadows, cold and wet, surrounded him, witness to his final moments, agonized and alone in an ever-growing sewer of his own filth. His body began cooling, his pulse lowering beat upon beat, his breath shortening to light, unsatisfying gasps that clouded in the gelid air. Through a thick haze of pain, Sasuke called for Naruto, his forgiveness, his light. He called for his brother, his reason, his guilt. If he was crying, he didn't know. There was mud in his eyes and slime crusting his face, but he felt it in his heart. The loss. The regret. Finally, as the edges of his vision began to dim and the pain seemed to subside to cold nothing, he called for his mother. He called for her to come and find him. In the dark she'd always found him. He was here now. And it was so very dark.

Mother …
When the canteen pushed against his lips and the water ran over his dry tongue, it was as though some had run an electrical current through him, sparking his nerves and system back to life any place the liquid touched. Fearful, for the memory of the river was all to close, he tried to spit it out, gurgling to whomever that the water was spoiled; he couldn't drink it, it would kill him. Only a wide, callused hand stroked his bangs away from his face and in a strangely manipulated accent he was told:

"It's rainwater. It's clean. Drink."

Skeptical (as even an expiring Sasuke is skeptical), but too weak to be anything but compliant, Sasuke let himself be fed from the canteen, swallowing only a few small mouthfuls before he had to stop. His head lolled and he coughed weakly, wincing as his abdomen screamed at the tension. The hand on his head moved to support his neck and the someone said:

"Help me get him out of this shit."

Suddenly Sasuke was aware of other figures moving around him. He could barely separate one shape from another, but he figured there were two, maybe three people that had come to his aid, though what they were doing in the forest in the first place was anyone's guess. He stayed as still as he could while they moved him, groaning lightly in pain as he was shifted onto some sort of rough, canvas material. It felt scratchy beneath his fingers. The water came again, then a cloth carefully patting the blood and fluid away from his face. It had also been drenched in water, blissfully cool against his skin.

"It's ok kid," the first voice spoke again. "There's a small logging settlement at the edge of the forest. Pretty sure they have a quack or a medic or something. We'll get you to some help, you just stay with us now."

A man's voice. It was a man's voice. It sounded strange and hollow in his ears and the words weren't working quite as well as they should. An accent perhaps? Hard to tell. The others he could barely see for his blurred vision, seemed to keep quiet until the settlement was mentioned. Then it became apparent they weren't so convinced the effort was worth the trouble.

"He's the colour of piss, Caliga," one of them hissed. His voice was even more odd than the first. "Done for. Won't even make it to the road."

"He'll live. I can see it in his eyes."

"His eyes are almost rollin' outta their sockets, you dozy cunt," the third (and surely the largest man by the depth of his baritone), said. "He'll be too weak for it."

"Nothing to worry about, just a little infection."

"Little? He's about as rotten as your fucking prick!"

"And you'd be the expert in rotten pricks, wouldn't you Drust?" The one called Caliga snorted. "Tell us all about your whores sometime, you seething sack of shit. Now move! We've got some ground to cover."

The tarpaulin Sasuke was lying on was swiftly engineered into a makeshift stretcher with the addition of a couple of bamboo poles and some ingenious rigging. A carcass stretcher. For large animals. That made sense; the men were hunters. Probably had to push deeper into the woods now that game was getting scarce before winter. Moving carefully, but with surprising speed, the group made their way back up the gully and through the forest. Sasuke watched the trees pass overhead
as strange, spidery blobs. When they reached another water source - a small, clear creek that babble rather delightedly as it trickled by - Caliga called the rescue mission to a halt and laid Sasuke out by the mouth of the stream, loosening his clothing before he removed it and began cleaning the skin beneath.

"Rest for a bit," he said as he wiped down Sasuke's muddied forearms with sheds of cloth. The other two had begun building a fire and had it lit faster than Sasuke could even compute. Slightly more cognizant now, he caught the man's wrist as Caliga reached to clean his face and shook his aching head lightly.

"Stop… Might catch-"

"Catch your bug? Unlikely, kid," Caliga reassured him, rubbing a dirty spot below Sasuke's chin. "Hunting out this way you have to dose yourself up well enough to survive a plague. Trust me, I could eat off your weeping arse-hole with no worries at all, c'cept for making sure I cleaned my teeth after."

"Gross…" Sasuke swallowed with difficulty. Caliga just shrugged and rolled him over to his side as he worked on his back. The other two sat around the fire, cocking their hip flasks against their lips as they watched the pair reproachfully. One of them motioned to him, lip drawn back in an arc against his teeth.

"What happened to his hand?"

"Guess that's his story to tell," Caliga surmised, quickly. "Probably smashed it falling down that damn cliff."

"Have to be pretty unlucky," the other pressed. He spat into the flames. "Looks like it was crushed or sommat. Looks like shit."

"So does the rest of him. You have some skill in pointing out the obvious," Caliga clicked his tongue, helping Sasuke roll back over. When he addressed him, the sharp tone in his voice had softened. He sounded very different when he spoke to the other two. "Now we had to burn your other clothes kid, they were pretty much fucked. I've got a spare skiv, though, that'll do you for now."

"Say goodbye to your shirt, then." Drust offered a toast the threadbare shift Caliga had pulled over Sasuke's head. "He'll shit that to pieces."

"Good thing I got it out of your bag." Caliga grinned, swiping the flask from the man's hand after he was satisfied with Sasuke's attire. "I'll drink to your loss though."

"Arsehole."

"Get him closer to the fire," the bigger man, still nameless, mused. "You'll need to warm him some more if you want him to survive."

Caliga nodded and obliged. Sasuke let out a gasp of appreciation as the warmth finally began to penetrate his skin, deep into his core.

"That threadbare shirt's no help either," Big man continued. "I've got some pelts I don't mind sparing. Screwed up the tanning, so."

"Cheers." Caliga sounded almost grateful. "Least someone's trying to help."
"You got my skiv, you damn filch, what the hell else do you want?" Drust grumbled. He snatched his flask back from Caliga's hand and drained it, perhaps convinced that his grog would become Sasuke's next possession.

Warm, clean and bundled in furs, though his headache remained and his bones felt as though they were filled with glass, Sasuke realized these men might have just saved his life. He hadn't been convinced up until this point; he still didn't feel quite confident in relaxing just yet. Nor was he sure he agreed that his life should have been spared; he'd been ready to go. He'd made peace with his fate. Only each breath that filled his lungs tasted so damn good no matter how sick he still felt. Each throb of his tired heart, pounded behind his eyes and in his ears, but damn if it didn't sound like music. His deus ex machina was a strange man with cunning green eyes and a mouth that could taint any idiom into a kind of debauched poetry, but he was a savior all the same. Sasuke would live. He would heal. Then he would face whatever challenges were left for him, be it Konoha, Naruto, or the world itself. He had a another chance. Normally he'd fight against his lack of choice, but right now it was just too hard to even think. Sasuke closed his eyes and willed himself to relax. Soon he would be receiving real medicine. Soon he'd be able to rest.

Only…

Only he couldn't quite shake the way these three strangers had turned up so suddenly, so fortuitously. It was if he'd been too lucky. People died in the forest all the time, why was he an exception? He could barely hold one thought in place, but he couldn't ignore the growing apprehension he felt among the shards of pain in his gut. Even half-conscious, Sasuke knew better than to second-guess himself. When Caliga spoke to him his voice was that of a country farmer, a hunter, his accent lilting as many seemed to when further away from the melting pot of vernacular most cities had on offer. Yet it seemed wrong. Something about it, something very slight, possibly rehearsed away to the point of invisibility, seemed wrong. He could have put it down to a misunderstanding, after all, he'd been floating in and out of consciousness since the moment they found him. But even senses that were as dull as the back of a knife, still had a sharp edge about them somewhere. Sasuke wasn't so naive that he'd ignore such an equitable feeling of uncertainty.

That nagging feeling only lingered when Sasuke finally came to, this time stretched out on an ancient hospital cot, in a dim, untidy little room. Disinfectant scented the air and the light, clouded by dust motes, hung still and white around him. An IV stood vigil at his side, sluicing much needed fluids and medicine into his system. His weakened body was covered by a light blanket that itched where it touched skin. Sasuke blinked his eyes a few times, feeling the stickiness of his tears gumming his lashes together. He could feel puffiness around his eyes, clearly the swelling in his face hadn't alleviated much, but on the whole he felt better than he had in several days. The pain wasn't gone, it lay dormant, sitting around him like a kind of wall, steep and mute, but it was manageable with the medication. Wiggling the fingers of his right hand, he found that it was bandaged tightly - prepped for setting. He could barely feel it anymore, though he imagined that was a good numbness, not the kind that gave cause for amputation.

Voices through the thin, custom wood wall him caught his attention and, with difficulty, he turned his head toward the sound. A door rested slightly open opposite his bed, revealing a sliver of what appeared to be a small office. Though his vision was foggy and his hearing just as unreliable, Sasuke picked out the form of a short, sagging man with snowy whiskers and pebble-round eyeglasses standing near a desk that was backed against the wall. He had his arms crossed over his sparrow's chest and seemed to be arguing with someone else whose identity was hidden behind the door. Only fragments of their conversation seemed to reach him, but Sasuke began to regret his eavesdropping almost immediately as they began to register.

- verge of renal failure - They said. - need of surgery… won't get back to your village in time...
Fire country too far-

That piqued his curiosity. Fire country. Konoha. Why were they talking about Konoha? Had someone recognized him? Didn't they say they were in a logging settlement? Maybe one of the loggers was from the South, or the doctor perhaps? Sasuke groaned as he tried to move, but he could manage less than a fraction before he had to give up, his strength already sapped with the sheer amount of energy it took to stay awake. He lay back and forced his ears to carve out the sound more clearly, his eyes still trained on the door. Every so often he thought he caught a glimpse of the doctor's company - what appeared to be three tall ANBU, clad in Konoha flaks and mountain gear. His heart lurched when he heard:

"fix him here? Needs to return alive for questioning…. War criminal, you know-

"I don't care if he's a criminal or a decorated soldier!" The doctor, who'd moved closer to the door and now far more easily deciphered, hissed. "That war decimated half the villages in the area and re-routed the trade roads that kept the others alive! You've got a lot of nerve coming here expecting any help at all, you arrogant bastards. If the boys were here rather than out rebuilding the damn countryside you brawlingidiots wrecked, you'd be out on your asses. Best you'll get for his condition is out West - Karikura hospital. It's on the main line, it'll only take you about a day or so. Look, I'll call-

The rest of his directions and the responses from the others were drowned in another wave of unconsciousness as Sasuke's weakened system gave out to fatigue and the morphine that candied his veins. When he woke again he was laid out in a much smaller room that seemed rather like a tent. Cloth draped tightly over a framework of metal arches reached over his head and a hurricane lamp, suspended from the scaffold, swung gently from side to side, casting odd shadows about the fabric walls. It took a moment for him to realize they were moving.

"Where?" He began, swallowing back the ache in his voice. "This?"

"On our way to a hospital, kid. Just relax." Caliga was suddenly sitting at his side, as though he'd materialized out of the darkness. He tugged at the bandage on Sasuke's arm carefully repositioning the tissue. "Won't be long."

"Doctor?" Sasuke asked, confused. He could pick out the sound of hooves now, the jingle of reigns, the crunch of gravel beneath wooden wheels. He was in a cart of some kind; a wagon. They'd acquired transport.

"Been and gone, kid," Caliga patted his hand reassuringly; a strange gesture. "Juiced you up good for the journey. Doc didn't have enough equipment out in the woods there."

"Journey?"

"Yeah." His voice dropped a little now. It was almost apologetic. "You're out of the woods for now, literally, but you've taken a pretty nasty beating. You need a hospital. Doc didn't have enough equipment out in the woods there."

"Equip-?" Sasuke managed to lower his eyebrows into something of a frown. "How bad?"

"Surgery-bad, I guess. Doc suggested we take you North to Gencha."

The frown deepened. North? No, he hadn't heard North. The doctor had said west. Karikura. Gencha was further away and close to the mountain border separating the Land of Sound from the Land of Earth, reasonably close to the palisade rocks of Iwagakure. In comparison, however, the
west coast was swallowed up in Suna's vast deserts and perhaps a little too near Gaara for Sasuke's liking. The direction was besides the point, in any case. Why had Caliga lied about it? Why change his mind and take Sasuke elsewhere when one journey was, for all intents and purposes, almost a day longer than another. Was it something to do with the ANBU he'd seen at the clinic? What happened to them? Had they not recognized him after all?

"Konoha?" He said, hoping to sound pitifully confused. Caliga blinked, frowning a little.

"No, Gencha. North. Konoha's miles away from here."

"Soldiers…" Sasuke coughed a little and moaned when it hurt. He'd seen ANBU soldiers, he was sure of it. He would have recognized that uniform anywhere. "I saw… Konoha Shinobi…"

"Where?"

"Clinic."

There was a little silent point where Caliga seemed to be turning that information over in his mind. His hand was resting on Sasuke's forehead, sympathetically, though there came the most imperceptible twitch in his fingers when Sasuke spoke. The sound of the horse's hooves against the road filled the little wagon tent for some time and the squeak of the IV as it swayed on its little hooks seemed to punctuate it. When Caliga spoke again, he was smiling; even his voice seemed to smile. It wasn't as comforting as it should have been.

"You were probably dreaming," he told Sasuke, reaching behind him to pull a small leather bag up to his knee. Sasuke noted how he kept it close to his side, as though he intended to keep the contents from view. "It was just us and the old guy. All the loggers were up in the forest."

Sasuke just looked at him, his skepticism on a slow simmer behind his eyes. It wasn't as though Caliga made him feel unsafe, it was just the oddness of the events up until this point which compounded into a grander sense of unease. For someone who'd based most of his survival on his ability to think clearly and act upon instinct, having painkillers numbing his system and a low fever blurring the edges of his understanding on most things tugged at Sasuke's restless hackles. Every sense that could still muster the synapses to function told him to stay on edge. His body muttered it was trying _it just damn well kept falling off._

"Why're you worried about Konoha anyway?" Caliga continued and to which Sasuke snapped back to attention. Caliga was examining his IV, the line tangled lightly in his fingers. "Something I should know?"

"Send help…maybe," Sasuke managed, encouraging some of his usual nonchalance to loiter about in his tone. "The river… Clean up. Could have given directions."

"In your state?" The man laughed. "You couldn't have told your arse from your elbow! You might have dribbled a bit, perhaps, but you've not said much for the past twenty something hours. Sensible thought, though. Tell you what, if I see any shinobi, I'll let them know you have information for them."

The offer came across somewhat as a challenge. It felt like one. Sasuke watched as the strange green eyes regarding him seemed to dance in the light of the swinging lamp above his head. For a moment they appeared a lot darker than he remembered.

"Sure," he replied. Caliga's hand remained in the bag for a little longer, then he removed it, empty and gave a nod.
"It's gonna get bumpier for a while, road's shit for the next stretch. Best you'd get some sleep while you can, I don't know how well the painkillers will tide you over that ride."

"Yeah," Sasuke agreed, licking his dry lips, feeling dizzy again. Though he fought against it, sleep persisted and the rolling motion of the wagon was only helping the darkness invade faster. Despite Caliga's warning and the apparent roughness of the road, Sasuke did not wake. He dreamed of the night and day passing by in bleeding black and blue, the grind of the road passing below them. He dreamed he heard the whinny of the horse as it was whipped into acceleration. He dreamed he heard Caliga and his men talking quietly in a language he didn't recognize - words flowed together without seemingly any breaks, sentences bled into a strange mass of sound.

He dreamed of a familiar face with hair that was dark thought it shouldn't have been. Then he didn't dream at all.

There was rock above him. Grey, rough granite. Its striations blotted by the smoke hanging suspended in the air like a cloud, matching the same fog that still clung between his temples, smothering his thoughts. Sasuke blinked, feeling the weight of his eyelids pressing in, coaxing him back to sleep, but his mind was stimulated now, alert and searching for further information. There was a cloth beneath him, woven, worn from use. The wefts were thick and plump, making the firm surface comfortable to lie on. Warmth generated by his own body accumulated in the threads, eased the ache out of his back and shoulders and offered an impression of comfort not commonly associated with sickrooms. Lifting his left arm, he found it pierced by a stratagem of IV needles, all taped tightly in place and lined up against one another like porcupine quills. His fingers had taken on an odd, sallow colour and his palm was blueish pale, but as far as he could tell, there was a pinkish hue blooming at the edge of the yellow. That was a little more heartening. His other hand, he was relieved to find, had been set in plaster quite magnificently and bound to his chest in a wide, tissuey bandage. Around him, the woody odors of dried herbs and the occasional sting of something sharper - like cypress or pine - permeated his nose and he breathed in deeply, letting the spiced air fill his lungs and slowly drag his senses back on line.

It was a cave, the room he was in. Carved out of the rock and fashioned to a workable finish. It was better than Obito's chambers beneath the Mountains Graveyard, but it was still a cave. Not a hospital. Sasuke found he was, yet again, unsurprised by this revelation. There was a door at one end, practically camouflaged by the smoke - Sasuke didn't notice it until it opened and Caliga stepped inside, padding softly over to the bed. He'd changed. Cleaned up a little. He looked different again, taller, broader. His hair curled when it hadn't before and his chin was shadowed by a rough, patchy beard. That was suspiciously new.

"Feel better?" He asked, drawing up a chair to sit at Sasuke's side. "You were out for a while, you know."

"Where's this?" Sasuke said, customarily ignoring the question. He wasn't in a hospital. He wasn't where he should be. "This is not Gencha."

"No, it's not."

"Then where the hell is it?"

Caliga sat back, eyebrows arching assent. A smile danced playfully at the corner of his lips. "Does it matter? You're on the mend. Pretty soon you'll be all better."

"This is not Gencha." Sasuke repeated. His hosts' actions hadn't sounded any alarms just yet, but suspicion was mounting. Charity was something Sasuke had never taken lightly. He wasn't about to start. "This is not where you said you were going to take me. Why?"
"Because they had Shinobi stationed at Gencha," Caliga replied, mildly. "Just like they do at Karikura. Just like they do everywhere. The Alliance aren't stupid, Uchiha Sasuke, they know where an injured fugitive is likely to end up."

Uchiha Sasuke. His name fell off Caliga's lips like a plumb line, heavy, certain and heading straight toward the floor. The look of reproach on Sasuke's face, the quick shame at being caught out made the stranger lean forward to rest his chin on his hand.

"They've got your face plastered up from Tsuchi no Kuni to the end of the ocean and cross ways at that," Caliga went on. "Just an avenue of Sasukes as far as the eye can see. Guess it's a boon you're not bad to look at, mm?"

"What do you want?"

"Your village must really want you back, there's a reward and everything. Pretty generous amount too. Screams desperation if you ask me."

"I am asking you. What do you want?" Sasuke said again, wincing at the softness in his vowels and the way his words slurred a little. He was still so damn weak. "Are you turning me in?"

"Where's the fun in that?" Caliga said. "Turn you in? Someone as interesting as you?"

"I'm not interesting. I'm a criminal."

"Are you? The posters just say you were a participant, a person of interest gone AWOL at the end of the war. Worst I've heard is fugitive, but there's no further description. How naughty have you been?"

"If I'm not a criminal then why's there a reward?"

"You tell me," Caliga said. "How come the great city of Konohagakure would offer a small fortune for your return? They've even listed recompense for information on your whereabouts. Cash for clues. Not very ninja-like, is it? Don't you guys pride yourselves in your ability to sniff out your own?"

"Who says I'm a ninja?"

Caliga's expression sloped into a kind of withering please and he motioned to the ink on Sasuke's pin-pricked forearm, poking out from under the lip of his cast.

"You like summoning tattoos that much? Seems weird to get one without the chops to be able to use it."

That inspired a little surprise. Sasuke's tattoo was a clone of Orochimaru's personal design; the only people to wear it were Sasuke and the Snake himself. That Caliga had even recognized the motif was worrying enough, however not as much a the immediate hint he'd let slip. Sasuke narrowed his eyes.

"Where is he?"

"Who?"

"Orochimaru," Sasuke tried to force the darkness into his gaze as much as he could. "I know he's behind this. Where is he?"
"What? The kiddie snatcher?" Caliga laughed. "Dr Pervert? Why'd we have anything to do with him?"

"Don't be an asshole," Sasuke growled, though it was weak and lacked bite. "You know who I am. You've known all along. That's why you saved me in the first place, you can drop the act. It's no mystery why Orochimaru would pay for my retrieval privately, even after his part in the war. So where is he?"

"I'd rather lick the shitnuts off a goat than work with that sex pest." Caliga said, breezily. "His reputation precedes him, thus we recede from any work that might circumnavigate his interests. We don't need work where the pink slip is literally his something pink and slippery. No thanks. You're the first job we've taken that involves anything of his-"

"I wasn't his," Sasuke interrupted. Caliga shrugged.

"Anything he considered his, then. Look, there's this rich Nob from some fancy grand house near Amegakure who's related to the Fire Daimyo or something. Apparently he has this daughter who's nuts about you. Wanted some chance to talk to you or something. Said you saved her life when she was a kid."

Sasuke ruminated the idea. It was probably true, though he could barely remember rescuing any daughters of note.

"The Toff hired us to track you down, get you out of searchlights, so to speak." Caliga continued. "When we found you all messed up in the woods, we figured it was best to take you back to base camp. Go from there."

"Base camp?"

"Yeah. Our place. I told you, we're hunters," Caliga said and to Sasuke's silence, added. "Of a kind."

"What kind?"

"The kind that turns a blind eye to a few rules here and there." Caliga said. "Takes the odd commission when it suits. Sometimes goes after bigger game than your standard pig and deer, if you know what I mean."

"I'd rather you elaborated."

"Let's just say our targets are more than what most hunters would have the nerve to track."

"Jinchuuriki," Sasuke narrowed his eyes. "You hunt jinchuuriki. So did the Akatsuki. Were you affiliated?"

"What, the Curtain Company?" Caliga snorted. "Those kids running around in nighties, hacking up anything that bleats? Fuck no. Whatever their agenda was, we weren't part of it."

Sasuke blinked. *Kids running around in nighties?* That was a particularly shortsighted way to describe Obito's cabal. Likely, Caliga and his team had never encountered them. They wouldn't have lasted a single conversation if they shared such an opinion.

"Then what?"

"Well, we've hunted a few rogue jinchuuriki here and there, didn't account to much. Clever little
buggers, those things. I meant people, mostly."

"Hunted people? That would make you special agents. Government agents-"

"Hardly."

"Assassins."

"No," Caliga shook his head, virtuous. His smile was not. "I told you. We're hunters."

Sasuke frowned. "What do you think is the difference?"

"Our targets generally know we're coming." Caliga explained. "The fun is in the chase more than the… you know. Other bit."

"So why take a job where your target is left alive?" Assassination, hunting, however they framed it, was dangerous. It was likely someone might get hurt along the way, especially if they set a shinobi in their sights and intended on delivering him still kicking. Caliga didn't seem that foolhardy, nor did his profession sound as simple as he made out. There was something about him that remained undoubtedly canny. If he wasn't a ninja, he'd certainly learned how to divert like one. "I'm guessing this kind of thing doesn't happen often."

"Not really. But as I said: you're interesting."

Sasuke stared at him for a moment.

"If you knew who I was.. am… you must have known what I can do. Or heard something of it at least."

"Yeah. So?"

Were they suicidal? Stupid? Or did they know he was sick? Sasuke couldn't figure it out. Konoha couldn't have been behind his rescue - he'd have been back in the Village by now, with Naruto slobbering over him like some manic puppy. Perhaps Iwa or Raigakure had some dirt on him they didn't want to share, but once again, this was unusual. He wouldn't put it past Ohnoke to go behind the Alliance's back, his village was famous for it after all, but Caliga and his men didn't seem like the type. They didn't seem like Orochimaru's type either. They didn't appear to be confederate with anyone. So why take such a risk on someone like him? Unless…

"Those people at the river," Sasuke said, wetting his lips slowly. It would make sense. It would make brutal, horrible sense, but- "Did you kill those people at the river to get to me?"

"Did I..?" Caliga laughed then. Slapped his knee and brayed loudly that it echoed across the room. His teeth seemed to shine in the darkness. "Did I take out a whole village to get to you? Poison a whole river just so you'd catch the shits and end up choking on forest mud until someone found you? Are you mental? They'd been dead for weeks, kid, I don't have that kind of foresight!"

"Weeks?"

"Sure. The river settlements have been quietly crapping out ever since Konoha got leveled the first time. Busted dams, ruined soil, river sickness, all kinds of shit. It's just taken awhile for it to travel downstream as far as it did and no one's raised the alarm because they're too busy getting out of the Akatsuki's way. Doubtless any warnings probably got eaten up in military correspondence anyway, so they were fucked no matter what. What happened to you was just bad luck, my friend. Just plain old bad luck."
Bad luck. Well, that was one thing Sasuke was outrageously accustomed to. "Then," he said, considering the facts, the possibilities. He rubbed his fingers together as though they itched. "What were you going to do if you didn't find me as I was? If I could fight you?"

"Why would you fight us if we were trying to help you?"

"Help? For a price? That's not help."

"Sure it is. That's how things work out this way, kid." Caliga stretched. "We might have just tagged along for a while, make sure you got out of the area before we reported back, that's all. The Toff's daughter didn't exactly specify what proof she wanted, only that you were safe."

"That sounds ridiculous."

"Settle down, it's true." Caliga crossed his arm over his chest, lengthening the tricep. Sasuke could see the foundation of his muscles under his skin. A strong body wasn't much against a ninja; it was a grave consideration however, for an invalid or a civilian. "Weren't you listening? The Nob lived near Konoha. You really think I'd risk taking you back to the country you were obviously trying to flee? I was going to give the girl a lock of your hair or something."

"Seems weird," Sasuke said, still unconvinced. "A noble relying on a group that isn't attached to any village. Nobles don't like that; they want the recommendation. They like the paperwork. You guys don't seem like the paperwork kind."

"That's assuming a lot."

"It's an educated study. I'm no expert but I've seen how a lot of brigand groups operate. Fought more than I can remember. You guys don't act like any of the others."

"You've barely met us," Caliga reminded him. "And you were pretty dosed the entire time. I wouldn't go pointing fingers too soon. You don't know what we can do."

"You're not shinobi. I know that."

"And what makes you so sure?"

"I can sense it," Sasuke lied. In truth, he didn't know - they just didn't seem like Shinobi, not even the rogue kind. For starters, they couldn't have been from the mainland. They were too different. Sasuke appreciated the fact that the Shinobi continent which he'd traveled almost end to end on his quest for vengeance boasted a variety of very individual creatures, but most (apart from those like Kisame who had physically changed their form for the sake of their abilities) seemed to have a kind of invisible link to the land they were born in. They fit. It was difficult to describe. Caliga, the way he dressed, the way he spoke, his manner, everything - didn't.

Sure, he might have been over-thinking it. Sure, he was fairly shaken to the core by his illness and his lack of chakra just worried his nerves something terrible - like a junkie itching for the next hit. But Sasuke was a keen study for things that seemed out of place and the more Caliga spoke, the more he looked at the man really looked at him, the more he seemed like something that did not belong. A blight might be a natural phenomenon upon crops and farmland; that did not mean it was meant to be there. It was simply an unfortunate sequence of events that encouraged such a plague to manifest. It was, as Caliga himself put it, bad luck.

The so-called hunter himself regarded Sasuke quietly for a moment, seemingly sniffing out an edge to work on. "Sense it?" He repeated after a moment. Sasuke nodded.
"All shinobi can sense one another. Their chakra. Some say it's by smell, some say it's a glow or a feeling."

Caliga leaned in a little more closely. "And with you?"

At his level, well, at the level he'd been, Sasuke could divine the chakra even in a low-level academy student several miles away. If someone wasn't particularly good at cloaking their energy, Sasuke could pinpoint them. Karin was his long range of course, but Sasuke knew he had been fairly reliable on his own. However in his current condition he couldn't have sensed Otsutsuki Kagura if she'd been sitting in his lap.

"A sound," he said, apathetically. "A buzzing."

"Sure that's not tinnitus?" Caliga remarked. He smacked his lips together in a sort of period, suddenly cheery. "Well, it doesn't take one Shinobi to catch another, does it? Anyway, as you know, we're hunters. We don't need magic to get by."

"You don't need what?"

"Chakra. Whatever. Look, believe me or don't, it's piss in the wind at this point. You heal up and fuck off, we go claim our reward, everyone's happy."

"And how do you intend to prove you've helped me?" Sasuke pressed. The facts swung around in his head. He would need more before he was satisfied to start laying them out. "I won't be going back the way I came."

"We'll take a photo of you or something," Caliga shrugged. "A Sasuke snapshot. Bet you've got a lovely smile in there-" One brow raised skeptically as Sasuke's scowl deepened. "-somewhere…"

"Your operation seems tragically blase."

"Look, you know what happens when you look gift horse in the mouth too closely, kid?" Caliga sighed. "You get your ear bit, that's what. Honestly, I honestly don't care about the cash, the crust didn't offer that much for you anyway and we're not skint. If you're really so dissatisfied with our hospitality, by all means say the words and I'll help you and your gammy insides back up to the road and on your merry fucking way. Sure, you've got a bit of jaundice still hanging about, sunlight will probably do you good. Might take a while to clear up, but I promise if we find you stiff in a ditch three days from now we'll look the other way."

"All right, all right. Point taken." Sasuke closed his eyes, tiredly. He wasn't exactly sorry, but he was at most times genuinely unaware of how rude he could sound. And he needed to stay in Caliga's favor. "Look, forget it. I'm just…"

"Pissy? Confused? Sick as a dog?" Caliga's voice softened again then and he reached across, over Sasuke's head to turn down the lamp. The light dimmed comfortably. "Don't worry about it. You're still pretty raw and that's not an understatement. Our doc says you were damn lucky to be alive and he's stitched up holes in our boys bigger than your head. You're a wreck, I mean that in the most descriptive sense. You've gotta give yourself time and stop fretting about everything."

"How…" Sasuke took a breath, feeling light headed again. "How wrecked?"

"I'll get the doc to give me his papers or whatever," Caliga promised. "Show you what the bill entails, ok? You rest. You need it."

"How much longer-" Sasuke started to say, but sleep was on him and the lights were out. His brain
ached to work, to pick things apart - an engine afraid to rust - but he just couldn't will the energy together to do it. Sleepiness weighed on his eyelids, pulling them down, shutting out the world. His breathing evened. Everything around him became slow and still as though time itself had plucked him out of its steady stream and kept him close in its pocket for later. He did not sense the passage of time, did not notice as details in the room began to change and shift around him. Though he tried to keep part of his mind vigil, he fell into a deep, animated sleep and could not be warned of the changing scents in the room - the incense that burned stronger and pungent enough to fill the room with haze- nor the shapes which moved through it. They were tall, twisted shapes draped in flowing cloaks which billowed in the fog like sheets caught in a breeze. The shapes belonged to creatures, Sasuke noted. Creatures with sunken black eyes and folded faces that flowed as they spoke to one another in a language not unlike the tongue of Caliga and his men that he'd heard on the wagon. Whether he heard it at all though, that was another mystery. It might have simply been a dream, for once Sasuke fell asleep, his dreams were lively and active as though they considered themselves waking thought on their own.

The fog filled his sleeping mind, fresh with burning sap and woodsmoke, and through it, the images that flashed upon the backs of his eyelids were buoyant and tilted in an odd, elliptical manner. The chants of the creatures, oddly lyric, drifted tunelessly about, seemingly burrowing under his skin in a way that seemed neither intrusive, nor painful. It just was. Their eyes, however, their strange mirrored eyes stung as they caught him, trapped him as a snake traps its prey. Their fingers pressed down deep into his flesh, down, down as though easing through clay, and their mouths were endless black holes surrounded by jilting yellowed teeth, shuddering as they continued to chant and moan. He felt dampness on his skin. Sometimes the world tilted, sometimes it stayed still. Yet nothing was ever truly grounded. Rather than anchored in place by such banal elements as gravity Sasuke floated free in a song of nothingness, tethered only by those strange blue marks or the silken smoke that seemed to course through his body in place of his blood. And still the creatures chanted. Sasuke stared at them, in his dreams, stared at their soulless eyes and voids of their mouths and felt nothing. He caught the blue of sacred markings on their cheeks and followed the pattern as it whorled across their faces, weaving a path that rose and sank within the folds of their flesh. He felt chakra, weak but warm inside of him, felt it glow and expand, like the roots of a plant unfurling into the soft dark earth it would call home.

Sasuke saw darkness then, as the feeling intensified, light. Endless light. A plain that surged to infinity in all directions. The light was bright, but it did not blind him and as he stared into it, he felt earth, a soft wet wight between his fingers, resisting at his toes. He heard his name and, somewhere in that desert-distance, he saw himself. He turned, but his face was unreadable. He called toward the mirage, tried to reach for it, but light brightened then, so much that it pushed out the other side of its own incandescence, bringing shadows back into to the world. Sasuke felt his head whirl, his stomach lurch in weightlessness that as soon as the bed seemed solid and tangible under his back that he hacked and choked, the vomit sliding up the back of his throat. Hands were on him almost at once, scooping him over, allowing the bile to spill into a wooden bowl hurriedly pressed against his lips. He choked again, but managed to cough. For once, it didn't seem to hurt his insides.

"Wa-"he began, and the water was there, cool and revitalizing, in a brass bowl this time. Sasuke blinked, trying to see past the receptacle and the blue-painted hand holding it steady, but he couldn't seem to see. The lights were low, the fog still hung in front of his vision, but it was more than that - as though his brain simply refused to accept the information. His eyes worked, but something inside him could not translate what they saw. And he felt strange. More than before, if that was even possible. He felt off. Something was different. Something was wrong; very wrong. Groaning again, Sasuke tried to command his body to comply, yet it resisted, remaining flat and motionless on the bed while his nerves burned, desperate to move.
A black-eyed man with a coarse, abrasive-looking beard covering the lower end of his drooping chin gazed over Sasuke's face speculatively, muttering a number of lyrical words to himself. Faded tattoos, misshapen with age, spilled over his cheeks and undulated as he spoke. It looked like water. Sasuke stared back, momentarily distracted, at which the old man hand came shooting forward, forcing his head back. His wide palm robbed Sasuke of his sight and yet when Sasuke gasped to protest, something warm and tumescent, something that felt so ugly was pushed into his mouth, filling it, widening his jam around it. He gagged, his eyes filling with tears while he choked and screamed around the blockage, struggling fruitlessly against the dead weight of his limbs which seemed to act in syndicate against him; programmed only to disobey. The metallic tang of blood seeped into his palate and he hissed and jerked, willing himself beyond any measure to spit out whatever it was the creatures had fed him. To surge to his feet, to fight off his captors, letting his speed carry him to freedom.

Only Sasuke didn't have speed. Sasuke could barely walk, move or even spit in his stupor. All evidence of his fear lay in his eyes, which, wide and tear stung, stunned into hypnosis - the struggling he believed was his reaction simply a manifest of his own drugged mind. Eyes that were once so powerful, now grew cloudy, frosted with the curse that the creatures had cast upon him. Time passed. Slowly, like a image blooming in the dim claret lights of a photographer's darkroom, Caliga emerged. His form seemed ghostly, a flickering collection of images as he passed the threshold and crossed the floor. Sasuke would have almost believed he was an apparition, only when he came to, the man was sitting at his side, concern was writ across his strange, freckled face. Sasuke looked at him for some time before he swallowed gingerly, fearful of choking on that horrible, fleshy bit. It was gone, however, probably ingested, though he never remembered doing such a thing. His stomach turned thinking about it.

"Why?" He heard himself ask. Though he hadn't prefaced the interjection with a question, nor had Caliga offered any confidence that he might dispute, there seemed an endemic understanding between them, gaps filled in, sentences finished. Caliga wet his lips and, with his rough, tattered fingers, traced the edge of Sasuke's jaw, eyelids low, remiss.

"I told you. You're interesting. We like interesting things here."

Sasuke blinked up at him. Then, rolling his drunken head from one side to the other, he took in the room again. It seemed different. No. It was different. It was larger. Grander. He caught the edges of torchlight flicking at the ends of the room that threw strange, dancing patterns onto the ceiling above, which was domed and vaulted, not rough at all. It seemed spacious, airy even, and the giant bulge above him, stretching many feet above his head, was decorated in a number of strange, stick-like pictographs. Or Runes. Or a written language of a sort, Sasuke couldn't quite decide, suffice to say he'd never seen anything like them.

"I can see why he liked you so much," Caliga said, running his fingers down Sasuke's neck.

"Who?" Sasuke didn't watch the fingers; he kept his attention locked on Caliga's face. Something told him, reminded him, to stay with the face, look for the tell.

"You're very easy on the eyes. Really. Quite beautiful." Caliga withdrew his hand to chew thoughtfully on his thumbnail. "But it's not just that, it's the attitude. Standoffish. Self-assured. You're a bit of snob, aren't you? He loved that. Loved 'em hard to get."

"Who are you talking about?"

"No one. Nothing," Caliga dropped the moony look and cocked his head to one side, letting a few loose curls dangle over his eyebrow. Had his hair been that long? "Just sleep it off. Don't mind the Docs. They've got some pretty old-hat methods, but they'll get you back on your feet."
"You're lying," Sasuke managed. He couldn't shake his head but the set of his jaw and the chill in his eyes said it all. "Again. You've been lying all along."

"I'm not lying," Caliga told him. "You're going to get better. The Docs have fixed you."

"Why?" His voice was starting to come back now. His throat was dry and the words grated as he spoke, but they were there. Somewhere, deep in his gut, he felt his chakra, warm and familiar. There wasn't much - barely enough to form a katon - but its presence reassured Sasuke. Perhaps he wasn't so helpless after all. "That crap about the Noble's daughter? That was bullshit wasn't it."

"Wow, that's a lot of venom right there," Caliga raised his brows. "And why am I getting run through the mud, mmm? I didn't lie. We were paid to escort you to safety and we did."

"Bull shit."

"Not at all. Well, perhaps some of it wasn't exactly crystal," Caliga admitted, toying with the edge of his lower lip as though trying to keep a smile at bay. "The little whore did want us to bring you back to her. Didn't seem to understand how much of a stupid idea that was. Then she wanted to come back here and see you, make sure we kept our word, all that crap-"

"Come back here?" Sasuke stared at him. "Here? As in, this place?"

"Where else would I mean?"

"Where am I?" Sasuke felt his fingernails dig into the pad beneath him, his nails catching on stray fibers one by one. The pressure in his nail beds confused him, his nails had been short, always short. Somehow, they seemed longer. "The mountains, I suppose, if you kept your word about going north. Somewhere near Iwa. If you'd gone to the Noble's home, back to the Konoha border, the return trip itself would have been at least a week. Eight days at most. I haven't been here that long."

"Haven't you?"

"I was in another room yesterday," Sasuke said. "You were there. You said you'd return with information about my condition."

"Yesterday?" Caliga's feigned surprise was so sloppy, it was insulting. "I only just got back. Can't have been yesterday."

"Don't fuck with me." It was nice to sound angry. It would have been nicer still to back it up with a chidori fizzing between his fingers, all shrieking blind fury, still he figured the look he managed was preface enough. "I saw you yesterday."

"Two weeks ago, actually," Caliga told him, then had the audacity to shrug. "Time flies when you're having fun, doesn't it?"

"I said don't fucking lie to me."

"What point would there be in lying? You feel better don't you? Stronger? That takes time, Kiddo. It's not an overnight fix."

"I was awake…" A chill passed over his flesh. Caliga was right, he did feel less broken. While his mind was still a carousel of broken memories and sensations (and on which his thoughts sat like an unhappy child, unwilling to ride), his body felt much improved. And those fingernails… "I was awake. I saw the room, I-"
"In and out of a coma, far as they described it. The Docs," Caliga added by way of explanation. "They had to put you under; you were pretty much ruined on the inside."

"You keep saying that," Sasuke felt the worry rise in his throat, though he angled it into something more of a growl. "What do you mean 'busted' Ruined?"

"I can't exactly give you medical definitions, their vocabulary is... different," Caliga began. He rubbed his chin. "From what I could gather - because they pretty much just mutter to themselves, it's really annoying - you were sort of... shutting down." There was an ambiguous gesture to accompany the last part. Sasuke simply glanced from Caliga's hands to his face then to his hands again. "Maybe it was old-quack-ese for organ failure."

"I would be dead then." Sasuke said, abruptly. "Organ failure? I'd be dead. Try again."

"No, not necessarily," Caliga waved a finger at him. "They're pretty onto it, our Docs. Very clever, very good at mixing up all your modern medical shit with their more, hmm, *arcane* methods. Spells and rituals and all that."

"Rituals?"

"Yes. Well, Ninja use what? Kata configurations? Healing chakra? Chanting? Some pretty archaic stuff, isn't it? And that's all on top of your lovely clean medical facilities, your hospitals and clinics and things. We have the same, pretty much. It's not as pristine, but it's the same. And our guys tend to take a bit longer to do what they need to. All that waiting on the full moon and first mists. Something about rainfall, I don't know."

"How long."

"Three and a half weeks. Closer to four, really. You've been out for a large portion of that time."

"Three weeks?!" Sasuke couldn't help the incredulity. Caliga nodded.

"And a half. Had to be. Docs said you hadn't properly rested in a long time. You were falling apart."

Sasuke considered the revelation mutely. Falling apart. Yeah, that was about right. In fact that was probably the most truthful statement that had ever come out of Caliga's mouth, and that was a sobering thought. Sasuke had to admit, he hadn't been easy on himself. Ever. A ninja shouldn't be; a fugitive, certainly not, however the deficits such a lifestyle had to take their toll at some point. If the sickness hadn't ravaged him thoroughly, then the fight with Naruto might have had something to do with it. Or his being impaled on his own sword during the war. Or the months beforehand living rough with Taka and Obito, or the fight with Itachi which almost killed him. Of course, *then* there'd been the internal reorganizing Juugo had performed the day he'd been partially disemboweled by Killer Bee and that had to count for some lasting intestinal/respiratory trauma. He now possessed a diaphragm that was made, essentially, from *some part* of Juugo, how did that even *work*? It added up. It had to.

Such casualties were besides the point, however. Not only had Sasuke fallen in to Caliga's debt...
(and, by extension, the debt of these "Docs", whomever they were), he was also in unfamiliar territory, too weak to move, possibly too damaged to last even if he did manage to escape. Sure, he had several checkpoints he’d established over the past few years of patrolling the upper area of the continent with Orochimaru, it didn't mean he'd make it to one. He had never been this susceptible in his life, it was a challenge even to lie still and speak rationally with his captor. For he was captive, wasn't he? He wasn't here for the good of his health and though Caliga was hardly forthcoming with his terms, Sasuke knew someone would want to collect. And soon.

If it were Orochimaru who had found him, doubtless he'd have already been hissing his good fortunes, admiring how his reptilian features looked on an Uchiha face. But Caliga wasn't Orochimaru. Sasuke tried the obvious first.

"My eyes," he said. It sounded almost bored; he was about as adept with flatness as any artist. Deidara might have even been proud, knowing the bland statement held the ignition to a temper bright enough to blow the moon out of orbit. Maybe. Sasuke gave a short, derisive snort. "They want my eyes, don't they?"

"Of course." Caliga smiled, as though it were the most obvious thing he'd ever heard. "There's only one pair left in the world, isn't there?"

"Why haven't they taken them?" Sasuke narrowed said recompense, nearly hiding the dark irises from view. Just one tomoe. Just one and I'd be free of this place. "What are they waiting for? I'm only getting stronger. They're doing themselves a disservice letting me heal."

"Oh no. That's part of it. They wanted you healthy first. No point in going ahead if you're not healthy."

"Why not?" Bells. He'd swear he could hear bells. This was Kakashi's damned initiation. This was a smokescreen, a trap, and he was just fucking walking into it. Sasuke cleared his throat, unwavering. "Eyes are just eyes."

"Yeah. But what good's one pair of Uchiha eyes?" He was aching for the punchline. Practically pissing himself for the shock finish. Sasuke felt his anger curling in the pit of his stomach, dark and fiery. "Sure, you could sell 'em for a shitload, maybe someone like that oily slug could clone them, but really. Really. There's no substitute for the original."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, if we were just going to take your eyes, Kid, why'd we need you all fixed up? It's not like you're going to grow another pair!" Laughed at that, he laughed. "I mean, we don't exactly need you to have them, but let's be frank here. We're not stupid. Priceless or not, sell something like that in a back alley and we'd have Konoha and your old boss swarming us like flies to shit. Besides-" Caliga's fingers dusted over Sasuke's chest, toying with the edge of the blanket. "-you're prepped now. Ready to go. You might have been at death's door, but man did you ever respond nicely."

"Prepped?" Sasuke swallowed with difficulty. He felt the answer hanging over his head though he couldn't bring himself to look up. "What kind of prep?"

"Well, what would you do with the last Uchiha in the world, mm?" Caliga's smile was something lascivious and horrific and quietly Sasuke waited while the truth sank in. What would he do? What would anyone do with the last Uchiha? When there were no wars. When the need for Shinobi was changing. Even if there was conflict rising and clans were being raided and collected like bubblegum cards, it had always been the same, always hiding behind the glory and grandeur of
battle. Everyone wanted a piece of the best. Everyone wanted what the other didn't have. The victors held the currency in Sasuke's world, his brother's, his father's and as far back as the first time two blades came together. Power was as old as fucking and breeding was as old as time itself. They didn't want his eyes. They wanted his blood. DNA. Building blocks, the blueprints of an Uchiha.

Sasuke almost laughed. Then they could have it and good luck to them. For all Caliga's posturing, all his claims about Sasuke's eyes and their worth, his jizz wouldn't account to diddly-squat. He could stud, that was certain, but an Uchiha - a true Uchiha, viable Uchiha - could not be made unless the mother was of the same blood. You might get a kid with dark eyes and hair. If you were lucky, they might even have some chakra-molding ability. But genetics were hit and miss as far as Orochimaru had explained (because sure, he'd jerked in a cup for that asshole. It never amounted to anything), and more often than not, the child was born a civilian. Sasuke felt his trump card materialize in his hand. He licked his dry lips to hide his amusement.

"Fine," he said, closing his eyes wearily. "I guess I don't have a choice, do I?"


"You want me to... impregnate-" God it was difficult to even think about. Gross. "-some girl, don't you? Grow your own Uchiha baby. That's why I've got to be healed, right? Healthy. Tough luck, I'm not fucking anyone. Give me the cup."


At Sasuke's confusion, Caliga leaned over and pinched the edges of the sheet between his thumb and forefingers, folding it back neatly as he spoke.

"It's a fairly obvious pattern. You get it with all sorts of inherited traits. Mine's the only one I've ever seen that works the other way, that's why they like me so much. But it makes sense, doesn't it? That the hereditary abilities stay with the mother. She carries all the juice, all the good stuff, the kid marinades in that for nine months, wallowing in possibility and then there you have it, one perfect little brat, all infused with the best its bloodline has to offer. And they say men are the strong ones. Honestly."

Caliga laughed again. Sasuke just stared at him until he felt his eyeballs cooling.

"What the hell are you getting at?"

"What do you think we needed you healthy for? You think we strapped you up so you'd shoot straight?" Caliga rolled the rest of the blanket back, revealing Sasuke's naked body laid out on the padded table. Goose pimples pickled his skin. Looking down the line of his chest, Sasuke noted most of the familiar topology of his own flesh, though he could only make out the points of his toes past his ribs. Everything past the equator was lost by the angle of his vision. But it felt wrong, Sasuke couldn't deny it. Something felt very, very wrong. Caliga's hand was on his knee, like a clamp, like a leech Sasuke could only wish to slap away. Rising to his feet, Caliga stroked the insides of Sasuke's thighs, encouraging the little muscles to jump and twitch with virgin inexperience.

"They're good, those ancient, ratty old boys. As much as I hate them, they damn well know what they're doing. They don't care for our words: chakra, magic, hoodoo, mojo, whatever, they just see power as power. They can read it. They can harness it and they can mold it just like getting their hands in clay and squeezing, you know what I mean? You can feel it too, can't you? Your chakra? Doing it's job very well, I see?"
"What job?" Sasuke whispered through bloodless lips. Caliga stopped toying with him and turned, regarding the boy for a long moment. Whether he was formulating a response or simply enjoyed manipulating the suspense was unclear, however his next move was to reach over and with surprising dexterity, slide two fingers over Sasuke's slack, shocked jaw. The fingers were gritty with dirt and basted with a rime of what tasted suspiciously like blood. When they pressed down on his tongue, curling slightly - almost a stroking action - he coughed around them, eyes narrowed and hateful. He was too disgusted to bite down; he'd rather not have any more of Caliga's taste in his mouth if he could help it.

"What job?" He repeated when Caliga removed his fingers and examined them, turning then in the light as saliva glistened on his knuckles. For a few tense seconds he said nothing at all, then, tilting his head to one side like a vulture examining its prey, running his eyes over Sasuke's body in an entirely disrobing manner, he took a step backwards and aimed those slick fingers between Sasuke's legs. In, he pushed. In, between, up, inside. Inside where there shouldn't have been an inside, deeper and deeper into a place that wasn't there; something open and vulnerable and so damn intimate. The sensation was too much; Sasuke couldn't help but utter a shocked gasp at the horrible, open feeling and tried to press his knees together, tried to push away from the feeling.

Wrong. This is wrong.

Caliga's arm was nothing if a steel girder, pushing flesh and skin apart with grinding, mechanical ease. It didn't hurt, not exactly, but the sensation was-

Wrongwrongwrongwrong-

-one of stretching, of muscles stiff and terse yawning into submission. Sasuke felt something resist, tense, then give with such an unbearable puncture-

something, something, what something? I don't have a something!

- vomit pulsed against the back of his trachea in a distasteful wave. A second time it surged when the cavity began to seep an unexplained wetness, warm as sticky sap against his groin. A third time when Caliga drew his fingers out, their passage followed by a slick, muculent sound. Caliga held the fingers up to Sasuke's face. They were stained crimson with blood. He smiled.

"Incubation."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I desperately wanted to call this chapter "Sasuke goes camping", but unfortunately it didn't fit the title format. I hope the editing isn't too shabby. I checked it twice over, but I'm not so sure about it still - that's the problem with editing in cafes before work, not great for the attention span. Likely I'll give it a couple of days and tweak a few things, but because I'm impatient I'm posting it anyway. Sorry XD.

Thank you for all the other questions, comments and encouragement - you all rock! I apologize for what will be a couple of ugly chapters before we can throw Naruto back into Sasuke's arms, the poor lamb.

A few notes: When Caliga talks he's speaking in a rural accent which, for some reason, uses a lot of English slang. So the farming community in the Naruto-verse all sound
like they should be in a Guy Ritchie movie, for some reason. I don't know. It makes
sense for Caliga but absolutely no one else at all. Um.

If you weren't sure:

Nob = Short of Noble. Slang for the upper class (or, you know. Nobles). Not to be
confused with knob, which is either on a door or part of the male anatomy. Some
people might think that Nobs are knobs, that's their opinion entirely.

Toff = Another word for noble or upper class. Apparently it used to denote a gold
tassel worn on the cap by titled undergraduates at Oxford and Cambridge, however I
do remember Stephen Fry explaining that it was also a name for someone who used a
lot of snuff (inhaling tobacco), giving them a ”toffee nose” (tobacco-coloured nose.
Gross). As it was usually the rich (or posers) who used snuff, the epithet stuck.

Shitnuts = I made that up because dingleberries kept making me laugh.

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