Chasing Yesterday

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Summary

Rokudaime Hokage Uchiha Sasuke is a man with nothing beyond duty to the dead. Yet when a second chance comes from the lips of a demon, his battles begin anew...

Notes

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Dealing With the Demon

Chapter Summary

"Sasuke, there comes a point in every man's life where he has a choice between what he wants to do and what he must." – Uchiha Fugaku

Rokudaime Hokage Uchiha Sasuke was an embittered, hollow, and lonely man. He had no family to speak of, and no one living who considered him a friend.

He also contained a ten-tailed bijuu in his gut, making him the shinobi world's greatest living weapon.

Absently clutching at his stomach, Sasuke threw his oak ink-brush into the trash bin. The Uchiha momentarily abandoned his paperwork, striding over to the window and throwing it open. He reveled in the cool night breeze that brushed against his face.

Konohagakure. The Village Hidden in the Leaves. Also known privately to Sasuke as his responsibility. The Rokudaime Hokage was well-known, respected, and feared by the other Hidden Villages. He did not, however, enjoy the love and well-wishes of the populace of his own. Konoha was an obligation, and he did not love his obligations.

He only loved those who gave him those obligations. Kakashi, Sakura, Itachi, and Naruko…

("P-Promise me Sasuke..." A burble of blood.
"Yes! Anything! Just don't you die on me dobe!"A choked sob.
"Heh," A chuckle "You always came through in the end."

"Naruko!")

Shaking his head against the memories, Sasuke slid his gaze over to a nearby balcony. "It's getting late, Kakashi. What do you want?"

Melting out of the shadows, his silver-haired jounin-sensei of a childhood long past favoured him with a courteous nod and a polite "Hokage-sama".

It was always Hokage-sama or Uchiha-sama or very rarely Rokudaime-dono from those that spoke to him now. Never Sasuke-kun or teme.

He had no remaining bonds with the living.

"Reporting S-rank mission completed, Hokage-sama." The dog-masked ANBU reported passionlessly.

"Dismissed, Kakashi." the Uchiha responded tiredly. The Fourth Shinobi World War had well and truly broken Kakashi. His mother died giving birth, his father committed suicide, his teammates dead on bad missions, and his sensei died fighting a demon. The death of two of his students and the estrangement of the third was the straw that broke the horse's back.
With a small bow, the ANBU operative flickered out of sight. Everything the Hatake had ever touched had turned to ash. The only thing left to him was a life of murder and mayhem – life as a member of Konoha's black ops.

Sasuke understood that. He also understood that he was personally responsible for much of the man's grief. It was all the Hokage could do to prevent his former sensei from slicing open his own throat through distracting Kakashi with a constant series of S-ranked missions.

("It's all your fault! Naruko is dead because of you!" A furious scream.

"Yes..." A tired whisper.)

Yes. Uchiha Sasuke was a man without any hope of redemption.

The Rokudaime Hokage spun about and stomped over to the door. Flicking the lights off, he left his office with a slam.

Sasuke wouldn't be finishing any more work that night.

Kakashi was there before him.

Konoha's monument to the honoured fallen had endured through the passing years, unchanged but for the new names constantly carved into it. Dark as night, the stone monolith absorbed the late evening starlight without a glimmer of reflection.

Sasuke had known many of the individuals now carved into the stone personally. He'd even been the one to send some of them on the missions they had never returned from. Sasuke rarely gave them a second thought on his frequent appearances at the stone, preferring instead to trace a single name over and over.

Namikaze-Uzumaki Naruko.

The two hollow men stood side-by-side as the night passed and the sky lightened. Unmoving until the sun began to peek over the trees.

Hatake departed, leaving the Hokage alone. It was only then that Sasuke permitted himself to consider the other of his great failures, granting the name the same reverent treatment as Naruko's.

Uchiha Itachi.

"All for Konoha," the Last Uchiha whispered, the pitch of his voice ugly and wounded. Turning away, Sasuke formed a hand seal and vanished in a swirl of leaves. Colours whipped by Sharingan eyes until Sasuke dropped out of the Shunshin to reappear before his office.

The chuunin guards snapped to attention with a "Hokage-sama!" that Sasuke promptly ignored.

"Inform Hyuuga Hanabi and Inuzuka Kiba that the meeting with the Kazekage is in conference room 3 at 1100 hours." He informed them curtly, before shutting the door on their mutual "Yes, Hokage-sama!"

It was hardly the first sleepless night that Sasuke had worked since the end of the Fourth Shinobi World War, and it would hardly be the last.

"I can give you what you want most..."
With a wordless snarl, the Uchiha slammed the voice of the Juubi to the back of his mind. Sasuke had no patience for its feeble attempts at trickery at the best of times. He was also not a fool, as the only things he truly wanted were dead and dust.

Slumping into his chair, Sasuke pulled a new brush out from one of the drawers in his desk and promptly began sorting through the paperwork that had been delivered that morning. He had a little more than three hours before his meeting with Sunagakure's diplomats and he felt he might as well make the best use of that time.

It wasn't like he had hobbies, unless one was to count the political games that accompanied his position as such.

Thirteen courtship requests, a formal invitation to the ball of one of Hi no Kuni's minor noble families, a sealed missive from the office of the Raikage, and the details of a business looking to open within the former Uchiha compound.

Immediately rejecting all courtship requests with a snort, he wrote a short note to inform his secretary to issue the traditional 'thanks-but-no-thanks' to the families that had made the requests. Despite pressure from the Konoha Council, the Uchiha had little inclination to marry or to engage in alternative arrangements in the aim of producing more Sharingan babies.

As far as Sasuke was concerned, he was and would always be the Last Uchiha. He already had made arrangements with the Hyuuga clan to put forth a replacement jinchuuriki upon his death, so there was no need to produce children for that particular reason, and he did not love Konoha enough to aid it in creating a clan of human weapons. It wasn't a concept Naruko would have approved of anyway.

Skimming over the details of the business that wished to open on his former clan grounds, Sasuke decided it looked respectable enough and stamped his approval. Calling for his secretary, he pressed the scrolls detailing his approval of the business and instructed her to send out refusals to all marriage proposals that were currently received and to please stop wasting his time by giving him the missives at all. It would suffice for her to automatically reject all of them.

Waving her away, he considered the request from the Sanada clan. Truly, they were minor nobles, only coming into hereditary lordship in the past few generations on the back of the current daimyo's great-grandfather's favour. The clan was fairly wealthy though, and had their fingers in mercantile ventures from Nami no Kuni to Tsuchi no Kuni. His appearance would surely show the favour of Konohagakure among the lesser nobility and the merchant class, and would not be likely to gain him enemies within the ranks of the older families. With a sigh, the Hokage drafted a short but formal acceptance letter, detailing his gratitude to be invited by such 'upstanding and prestigious individuals'.

The Uchiha Hokage was a former criminal and traitor, and really needed all the political aid he could get. His clan name wasn't worth much anymore, especially not after he declassified the truth of the Uchiha Massacre. Itachi had become a martyr, but the rest of the clan had become derided as traitors. Sasuke was merely considered one more in the line.

Turning his gaze to the letter from the Raikage's office, he frowned with displeasure. The man loathed him at the best of times and blamed him for both the death of his brother and the loss of his arm. Sasuke was surprised that the man had never stepped down after the injury, but was impressed that the man kept office by proving he was still truly deadly in the field. Ei was not in office because of political manoeuvring. Not that Ei had any real subtlety on his own part.

Hokage-dono,
Despite our less than illustrious relationship and our history of personal enmity, I urge you to consider a course of action that may heal the rift between us. Our disagreements have been detrimental to the alliance between our villages and cannot continue to stand between us.

In response to the urging of the Kumogakure Council, I am willing to concede forgiveness to your injury upon my person if you willing consider a joining between our two families. My eldest daughter is an accomplished kunoichi only slightly younger than you. I do believe that regardless of your personal misgivings, you two may reach an accord and some measure of affection.

Consider this the formal request for a courtship between you and my daughter.

Yotsuki Ei.

Yondaime Raikage of Kumogakure.

Sasuke flopped back into his chair with narrow eyes. This sort of outreach from Ei was unprecedented. Frowning, Sasuke folded his arms across his chest. He was well aware of the political games he as the Hokage was immersed in, and there was value in both what a person said and what they didn't say.

The Raikage said he would forgive Sasuke's injury to his person, but not his injury to his village or his injury to his brother, which the Raikage considered far more worthy of hatred than his own 'mere' arm.

Pinching the bridge of his nose in exasperation, the Uchiha considered the pros and cons of a positive response. Sasuke narrowed his eyes at the missive, before he sighed with exasperation. He had precious little to gain with this and everything to lose. A positive response would net him only dates with a woman that likely already despised him, but a negative response could be taken as an insult and be grounds for weakening or even destroying the current relationship between their villages.

Raikage-dono,

I have made it a general point in my interactions with others to refuse all proposals out of principle. I am of the sincere belief that the Uchiha clan is truly accursed. However, I cannot ignore the possibly of reconciliation between us.

Therefore, in the interest of Konohagakure and Kumogakure's relationship and the promotion of peace, I am willing to concede to a courtship between your daughter and I. If there is compatibility between her and I, then perhaps we will be willing to consider further proposals.

Uchiha Sasuke.

Rokudaime Hokage of Konohagakure.

Sealing his affirmative with the official seal of the Hokage, Sasuke glared at the response and wished that Ei would drop dead. The man was well aware of what position such a request would put him in, and likely only went along with it for that reason. The Uchiha doubted this courtship would get any further than a series of very uncomfortable meetings and dates, but it would still be annoying as hell to have to deal with.

Rolling up the scroll, he tied it off with the traditional red silk-string of his office before summoning a messenger hawk to relay it to the Raikage. Calling for a strong herbal tea, the Hokage settled back down to finish off the paperwork he had left abandoned the night before.
Processing mission reports always tired him out and reminded him too strongly of his own losses and stupidity. As he finished filing all S and A ranked reports he was interrupted by his secretary.

"Hokage-sama, the Kazekage has arrived." The women stood at the door, a blank look on her face but a slight amount of concern in her brown eyes. It was impossible to work for someone for so long and not achieve a modicum of regard for his well-being, especially given the obvious signs of stress in Sasuke's appearance.

Rising to his feet silently, the Uchiha slid his chair in before departing to the conference room.

To say that Sabaku no Gaara considered the Hokage an annoyance was a vast understatement.

Gaara hated Sasuke with every fibre of his morally-upright being, and the only reason he had not smeared the man into blood and paste was because of his respect of Naruko's lingering affection for the man and the sincere regret the Uchiha wore like a shroud everywhere he went. The Kazekage recognized the hypocrisy of his own feelings, but emotions were rarely logical.

Crossing his arms, Gaara stared at the Hokage with distaste. As much as he truly hated to admit it, the robes did suit the man. It was a point in the Uchiha's favour that he didn't emblazon his clan emblem onto the back of the traditional robes, since it spoke of his loss of the arrogance that had accompanied him in his earlier days.

The Rokudaime Hokage's face was pale and wan, drawn with frown lines reminiscent of the late Uchiha Itachi. Taking in the bruised purple skin that seemed burned into Sasuke's eye-sockets, Gaara allowed himself to feel the slightest inkling of pity. It was obvious that before him stood a tortured and condemned man, and while Gaara would have willingly done the deed himself and offed the man, he had no taste for the torturous living death the Rokudaime consigned himself to. If the Uchiha had gone and committed seppuku, the Kazekage wouldn't have held it against him.

"Kazekage-dono". Polite and dry as always. Sasuke showed very little emotions at the best of times.

"Hokage-dono" he replied neutrally.

"Yo, Gaara!" Inuzuka Kiba burst in the room. At the age of twenty-five, the Inuzuka clan head was just as shaggy and feral as he had ever been. Boisterous and loud, he strongly reminded Gaara of what Naruko had been like years ago. The clan head had toned down his the brashness of his youth in official functions, but he was personally familiar enough with the Kazekage not to bother.

"Kiba." Gaara favoured him with a nod and a small smile.

Turning to the third Konoha shinobi as she entered the room, Gaara inclined his head and uttered a respectful "Hyuuga-sama".

Mimicking the motion, the head of the Hyuuga clan greeted him. Hyuuga Hanabi glided through the room and took a seat at the far end of the meeting table, preferring to sit at the end and not beside the Hokage she considered personally responsible for her elder sister's death.

Sinking into his own seat across from the Kazekage, the Uchiha nodded to the foreign leader's siblings in greeting.

Temari merely glanced away as a subtle snub and Kankuro gave him a curt nod in return. The Kazekage's relatives blamed him for the death of a close friend, and the Hokage could hardly blame them. If he had switched sides earlier, there was much that could have been avoided.
Kiba plopped down in the seat next to the brunette and grinned roguishly across at Temari, who scowled back. Married to Shikamaru several years ago, the woman hardly appreciated the Inuzuka's occasional flirt; though she did know he truly didn't actually mean anything by it.

Kankuro glared at the clan head with a look that clearly said piss-off-and-leave-my-sister-be. Kiba only gave a sharp bark of laughter before ordering one of the chuunin guards standing by the door to fetch him some water.

"We are gathering here today to recognize a further deepening of ties between the villages of Konohagakure and Sunagakure," Sasuke droned blandly. "To this end, we have drafted a free-trade agreement in regards to ninja equipment and foodstuffs. Recognized items are…"

Tuning out the speech he really didn't give a crap about, Kiba turned to stare at his deceased teammate's sister. Hanabi hardly could contain the look of distaste on her face for their leader. It kind of annoyed Kiba, really. The Inuzuka was hardly a fan of Sasuke's, but he didn't lay blame where blame wasn't due either. Hinata had been a dear friend of his, and there might have been the possibility of something more there after he had worn the Hyuuga clan elders down over the years. Sadly, before he had made any true progress on that front at all, the heiress had perished on a bad mission. Kiba had been absolutely pissed and prepared to murder the Hokage but-

("Do you truly think that Hinata would have wanted you to commit high treason and murder someone that the woman she had admired considered her best friend? Regardless of Uchiha Sasuke's personal failings as a person, he is not to blame in this case. It was a bad mission, and there was little the Hokage could have done for the matter. Be thankful he was able to recover Hinata's body before someone desecrated it in the name of science or stole her Byakugan.")

Damn Aburame always had to deal with everything in life with the cool logic of his.

Kiba wasn't an Inuzuka shinobi for nothing though, as he could smell the distress that Shino had been feeling. And if Shino - someone who had cared about Hinata as much as Kiba had, regardless of how he had shown it - couldn't hold it against the Hokage, then the Inuzuka had decided it was best to step back and rethink it.

The Inuzuka Clan Leader was glad he had. Once he'd stopped trying to hate Sasuke for every bad thing that happened to the village and the Konoha Twelve, he could really see the man.

Drifting around like a ghost at all hours of the day, spending his nights at the Monument, and working so mechanically that he had seemed to conquer the paperwork that plagued every Hokage prior, Inuzuka came to a conclusion: He couldn't hate Sasuke anymore. He pitied him really.

It was obvious that whatever kept the man going wasn't something that was going to keep him happy.

"…Items that we will be considering contraband are…"

But shit, Hanabi didn't see it that way. Neither did Tenten or Lee. Neji was coolly polite, but he wasn't fond of Sasuke. Naruko was dead and six feet under. So was Sakura for that matter. Shikamaru didn't hate the Hokage per se, but he was definitely not a friend of his. Chouji and Ino couldn't even be bothered to give him the time of day.

The only ones remaining from the Hokage's childhood that didn't try to make his lot miserable were Shino and Kiba, and maybe Shikamaru. Sasuke was incredibly alone.

Kiba didn't have the patience to try and be his friend, and he doubted that the Uchiha would want
him to. But he could see that the raven did appreciate his neutrality to him, and sometimes his antics could garner him a very slight reduction in the tension that followed the Rokudaime wherever he went.

"Any objections?" Sasuke finished.

"No, Hokage-dono." Gaara replied.

Then Sasuke signed both copies of the trade treaty, before passing them to the redhead, who did the same. Kankuro leaned over and signed the slips, followed by Temari. The blonde slid them back across to Kiba, who inked his name before pushing them down to Hanabi.

After the Hyuuga affixed her signature as the last witness, she rolled up both copies and passed one to each village leader. The Hokage stood up and strode to the door.

"I don't know why he doesn't just kill himself, everyone knows Naruko-" the brunette puppeteer muttered under his breath.

"Kankuro!" The Kazekage hissed, "Shut up!"

By the slight stiffening of his shoulders, it was obvious to the Inuzuka that the Uchiha had heard the remark. But instead of even attempting to reject the accusation, he simply left the room.

Which totally wasn't healthy at all.

"What the fuck is your problem?" Kiba growled at the Suna-nin, who drew back with a defensive glare.

"Oh shut it! You know it's true."

"That's irrelevant! I won't have you endangering our relations with other villages, Kankuro!" The redhead spat. Temari just crossed her arms and glared at the table.

"I agree with him." Hanabi replied from the end. "He's caused a lot of death over the years."

The Inuzuka shot to his feet and favoured the Hyuuga with a heated look. "Will you piss off? Hinata was my teammate too, but you can't just fucking blame him for something he had shit all to do with!" then he departed with a slam of the door.

"Well that was interesting." Temari finally uttered sarcastically.

Drifting through the hallways of the Hokage Tower, Sasuke found it incredibly difficult to quiet the voices in his mind.

(Your fault your fault Come it's all my fault she's dead because of you I can they're all dead give you your brother is dead your your team is dead your HEART desire is deaddeaddeaddeadDEAD)

Clenching his fists hard enough that his nails dug into the skin and blood welled up on his palms, Sasuke stopped in the first abandoned hallway he found and leaned his face against the wall. He felt unbearably hot suddenly, and the cool plaster pressing against his flushed skin was heavenly.

"Shit man, you okay?"

It was Inuzuka. "Yes, I'm fine." He replied neutrally. The Inuzuka-nin gave him a look that suggested he was being particularly dense before grabbing the treaty scroll from his pocket.
"I'm just going to run this down to the archives. Why don't you go home or something?" The man suggested and took off before his Hokage could order him otherwise.

"What am I supposed to do Naruko?" he whispered to the empty corridor. "I can't survive this…"

"Come to me and I will give you what you desire."

Shoving the demon's voice back, Sasuke took a shuddering breath. That was twice in one day, which meant his mental discipline was slipping. He needed to go meditate. Emotional turmoil when one was host to a demon was extremely unhealthy for the host and dangerous for those around it.

Thus resolved, Sasuke meandered through the Tower until he found the nearest chuunin. Curtly informing the women that he was taking the rest of the day off and ordering her to inform his secretary, he left the stunned girl in the hall for the nearest window.

Taking off through the opening and over the rooftops, the Hokage felt lucky enough that he had no more meetings that day.

Sasuke didn't know if he could take much more of it.

Almost against his will, he ended up at the Naka Shrine of the Uchiha clan. It wasn't exactly a place with the fondest memories of his, being both a reminder of his tragic childhood and the location where his clan had planned their traitorous coup d'état.

But it was his, property of him and his cursed clan. No one ever bothered him there, save the occasional ANBU in times of emergency.

Gliding through the faded red arches and up the weather-beaten steps of the temple, Sasuke breathed in the cool, free air of the forest. Almost against his will, he felt his tensed shoulders relax and a measure of peace come over him. If not for his obligations, he idly wondered if he might have ended up a monk. It was a slightly amusing thought, that one whose entire childhood had been consumed by ambition to be the strongest shinobi would be able to long for quiet halls and mist on the mountainside.

Sasuke's favorite concept had been "power". Itachi's had been "peace". The crux of their differences when the Fourth Shinobi World War began. Two brothers with completely different views of the world. The Curse of Hatred and the Will of Fire. But eventually Sasuke had his eyes replaced with Itachi's.

Sasuke wondered whose view of the world he was seeing now.

Ignoring the scent of dampness in the air, Sasuke lit the candles in the abandoned shrine with a minor Katon jutsu. Throwing the room into relief, the mahogany floor reflected a slight golden sheen while the roof stretched away into darkness. Lighting the incense burner, Sasuke knelt before the statue of some forgotten kami.

Eventually the smell of the burning incense filled the air with a hint of lavender and sage. Closing his eyes and settling his hands into his lap, Sasuke turned his focus inward.

Sasuke opened his eyes to a dark and dank sewer.

It was so very akin to the way that Naruko's seal had been when he had invaded her mindscape almost a decade ago. Sasuke wondered if every jinchuuriki's seal resembled a sewer by default or if it said something about the state of his and Naruko's minds.
"So you come, Uchiha."

"So I come." the Hokage confirmed, before checking the bars and the seal array holding the gates closed. It wasn't as perfect as Naruko's had been, but he hardly expected it to be. Firstly, Naruko's father had been a sealing master of unparalleled skill. And secondly, no seal - not even that of the shinigami - could hold the collective entirety of the bijuu after the death of the host. The Hokage had decided it a waste to sacrifice the lives of his ninja to create an unbreakable seal for only his lifetime, especially when this less-effective one could be supplemented by his willpower and his Eternal Mangekyou to the point that it would make little to no difference.

Spotting rust crawling up several of the bars and the slight bent in a few of the others, Sasuke directed his chakra into repairing them back into the shape they held several weeks ago. It was really a chore, he decided with a small amount of exasperation.

"I can give you your heart's desire."

"Hn."

Sasuke ignored the beast, concentrating on fixing its cage so he could leave and sleep. It seemed the expense of mental energy in repairing the seal tired his mind to the point where his body could enjoy a full night's rest without being plagued by nightmares.

"Your friends. I can bring them back."

"Shut up!" The Hokage hissed, not pleased with the beast's prodding of his weak points. The dead were dead, and that was it.

"Oh? So you didn't know that the Rinnegan can reject death? That it could be used to revive the fallen?"

"Shut up and stop lying!" Sasuke snapped, determining that the gates were prepared enough. Whirling in place, he stalked away in a rage.

"Silly little ningen. Demons don't lie. Tell half-truths and give false implications. But we cannot outright lie."

The Rokudaime froze in place. It was a common factor to demonic legends. He felt foolish for having forgotten. Slowly turning around, he pinned the demon with a dark glare. "So you're saying that you can give me the Rinnegan?"

"Yes." The demon perked, all malicious cunning now that its container was listening to it.

"And the Rinnegan can bring the dead back?"

"Yes."

Narrowing his eyes, he spotted the half-truth and exposed the demon's plan.

"Can the Rinnegan bring Naruko back?" Silence was his response. "Can it?" Sasuke pressed.

Snarling and bashing against its cage, the bijuu finally growled out "No".

"So you can hardly give me what my heart desires then." The Rokudaime answered curtly before turning to the exit. Just steps before he left the inner world, the demon howled at him "Wait!"
"Oh?" he looked over his shoulder with a quirked brow.

"There is... another way." The Juubi hissed out, voice low and sibilant.

Facing about fully, the Uchiha crossed his arms and stared at the demon impassively. "Speak then".

"I am an existence of pure living chakra. Using my energy, you will be able tear your soul from this mortal coil and throw it back through the fabric of time."

"What happens to this world?" Sasuke muttered after a moment's pause.

"It ceases to exist".

"And my memories?" he demanded. "Do I keep them or lose them?"

"They remain with you."

"And my body?"

"Gone".

"Can I obtain a body?"

"You may."

"How?"

"Seek out your living locus, you can merge with that soul and take over his body."

"So I'm essentially going to have to go back and kill my past counterpart to steal his body?"

"Exactly."

The Rokudaime frowned. It seemed too good to be true. And it likely was. But still...

"What happens to you?"

Here the demon seemed to hesitate. "I am split into my nine counterparts and merged with them."

Blinking in surprise, the Uchiha asked incredulously "Why would you want to do that?" Snorting at him, the Juubi motioned to its cage.

"I have no desire to remain here for eternity, held by jinchuuriki after jinchuuriki. By going back, there is always the chance that you might fail and I reform free. Even if you succeed, I will likely eventually reform. And I won't be conscious for the interim. It would be like going to sleep and waking up free. I would rather make a deal with one of Hagoromo's filthy get than experience however many mortal lifetimes it would be before I taste freedom again."

Self-serving and destructive. "I see why you'd be for this plan then. At least you won't be waiting twenty generations for freedom."

The bijuu grinned at him, all fangs.
Stalking over to the cage, Sasuke glared up at the beast.

"Do we have a deal then? Release me and I will do this thing for you."

Could he really do it? For all intents and purposes Sasuke would be destroying the victory they had fought so hard for. Obito would be resurrected, and it would be another race to complete or destroy the Eye of the Moon plan. The Uchiha Hokage didn't kid himself about the ease of it either. Obito was intelligent and cunning. A genius on or near the level of Shikamaru. A master manipulator. Was he brave enough to go up against that again? Further, was Sasuke greedy enough for his own comfort to take a chance at losing and causing the destruction of the shinobi world?

Yes.

Uchiha Sasuke was never a true coward, and if there was one thing he had always been, it was selfish.

"We have a deal. You send me far enough back to have a reasonable chance of saving Naruko and defeating Obito. Not merely a fraction of a moment in which to save her or fight him."

"So be it." the demon narrowed its eyes at the Hokage.

With a trembling hand, Sasuke reached up and tore the paper seal from the door of the cage.

White-hot agony rose through him from the very depths of his being, until his mind was totally insensitive to all rational thought process. It was obliterating. Reality screamed and the universe crumbled. Time ran backwards, with a jerk his soul tore loose from its home. Sasuke knew no more.

Fifteen year old Uzumaki Naruko woke up screaming.

Jiraiya burst through the door of her hotel room, hands already flying into seals. Stopping on the threshold after he automatically assessed the lack of danger, he lowered his hands with a sigh and took in the pale and shaking girl on the bed.

An old worn hand threaded into her messy blonde hair with fatherly affection. Pulling her knees up to her chest, Naruko wrapped her arms around them and attempted to ignore the strange burning from her seal. Another sigh; and the old man's hand stroked her head. "Naruko." Jiraiya murmured, and she shook. "Naruko." The sennin repeated with a little more force, attracting the attention of Naruko's tear-swollen eyes.

"Another nightmare?"

"Y-yeah..." her voice was tired and raspy from the screaming.

Her godfather gave a slight frown before rubbing his eyes. "I don't know what you dreamed about this time Naruko, but it'll be fine. Your friends won't leave you, we can beat Akatsuki, and the Uchiha should still be alive." Jiraiya listed the assurances to her more traditional nightmares that he'd heard of in one form of another since they began traveling together several years past.

Another stroke and the calloused hand withdrew. "Get some rest, Naruko, we'll be in Konoha in three weeks". The padding of Jiraiya's feet trailed over to the door, sliding the screen closed and leaving her alone in the dark room.

Naruko slowly uncoiled, settling back into her sleeping roll. One hand came up to absently run over
the seal on her stomach, tracing the lines that were no longer burning. They still felt abnormally warm. Whatever that dream had been, it wasn't on the reel of her more frequent night horrors.

(BloodSasukepainPromisedeathObligation.)

Frowning, Naruko crossed her arms behind her head and stared up at the ceiling.

"Sasuke…"

Naruko remained in that position until the night fled and the warm of the sun shone through her window. Unnoticed and unseen through it all, the soul of Uchiha Sasuke stood at the foot of her roll and watched the blonde. A small smile curled his face with affection.

The dobe still wore those kami awful toad-patterned pyjamas after all. He idly wondered if she would wear them to the end of her life. The end of her second life that was, since Sasuke had no intention of letting this one end as early as the last had.

Knowing he had little time to waste, Sasuke finally moved from her feet up to her head. Kneeling down, he stared into her tired and pensive face. The Uchiha ran an insubstantial hand over her cheek, leaning in and whispering into her ear "Would that I could wipe away those tears…"

Naruko shivered, feeling strangely close to Sasuke at that moment.

Sasuke drew back warily. Examining the two threads that grew from his chest with a considering look; he wondered if her strange reaction had anything to do with them. One, gold and thrumming with energy and purpose stretched across the room and out the door. Grasping it with his hand, he was filled with the feeling of hatred and cold determination. It reminded him strongly of him as he would have been at this stage in his life.

He knew instinctively that it would lead him to his host body and the past self Sasuke would need to murder.

The other thread ran red as blood from his heart to hers, and his lips curled with amusement. Wrapping his hand around it, he was overwhelmed with a feeling so warm and uniquely Naruko that he drew in a sharp breath instinctively.

The girl on the futon arched, eyes fluttering wide, and she gasped. "Sasuke…?" Naruko's blue eyes darted across the room, focusing suspiciously on the closed window before she settled back down and shut her eyes.

Withdrawing his hand with a jerk, Sasuke closed it into a fist and ignored the tingling in his palm. Then he gave a bitter chuckle. "I guess Obito was right after all, Naruko. We have always been destined to be brought together again and again."

Rising to his feet, Sasuke took the gold thread in hand and followed it to the door. Full of power and purpose, he grinned.

"Though I suppose the nature of that meeting, whether in friendship or conflict or love, was always up to us."

Then he was out in the hall of the country inn, ignoring the traditional architecture and wooden hallways. Striding through the corridors, Sasuke passed through several people on his way out.

Sasuke didn't need to breathe in this form, but there was something so incredibly comforting about stepping outside into the grass, the glister of morning dew stretching out around him. Wind
whistled through the trees, and he took off down the forest path like a dark dream.

There were many things he had to do, and little time in which to achieve it. But for the first time in years, Sasuke had hope and a purpose.

He would save her.

Winding through the dark passages of an Otogakure base, the Uchiha frowned in displeasure.

Sasuke's sixteen year old self led the way through the darkness, unaware that a desperate ghost followed behind at his heels. The boy occasionally muttered to himself about Itachi, and the older Sasuke could only shake his head with displeasure.

Disregarding the boy's misguided vengeance, had he really been that totally obsessed?

The memory of blood punching through a twelve year old girl's chest and mad laughter flashed through his mind. Sasuke sighed with resignation. Yes, he truly had been that obsessed. With a last glance at his younger self, Sasuke drifted away.

It wouldn't do for the boy to collapse in the hallway when Sasuke took his body. Better to wait for later on in the night when he was sleeping before making his move.

Re-familiarizing himself with the beaten stone ruins that made up Orochimaru's latest hideaway, the Uchiha searched for the library that Orochimaru would have undoubtedly set up.

Finding the grey steel vault that the Sennin preferred to guard his libraries with, Sasuke stared at the door. Sasuke tapped his fingers on his pant leg, coming to the decision that it would be best to scout the area out now, before returning to claim his new vessel.

Ghosting through the door with his formal Hokage robes aflutter, the Uchiha was greeted by the sight of reams upon reams of scrolls stuffed into cubby holes built into the stone walls. Tracking his gaze across to the desk that would contain some of Orochimaru's more sensitive documents, the former Hokage stopped and blinked in surprise.

"Well would you look at that," Sasuke muttered. "It's the old snake himself."

Orochimaru looked deceptively young, white skin unmarked by wrinkles or age spots. But the Uchiha could easily see the rot eating up the elder man from within. His face was drawn and his eyes glazed. The snake couldn't even be bothered to properly affix his outfit. Orochimaru's shirt was rumpled and the purple string was tied about his waist haphazardly.

His body was rejecting him. The sennin would need a new body soon. Too bad that Sasuke didn't intend to allow him one.

The scientist was inking out something one several pieces of paper, and curiously Sasuke drew up to the man's side. Peering over his shoulder, the Uchiha was unable to stop the slow wicked grin as he read the files Orochimaru was updating.

It was completely expected that the snake would keep track of his old comrades in the Akatsuki. The look of distaste on Orochimaru's face as he wrote out new details in Itachi's file was especially amusing. Sasuke didn't doubt that he was remembering his defeat at the elder Uchiha's hand when he tried to steal his body.

Breaking out into coughs, Orochimaru covered his mouth and heaved. Once the fit subsided, the
Hebi Sennin ignored his burning lungs and flicked his hand to the side. The blood that had been coughed up splattered on the floor, and the man frowned. Shaking his head, Orochimaru rose to his feet and departed, intent on returning to his rooms to rest. He'd need to take Sasuke-kun's body soon.

Sasuke watched the Sennin leave the library, frowning before turning to examine the file folders that had been left out on the desk. As soon as he took his new host body, Sasuke would need to move against Orochimaru. The man was sickly, and Sasuke knew all of his weaknesses. But Orochimaru was still an S-ranked nukenin, and a dangerous enemy to Naruko's Konoha.

Reaching out towards the meticulously organized folders, Sasuke scowled as his hand passed through the paper and into the desk. Growling with annoyance, the Uchiha straightened before clamping his hand on the gold thread extending from his chest.

Following the thread back through the maze of corridors, he sidled up behind his younger counterpart and proceeded to tail that boy for the remainder of the day. The younger Sasuke truly didn't have many hobbies, only stopping his training to eat and use the toilet.

As night fell and the younger Sasuke ceased his daily training, the elder Sasuke shivered with anticipation. Soon he would be corporal again, and he had many goals to accomplish. There were so many things to be put into motion, and the anticipation of it burned through his spirit. Mind spinning with calculation, he waited as the younger boy showered and collapsed into bed.

Eventually, the boy's breathing evened out, and the elder Sasuke took the moment to truly examine the younger.

In sleep, his face had smoothed out of his customary scowl and into something more innocent. Pale skin and dark hair framed an aristocratic face with a narrow nose and pale pink lips. A lean, muscular frame spoke of strength and power. Objectively, the specimen before him was a handsome individual.

Contrary to the relaxed appearance of his younger counterpart, the elder Sasuke was paler with raven hair interspersed with strands of grey. Purple bruising lined his eye sockets and his lips were chapped and red. His tall frame was stretched and thin, hands unhealthily bony. There was too much weight on his shoulders.

Drawing back, Sasuke considered the morality of what he was about to do. He would be destroying his younger self, breaking down and absorbing the boy until only he remained. Heaving a sigh, the Uchiha rubbed his eyes before resolving himself.

Bony fingers reached out to coil around the teenager's pale throat.

"Sorry brat, I need this body more than you do."

He squeezed, and with a snap of vertigo and the feeling of not-quite-there, the elder Sasuke vanished.

The teenager on the bed took a deep breath, rising from the depths of sleep with a shudder. Snapping his eyes open, the Uchiha glared at the ceiling.

Twin Eternal Mangekyou Sharingan burned in the darkness.
Tsunade hated her job.

She really did. She hadn't ever asked to be Hokage. Tsunade had never even dreamed of being Hokage as a child, despite being the Shodaime Hokage's granddaughter. And after Dan and Nawaki, she'd have rather died than become Hokage. Yet here she was - the Godaime Hokage - and distinctly not dead.

All for the sake of a blonde-haired, loud-mouthed, bouncy little brat.

A smile curled her lips as she reflected on that thought fondly. Naruko really had the power to make people want to be better than they were. Tsunade had been an old drunk, wandering the world and gambling away her soul. Naruko turned her into a Hokage, responsible and driven. Gaara had been a monster, murdering everything in his path to prove his own existence. Naruko had made someone like that a Kazekage, giving him the strength to search for acknowledgement outside of fear. Gaara was well-loved by the people of Suna.

Tsunade sincerely hoped that Naruko herself would get that sort of ending. That somehow, she'd manage to be transformed in the popular perception of the village from a demon container to the bright light of hope that she really was.

"Yo! Where's the candy?" With a pop, a toad appeared in her office, and Tsunade fought the urge to roll her eyes. Jiraiya was an extremely powerful shinobi, just as all the Sannin were, and had certainly gotten wise in his old age. Not that he often showed it. But why did he always choose the youngest, most impatient, and most disrespectful of toads to deliver his messages?

"There is none." She replied, eyeing the bouncing orange toad. "Just tell me what the message is. If you want candy, beg Jiraiya for it."

"No way! That old man specifically told me that when I got here a blonde woman with huge knockers was gonna give me some candy!"

The Hokage rubbed her forehead with one hand in exasperation. "It's like babysitting a child." She muttered, "And not a cute one. One of those brats who scream and cry and whine while making a mess out of everything."

"I WANT CANDY!"

"No."

"GIMME CANDY!"

"I said no!"
"Well I guess you'll never get that message then." The toad replied with a knowing look, crossing his warty arms. Nonchalantly, the toad rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling.

Tsunade lasted just long enough for the orange-coloured amphibian to break out humming a little ditty before growling "Fine!"

Calling one of her chuunin in from guarding the door, she informed the skeptical woman to go buy a bag of candy. The toad interjected that he wanted chips too, and something sweet to suck on. Ignoring the incredulous look the kunoichi sent her, the Last Senju waved her away.

The clock ticked as Tsunade worked away on her paperwork. She obviously wasn't getting the message until the chuunin was back with candy, so best to take advantage of the wait and get some work done. She'd have time for a drink after the little orange nuisance left.

"Hokage-sama, I've retrieved the items you requested."

Snorting, Tsunade just motioned to the desk.

Dropping the box of candy and the bag of chips on the desk, the chuunin bowed before leaving the room to resume her post.

Tossing the candy to the toad, Tsunade put her elbows up on the desk and leaned forward, cradling her face in one palm. The toad clearly ignored her, munching away happily at his treats. Tapping her fingers on the desk, the Hokage waited.

Finishing with a burp, the toad flopped back down on his desk and sighed, looking dreamily out the window.

The Senju felt her face sink into a frown. "The message?"

"Message? Oh! I forgot."

The Hokage twitched.

Yuki Hikari was a seventeen year old chuunin. Not particularly gifted in any field, but not particularly terrible in any either. Boringly average. Tossing her blonde hair to the side, the kunoichi leaned back against the wall outside the Hokage's office. It wasn't a very interesting job on any given day, but it paid the bills and that was what matter in the end.

Snorting, the woman shook her head. "Candy."

A crash echoed from the room behind her, and the woman just sighed.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU FORGOT?"

The Hokage screamed a lot. It was something one got used to, working outside her office.

"GET BACK HERE YOU LITTLE BASTARD!"

The other guard chuckled, and Hikari sent him a side-along glance. "Never gets old."

"I'M SORRY! I'M SORRY!"

Frowning, she rolled her eyes. "I don't know, I could get used to some peace and quiet around here."
"OKAY! OKAY! HE SAYS HE'LL BE BACK IN THREE WEEKS!"

"Oh so *now* you know." The blonde Hokage glared at the impertinent toad.

"I guess that brain damage you gave me really helped me recall it." the toad replied snidely.

Sighing, Tsunade pointed at the door. "Get. Out."

With a last glare, the little toad poofed away.

"It makes me miss Gamakichi," she moaned. "At least he didn't deliberately try to annoy me."

Huffing, the Namekujii Sennin leaned back in her chair, a pensive expression adorning her face. With Naruko coming back in three weeks, she was sure that Akatsuki would be on the move.

Calling in one of the guards – the man this time – she gave him a stern glance. "Get me Hatake Kakashi. And for your health, he better not be late *this* time."

Whatever the man saw in her face had him pale and stammering as he bowed quickly and fled.

Sighing, Jiraiya leaned against a tree and stared at his pupil. Whatever the girl had dreamed of the night before was obviously still bothering her. Her concentration was shot all to hell.

Taking in the Uzumaki's appearance, Jiraiya fought the frown tugging at the corner of his lips. The girl was abnormally pale, practically grey even. She had dark smudges under her eyes and her hands shook almost imperceptibly.

She was having trouble holding a Rasengan, which was something she hadn't struggled with since she was thirteen. Though if the distant, troubled look in her eyes was any indication, it was not an issue with chakra control. Scratching the back of his neck, the Sennin scowled. It was really the prerogative of a sensei to get involved when a pupil had such obvious personal issues. It was also the responsibility of a godfather, as shitty as he had been at the job.

"Naruko." The girl ignored him.

'In one ear and out the other' Jiraiya thought irritably.

"Naruko!" he barked.

"Huh?" drawing her attention, the sputtering Rasengan on her palm burst into wisps of blue chakra before dissipating. Giving him the fake smile that he had seen on her face too many times to be comfortable, she exclaimed with false vigour "What? What huh ero-sennin? Are you gonna teach me a new jutsu?"

Plopping to the ground and leaning against the tree, Jiraiya blew out a breath. "Come here Naruko." He motioned to the grass in front of him. Grin sliding off her face, the blonde trotted over before sinking down to kneel on the greenery. She'd been caught, she knew.

"You've been bothered all day, Naruko." He stated.

"Neh, I'm just kinda hungry! All I need is some good old ramen and I'll be fine!" Naruko weaseled.

Pinching his nose, the Sennin gave her a look. "You can't lie to me Naruko. Firstly, you're a terrible liar when you aren't on a mission. And secondly, I'm your shishou. You *shouldn't* be trying to lie to me. Especially not when I know better. Now tell me what's wrong." He commanded.
"Nothing's wrong." she denied feebly.

Digging right at the heart of the matter, Jiraiya snorted. "What did you dream about last night?" the old man demanded shrewdly. The girl crossed her arms over her knees and gave him a blank look, not speaking a word.

"Naruko," he groaned. "I'm your godfather."

"I died." She whispered. "I don't know what it was. There was just so much blood everywhere."

Reaching out to pat her shoulder, "Take your time, just start from the beginning", he told her quietly.

"It was dark. Maybe I dreamed I was asleep or something, but when wherever I was lit up I was in a cave somewhere. That wasn't so bad, but for some reason I just felt really scared. Then it got all dark again. When I could see after that, there were all these candles around me. And there was a man too."

Taking a shaky breath, she shivered. "I don't know. But he didn't look scary at first, but I knew that he was. I knew he was bad. Like really, really bad. He had a mask on. Something white with lines on it, I can't remember very well. He had a knife. He hurt me. I could feel it. I don't know why, but I could feel it even though it was a dream. He kept hurting me and hurting me. There was a boy there too, he hurt him too. I don't know how badly. There was blood everywhere…"

Staring at her with an indefinable look on his face, Jiraiya silently motioned for her to continue.

"It went dark again. I don't know for how long. When I woke up I felt like I was dying. I don't know how but I just knew I was going to die." Choking back tears, Naruko continued with a short statement "Then Sasuke was there."

That concerned Jiraiya. Not the fact she had dreamt of Sasuke – since she had done that before and some of those dreams might even inspire an Icha Icha chapter-, but the fact that she just stared at the palms of her hands with an eerily blank look.

"Go on." He prodded. "Tell me about Sasuke."

"He was covered in blood, I think it was mine. He kept crying too. He looked really panicked. He kept telling me I wasn't going to die. I didn't really believe him so I made him promise me that he was going to do something." Her brow furrowed. "I don't know what he promised to do, but it made me happy. Then I asked him to find the boy, see if he was okay. He gave me this really confused look; he didn't know who I was talking about. I told him to go look for him, so he did."

Running a hand through her tangled blonde spikes, Naruko tugged at a knot. "When he came back he looked at me with this really odd look on his face. That kind of worried me, but he told me the boy was fine. Then he just kinda rubbed my head and told me everything was going to be alright."

Flicking her eyes to her godfather, the girl stared at him through the fringe of her bangs. "Then he kissed me and just held me until everything went dark. Then I woke up."

Silence hung over the field like a grey pallor before the old man broke it with a murmur of "I see." Wearing a pensive look, he cradled his chin in the palm of his hand and considered her.

"My original thought was that you had a memory from one of your past lives surfacing in a dream," waving away the suddenly concerned look on her face, he pushed on. "But seeing as how Sasuke was there, that kind of blows that theory out of the water."
"There are really only two things I can think of," he muttered. "Either A) you're prophetic, which I doubt since you'd be having a lot more odd dreams like that. Or B) The Kyuubi is just fucking with you, which is probable; the tailed beasts have done that to containers before. Your friend Gaara being a modern example."

Collapsing to the ground in relief, Naruto gazed up at the sky and watched the clouds roll by.

"Hey, ero-sennin… do you think that Sasuke is going to come back?"

The only sound was that of two people breathing.

"I think," he answered slowly, "that if you had asked me about this a couple of years ago I would've said no." Shooting up, the Uzumaki gave him a very dirty glare. "I said a couple of years ago." The old man reiterated.

"Now I couldn't really say. I thought for the longest time that I could make Orochimaru come home and somehow make everything fine." The Sannin shook his head. "That was impossible. Even if Orochimaru had been willing to come home, he had already committed too many crimes to be welcomed back with anything but an execution. If he had restricted his experiments to foreign ninjas that we brought back, they'd have likely let him off with a slap on the wrist and an order to report the results of his research."

"What?" Naruto shouted. "How could they let him do that? Experimenting on people is wrong."

She declared hotly.

Jiraiya only chuckled. "Still so very young…" he whispered to himself. "Naruko, it wouldn't have mattered if it was right or wrong. There are a lot of people on the Konoha Council who would be perfectly willing to authorize that sort of research. If you ever get to be Hokage, you're going to have to deal with those types of people."

"But getting back to the point. No, Orochimaru didn't restrict his research to foreigners. He committed treason against the state and is now an international criminal. My old friend wouldn't have done any of that. This new Orochimaru is not him. I think anything that was left of my old friend died when he killed Sarutobi-sensei…" he trailed off.

He grinned at Naruto. "Your Uchiha on the other hand, hasn't really done anything noteworthy as of yet. He's not even listed in the Bingo Book, which means that the village still wants him kept alive. They won't offer a bounty for his head. The Sharingan is a very valuable kekkai genkai, and the Council will be willing to take a more lenient stance to ensure it remains within Konoha. Besides what he did to you, he hasn't caused any real injuries to any ninja of Konoha. Some people might look down on him for having left, but if you can get him back soon enough most of the village will probably look the other way on it. Especially if he brings back something to benefit the village."

Blinking at him, the girl mulled over what he had just told her. Then her face flushed "O-oi! What do you mean my Uchiha?"

Assuming a patently innocent look, the old man drawled "Well, I have been sharing a room with you for the last few years. Sometimes you like to talk in your sleep…" he ended suggestively.

She did no such thing. At least not often and certainly not about the subject matter he was referring to. But Jiraiya was hardly going to tell her that. Naruto made a choking sound.

Ruffling her hair, Jiraiya smiled at his goddaughter. "You should get back to training." he ordered.
Shooting to her feet, the now thoroughly flushed girl took off running.

The Sennin could only bask in the fond feeling bubbling up from his stomach. It was Naruko, and if anyone had a chance to bring back that foolish Uchiha it was her. And if she ever did manage to bring him back...

His hand twitched for want of a kunai.

Well, he'd have to lay down some ground rules.

"She could never really blame you for your own stupidity, you know."

"I do."

"I was the one that gave up on you."

"I remember."

"Everyone else did too. She was the only one that didn't."

"I know."

"You made a promise when she died. You better not break it for anything."

"Who do you think I am?" Sasuke snarled. "Years of my life were spent like this! I am no stranger to revenge and the idea of carrying the wishes of the dead!"

"Good, just as long as we understand one another."

Sakura stalked off, pink hair swirling about her shoulders. Sasuke watched her go with a blank look. Team Seven was reunited. Only not really, because Naruko was six feet under, Sasuke was chasing a masked man, Sakura was drowning in the blood of the wounded, and Kakashi was running with murder.

He felt like such a fool for having thrown them away.

"I guess you really don't know what you're missing until it's gone."

The Uchiha vanished, prepared to hunt down and destroy a threat to Konohagakure. He fought, he bled, he killed, he dreamed, he adhered.

Fire and vengeance.

Duty.

Everything was for them.

Atonement could never be enough.

The ceiling was pockmarked and covered in scratches, he noted dully. Sasuke perceived every nook and cranny with his Sharingan. Reaching up with shaking hands, Sasuke covered his face. Smooth, unmarked skin. Flush with power and vitality. No hint of the broken down world he had lived in.
Sasuke was back.

The first rusty chuckle broke from his throat unwillingly, followed by another, and another. Soon enough, he was howling with maniacal laughter. Pitching off the bed, Sasuke rolled to his feet giggling.

It was too much. The Uchiha laughed until he was red in the face with the effort of it, before trailing off with a wheeze. Brushing his nose with a sniff, Sasuke straightened and grinned.

Throwing on the white haori and purple hakama that his sixteen year old body had come to be known by within the various research labs and prisons that made up Otogakure, Sasuke tied his chokuto about his waist before assuming a carefully blank expression.

'Deep breaths, Sasuke. Calm down, make a plan.'

Once he was sure that his maddened hysterical amusement had been suppressed, the Uchiha wandered over to the only other piece of furniture in the cramped room besides the bed: His desk.

Fiddling through the drawers, it only took the raven a moment to find what he had been looking for. Withdrawing a plain scroll, he spread it open on the desk.

Blank.

As it should be. Rolling the ream of paper back up into a cylinder, Sasuke stuffed the scroll into his haori and felt it settle in the vicinity of his waist on the right hand side.

Steeling himself with a deep breath, the Uchiha turned and slipped out the door.

The corridors were dark and dank, the torches all but burned out. Piercing the void was no problem for his kekkei genkai though, and the Uchiha crept along the nostalgic passageways.

Down deep into the bowel of the earth he went, reaching the bottom floor after a long trek in middle of the night.

Rounding a corner, he froze for an infinitesimal moment as he spotted one of Orochimaru's guard dogs. He then continued along as if nothing were amiss. The Otogakure jounin standing guard at the end of the hallway had yet to detect him.

Drifting along soundlessly, he came closer and closer to the man. Twenty feet… fifteen… ten… five.

It was some base instinct left over from the early days of evolution that made the hair on the back of his neck rise, but the Otogakure jounin spun in place before being pinned by two red eyes glowing in the dark.

Three tomoe tracked a lazy swirl as the crimson orbs observed him. Remembering his manners, the jounin snapped to a salute. "Uchiha-sama!"

He waited breathlessly as those entirely unnerving eyes regarded him.

"Hn." Came back from the darkness.

The orbs narrowed dangerously, but the jounin's only notice of what was to come went unheeded.

Then the jounin was choking on his own blood, it took his dazed mind a moment to realize that the Uchiha had crushed his trachea with a single punch.
Collapsing to the floor, the jounin stared up at those *horrible* red eyes as his lungs began to burn from lack of oxygen. Red twisted with black was the last thing the Oto-nin saw before the world went dark.

Sasuke down at the body dispassionately, reaching down the Uchiha grabbed a handful of hair. Dragging the dead man by his hair, Sasuke shoved the body in the nearest closet.

After checking the hallway for witnesses to his bloody deed; Sasuke slid the door shut on the body of the shinobi. The Uchiha barely even cared to notice the bubble of blood that swelled at one corner of the dead man's mouth.

Continuing on, Sasuke coldly repeated the process for every one of Orochimaru's servants he found, shoving their bodies in bathrooms and supply closets.

Coming at last to the library, he flexed his fingers.

Hand lighting up with sparkling lightning, Sasuke quickly slashed through the hinges of the vault door. Then pointing at the lock, he willed the element into a Chidori Eisou, shooting through the lock with ease.

Stepping to the side, the Uchiha grasped the edge of the steel plate and *pulled*. The metal let out an unholy shriek before tipping over with a bang.

Rushing into the office, Sasuke vaulted over Orochimaru's desk and yanked out the drawers.

Fumbling through various knick-knacks, he came across a think manila folder. Eye gleaming with triumph, he pulled out the blank scroll he had taken from his room and unrolled it with a flourish.

Purloining one of the old snake's brushes, he inked out a series of slightly sloppy seals before placing the folder on the center of the scroll. With a burst of chakra, he sealed the Akatsuki files into the newly made storage scroll. Rolling it back up, he shoved it back into his haori. If Sasuke had the chance, he would return later to seal more of Orochimaru's library into the scroll.

"Sasuke-kun?"

Whirling about, Sasuke only had a moment to perceive Kabuto standing at the entrance to the library before with grey-haired medic was running.

"Fuck." The Uchiha cursed empathetically, taking off after the older man in a flash.

Kabuto was good, *extremely* good. He was a genius with a slew of original techniques and a regenerative jutsu on the level of Tsunade. The man had nearly perfect chakra control and a photographic memory. Kabuto excelled at being a ninja. He was extremely deadly. One of the best.

Sasuke was better.

The med-nin had barely rounded the corner before a blade slammed through his back, destroying his kidney, before exiting the front. Stumbling, the medic shut off his pain receptors before continuing to run at full speed.

That single stumble was fatal.

Filling the air with the sound of chirping birds, Sasuke roared "Chidori!" The Uchiha's lightning encased fist ran Kabuto through, obliterating his heart.
Yanking his bloody hand from the genius' back, he grasped his Sword of Kusanagi and tore it from Kabuto's body.

Spinning in place, blade alight with a Chidori Nagashi, the Uchiha decapitated the grey-haired man with a back-handed slash. Kabuto's head rolled to the ground, the medic's dark eyes staring sightlessly up at Sasuke.

Sucking in air to calm his rapidly beating heart, Sasuke slumped against the wall.

"There we go." he laughed. "One down, with one more ticket to punch for today."

Stalking down the halls, Sasuke sought out a certain snake.

"Sasuke-kun." Orochimaru greeted his next vessel with a frown, but still attempted to oblige the boy. "It is very late. What do you desire?" the old Sennin hissed. It would be very soon when he planned to Sasuke's body for himself, but until that moment it was best not to risk driving him away by being unaccommodating. Without a doubt he could track him down if Sasuke fled and defeat him, but to so Orochimaru would require a new body. Which would add several more years of delay before Orochimaru could get his hands on the coveted Sharingan.

The impertinent boy merely gave him a slow blink, and the Sennin felt the last dregs of his patience fizzle out. "If you do not have an urgent matter to discuss with me, leave me!" he ordered. If the Uchiha felt secure enough to so blatantly waste his time, then perhaps it was time Orochimaru arranged some education for Itachi's brother.

With no change in the blank expression on his face, Sasuke cocked his head and stared at the S-ranked nukenin. "Have I ever told you that I consider you little more than a worthless snake? That I feel you are an existence that spends his time wriggling through the dirt?"

The Hebi Sennin's white cheeks lit up, sending a dusting of red over the cheekbones below his purple eye sockets. "Get out!" Orochimaru snarled. "Else I will not be so lenient and end you now!"

The nerve of the boy! There was most definitely a matter of disciplining on the agenda for Sasuke.

The raven-haired boy just gave him an infuriating smirk, blatant amusement in his spinning Sharingan eyes.

Wait. Spinning?

The world tunneled in around him, until all Orochimaru could perceive were the three spinning tomoe of Sasuke's Sharingan. They spun faster and faster until they became a red and black swirl. Abruptly, the spinning stopped, a six-pointed starburst pattern appearing in the Uchiha's eyes.

"Mangekyou." Both shinobi breathed at the same time. One with awed fear and the other with sadistic pleasure.

Closing his right eye, a trickle of blood welled up and seeped through the closed lid of Sasuke's socket. Seizing his chance, Orochimaru dove from the bed with one fist cocked back. Itachi had been profligate in the use of Amaterasu during their time in Akatsuki together, and the sennin was more than familiar enough with the jutsu to not want to be struck with a fire that never died.

Sasuke's right lid blinked open. "Tsukuyomi!" The Uchiha barked, and fifteen flaming kunai sunk into the old snake's body.

Collapsing to the ground with a howl, Orochimaru writhed about in pain. How?! How had Sasuke
gained the Mangekyou Sharingan without him even being aware of it? And how had he reversed the antipode techniques of his doujutsu to cast the Tsukuyomi with his right eye?

Stepping over his former shishou's trembling body, Sasuke learned down to whisper with a cold, and deadly drawl "So you wished to gain my eyes for yourself, did you? Very well, let's trade then, shall we?"

One hand came to rest on the Sennin's face, fingers ever so slowly pushing into one of Orochimaru's eye sockets.

Pulling up once he had an appropriate grip, Sasuke tore the orb from its optic nerve with a squelch, and setting off another round of howls and curses from his former mentor. The world was illusory only, but the pain was real enough for the nukenin.

"What's wrong?" Sasuke asked snidely, his face blotted out in the dark half of Orochimaru's field of vision. "I thought you wanted my eyes? You should know the first process of implanting someone else's eyes in your head is to have your own removed. So why don't you calm down and sit still?"

Repeating the process to his other eye, Sasuke left the other shinobi shivering on the stone floor, blood pouring from his empty sockets. Pure and reckless hate seeped up from the cracks of Orochimaru's soul. Wherever Sasuke had learnt to be so cruel was irrelevant. Once the genjutsu was ended, Orochimaru swore internally that he would make the boy regret ever raising a hand to him.

"Hn." The Uchiha grunted, before slamming his chokuto through the snake's forehead. Pure white hot agony seared Orochimaru's brain, and he spared a moment to think on the clinical horror of it. A blade through the middle of his skull, and he was still alive to feel it sliding and destroying his precious grey matter.

Dimly, Orochimaru registered the sound of Sasuke's snapping fingers. An odd numb sensation washed over his blind world, and suddenly colour rushed back in as his illusory flesh was mended.

Glaring at Sasuke hatefully, the sennin threw himself up at his torturer with a howl.

"Round two." The Uchiha grinned sadistically. With a wave of Sasuke's hand, Orochimaru's knees exploded.

Sasuke crouched down next to him, easily snatching the fist that flew towards that disgustingly aristocratic face. The boy lowered his mouth to hover right next to Orochimaru's head, and the Hebi Sennin couldn't prevent the sheer tide of horror that flooded through his veins at what was whispered into the shell of his ear.

"Five seconds down. Two days, twenty three hours, fifty nine minutes, and fifty five seconds to go".

Watching dispassionately as his former mentor twitched on the floor and foamed at the mouth. Sasuke felt the first inklings of disgust. The man was supposed to be strong. Kabuto was supposed to be strong. It wasn't supposed to be this easy.

Truly, it was better for him if it was, but Sasuke liked a challenge. The first time around, Orochimaru had almost won despite the impression Sasuke had preferred to give others. Kabuto hadn't been killed until Sasuke had lost control and simply burnt the man to ashes in black fire.

Eyes widening in suspicion, Sasuke threw one last glare at the drooling Sennin before incinerating
the man with a burst of black fire. No need to leave Orochimaru's DNA around for someone to take advantage of again.

Spinning about, he took off down sprinting the tunnels, retracing his steps until he rounded the corner. Sasuke skidded to a stop and stared at Kabuto's body - or rather, what should have been Kabuto's body. Instead of the sight of silver-haired medic carved into multiple pieces, there was only a scattering of bloody chunks of flesh. The slippery shinobi himself was nowhere to be seen.

With a scream of rage, the Uchiha slammed his fists into the wall. "In'yu Shoumetsu, huh?" Sasuke hadn't known Yin Healing Wound Destruction was that powerful. Enough to heal a Chidori to the kidney, certainly. But strong enough to drive the body to grow towards its decapitated head? He'd underestimated Kabuto.

"Well this changes things," Sasuke growled, before stomping his heel into one of the bloody chunks of flesh that had been carved from Kabuto's body during their brief struggle. Grinding at the gore in frustration, the Uchiha struck out at the wall again and watched dispassionately as it crumbled inward.

Then Sasuke clenched his fists, sucking in a calming gust of air and holding it in his lungs. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, nine and a fucking half, ten.

The first strike hadn't gone off a planned, but Orochimaru was dead and not lurking about in Sasuke's subconscious. Hopefully Kabuto was not in possession of any of the snake's living cells. If he was, Sasuke still had months to kill him before the cells truly integrated. Kami-sake, he'd wanted a bit more of a fight. Not to engage in some kind of absurd scavenger hunt!

Shaking his head, Sasuke turned from the destroyed wall and followed the bloody trail of Kabuto's blood to back to Orochimaru's library.

Shifting anxiously through the scrolls, Sasuke looked for the contract he had removed from this room the last time he had destroyed Orochimaru.

Historical records and Otogakure mission reports ended up all over the floor. Priceless information regarding the snake's human experimentation would have joined them, but Uchiha Sasuke had been the Rokudaime Hokage of Konohagakure, and under his rule the village had regained the title of Strongest that it had lost when Pein destroyed it.

He well understood the value of such scrolls, even if most balked at the methods by which the information they contained were gathered. Those ones ended up on the desk. Tsunade might wring her hands at the perceived immorality of it all, but she would make use of them.

At last! Lovingly wrapping his fingers around a yellowed old scroll, he unrolled the Hawk Summoning Contract with near reverence. Sasuke had looked through the Uchiha Clan's family scrolls many times in search of one of the bird summoning contracts that the family had possessed. Itachi had taken the Crow Summoning Contract with him, and until he'd found the stolen Hawk Summoning Contract in Orochimaru's lair the first time, Sasuke had assumed his brother had taken it with him as well.

Biting his finger and signing his name in blood, he felt the rush of power and confirmation that came with being acknowledged as a true predator. It was good to know that the Hawks wouldn't reject him this time around. They were an incredibly useful family of summons, and Garuda had been the closest thing he'd had to a friend after Naruto had died. The Hawk King was taciturn and non-judgemental, granting his loyalty to the Last Uchiha without grudge or reservation.
Speaking of summons...the snakes.

With narrowed eyes, Sasuke's right hand came up to run over the disconcertingly familiar cursed seal this body bore. Without the initiation of Orochimaru's Living Corpse Reincarnation, he did not carry the snake's actual mind in his body. Hence there was little-to-no chance of Orochimaru rising up to seize control of his body in a moment of weakness.

The Ten no Juin was a visible reminder that Sasuke had once truly been owned in a way by Orochimaru in a way. That he was stamped with the man's influence. Instinctively Sasuke wanted to take a hot poker to his flesh and burn it right off, but perhaps he would do better to keep the tainted power for the coming war.

The Cursed Seal of Heaven was a double-edged blade contained a portion of Orochimaru's chakra at the moment though. He would have to ask Itachi if he could remove the chakra but leave the seal. Even if Orochimaru's mind itself was gone, the sennin's energy was still potent and relying on it might cause Sasuke trouble down the line.

It was a dangerous, but powerful weapon. Akin to the might of a jinchuuriki, or at least strong enough to go toe-to-toe with Naruko when she had employed her first tail of bijuu chakra at the Valley of The End in order to bring him back to Konoha.

Abandoning that line of thought, he returned to his original consideration. He had signed the contract with the Hawks, but through his apprenticeship with Orochimaru he had held the allegiance of the Snake Clan as well. They were much more powerful than Garuda's relatively young dynasty. Sasuke remembered well the initiation ritual. Manda's fang to his jugular vein, and the hot feeling of poison running through his veins like barely restrained lightning. That poison remained in his body, granting him immunity to many toxic substances. But summoning contracts were a matter of both blood and soul. Would the snakes recognize him as their summoner, or were they bound to the Sasuke of the past?

Sasuke bit down on his thumb, rushing through hand seals before pressing his hand to the floor with a shove of his chakra. For a long moment the Uchiha waited with a baited breath as the skein of his spiritual energy lashed out into the other dimension where the summoning creature spirits resided. The first curl of resignation began to burn in the base of his throat before something caught the other end of his chakra and

With a sensation of vertigo, Sasuke was dragged through time and space and ungracefully dumped in the dirt. Scowling, the Uchiha rose to his feet before piercing the surrounding darkness of the Snake Clan's den with activated Sharingan. "Feeling a bit tetchy today, aren't we?"

"Still your tongue, hatchling." A tiny white snake slithered towards him through the dirt, growing in size with every slither the closer she came. By the time she reached him, the white snake had swollen in size so much that her bulk blotted out everything else from Sasuke's field of vision. "You have some nerve just calling for us. Did you think I wouldn't notice someone else coming along and gobbling up one of my summoners?"

Warily, Sasuke craned his head up to meet the slitted golden eye of the Hakuja Sennin. He'd never properly met her before. When he was young, Sasuke had no time for the elders of the clan. Manda's brute strength was all that he'd been interested in. Then after Naruko's death and Itachi and the chaos of the Fourth Shinobi World War, he hadn't been interested enough in power to reach out. But still, Sasuke knew her name.

"Rin. It's me."
"I see that, you young fool! Did you not think I would know?" Moist breath washed over him as the thick coils of her scaled white body brushed up against his skin. Rin tightened further and further about him until Sasuke could barely breathe. "Did you not think I could see it? Young or old, weak or strong, past or future, you belong to us. I see you, I smell you, I know you, time-stream-swimmer! To sign a contract is to pour your soul into us, as we pour ours into you. The Clan could not have failed to notice!"

Swallowing thickly as Rin's opened mouth turned to face him, the Snake Clan's matriarch nearly touching him with her venomous fangs, Sasuke leaned away. "Look, I didn't mean any disrespect by it. I just couldn't refuse the deal! Do you have any idea of what it feels like to lose everything over and over again? I'm sorry if that inconveniences you, but I don't regret it!"

Rin's gold eyes stared at him wordlessly before scaled eyelids blinked shut, opening only to reveal a bare band of yellow as she considered him. "We do not know you anymore, Uchiha Sasuke. But the contract will hold, if you permit us to know you."

"Fine." Sasuke rolled his eyes, more than a little bit fed up. He was still himself. Humans changed all the time. But he had no more time for thoughts as Rin's form turned to insubstantial smoke, flooding into his flesh. It was disorientating and violating as he and Rin bled together at the seams, and Sasuke could feel the snake matriarch as she slithered in and through him, tasting the flavour of his memories and the deepest emotions in his glass heart.

"Very well." Came from without and within him, and Sasuke was thrown. Unimaginable darkness blinkered his spinning eyes, and then the world rushed back in to leave the Uchiha standing nauseated within Orochimaru's library. The feeling of familiar cold-blooded power settled into his bones, and Sasuke knew he would have no trouble calling on the snakes for aid in the future.

Tossing some of the minor contracts the Sennin had pilfered over the years onto the desk, Sasuke searched the empty cubbyholes for any missed scrolls. He found two more scrolls regarding history, tossing them to the floor with a snort. Retrieving several blank scrolls from within the desk, Sasuke set about sealing all the information regarding kekkei genkai, various experiments, and summoning scrolls into storage seals.

Finishing with space to spare, Sasuke stared at the mess of scrolls on the floor and debating simply leaving them. Then he sighed with disgruntlement and rolled his eyes before beginning to gather them up.

He just knew that Tsunade would want them.

They too, ended up sealed into storage scrolls.

Sasuke also knew that this collection was hardly the entirety of the knowledge Orochimaru had gathered over his lifetime, but at least she couldn't complain that he destroyed possibly useful information when he leveled the base.

Trotting out of the library and down the corridor, Sasuke stepped into the first residential room he could find. The dark-haired adolescent ignored the corpse of a woman he had killed earlier propped up in the corner, setting about finding something to carry all the scrolls in.

Finding an old camping knapsack in the closet, Sasuke testing the fabric and decided it was good enough.

The time traveler returned to the old snake's desk, stuffing the various storage scrolls into the sack.
After filling it three quarters of the way and cleaning off the desk, Sasuke scoured the room for any last missing item. Spotting another scroll tossed into the corner of the study, he scooped it up with a huff and shoved it into the bag.

Departing for the surface, he kept his Sharingan activated to forewarn him of any possible counterattacks, by disgruntled Oto-nin or Kabuto himself.

When Sasuke stepped outside, he automatically squinted as his eyes quickly adjusted to the pre-dawn light.

Turning his face to the sky, Sasuke sent his hands flying through seals before bringing them up to pinch over his lips. Wordlessly blowing a series of flaming dragons into the stratosphere, he watched and waited for the sky to darken with the familiar gathering of a thundercloud.

Rotating to gaze at the mountain hideaway that made up the hidden base that he and the now-deceased Sennin had been living in, he tensed. Sasuke's left fist lit up with chirping and the fizzle of pure white electricity.

Arcing a beam of lightning up into the clouds, he leashed the natural energy of the nimbus to his command. Then he smirked.

Just for old times' sake. He felt like such a dramatist. But there was little point in a life lived without living it to the fullest, or some such nonsense Naruko had always claimed.

"Vanish with the roar of thunder."

His upraised arm swung down, and with a gurgling roar the silhouette of one of the legendary Kirin outlined in electricity lunged forth with all the fury of heaven.

The mountain exploded. Shards of stones flew in every direction, and he had to actually bat a few away as he watched the base collapse inward. Kirin was his most rarely used technique, as Sasuke didn't often find himself needing to generate gratuitous amounts of destruction, but there was still something satisfying about just taking in the wrath and ruin he could call down so easily. It was almost cathartic.

Hefting the sack filled with scrolls, the Uchiha involuntarily made a face. He had little to no desire to play messenger boy. Then Sasuke remembered a head of orange hair and a gentle demeanor with a smirk. Well maybe he wouldn't have to. He knew just the man for the job. And since it would be Sasuke asking, being Kimimaro's replacement, he didn't doubt the man would jump for joy and rush to fulfill his every whim.

Juugo had always been eager to please.

And who knew?

Maybe having the legendary Tsunade examine him could lead to a cure for his condition. Or at least some measure of control. That had never really been an option for the bipolar man. Juugo had passed from the company of one criminal to another, with none of them truly involved in worrying about his condition. Then the peaceful man had died, warning a group of shinobi to flee from Obito and giving into the warlike urges inside for a final time.

All of Team Taka, save Sasuke himself, had passed into the next world in similar ways. It was just one of his many regrets, and one that he would be sure to correct now that he had a chance.
Two Upended Bowl of Ramen

Chapter Summary

You didn't know anything about what was happening at that time... You did not know anything about the Uchiha clan's foolish idea... you were just a kid. Plus it wasn't for your sake alone... I also thought that one day I should be judged for the crimes I committed by an Uchiha like you, for that sake I used the hatred within you... and that's why I failed. The only thing I did was, giving the hatred to you and making you flee the village... I turned you into a criminal. - Uchiha Itachi

(Jun gasped, and then giggled. "Oh Takuo" she moaned in a breathy voice. Takuo grinned roguishly, bending over to capture Jun's rosy red lips. With Jun moaning into his mouth, Takuo took the opportunity to invade hers. Their tongues danced in a duet of passion, and Jun marveled at the taste of peppermint the filled her mouth.

Trailing fingers leaving streaks of fire down her sides, Takuo's hands came to rest on her waist. The man jerked in surprise at the way the woman's questing hands tangled into his obsidian hair. Pulling him down with a renewed burst of passion, Jun's breasts pressed up against Takuo's chest. He hissed and bucked, pushing his hardened flesh into her, groaning at the layers of cloth separating them.)

Icha Icha Paradise snapped shut at the same moment the door burst open.

Kakashi was moving three moments before that.

His kunai bore down on the intruder in a dark whirl of death. The jounin only pulled back at the last moment, leaving the shaking brunette Konoha chuunin staring into the pointed end of the blade.

Silence held for a time, before the jounin slowly raised his visible eyebrow and drawled at the sweating shinobi "Maa, you shouldn't burst in here like that. Surprising me always has unfavourable consequences. I really can't help it..."

The trembling man went white as a sheet, pupils contracting as he stared into Kakashi's face. "Hokage-sama-" he stuttered, shivering.

"Hokage-sama, what?" the jounin asked blankly.

"Hokage-sama wants you in her office right away!" the chuunin finally shrieked, before spinning in place and taking off down the hallway.

Standing alone in his apartment, the copy-nin's visible eye crinkled in amusement. "I guess I still got it." He chuckled. Kakashi pocketed the kunai before staring mournfully at the garish orange cover of Icha Icha Paradise.

"But I wanna know what happens next." He whined into the empty air. Slipping the book into his kunai pouch with a sigh, Kakashi stepped out of his apartment. He closed and locked the door, before meandering out of the building and down into the busy streets.
"Ohayo, Kakashi-sensei!"

"Ohayo, Sakura."

The eagerly waving pinkette rushed over to him. Pushing through the crowd, Sakura pulled up beside him. Continuing on at the same pace, Kakashi made little reaction to her presence beyond the pleased curve of his lips beneath the fabric of his mask.

"What are you doing today, Kaka-sensei?" the teenager eventually asked.

The man shrugged back. "Tsunade wants to see me about something 'right away'."

"Shishou wants to see you? Is it serious, do you think?" Kakashi shrugged again. "Serious enough I guess, since she sent a chuunin to commit home invasion to ensure that I got the summons."

Blinking in surprise, Sakura arched a brow at her occasional mentor. "Home invasion." she repeated skeptically.

The masked man nodded vigorously. "What else do you call it when someone bursts into your apartment with even knocking?"

Shaking her head at him, Sakura conceded the point. "I suppose so."

"Plus," he continued, voice rising to a whine. "He interrupted me from reading my book! Doesn't the man know that you don't interrupt someone just when Jun was about to-"

Smacking the pervert on the back of the head, Sakura interrupted his tirade.

Dodging around a gaggle of kids, Sakura gave him a foul glare. "Careful, Kaka-sensei" she warned. "If you keep this up I might spend my life savings on an S-ranked mission to have ANBU burn all your books. It would even be worth it."

Stumbling, he whipped his head around to look at her in horror. "You wouldn't."

"Don't push it."

Nodding to the chuunin stationed at the base of the Hokage Tower and stepping indoors, Kakashi grunted at his student. "You realize that if you did that the only recourse for me would be to go rogue and perform 'research' like the great Jiraiya-sama?"

Turning faintly green, the pink-haired teen shrieked "Nasty sensei!"

Scratching the back of his head, Kakashi ascended the staircase with his wayward student in tow. "I'm just giving you a fair warning." He laughed. "You sure you want to burn those books?" the Hatake grinned.

Sakura punched him in the kidney, watching in amusement as the man doubled over choking. "If I get to do that every time," she drawled, "It just might be worth it."

Waving her away he snorted. "Alright then Sakura-sama. I won't even try to explain the glory that is Icha Icha to a neophyte like you."

She raised her first threateningly, but Kakashi ducked through the door to the top floor and was gone. Huffing, the girl crossed her arms and followed him the rest of the way in silence.

Opening the door to the Hokage's office, Kakashi reflexively ducked the paper weight that flew at
his face. Giving his student a thumb up, the jounin sidled into the office before shutting the door in her surprised face.

Waiting until Sakura’s voice growled in annoyance through the wood and the sounds of her footsteps wandered off, Kakashi turned to face his superior.

Giving him a sober look, the blonde pointed at the chair in front of her desk.

With a sense of trepidation, he crossed the room before sinking down into the stiff-backed wooden chair.

Threading her fingers together, Tsunade leaned back. "I just got a message from Jiraiya." She stated shortly. The copy-nin sat patiently, and after a moment of pause she continued. "Naruko should be back in the village in three weeks."

Hand coming up to rub the hitae-ate that hid Obito's eye from the world, Kakashi frowned. "Is that so?" the man queried. The Hokage nodded. "Any news about Akatsuki?"

"Not yet."

"Ah I see. Is it still Itachi and Kisame that are tasked with capturing the nine tails?"

"Jiraiya's sources indicate that they still are, despite their lack of movement in the last couple of years."

"That's a bit suspicious." The shinobi decided.

Shaking her head with denial, Tsunade disagreed. "Only somewhat. We can't claim to know all that much about the organization outside of their dubious goal of capturing the nine bijuu. We have no idea what they want to do with them. It could be any number of things, from world domination to removing living weapons from the grasp of the hidden villages."

"I would hardly classify them as 'living weapons'..."

"Political considerations aside Kakashi, that's what they are for all intents and purposes when it comes to international relations. Any village with a jinchuuriki has a leg up on those who do not. It swings negotiations in our favour to have imprisoned the Kyuubi."

Snorting, Kakashi just shrugged his shoulders. "I doubt you called me up here to discuss the political ramifications of the various jinchuuriki."

Giving the jounin a sour look, the blonde huffed. "Whatever. The original point is that with Naruko back in the village, we can certainly expect the Akatsuki to send someone to capture her sooner or later. You were a pretty lazy jounin-sensei back when they were all still genin. I fully expect you to act more responsibly and actually train them. Even if it isn't jutsu, they will still need to be educated regarding strategy."

Blinking in surprise, the copy-nin crossed his arms and leaned back. Raising his visible brow, the jounin looked at Tsunade with suspicion. "What brought all this on?"

"I'm getting old Kakashi."

"Old? I never. You are the very picture of vitality and youth."

Glaring at her rebellious subordinate, Tsunade continued. "I'm getting old, Kakashi. I can't and
won't be Hokage forever. I don't expect you to do an absurd amount of work, but unless you plan to be Hokage after me, there are very few I would trust with the hat. One of them being your student."

"Isn't it a bit early to be thinking of making someone like Naruko the Hokage?" he protested. When the Hokage gave him a surprised look at the snub of his student, Kakashi backtracked. "Not to say that she'll never be ready for it, but she's still pretty young. Too young really, to be thinking about stuff like that beyond just viewing it as a dream."

"Minato was not very old at all when Sarutobi-sensei made him the Yondaime." She countered.

He shot her down. "Naruko is not Minato-sensei. Further, even at Naruko's age sensei knew that there were tough decisions in life and he was prepared to deal with them."

Pondering that statement, Tsunade slowly questioned "You mean the Uchiha?" At his curt nod, the blonde pinched her nose and sighed. "I suppose so. But Jiraiya himself didn't give up on Orochimaru for years, and he would've made a better Hokage than me."

"By the time they were willing to consider Jiraiya for Hokage, he had long washed his hands of Orochimaru."

"Speaking of the old snake. That time is getting close."

"Time for him to switch bodies?"

"Yes."

Tapping her fingers on the desk, the room was silent for a long spell. "As I said, I expect you to take the next few years to prepare Naruko for becoming Hokage. Or at least prepare her for the preparation of becoming one. You're dismissed."

Pouring herself a saucer of sake, she watched with lidded eyes as the jounin rose to his feet and headed for the door. Calling out as he set his hand on the knob, the Hokage declared her judgement.

"And Kakashi?"

"Hmm?"

"Letting Orochimaru get his hands on the Sharingan would be an unmitigated disaster for the Hidden Leaf. I will be sending your team on a mission to retrieve the Uchiha when Naruko returns, assuming nothing else comes up. If it doesn't look like you can make him come back..." she trailed off, looking listless. Then her eyes hardened to brown chips of ice.

"If he refuses to come back, I expect you to kill him."

The silence was damning before he replied with an even, emotionless voice.

"Hai, Hokage-sama."

He left, shutting the door with a quiet click. The silence Kakashi left behind was deafening.

"What are you doing here?"

"You should know by now."
A pause.

"You shouldn't be here. He'll kill you if he finds you."

"I don't care."

"Still chasing after me after all these years?"

A smirk.

"You know it."

"Still longing for what used to be?"

Another pause.

"You know the answer."

"I do."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing."

An arched brow.

"Nothing?"

"I'm not going to tell him I saw you here."

A laugh.

"You never do."

"You had better be gone in the morning."

"I always am."

Lips crashed down onto lips, hands clawing desperately at clothes with barely contained passion. And there was no more time for words.

Ramen; Sasuke decided, was truly garbage.

It tasted well enough, but there was far too much salt in it to be anything resembling healthy. He really had no idea how Naruko didn't get absurdly fat eating as much of it as she did. There were never enough tomatoes, and he wasn't all that in favour of it even when there were.

Naruko loved ramen. So he ate it at least once a week, in memory. Memories of the dead were a terrible thing.

But she wasn't dead anymore.

He was pulled from his musing when something squealing slammed into his back and arms came up to wrap around him.

Danger close!
Sending the bowl of ramen to the floor where it shattered on the porcelain tiles as the sudden bump sent it flying from his hands with a crash, Sasuke leapt into the air with a snarl. His feet planted on the ceiling, and Sasuke whirled about with his chokuto whirling. His Sharingan perceived Yamanaka Ino's upside-down face looking surprised and frightened as the blade arced towards her.

Sasuke pulled back on his Sword of Kusanagi, determined not to put a dent in his day by murdering one of the Rookie Nine over a spilled bowl of ramen. Honestly, fangirling aside Ino might have even arguably done Sasuke a favour.

Then Ino was yanked backwards by a burly teen in samurai armour. Chouji sent him an amazed look, choking out "Sasuke!" in shock. Nara Shikamaru stood behind him with an indecipherable look on his face.

"Uchiha Sasuke." Sarutobi Asuma looked as grizzled as ever, or at least as grizzled as he had the last time Sasuke had seen the man before his untimely death at the hands of Hiden. Which was something he would have to change, if only for Naruko. Heaven knew the woman had an obsession with saving people from their own mistakes.

(But Sasuke couldn't complain about that tendency. Not without being a hypocrite.)

"Sarutobi Asuma." He answered curtly; before Sasuke released the flow of chakra to his feet and dropped back down to stand upright.

The jounin's brown eyes trailed over Sasuke, taking in the changes that had occurred since his defection. "Where's your master?" he asked, peering around the ramen stand as if he'd find Orochimaru sitting on one of the stools or crammed into a booth.

Sasuke's lip curled. "I have no master." He replied coldly.

Asuma just grunted, determining that either the snake wasn't around, or was hidden too well if he was. Snapping back to the Uchiha, the Sarutobi enunciated very formally. "Uchiha Sasuke, Nukenin of Konohagakure. As a jounin of Konohagakure, I will be taking you into custody. Will you comply peacefully?"

Sasuke just snorted in disdain, and the jounin's face darkened.

"I see…" He trailed.

Shaking his head negatively with raven locks trailing, Sasuke brought his Sharingan to enrapturing whirl. "Not today Sarutobi," Sasuke offered. "Some later date I'm sure."

Asuma looked at him with surprise, and then amusement as Sasuke's body locked up.

Moving against his will, Sasuke's hands slide his chokuto into its sheathe before clasping together and offering themselves up to be bound.

Sasuke frowned at Shikamaru, whose connected shadow had the Uchiha aping his moves.

"Kagemane no Jutsu." The Nara stated blandly.

The raven nukenin barked with laughter. "You have no idea who you're dealing with." he said darkly.

Then the air around him was filled with violet streamers, as ghostly ribcage fading into existence. Ino's face twisted in unadulterated shock as Susano'o manifested around the Uchiha. An armless,
legless, and headless skeleton towered over the Konoha-nin, muscles appearing and weaving over its frame before finally being covered by demonic armour in an absurd macabre display.

Shikamaru felt the rebound of his broken Kagemane slam back into his chakra coils, and then he was shouting. "Move!" The Konoha team fell back, watching warily as the Uchiha stared back at them.

Sasuke gave him a cocky grin. Then the purple warrior vanished, and Sasuke was reaching back to grasp a previously unnoticed sack that had been propped up against the foot of his stool. Whipping his hand out, he heaved the bag towards Asuma, who caught it with a grunt as it collided forcefully with his chest.

The Nara's shadow was already shooting towards him, and the nukenin met the shadow user's determined eyes.

"Boom." He stated, the corner of his lip quirking up in mockery.

And the street between them filled with a rush of fire and white light as Sasuke set off an exploding tag.

Ramen; Naruko decided, was truly the food of the gods.

Delightfully chewy and salty, with a bowl of warm broth to wash it all down. And there were so many flavours! From chicken to miso to pork and so many more. And sometimes, if one was really lucky, there would even be extra plums!

Slurping the last of the broth out of her bowl, the girl grinned before signalling the ramen stand owner. "Oi ojii-chan! Can I get another bowl?" Smiling at the energetic blonde, he spooned another bowl out of the pot and handed it to her.

"You know, you remind me a lot of my grandson. He loves ramen just as much as it seems you do."

"Oh really?"

Jiraiya leaned against the counter, tuning out the rest of the babbled conversation. Watching the road with narrowed eyes, the old man examined the faces of the passerby. Recognizing one of them - an elderly man – he sidled over.

Bumping into his target's back, Jiraiya watched as the grandfatherly man jumped and dropped his cane. "Oh my!" he exclaimed. Turning about to give whomever had bumped him a glare, he grumbled at Jiraiya. "Young'uns these days, they've got absolutely no respect for their elders…"

Raising his hands with a placating gesture, the Sennin protested "Sorry there ojii-san. Don't worry; I'll pick it up for you." Swooping down, he scooped the cane off the ground and made a show of dusting it off. "You better clean it off, that there cane is a family heirloom. My father used it, and my father's father, and his father…" the elderly man rambled.

Passing back the stick with an exaggerated motion of caution, Jiraiya gave a sarcastic bow. "As you wish, Goshujin-sama." Snorting with amusement, the white-haired man crossed him arms and watched his elder stalk off in offense.

Feigned offense anyway.
Grinning at the thought, Jiraiya slipped his hands into his sleeves. Tying one of the strings sewn into the arms around the scroll his spy passed to him, he reached to scratch the back of his neck. Stretching his shoulders, the Sennin spun back and trotted to where his pupil was starting on her sixth bowl.

"Last one, Naruko." He warned, ignoring the teary eyed look she gave him.

Then an explosion rocked the city, and both shinobi were running for the source of the noise with a curse.

Blown off his feet, Shikamaru flew backwards only to be caught by Chouji, who already had his other arm around Ino's waist. Drawing back towards their sensei, the three looked to their team leader for orders.

"Don't look at me!" he barked, still clutching the sack the Uchiha had thrown at him. "Pursue him!"

Team Ten shot off like a brace of kunai, following the Uchiha who had just rounded the corner of one of the buildings at the end of the street. Cursing, Asuma hefted Sasuke's sack, taking a look inside for curiosity. "Scrolls…?" he wondered aloud.

Sasuke frowned in annoyance. The Konoha-nin were still trailing a street behind him in pursuit. Even though he had intentions to go back to the village Naruko loved eventually, it was an unnecessary interference in his plans to go back at the time. If they managed to drag him back then, he'd likely be confined within village borders for six months or more.

Six months of inaction would be the death of his hopes. He didn't want to let Obito get his hands on any of the tailed beasts if he didn't have to.

Sasuke also needed some proof of loyalty to get the Council off his back. And he had to figure out what to do about his brother.

Dodging through an alley, Sasuke came out on the other side amidst a pushing market full of people fleeing the explosion he had set off. Ducking his head, he drifted within a gaggle of men heading north.

"Not exactly the best hiding spot. It might've fooled anyone else, but not me."

The falsely jovial tone belied Shikamaru's completely serious face as the Uchiha whirled, snarling at the other teen. "Just go home, Nara!" Chouji's determined face loomed behind the shadow-user, and Ino's pleading one joined his.

"Just come home Sasuke-kun." She pleaded. "Sakura really misses you."

"Be that as it may," Sasuke answered icily, "Current political pandering would get me under watch for too long. I can't let that get in my way."

Shikamaru's face went strangely pensive, but Sasuke was out of time.

Whipping his hand forward, lightning chakra crackling around his arm, Sasuke aimed above and slightly to the left of the Nara's topknot. "Chidori Eisou!" he barked, and the electricity lanced towards Team Ten.

The pineapple-haired chuunin hit the dirt, not realizing he was already out of the line of fire.

Then Sasuke was running. Dashing around the corner, he rushed past a pair of red and orange blurs
topped with white and blonde. His heart leapt into his throat.

Sasuke would recognize that spiky blonde mane anywhere.

The Uchiha ran harder, trying to pretend the burning in his chest was from exertion.

And if Sasuke could recognize her, she could certainly recognize him as she saw her former Uchiha teammate for the first time in three years.

"Sasuke!" rang out behind him, echoing in his ears.

(Sasuke!

Sasuke, I'm talking you back to Konoha!

That's something I'll never give up on!)

Swallowing, Sasuke pushed the memories to the back of his mind. So damned close. But so damned far.

He took to the rooftops, leaping across the buildings. The single set pounding of feet behind him created an almost irresistible temptation to turn. Keeping pace, Sasuke quickly approached the edge of the village landing on the last rooftop before the wilderness with a sigh and stopping. Staring out over the trees, he heard the set of feet stop behind him.

"Sasuke." She murmured; and he turned involuntarily, staring into the face of Uzumaki Naruko for the first time in five years.

"Naruko." He answered back just as quietly, roving eyes drinking in the sight before him.

Her blue zori of youth had long since been exchanged for a set of black. She had abandoned the horrendous orange jumpsuit of her childhood, replacing the orange pants with biker shorts and black legwarmers. The jacket had gone the way of the pants, being replaced with a black and orange vest. Underneath it all was a mesh bodysuit, cutting off halfway down the thighs and halfway to the elbows.

Sasuke's face was a blank mask, Naruko couldn't help but feel. The raven had gotten taller over the years, and his hair was longer. Black hair framed his face, and ebony eyes regarded her impassively. A white haori open at the chest replaced the blue jacket she had last seen him in, but she didn't doubt he had the Uchiha fan emblazoned on the back. Plain black hakama covered his lower body, around which he had wrapped a blue cloth, secured in place with a long purple rope. The back of his hands were covered by a square of black leather, and she didn't doubt the arm guards extended up to his elbows.

"Hn." He grunted.

She smirked automatically, savouring the nostalgia. The response was just so Sasuke.

"So teme, are you coming home? Or am I going to have to break your legs and drag you home?"

Sasuke raised an indifferent dark brow. "You, beat me? Keep on dreaming dobe."

Naruko grinned. Holding her hand out in silent question. He stared at it without reaction. The minutes ticked by, and the smile slowly slid off her face until she had assumed an equally blank expression.
He took a step forward, then another. As Sasuke stalked closer and closer, he felt almost physically ill at the naked hope in her blue eyes. Stopping just out of her grasp, he reached his own hand out.

Two fingers reached out and poked her forehead, before Sasuke trailed his hand lower to brush her pink lips. A dusting of red lit up her tanned cheekbones, and he could feel the slight part of her lips beneath the tips of his fingers.

It was almost dangerously lurid, and the Uchiha smashed down a certain kind of memories before they even had a chance to rise up. Sasuke was not leaving with a tent pitched in his pants.

Dropping his hand back to his side, Sasuke sighed. "Sorry Naruko," and her face looked like the world was breaking in front of her. "Maybe next time."

Then he bit his thumb, flashing through hand seals before slamming his palm into the ground beneath him. Smoke burst, and when it cleared he was standing on the back of a giant hawk, the bird floating just out of her reach.

Slowly rising, the hawk turned to the north and flew off into the horizon. She was left standing alone, staring at him as he slowly vanished from sight.

Jiraiya landed softly on the roof beside her, followed closely by Asuma and the rest of Team Ten. "Naruko?" her shishou asked softly. Receiving no response, he sighed. "Where's Sasuke?"

"He left." She answered dully. "He left me behind again."

Placing a comforting hand on her shoulder, he gave her a small pat before turning to the Sandaime's son. "What happened?"

Pulling out a cigarette, Team Ten's jounin-sensei took a long drag. Puffing out a cloud of white smoke, he gestured to his student. "Ino spotted him at ramen stand eating." Naruko's face assumed an extremely incredulous expression.

"She rushed up to him." Tossing the now flushing blonde an amused look as the jinchuuriki looked on in interest, he continued. "Scared the crap out of him I'd guess. Jumped right for the ceiling and hung upside down like some kind of cat. Kid's got scary reflexes I tell ya. If he hadn't recognized her at the last second, he probably would've killed her."

Scratching his beard, the jounin took another drag. "Anyway, I told him I was gonna bring him back to Konoha. Asked him to come peacefully. He just said 'Not today, Sarutobi'. Shikamaru took the chance to grab him in a Kagemane, and it seemed like we had it in the bag."

"Then he got this pretty shifty look about him. Told us we didn't know who we were dealing with. That's when it got really weird." Asuma tossed the butt of his cigarette away, fixing Jiraiya with a serious look. "Kid called up some kind of purple fire thing. Looked like some sort of ghost. Whatever it was, it broke Shika's Kagemane like it was nothing. I've never seen anything like it."

"I've never heard of anything like it." Jiraiya answered the implied question.

The jounin frowned. "Right, anyway. Just when he was looking all set to attack us, the ghost just vanished. Then he threw that," he nodded at the tan sack, "Lit off an exploding tag, and took off. You know the rest of the story." Looking over at the rest of the team, he raised a brow. "Unless you guys have something to add."

"Just another jutsu" Shikamaru stated, shrugging. "He called it 'Chidori Eisou'." Naruko snapped her head around to stare at him. "It was just a beam of electricity I guess. It was crazy fast though.
I'm really lucky he wasn't trying to take me out."

Eyes widening, Chouji immediately yelped in protest "What are you talking about Shika? He almost blew your head off with it!"

The Nara shook his head. "I kind of reacted on reflex. But I saw how fast that jutsu was. Missing me from that kind of range? No, not a chance. And if he was out to get me, he would've aimed lower since chances were I'd duck. I suspect that if I'd stood still, it probably would've just gone right over my head."

Silence was left after that statement. "I see," Jiraiya muttered pensively.

"I think the real question," Ino piped up.

"Is what the hell is in the bag?" Chouji finished.

"Scrolls." Asuma answered shortly.

Naruko twitched.

"Well I don't have to guess if you ever thought to look and see what was written on them?" Ino asked snidely. The Sarutobi just shrugged and lit up another cigarette.

Stalking over to the bag, Ino's hand dove inside and pulled out a random scroll. Unraveling it with a flourish, she stared at the kanji inscribed before tossing it at Jiraiya. "It's a storage scroll" she muttered.

Unraveling the ream of paper, Jiraiya stared at the scroll before glancing up at them. "Get back," he warned the other Konoha-nin. After they took couple of steps back, Jiraiya shattered the seal with a burst of chakra.

A poof of smoke appeared over the scroll, and a hefty pile of scrolls appeared. Dropping onto the rooftop, they immediately began to roll about. Kicking one back to the Sennin, Shikamaru crossed his arms and waited.

"Oh please tell me this isn't going to be storage scroll inside storage scroll for like thirty tries." The old man moaned.

"First of all, ero-sennin, Sasuke isn't you. And second, that's not even possible and you know it." Naruko answered.

"Pfft. Fine. Ruin all my enjoyment with your logic and anti-fun ways." The sage whined. His pupil just rolled her eyes. Picking one of the unsealed scrolls at random, he opened it with a flick of his wrist. Examining the contents, the amused look on his face changed into shock.

"What is it?" the blonde jinchuuriki asked excitedly.

Turning to look at her, the old man let his eyes fill with tears. "It's… a transcript of my very first Icha Icha novel."

Everyone on the rooftop assumed blank expressions.

"YOU IDIOT!" the old man's student shrieked, kicking him in the back of the head.

Jiraiya just laughed. "No seriously though, it's actually some kind of historical record."
"The Uchiha came all this way, carrying a bag full of history?" the Nara asked in bewilderment.

Shrugging, Jiraiya answered flippantly. "Who can say? Toss me another one."

Catching the second scroll Chouji tossed, Jiraiya opened that one as well. A frown slowly etched itself onto his face. "This is…" he muttered to himself.

"What is it?" Asuma questioned, meandering over to the Sennin.

"It's a record of Orochimaru's human experimentation. I recognize his handwriting. Quick! Check what's in the other scrolls!"

"This one's just more history." Naruko whined. "Why do I always get the boring reads?"

"More human experiments?" Asuma drawled.

"Oh wow! This one's a summoning contract!" Ino laughed.

"Jeez, what did he do? Steal the whole library? Trade records…" Chouji snorted.

"This one's Akatsuki."

All eyes turned to Shikamaru as he shook the scroll in his hand at them. "This scroll here information on the Akatsuki. About someone called Deidara."

Stalking over to the Nara, Jiraiya snatched the scroll out of his hand. The pineapple withdrew with his hands up, but the Sennin ignored him. Tearing the scrolls open, he devoured its contents.

"It's accurate." He finally decided after a long pause. "Looks like Orochimaru wrote this one up himself too." Looking around at the trove of information with new eyes, the Sennin smirked appreciatively.

"Well, well, well. It looks like our little Uchiha has been a very bad boy." He grinned.

"Are you sure this is all good information?" The Sandaime's son asked. "It could be a plant." He ignored the searing glare Naruko sent his way for doubting her friend's motive.

"No." the Sennin denied. "There's way too much here to be a plant. And if it was, Orochimaru wouldn't have personally wasted his time writing these out. Further, there isn't even any motive. Orochimaru used to be in Akatsuki, but they're pretty much enemies at this point. He'd never do anything to their benefit."

"The only situations I can see are that either Sasuke was transporting these, which I'd doubt. Orochimaru wouldn't endanger his next body for such a menial task. Or that Sasuke stole them himself, for some unknown purpose."

Asuma crossed his arms and stared at the white-haired male. "Well whatever it was, we have all his scrolls now, he won't be accomplishing much with them."

"No." Shikamaru interjected. He had a concentrated look on his face as he formulated his theory.

"If he wanted to take them, he easily could have. Did you not see the way he left?" Nodding towards the horizon, the Nara sighed. "Uchiha's got a flying summon now. If he really wanted to keep these out of our hands that badly, he would've taken them with him. And he didn't fight us at all. Just did what he needed to so he could get out of the area."
"And he tossed them at you" Shikamaru told his sensei. "None of us even knew the bag was his, he could've left it behind and come back later if he didn't feel his chances of getting away were good with them. If anything, I'd guess he wanted us to have them. Wanted Konoha to get them, I'd suppose."

"No way…" Chouji breathed.

"And didn't you listen to what he said when you told him you were taking him back? 'Some later date'. His exact words."

"Naruko!" he barked, and she gave a slight jump. "I know you asked him to come home. What did he say to you?"

"He said 'Sorry Naruko, maybe next time'." She whispered.

The Nara nodded as if all the pieces fell into place. "So that's it then." He concluded. "Either he wants to come home or figures he'll need a place to go after he kills Itachi, or something."

"Yatta!" the jinchuuriki shouted. "I knew it. He'll come home right, ero-sennin? He's not such a bad guy."

"That 'not a bad guy' shoved a Chidori through your chest." Jiraiya stated coldly, folding his arms over his chest and scowling towards the north.

Naruko's face went grey, her whisker marks standing out in stark relief as she turned away. She couldn't even begin to conceal the flash of hurt that flashed across her face. It wasn't exactly a secret what had happened in the Valley of the End, but she hardly wanted to have it brought up ever again.

"Shit." Shikamaru muttered under his breath.

Looking from master to student and back, the Konoha jounin sighed. "Alright Team Ten. Gather up the intel, we're reporting back with this information straight to the Hokage."

Wordlessly, the jounin's team scooped up the pile of scrolls and resealed them. Stuffing the storage scroll back into the Uchiha's sack, Asuma hefted it before slipping his arm through the strap. Lifting it up and over his head, the Sarutobi settled in so the strap formed a diagonal band across his chest.

Taking off back across the village, Shikamaru on his heels, the jounin sighed. "That poor kid. Chouji followed his friend and leader a moment later. Ino gave Naruko a look of pity before following the rest of her team.

Jiraiya and Naruko stood alone on the roof. After a moment, the Sennin reached out to rest a hand on her student's shoulder. The blonde knocked it away with the heel of her palm. "Just leave me alone for a minute." She choked.

"Alright then." Her godfather agreed quietly, disappearing from the roof with a rustle.

Once alone, the Uzumaki's trembling hand came up to rest on her breast. Tracing the shape of the no-longer visible hole the Uchiha's Chidori had torn through her chest, she took a shaky breath.

"Sasuke…" she murmured. Wiping away a tear, Naruko took a moment to calm herself. Then pasting on a fake smile, she vanished soundlessly to join her sensei. Sasuke had gotten away this time. Next time she wouldn't be distracted by his odd touches and the queer look on his face. She'd
simply break his legs before he had a chance to open his mouth.

"I told you once before. Those who disobey the rules are trash, but those who abandon their comrades are worse than trash. You; Sasuke, are worse than trash."

He laughed uproariously.

"Since when did I submit to your judgement, Kaka-sensei? Those words are a meaningless platitude."

"They're our way of the ninja. Our Nindo. Team Seven. Sakura, and Naruko, and I. It was yours once too. It still could be."

"And do you know my way of the ninja, my Nindo? Sensei? My way of ninja is hatred. It is hatred that makes me strong. Hatred that keeps me alive. Hatred that gives me purpose."

"Hatred is never the answer Sasuke."

"I told you before, didn't I? My Kaa-san, my tou-san, my nii-san. My aunts, my uncles, my cousins. Their voices cry incessantly. This is my family Kakashi! Even after death, they cry. I will save them from their pain! This is my hatred! This is my justice! This is my vengeance! Prepare yourself, Konoha-nin! Your blood will ease their passing!"

"I wish so badly that it had not come to this, Sasuke."

Tangling his fingers in the feathers of his summoned spirit, Sasuke wordlessly ordered the bird to land. The hawk circled, wind rushing beneath and over its wings and nearly blowing the Uchiha off when he stood. Landing in a brace of trees, the hawk crouched and he disembarked.

"A pleasure, Sasuke-san." The predator rumbled.

"As always, Garuda."

Vanishing in a puff of smoke back to its ancestral hunting grounds, the hawk left him alone. Taking the moment to lean against a nearby tree, Sasuke slid to the ground. He buried his face in his hands.

"I didn't think it would be this hard." he whispered, unable to banish that terrible look of breaking from his mind. Biting his lip, the Uchiha steeled his resolve. "Remember what you're fighting for." He growled, rising to his feet.

Stepping onto the forest path, he followed it along its winding route until he came to the end of the woods. The trees vanished, replaced by rocky plains and the distant mountains of Kaminari no Kuni on the horizon.

Squatting on the planes was a sprawling prison complex. Orochimaru's North Base. Sasuke dashed across the plain, covering the distance in a few minutes.

Open steel panels loomed high, barbed wire and bolts that might intimidate a fresh-faced genin. Sasuke strode confidently between the front gates with nary a pause, surprising an armed patrol of Oto-nin.

The two parties regarded one another warily before Orochimaru's servants seemed to recognize
him. They snapped to a rigid salute, belting out "Uchiha-sama!" with military discipline. He gave them a masked look with a hint of murder in his eyes. "Take me to the leader of this base." Sasuke ordered coldly.

Leading him through the main entrance of one of the nearby buildings, his guides confidently showed him the way down the twisting corridors and straight into the commander's office. The two guards saluted their commanding officer before departing back to their posts.

"Do you know who I am?" the Uchiha asked, voice cold as ice.

"Some self-important whelp, no doubt." The bearded man snorted. Frowning at the newcomer, the middle-aged ninja's wrinkles deepened. "Well spit it out! What are you here for?"

"I am Uchiha Sasuke," he answered with venom. "The Orochimaru Vessel. I would dearly watch your tongue when you are addressing me, if I were you. I will remember it."

With each word the base commander grew more and more white. "I apologize Uchiha-sama." he stammered. "Commander Hojo, at your service". The shinobi bowed, harsh electrical lighting gleaming off his bald head.

"Hn." Sasuke grunted. "Show me to the security room." The Uchiha ordered.

"The security room?" Hojo queried. "What would you need in there for?"

"I am on an assignment from Orochimaru. You would do well to obey me and do as I say. If I am forced to return to him empty handed, he will be less than pleased. Especially when I inform him as to your role in the failure of the mission."

Hojo went grey, and seemed almost ready to faint. "Yes, of course sir. Right this way." Leading him out of the office and down the hallway to a hidden room, Hojo slid open the door to allow the raven into the security office.

Examining the camera displays, Sasuke grinned. "I see you've kept the experiments well in hand." He said offhandedly.

Hojo flushed at the unexpected praise. "Yes sir! We run a tight ship around here, yes we do."

The Uchiha snorted in amusement. "Is that so?" he drawled. Reaching down to the console, he shattered the glass covering the emergency release button, before pressing the button. Alarms blared through the base and spinning red warning lights flickered on.

"What are you doing?" Hojo shrieked, rushing over.

Sasuke backhanded the man to the floor, knocking a tooth loose in a sprinkle of blood.

"These are Orochimaru-sama's treasured experiments! You can't let them run free" the ninja protested, pressing a hand to his bleeding mouth. "What do you think he'll do to you when he finds out how badly you fucked his research up?"

Sasuke burst out laughing. "Him? What he's going to do to me? I killed him the other day."

Stopping abruptly, Sasuke gave the base commander a bloodthirsty grin. He leaned over to whisper to the elder man that was trembling on the floor.

"I think Hojo; you ought to be more worried about what I'm going to do you." Twin starbursts spiralled into the Uchiha's eyes. Closer examination revealed a three pronged triangle in each
starburst, each own facing upside-down to the other.

The Commander of Orochimaru's North Base died screaming in a burst of black fire, and Sasuke strolled out the door of the security room whistling a jaunty tune.

Tracking down to the bottom floor, Sasuke cut down Cursed Seal experiments and Oto-nin alike. It was particularly amusing to see the naked hope for his aid as word spread that "Uchiha-sama." was in the base. Almost as amusing as watching the shocked and betrayed looks Orochimaru's servants gave him when he cut them down just the same.

Blood slicked the tiles thicker and thicker, and his zori left squeaks with every step as he padded through the maze. Turning a corner, he ducked a haymaker that way flying for his face before slamming the heel of his foot into his assailant's chest.

"I'll kill ya! I'll kill ya!" the monster giggled, until the Uchiha hammered him with killing intent. The monster collapsed to the floor, cursed seal abilities receding.

Staring at the orange haired man curled up on the floor, Sasuke demanded his attention with one forceful word.

"Juugo."
"I'll be gone soon. But I'll say this, even if it is my undoing. Whatever your plans are, do not destroy Naruko. If you do... you'll regret it..." – Kyuubi no Kitsune

"Juugo."

The orange-haired man all but ignored him, curling into an even tighter ball on the floor and sobbing. "I did it again, I did it again..." Juugo gasped, stomach twisting in guilt and self-loathing. Why couldn't he just control himself?

"Get up Juugo."

He just wanted to be left alone. He'd only gotten involved with Orochimaru because he'd thought the man could provide him control over his condition. When the old snake didn't even try, just using his blood to experiment on other people, he'd known. Orochimaru was never going to help him.

A clawed hand wrapped around his throat and heaved him off the ground. Slamming him into the wall, he was left staring into a greyed face with spinning red eyes and black sclera. The man's lips were purple, fangs poking out over his lips. Wings resembling webs hands arched out of the man's back, and his hair was a shaggy blue-black mane.

One of his copies.

"Juugo." The copy hissed at him. "Now that I have your attention..." the other snarled, his skin lit up with coiling red and the state of cursed power left him. The face left behind was pale, framed by raven-back bangs, and the expression he wore was ice-cold.

Dropping Juugo on his ass, the other crossed his arms and stared down at him. Rubbing a hand on his bruised throat, Juugo stared back.

"Do you know me?" the teenager asked him.

"I don't." Juugo shook his head, staring at the cursed seal that marked the other's neck with something like remorse. The other's lip curled. Whether in derision or pity, Juugo couldn't really say.

"Uchiha Sasuke."

Sasuke stared at Juugo carefully, searching for some form of reaction. Juugo made none, seemingly content to stare at the cursed seal with painful regret on his face. The Uchiha sighed. As annoying as it was, he didn't have the heart to snap at the bi-polar male for his guilt.

Sasuke himself was no stranger to guilt. He couldn't fault another for feeling it.

Grabbing the orange-haired man's chin with a pale hand, Sasuke forced the other to stare into his
eyes. "I am Uchiha Sasuke." he repeated. "I have come here for you, Tenbin no Juugo."

"For me?" Juugo stuttered. T

The Uchiha narrowed his eyes before opening with his trump card. "I come in place of Kimimaro." He stated boldly.

Juugo's eyes widened and he shot to his feet. "You're here for Kimimaro? Where is he?" Sasuke drew back warily, but Juugo was beyond caring. Grasping Sasuke's biceps with desperation, he pleaded with the other. "Where is he?" he repeated. "It's been a very long time. No one would tell me anything about him!" Juugo had been starved for news of his only friend.

The Uchiha regarded him with a mixture of shock and pity, before his face softened slightly. "So they haven't told you yet..." Sasuke mused, more to himself than to the orange-haired man.

Juugo watched him with a growing sense of trepidation. "Just tell me!"

"Kimimaro is dead."

The man went pale, reeling away from the raven in despair and pain. Covering his face with one large hand, he choked back a sob. "Oh no..." he muttered. A hand came up to grip his shoulder, and he startled at the unexpected kindness from a stranger.

"Come Juugo." Sasuke commanded, before striding off down the hallway. With nothing else to do, the orange-haired man went after him.

"Kimimaro died for my sake." Sasuke offered the other as he stepped out into the dark night.

Juugo's detached look sharpened and focused on the Uchiha, hanging on his every word.

"I left Konoha when I was thirteen years old to go to Orochimaru." Sasuke continued, eyes cautiously scanning through the twilight for any escaped convicts.

"Konoha sent a team to pursue and retrieve me. Anticipating this, Kabuto woke Kimimaro and sent him out to ensure that I made it to Otogakure safely. Kimimaro died in battle against Sabaku no Gaara; the man who would become Godaime Kazekage."

The prison courtyard was silent except for twin sets of breathing rasps. Sasuke folded his arms and leaned back against the outer chain link fence while Juugo looked on. The orange-haired man took a moment to mull over what the raven had told him.

"That doesn't explain why you've come here." He finally stated. "Or why you've come looking for me."

Regarding Juugo with an impassive look, the Uchiha's hand rubbed at his chin thoughtfully before he opened his mouth. "I have goals. Things I need to do. For that purpose, I'll be assembling a team. I need strong people to fight with me. I sought you out because you are strong. And I know you're not motivated by ambition, so you won't turn around and stab me in the back."

"And what's in that for me?" Juugo muttered, clenching his jaw at the thought of being someone's pawn again.

"After all is said and done, I intend to return to Konoha." The cursed man sent him a questioning look, to which Sasuke shrugged in reply. "I am finished with my tutelage beneath Orochimaru. I had no intention of becoming his next body. And since he had no intention of letting me go, I
killed him."

Pressing his lips together as the teen before him shot up several levels on his danger scale, Juugo frowned.

"When I go home to Konoha, I'll turn you over to Tsunade - the Hokage" Sasuke clarified when the man simply looked confused. "She was Orochimaru's teammate back when he was a Konoha-nin, and she's a famous world-class medic. A complete genius in her field. If anyone would cure your rages without demanding you sell your soul to them, it would be her."

"I see." Juugo muttered with a considering face.

"So how about it Juugo? Will you help me accomplish my goals?" Sasuke pressed.

Eyes flashing, the gentle giant stared at the Uchiha suspiciously. "And what would your goals be? I have no intention of trading one dark master for another."

"I am going to hunt Akatsuki."

"Akatsuki?"

"Akatsuki is an organization of S-ranked criminals that intend to gather all the tailed beasts under their command. With that power, they will rule over the world."

"And why would you take it upon yourself to hunt them?"

Sasuke's pale face went oddly vulnerable. "I have… precious people I suppose. They're not strong enough to go against Akatsuki yet, and when they are it will be too late. I can't let that happen."

Throughout Sasuke's confession, Juugo's face softened from suspicious to understanding. Taking in the new look on the cursed man's face, the raven posed his question again.

"So Juugo, will you help me? Will you help me destroy the Akatsuki?"

Juugo's face curled into a small smile.

"I can't let you die… You're all I have left to remember Kimimaro. So I'll help you."

Sasuke's face melted into an indecipherable expression. "Somehow, I knew you'd say that." He whispered.

And the two melted into the night, vanishing under the dark moon.

Crouch. Tense. Leap. Repeat.

Sasuke and Juugo continued to push themselves at a grueling pace through the night, fleeing Orochimaru's North Base, heading southwest. The Uchiha took the lead, guiding Juugo through forests, over rivers, and around rice fields. The orange-haired male was content to follow quietly.

As dawn peeked over the horizon, Sasuke called for a stop along the bed of a small stream. Bending down, he cupped some cool water in his palms before bringing it to his mouth. He deliberately ignored the way Juugo dropped down beside him, more desperately drinking. The cursed man was soaked in sweat, hands shaking slightly as his body was forced to readjust itself to exercise after years of inactivity.
Sasuke grunted, plopping down on a rock and folding his hands between his knees. Juugo lowered himself to the ground beside him, determined to find rest but not to show weakness.

Sasuke didn't really care either way. He was in a good mood. He'd killed Orochimaru, escaped Konoha, and found Juugo. Things were coming together nicely.

Of course, Kabuto had escaped; he'd had a painful run in with Naruko, and after his confrontation with Team Sarutobi Konoha would very likely redouble their efforts to capture him.

Sasuke's mood soured.

While Juugo's breathing regulated and he stopped sweating, Sasuke stared down at his hands.

"Juugo."

"Hn?"

"Have you ever hurt someone you loved?"

Juugo sent him an ironic look. "Sasuke, do I need to remind you that my murderous rages are completely out of my control? What do you think drove me to seek Orochimaru out in the first place? I didn't hurt someone I loved, Sasuke, I murdered them." The orange-haired male seemed to age decades in a breath. "Not a moment goes by when I don't regret it. It drives me to try to be better than I am - to work towards being a kinder and less selfless man to atone for my sins. It inspires me to keep looking for a cure to this curse as long as I draw breath."

Absorbing the speech in silence for a moment, Sasuke's hands clenched until his knuckles turned white. "And what would you do if they were still alive?"

"Do my best to make amends I suppose. Even if I had to spend the rest of my life doing so. Until they forgave me and I was able to forgive myself."

Dragging a hand through his hair, Sasuke's face went pained. "What if you don't deserve to be forgiven? What if no matter what you did, you never could deserve absolution…" he whispered.

Placing a hand on the younger teen's shoulder, Juugo stared him in the face. "Sasuke…" he sighed. "My father once told me that people don't deserve forgiveness. Forgiveness isn't something to be earned, not really. It's a personal choice to forgive someone. Letting go of hatred and pain… it happens when the wronged party is willing to give it. Then it's just up to you to accept or reject it."

Standing, Juugo wandered along the stream to gaze down the road. He gave Sasuke a moment alone.

Watching the orange-haired man's face, Sasuke was struck poignantly by all the quiet nobility and wisdom he read there. Swallowing past the taste of ash in his mouth, he stood. This was the man he had left to die after the Kage Summit?

Evidently, he'd committed more crimes than he knew.

"Come Juugo. We have places to be." Sasuke was proud of the careful neutrality his voice and face portrayed. He began to walk.

Not that it mattered, with Juugo reading the turmoil in his coal black eyes.
Nodding wordlessly, the giant followed.

A bag of scrolls was upended on her desk.

Tsunade watched skeptically as Sarutobi Asuma began to thumb through them, sorting the cylinders into neat rows for her inspection. Stepping back, the jounin lit up a cigarette and took a long drag.

"That'll kill you, you know." The Senju informed him with a long-suffering glance.

"Maybe, but it won't kill me today." Asuma grunted. Shikamaru stood behind him and slightly to the left, unable to help the roll of his eyes at his stubborn sensei.

Shaking her head with amusement, the Hokage selected a scroll at random. Rolling it open, she examined the storage seal before assuming a thoughtful look.

"You say the nukenin Uchiha Sasuke gave these to you?"

Team Sarutobi's leader shrugged. "I couldn't say either way," he confessed. "Though Shika is pretty convinced that he did."

"Is that so?" Tsunade pinned the Nara with a hawkish glare.

"Troublesome…” Shikamaru sighed, tugging at his topknot absently. "You didn't see it, Hokage-sama." He answered. "The Uchiha just played us. He had control of the confrontation from the very beginning. We wouldn't have been able to take these to you if he didn't want us to have them."

Tsunade tapped her arm in thought before coming to a decision. Lips thinning, she turned to the chain-smoking shinobi. "Sarutobi Asuma, I want you to bring together a team consisting of Team Asuma, Team Gai, and Team Kurenai. Yuuhi Kurenai is excused from this mission due to health concerns related to her pregnancy. Assemble back in my office shortly after noon."

"Hai, Hokage-sama." He confirmed. Team Asuma departed, trailing out the door. Shikamaru sent the Hokage a calculating glance over his shoulder as the door banged shut behind him. "She's up to something." The shadow-user muttered.

Chouji tossed his head. "Probably. But she's the Hokage. We're supposed to follow orders."

"You three go find Team Gai. I'm going to look for Team Kurenai." Asuma ordered.

Ino leered at him. "Looking to get some private time with Kurenai-sensei?" Chouji chuckled and Shikamaru rolled his eyes at her conduct.

Stepping out of the Tower, Asuma wordlessly formed a hand seal and vanished in a swirl of leaves.

"Hey! No fun!" the blonde whined.

"Quiet down." Shikamaru ordered exasperatedly. "We'll go to Tenten's family shop first," the Nara decided, turning and heading east. "Oh, and I think it would be best if we didn't say anything to Sakura about Sasuke," he suggested quietly.

"Got it." Ino affirmed while Chouji nodded in agreement.

The bell rang when Chouji opened the front door of the shop, dulcet tones filling the air. "Ohayo, ojii-san!" Ino chirped to the brown-haired man behind the counter. Regarding them with impassive
brown eyes, the proprietor merely gave her a nod.

"We're looking for Tenten." Shikamaru informed him. "I don't suppose you'd know where she is?"

Sighing, the man leaned forward on the counter, propping his face up on one hand. "I don't know what my niece gets up to these days. She's not a kid anymore. Probably off training with her team or eating lunch with them."

Thanking Tenten's uncle, Team Sarutobi filed out the door.

Standing on the sidewalk awkwardly, Chouji frowned. "I don't suppose either of you know which training ground they'd have picked today?"

"Let's try Training Ground Three" Ino offered. "Sakura goes there sometimes and Lee is still asking her for dates." Rubbing his forehead, Shikamaru agreed. As one, the three teammates moved across the village to Training Ground Three.

Clamping over the red oak bridge that had been identified with Team Seven once they passed the Bell Test, the Yamanaka couldn't help but sigh. Ino against the rails, staring down at the river. Her reflection looked back up at her, long blonde bangs covering one half of her face and leaving one blue-green eye visible.

"Things have changed a lot in the past couple of years, haven't they?" she mused.

Chouji's reflection peered over her reflection's shoulder, and the plump teen grinned. Shaggy brown hair waved about in the breeze and he raised his left eyebrow. "You're being uncharacteristically philosophical, Ino," he teased, and she swatted him playfully.

"Ino-san!" a voice called.

"Eh?" the blonde spun around.

Waving eagerly from the field next to the bridge, Rock Lee continued his one-armed push ups.

Sitting cross-legged on the chuunin's back, Neji smirked before placing one hand on the bowl-cut covered head to force it to face back to the ground. "Don't get distracted Lee, or is your training truly not that important?" the Hyuuga goaded.

"Yosh!" the Green Beast shouted, a fire lit in his eyes. "I will do a thousand one-armed push ups!" he declared. "And If I cannot do that, I will run around the village one hundred times one my hands backwards! And if I cannot do that, I will climb the Hokage Monument on only one foot!"

Nodding along absently to his teammate's rambling, Neji gave Team Sarutobi an amused look.

"We were just looking for you." Shikamaru grunted, shoving his hands into his pockets.

Face falling into a curious expression, Neji crossed his arms. "Oh really?" he asked.

"Well, you and the rest of your team." Chouji amended.

Frowning at the newcomers, he jerked his head towards the woods. "Tenten and Gai-sensei should be somewhere in there having a sparring match. We'll be here when you get back." The Hyuuga uttered with a bored tone.

Groaning in annoyance, Shikamaru strode into the brush. Leaving his teammates behind, the chuunin continued alone. Pushing brambles out of the way, he wandered the woods before
catching a faint clash of metal. Turning towards the source of the sound, the Nara moved around gnarled trunks before stepping out into a clearing.

Tenten dodged under Gai's fist, lashing out towards his face with a brace of shuriken. Pulling back from the flying stars, the jounin went low to sweep her legs out from under her. The brown haired girl recovered with a handstand, flipping away before drawing out a katana. Stabbing toward her sensei with a sharp thrust, Gai whipped out a kunai and deflected the path of her blade with a skitter of sparks. He winced at the force behind the blow, and withdrew.

Clapping his hands to indicate a time-out, the taijutsu specialist turned to their visitor. "Shikamaru-kun." He greeted dubiously.

"Gai-sensei," the shadow-user returned, eying the man's panting pupil.

"What can I do for you?" Gai asked, motioning to his student. "If it is something I can do quickly, I would prefer to have it done. Tenten still has much training left to complete."

Glaring at the bowl-cut man as she straightened, Tenten trotted over to where Shikamaru and Gai were conversing.

"Troublesome," the Nara muttered under his breath. "I'm just here to let you know that Hokage-sama wants your team for a mission. Meet her in her office just after lunch." Gai nodded curtly in response, and Shikamaru spun about, vanishing back into the forest. Tenten watched him go with a frown before looking over at her sensei.

"What should we do Gai-sensei? Keep training?"

The jounin shook his head. "No" he replied seriously. "Go home and clean up, prepare for a mission outside the village. We can't compromise our ability to do the mission by training more than is healthy. It would be most un-youthful."

Snorting at that, Tenten wandered about the clearing to gather up her tools.

Shikamaru collapsed to the ground beside the huffing Lee. Rolling over to stare up at the sky, he crossed his arms behind his head and relaxed. He took in the clouds rolling by, tuning out the world around him.

"Mendokusai."

The world would be far better off if everyone acted on logic, rather than emotion. Or so Aburame Shino thought. Being sought out by the jounin of Team Asuma was one such example.

While the logical process might have dictated that jounin Sarutobi Asuma would have immediately informed them as to his purpose in seeking them, apparently logical process was not in vogue with the other shinobi of Konoha.

The Sarutobi was wasting his valuable training time. Such a thing could compromise his efficiency and end up costing him his life on a mission. Just a little faster, just a little stronger, or just one more technique could make all the difference in a life and death situation.

Emotional platitudes had their place, of course. Rationality would declare that it was not conductive to the health of the human psyche to force oneself to follow all laws of the Shinobi to the letter. Shinobi were human, and humans felt emotion. It was a fruitless endeavour to attempt to force a human into being a machine. Humans were organic, not mechanic.
Shino was a human as well, and perhaps that was why instead of breaking the moment so that protocol could be followed, he leaned back. He had his own emotions, and he was far too shy and embarrassed at the way Sarutobi flirted with his sensei.

The Aburame was not getting involved, thank you very much, even if it did end up getting him killed. He wasn't loud or brash. He didn't interfere in the private romantic (or not so private in this case) lives of others.

That was Kiba's job. And like a dog guarding his territory, the Inuzuka lurking beside him was getting more and more wound up at the man intruding on Team Yuuhi's time and space.

Kurenai giggled, and Kiba snapped.

"As fun as this all is," he growled snidely, "Team Kurenai has things to do. So why don't you hurry up and tell us want you want, and then get moving."

Kurenai shot him an appalled look, and looked ready to tear into him, but Asuma waved her down with a hand.

Giving Kiba a slow blink, he drew a long drag on his cancer stick before blowing a cloud of smoke in the inu-nin's face. "I'm here to tell you that Hokage-sama has assigned your team joint mission with my team and Team Gai." He drawled nonchalantly.

Kurenai pinned him with a red-eyed glance. "And who is going to be in charge of this mission?"

she asked.

Asuma shrugged. "Gai and I will end up sharing joint command most likely."

Her brow furrowed in displeasure. "Is a woman not in the running?"

The Sarutobi gave her a significant look. "You, Kurenai, won't be going on this mission."

Giving her boyfriend an offended look, the woman growled. "Why not?" Hinata flushed and began to push her fingers together. The Inuzuka's face assumed a positively predatory look, and Shino merely readjusted his sunglasses.

Placing a palm over her stomach, Asuma chuckled. "I should think that should be obvious."

Nodding frantically, Hinata squeaked out "Ano… you should be more concerned for your health, Kurenai –sensei."

Kiba grinned at her. "Yeah sensei, you don't want to do anything that might injure you."

Shuffling, Shino made his own concerned contribution. "It is imperative that when one is in your condition, that they do not undertake unnecessary risks."

The Yuuhi made a choking sound. "You all knew?" she demanded incredulously.

"I can smell it." The Inuzuka offered.

"Ano… Byakugan can see it." Hinata clarified.

Shino just shrugged. "It was a logical conclusion given the change in pheromones my kikaichu can detect."

"I see…" she trailed with a distant look. Sending her boyfriend a glare, she swatted the man's arm
and told him to scram. Then fixing her team with a dangerous mask on her face, she smirked. "If you three have time to be gossiping about my private life, then you have time to be training. Twenty laps around the village in five minutes. Get to it!"

Kiba groaned.

"We six have gathered here today to discuss the fate of Uchiha Sasuke, Nukenin of Konohagakure. S-ranked International Criminal."

"The circumstances regarding the capture of Uchiha Sasuke are highly irregular. He chose to surrender himself to Senju Tsunade, Godaime Hokage of Konoha. He claims that he wishes to abandon the Eye of the Moon Plan and bring us aid in destroying Uchiha Obito. What say you, Five Kages?" General Mifune rumbled.

"He should be put to death immediately for his crimes against us." The Raikage growled.

Leaning back in his chair, Sasuke listened. As curious as he was regarding what each Kage was doing, no one trusted him - an Uchiha - not to place a genjutsu on them. They had bound his hands behind his back, chaining him to a chair in front of the Five Kage and the General of the Land of Iron.

It was with a bitter smirk that Tsunade bound his eyes. She chose to cover his vision with his old hitae-ate. The long scratch that Naruko's Rasengan had carved into it during their battle at the Valley of The End was prominent. The irony of it all was biting, and the memories assorted with that forehead protector made him ache to his bones.

Silence met the Raikage's statement.

"Does no one wish to offer any alternatives?" the General finally asked.

"I say we use him." The Mizukage decided after a long pause, the typically sultry note of her voice repressed for a purely business-like manner.

"No!" the Raikage snarled.

"Oh stop your whining. She has a perfectly valid point." The Tsuchikage chuckled.

"You only say that because he's never done anything against your village." The Raikage barked.

"And you only say kill him because of what he's done to yours." the Tsuchikage answered curtly.

"You're not looking at this logically Ei." Mei drawled. "We're losing this war. Turning aside any edge out of foolish pride will be our undoing."

The Raikage gave a wordless snarl, and all six of them drew quiet. Sasuke frowned. What were they doing?

"Even if we wanted to, we can't guarantee his loyalty." The Raikage muttered.

"He has a point." The General pointed out.

"Loyalty Seal." The Kazekage uttered in a quiet tone. "I do not do this out of fondness for my old friend." Gaara's voice continued. Evidently one of the other Kage had given him a suspicious look. "Personally, I would be happy to turn him into paste myself, but it is as Mizukage-dono said. We need allies."
"A Loyalty seal won't take unless he's willing to go that far." the Hokage pointed out. "He knows perfectly well that whomever the seal is bound to could kill him at any moment."

"Then - providing he accepts - we paint one on him. Either it'll take and we can use him, or it won't and we'll kill him. Is this acceptable, Uchiha?" the Kazekage riposted.

"Yes." Sasuke croaked, voice cracked from lack of food or moisture prior to his impromptu trial.

"All those in favour of the Kazekage's suggestion?" The General asked.

"Yea." Said the Tsuchikage.

"Yea." Said the Mizukage.

"Yea." Said the Kazekage.

"Nay." Said the Raikage.

"Abstain." Said the Hokage.

"So it is decided. We will bind Uchiha Sasuke if we can, kill him if we cannot. I assume there are no problems if I bind the seal to myself?" All five Kage agreeing, the General sent for ink and a brush.

Sasuke’s chains were unhooked from his chair and he was dragged blind and stumbling across the room. Pushed down on a table, his hands were bound again above his head.

The cold end of a brush began to slide over his skin, and the Uchiha suppressed a shiver.

When they were finished, one of the Kage placed a hand on the center of his chest. Slim and soft, with long nails that almost pricked his skin. The Mizukage then. With a burst of chakra through the sealing complex written into his skin, he felt an agonizing burn over his heart.

"It is done." The General confirmed.

Then the hand was removed from his chest. With a click, the wrists and legs were unbound. Reaching immediately for his hitae-ate, he moved to tear it off. Reconsidering, he only readjusted it to sit on his forehead. Blinking his eyes open, he caught the Hokage staring at the motion with an unreadable look in her eyes. Sitting up and swinging his legs around, he shakily stood.

Sasuke ignored the hostile glances from the Raikage and Kazekage to stare down at his chest. Seemingly tattooed into the skin was the kanji for 'loyalty'. Surrounding kanji was a string of indecipherable characters that completed the seal.

Raising his eyes to stare into the Mizukage's face, she smirked at him. It was not a nice smile.

The General held out a hitae-ate with the kanji for 'Shinobi' carved into it.

Sasuke tied it around his neck, leaving the one he had worn as a child on his forehead.

"Welcome to our side of the war, gaki." The Tsuchikage grinned.

Shikamaru was startled out of his nap when Ino's foot slammed into his side. Curling over his hurt midsection, he sent Ino a deadly glare. The effect was obviously ruined by his wheezing, as the blonde just smirked at him.
"Come on you lazy bum! We have to get going. It's almost time to meet with Tsunade-sama!"

Clucking his tongue, Chouji offered the Nara a hand up, with he took with an exaggerated groan. "Troublesome," he muttered.

Crossing his arms at the boisterous display, Neji regarded the team of chuunin with an impassive glance. Shikamaru just sent a mocking look back, to which Neji's face twitched. Whether in annoyance or amusement the Nara couldn't tell.

Lee simply jogged in place, waiting for the rest of his comrades to embark.

Gai and Tenten drifted out of the forest, the former looking unruffled will the latter looked rather displeased.

Sending the two a curious stare, Lee couldn't help but voice his opinion. "Gai-sensei? It doesn't seem like the two of you have had participated in a youthful sparring match."

Sending his protégé a blinding grin, the older man winked. "Of course not Lee! While it is commendable to give your all to your training, at the same time you cannot compromise your mission. Your missions are important for the safety of the village! It would be most un-youthful to fail them because you were foolish."

"Yes Gai-sensei!" Lee recorded the words on a notepad.

"Yosh, Lee!"

"Gai-sensei!"

"Lee!"

The sun rose over the horizon, and waves crashed against a beach that had appeared behind the two green-clad shinobi.

Team Asuma looked traumatized.

Team Gai looked long-suffering.

With an enthusiastic shout, Gai took off running in the direction of the Hokage Tower, Lee close on his heels. With a sigh and a shake of his head, the Branch House Hyuuga followed along in their wake.

"How can you not be totally crazy by now?" Ino hissed incredulously.

Tenten sent her a very wide, very happy grin. "Who says I'm not?"

Chouji went pale, and Tenten skipped off after her team.

"Let's go." the Nara muttered after a long pause, meandering off in the direction of the Hokage Tower. Chouji gave a large gulp before dogging his childhood friend's heels. Ino just rolled her eyes at them before dashing in front of the Nara. Taking her place as leader, she looked over her shoulder and stuck her tongue out at him.

Shikamaru just blinked at her antics before sighing and turning his face up to the sky.

When the three got to the Tower, they were mildly surprised to see Lee and Gai standing around outside waiting for them. "Everyone else is already up in Hokage-sama's office. Come; let us go
forth on our joyous mission!" Giving Chouji a blinding grin, the jounin ran into the Tower. Lee shouted "Gai-sensei!" before taking off in pursuit of his mentor.

Ino frowned and jogged up after him. Shikamaru rubbed his face before continuing at the same lazy pace. Chouji pulled out a bag of chips. Offering the first one to Shikamaru, who took it as was their childhood custom, Chouji dug in.

The Akimichi had just finished the bag and tossed the empty plastic into a nearby waste bin as the two reached the top floor. "Think it has something to do with Sasuke?" the big-boned teen asked lowly.

The Nara didn't even have to ask what he was referring to. "Of course." He answered shortly, before stepping in the Hokage's office.

"You're late."

Shikamaru sighed before trotting over to stand next to Asuma. Ino gave him an elbow to the ribs, and he sent her a warning look in return. Ino just rolled her eyes at him before turning to poke Chouji. Chouji poked her back, and soon the two were engaging in a war of pokes.

"Will you two idiots stop that!" Tsunade snapped. Flushing at the rebuke, the two subsided.

"Now," Tsunade growled. "If there are to be no more interruptions, I would like to get to the point of why you are all standing in my office."

"As you all know," the Hokage began. "Nearly three years ago Uchiha Sasuke went rogue and abandoned Konohagakure." Those in the room who had participated in the disastrous retrieval mission stiffened.

"Tempted by the offer of power, the Uchiha deserted for the sake of S-class criminal Orochimaru. Konoha sent a team to retrieve him, but the effort ultimately failed and he succeeded in deserting."

Pinning them all with a solemn glance, she continued. "This is what is commonly known and available on the streets of Konoha. I am about to offer you a top-secret mission that will be known to no one outside of this room. You may not even speak of it outside this room, until you are on the mission. Knowing these parameters, do you accept? If you choose not to participate in the mission, leave the room now."

Nobody moved, and the Hokage nodded with a satisfied expression.

"Very well. Yesterday afternoon, Team Sarutobi encountered Uchiha Sasuke in the Land of Rice Paddies." Every face in the room snapped to stare at her.

"This encounter led to an altercation as Team Sarutobi attempted to apprehend him. They failed, and he escaped. However," she stressed. "He apparently passed this along to Sarutobi Asuma during the fight." She motion to a worn bag lying flat on the desk. "When Team Sarutobi examined the contents of the bag, they discovered a trove of sealing scrolls."

Looking out at all the riveted expression that her subordinates wore, Tsunade leaned forward.

"Contained within these scrolls were more scrolls. And within those scrolls there was a wealth of information." Raising a hand, she rose one finger for each item she listed. "History, trade records, summoning scrolls, records of Orochimaru's human experiments, and Akatsuki."

"Cross-referencing the information with our own records has indicated that the information the
Uchiha passed to us was genuine. Furthermore, much of it was written in Orochimaru's own handwriting. We have concluded that for some unknown reason, Uchiha Sasuke has abandoned Orochimaru.

The shinobi that were on Team Kurenai looked shocked.

"Orochimaru and Akatsuki are known quantities. We might not have the best or most accurate information regarding them, but we can definitively say they are enemies of Konoha." Frowning, she motioned to the bag.

"However, Uchiha Sasuke has become an unknown quantity. He is not likely to join Akatsuki, considering his brother is in the organization. He has just betrayed Orochimaru, and evidently is not going to go back, especially since he appears to have pilfered the old snake's entire library. We cannot definitively say that the Uchiha is an enemy of Konoha. We know absolutely nothing of his motives outside of killing Itachi. He has given us this information, but refused to return to Konoha. Thus I am forced to create this mission."

Threading her fingers together, Tsunade leaned back in her chair and fixed the gathered shinobi in the room with a stern glare. "Your mission will be to capture Uchiha Sasuke and return him to Konohagakure. We cannot afford to allow him to roam about and do whatever he will. He has shown us that he is willing to interfere in our business, so we must take precautionary measures. Also, the time for Orochimaru's body transfer draws near. Allowing him to possess the Uchiha's body would be an unmitigated disaster for Konoha. The Sharingan is powerful, and we cannot allow one of our enemies to come to possess it.

"Uchiha Sasuke is a powerful shinobi, which is why I have put together this team. You are the best of your generation. You will form the Twelve Man Pursuit Squad for the duration of this mission. Team Seven cannot participate in this mission, because of the possible conflict of interest. I expect all of you to do your best to capture the Uchiha and return him to the protective custody of Konoha. Do you understand?" the Hokage's deceptively young brow furrowed.

"Hai, Hokage-sama!" the newly dubbed squad saluted.

"Dismissed." She ordered.

The group filed out, and her apprentice slipped in the door.

Staring back at her comrades with a curious look, Sakura turned to Tsunade. "What was that all about?" she asked with an arched brow.

The Hokage just gave a small smile at her, "Nothing important Sakura, nothing at all."

"Where are we going?" Juugo asked quizzically.

Sasuke kept walking. "We're going to Orochimaru's West base. There is another person I want to retrieve there."

The bi-polar male considered that. "Who?" he finally asked.

"Someone named Suigetsu." Sasuke answered shortly.

"And what is his specialty?"

The Uchiha sent Juugo a sharp glance, which he just waved off.
"I'm not totally out of it, Sasuke." The orange-haired male protested. "You told me yourself that you came after me because I had power. Even if it's cursed, it's still a special power other shinobi don't have."

Smirking at his companion's receptiveness, Sasuke turned to face forward again. "Suigetsu is a member of Kirigakure's Hozuki clan. They have special techniques that allow them to turn into water. Unless they're struck with chakra that can disrupt their abilities, you really can't kill them unless you can somehow force them to deadly chakra exhaustion. A knife would just pass through them, and smashing them would make them splatter into water. They just reform after any strike."

"Sounds pretty interesting," Juugo confessed. "Do you think it's like a kekkai genkai or-"

"Hush Juugo," Sasuke interrupted. "We're here."

Sasuke turned off the road, trailing into the woods with his companion at his heels. Stopping at the base of a massive tree, he crouched down and examined the ground near the roots. The Uchiha activated his Sharingan, easily perceiving the slight indentation that marked the hidden door switch, and pressed it.

A plate to their right slid open, revealing a stone staircase that struck boldly into the earth. Immediately jogging over, Sasuke passed down the stairs. As he and Juugo made their way down, the timed door slid shut again.

Reaching the bottom of the staircase in moments, they turned the corner and wandered into the base. Ignoring the curious stares from the base personnel, Sasuke followed the marked directions towards the laboratory.

Pushing aside the metal door guarding one of Orochimaru's more valuable experiments, Sasuke stepped into the room. A huge cylinder filled with water sat in the center of the room. An insubstantial face formed within the liquid and pressed against the glass with a disgruntled look on his face.

Sasuke almost laughed. He'd come to expect such things from Suigetsu.

What he didn't expect was the familiar redhead staring at the readings Suigetsu's prison provided, jotting down the numbers. "Karin?" he wondered aloud, and she turned to look at the intruders with a curious look.

"Sasuke-kun?" she breathed, readjusting her glasses as if she did not quite believe his presence.

He crossed the room with Juugo looming over his shoulders. "I didn't expect you here, in the West Base" Sasuke confessed. "I'd have thought you were still milling about in South Base."

Mistaking his knowledge of her working schedule as interest, the girl flushed. "Well, Sasuke-kun." She offered shyly. "I'm here on Orochimaru-sama's orders to take care of Suigetsu for a while."

The exasperated look on Suigetsu's face in the tank expressed what he thought of that.

"No, you're not." Sasuke stated curtly.

"What?" she queried in confusion.

"You're not here for Orochimaru. I killed him two days ago. His orders no longer mean anything."

The redhead blinked in shock. She was just coming to terms with the information he'd dumped on
her when he nudged her aside and slammed a palm down on the console. A hole opened at the bottom of the cylinder on the far side, and water rushed out.

Suigetsu reformed outside the cylinder in moments before stretching with an exaggerated motion. Opening his arms as if to welcome the whole world, the purple-clad nin grinned at the ceiling. "Freedom!" he laughed.

Sasuke came up behind him. Spinning to stare at the raven with a positively predatory look, the Kiri-nin bore his teeth at the Uchiha. "Just because you killed Orochimaru doesn't mean I owe you anything!" Suigetsu declared. Miming the motion of a pistol, he shot it at Sasuke, squirting him with water. "One of us would have done it sooner or later. What you did is nothing special."

Ignoring the rudeness and the way Juugo frowned and Karin squawked, Sasuke pinned Suigetsu with a confident look. "I have enemies I think you'll want to fight."

"Oh?" the white-haired shinobi leaned forward in detached interest.

"Kirigakure no Kaijin, Hoshigaki Kisame."

Suigetsu gave him a long look before grinning. Clapping the raven teen on the shoulder, he laughed. "I think I'll get to like you! Now let's get out of this dump!" He quickly shook himself before practically running from the room.

Juugo followed him after a significant look from Sasuke. He turned to stare at Karin. She stared back.

(Don't move Karin.
A grateful look.
Chidori through the chest.
A look of shock and betrayal.)

Shaking the memories of the last time he'd seen her away, Sasuke gave the girl an unreadable look. "I want you on the mission." He declared.

"Of course Sasuke-kun! Anything-"

"No." he interjected.

"Don't do 'anything for me'. I'm asking you to come on the mission because you have useful skills. I don't intend to indulge your infatuation with me." He informed her in wintery tones.

Drawing back, she gave him a hurt look, and Sasuke sighed at the sight. "Look Karin. I know what you're feeling. I'm not blind. But I'm telling you right now, don't bother getting your hopes up. There is no chance of it happening."

"No chance?"

"Yes."

"What if-"

"No chance."
"How about-"

"No. Chance."

She regarded him with a strange look on her face. "Are you in love with someone else?" she finally asked.

"Yes." He admitted candidly. At that moment, Sasuke expected her to refuse the mission out of hurt. It would be annoying, but at least it'd be honest.

He didn't expect her to squeal and throw her arms around his neck.

"That's so romantic!" she declared. "Oh I'm going to have to meet this girl! We're going to do her nails and visit the hair salon and maybe I'll even get to be a bridesmaid..." she rambled.

The Uchiha drew back with a choking sound, and she trailed off. "So does that mean you're in?" he asked after a moment of silence.

She smirked at him. "Of course I'm in, I can't let the prince die off before he marries the princess!" then she sauntered out of the room, leaving him to blink in surprise. Was it really going to be that easy? Maybe he should've tried it on his other fangirls back in the day...

Shaking his head, Sasuke departed for the surface with a vaguely confused Juugo trailing behind him.

"What are we gonna call ourselves?" Suigetsu fired at him as soon as he reached above ground. Sasuke felt an amused and nostalgic smirk curve about his lips.

"We're going to call ourselves 'Taka', if you insist on juvenile titles like a sumo wrestler from Tsuchi no Kuni." And with eighteen days left before Uzumaki Naruko would return to Konoha, Uchiha Sasuke set off in the night after his brother.
"I will work hard, because I want to become acknowledged by others. That's what I thought when I look at Uzumaki Naruko. Bonds with others... Up until now, I only have known them as hate and murderous intent. But I wonder, what is that bond she longed for? Now I understand, even only a little. Pain, sadness... and joy. These feelings allow you to understand others." – Sabaku no Gaara

Landing on the weathered tile rooftop of the building at the edge of Taku, Asuma whipped out a cigarette and lit up. "This is where he vanished," the jounin puffed. Kiba and Akamaru prowled the rooftop and sniffed periodically as the rest of the Eleven Man Pursuit Squad lingered on another building.

"There's really too many scents to be comfortable with." The Inuzuka muttered. Crouching to the ground, he mentally sifted through what he could detect. Something flowery and smelling of a hint of ramen – Naruko. Sake and oil – That pervert Toad Sage. Tobacco and musk – Asuma. Something odd tickled his nose. He breathed in again, considering the odd smell. Crackly - Rather like the air right before a lightning storm.

"Do you smell that boy?" he muttered to Akamaru. The dog barked. "Do you think it's him?" A whine. He frowned. "Well go sniff around; maybe we'll get a clearer picture." The dog tracked over the rooftop, snuffling with his nose to the tile. The Sarutobi sent the pair a curious look.

"It takes longer than it should since the tiles don't hold the scent as well as the ground would. Not to mention you muddled it all up the last time you were here." Kiba justified. The jounin had the grace to look slightly guilty. Akamaru trotted back up to his master, sitting and growling. The Inuzuka sighed and shook his head. "We can't make out anything here." He called to the rest of the squad.

Deciding it was fine to join him, Neji made the jump across to the roof. He was followed by the rest of the squad, who clumped together into a shoving gaggle in the Branch House Hyuuga's wake.

Snorting, Asuma dropped his cigarette to the tiles and ground the butt into the rooftop with one of his boots.

"Troublesome." Shikamaru moaned, dark eyes fluttering shut.

Staring up at the moonless sky, Chouji frowned. Even with three square meals a day, he was hungry again...

Ino crossed her arms and tapped an impatient foot. "Well!" she snapped, making the group jump. "We don't have all night. If the trail is cold we just have to head in the previous direction he left in and hope for the best!"

"North." Asuma grunted. At the questioning glances he got from the rest of the squad, he clarified. "The last time we saw the kid he was flying north on a hawk summon."
Tenten cocked her head. "Well, he couldn't have flown forever. He'd have to have set down somewhere."

"I say we go north, as far as the Kaminari no Kuni." Gai suggested, uncharacteristically serious. "We don't want to risk an incident with Kumo at this point if we don't have to."

"And when we get to the border, it would be most logical to split up and look for clues." Shino concluded. "If there are none, we can send a message back to the Hokage and ask if our mission directive includes operations in foreign territory."

Kiba wordlessly snarled before leaping off the roof, bounding away northwards into the trees with Akamaru close behind.

Neji cursed inelegantly, rising eyebrows across the squad, before taking off after their self-appointed guide.

Tenten shrugged at Lee before rushing after her teammate. Breaking the spell of immobility, the rest of the Squad scrambled in pursuit.

Kiba pushed himself forwards, straining with every leap to close the distance between himself and the Uchiha. This is what he was made for, bred blood and bone trackers for generations. He contented himself with the burn in his blood, hunting song hammering in his veins. Behind him, Akamaru woofed in agreement, picking up on his master's silent sentiment.

("Understand your prey. This is the first and last lesson of the hunt. If you do not understand your prey, seek to know how it feels and how it thinks. Only then can you predict its movement.")

Or so his mother had said to him a decade ago when he was just first beginning to truly communicate with Akamaru. It was a lesson that had served him well in his missions over the years. It was something that Kiba had tried to teach his teammates over the years as well, but he'd have had better luck beating blood from a stone.

Hinata smelt of prey: the timid young fawn and then the more mature doe. She'd grown deadly with age and more confident, but she didn't have the instinct to be a predator. Shino was totally an enigma: always the same smell of community and colony - not predator and not prey- the Aburame was simply there.

Only another one who had the instinct of a predator could understand the lessons his clan learned and taught parent to child. Uchiha Sasuke; Kiba had instinctively known even as a child, would have understood.

Which brought him to his current problem. That Uchiha Sasuke was one cold fish. If Sasuke was a predator, he was a snake: never moving or showing emotion until it was time to strike. But something subconscious understood that the conclusion he'd made was wrong. Sasuke didn't strike out in a patient flash of scales. Feathers burst through his mind, the answer so very close -

A hand wrapped around his collar, jerking him backwards. Eyes bulging, his movement threw his feet out and he crashed onto his back in the dirt. Glaring hatefully up at a set of pale eyes, the Inuzuka gave a wheeze of rage. "What the fuck, Neji?"

The pale bastard rose one dark brow up before motioning significantly behind them. "In your haste to catch up to Uchiha, you seem eager to leave the rest of us behind. Are you looking for some one-on-one time with him before we catch up?" the Hyuuga leered sarcastically.

Kiba sputtered at the dig that was entirely too crude for what he expected out of the uptight
Hyuuga. "What? No! I'm not thinking anything at all about that cold bastard. He's not attractive at all! He's not Hinata or anything!" the Inuzuka practically shouted. Neji went eerily still.

"What did you say about Hinata?" Neji asked in a lethal tone.

Oh shit.

"I am given to understand that neutering is the appropriate response to a mutt that cannot contain his urges."

"Dynamic Entry!" Two feet caught Neji in the back, catapulting him into the nearest tree.

Kiba breathed a sigh of relief. Saved by the Eyebrows. Shooting to his feet, Kiba made a show of brushing the dirt off. The dark glare and the long look Neji sent his privates did not go unnoticed by the Inuzuka. And was that chakra sputtering out of the Hyuuga's fingertips…

"Man, Kiba, do you have to work us so hard? Don't be so troublesome…"

"Leaving your comrades behind is a most unyouthful display!"

"If you're going to run us cross-country like this kid, maybe I should give up smoking. I might need these lungs after all."

Flushing red, Kiba scratched the back of his head. "Sorry…" he muttered. Hinata watched curiously as his cheeks reddened, making his red facial markings less and less visible.

"So…" Shikamaru intoned. "You find us any clues or are we just running blind at this point?" The Inuzuka blinked in surprise, before smirking and sticking his hand into his pocket.

Drawing out his closed fist, he slowly opened it to reveal a ball of feathers. Ino immediately stepped forward and drew one from the pile. Ignoring Kiba's growled protest; she held it up to the sky, peering at the feather in the starlight.

"Hawk feather," the blonde confirmed. "Mountain Hawk-Eagle to be precise. Kumataka."

Lowering the feather she turned to face the rest of the squad. They all wore expressions of varying incredulity, Kiba even gaped at her. Glaring at the group, she hissed. "Oh come on guys! I'm not an idiot."

"Could've fooled me…" the Inuzuka muttered, and the blonde spun on him before slamming her fist into his face. Kiba reeled back clutching his nose and feeling very sorry for himself.

"Besides," the Yamanaka declared imperiously, tossing her hair over her shoulder. "Ornithology is a very lady-like pursuit. Now I know what the poor dears will eat when I fill my gardens with them."

Pinching his nose, Shikamaru rolled his eyes towards the Inuzuka. "Oi, Kiba. Let's just go." The Inuzuka smirked in understanding, leaping off towards the North again.

A broken mask lay at his feet, blood and gore splattered his uniform. But he was far too preoccupied to deal with it. A wrenching pressure built in his mind, pushing and pulling, pushing and pulling, front to back, left to right, up to down.

It was madness.

But Uchiha Sasuke was no stranger to madness.
He had no idea how long he lay there, collapsed to the ground amid the cooling remains of a dismembered corpse. His heart pounded in his ears, chakra hammering through his coils. Twisting and fighting against itself. Twisting and fighting against the other.

Violet on violet. Violet on black. Black on violet.

Maybe his mind broke and maybe it didn't. Perhaps his mind had broken and he was putting himself back together again. Blue and blonde, hold on to the pain. No pain no gain. He giggled.

Reaching a hand up to absently scratch at his face, he only succeeded in smearing the gore into his cheek.

It seemed as if an infinity of eons wrapped him up, carrying his mind along. He broke a million times and put himself back together a million times, because he could never ever give up and he couldn't remember why but blue and blonde didn't want him to and he couldn't disappoint blue and blond. It would obliterate him beyond repair.

Maybe it was love and maybe it was honour and maybe it was loyalty because it was all so fucking trite like that.

He swam. Inky blackness coiling around him and in him and through him. It devoured him, but he devoured it right back because if he let it devour him he wouldn't exist.

And that would be giving up, wouldn't it?

Eventually, he perceived metal. Towering rusty spires that looked just about ready to collapse. Something great and dark and malevolent threw itself against the bars again and again and again, each strike bringing forth hot spikes of pain from inside of him and he just knew.

He knew this couldn't go on.

"Stop it..." he whispered.

"Stop it..." he muttered.

"Stop it..." he spat.

"Stop it..." he growled.

"Stop it!" he shouted, voice reverberating and echoing in upon itself until his voice repeated over and over stop it stop it stop it stop it until it trailed away into nothingness.

"You do not command me little ningen. You are nothing less than a smear of shit on the bottom of my foot." Ten tails weaved in the void, and the malevolence hurled itself into the prison again to make a point.

"I order you to stop that right now!"

"FOOL! You have no power here! You are no Rikudo Sennin!"

He threw his hand out, drawing nobility up and around him like a cloak. He didn't notice the way the malevolence drew back from him, or the way blood poured from his eyes, signalling the use of something extremely hazardous to his very soul. He gambled with his existence.

Starburst spinning, he cried in the hallowed voice of a thousand ancestors.
"You are merely a cursed life, a malevolent existence of coalesced energy... An unstable force, lacking in sentiment or passion, you require a guide to show you purpose. That guide is the Uchiha! The tailed beasts are but slaves to those with blessed eyes. Obey!"

And for the first time in five days, Uchiha Sasuke rose to his feet.

He was remade.

It was Kiba who pulled up short, halting in a seemingly random forest clearing and crouching to the ground. Hand stretching out to trace over a patch of grass that appeared to Chouji the same as any other, the Inuzuka looked over his shoulder and grinned at the squad.

Longer than normal canines prominent, the grin transformed into a smirk. "He was here," Kiba declared, motioning to the clearing in general. "This whole place is full of the scent from back on the roof."

"I thought you said you couldn't get a reading on it." Tenten protested.

"Well, not enough back there to say for sure which one he was. But there was only one scent there that's here as well, and we know for a fact that everyone else that was on that roof was nowhere near here when this track was left."

Feeling impressed despite himself, Neji gave the inu-nin a less frosty glare than usual. Studiously ignoring the Hyuuga, Kiba scratched Akamaru behind the ears.

"Well," Asuma decided. "Let's move on."

Hurrying in their original direction, the Eleven Man Pursuit Squad passed through the woods and out onto a rugged rocky plain. Readjusting for the change in terrain, Kiba and Akamaru dropped from the lead to the center of the group.

"I'd say that he probably went to whatever that is." Kiba ventured, pointing out a towering stone monolith in the distance. Nodding in agreement, the squad broke into a pincer formation as they approached the structure so as to reduce target viability.

It was rather pointless, as it quickly became apparent that the structure was utterly deserted. The Eleven Man Pursuit Squad reformed before the front gate.

"... It's a fucking prison." Kiba muttered after a long pause.

Frowning at the unyouthful display of coarse language, Lee took the lead. Stepping through the overhand, he was overwhelmed by the smell of blood and death.

The Green Beast of Konoha pinched his nose, sending his comrades a warning look over his shoulder before pushing onwards. The reason for the smell quickly became apparent as they stepped into the main building, bodies and pieces of mangled flesh littered the floor.

Chouji wrinkled his nose in disgust, noticing with trepidation that some of the bodies seemed struck in a tableau of half-human monstrosity, some body parts twisted and deformed. "What could he be coming to a place like this for?" the Akimichi wondered aloud.

"Couldn't say," Kiba answered. "But his scent comes out pretty strong. Two trails. One going in and one coming out."
"If he's already gone, then why are we going in? This place is pretty nasty!" Ino complained.

"Use your head, troublesome woman. If he came here, he came here for a reason. We need to find out what he's up to." The Nara sighed mournfully.

Pulling up to a seemingly random wall, Kiba frowned. "What the hell…" the Inuzuka murmured to himself."Oi!" he called out, turning to face the group. "It smells like he just came up to this wall and vanished, then reappeared five minutes later and keeps going that way." The Inuzuka pointed further down the hall.

"It's a secret room, Kiba-kun." Hinata declared, stepping forward. Veins distended around her active Byakugan, she moved up to the wall and ran a hand over it. Pressing down on a portion of the wall at waist height, a loud click sounded. The metal sheet sunk inward before rolling to the side with a squeak.

"Eugh," Asuma grunted, stepping into the room first. Noticing a black lump on the floor, he stared at it curiously. The floor underneath it seemed slightly melted and warped, as if something of extreme heat had sat on it for a time.

"Dead body." He warned his subordinates and fellow Team Leader. Gai came up beside him, crouching down to get a closer look at the body. "Definitely death by Katon Jutsu" Team Nine's sensei muttered.

"Uchiha killed him."

Akamaru barked in agreement with his master. The Inuzuka shrugged. "He's the only other recent scent in the room."

"Shikamaru-kun." Gai stood, motioning to the console. "Do you think you can find us a record or video of what happened here?" Yawning, the Nara moved over to the machinery and examined it. Pressing a few keys, the video feed from one of the cameras went black. Flickering on again, the image now showed the group standing around Shikamaru.

"Well I've got the live feed now." Flipping a plastic cover up, the pineapple-haired nin pressed a button marked with a leftward facing arrow. A set of numbers popped up on the bottom of the screen, counting down as the video rewound.

"There." Neji uttered quietly, stepping forward to press the play key. The screen showed Sasuke stepping into the room and striding over to the console.

"There's no sound." The Aburame confirmed when the Uchiha smashed aside the glass protection over a large red button.

Grunting in affirmation, Shikamaru quickly located a dial and cranked it up.

"What are you doing?" the bald man shrieked, rushing over. Sasuke backhanded the man to the floor. A thin trail of blood leaked from the corner of the man's mouth, with the faint white glint of a tooth barely visible. "These are Orochimaru-sama's treasured experiments!" the ninja protested. "What do you think he'll do to you when he finds out how badly you fucked his research up?"

Sasuke burst out laughing. "Him? What he's going to do to me? I killed him the other day."

Stopping abruptly, Sasuke gave the base commander a bloodthirsty grin. He leaned over to whisper something to the elder man that was trembling on the floor. Whatever it was had the man blanching with a sudden expression of primal fear.
The Commander of Orochimaru's North Base died screaming in a burst of black fire, and Sasuke strolled out the door of the security room whistling a jaunty tune.

Watching as smoke curled up from the corpse, the Pursuit Squad was silent. "He's gone mad." The Branch Hyuuga finally whispered. Ino watched pale-faced as the Uchiha continued through the base, mercilessly cutting down any of both Oto-nin and experiments that were in his way.

"He's completely changed." Yamanaka whimpered. Asuma just sighed and looked over at Shikamaru "I guess that validates your theory about why he didn't try to kill us."

"Holy shit on a stick!" Kiba shouted. The rest of the squad turned to face him with varying degrees of annoyance. Slapping a hand over the pause key, the Inuzuka rolled his eyes. "Did you not hear what that prick said? He killed Orochimaru!"

"He's right!"

"Most youthful to remove an enemy of the village!"

"I guess that troublesome Uchiha can do something right with himself."

"Hokage-sama will want to know about that right away." Gai muttered to the other team leader.

"Damn straight. We'll have to send a message back when we have the chance." the Sarutobi puffed. Lee shouted in shock, and the Sarutobi spun back to the video. His blood ran cold as he saw the Uchiha light up with coiling red light that settled into ash-grey skin. Giant webbed hands burst from Sasuke's back and his lips turned purple. Growing fangs and darkened sclera, the Uchiha oozed malevolence.

"It appears that the Uchiha has been fully aware of and using his cursed seal to its potential." Neji acknowledged. Those who had participated in the first Sasuke Retrieval Mission nodded in agreement.

"Juugo."

Turning back to witness the unfolding drama on video feed, the squad went silent.

The monstrous Sasuke hissed at Juugo. "Now that I have your attention..." he snarled, his skin lit up with coiling red and the state of cursed power left him. The face left behind was pale, framed by raven-back bangs, and the expression he wore was ice-cold.

Chouji exhaled in relief. That Cursed Seal state was too scary. He'd almost died the last time he went up against that.

Dropping Juugo on his ass, the Uchiha crossed his arms and stared down at him. Rubbing a hand on his bruised throat, he stared back.

"Do you know me?" the teenager asked him.

"I don't." Juugo shook his head, staring at the cursed seal that marked the raven's neck with something like remorse. The nukenin's lip curled.

"Uchiha Sasuke."

Grabbing the orange-haired man's chin with a pale hand, he forced the cursed man to stare into his eyes. "I am Uchiha Sasuke" he repeated. "I have come here for you, Tenbin no Juugo."
"For me?" Juugo stuttered.

"I come in place of Kimimaro." He stated boldly.

Juugo's eyes widened and he shot to his feet. "You're here for Kimimaro? Where is he?" the other drew back warily.

Grasping Sasuke's biceps with desperation, he pleaded with the other. "Where is he?" he repeated. "It's been a long time. No one would tell me anything about him!" he'd been starved for news of his only friend.

"So they haven't told you yet..." Sasuke mused.

"Just tell me!"

"Kimimaro is dead."

The man went pale, reeling away from the raven in despair and pain. Covering his face with one large hand, he choked back a sob. "Oh no..." he muttered. A hand came up to grip his shoulder. "Come Juugo." Sasuke commanded, before striding off down the hallway.

"Logically we must now assume that they are traveling together." Shino readjusted his sunglasses. "It appears that this Juugo of the Scales is a dangerous and unstable individual of some power."

"Shino-kun is right." Hinata supported her teammate.

Spitting to the side, Asuma drew out a stick of tobacco. "Alright," he lit the end. "Let's just get out of here; I'm getting sick of this place already."

"About damn time." Kiba growled, before leading them back through the halls and outside in a rush. Pausing a moment to scent the air, he pet Akamaru before leaping off South-West. "Sasuke's trail comes this way," he shouted back as the rest of the squad sprang into action.

"The crazy bastard hasn't called up his hawk, and there's another scent traveling with his."

"Lee! If we encounter the two of them, I expect you to fight Juugo." Maito Gai ordered.

"Yes, Gai-sensei!"

"Saving Konoha now, Sasuke?" Obito laughed sardonically.

"Shut up."

"What happened to getting vengeance for the Uchiha clan? I thought you were going to destroy Konoha? Why do you turn on me now, with victory so close at hand?" The masked man questioned, genuinely curious.

"You don't know the first thing about me. Don't pretend like we're friends."

"That hurts Sasuke, and after I went through all those favours of bringing you face-to-face with your enemies? Of transplanting Itachi's eyes?" Obito drawled.

"Don't talk about Itachi."

"You misguided fool. You're a hundred years too early to be talking back to me. I'm going to
destroy you." he snarled, false joviality fading entirely from his voice.

"I don't plan on changing. Nor am I interesting in working for you. And I don't plan on dying! You're the one who's going to die."

"You're going to die fighting against me." The criminal declared.

"Fine then! I'll kill you first."

Sasuke, Karin decided, was the most normal crazy person she's ever met.

Oh he acted well enough. He was controlled and neutral, and every movement carried some form of purpose. Sasuke made decisions rationally, and didn't snap randomly and start killing things.

It helped that he was very easy on the eyes.

But Karin had met him twice before in her life. Once, when he had saved her life during the chunin exams from a wild bear. He'd given her a handsome smile, before allowing her to keep her Earth scroll and returning to his team. That encounter had generated an infatuation in her that had lasted years, only growing even more the next time they met.

The second time Karin met Sasuke was on the battlefield. At one point during her tenure under the Snake Sennin, a horde of prisoners had broken free. Orochimaru had chosen to send Sasuke to put the rebellion down. In those short hours together, the strength and beauty of his chakra had been truly captivating. She'd honestly never witnessed something so stunning before and certainly nothing of that level since.

Meeting Sasuke for the third time had been a wake-up call. He'd melted out of the shadows, all cold winter and iron determination. Men like that were different than ordinary men, and that would have been all well and good if Karin wasn't able to feel chakra. The energy was hardly leashed within his skin when he wasn't attempting to contain it.

His aura was dark and sad, full of old pain and regret. It was as if moonlight rang through him, beautiful and cold, but with madness just lurking beneath the surface. The Uchiha was only a couple of steps away from breaking, clinging to the threads of sanity by his fingertips. His chakra was always stretching and yearning.

Karin didn't have the patience or strength to live with that, to deal with it every day for the rest of her life. She knew that she wasn't what his chakra had been looking for. It would take an extraordinary person to give him what he needed.

She wasn't that person.

The strings of infatuation still pulled at her, but Karin was nearly a grown woman and sometimes one just had to move on with their life.

"Oh man. This is taking forever. Where are we even going?" Suigetsu whined.

Glaring at the Kiri-nin, the redhead readjusted her glasses. "Well maybe if you weren't an idiot, we'd know by now. Asking over and over when we're going to get there like a three year old is probably why Sasuke-kun isn't telling you." She snapped.

"Oh Sasuke-kun." The Hozuki moaned. "Oh Sasuke-kun. I don't care what we do or where we go, just as long as a get to be with you." He leered at Karin in obvious reference. Flushing with
mortification, the redhead whipped her fist out and drove it through Suigetsu's face. His head splattered into water, soaking her sleeve.

"Suigetsu, stop pissing Karin off. I thought I told you to cooperate." Sasuke called from the front of the line blandly.

"Got it." The Kiri-nin grinned, the bottom half of his face reforming. He sent the redhead a very insincere smile, "I'm sorry, Karin." Suigetsu apologized sarcastically.

Stomping to the front of the line, Karin grabbed the Uchiha's sleeve, pulling him along. "I can't stand that loudmouth," she growled. "Let's go."

"Let me go." He stated neutrally, "I can walk by myself."

The redhead released Sasuke's arm, but remained at the forefront of the group. Juugo just grinned at it all in amusement.

"So… where are we going?" Suigetsu asked.

After a moment, the Uchiha finally began to answer. "When I was on a genin team, we decided to go on our first C-rank mission." Sasuke smiled nostalgically. "It turned out later that our client had lied about the difficulty of the mission. It was actually worth A-rank pay, but his village was short on cash and a C-rank was all he could afford."

"After bringing the client to his home country, we were attacked." The Uchiha took a slow breath. "The man hired to kill our client was Kirigakure no Kijin, Momochi Zabuza. After our sensei defeated him, a Kiri hunter-nin stepped in at the last minute to take the kill. Only instead of destroying the body, the hunter-nin picked him up and ran. We guessed that by disobeying proper procedure, the hunter-nin was actually a fake. We were right. About a week later we were attacked again. The fake hunter was his apprentice. After a long fight, our sensei eventually killed the apprentice."

Dark eyes glinted as Sasuke's turned over old memories. "Zabuza's employer betrayed him, and he stopped fighting us and killed his former employer. Then he died from his wounds."

Silence followed the story, until Suigetsu brought it by uttering "Well that's one fucked up story pal, does it have a point?"

Sasuke rolled his eyes. "What do you think we did with the body? We buried the Kubikiribocho with him. We're going to Nami no Kuni to get it back."

"So we're going to Zabuza's grave?" the Kiri-nin demanded.

"No. Daikoku Tenzen has already been there to steal the sword. He feels that it makes a good trophy. We're going to his castle to get it back."

Suigetsu fell silent after that, facing down towards the ground and glaring. Evidently he had his own feelings towards those who frivolously desecrated the dead.

Juugo sympathized. If someone had dug up Kimimaro's dead body for a tool needed to survive, he might have forgiven it. To dig him up and take a trophy was unforgivable. It didn't mean he liked the Kiri-nin at all. Suigetsu was someone he couldn't really understand. The boy just loved killing, and for someone who killed without control, such a thing was incomprehensible.

Sasuke sighed, looking up at the stars. Evidently this team needed to experience a few battles to...
more resemble the Team Taka he had been familiar with during his hunt for Itachi and later hunt for Danzo.

"We're stopping here for the night." The Uchiha declared, turning off the forest path and picking a tree at random to sit with his back to.

"I'm going to find a river." Suigetsu muttered before vanishing into the trees.

Juugo began to break branches off of the trees before tossing them into a pile. When he judged the pile large enough, he nudged Sasuke. The raven snapped out of his thoughts and turned to stare at the orange-haired male.

"Fire?" the bi-polar man asked.

Sasuke nodded before forming a small series of hand seals. Cupping his mouth, he blew a stream of fire at the pile of wood. The branches caught with a roar, crackling sparks. Karin sighed in relief before plopping down next to the flames and curling up on her side.

Suigetsu stalked back out of the forest and regarded the other three with a curious look. Deliberately placing himself on the opposite side of the flame from Karin, he sunk down to sit and crossed his legs. After a moment of pause, Juugo walked into the firelight and sat down on one side of the fire, carefully halfway between Karin and Suigetsu.

The Uchiha just smirked. Evidently, for all their distance and independence, the other members of Taka still sought out human companionship. Rising from his spot, he glided over to place himself opposite of Juugo. The other three regarded him with some surprise, but he said nothing and they all allowed themselves to bask in a silent fellowship.

"Why are you here, Karin?" the orange-haired male rumbled. Suigetsu assumed a look of curiosity and Sasuke cut his stare towards the redhead.

Pressing her lips together, she stared more determinedly at the shifting flames. After considering the question she finally answered in an almost shy tone, "I guess it's because I have nowhere else to go really." She drew her knees up to her chest. "I'm not like any of you guys," she muttered. "I was genuinely loyal to Orochimaru."

"I didn't personally like that man." She said quickly when Suigetsu's face turned murderous. "But I guess he gave me a purpose. I don't have a home to go to. My whole family was burnt to the ground in a war. Working for Orochimaru gave my life the purpose and meaning that I'd lost. Now that Sasuke's killed him, I basically had nothing else to do until he offered to take me with you all." Karin finished.

"I'm here because I also have nowhere else to go." Juugo confessed. "I've lived my whole life unable to control myself. Orochimaru told me he could possibly cure me, but in the end he didn't even try. I'd resigned myself to a life of human experimentation." His face grew strained. "Kimimaro was my only friend, and he died. My friend told me before he went on his last mission that I should think of Sasuke as his reincarnation."

The Uchiha frowned.

"So Sasuke is really the only thing I have left to remember him by, and I can't let him die. He's also able to act as my cage, preventing me from engaging in random murder. That," Juugo shrugged, "And Sasuke has promised to take me to someone who might be able to cure my curse."

The Kiri-nin rubbed as his face. Sighing exasperatedly, he offered up his own story. "When I was a
kid me and my brother always had this dream. That we were gonna join up with the Seven Ninja Swordsmen of the Mist and lead the group to new glory days. That dream kept us going through the dirtiest, bloodiest missions. My brother even made it, mastering every single sword in the group. Then he died. After that, I've made it my goal in life to collect all seven swords. When I do, I'm going to reform the group and make it worth something again. I'll do whatever it takes to make it come true." Suigetsu vowed.

Jerking a thumb towards Sasuke, he smirked. "Which is why I'm with this cold fish. Whatever he's up to, he claims it'll give me a shot at Kisame. A chance to take his Samehada. And since he appears to be willing to provide me with Kubikiribocho, I'm inclined to believe him."

Crossing his arms, Suigetsu looked over at Sasuke. Karin mirrored the motion while Juugo leaned forward in interest.

Sasuke stared back. "What?" he finally intoned.

"Oh come on. Don't be like that, dear fearless leader!" the Kiri-nin complained. "Sasuke." Juugo commented in disapproval. "Yeah!" Karin growled, agreeing with Suigetsu for once. "We all spilled our guts; you have to do the same!"

"Says who?" the Uchiha asked blandly.

"Says the rules!" the redhead sputtered.

Sasuke raised a brow at that. "I believe this is what my Academy teachers referred to as 'peer pressure'."

"I gotta concur with this bitch," Suigetsu declared, ignoring the indignant squawk Karin made and bulldozing right over Sasuke's sarcasm. "Everybody knows that when a bunch of people get together and tell their life stories, everybody has to be involved. Alcohol or no alcohol."

Karin threw a flaming log through his head. It went in one side and out the other with a sizzle.

"Fine, fine." Sasuke rolled his eyes.

"When I was a kid, I used to adore my brother. However, when I was seven years old, Itachi turned around and massacred the entire clan. After torturing me, he left me alive and fled Konoha. I spent years training to take revenge on him, even going to Orochimaru for training. Eventually, I found out that Itachi had killed the clan on secret orders from the Konoha Inner Council, and only pretended to be a murderous psychopath because he wanted me to grow stronger and to protect me from the elders. So now I'm going to find him and bring him home, and then kill the council." The Uchiha finished, glaring at the fire with agitated Sharingan.

"That's an even more fucked up story than your first C-rank mission." Suigetsu commented, sharpened teeth bared in a mirthless smirk.

Sasuke threw a flaming log through his head. It went in one side and out the other with a sizzle.

Having a shishou like Jiraiya was incredibly annoying.

Or so Naruko thought.

She couldn't even make it past breakfast without his perversions causing a scene.
"So tell me, Naru-chan, what did you dream of last night?" the old pervert waggled his eyebrows.

"Nothing at all." the blonde replied emotionlessly, digging into her steamed rice with gusto. It wasn't *ramen*, but it was still food.

The Sennin's elbow dug into her side, knocking her chopsticks off course. The sticks dug into her cheek, smearing her food across her face. Her eyes narrowed.

That, as far as Naruko was concerned, was a declaration of war. And no one had *ever* won a prank war against Uzumaki Naruko.

"Come on, Naruko, surely you dreamt of something." Jiraiya goaded, lips curling up into a mocking smile.

"Okay." she replied. Turning to face her godfather, the girl assumed the most serious expression she could maintain. "I actually had a dream about you and Orochimaru."

The Sennin eyebrows rose, and he motioned with her hand to continue. "I was in my room, and I heard a bunch of bangs and crashes from yours. I was pretty curious, so I went to check it out." When I opened the door, you and the old snake were sharing the bed. It was all pretty sweaty Ero-sennin."

The man turned slightly green. Shaking his head, he turned to his own food. "Very funny Naruko." He muttered.

Leaning over the scuffed counter, she lowered her voice to a whisper. "I mean, I had no *idea* that he could do *those* types of things with his tongue."

"Naruko."

"I wonder if the two of you got up to those sorts of things when you were on the same team?"

"Naruko!"

"I mean, you must've had some missions together right? Probably had to share a tent at some point..."

"Oh gods…"

"Like, not saying anything about you Ero-sennin, but I know sometimes you guys can get a little frustrated."

"Naruko!"

"Hey, I'm not gonna judge. Though it might explain why you're so crazy for women now. Repression and all that."

The old man dropped his utensils with a clatter and left the room. The blonde Uzumaki grinned.

Jiraiya spent the rest of the day being hit on by men of various ages. All of them transformed clones of Naruko of course, but the old pervert didn't need to know that.

"Would you like some special sauce on that rolled omelet, Goshujin-sama?"

"What?"
"I can include a little extra with those kunai, Goshujin-sama."

"Ehh?"

"Would you like me to wash your back, Goshujin-sama? Here at Ryukin Hot Springs we like to ensure our customers leave here very satisfied."

"Umm, no, I'm good."

"Are you doing anything later, handsome? I'd really like to go grab a few drinks."

"No! Gods no!"

It was a very frazzled Jiraiya that sunk onto the stool next to Naruko at dinner time. The Uzumaki favoured him with an innocently curious look on her face. "What the hell happened to you old man?"

Heaving her off the stool, her godfather clung to her like a lifeline. "Oh it was horrible Naru-chan! I went out for lunch and some guy asked me if I wanted 'special sauce' in my omelet. Every time I walk the streets guys go around pinching my ass." The Sennin sobbed. "I went to go have a bath to relax and some perverted guy asks me if he can wash my back! What is the world coming to?"

The blonde awkwardly pat him on the back, rolling her eyes. "You can let go of me at any time you know, ero-sennin. Really. Any moment now."

"What a poor, poor man." A feminine voice drawled, cutting into their tête-a-tête shamelessly.

Spinning in his chair, Jiraiya beheld the most heavenly thing he'd seen all day. "It was terrible!" he wailed, latching onto the strange woman. Shapely breasts pressed into Jiraiya's face, and the legendary pervert grinned.

Naruko gave the woman a significant nod. "I'm gonna go back to my room ero-sennin, see ya later." She left the room, containing her snickering until she shoved through the door.

"Don't call me that!" the old man bellowed after her. The strange woman just giggled and swat his arm. "Ero-sennin huh? That's kind of cute…"

"I'm Fuka." She smiled, all white teeth and lush lips. Deep forest green eyes glinted in the half-light of the pub. Thick black hair cascaded down her back in curling waves, looking smooth to touch. The faintest smell of jasmine wafted through the air towards the shinobi.

"Jiraiya." He replied, grinning back. The women were trying hard today, weren't they? Even as a legendary S-ranked shinobi, Jiraiya usually had to work harder to pick up. Not that the sennin hadn't run into more desperate women in his time. It was all luck of the draw, really...

"What do you say we get out of here?" she whispered breathily. Dainty fingers twined through Jiraiya's in a loose grip. Leading the older man by the hand, Fuka showed him through the corridors to her room. Cheap reproduced paintings of mountains and bamboo forests decorated the walls, giving the rented room an atmosphere of nature and thrift.

Pushing the Sennin down on the bed, she grinned seductively before untying her obi, baring glorious breasts to the world. "I don't usually do this so quickly, you know..." Fuka murmured coquettishly.

Jiraiya drooled helplessly. She had the pinkest, perkiest nipples he'd seen in months, and the Gama
Sennin had seen a lot of nipples in the last few months. The woman ran a slow hand down her stomach, watching the shinobi through lidded eyes.

"I've been watching you for a while now." She informed him softly. Fuka covered her mouth with a hand as a faint red flush coloured her cheeks.

"Oh?"

Smirking, she spun around and slid her yukata to the floor. "Oh yes. I tend to take notice of handsome men that I see around here."

The Sennin grinned at the ego-stroking. "So I've heard," he replied arrogantly. More than five decades old, and he still had it!

Turning back to face him, Fuka stuck a pink tongue out and ran it over her ruby red lips. Two hands came up to cup generous breasts, playing at her nipples. Almost unwillingly, the old man trailed his eyes down her lithe figure, taking in flared hips and dark curls. And was that a penis -

Jiraiya screamed like a little girl and fled the room, ignoring her calls of "Come back, pretty boy!"

Dashing through the halls of the inn, he leapt around curious looking guests and whipped open the door to Naruko's room. Slamming it shut behind him, he collapsed to the ground and curled into a ball.

Rising one dark-gold eyebrow at the man, Naruko drawled "Have fun, pretty boy?"

"No!"
"The true measure of a shinobi is not how he lives but how he dies. It's not what they do in life, but what they did before dying that proves their worth. Thinking back of it, my story is one full of failures. Tsunade rejected me every time. I couldn't save my friend; I failed to protect my student… and my teacher. Compared with the Hokage who came before me, my accomplishments have all been petty and insignificant. I wanted to die like them…" - Jiraiya no Sannin

"He was here."

Kiba crouched down next to a tree, staring intently at a myriad of tracks in the dirt. Tracking them as they wove about the trees, he followed them until they vanished. Frowning thought, the Inuzuka stepped forward and stomped, relishing in the hollow clang that confirmed the presence of a secret hatch.

"Secret hatch." He called out in a bored tone, stepping off the hidden door and grinning.

"Do we go in?" Ino asked the group at large.

"I say we do." Tenten replied, fingering a kunai at her hip.

Shikamaru just snorted. "For what purpose? If Sasuke was here chances are he just picked up a couple of new lackeys and went on his merry way."

"That," Shino supported "And the face that my kikaichu fail to detect any strong presence of any competing decomposing animals or bacteria in the area."

"And what does that have to do with anything?" Chouji demanded confusedly.

Neji's lips thinned in annoyance. "He means that it is improbable that Sasuke went in there and slaughtered everyone. This is likely another one of Orochimaru's hideaways, though it begs the question of why he would murder everyone at one and not touch anyone at another."

"Exactly!" Gai boomed. "It would be most unyouthful to assault unsuspecting enemies when we are in pursuit of our own!"

"What the hell?" the Inuzuka muttered.

"He means it would be a waste of time to break in there and fight our way through however many Oto-nin for information we can already guess at when we're chasing after Sasuke." Asuma interpreted.

"This is as good a place as any to send our information to Hokage-sama." Hinata pointed out shrewdly, active Byakugan subsiding as she had her fill of examining the underground complex.

"Of course!" Gai agreed, before biting his thumb and forming seals. Pressing his palm to the ground, he barked out "Kuchiyose no Jutsu!" He smiled apologetically at his disabled student.
"What do you want, Gai?" echoed from the burst of smoke in a rasping voice, creaking through dry vocal cords.

"I need you to run a message to Konoha, Ningame."

"You summon me for the first time in years, and the only thing you want is for me to move my aching bones halfway across Hi no Kuni?" the smoke replied in an aggrieved tone. A scaled leg stepped forward slowly, padding down on the grass cautiously. Gai struck a nervous look.

"I should refuse you out of principle! The nerve of you." The voice moaned. And out of the smoke stepped-

"It's a turtle." Kiba muttered incredulously. "He wants to send urgent information to the Hokage on the back of a turtle! We would like it to get there before next year!"

Sending the shinobi an offended look, Ningame rolled his eyes. "I am a tortoise young man. And don't you forget it. You seem to be keeping rather unrefined company these days, Gai."

The jounin sent Kiba a warning look, and the Inuzuka drew back rolling his eyes. "Fine, fine... I guess we're living in a nursery rhyme these days. Anyone have a rabbit summon? We can really make things interesting then!"

"He does have a point though." Asuma declared, puffing at his cigarette.

"Well what else can we do?" Gai sighed. "No one else here has any summons."

The Sarutobi's face went unreadable. "That's not exactly true." Slowly forming seals, he pressed his palm to the ground and muttered in a low tone "Kuchiyose no Jutsu."

A much larger cloud of smoke billowed forth from Asuma's fingertips, driving Neji to step back with a faint cough. A burly ape appeared from the curling wisps, baring his fangs at the group. "I thought I warned you not to summon me, Sarutobi!"

Asuma held up his hands in a 'peace' gesture. "I know. But we have urgent news for the Hokage and I expect you'll want to hear it as well."

"Orochimaru is dead."

Asuma nodded. "Yeah, Orochimaru is dead. It appears that Uchiha Sasuke killed him."

The annoyed look on Enma the Monkey King's face faded away to curiosity. "Oh?" The white wisps of facial fur around Enma's jawline swished as the summoned creature leaned forward in interest.

Asuma nodded. "Yeah, Orochimaru is dead. It appears that Uchiha Sasuke killed him."

Asuma nodded. "Yeah, Orochimaru is dead. It appears that Uchiha Sasuke killed him."

"Orochimaru is dead."

The ape howled in laughter, slapping a great palm over his belly. "The traitorous student is murdered in turn by his own! I love the irony!"

"That's what we need the Hokage to know." The Sarutobi confirmed. "Will you take the news to her?"

"I guess I can take this to Tsunade-chan."

Enma frowned before palming his face. "I guess I can take this to Tsunade-chan." the Monkey King murmured. Leaping away into the trees, Enma fled to the south.
"He's a rather cheerful fellow isn't he?" Ningame uttered sarcastically, lowering himself down to the grass in a sprawl.

"Hush, Ningame. You can go back home now." Gai patted the tortoise on the head.

Giving the bowl-cut man an annoyed look, the tortoise vanished in a puff of smoke.

"He still grieves for Hokage-sama?" Gai whispered to Asuma.

Dropping his cigarette to the ground, the bearded jounin nodded. "Yeah, he won't let anyone summon any monkeys at all. I suspect he'll get over it in time, but Dad and Enma were friends for decades. It'll be a while yet, though he didn't raise nearly the stink about it when granddad died, from what I hear."

Squinting at the morning sunlight, Kiba did a few mental calculations. "We're about half a day behind them." The tracker declared absently. "It doesn't look like they're really rushing anywhere at the moment. I think if we push it, we can catch up in a few days. Assuming they don't take to the air. If they do that, we're totally screwed and we'll end up with no leads." He finished with a blunt tone.

"Well," Asuma decided. "You heard the kid."

Kiba gave the jounin an annoyed look. "I'm not a kid!" he growled. "I have hair under my arms and everything! Right, Shino?"

"Kiba. That is not information that is considered appropriate to publically disseminate."

Asuma shrugged. "You heard the kid," the Inuzuka sputtered at the goad. "We have the trail, and no time to waste. Let's get moving!"

The Eleven Man Pursuit Squad vanished, leaving the grass rustling behind them.

"Temporary Shinobi of the Allied Forces, Uchiha Sasuke. As promised, we have reconvened to judge your crimes after the destruction of the Akatsuki and the Eye of the Moon Plan." The Sandaime Tsuchikage's daughter declared chillingly.

"So noted." The newly made jinchuuriki replied just as frostily.

"You are charged with numerous counts of treason, espionage, murder, assault, theft, and manslaughter." Tsunade informed him in a blank tone. "As per recognition of your invaluable services rendered to the Allied Shinobi Forces over the course of the Fourth Shinobi World War, the Alliance has agreed to drop the charges of assault, theft, and manslaughter."

Sasuke repressed a snort. That was irrelevant. The remaining charges were more than enough to convict him and earn him an execution.

"In addition, the Kazekage has agreed to drop all charges for crimes rendered unto Sunagakure."

The Uchiha sent the Kazekage a shocked look, and Gaara regarded him silently with cold teal eyes. Apparently, the Kazekage wasn't willing to forgive him for what he had done. The man was only human after all. But Gaara also recognized that it would be extremely hypocritical to hold someone's past actions against them, especially considering his own.

Not that it really changed the verdict he would receive. But that didn't truly matter either. Sasuke
had a promise to keep and he wouldn't let death catch him here.

"How do you plead to your remaining charges?" the Senju finished, watching the Uchiha with lidded eyes. It wasn't disgust or hate written into her face, though those emotions were present, so much as it was curiosity.

The Godaime Hokage was interested in what he would do. It made him want to smirk in amusement.

So he did.

The Raikage's face grew murderous; the Kazekage's face remained as eerily blank as ever, the Yondaime Tsuchikage's face turned incredulous, the Mizukage's face curled in mirth. The Hokage leaned forward in her seat, hands folded atop one another, curious look deepening.

"I plead guilty." He intoned, smirk still written onto his lips.

Tsunade's brow rose. "You do realize the guilty verdict would be enough for execution. Do you still wish to plead as such?"

He did.

The Raikage grinned with triumph while the Tsuchikage drew back in shock.

"We five hereby condemn you to death, to be carried out on the morn." Kurotsuchi stuttered.

Sasuke laughed.

"I think not." He informed them darkly.

Ei shook with rage, pointing a meaty finger at the raven "You can't save yourself Uchiha!" he roared. "Justice will be done."

The aforementioned Uchiha merely went hysterical. "I am a jinchuuriki! The jinchuuriki! My death will release the Juubi back into the world, and there is no one else here with the same eyes as me. The Byakugan is all you have, and it is not enough! Not nearly enough without my cooperation."

"And what is stopping us from simply transferring the Bijuu to another host?" Mei asked, her face still wearing a look of poisonous delight. She truly loved political games.

"And what is stopping me from simply releasing it at any moment?" Sasuke replied in the same tone. "You can do nothing." The jinchuuriki hissed.

"It appears we have no choice." The Godaime Kazekage droned. "All those in favour of dismissing the charges against Uchiha Sasuke?"

"Yea." Tsunade muttered, her look of curiosity gone.

"Yea." Mei declared in a flippant tone.

"Yea." Kurotsuchi answered coldly.

"Yea." Ei growled, his hands twitching in rage.

"Yea. And it is done." Gaara finished blankly. "Uchiha Sasuke, you are free to go."
Sasuke stood, face written in iron determination. He had a promise to fulfill, even if it destroyed him in the end.

"You're sure this is the place?"

"Yes, Suigetsu. This is the place."

"Like, really really sure?"

"Yes, Sasuke-kun is sure, you idiot! Now stop wasting our time!" Karin barked.

"Why you!" Suigetsu twitched, his hands aching to wrap around the redhead's neck and squeeze.

Placing a hand on each of their shoulders, Juugo loomed over the two. "Now, now. Let's not fight." His face was eerily neutral.

"You two fight like an old married couple." The Uchiha muttered, picking around a pile of rocks.

"What! Me? Married to that bitch?" the Kiri-nin howled, pointing offensively at Karin.

The redhead readjusted her glasses, glaring back. "I think the bigger concern out to be what kind of drugs Sasuke is on that he'd think I would ever get involved with an idiot like you!" she spat.

Catching onto Sasuke's game, the orange-haired man's face grew into a smile. "Oh look," he teased. "You two even have pet names for each other."

The two went silent, both turning to face Juugo with identical expressions of murder. "How long do you think it would take you to kill him?" Karin shot at Suigetsu.

"How long do you think it would take you to hide the body?" he shot back.

Both faces grinned malevolently at the cursed male, who went pale and took a step back. "Now, now, let's not be too hasty here..."

"Whenever you three decide to split up your threesome and decide it's time for us to go get Kubikiribōchō, I'll be down there." Sasuke rolled his eyes before diving into the underbrush towards the valley floor.

The other three members of Team Taka sputtered with mortification before tearing off through the mist after their wayward leader. Several days of close quarters travel had done wonders for bringing the members of Taka into contact with each other's eccentricities.

Catching up with the Uchiha, Suigetsu drew up to his side and stared out at the looming castle. "So this is where Daikoku Tenzen lives..." the Kiri-nin muttered, narrowing his gaze in thought.

Sasuke stood, crossing his arms and staring down at the white-haired male. "Go get it." The Uchiha ordered.

"What?" Suigetsu replied dubiously.

"Kubikiribōchō is in the castle. Go get it; you're on your own." Sasuke clarified, black eyes emotionless.

The Kiri-nin glared at him suspiciously.
The raven's lips curled into a smirk in response. "Think of it as a bet." He declared airily. "If you can pull it off, I'll buy you some yogurt. Or is that too much to ask?"

Suigetsu laughed in surprise. "I didn't think you had such a playful side, Sasuke-kun. Fine then, I'll win it." Then the Kiri-nin was driving forward, leaving the rest of Taka behind.

"Are you sure this is wise, Sasuke?" Juugo muttered quietly.

"He can pull it off." Sasuke responded confidently.

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The Kiri-nin leapt through the open gate, surprising the sleepy guards stationed at the gatehouse. "Intruder!" one shocked guard shouted, while the other one whipped out a horn and blew it. A low blast filled the valley, echoing between the walls of the courtyard.

Mercenaries burst through the side doors, surrounding Suigetsu in the centre of the courtyard. One swaggered forward arrogantly. "You're entirely surrounded," the man declared brashly. "Surrender and you won't be hurt, too badly." The men surrounding the two jeered.

"Cut him up!"

"You're dead meat kid!"

"He's gonna whoop your ass!"

"Is that so?" the shinobi laughed, before yawning exaggeratedly and scratching his head obnoxiously.

The man in front of him flushed, before gritting out "Don't say we didn't warn you!" His katana lashed towards the Kiri-nin, slashing through his waist. Suigetsu collapsed, the halves of his body slumping to the dirt. Snorting in disgust, the mercenary sheathed his blade before spinning on the spot and striding back towards his comrades.

"Well that was fun!" the Kiri-nin shouted jovially, the halves of his body sliding back together. Lying on the ground, he rolled onto his side and propped his head up on one elbow. Making a show of buffing his nails on his purple shirt, the teen cocked a brow.

Flowing to his feet, Suigetsu gave the other man a malevolent grin. "Well, I guess it's my turn now." Leaping forwards, he brought his fist into the mercenary's face. The man's nose broke with a loud crack, before the white haired teen's foot slammed into his chest. The mercenary fell to the ground with a gurgle, ribs collapsed into the cavity of his chest.

Silence hung over the courtyard.

"Get him!" shouted one brave, foolish man. And the group charged forward, swinging their weapons.

Dodging under an axe, Suigetsu chopped out with his hand, shattering one man's trachea with a spurt of blood. The Hozuki sunk low, a foot lashing backwards to destroy another combatant's kneecap with a sickening crunch, and Suigetsu sputtered with laughter. He felt truly alive for the first time in months! This was living! The rush of battle and blood and iron! Not being cooped up in a tank for months on end...

The Kiri-nin reached out to grasp the top of a man's head, pulling himself up and into the air with a heave. Striking out with his booted foot, the toe of Suigetsu's boot drove into the temple of a red-
haired man, sending him careening into unconsciousness.

Suigetsu wove through the churning mass of bodies, striking out like a snake and destroying another enemy with every blow. He noted with some amusement that the closer he got to victory the more men that broke ranks and fled out the gate and into the forest.

Flashing through the mist, the Kiri-nin slipped behind the last enemy and brought him down with a fist to the back of the head. Sighing with disappointment, he stepped around the groaning men scattered about the courtyard and slipped into the castle proper.

Gliding through dark halls and up creaky staircases, Suigetsu frowned. There should be more people around here than this…

The white-haired shinobi gained the second-last floor, pausing and cocking his head to the side. He could hear the faint murmur of voices and the creak of leather. Metal rattled as several individuals shifted from side to side.

With a smirk, the white haired teen strode across the room and up the last staircase. He barely perceived booted feet before a sword slashed through his face. Head exploding into water, Suigetsu crossed his arms and tapped a boot against the stairs. The man who had 'killed' him shrunk away in fear.

"Well that wasn't very nice." The lower half of his face drawled, the insides of Suigetsu's skull looking like a mixture of grey goop and floating chunks of gore.

The room exploded into mutterings, with more than a few voices breaking out in disgusted dry heaving. One man cried out "I didn't sign up for this!" And then attempted to push past Suigetsu and flee.

Slamming the coward's face into a support beam with a hollow thunk, the white-haired teen sighed. Blinking cold purple eyes up at the gaggle of men crowded into the room, he muttered out in jovial tone "So where is the big boss?" Receiving no reply from the frightened group, he deliberately ascended the rest of the staircase.

The men drew back from him, and with an amused smirk, the white haired teen began to weave back and forth with a predatory leer. Herding the men toward the other end of the room and away from the only escape, he bore his teeth at them. "So how about it? Where's Daikoku Tenzen?"

"He's here!" one shouted, shoving forward a bearded man. Tenzen stumbled to his knees before turning his face up to stare at the interloper. Suigetsu loomed over him, murder written into every motion.

"So how about it, Tenzen-chan?" he whispered. "Where's my Kubikiribōchō?"

"Here!" Someone roared behind him, and the Kiri-nin was bisected in half. It was all for naught, as the teen simply melted into water before reforming with a swirl. Regarding the giant cleaver with covetous eyes, he stepped forward and into his would-be killer's personal space.

Showing his shark teeth, he laughed. Suigetsu leaned forward, slapping one hand one the pommel of the sword. His warm breath washed against the other man's face. Then his arm swelled up to muscular proportions.

"I'm quite envious. Even though you've had no real training, you can swing this big old blade like it's nothing…” he drawled. Then he yanked the Kubikiribōchō from the other man's grip, sending him stumbling away.
Hefting the blade onto his shoulder, Suigetsu smirked. "Well now," he began dangerously. "I guess it's time to take care of the rest of you."

"Do you really think you can just come in here, do these things, and just end it like that?" Tenzen sputtered out in fear.

Peering over his shoulder at the man, Suigetsu replied "You have to pay your debts, right?" Then his eyes narrowed. "Allow me to test this sword on you."

Whirling the giant cleaver out, he spun in place and whipped his arm forward.

A hand clamped over his wrist in an iron grip.

"That's enough Suigetsu." Sasuke stated coolly, regarding the trembling men before him with disgust.

Suigetsu snorted at the group. "You better get out of here," he warned. "I'll only spare lives in respect to Sasuke's wishes."

The two members of Taka turned, striding towards the staircase.

"Sasuke?" Tenzen whispered, clutching at his rapidly beating heart. "No way!" he shouted as the two disappear down to the next floor. "The Sasuke who killed Orochimaru?"

Suigetsu smirked at his companion. "You're quite the celebrity." He informed the Uchiha sarcastically. "To think that your name would be known all the way out here…"

"That's not the first time you've said that." Sasuke replied blandly.

"What?"

"Hn."

"I could've sword I heard…"

"I didn't say anything, stop fantasizing."

"Me? Fantasizing? About you?"

"Yes." The Uchiha answered arrogantly as they turned a corner. "I know I'm good-looking, but keep such thoughts to yourself. I don't swing that way."

"I'd watch yourself." the Kiri-nin warned. "When I have this sword I can't lose, not even to you."

"You keep telling yourself that."

"Oi!"

"Sasuke!" Karin interrupted as they reached the ground floor. Rushing up to the two, her hands twisted in worry. "While you guys were up there, I sensed a group of chakra signatures rush in. They're waiting outside."

Frowning at the redhead, Sasuke palmed his face. This hadn't happened the first time around…

"Do you need me to take care of them, Sasuke?" Juugo offered in a concerned tone. Staring back into the anxious pair of orange eyes, the Uchiha slowly shook his head.
"No." he decided. "No, we're going to deal with this as a team."

"Karin!" He barked, and she leapt at the sharp cry. "You stay behind me and to the back." Turning to the Kiri-nin at his side, he met his purple eyes with resolve. "Suigetsu, when you get out there, swing around to the right."

Facing forward again, he raised his chin. "Juugo, you go left." Sasuke commanded.

"When we get out there, we're going to see who it is and what they want. We might get out of this without having to fight anyone."

Sasuke stepped forward, the rest of Taka falling in behind him. Striding across the courtyard with deliberation, he slipped under the arc of the gate. Faltering, he ground to a stop and staring at the group of shinobi assembled before him.

"Uchiha Sasuke."

He balled his hands into fists.

"Sarutobi Asuma and Maito Gai." He spat. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"I believe you already know." Gai informed him solemnly.

Spitting to the side, he glared forwards. "Yeah, I guess I do."

And then they moved.

Asuma leapt at the Uchiha, trench knives hissing out to clang with Sasuke's Sword of Kusanagi. Gai's hand flew through the cloud of sparks at Sasuke's face, and the Uchiha bent backwards at the waist.

Placing his palms on the ground, he completed the motion by whipping his feet off the ground at the two jounin. Gai crossed his forearms and blocked one outstretched leg while Asuma slapped the other one to the side. Coming to his feet, Sasuke snarled murderously at the pair before he jumped to the side and avoided a swarm of kikaichu.

Ino's hand assumed a triangular seal and with a bark of "Shintenshin no Jutsu!" her mind launched itself at Karin.

Sensing the incoming mass of chakra, the redhead swung to the side. Drawing out a kunai, Karin whipped it back across the field at the blonde. An armour-clad arm shot out and deflected the blade with a clang.

Stepping in front to guard Ino's immobile body, Chouji held his hands out in preparation for his family techniques.

Diving to the side, Juugo rolled under a swinging green clad leg. Skin flowing into brown, he spun around and lashed out at the green blur. The ninja leapt backwards out of the swing of his swollen clawed fist.

Muttering about "troublesome psychopaths", the Nara's shadow launched itself and connected to the cursed man's. Smirking to himself, Shikamaru declared in triumph "Kagemane no Jutsu, complete."

Juugo's face went cold, before a set of cylinders emerged from his back, lighting up with a burst of
chakra. Shikamaru was forced to abandon his technique or be carried along as the orange-haired man rocketed forward.

Two Hyuuga split as a giant iron cleaver swung out towards them, one leaping high and using the metal surface to launch herself even higher, and one going low under the swing. Hands burning with chakra, the doujutsu wielders struck out at Suigetsu in a flurry of chakra laced blows. He collapsed into water before the first strike reached him, forming a puddle at their feet.

Reforming behind them with a grimace, he rocked with a backhanded cleave at the pair. Neji spun into a Kaiten, chakra whirling to deflect the murderous blade from their flesh as Hinata dove forward, hands spearing out towards Suigetsu's face.

"Don't kill them!" Sasuke called out to the rest of his team before tossing out a series of Chidori Senbon at the jounin. Wind chakra coated knives brushed aside the flurry of electric lances as Gai frowned.

"It is most unyouthful Sasuke-kun to think that you would be able to defeat all of us without pursuing us with the intent to kill."

Sharingan blazing, Sasuke traded blows with the jounin before grunting out "Oh believe me, I could kill you all by myself. You're just lucky that I am trying very hard not to." A trench knife sunk into his back, before the Uchiha burst with smoke into a log.

"Kind of hard not to!" Suigetsu growled, rolling under Hinata and swinging his cleaver back towards Neji. The Hyuuga assumed a frosty glare as he ducked under the whirling iron.

"Don't underestimate us!" Hinata ordered coolly, lashing out with her foot. The girl's leg swung right through Suigetsu, his midsection spurting water before the breach sealed itself.

Narrowing his eyes at the girl, the Kiri-nin kicked out with his own boot and knocked the wind from her with a whoosh.

Drawing back as her cousin leapt forward, Hinata's hand lit up with medical chakra. Running a hand over her stomach, she smoothed away the bruise before it even appeared.

Juugo crashed into Lee, sending the two to the ground in a tangle of limbs. Roaring with frustration, the orange haired man drew on even more of his curse and began to punch down with two swollen fists at the bowl-cut Lee. The chuunin caught each blow on his forearms, blocking as best as he could. "Juugo!" the Uchiha shouted from the side, and with a quick glance at his comrade, one of Juugo arms curled into a catapult.

Sasuke crashed his feet into the hastily formed launch pad, before Juugo's arm hummed with chakra and sent him flying back towards the battle.

Kiba barreled into Juugo, going down in a tangle of limbs and snarling that pulled the orange-haired man off of Lee. The taste of blood roiled over Kiba's tongue as Juugo hammered an elbow into the Inuzuka shinobi's jaw and threw away the growling Akamaru with a kick.

Rolling over onto Kiba, Juugo shook the pounding rage out of his head and lurched away to safety. Lee's feet hammered through the space his chest had been just a moment before, and the bi-polar male appreciated how close he'd just come to the pain of a broken rib.

Dashing forward, the armour clad Chouji cleared the field in a moment, bearing down on Karin like a bull.
The girl shrieked and spun to the side, hand slashing out with a hastily formed chakra scalpel. The dull green mist did its job, carving a bloody furrow into the Akimichi’s side as he barreled on past.

Chouji spun in place, a meaty fist shooting out to nick the redhead's face.

Stumbling back, Karin lifted a trembling hand to her split lip, staring at the blood before glaring hatefully at the brown-haired shinobi. Forming a chakra scalpel in each hand, she rushed towards her foe with a shriek.

Curling into a spinning ball, Sasuke flew past the two jounin. It was only his Sharingan that allowed him to perceive the shock and flood of understanding that covered their faces as his whole body lit up in a swirl of Chidori Nagashi. Slamming through the cloud of hovering Kikaichu, the bugs curled up and died whenever they touched him or his chakra. Ending his spin, Sasuke whipped out his Sword of Kusanagi.

Shino stared at him in shock as the lightning-wreathed blade slashed into the Aburame's left shoulder, deadening the nerves and causing that arm to flop uselessly. Landing in a crouch, Sasuke whirled in place; chokuto lifting in a backhand swing aimed at Shino's other shoulder. He was foiled by Asuma again with wind-laced trench knives, sparks flying as the blades clashed.

Suigetsu slapped Neji's outstretched fingers aside, keeping the dangerous chakra away from his skin. The Hyuuga kept in close quarters, preventing him from drawing the Kubikiribōchō into a slash. The Kiri-nin scowled in rage as he was forced to use his beloved sword as a shield, weaving the flat of the blade back and forth to deny Neji. The Hyuuga's superior smirk only incensed him, and his own fist launched out and drove into the Branch member's cheek. His elation at the swiftly forming purple bruise was foiled when Hinata lanced out at him, landing a Jyuken strike on his forearm.

Glaring at the girl, he took advantage of Neji's momentary distraction to leap backwards and gain some distance. He felt the first inkling of worry as the skin and muscle around the tenketsu refused to turn into water, and his respect for the pair's abilities rose. Grinning with bloodthirst, he dove back into the fray with a swing.

"Neji!" Hinata shouted, and the jounin dodged. Suigetsu managed to nick his arm, drawing the first real blood of the fight between them.

Lee flew at Juugo, and the cursed man could barely keep track of him. Fists slammed into his body, writing a record of bruises onto his skin. Crossing his clawed fists in front of him, he blocked a kick aimed for his chest. Then he felt the kick aimed for his back contact, and he slid forward, rolling in the dirt. Shikamaru's shadow connected with his again, and he felt his whole body lock up. A triumphant Kiba twisted into a swirling Tsuuga.

Laying there for a moment, the orange-haired man closed his eyes. "I'm sorry." He muttered, before his eyes snapped back open, sclera swollen black. "I'm sorry, but I can't let you hurt Sasuke!" Juugo gave himself entirely over to the curse, shattering Shikamaru's bind in a single movement before leaping at Lee with a mad howl, matching the chuunin blow for blow.

Shaking her head as her mind returned to its proper place, Ino hurried forward to join her teammate in attacking the redheaded girl.

Karin scowled in annoyance and jumped backward. Spinning in midair she righted herself and speared towards the Yamanaka with green shrouded fingers. Recognizing the tell-tale glow of medical chakra, Ino's own hands lit up in green, her chakra brighter and more focused than Karin's inexperienced efforts.
The chakra scalpels bashed into one another, green mist sputtering, before Chouji came up behind the redhead. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he barely had time to grin in triumph before Karin stabbed down, her scalpel slashing the muscle under his skin. Released by the boy, the redhead launched a dirty but ineffective kick at the Akimichi's man parts.

Withdrawing from his tangle with the Sarutobi, Sasuke grasped Gai's incoming arm at the wrist and launched the man over his shoulder with a yank. Leaping backwards, he tumbled through the Sarutobi's outstretched arms and whipped his arm forward. Releasing his sword of Kusanagi, he nearly sighed in relief as the electricity conducting metal pierced through Shino's right shoulder. He'd been worried for a moment that the Aburame might get himself killed trying to dodge. Sharingan churning into Mangekyou, he glared at the side and incinerated the kikai-nin's colonies with an explosion of black fire.

Grimacing at the loss of so many valuable allies, Shino gave Sasuke a short nod and retreated towards Shikamaru to have the blade removed from his flesh.

A flash of instinct had the Uchiha spinning to the side, reducing the Sarutobi's crippling stab to a bleeding gash along his side. He brought his arms up in the next moment to block a kick from the taijutsu specialist.

Panting in exertion, the Hozuki drew away from the two Hyuuga. Black spots dotted his arms, signifying sealed tenketsu. The two regarded him warily, small slashes littering their forms. Suigetsu's lips thinned and he glanced to the woods. There was no one guarding it, no one to stop him from running. Neji's face went blank as he watched his opponent visibly consider abandoning his comrades, and Hinata's face grew incredulous.

Turning his focus to his team leader, he watched as Sasuke stabbed through one of the Konoha-nin's shoulders before dodging and going up against the two jounin. Scowling, his hand tightened around the Kubikiribōchō. "I must be crazy," he muttered "To go about sacrificing my own ass to protect them." Glaring with renewed resolve, he stepped forward towards the pair.

Hinata felt some relief. She would've felt bad for Sasuke if his allies turned and ran out on him.

Rock Lee grimaced in pain as another brown claw collided with his body. Leaping away from the man-turned-monster, Lee shouted out. "Go Shikamaru-kun! Go help Ino-san and Chouji-kun!" The bleeding Aburame shoved at the Nara's shoulder, wordlessly commanding him to go. "I can hold him off for long enough!" Lee reinforced, blocking another fist from the murderous Juugo until Kiba and Akamaru drove the orange-haired man back with a flurry of slashes.

With a curt nod, Shikamaru stood and fled across the field towards the rest of his team. Straightening, Lee crossed his arms before barking out "Kaimon, kai!" the green-clad chuunin blurred as he charged toward his opponent. Dust swirled around him as he reached new heights in speed. Leaping into the sky, he spread his arms out and shouted "Kyuumon, kai!"

Juugo howled at him, his hand forming into a series of cannons.

"What?" Lee gasped as the cannon filled with yellow light and blasted at him.

"Shit!" Karin cursed, pulling away from the two Konoha-nin. Pulling out another kunai, she deflected an incoming one from Ino before heaving the one in her hand towards one of the gaps in Chouji's armour. The Akimichi just curled into a ball, the blade careening helplessly off course as it contacted his body plate. "Ino!" the boy shouted, and the blonde nodded in understanding before diving towards the chakra sensor with renewed fury. Barely able to keep up with the push of taijutsu, Karin could only watch as the boy began to swell.
When he had reached truly epic proportions, the boy boomed out "Nikudan Sensha!" Then he began to roll. The Yamanaka retreated, and Karin cursed again at the human tank rolling towards her. Leaping to the side, she dodged the boy himself before a rock struck her temple and the world flashed white. Shaking through the pain, she ducked under Ino's overconfident punch and hammered a fist into the girl's gut. Blinking a stream of blood out of her eye, she froze in helpless shock. "Kagemane no Jutsu" drawled a tired voice behind her, and with a sigh of relief the blonde stepped forward with a spool of ninja wire to bind her hands.

Seeing Karin captured out of the corner of his eye made him swear in annoyance. These damned Konoha-nin were going to ruin everything! Kicking out with an enraged foot, he drove the wind from Maito Gai with a burst of spittle. The jounin withdrew, circling to the side. Sasuke kept track of him as best he could while slapping aside the wind-covered knives the Sandaime's son stabbed at him with. He was starting to regret disabling Shino while giving up his sword. His Mangekyou spun as he wove a genjutsu around Asuma.

The jounin collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut, and he left Gai behind as he rushed the rest of Team Asuma. The cursed seal wove across his skin as he crouched before Chouji. Bringing his fist to bear, he shattered the Akimichi's chest plate with a single strike before he was forced back onto the defensive. Gai and a reawakened Asuma drove at him, stabs and punches caught on the backs of his webbed wings.

Suigetsu retreated across the field desperately, the Hyuuga cousins fighting in tandem. He growled desperately as Karin went down and Sasuke moved to free her. These Konoha kids were tough! Dropping the giant cleaver, Suigetsu dove towards the two Hyuuga. He had time to register the shock expressed at his sudden change in tactics before he was whipping out a kunai and driving it through Neji's bicep. The Branch member cursed foully as his cousin drove the Kiri-nin back with desperate Juken strikes.

Gripping the blade with his other arm, Neji yanked it from his flesh and dropped it to the ground. Blood streamed from the wound as he backed-up his cousin.

Suigetsu had reclaimed his blade and was swinging it at the pair in an effort to prevent close quarters. He was made to duck as a kunai whistled at his face, only to catch Shikamaru's fist into his cheek. That gave the Hyuuga the opening they needed, and the two of them slammed their palms into his chest, sealing the remainder of his tenketsu and preventing any form of his Hydrification Technique. The Kiri-nin howled in rage as Chouji wrapped a giant fist around his struggling form and Ino began to bind him.

Lee burst through the yellow beam of energy, skin red and eyes white. Juugo's face twisted in surprise before the taijutsu specialist landed on him with a kick. Driving the orange-haired man's face into the ground, Lee leapt back to avoid the blade the formed on Juugo's back and swung for him. Pursuing the chuunin with an axe formed on each forearm, the cursed man swung desperately. Lee simply danced around his blows, unable to press forward but unable to be struck. Chouji rolled between them, the human tank forcing both combatants to retreat. Juugo spat in rage and rushed at the chuunin again. The Hyuuga cousins dove in from his sides, and he spun under their chakra covered palms. Crossing his arms, the cursed man blocked an overhead axe kick from the bowl-cut chuunin before Chouji's fist hammered him in the back.

Flying forward, Juugo rolled to his feet with a snarl. Boosters forming on his back, he flew towards the gaggle of Konoha-nin. Neji stepped in front of him, and with a whirl formed a spinning sphere of chakra. "Kaiten!" he shouted, and Juugo bounced off the sphere and barely had time to process the cold statement of "You are within the field of my Divination. Hakke Rokujūyon Shō!" and then Neji's palms were slapping up and down his body. Cut off from the flow of chakra, Juugo's form
receded and he was easily bound by a softly cursing Kiba.

Seeing each of his comrades taken in a matter of minutes infuriated the Uchiha. "Enough!" he shouted, cursed seal receding. Mangekyou spun in his eyes and purple streamers flashed around him. The ghostly skeleton burst into being, muscle flying over it and armour slamming over it. The secondary layer of armour slid over it, causing the guardian to resemble a yamabushi. "Susano'o," he declared in a voice as cold and chill as the grave.

Striding over, he threw the bound Karin over one shoulder before turning to glare at the Konoha-nin. "I don't know what the fuck you think you're doing, but you're getting the hell out of my way!" he swore. One insubstantial armoured fist backhanded the two senior jounin across the field, and Lee leapt into the air to catch them.

Landing on the ground, the chuunin peered at the Uchiha. The spiritual manifestation reached out to pluck Suigetsu and Juugo from their captors, bring the members of Taka of him in clawed hands. The two were set gently on the ground. "Get you gone!" he commanded regally, hand thrown out towards the Konoha Pursuit Squad. The Susano'o mirrored his motion, before fading away after its intimidating function had been served.

Then the ground was crumbling beneath his feet, and Sasuke's eyes widened in pure shock as Hyuuga Hinata dove up from beneath the dirt. Byakugan blazing and hands shrouded in chakra, he barely heard her whisper of "Sorry, Sasuke-kun." as her hands ghosted up his neck.

Sasuke didn't think. He merely reacted, lashing out with a shroud of Chidori Nagashi that filled the air with the scent of cooked meat while desperately calling his absolute defence back up. The tenketsu in his neck snapped shut as the Hyuuga Heiress forced herself to move through the pain, slowing the flow of chakra to his eyes to a trickle.

His eyes faded to coal black, and the ghostly purple warrior shattered around him. Dropping Karin, he slammed a fist into her chest. The Hyuuga flew back, replaced by a determined Lee. Dodging under Lee's kick, he swept a leg out and sent the boy tumbling to the ground.

Damn it, damn it, damn it! Why hadn't he just continued to manifest the chakra construct? The reserves of the body Sasuke had taken from his younger self didn't have the chakra reserves his original body had built up, but it would have been able to handle the load.

Then Gai's fist hammered into the back of his head, sending the world spinning. Desperately, he lit up the air around him with a Chidori Nagashi, faux-lightning armour driving away his opponents. He stepped back, blinking blood out of his eyes as the use of Mangekyou caught up with him. Gai's face went extremely concerned, worried that he had struck the Uchiha too hard and that he was the cause of the boy's ocular bleeding.

Sarutobi Asuma stepped forward, fist wreathed in wind. Piercing through the makeshift lightning armour with a thrust, he drove his fist into Sasuke's gut. The breath rushed out of him, and the Chidori sputtered. Neji took advantage of the distraction of tap his fingers along Sasuke's body, sealing more of his tenketsu. The electricity died. Then Gai kicked his feet out from under him and sent the Uchiha stumbling to his knees. Stepping onto Sasuke's back, Lee completed the motion and pushed him to the ground.

Chouji grabbed his struggling arms and bound them behind his back with ninja wire. A black cloth slipped over his eyes, Hinata's trembling hands smoothing out any uncomfortable knots. Sasuke grit his teeth as he laid face-down in the dirt, bitterness and rage in equal measure spreading through his veins.
Uchiha Sasuke; brought down by Konoha.

He'd failed.
"Man, Hinata-chan was awesome!"

Lying in the dirt, Sasuke could only seethe in frustration as the rest of the squad fussed over Hinata and congratulated themselves with much backslapping. His only consolation was that Hinata seemed unable to handle praise and thus didn't spend her time bragging about being the one to get inside his guard. Though that could be dismissed as her being less interested in preening over herself and more interested in healing away the burns that surely covered the skin of her arms - the result of Sasuke's Chidori Nagashi.

"Ano..." Hinata stuttered, flushing and pressing her fingers together as the last bit of crisp red skin faded back to its typical pale hue."If not for Sasuke-kun making a mistake, I wouldn't..."

Rolling his eyes at their antics, Asuma puffed a white cloud before drawling "Alright kiddos, that's enough. Let's get moving."

The white-haired teen on the ground snarled at the group. "You better watch your asses! When I get out of here I'm gonna kill you in your sleep!" Suigetsu's writhing about and violent threats made Lee frown in concern, though Neji only regarded the Hozuki with a look of obvious contempt.

Karin sighed mournfully, before rolling to her side to allow the blood streaming from her forehead to run away from her eyes. Her eyes came to rest on Juugo.

The orange-haired man stared back at her, face twisted in regret and self-loathing. As far as he was concerned, he'd failed to protect Sasuke and thereby failed Kimimaro.

Ino frowned at the writhing Suigetsu. "Will you quiet down?" she growled at him in annoyance. "Hey, fuck you bitch! Why don't you and your merry band piss off?" he hissed back, sending the blonde a murderous look. Chouji glared at the rude prisoner, and Shikamaru snorted in amusement.

"Suigetsu, it's enough."

The Kiri-nin went silent at Sasuke's neutral statement, staring hatefully up at his captors.

Turning his head to the side, Sasuke ignored the way the ground pressed up against his cheek to address the team. "Konoha-nin, I don't suppose you'd be willing to let them go? The only one you came for is me. They don't deserve incarceration for their generosity."

"Sasuke!" Juugo whispered in alarm to him in alarm, and the Uchiha felt a small smirk curve his lips. Naruko must have rubbed off on him, masochistic optimist that she was...

"Sorry." Asuma replied after a moment. "They're not really acting against the Village, but I'm
quite sure that if we let them run free they'd come back later to set you free." Scratching his beard, he sent a suspicious glance at the bound and blinded Uchiha. "I'll see about getting the Hokage to let them walk when we get back to the Village. That fair enough?"

"That's fair." Sasuke replied blandly, forced to concede that he had no real bargaining power in this particular instance. Frowning at the dark world, he was startled as soft hands wrapped around his arms and heaved him to his feet.

"Anyway," the jounin continued. "We should be getting going."

"Just give me a minute." Ino interrupted, hands lighting up with green chakra. Pressing a hand to Chouji's side, she healed the gash Karin had dug there during their fight.

Nodding in thanks to his teammate, Chouji bent over and lifted the redhead. Standing easily with the prisoner held in his arms, he ignored the way the Yamanaka scowled and gave her a significant look. The blonde sighed before running medical chakra over the girl, sealing the scratches and gouges she had acquired.

Lee pulled Juugo to his feet, and the orange-haired man stumbled before standing under his own power. Blinking at his former opponent, he was surprised at the way the green-clad chuunin grinned at him before giving him a thumb up. Smiling in bemusement, he just tuned out the abrupt chatter regarding his 'Power of Youth', and tracked his concerned gaze back to the Uchiha.

The silently seething Suigetsu was thrown over Gai's shoulder, air rushing out of him with a whoosh. The man struck a 'nice guy' pose before complimenting Lee on being Youthful and helping a wounded combatant. The Kiri-nin groaned as the world inverted, hoping to all that was holy that when he vomited from the blood rushing to his head, it would be all over the jounin's back.

"Alright team, move out! And don't drop any of the kids." The Sarutobi commanded before setting out back through the trees.

Stepping forward blindly, Sasuke followed the rest of the group by sound alone. When he tripped over a root, the Uchiha expected to collide with the ground and prepared himself for the humiliation of it all. He didn't expect soft, insistent hands to wrap around his bicep to steady him and prevent his fall. Stumbling into his guide, his nose filled with the scent of lavender. He frowned.

"Be careful, Sasuke-kun." The woman whispered, and he grit his teeth. Jerking away from Hinata, Sasuke stomped forward. The Hyuuga just smiled in amusement before trapping his shoulder with one hand and steering him around the obstacles his bound eyes could no longer see.

"Stop here for the night."

The raven shook himself out of his musing as the Sarutobi's voice cracked through the darkness like a whip. Despite being captured by Konoha, he was still alive, and so long as he lived and breathed he needed a plan. His number one enemy at the moment was the Konoha Council, who held his fate in their hands. It would take all his political skill garnered over the years to manipulate them.

Pushing Sasuke down against a tree, Asuma snorted when the Uchiha sent him a glare. Or at least tried to. "You stay there." He ordered, amusement in his tone, and smirked all the more at the way the visible portions of Sasuke's face went even darker.
The Uchiha heard the fading clamp of boots as the beard jounin moved away from the main prisoner. Another body sunk to the ground next to him, and a tingle in his cursed seal and the feel of instinct told him the warm bulk pressed up against him was Juugo. The sound of a nearby flop followed by cursing nearly made Sasuke smirk. Suigetsu was unmistakably quite angered that the canny Branch House Hyuuga made sure to seal his tenketsu periodically and prevent his easy escape.

A slow stomp followed by a high squeal signified Chouji dumping Karin. Evidently she had landed on top of the Kiri-nin if his sudden renewed mutters were anything to go by. The crack of branches landing in a pile followed by the whoosh of a Katon jutsu told his sight-deprived mind the Konoha-nin had lit a fire. Unconsciously, he leaned forward to take in a little more warmth. Juugo's sudden elbow to his side made him jerk back with a hiss. His head whipped towards the orange-haired male, mouth open to tear into him –

And the cursed man brushed a slow, deliberate shoulder against the cloth covering his eyes. His mouth clicked shut in realization. Cocking an ear, he strained to hear the sounds of the roving squad. Two people conversed over the fire, three were not in the clearing at all, and three more made careful rounds around the group. The rustle of branches above him led him to believe that there was one up in the trees. Sasuke frowned. He couldn't detect the other two at all. Likely the jounin. Still, he wouldn't get much of a better shot than this.

Leaning back towards Juugo, he pressed his face into the other man's chest. He smelt like trees and nature, Sasuke noted absently. Rubbing his face furiously against Juugo's shoulder, he felt the cloth slipping up. Cool wind brushed over one lid and Sasuke grinned in triumph. His right eye blinked open, staring into Juugo's amused face. Renewing his attentions to his other eye, he had barely begun to press the cloth up before the orange-haired teen's face twisted in resignation. A strong, burly hand wrapped into his raven strands and pulled. Another calloused hand came up to yank the cloth back down over his free eye before he could even attempt a genjutsu.

The hand released him, and Sasuke grit his teeth at the sore spot left behind. It was surprising the bastard hadn't ripped his hair out!

"Separate them." Asuma ordered the group at large, staring down at the stubborn Uchiha.

"Is that really necessary?" Neji's calm tone asked from behind him.

"Uchiha - that stubborn kid - almost got free and none of us were even watching him." The Branch Hyuuga assumed a look of surprise and grudging respect at the captives' ingenuity. "We can't keep them together or they'll come up with another plan."

Karin was swept off the ground with a squeak, followed by Suigetsu's violent threats, and the sudden loss of warmth at his side informed him that Juugo was gone as well. Repressing a shiver at the unexpected chill, the Uchiha pressed his lips together in annoyance.

Three sets of feet trumped back into the clearing followed by a wet thud.

"Was that really needed?" the Yamanaka complained.

"Damn straight." Inuzuka replied.

"Don't be so troublesome, deer is good." Nara muttered.

Ino snorted at that. "Just because your clan likes to raise and eat wild animals doesn't mean the rest of us do."
"I've got no problem with it." Chouji laughed. "Me either." Tenten confirmed, followed by a chorus of affirmations. Turning a pouty face towards Hinata, Ino begged. "Come on Hinata-chan, back me up here."

"I really don't have a problem with it either." The Hyuuga Heiress declared, quietly entertained.

The Yamanaka huffed, and silence fell thereafter. It was only the slow sizzle of fat and the delicious aroma of venison that told Sasuke there was food being prepared. On cue, his stomach rumbled softly. He had the sudden urge to punch his gut. Damned body showing weakness on him.

A wet cloth smoothed over his face, wiping away crusted blood before dainty hands fixed the blindfold to a more comfortable position. The person withdrew for a moment before returning. Bringing with them some of the delicious smell from earlier. A spoon pressed against his lips, and his face lit up in mortification.

"I'm not a damned baby!" Sasuke hissed. The other person sighed before withdrawing the spoon. Dropping into the bowl with a small chink, they readjusted themselves to a more comfortable position.

"I always used to cry and give up..." Hinata began quietly. "I took so many wrong turns. But Naruko helped me find the right path." Sasuke turned to face the Hyuuga, expression carefully blank. Just where was the woman going with this unasked-for confession? "I always used to watch her; I wanted to chase after her, to catch up to her..."

"Naruko has been dealt so many bad hands in life that my own troubles can't even compare." The Heiress confided. "People put her down, ignored her, and rejected her. But she never gave up. She always kept smiling."

Sasuke's lips twitched. That sounded just like the dobe.

"She makes mistakes but..." the girl paused, seemingly marshaling her courage before continuing. "But because of those mistakes, she has the strength to stand up to anyone. That's why I think Naruko is truly strong. When I watch her, I feel full of courage. I feel that I can keep going, that I can succeed. That even I am worth something."

Sasuke 'stared' at her in something akin to shock. He had no idea why she seemed convinced that he would be an ideal place to dump her confessions. Did he have a psychologist stamp branded over his forehead or something?

He could hear the smile in her tone as she pushed on. "I know that to Naruko-chan, you have become one of her most precious people. Naruko is willing to do anything for her precious people. She is willing to laugh for them, to cry for them, to fight for them, to bleed for them, even to die for them."

The Uchiha thinned his lips against the sense of angst that roiled in his gut. Sasuke was well aware of the completely odd and unwarranted value that Naruko placed on him. It was something he had never and would never deserve.

"Sasuke." The Hyuuga said sharply, and he took note of the conspicuous lack of honorific. "Naruko saw in you something worth doing all those things for. Whatever quality it is that drew you together; it is something that she treasures. When she was a child, Naruko always said 'My goal is to become the Hokage!' Do you know what she says is her goal now?"

Sasuke turned his face away from the other. He already knew, he didn't need to hear it. If Hinata's
goal was to place the guilty burn back in his chest after it had been momentarily forgotten in the cheerfully psychotic and dysfunctional familial dynamics of Team Taka, she was succeeding.

"Uzumaki Naruko wants to bring you home. Because you are so important to her that she is willing to even give up becoming the Hokage! 'How can I become Hokage, if I can't even save one friend?' she told me. Every time someone suggests that she focus more on preparing for the position rather than chasing after you, she gives them that exact response." Hinata's voice softened, and he sightlessly turned back towards her. "Naruto-chan has become one of my precious people. And in her absence, I will do my best to care for someone she considers one of her precious people."

"Oi! What are you two whispering about over there?" Shikamaru drawled, cutting into Hinata's quiet monologue gracelessly.

"Nothing, Nara-kun." The Hyuuga answered formally, and Sasuke knew the one-sided conversation was over. But the next time she pressed the spoon to his mouth, he ate.

And on the next morning, he allowed her to lead him stumbling and blind home.

It was the middle of the night when they reached Konoha two days later. The disorientation of being carried over the wall like a sack of potatoes was nauseating, Sasuke decided. And he would quite kindly appreciate if they could walk to the Hokage Tower.

Instead, Asuma sped over the rooftops. Every bound drove his shoulder into the Uchiha's gut. Unable to see, there was nothing Sasuke could've done to prepare for the sudden jerk every time the jounin landed or leapt. And there was nothing that could have prepared him for the dizzying feeling of dangling from a great height as the Sarutobi reached the tower and walked up the side of the tower.

Swaying in the wind, the Uchiha was quite ready to puke. Preferably all over the bastard jounin. And maybe if he was lucky, the spillover would nail the other bastard jounin. Or maybe the white-eyed asshole jounin, or that dickweed tracker…

Sasuke was not feeling very charitable at that moment.

A window snapped open and a woman hissed "Get the hell in here, quickly!"

Asuma grunted in assent before diving through the open pane. Sasuke's head cracked off the bottom of the frame, which he decided was the last straw and responded by heaving up all over the floor.

"By the Will of Fire, Sarutobi, when I asked for him alive I meant alive." The Hokage's voice growled in exasperation.

Shrugging without a hint of apology, Asuma dropped a shaky Sasuke onto his unsteady legs.

The Last Senju rolled her eyes before dragging the staggering teen over to the chair directly across from her own. "Now clean that up!" she barked, pointing to the vomit, and the jounin's false contrition transformed into true dismay.

Tsunade's hand shot up to grasp Sasuke's face from the bottom of his chin. Pressing a glass to his lips, she frowned. "Drink." she ordered, and with a grimace the Uchiha followed the order before spitting the water blindly in the waste bin she pressed beneath his chin. Spitting again to remove the last traces of the taste of vomit from his mouth, Sasuke leaned back, uncomfortable with the way his hands were crossed behind his back.
Rolling her eyes at the boy's stoic face, Tsunade grabbed a brush and a pot of ink. Walking over to the shinobi, she dipped the brush in the ink before tangling one hand in his hair, and pulling back gently to force Sasuke to bare his throat.

The ink brush danced over Sasuke's flesh, slimy end tracking arcane symbols from one end to the other. After the woman completed her collar of seals, she impressed it with chakra to seal the flow of chakra from his body to his neck to just what he needed to sustain life. Having ensured the sealing of his Sharingan, the blonde roughly tore the black cloth from his face.

Blinking his eyes open, Sasuke ignored the gritty feeling and stabbing sensation that told him he'd been in the dark for too long. The candles in the Hokage's office seemed far too bright to his sensitive eyes, and he waited for the stinging to abate as he readjusted to the world of light.

Tsunade stared coldly at him before yanking up his pant legs and recreating chakra seals around his ankles. He only watched, seething, as she locked away his shinobi skills. Finishing his legs, the Hokage stood before moving behind him.

Sasuke felt like a newly minted genin, unable to even walk up a tree with his feet sealed.

Asuma pressed into his back, the jounin's burly arms wrapping around him and preventing him from attempting an escape while the Hokage untied his hands. Gasping in displeasure at the feeling of hot needles stabbing under his skin when the flow of blood to his hands returned to normal, Sasuke glared at the wall. Tsunade's brush slid around his wrists, completing the series of seals that restricted his ability to mould chakra.

The jounin and Hokage withdrew, the former wandering back over to the window and slamming it shut. Tsunade strode back around the desk and sunk into her chair, icy brown eyes staring at him over folded hands.

"Uchiha Sasuke." She stated chillingly.

"Senju Tsunade." He answered just as coldly.

"Sasuke?" she looked up at him, blue eyes flashing.

"Hn." He merely shifted his arms around her waist in response. Turning away, she settled her back into his chest.

"Back when we were kids, the entire village used to despise me, because I'm the jinchuuriki of the Kyuubi. I even used to crave for revenge." His lips thinned, and he pressed his face into the back of her neck inhaling her scent of strawberry shampoo.

"I used to think I didn't have bonds with anyone." The blond continued. "Until I met you and Iruka-sensei, I was all alone. I used to watch you, and I felt reassured that I wasn't the only one that was alone. A lot of the time, I wanted to go over and try talking with you. It made me sort of giddy." She folded her hands over his.

"I was jealous of how good you were at everything; I wanted to be just like you. You were really someone… that I admired. You became my first friend… the first of so many things."

"I'm really glad I met you."

"Naruko." He breathed. "You can't change me now, no matter what you say. Too many bridges have been burnt for me ever to turn around."
"I know," she answered quietly, staring back up with unshed tears. "And I'm sorry."

He kissed her.

She was gone by morning.

"I assume that you know why you're here."

"Of course."

"I heard you murdered Orochimaru."

Sasuke's eyes narrowed. "I did. And what of it?"

Her lips twisted in half-remembered pain. "The fact that you killed my old teammate will reflect favourably."

"On my trial, you mean." He provided curtly.

The Hokage gave a brief glimpse of surprise before settling into neutrality. "Yes." She answered. Silence held sway between them.

"When is it?" he asked in an aggrieved tone.

"I haven't decided yet."

"I see."

"You'll be held in incarceration until then. I'm afraid that you'll not be allowed visitors without my special permission."

The corner of his lips curled in amusement. "You're keeping this from Naruko."

The Uchiha accused.

"I am not."

"You'll be held in incarceration until then. I'm afraid that you'll not be allowed visitors without my special permission."

The Uchiha bit his lip, considering the pros and cons of informing her about the truth behind his clan massacre. Shaking his head, he pinned the elder woman with a blank look. "No." the Uchiha decided. "Any information regarding my activities during my tenure at Otogakure and prior to it will only be released during the course of my trial."
Information was power, and by controlling the flow of information, he was retaining some form of power for himself. By the way the Hokage's eyes narrowed in displeasure, she knew it too.

Nodding along as if there was no issue with his reticence, Tsunade informed him "Very well, Uchiha. I will inform the Council of your arrival. Until such a time as we convene for your trial, you will be imprisoned in ANBU headquarters." She summoned one of the masked members of the Special Forces with a burst of chakra.

Sasuke watched as a man wearing a cat mask crawled through the window and regarded him. He assumed the man had a look of surprise, but the mask hid his face and the man's body language surrendered nothing.

"Tenzo." Tsunade sighed in a tired voice. "I am placing Uchiha Sasuke in prison at ANBU headquarters until he is summoned for his trial. You are to escort him there."

Standing, Sasuke glided over to the ANBU. There was something about him that was familiar, though he couldn't quite place it…

"Sasuke." Tsunade muttered. Turning back to the deceptively young looking Hokage, Sasuke regarded her with a curious look. The woman looked more akin to her own age at the moment, remembering just how young and foolish Sasuke was. "I will give permission for one individual to visit you on occasion during your incarceration. Choose wisely."

"Hyuuga Hinata."

The blonde shot him a surprised look. As far as she knew, Sasuke and Hinata had barely spoken more than two words to one another before he defected to Otogakure. Giving the boy a short nod, the Senju turned back to her paperwork in clear dismissal. Tenzo threw the teen over one shoulder and vanished back out the window.

"Sarutobi." She muttered. The jounin grunted in acknowledgement before crossing the room to stand before her. "I want to interview each of the Uchiha's companions over the next day or so. I'll need to come up with an idea of how to deal with them."

"Hai, Hokage-sama."

Sasuke was dropped unceremoniously on the ground as Tenzo landed in front of a nondescript, run down building. Climbing to his feet, he sent the ANBU a murderous glare. The man just shrugged off the look, before clamping a hand down on the teen's shoulder and steering him into the decrepit house.

The Uchiha sneezed at the dust in the air, but carefully paid attention to the twists and turns the ANBU made as he shoved Sasuke forward. It was unlikely that Sasuke could escape with his chakra bound as it was, and even if it wasn't the Uchiha doubted he would want to. Escaping would further damage his reputation and mark him an enemy of the village. But better to be prepared... just in case.

Leading him to a staircase, Tenzo peered down into the darkness before the two descended to the basement. Sasuke wrinkled his nose at the smell, thankful that in the former future Pein's destruction of Konoha had prevented him from ever coming in contact with the place.

The two shinobi strode through the dark, coming to a far corner before the ANBU released him. Crouching down, Tenzo grasped a metal ring and pulled up. With a squeak, the metal hatch opened. Placing a hand on Sasuke back, the man pushed him forward.
Sending the ANBU another annoyed glare, the Uchiha stepped forward and dropped into the hole in the floor. Tenzo followed, climbing down a ladder set into the wall, before slamming the hidden cover shut with a bang.

Creeping along under the earth for several minutes, Sasuke was noted the occasional ladder nestled within the winding, branching corridors that undoubtedly accounted for the ANBU's quick response times to crises.

The two turned a last corner and came to a seemingly dead end. Tenzo formed a one-handed seal, and with a rumble the wall of stone slid aside, allowing the two access to ANBU headquarters.

Stepping haughtily past the older man, Sasuke regarded the personnel bustling about with a thoroughly arrogant look. False confidence worked almost as well as true confidence. And Sasuke was anything if not self-assured.

Some members of ANBU met his cold black eyes with cool glances of their own, while others appeared to slink around him, apparently cowed. "Stop teasing the rookies." Tenzo ordered him gruffly, before turning the Uchiha and pushing him down a side passage.

Coming to a steel door, the ANBU twisted a large dial poking out of the center. A click echoed in the silent hallway, signifying the deactivation of the locking mechanism. Pulling the great door open, Tenzo herded Sasuke inside before shutting and locking the passage behind him. Rows upon rows of cells stretched out before him.

The older man grabbed the teen's elbow and pulled him to the side. Hidden in the shadows, a bespectacled man peered up at them from behind a desk. "Uchiha Sasuke." Tenzo informed him in a blank tone, and the man's eyes sharpened as he regarded the Last Uchiha. Granting the pair a slow nod, he faced back down to his paperwork and marking something. After a moment, he muttered "Cell 356", and tossed Tenzo a key.

Thanking the man, the ANBU operative steered Sasuke three rows to the right and headed him down a long corridor of conspicuously empty cells. Stopping in front of one with the numbers "356" emblazoned above it in faded red paint, the ANBU unlocked the cell and shoved the teen inside. Sliding the door shut with a creak, he pocketed the key and strode away whistling.

Rolling his eyes at the false joviality, Sasuke turned to examine his living conditions. No windows and no holes in the ground, just masoned stone all around him. A bucket sat in the shadowed corner to his left, and a ratty bedroll was strewn out on his right. Trotting over to the bedroll, he scooped it up and held it to the light. It was old, but it looked clean enough. After sniffing it, he decided it smelled cleaned enough too before laying it out on the ground and curling up to sleep.

The next morning the Uchiha awoke startled as the door of his cell clanged shut. Peering up, he caught a concerned glance from pale eyes. Running a hand through his hair, the Uchiha groaned before sitting up and propping his back against a wall. Stretching his legs out, Sasuke motioned to the ground beside him. With a look of amusement, the girl dropped to the ground beside him and assumed a position similar to his. Turning to face her, he pierced her with a glance.

"Tell me about Naruko." Sasuke commanded.

Hyuuga Hinata answered, her soft voice spilling quiet words long into the day.

"Do you know who I am?" Tsunade asked.

"I'd assume you are the Hokage." Juugo replied.
Grimacing, the Senju propped her chin on her hand and stared the foreigner down. "Do you know why you're here?" she questioned archly.

Raising an amused brow, the cursed man snorted. "I have no idea."

Rolling her eyes at the blatant lie, Tsunade buffed a nail on her shirt. "Why were you traveling with Uchiha Sasuke?"

"Because he asked me to."

"Why did he ask you to travel with him?"

"Because he wanted to." Juugo deadpanned.

The Hokage massaged her temples before tossing a fiery glare at the young man. "What was the purpose of him asking you to travel with him?"

Narrowing orange eyes, Juugo replied carefully "To accomplish his goals."

"What are his goals?"

"He claims he wishes to destroy the Akatsuki." Juugo yielded, not really considering the information worth fighting over.

"The Akatsuki? Or Uchiha Itachi?"

The orange-haired man regarded her with suspicion. Did she not know the truth behind the massacre? No, he decided, otherwise she wouldn't be asking. "The Akatsuki." He answered carefully.

The blonde grunted before staring out the window at the morning sun. Wincing, she turned back to the prisoner and launched into a new series of questions.

"What do you get out of it?"

"A cage. And possibly a cure."

"A cure? For what illness?" Tsunade asked curiously, medic tendencies getting the better of her.

Sucking in a cheek, Juugo considered holding back. Eventually shrugging, he plowed forward. "I have a condition where I fly into murderous rages when stimulated." Biting a lip, the Senju motioned for him to continue. "Orochimaru claimed that my body contains enzymes that trigger the state. His cursed seal is based off my abilities."

The medic gave him an interested glance before muttering to herself "Kekkei Genkai? Or maybe…" Tapping a finger on her desk, Tsunade pursed her lips. "And where would you obtain this cure?"

"From you."

The Hokage's eyes went wide. "From me?"

Juugo looked confused before continuing. "Sasuke says that you're a world class medic, second to none. And that you might have the ability to do what Orochimaru would not."

"I think" she drawled, "I must ask with what authority would make a nukenin like Uchiha Sasuke
"He wanted to go back to Konoha." Juugo sighed with resignation. "Sasuke said that when he came back, he was sure he could talk you into it."

"Talk me into it?" Tsunade hissed, enraged. "What on Earth would make him think-" The Hokage cut herself off with clenched fists, staring down at the grained whorls of her desk. Juugo just smiled in resignation.

"Suppose I did this. What is Konoha going to get out of it?"

"Assuming you don't execute Sasuke? A loyal and powerful shinobi I suppose. Though I'm not really a fan of fighting."

"And why should my actions in relation to Uchiha Sasuke dictate whether or not you wish to cure your curse?" she demanded. "Isn't that the reason you joined him in the first place?"

Orange eyes went ice-cold. "I suppose. But when it comes down to it, living with the curse is something I'm used to. Sasuke is my cage, and with him at my side I don't need to be afraid of losing control. I would choose him over a cure any day."

"You are loyal to Sasuke? You do know he's a traitor?" Tsunade asked in surprise.

Juugo's face grew fond and slightly wistful. "That might be so. But Sasuke is not the same as Orochimaru, or you. He's more like Kimimaro than anyone I've ever known. If he's going to use you, he's plain about what he wants. And despite what you say, he's never betrayed us, Taka."

Unaware of the irony of his own words, the cursed teen continued. "He must've known on some level that when Karin sensed your shinobi, they were after him and not any of us. I offered to go out and fight them. If he let me, he could've easily gotten away in the confusion. Do you know what he said?"

The young man took a breath. "He told me 'No, we're going to deal with this as a team.' Then he fought with us. And at the end, when we all went down? He stayed. Sasuke still could've fled, and none of your shinobi would have taken him. But they would've taken us. Sasuke is rotting in a cell now because he wouldn't leave us behind."

"That's why I will always follow Sasuke." Juugo declared firmly.

The Hokage studied his face with unreadable brown eyes before snorting. "Fine then, you can have the cell across from his."

Recognizing the unspoken kindness for what it was, the cursed man inclined his head. Despite her prickliness, the Hokage evidently had some soft spot beneath all the militarism required of a Hidden Village's Kage.

And when Sasuke stared questioningly at him from his cell later that evening, Juugo merely smiled enigmatically.

The door slammed open, and Suigetsu strode in with an expression of rage. "Where the hell are Sasuke and Juugo?" he roared into the quiet office, covering up his internal anxiety with pure swagger.

Tsunade merely regarded him with a curiously cool expression before motioning slowly to the
The Kiri-nin scowled before crossing the room and throwing himself into the chair rebelliously.

"I swear to all the damned ancestors that if they're dead…" he threatened, bearing shark teeth at the Hokage.

She merely smiled enigmatically. "Oh, they aren't dead yet." She declared absently, and the expression on Suigetsu's face went from merely angry to purely murderous.

Narrowing his eyes at the Senju, the white-haired teen crossed his arms before frowning in consideration. "What do you want?" he hissed.

"Whatever makes you think I want something from you?" she asked, face written with faux-curiosity. Suigetsu simply stared at her.

"I'm not stupid, Hokage-sama." The Hozuki professed coldly. "First, I wouldn't be here if you didn't want something from me, then I wouldn't be in the office in the first place. And second, the threat you just made is pure amateur when it comes to Kirigakure interrogation."

"Tell me why you're traveling with Sasuke."

"I don't think so!"

Making a disinterested noise, the Hokage looked out the window. "I must admit, gaki, of all the members of the Uchiha's little posse, you're the most difficult to deal with."

"As far as I'm concerned. That's a compliment."

"Oh please, I've dealt with scarier and more difficult prisoners than you. I'm referring to the fact of your citizenship. Technically, you're listed as a nukenin in Kirigakure's Bingo Book, but the fact of your forced imprisonment by Orochimaru will satisfy the Hidden Mist. As a relative of the Nidaime Mizukage you have value, and being a master of the Hozuki clan techniques makes you even more valuable."

"I know I'm pretty, but a few cheap praises aren't enough to jump these bones." Suigetsu laughed in amusement.

The Hokage sent him an entirely disgusted glance. "As much as I would like to, your foreign citizenship means I really can't publicly castrate you. However, I can certainly do it in private. No one knows you're in Konoha right now. And at the time I'm starting to wonder if Orochimaru had the right idea with you after all."

"What the hell does that mean?"

Tsunade thinned her lips in displeasure. "It means that I'm very tempted at the moment to lock you in a tank and let the science department study you for however long it takes them to reverse engineer your family secrets."

The teen grit his teeth before staring out the window at the village. "You've made your point." He growled.

A victorious smirk rose on the Hokage's face. "I'd like to have someone of your level of skill on loan from Kirigakure. Obviously, I can't expect you to become one of our shinobi or perform missions for us officially, but I'm sure something could be done."
"We'll see."

"Oh? And what if I demand that you turn yourself into the Mizukage now so that this little deal can be set up? Terumi Mei might be powerful, but she's very aware of the fragility of Kirigakure after their civil war. She can't afford to get on the bad side of any of the other great hidden villages."

"I'm not doing anything for anyone until I see Sasuke walking the streets a free shinobi." Suigetsu stated flatly.

Cradling her face on one palm, Tsunade frowned pensively. "Just what is it about Uchiha Sasuke that inspires loyalty? You and Juugo both have been absurdly difficult to deal with, considering your relative situation as prisoners with no rights to speak of."

The Kiri-nin glared. "Sasuke is the sort of person that creates history. He can make dreams happen. I don't expect you to understand." Truthfully, even Suigetsu himself barely understood it. He'd liked other teammates before Sasuke, but there was simply something indefinable about the Uchiha that drew others to him like moths to a flame.

"Whatever," she muttered under her breath. Tsunade wasn't paid to be some sort of therapist or sociologist that studied why people formed entirely ridiculous attachments. "I can't let you run around loose right now. You'd just try and break the Uchiha out. Have fun sitting in a cell next to his."

Suigetsu cursed again.

And when Sasuke frowned at seeing another of his companions incarcerated, Suigetsu rolled his eyes and told him that was none of his business.

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Tsunade liked Karin.

Not because of any particular facet of her personality, but rather for the fact that the girl knew her situation. Sitting white-faced with clenched hands before the Hokage, the redhead was quietly respectful. It made the blonde grin inwardly.

It seemed so rare to get respect considering who had been traipsing through her office over the last few days. Of course, considering that the respect was likely given out of fear rather than consideration left a foul taste in her mouth. She wasn't Orochimaru, who had undoubtedly punished the most minor of offenses with absurd sadism.

"Karin, was it?" she drawled, silently dismissing her guards with a flash of amber eyes.

"Yes, Hokage-sama." The girl stuttered, clenching at her lavender jacket.

"Why are you traveling with Uchiha Sasuke?" It seemed to be the question of the week. Because surely, the Hokage had nothing to do besides pander to a circus troupe of colourful fools following behind the greatest fool of them all...

"Well, because he asked me to."

"And why did he ask you? What is it that distinguishes you from any of the other servants of Orochimaru that Sasuke has known?" the blonde pressed. Certain individuals would be absolutely pissed if it was for romance, both politically and socially. The Hokage could feel the headache building behind her eyes. The Uchiha hadn't even gotten the slap on the wrist he was surely going to get from the Council, and Tsunade could already picture the political posturing.
"I'm a chakra sensor." Karin offered, either completely missing the subtext of Tsunade's questioning or ignoring it.

"Ahh." Tsunade grunted back. She fell silent; watching with lidded eyes as the redhead slowly became more agitated.

Fidgeting and glancing at the clock, the first stirrings of annoyance rose in Karin's eyes.

"What are **you** getting out of the arrangement?" broke the quiet like a whip.

"Umm… well." Karin stalled with a red face.

"Spit it out!" Tsunade barked, watching the growing blush with trepidation. The girl mumbled.

Sighing, the Hokage slapped her palm on the desk, to which Karin jumped.

"He gives me a purpose!" the redhead squeaked.

"A purpose?"

"Yeah."

Tsunade digested the sentiment with a frown, before groaning and pulling a bottle of sake from her desk. "So you too are loyal to Sasuke…"

"Sasuke gives me a purpose in life. To help him in whatever he needs to have done. I know he's using me. That's how the world works. That's why I was loyal to Orochimaru when he was alive. He gave us - the outsiders - a place to belong and a purpose to be. But Sasuke isn't like Orochimaru. He might use you, but when he looks at you, he's looking at you. He's not staring at you like you're a glorified piece of lab equipment with a bad mouth. " Karin proclaimed in a ringing tone.

The Senju merely snorted in amusement before calling one of her ANBU to assign the girl the cell across from Suigetsu.

It was only after the smirk curled on the redhead's lips the moment before she'd vanished that the Hokage realized she'd been played.

The girl was a commensurate actor. She'd never been scared in the first place, and had undoubtedly just been playing the Hokage like a fiddle to give up only the information she wanted to.

Tsunade was reluctantly impressed.

Staring over at Karin a few hours later, Sasuke was surprised when she smiled in self-satisfaction.

"Looks like we're all criminals now, Sasuke-kun."

The days rolled by, each morning and evening like the next, only marked by the strange hush among certain shinobi of Konohagakure. There was an electric charge in the air that had been building as the weeks rolled by. Tension rolled higher and higher as more and more often certain circles of shinobi were seen holding quiet conversation in hushed corridors.

And deep underground, Suigetsu joined Uchiha Sasuke in the dark the day after Juugo. Karin came two days later, and Team Taka was reunited in their incarceration, one by force and three by choice, broken only by the occasional visit from Hyuuga Hinata with news from the world above.
It was into this changed Konoha that Uzumaki Naruko stepped; the effects of Sasuke's intervention already creating waves, on one sunny morning.

"Everyone, Uzumaki Naruko has returned!" she declared, smiling brightly.
Rubbing his fingers over his throbbing temples, he scanned back over the report on granary storage capacities and wondered at the sanity of his ancestors in building a Hidden Village in the desert. Sabaku no Gaara was uniquely suited for life in the sand, but that was not a predisposition he could transfer or gift to the people of Sunagakure.

Not that Gaara would ever want to pass the curse of containing the Ichibi to anyone else in the first place.

Every year. Every month. Every week. Every single day it was a struggle to survive in the harsh desert clime. Food was often rationed, water was even more so. They might have possessed an underwater river running below the village, but that didn't grant them the frivolous freedom the other Hidden Villages had in regards to the life-giving liquid.

The only thing Suna had over the other villages were ninja that were singularly harder and tougher than many of their foreign rivals. It was something the Godaime Kazekage took pride in. Which is why he understood the frustration that had led his father to agree to invading Konoha.

The daimyo of Kaze no Kuni was just as stubborn and cheap as he had ever been. Sunagakure kept itself from bankruptcy only by taxing its citizens more heavily than other villages would have. The people of the village understood the necessity of it, and paid their taxes with a grim smile. The patriots had no more desire to abandon Suna than Gaara himself.

That didn't mean that there weren't more militaristic factions promoting more permanent solutions to their problems. It had honestly surprised Gaara at first, that rather than plotting against him, the jinchuuriki, his comrades plotted against the daimyo. They were extremely devoted to Gaara himself, and it lit a warm feeling in his chest to feel his dedication to them returned. That didn't mean Gaara could allow them to overthrow the daimyo.

Not yet anyway.

Which is why rather than executing them, he merely approached and disbanded them. They were surprisingly willing to disperse with the word of the Kazekage that 'it has not come to this, yet'.

Because on darker nights, Gaara contemplated following that sort of action as well. None in the village would claim he had acted unjustly.

"You're thinking too hard again Gaara." A hand pressed itself down on the Kazekage's head, mussing red strands. Gaara broke the hand's hold by stretching his neck from side to side, releasing the tension that had built up over the past few hours.

"I am the Kazekage, Kankuro. It is part of the job description to think too hard." He returned in a
dead voice, lips twitching as he fought to keep them from a smile. After the invasion of Konoha, Gaara had been inspired. Uzumaki Naruko had taught him about bonds. Bonds of friendship, bonds of camaraderie, bonds of family. His relationship with his siblings had never been better, thanks to the lessons Naruko had instilled in him.

He wondered what she was doing right now.

A knock sounded on the door, shattering his musing, and Kankuro tensed automatically beside him. Gaara could no longer hold in a smile. Though the tension had only been infinitesimal in his brother's body, he could well read the meaning. Kankuro would fight to protect his younger brother. Quite an about-face from the brother who had feared him as death incarnate only a few years ago.

The door creaked inward, and a stony faced chuunin snapped a salute to them before barking "A message for you, Kazekage-sama!" The man held out his fist with a scroll clenched in his grip. Giving his brother a nod, Kankuro strode across the room and snatched the scroll from the man. Dismissing the messenger, the puppeteer slid the door shut with a soft bang.

Peering at the cylinder, Kankuro grinned. "It's from the office of the Hokage." He informed Gaara. Tossing the scroll across the room, he watched as his brother's pale hand swiped it from the air. Smirking at the Kazekage, Kankuro drifted around to his brother's back. "Maybe it's about Naruko. Gonna arrange a marriage between the Kazekage and the next Hokage?" The brunette nudged the redhead in the ribs.

Gaara merely rolled his eyes at his brother's antics. "Hardly. And I'd refuse if they tried. Contrary to what you seem to think, I don't look at Naruko as being any more than a friend, or maybe a sibling. Should I ask you if you're swapping spit with Temari?" the Kazekage deadpanned.

Kankuro went faintly green. "Ugh. No man. I get it. Besides, that girl is probably still crazy about Uchiha. Your chances would never have been very good in the first place."

Snorting, the redhead broke the seal on the message. Unraveling the scroll with a flourish, he examined its contents. The look on his face evolved from faintly interested to a confused frown. "This is…" Gaara muttered.

Taking a deep breath, Naruko spread her arms open to welcome the world.

Jiraiya watched the energetic blonde with an amused smirk.

"It's so good to be home, right ero-sennin?" Naruko laughed. Dashing past the startled gatekeepers, she entered the village proper and vanished.

The sennin shook his head. "That girl…" he muttered.

Wind whistled through her hair as Naruko dodged through the villagers crowding the streets, ricocheting off the walls of nearby buildings when the crowd became too much to simply push through. She followed the path of memory, stopping before a building. It was far different than the last time she had been there, the dingy and beat-down construction of her past being replaced with a clean and rebuilt present.

Blasting through the open front doors, the blonde scrambled across the room to wrap her arms lovingly around a stool. "Oh stool-kun!" she sobbed dramatically, "How I've missed you!"
Standing behind the counter, Ayame could only blink in surprise at the odd customer. Still, there was something familiar about the girl. Blonde hair, orange clothes... "Naru-chan?" the ramen girl ventured.

A blinding smile was sent her way. "Ayame-nee-chan!" the blonde shouted.

"It is you!" Ayame laughed. "Hey tou-chan!" she yelled over her shoulder. "Come out here and greet our customer!" Stepping out from the kitchen, Teuchi blinked before rubbing his eyes.

"Well I can't believe it. Our favorite customer! What'll it be today?" he smiled, laugh lines prominent.

"Six bowls of Miso ramen old man!" Naruko barked happily.

"Coming right up! First one is on the house." Teuchi answered, before vanishing back into the kitchen.

"So what have you been up to these past few years Naru-chan? Meet any cute boys?" the waitress teased. Naruko rolled her eyes before regaling the girl with the tale of her adventures with the toad Sennin.

Teuchi returned from the kitchen with a bowl of miso and handed it to the girl. The Uzumaki immediately began to slurp it down, leaving the old man to shake his head in amusement before returning to work.

As Naruko finished her first bowl and handed it to Ayame, a clawed hand tousled her hair about. Scowling, the girl spun about on her stool and sunk a fist into Kiba's gut. The Inuzuka bent over wheezing, Naruko crossing her arms and staring down at him with a superior look.

"What the hell Naruko?" he gasped out.

She merely sniffed before starting on her second bowl of ramen.

Straightening, Kiba sunk onto the stool next to her and rubbed his nose. "So..." he trailed. "What's up?"

Swallowing a mouthful of ramen, Naruko answered with a snide "Oh you know, just the sky and all that." Growling at the sarcasm, the Inuzuka stuck his tongue out at the girl before leaning against the counter.

Two hands came around to pinch the girl's cheeks, and Ino squealed "Naru-chan!"

Slapping the Yamanaka's grabby hands away, Naruko finished her second bowl at record speed before pushing it to Ayame. Spinning about, Naruko wrapped her arms around the other blonde, giving her a back breaking hug and laughing. "So where's Sakura?" she queried.

Ino gave a pout and sighed mournfully. "I see her for the first time in years and she can't even say hello. Just wants to know where Forehead is."

"Naruko?" Someone sucked in a sharp breath.

"Speak of a demon and they shall appear." Ino muttered. Kiba gave a barking laugh at the idiom and at the way the Yamanaka was pushed aside.

Sakura threw her arms around Naruko, and the blonde shot to her feet before the two teammates
spun about in a gaggle of limbs. Grabbing Naruko's hand, the girl gave a sharp tug. "Come on Naruko; let's go find Kaka-sensei!"

"But my ramen!"

"We can come get it later. Right, Teuchi-san?" Sakura prodded. The ramen stand owner gave the girl an absent wave.

"Oh Sakura-chan! You'll never guess what happened a few weeks ago!" the jinchuuriki chattered. Sakura merely gave an absent nod before pulling her teammate along more insistently. "I saw Sasuke!"

Everyone stopped. Sakura's arm went limp as she whipped around to stare at the Uzumaki with wide eyes. In her typical oblivious fashion, Naruko plowed onward. "And Ino was there too! I'm sure she can tell you all about it."

"Is that so?" Sakura muttered, narrowing her eyes furiously at the Yamanaka.

Ino went pale, before stuttering. "Ahh, another time Sakura. I've read got to get back to work, okay? Thanks, bye." The girl shot off, leaving the two girls and the Inuzuka alone.

Kiba scratched the back of his head. "I should really get going to." He mumbled, before striding away. "Nice seeing you, Sakura, Naruko!" he called out before turning into a side alley and disappearing.

Sakura stared after him suspiciously before shaking her head. Renewing her tugging on her teammate, Sakura dragged Naruko away from the ramen stand.

The two took to the rooftops, bounding across the village. "Why did I have to leave my ramen behind?" Naruko whined. "That old perv could've waited."

Sakura rolled her eyes. "Ramen this, ramen that. I'm surprised you're not a fatass with the way you eat it all the time."

"Oi!"

Chuckling in amusement, the Haruno landed on the roof of Kakashi's apartment in a crouch. Naruko skidded to a stop beside her. "It's not my fault you can't see and enjoy the pure glory that is ramen!" the blonde declared, shoving her finger at her teammate's face.

Sakura slapped the digit away. "Watch where you're pointing that finger, Naruko, or I might have to break it off." She warned.

Pulling the door to the apartment open with a bang, Sakura led the way as the two descended into the building. Shoving her hands in her pockets, Naruko slouched after the other girl. "Man," the blonde complained "This is totally not what I was thinking of for my first day back, dattebayo…"

Sakura knocked at Kakashi's door before folding her arms behind her. "Don't just open the door, it's rude!" she hissed.

"I don't think Kakashi is going to care all that much." Naruko retorted.

"You say that now, but what if he's doing something dirty?" The pink-haired girl muttered, and the Uzumaki's face went faintly green.
Before the blonde could offer a reply, the door swung inward. Kakashi stared at his two students in silence before his eye crinkled as he grinned. "Maa, look at this. My two cute little genin have come to visit their old man sensei." The jounin stepped away from the entrance, and Sakura glided in with an imperious sniff. Naruko followed after, still looking vaguely ill.

"It's been a long time, Naruko." Kakashi said quietly, before tangling the girl's hair and crossing over to his ragged couch. Sinking into the weathered cushions, the silver-haired jounin yawned. "So," he began. "What's the reason you two have decided to disturb my Icha Icha time?" Whipping out the familiar orange book, he motioned at them with an absent wave.

Sakura growled at the man's behaviour as Naruko dragged over a couple of shabby chairs from Kakashi's kitchen. "You've got some pretty shitty stuff here sensei." The girl stated bluntly.

Sakura punched the back of the blonde's head before bowing towards Kakashi. "Sorry, she obviously doesn't have any manners."

The jounin merely laughed. "So what can I do for you?" the Hatake asked airily, kicking his feet up on the Chabudai.

Sakura chewed her lip. "Well," she started, "I originally was just going to take Naruko to see you now that she's back in the village, but she says she has something interesting to tell us."

Kakashi quirked a brow. "Is that so?" the man murmured.

Naruko regarded the two with a baffled look on her face. "Umm. What?" Sakura slapped her forehead before looking at the blonde with a murderous look on her face. Naruko brought her hands up defensively. "I have no clue what you're talking about Sakura-chan!" the girl protested.

"Sasuke obviously!" the pink-haired teen hissed.

The jinchuuriki assumed a look of comprehension before propping her chin on her hand. "That's right." She mused. "Hey, Kaka-sensei!" she prodded. The man grunted in response, flipping through another page of his smut. "I met Sasuke a few weeks ago."

Kakashi snapped the book shut, shoving it in his kunai pouch before leaning forward with a look of interest. "Tell me more." He ordered.

"I can't say all that much. He had more time with Team Asuma than he did around me." The girl confessed. "The only reason I thought it was something I should say is because he did tell me that he wouldn't come home with me 'this time'. Asuma seemed to think that it meant he would come home sometime on his own. But Asuma should have told you about it already!"

The jounin rubbed his chin, a sour look on his face.

"No one told you." Sakura whispered with a thoughtful frown. Suspicions formed in her mind. Trusting that her shishou would tell her the truth, she forced the concern away, but couldn't keep them from rising in the back of her thoughts.

"Eh?" Naruko shouted. "Why wouldn't he? We're Team Seven, and Sasuke is part of Team Seven too, dattebayo!"

Kakashi gave the two a lazy shrug. "Well, who knows? We have a meeting with Tsunade soon anyway. She says she'll be sending us on a mission."

The blonde groaned, thunking head on the back of her chair. "I just got back!" she
complained. "And now we're going to have a mission already?"

Crinkling a smile towards the girl, the jounin gave a wink. "Well, if the mission is what I think it is, you're going to be glad to be going."

"You know what the mission is? Tell me Kaka-sensei! I wanna know!"

Kakashi assumed an amused mien before forming a languid hand seal. The man vanished in a swirl of leaves.

His genin sighed before following their team leader with more conventional methods.

"How did it feel, Uchiha?" was the first thing the Jounin Commander heard as he stepped into the Hokage's office. Sasuke's face furrowed in confusion.

"You know what I'm talking about. How did it feel to crush that masked bastard beneath your feet and leave his body mutilated and bleeding after what he pulled?" Tsunade urged with a hint of bloodthirstiness.

Lips twitching, Sasuke inclined his head towards the Godaime. "It felt glorious." He admitted, dragging up the memories of yesteryear. "Like maybe Naruko was resting a little easier."

"Just Naruko?" she asked archly. "What about-"

"Don't even talk about it." Sasuke growled, voice low and strained.

Pursing her lips, the Hokage examined his strained form before dropping the subject. Rubbing the red and white traditional Hokage hat on her desk, Tsunade's face went considering and apprehensive. "And how did it feel to manipulate the five Kage?" she murmured with lidded eyes.

Sasuke pressed a hand to his forehead, dragging the palm over his face. When the hand dropped back down to his side, his face was dead and blank. "Empty." The Uchiha informed curtly.

Rising to her feet, Tsunade crossed her arms before placing the hat on her head. "Empty?" she asked shrewdly. "You successfully forced the hands of the five Kage into letting you go. Because of what you contain, they cannot afford to kill you. Are you telling me you felt no personal satisfaction doing this?"

Grunting, Sasuke stared over her shoulder.

Placing an errant hand on her hip, Tsunade snorted incredulously. "Then why did you do it at all?"

"I made a promise." Monotone and factual.

"To who?"

"Naruko."

The blonde was silent, heart twisted in old and new pain. "And what," Tsunade whispered. "Was this promise?"

"To protect Konoha." His response seemed to echo in the room, a condemnation.

The Hokage bit her lip, musing "I see." She cupped his face with a soft palm and brought his gaze to hers. Seemingly, Tsunade came to a decision as she stared into Sasuke's Sharingan eyes.
Blood and madness.

Devotion.

The curse of the Uchiha Clan.

Trailing a slow hand up to her head, she gripped the rim of the Hokage's hat with white knuckles. Whipping it off, she held it in both hands before gently lowering it down over his hair. "I, Senju Tsunade, Godaime Hokage of Konohagakure, sentence you, Uchiha Sasuke, to live a long life in contrition."

The Uchiha's eyes were wide in denial, trembling hands coming up to tear the hat away. She caught his hands in hers, bringing them back down insistently. "Bear this dream." She declared, voice ringing in benediction. Sasuke's face slackened in understanding.

"Rokudaime Hokage Uchiha Sasuke."

His hands stopped struggling.

"Ohayo baa-chan!" the door to Tsunade's office bounced open, an orange and blonde blur flying through. Giving the cat masked ANBU a significant look, the Hokage wordlessly dismissed the man. Tenzo bowed to the Senju before catching Kakashi's surprised eye and leaping out the window.

Favouring her guests with a small smile, the Hokage rose. "You've finally made it home, Naruko." She said warmly. The girl in question dashed across the room, throwing herself at the older blonde. Tsunade caught the teen with a surprised look that faded away to affectionate when Naruko hugged her tightly.

Releasing the Hokage, Naruko spun back around to sink into one of the chairs across from Tsunade's. The older blonde gave her a queer look for a moment, before it slid off the Senju's face. Naruko dismissed it as a moment of Tsunade simply being weird, before taking in the office.

It hadn't changed much.

The semi-circular room was still bounded by a series of window panes, with the desk directly opposite the door. The center was a bare as ever, but a couple of new bookcases were shoved against the wall by the door. There were less scrolls overflowing on the desk as compared to when the Sandaime had still been Hokage. Naruko let herself feel a moment of regret and nostalgia for the old man before pushing the emotion away.

Sakura leaned over Naruko, crossing her arms on the back of the chair and regarding the blonde Hokage with a mingled look of respect and fondness.

Kakashi merely moved to the empty center before whipping out his orange smut book and diving back in to Icha Icha. The three females of the room watched him with murderous looks, and Kakashi decided after sweating the killing intent for a few minutes that he could wait until after the meeting to see what happened to Haru next. He slid the novel back into his pouch before assuming a patently innocent expression. From the lack of change in the regard he was receiving, he decided it wasn't working.

"Now that you're all here," Tsunade drawled, dragging her searing eyes away from the impertinent Hatake. "I'm going to assign you all a very important mission." Kakashi straightened with expectation, and Sakura sent a surprised and suspicious look at their team leader.
"For the next few days, I would like you to carry an important and sensitive document to the Kazekage." The jounin stared at her with a frown on his face, evidently expecting the Hokage to have offered them something else. "I can't afford to send it by hawk in case of interception. I expect you all to depart immediately."

Naruko shot to her feet, excited at the prospect of having a vital mission. The younger blonde bounced away. Sakura shook her head at her friend's antics before nodding to both senior shinobi and trailing out the door after her.

The door banged shut, and the temperature in the room dropped forty degrees.

"I was under the impression that Team Seven would be undertaking a retrieval mission for Uchiha Sasuke." Kakashi stated coldly, his visible eye a dark frozen chip of ice.

Tsunade's lip curled in annoyance and a spot of condescension. "It has been reassigned to another team." She answered in a similar tone, visage as still as carved stone.

The Hatake drew back in shock, "Sasuke is a member of Team Seven." he declared, voice incredulous and twisted with anger. "Bringing him back to Konoha is a Team Seven mission."

"The retrieval mission will be assigned to whatever team I decide is most fit to complete it." The Hokage spat.

"And that team is Team Seven!" he shouted back.

"You are getting dangerously close to treason, Jounin Hatake." The blonde warned chillingly. Kakashi gave a wordless hiss before attempting to compose himself.

Tsunade watched his clenched and shaking fists with a look of disinterest, masking the guilt that was rolling in her gut. She couldn't allow for the conflict of interest. "I will be assigning Tenzo to your squad for the duration of this mission, and possibly for a longer term, depending on his compatibility and performance." She informed him after a lengthy pause. Her face scrunched in distaste.

"Danzo and the Inner Council are also insisting that I include one of their lackeys on the mission. I suspect he's a member of Danzo's Ne." Tsunade refused to put any of the former Sasuke Retrieval Squad with Naruko for fear they'd crack and spill the news to the girl, which was the main reason Danzo insisted so hard on using his subordinate.

Naruko was a jinchuuriki. A living weapon as far as Shimura Danzo was concerned. She needed protection. Preferably from one of his own.

"Root?" Kakashi frowned in curiosity despite his irritation.

"I'll need you to keep an eye on him. If we can, I'd like to control what information the Foundation actually has access to."

"I don't know why you don't just move in on them and destroy them." The jounin muttered.

Tsunade tapped a manicured nail on the desk. "You know why." She answered. "Root doesn't officially exist. They're just an open secret. Sarutobi-sensei tried to disband them before. Danzo has hidden his tracks too well. We wouldn't be able to get all of them, and we wouldn't be able to convict him of anything. Especially since he brands his subordinates with a loyalty seal."

Kakashi grunted in assent.
The Hokage stared at him for a moment longer before waving her hand towards the door. "Just get out of here will you?"

The silvery haired man bowed slightly before padding over to the door. Pausing with his hand on the knob, the jounin threw her an unreadable glance over his shoulder. "You're not going to be able to keep this out of Team Seven for long. Sakura and Naruko won't stand for it." He threw open the door, "And I might not either." the man warned as the door clicked shut.

Tsunade palmed her forehead.

"With any luck, I'm not going to have to." The Hokage whispered.

"You're an idiot!"

"And surprise, surprise, you're a bitch!"

Sasuke sighed, leaning his forehead against the bars of his cell. Sending Juugo an exasperated look, the Uchiha rubbed his temples. "Day in and day out…" he muttered, glaring at the bickering members of Taka.

"Like I said before," Juugo called with amusement, "They're exactly like an old married couple. I wonder how many kids they're going to have?"

Suigetsu spat a curse at the orange-haired male, while Karin folded her arms and glared at the wall as though her eyes would burn a trail through it to reach Juugo.


The comment switched the object of the pair's ire from the cursed man to the time-traveller. "You better watch your ass Sasuke. I'm going to kick your shit in as soon as we get out of here." The Kirinin threatened. The redhead growled at him to stop threatening Sasuke, and the two started back up where they left off.

"My, my, you've certainly picked up some interesting characters, Uchiha." A voice drawled. Jiraiya of the Densetsu no Sannin melted out of the dark, gazing down at the raven with cold eyes.

Sasuke gave the man a smirk in response. "Jiraiya." He replied curtly. His eyes trailed over the red-clad form "To what do I owe this very dubious pleasure?"

The elder man snorted, shoving a key into the lock of Sasuke's cell. "I hear that you've gone and killed Orochimaru." He offered conversationally, turning the key and sliding the bars to the side.

Sasuke's chin rose, and he quirked a brow. "So I did. What of it?" A fist sunk into his gut, and he bent over wheezing.

"That was for Orochimaru." Jiraiya informed, before ruffling the raven's hair. "And that was for Orochimaru as well".

The Uchiha straightened and glared at the Sennin. "Such is the bond of old teammates, I guess." Sasuke muttered sarcastically.

The white-haired man hummed in response before placing a hand on Sasuke's head. "That was some good work." He told Sasuke absently, pushing his head to the side and peering at the Cursed Seal of Heaven.
"I try." The Uchiha retorted in a bland tone.

Jiraiya's mouth twitched. Hand lighting up with a soft glow of blue chakra, the sage brought his hand over the seal.

Sasuke sucked in a breath as his neck lit on fire. Blinking at the reaction, Jiraiya sent him a vaguely apologetic look before increasing the push of chakra. The pain rose, making the Uchiha give out a choked cry before it felt like something snapped. The discomfort vanished abruptly. A series of arcane symbols extended outwards from the cursed seal, spiralling out in geometric patterns over his shoulder and down his back and chest.

"I've been wanting to examine one of these for a long time," Jiraiya breathed in tone of glee. "I never could before since Orochimaru used himself as the gate for the cursed seals." Sasuke grunted, and Jiraiya regarded him with a superior look.

"You have no idea what I'm talking about." He laughed. The Uchiha grunted again.

"Listen up kiddo." The Sennin declared grandly. "I - the great Jiraiya - will be giving you a crash course in the field of fuuinjutsu!"

Sasuke didn't bother to resist the urge to roll his eyes.

"First of all, each seal obviously is built around a purpose. Second, seals can be tampered with to disturb what this purpose is. You know this already." Jiraiya sighed, before continuing in a surprisingly serious tone. "Because a seal can be altered, many people choose to overlay the seal with another seal to prevent meddling. However, no seal can ever be completely secure. You with me so far?"

Sasuke's expression had morphed from annoyance to a haughty sort of interest over the course of the speech. Orochimaru had never really taught him much about the discipline of fuuinjutsu when he'd been the snake's student, and Orochimaru had been his last real instructor. He gave the sennin a short nod.

"Fuuinjutsu has restrictions. There are certain things that simply can or can't be done. Some people spend their lives trying to find out why this is, and trying to find a way around the fundamentals. But that's not important. Getting back to the point: each seal can be altered. Even when you overlay the seal with an anti-tampering seal, that seal will have at least one point where it too can be changed or broken, though it can be difficult to find that point."

Jiraiya's voice filled with professional envy and a touch of respect. "Orochimaru got around that by linking the seals in a network. He never cared much for seals, so for him to create a network is pretty prodigious. Even masters rarely do that sort of thing. By linking all his cursed seals in a network, he was able to make the weak point of his seals himself. As long as he lived, no one could alter his work without his say so. That asshole was a real genius." The man finished nostalgically, falling quiet.

Sasuke gave him a moment, staring over at Juugo who listened with desperate interest. Even Karin and Suigetsu were being quiet and attentive for once.

Jiraiya gave a visible shake. "So anyway." The Gama Sennin snorted. "I can pop that seal for you right now. Just give me a moment." Flaming blue palms came up before Sasuke slapped the older man's palms away.

"No." the Uchiha decided. Jiraiya's face went suspicious, eyes narrowing.
"It's a tainted power." Sasuke explained. "But considering Akatsuki, I'll be needing it."

The Sennin gave a start at the name of the criminal organization, suspicious look fading away to shocked comprehension that gave way to amusement and glee. "I see." The older man laughed. "Well, if that's how it is, I'll just close the seal."

Sasuke sighed. "Wait."

Jiraiya made a clicking sound with his tongue. "What is it?" he muttered exasperatedly.

The Uchiha pointed a pale finger at the expanded seal. "This still has Orochimaru's chakra in it."

Jiraiya frowned before re-examining the seal. With a grunt, Jiraiya looked back at the Uchiha. He tapped a circle of characters. "This element here is meant to derive trace amounts of chakra from Orochimaru's own chakra system. It would introduce his chakra into your own, as well as powering the transformations. Now that he's dead, that tap is shut off, so to speak. All that's left in the seal is a limited amount of his energy, which is consumed every time you use the seal."

The Uchiha pinched his nose. "So when all his chakra is gone, the seal will no longer work?"

With a shrug, the Sennin hazarded a guess. "I'd say so."

Sasuke clenched his fist, staring at the wall with an expression of anger.

"I could try altering the element to draw your chakra instead for the transforming. It shouldn't do anything to you if your own chakra was to bleed back into your system for the seal." The older man offered with an excited expression. "I could even reset the gate of the seal as you, so no one could tamper with it without your say so. Though they could torture you into opening it for them… ."

Favouring him with a reluctantly grateful look, the Uchiha nodded. Cackling with glee, Jiraiya clapped his hands. "I simply love to experiment with seals." He confided to Sasuke, hands lighting back up.

"Wait, experiment?"

Then Jiraiya's hand slapped over his neck, and the world exploded into red before fading away.

Sasuke woke up on his back staring into Jiraiya's worried face. The man's hand pinched his nose. "Gah!" Sasuke growled, pulling his face away. The Uchiha rolled to his feet, swaying for a moment before steadying himself with a hand on the wall. He felt cleaner. As though he had been dirty for a very long time and only just took a bath.

Jiraiya stared at the seal as it shrunk back into three tomoe, Kakashi's Fuja Hoin reforming a spindly circle around them. "Kakashi did some good work," Jiraiya muttered, peering at the Fuja Hoin. The sennin nodded approvingly before striding out of the cell. "It's likely what makes your transformations so easy for you to manipulate." he called over his shoulder.

"Tsunade says your blood work came back, and we've theorized a solution to your problem." Jiraiya informed Juugo, who started in surprise. Declaring "I have to go get some ink and a few brushes." he sent another amused look at the Uchiha before gliding down the hallway.

"What the hell Sasuke?" the cursed teen barked out.
Sasuke slumped against the wall, sliding back to sit on the ground. Favouring Juugo with a tired glance, Sasuke sighed. "What?"

Juugo seemed to struggle with himself before hissing "Why would you keep the seal? It's cursed! The only one to have to deal with this should be me!"

Sasuke's eyes drooped sleepily. "Hnn." The teen grunted before rolling onto his side. Pillowing his head on his arm, he breathed in a barely audible tone. "It's not so bad having something in common with you, I guess…" The rising of his chest evened out as Sasuke sunk into unconsciousness, the strain of so suddenly altering the cursed seal taking its toll on his body.

Juugo stared at the leader of Taka with a dumbfounded expression as Sasuke, accidently and effortlessly, won more loyalty from him.

Karin coughed into her fist, and the teen jumped before taking in the slick smirk Suigetsu was giving him. "Very cute, Juugo-chan." The Kiri-nin drawled. The redhead involuntarily snorted with laughter. Flushing, Juugo turned away to stare into the darkness.

The four remained as they were until Jiraiya reappeared with a clatter of geta. Karin and Suigetsu slunk to the back of their cells, watching the sennin warily. He was just another captor, as far as they were concerned.

Juugo pressed himself up against the bars, unabashed hope adoring his face. The elder man clicked open the lock to Juugo's cell before yanking the door open. Placing a hand on the eager teen's chest, Jiraiya pushed Juugo back until he had sufficient room to enter the cell himself.

"Alright, so the best we can do is giving you a measure of control." Jiraiya told the teen bluntly. Juugo's face fell. Placing a hand on the orange hair, the sennin ruffled the teen's locks with a grin. "Don't be like that! Tsunade has told me your condition is easier and harder to deal with at the same time. It's a bit like a Kekkei Genkai. In fact it probably is. And no one can suppress a Kekkei Genkai very well."

"Kekkei Genkai?" Juugo wondered aloud, growing nostalgic. "Sort of like what Kimimaro had… and what Sasuke does now."

The sennin nodded before persisting. "Your cells produce enzymes that bring about the rage and the transformations, so by restricting the flow of enzymes we can cut off the murderous fits you apparently get."

Juugo demanded with concern, "But wouldn't that remove my transformation ability as well?" Jiraiya shrugged back. "Probably, if they were triggered by the same enzyme. But they aren't. They're simply produced at the same time in the same place. They're not one in the same."
Snapping his fingers, the Sennin brought out a jar of ink.

"So we have devised a series of seals to suppress the production of that enzyme when you draw on your power. We won't be able to cut it off completely," he warned sternly. "So you'll still end up feeling aggressive when you fight. Not that that is always a bad thing, but you'll need to deal with it."

The cursed teen nodded resolutely.

"Good." Jiraiya stated in approval. "Now take off your shirt and pants." Juugo froze with an unreadable look on his face. The sennin rolled his eyes before dipping a brush into the jar of ink and pointing the brush at the teen with significance. Stripping his clothes off in a flash, Juugo stood
only in undergarments before the sennin, shivering in the cold.

Touching the brush to the teen's skin below the chakra seals on his neck, Jiraiya traced a similar ring with different characters while wearing a look of concentration. His hands moved far faster than Tsunade's had when she applied the chakra suppressors.

Repeating the process on the left arm followed by the right, Jiraiya broke the rhythm that had him following the Hokage's actions. Painting what appeared to be a sunburst of characters on Juugo's chest, Jiraiya moved around before inking out a crescent moon of symbols. Finally, the man crouched and circled the teen's ankles with his brush before stowing away his fuuinjutsu materials.

Forming a series of hand seals, Jiraiya's hands gave off a bright orange cloud of chakra. Placing his palms on either side of the sunburst, he let the glow seep into Juugo's skin. As the last of the orange faded, there was an abrupt crackle as the new seals flashed white radiance. The white stained orange, and eventually stopped giving off luminescence. All that remained were a group of what appeared to be bright orange tattoos.

"They look like chakra seals…" The previously silent Karin mused.

Sending the girl a considering glance, the sennin smirked. "Well, close enough. We based these off a combination of medical techniques and chakra suppressors. They're a derivative, you might say." Jiraiya finished in an arrogant tone. "Not bad for a couple of hours of work, If I do say so myself."

Juugo suddenly slumped to the ground. Kicking the teen's clothes over his form, Jiraiya slid the cell shut lazily. "Now, my work is done." Then he flickered away, leaving two members of Taka slightly in fear of his ability that neither would admit, and two unconscious on the floor.

Bouncing in place, Naruko ignored the annoyed glares Sakura sent her way. It was a familiar team dynamic. All they needed was Kakashi standing around reading porn and Sasuke brooding and everything would be alright. Swallowing past the feeling of nostalgia, Naruko stopped her fidgeting. The pink-haired medic looked at the blonde in surprise before frowning in understanding and similar pain.

Sasuke.

The reverie was shattered as Kakashi flickered into place between the girls. Both genin instinctively knew something was wrong. The jounin was reading his porn as he usually did. But his back was rigid and his hands clenched around the orange book a little too tightly. He didn't even turn the page. They didn't have a chance to ask him what was wrong before an ANBU in a cat mask walked up to the three.

The two girls regarded the man with curiosity, and the cat ANBU stared back impassively.

"Yo." Kakashi greeted, breaking the standoff.

A hand came up and peeled the mask away, revealing plain features and a helmet similar to that of the Nidaime Hokage. "I'm being assigned to Team Kakashi for the duration of the mission." The brown-haired man informed the group. "You may call me Yamato."

"Tenzo. When is the other one going to come?"

Yamato frowned at the blatant disregard of his new codename. "Kakashi-sempai" he protested in an aggrieved tone, "You're supposed to call me Yamato."
Kakashi finally turned a page in his book, returning to a semblance of normality.

"Kakashi-sempai?" Sakura asked in question.

The older jounin nodded without removing his eyes from the book. Sakura didn't scold him about it, for once, simply grateful for the typical habit. "Tenzo was my cute little kouhai back in my ANBU days."

"Cute little kouhai?" Naruko reiterated. "Wow Kaka-sensei, I didn't know you swung that way. Though it explains why you never had a girlfriend." Both jounin made choking noises.

Yamato recovered composure first. "To answer your original question, Kakashi, he should be here shortly. In fact," he pointed up the street. "That's him right there."

Pale features topped with raven dark hair materialized out of the crowd. Sakura's hands instinctively shook at how much the teen looked like Sasuke. Walking along the road with a bare midriff, the raven came up in front of them. He gave the group a patently false smile.

"Hello. I am Sai. I'm being assigned to Team Kakashi in replacement of Uchiha Sasuke."

"You could never replace Sasuke!" the blonde glared, eyes red with whisker marks swollen and feral.

Sai stared at the girl with a puzzled look on his face. "Uchiha Sasuke left. That means there is a free spot on this squad. Of course, I can't be completely a replacement for Uchiha. I'm not a coward or a traitor after all."

Naruko made a hiss of rage before whirling around and slamming a fist into a nearby tree. The bark splintered under her punch, to her satisfaction. Taking a deep breath, the girl visibly calmed herself.

Sai turned a curious look to Sakura, who cracked her knuckles and stared back with violent intent.

"It's enough." Kakashi's voice cracked like a whip. "Naruko, Sakura, don't kill your new teammate. Sai, stop insulting Sasuke."

The raven nodded in assent, confused. He'd done exactly as his books had advised him. Pulling out a novel boldly titled "Making Friends", the Root agent peered through the pages. Introducing himself first, and ingratiating himself by insulting an out-of-group individual.

"Emotional conditioning, do you think?" Yamato whispered over to the Hatake. Kakashi hummed with agreement.

Sai snapped the book shut with a comprehending look. The next step was to give his new teammates nicknames. Preferably something teasing and false. Smiling falsely at the genin, he took in their forms.

Striding up to the two, he bowed. "I am sorry we got off on the wrong foot." Sakura's steamed rage simmered down to a low boil, and the blond looked to the side with a frown. Turning first to the medic, Sai gave another false smile. "I hope we can get along, Ugly." He faced over at the blonde, not noticing the sputtering Sakura behind him. "I think I will call you Washboard." He informed the girl, staring obviously at her ample chest.

Sakura's fist cracked off the back of his head, and she gave the pale boy an infuriated look before stomping down the road towards the village gate. Naruko simply chuckled evilly, cracking her knuckles as she looked down at the hunched Sai. The blonde wordlessly followed the pink-haired girl.
Sai straightened, again confused. It seemed nothing was going as his books had said they would. "Wait Ugly, Washboard!" he called, jogging after the two.

Sakura gave a wordless scream of rage. Kakashi laughed in amusement, joined by Yamato in short order.

"Danzo needs better gophers." Yamato opinioned, before the two jounin meandered after their charges.

The three waited at the gate, Sai looking worse for the delay. A bruise already was forming on one cheek.

Sakura twitched, face flushed with rage.

For her part, Naruko looked out at the forest with wistfulness. It almost seemed only yesterday when the original Team Seven had taken the mission to Wave. It was really unfortunate the way things had turned out with Haku and Zabuza. Though, Naruko couldn't help but smirk. It was really cool to have a bridge named after her.

The Great Naruko Bridge.

When Kakashi and Yamato reached the trio, the group set out. Peering up at the sky, blue eyes glimmered in the midday sun.

"I wonder who the Kazekage is right now..." the blonde murmured.
A shout echoed through the forest, startling a flock of sparrows into flight. The frenzied chirps and flapping of wings did little to detract attention from a certain blonde kunoichi.

"Gaara is the Kazekage?"

Sighing in exasperation, Sakura palmed her face. "Yes!" the pink haired medic hissed. "He's been the "Kazekage for a while now. I'm sure Jiraiya-sama could have told you all about it."

"That old lecher never said anything about it, dattebayo…" Naruko mumbled, looking down at the ground as the group walked along the forest path. Slapping her cheeks, the blonde pinned Sakura with a bright grin. "So what else has changed since I went on the trip with ero-sennin?"

Looking thoughtful, the Haruno tapped a finger to her lips. "Well," she began. "First of all, everyone in the Konoha Eleven became chuunin. Neji even became a jounin."

Naruko squawked in disbelief. "What? No fair! Now it's just me and Sasuke that are still genin!"

"And what about you, pasty bastard? Are you a chuunin too?"

Returning the question with a fake smile, Sai shrugged. "I'm in ANBU, washboard."

Moaning in disbelief, Naruko tugged her hands through her waist-length blond mane. Sakura regarded her action with curiosity before blinking and seizing a lock of blonde hair. Giving a soft pull, the medic grinned. "When did you stop wearing pigtails, Naru-chan?" She crooned.

Poking the other teen her side, Naruko whipped her hair from Sakura's grasp. "A year or so ago." She offered absently, running quick fingers through her locks to untangle it.

"And this vest, where'd you get this?" Sakura continued to prod, sliding curious fingers over Naruko's black and orange sleeveless vest.

Naruko laughed in surprise. "Why Sakura-chan? You want one?"

Snorting in disbelief, Sakura shook her head. "Not a chance, Naruko."

The blonde pouted for a moment before grinning. "I got it from ero-sennin a while back."

"And you don't find it odd at all that the old pervert was buying you, a teenage girl, clothes?"

Turning slightly pale, the blonde shivered at the mental image. "It wasn't like that at all!" she growled.

Sakura chuckled before staring up the path. "I think you'd look better if you wore a scarf with it."

"If people change… then so can I. But some things never change. Bonds. I'd like to learn more about them." – Sai
Temari does something like that sometimes…” the medic offered before falling silent.

Sai watched the group with curiosity. The two girls chatted amiably with obvious friendship, while the two jounin walked slightly ahead. Kakashi was bent over a book while Yamato muttered to his sempai in frequent whispers. Sharingan no Kakashi simply nodded along while turning the pages. Whatever was in the book must be interesting, Sai decided. He'd do his best to obtain a copy for himself.

Naruko laughed uproariously at something Sakura said before jogging up to the head of the group, leaving the Root member and the pink-haired medic together in silence.

Sai considered the girl before deciding to pose a question. "What is it about Uchiha Sasuke that inspires such loyalty from you? As far as I am aware, he abandoned Konoha and became a traitor, so why?" He asked, soft voice barely sparking with confusion.

It was only the presence of the first real emotion that she could discern that kept Sakura from punching him outright. "He's not a traitor. He's a friend." Sakura responded tersely, automatically scanning the trees and not looking at her teammate.

Sai stared in incomprehension, saying nothing.

"Are you frustrated?" the medic asked, amusement colouring her voice.

"Frustrated?" he smiled falsely. "I don't have emotions, Ugly."

Sakura threw her hands up before stalking to the front to walk with the Uzumaki.

Yamato noticed the action and slowed his pace, coming back beside the Root member.

"Even when I force myself to smile, it seems like I end up being the type of person who is hated," Sai confessed to the brown haired ANBU.

The jounin sighed, pressing a hand to his forehead.

It was going to be a long journey.

___________________________________________

His brother was crumbling into dust in his hands. Fading away and leaving him behind for a second time.

"Itachi... You always used to tell me "later, later", and in the end it was just lies!" he shouted, voice full of pain and fear and sorrow. Itachi chuckled, a wheezing sound that had no place in the moment. A fond smile was twisting his face.

"Foolish little brother." He gasped out. The elder Uchiha's body crackled, the smell of grave dirt intensifying. "You were supposed to tell me everything!" Sasuke growled, hands fisting in his brother's crimson jacket.

Two fingers poked him in the forehead.

"My foolish, silly, beloved little brother. You and I are flesh and blood. I'm always going to be there for you, even if it's only as an obstacle for you to overcome. Even if you do hate me. That's what big brothers are for." Sasuke choked a sob. "You damned fool." He rasped. "You're not going to be there because you're going to die again!"

A gritty hand slid over the younger Uchiha's cheek. "Don't cry, Sasuke." The hand pressed over
Sasuke's heart. "I will always remain with you here." Itachi's fingers trailed back up to brush under his younger brother's eyes. "And here."

Itachi smiled, and his face cracked fatally. "You don't need me to tell you the answer. You will find it. You know it." Shattering into dust, his last words were a whisper in the dark.

"You can see it now."

Sasuke was left with his arms wrapped around the body of the woman Kabuto had sacrificed to power Itachi's temporary resurrection. He howled with anguish, new tears of blood streaked down his face. The cave exploded with black fire, incinerating the sacrifice and Kabuto's dismembered corpse. There would never be another snake like him.

Rising to his feet, a spectre wreathed in dark flame, Sasuke burst forth from the cave. Streamers of black coiled behind his frame as he bolted through the trees. The forest and the mountain burned, a fitting pyre for one so mighty even among the Uchiha.

And with his brother's second death on his brain, Sasuke fled the scene. He fled the battle and he fled the war.

'You can see it now.'

A paint brush painstakingly trailed over a half-filled page. Lines depicting one of his more recent opponents slowly inched into existence. "What are you doing?" startled him, and Sai hastily drew his brush away from the page. He smiled, fraudulent over a pale white face. "I'm painting, Ugly."

The medic brushed off the comment and sunk to her knees next to him, pink tendrils haloing about her head as she crouched. Delicate fingers snatched the book from him, and Sai automatically reached out to take it back. Sakura gave him a slightly condescending look before blowing over the page, drying the ink.

She flipped through the book, taking in the artwork that Sai had painted over the years. Her face grew more and more amazed with every picture. "You're not bad." The girl offered, eyes still drinking in the painted lines and careful shading. "There are no titles though." Sakura frowned. "Why is that?"

Sai blinked. "I've drawn hundreds, maybe thousands of pictures so far. When an artist draws, they're typically expressing some emotion. They have some image they're trying to convey. Titles describe a picture like a name describes a person, don't they? They articulate feelings..." the Root member shrugged. "To be more precise, even if I try to give them titles, I just can't do it. I don't feel anything… they don't put me in mind of anything. I have nothing I'm trying to convey to others."

Sending the other teen a skeptical look, Sakura snapped the book shut and pointedly tapped the cover. "You're telling me that you painted this whole book and didn't feel anything? Nothing at all?"

Sai replied with another fake smile. "I told you Ugly, I don't have feelings."

"So why are you drawing this in the first place then?" she asked, arching her eyebrows.

Sai's face went strangely pensive, the second real emotion that Sakura had seen from him since they'd met. Haltingly, Sai confessed "The center of two pages were the ones I wanted to show my brother the most, but since he's dead, I can't remember what I wanted to draw on them."
"Is that so?" Naruko's voice cracked, and both spun to face the darkness. Naruko's eyes shimmered dark blue in the firelight, her face marked in flashes of light and shadow. Striding forward, she emerged from the night like some feral beast, whisker marks and blonde locks wild, untamed.

Sai motioned into a false smile automatically, and the blonde narrowed her eyes. "We weren't connected by blood, but he did compliment me on my drawings quite a bit."

The Uzumaki regarded his face searchingly before snorting and turning away. She glided over to the crackling campfire and flopped down next to the burning wood. Kakashi looked up from his book for a moment before staring back down at the smut.

"Family is important." Sakura informed Sai with a small smile. "Team Seven is a family, of sorts. And our teammates are our siblings. Me. Naruko. Sasuke." The medic dusted off her lap before pressing the picture book back into Sai's hands. Making a short wave, Sakura rose and joined Naruko by the fire.

A rustle of cloth and the slightest creak of a branch reached Sai's ears as Yamato passed by, making another round of patrolling the area for threats. Left alone, the Root member passed a hand over the faint pain in his chest. Dismissing the ache as heartburn, he gazed up at the full moon.

"Siblings?"

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Moonlight slanted into his office, casting the room into pale relief and deep shadows. A candle by his left hand burned low. Pulling a new stick from his desk, he lit it and placed the tall candle on his right, opposite the short one. Dipping his brush back into a half-empty inkwell, he pressed the end to another page and continued to work.

Gaara always worked late.

Kankuro was dozing away on the nearby couch underneath an open window. Cool desert wind ruffled his brother's brunette bangs. The puppet Karasu was propped against a nearby wall. Gaara traced over the purple kabuki paint inked onto his brother's skin.

An explosion shook the office, sending his two candles sputtering out and rolling away into the dark. Leaping to his feet with wild eyes, Kankuro whipped a hand to the side and reflexively connected chakra strings to his puppet. Karasu creaked into movement, clattering as it assumed a battle read stance. A towering stack of paperwork toppled over, papers fluttering about.

Gaara rose, and Kankuro's darting eyes focused on his younger brother.

Licking his dry lips, Kankuro croaked "What's going on?"

Gaara strode towards the door of his office. "That's what I intend to find out." He replied.

The door burst inward, a frantic chuunin barging into the Kazekage's office. "Kazekage-sama! An unidentified intruder has infiltrated the village!"

Teal eyes regarded the man. "Describe this man to me." The Kazekage ordered.

Saluting, the chuunin barked "A young man with long blonde hair sir. He's dressed in a black cloak with red clouds."

Gaara frowned before dismissing his subordinate. Turning to face his brother, Gaara pressed a hand to his forehead. "Akatsuki." He told Kankuro.
The brunette's face twisted with anger. "They're here to capture you?" he stated rhetorically before dashing over to the door, determined fight against anyone who would harm Gaara. A hand snatched his sleeve, yanking the older brother back from going to die.


Kankuro immediately made sounds of protest that Gaara cut across with a slash of his hand. "We have received intel from Konoha. It will be to our benefit to use it. Coordinate the defense."

"Gaara, I can't-"

"I am your Kazekage." The redhead stated mercilessly. "Follow my orders."

Visibly struggling with himself, Kankuro stood in place until his younger brother pointed at the desk again. Giving in rebelliously, Kankuro moved to the end of the room and sunk into Gaara's seat.

Favoring his brother with an approving nod, Gaara glided from the room. Kankuro grit his teeth before opening the folder regarding Akatsuki and pulling out the information on its only blonde member: Deidara. Shouting for a messenger, he got to work.

Another burst of fire lit off below him, and Deidara laughed. Shouting "Art is an explosion!" out over the dark village, he turned his clay bird along another side street. Growling to himself, the Akatsuki member glared around. "Where is that jinchuuriki? He should've come running as soon as I set off the first one."

A whip of sand rushed at his face out of the night, and the blonde heaved his clay transport into the air. Adhering to the nearly vertical slope with chakra, he stared over his shoulder. The wisp of sand continued to follow him, slowing the higher he went. Eventually, the sand broke off before rushing back to the ground.

A redhead regarded him impassively, the sand coming back to coil around his form.

The ground rumbled beneath Gaara's feet, and a clump of sand pulled up from the ground, forming a floating platform. Crossing his arms, the Kazekage was the picture of calm as he rose into the air after the nukenin.

Deidara sneered and shoved a hand into one of the pouches at his side. The mouth growing from his palm slobbered and licked up a ball of clay, chewing the white substance. Streamers of sand arched around Gaara's form, coalescing and stabbing towards the Akatsuki shinobi.

Pitching his palm forward, a sparrow flew forth before swelling in size. The larger-than-life animate statue glided over the Kazekage's spear of sand. Grinning, Deidara formed a Seal of Confrontation and shouted "Katsu!" The sparrow exploded, shattering Gaara's strike and scattering it into dust. The cloud of sand filled the air between them before drifting back over to the redhead and clumping together with his floating platform.

"That's as far as you go." Gaara uttered in an icy tone.

Deidara smirked. "Oh?"

In silent response, the Kazekage slowly lifted his arm. His sand twisted in agitation, churning
furiously. Several spouts of sand spit toward Deidara, mouths forming from the dirt with wicked teeth. The blonde wheeled his sculpture, clay bird spinning away from the strike. The sand chased after him, driving him further and further away from the jinchuuriki.

A series of javelins hissed through the night, steel tips gleaming in the moonlight. Dodging the missiles, Deidara was pushed to the side by concussive force as the exploding tags tied around the spears activated. Splinters and metal fragments rained down on the dark village below.

Gaara nodded approvingly as the effects of leaving his brother with Konoha's intel began to show. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Kankuro shouting and pointing at group after group of Sunagakure shinobi. Shaking his head ruefully at his stubborn brother, Gaara refocused on the enemy of his village with iron determination.

Diving back into the streets, Deidara weaved through the dark alleys and empty streets. The sand followed, snapping at him like a pack of angry lions. The commotion was loud enough that the village began to stir, the low mumble of voices buzzing as people rose from slumber.

A man and his son stumbled forth from one of the dome-shaped homes, rubbing sleepily at their faces, before peering about for the cause of the loud sounds that had shook the night. The flap of wings drew the father's attention, and he threw himself at his son. The pair hit the dirt as a great white figure shot through the air where their heads had been. The man watched in shock as a blonde on a giant bird wheeled the nearby corner, before a cloud of sand whistled on past in pursuit. Eyes hardened as he shoved his son back inside before running out to wake the neighborhood.

Gripping tightly to molded feathers, Deidara swore as he twisted around the Kazekage's lances. The hum of voices grew louder and louder, lights flickering on and doors slamming open. Shinobi and civilian alike stared at him with open mouth shock as he flew by. Gaara's pursuing sand shattered the frozen tableau as civilian parents herded the children and the elderly back under cover, taking the children of shinobi parents under care as well. The shinobi of the village threw on their mission gear with grim faces and grateful looks at the solidarity of their civilian counterparts. Messengers from Kankuro ran through the streets, shouting orders.

Faint shouts of "Intruder!" and "Attack!" reached Gaara's ears and he frowned. It hadn't been his intention to start a panic.

Deidara rose out of the streets with a furious expression, his eye scope doing little to hide his irritation. Sasori was going to kill him! If not for being late then for allowing such a commotion to occur. "I guess my stealth moves failed." He called out, shoving both hands into his clay pouches. "But thanks to that, I don't have to spend time looking for you. Maybe I should bomb civilians more often if it gets me what I need." The blonde stalled.

The Kazekage caught his attention with a murderous look, stretching his palms up to the sky. Sand rose, great rivers of sand leaping into the sky from the desert. Shocked cries of "Kazekage-sama!?" rang out, the village shocked at the display of power. Deidara involuntarily drew back as tonnes of sand arched around the Kazekage, ruffling his red hair and billowing his jacket. The sand converged, mutating into what appeared to be a monstrous claw.

The giant claw slashed toward the terrorist bomber, who whirled away and flew. "Just a bit longer." He whispered, mouths on his palms chewing frantically. Crouching closer to the back of the clay bird, he dived down and under the huge paw. Pulling his hands from the pouches, he clenched his fists and poured chakra into the supple clay. When his hands opened, they revealed six clay birds to his eager eyes.
Dumping his prizes over the side, he watched in glee as they spread their wings and flew. So small and insignificant in the battle of sand monsters, hurling javelins, and flashy explosions, they passed through the air unnoticed. Continuing to lead Gaara's sand through the sky and dodging around the spears of the shinobi below, Deidara tracked the birds with his eyes. Closer and closer they wove to the Kazekage, until…

"Katsu!"

The air around Gaara filled with fire and smoke.

"Hey Kakashi-sensei," Naruko whispered, hand shooting out to paw at his copy of Icha Icha. The jounin effortlessly leaned back, dodging her grasping before turning another page. Humming "Hmm?" the Hatake peered at her with his single visible dark eye.

The blonde grinned before shoving a hand into her kunai pouch. "I got you a gift! I was going to give this to you earlier, sensei, but then I got all distracted and… yeah." She chuckled, scratching the back of her head. "Here!"

A green covered book was shoved into his hands. Kakashi stared at it in shock. "The next in the Icha Icha series, *Icha Icha: Tactics*! It hasn't even been released yet. Signed by the author and everything!

"I know you like this kind of garbage…" Naruko ended with a mumble.

"Garbage!" Kakashi shot to his feet before passionately expounding on the glory of the Icha Icha series. "The writing is simply superb! Drama, Action, Romance!" he rambled.

Sakura stared at him with astonishment before smirking in amusement. Yamato stifled snickering behind his hand. And Sai…

"Will you be spending your time reading that book from now on, sempai?" the Root member asked blankly. Kakashi nodded vigorously, to which Sai gave a single nod in decision. "If that is the case, may I be permitted to read the other book that you were reading earlier?" The medic spun to gape at him in shock, Yamato laughed even harder, and Naruko blinked in surprise.

Kakashi strode across the clearing and took Sai's hands in his. The Root member stared at him in confusion, but the jounin was beyond caring. "I was wrong about you!" The silver-haired man blubbered. "You are truly a kindred soul." Reverently withdrawing his orange book from his pouch, he pressed it into Sai's chest until the pale boy took it from him. "Protect it with your life." He ordered sternly.

Sai made a fake smile. "Of course, sempai." And cracked the book open to the first page.

Sakura twitched.

Shouts echoed from the village below. Deidara ignored them, peering into the smoke and inching closer. As the smoke cleared, the blonde found himself staring at a sphere of grit. "So that's how it is?" he muttered. The ball of sand peeled like an orange, streamers shooting forward. Flying backwards, the blonde dodged the incoming strike.

A rumble distracted him, and he spun around to face a brown wall. "What?" he gasped as the world abruptly darkened. Shifting sand covered the Akatsuki member, forming a prison of silt. Gaara reached a hand out towards the mass of sand. "Sabaku Sōsō" he growled, clenching his fist.
Deidara's prison began to contract, pressure building within to attempt to liquefy the blonde. The side of the sphere exploded, leaving Deidara to head towards the ground in a freefall. He had detonated his clay bird to blow a hole in the sand, allowing him to escape. Reaching a hand into one of his clay pouches, he scowled. "I should have listened to Sasori no Danna when he told me I needed more." A whip of sand curled about his leg, yanking him from his downward arc and flinging him back towards the sand prison.

Twisting, Deidara whipped his new sculpture out as the world darkened again. Hastily pumping it full of chakra, the clay owl swelled until it was large enough to bear its maker. Deidara mounted the owl, steering it from the prison with mere seconds to spare. Wiping sweat from his brow, the blonde manoeuvred around more steel-tipped explosive spears before shoving both hands in his pouches. "Getting interrupted like this from below is annoying."

Gaara drew back warily, regarding his circling opponent with suspicion. Normally, he would have been happy to pursue. But he hadn't become Kazekage by being stupid. He had read about this Deidara in the reports Konoha had sent him. A terrorist bomber who used clay figures in conjunction with a kekkei genkai to make explosives. The man had been molding clay from the beginning. He had to run out of it eventually.

With his own sand platform hovering from side to side, the Kazekage watched his opponent furiously mold something between his hands. Below him the village scurried with activity. He repressed a frown. Fighting above the village was not his prime choice of venue. He was greatly restricted by having to defend his people.

Opening his hands, Deidara grinned at the clay statue that sat between his palms. Rounded on the bottom and pointed on the top. The statue's hands were long and feathered, folding over its plump stomach. Complete with a nearly featureless face that was only marked by tiny eyes and a gaping mouth. The blonde ran a hand over the figure. He'd created this masterpiece based off of Leader-sama's Gedō Mazō statue. Throwing the statue into the wide space between him and the cautious Kazekage, Deidara laughed hysterically. "I'm sick of looking at your impassive face!"

Swelling between them into gigantic proportions, the sculpture filled the air with its massive bulk. Gaara's eyes widened at the monstrous explosive.

Deidara smirked. "My specialty, infused with my highest level of chakra, C3. It's my greatest achievement as an artist!" The bust spread its wing-like hands, arching across the heavens like some celestial messenger. And then it sunk, falling towards the village and picking up speed on the way down. Screams and yells of "Retreat!" echoed back up at the pair, and Gaara's face twisted in horror.

Forming a seal, Deidara murmured in the too quiet night. "It's too late." The statue began to glow, golden light illuminating the dark village. The intensity of the glow increased until it blinded those below, and then it exploded, creating an enormous fireball. A miniature sun hung in space, distending and swirling, throwing out rings of smoke and visibly heating the air.

Stumbling along through the trees, he blinked tiredly. His steps were faltering, stuttered and breaking without rhythm. He wondered why he could feel the cracks in his mind. Was he crazy already? Did it even matter?

It did not. He decided. He'd been bat-shit fucking crazy since he was seven years old. The only change was the degree of crazy. And truly, the motivation of his obsessions. What was vengeance?
Justice. Vengeance is but justice brought forth and enacted by the wronged party instead of an unrelated organization.

There was no sun.

The sky was gone.

He could feel the heat from a flaming orb beating onto the back of his neck, the heat of high summer beading sweat that soaked caked dry blood into a macabre paint. Some might have said it was the sun that illuminated the world, hanging in the sky above and giving life to the fucking pointless ball of mud he lived on.

They were ignorant. He knew. The sky was fathomless and blue and glimmering with life and laughter and unshakable determination. The sun was blonde and soft and painfully beautiful. The sky and the sun ruled everything of him and in him. But they were gone. Only he remained, spun crimson moonbeams and cold black starlight filling the empty void where the sun and the sky had been.

Leafs rustled in the breeze, branches shaking as shadows masked by the face of animals trailed after him. Murder dogged his steps, mechanical duty and patriotism snapping at his heels. But they dare not come too close.

For he was Vengeance itself.

A blade rattled in its sheathe and he steadied it with a hand. The gate yearned before him, stone effigies guarded by two mortal men. They gaped at him, fear and awe written. He sneered at them. Mere men lacking purpose and conviction. Trapped in their pathetic cycles of mediocrity. He might have slain them where they stood.

But he had Promised.

Gliding between them, he set his eyes on the looming spire that scraped towards the sky. He could not follow the path of memory. This place had been burned and rebuilt and thus rendered his childhood in this place even less useful than it had been. The only purpose of his living here had been to meet the sky and kiss the sun.

He blinked.

Whispers followed behind him, exclaiming at his gore splattered appearance with disgust and terror. He cared not.

Again. He blinked.

The tower was not as he had remembered it, though climbing the floors was easy enough. His legs burned. Walking too long without rest or sustenance was taking his toll. But he cared not. The only purpose this meat sack had left was to bear him onward to justice.

Such did he come here for. Fulfilling justice alone had always been his preference, but years apart from those who inhabited the world had destroyed his knowledge of where his justice may have been found. It was likely that they would take his life after he brought vengeance to bear.

He considered that irrelevant. He was prepared to die for justice.

Reaching forth with a red hand, he turned a brass knob. Pushing the portal inward, he entered within, leaving gory crimson streaks to mark his passing.
Brown stared into swirling red with purpose. Silence gulfed between them. Lips pinched and foreheads frowned.

**Question?**

*He sunk to his knees, offering his hands to the Shadow of Fire in submission.***

**Such for his vengeance.**

"I surrender."

**Uchiha Sasuke, come home to Konoha at last.**

As the light faded, the shinobi of the village were astonished to still be alive. Gazing upward, they beheld a great brown ceiling over the world. Some blinked in confusion, until one cried out "It's Kazekage-sama's sand!" Cheers filled the night "Look at how big that sand shield is!"

Standing beside the Kazekage's brother, Baki sighed in relief and pride. "Nothing less from the Kazekage". Kankuro ignored him, grimacing in concern. "Gaara..." he whispered hoarsely.

Panting, the Kazekage's outstretched arms trembled with the force of holding the tonnes of sand in place and preventing it from crushing the village. Sweat trickled down his face, the ache of exertion settling in. Flicking his eyes from the shield of sand, he barely had time to blink at how much closer the Akatsuki member was before the man formed a seal.

"This is the end." Deidara declared, and clay centipedes slithered up from the back of his remaining absolute defense of sand. Twisting in through the front, the clay insects wrapped around Gaara's body.

"Katsu."

The world was full of heat. He felt the armour of sand that coated his skin crackle, and the beginning of blistering from his pale skin. It was excruciating, more so than if he had been a normal person with normal sense of pain. He regretted relying on the armour to prevent any injury now, with agony spearing his mind. There was a faint sense of panicked shouting beneath him, and he forced open his eyes.

The sand that he had used to protect Suna from Deidara's giant statue was crumbling down. Clawing with desperation, he seized control of the sand with his last remnants of energy. The silt trembled to a halt, and the redhead gasped with exertion.

The Akatsuki nukenin drew back cautiously, watching the Kazekage. Deidara had used the last of his clay in that final assault, and if Gaara struck out at him now he had nothing left to defend himself with.

Lifting his shaking hand, Gaara pulled the sand up inch by painful inch.

Deidara's face shone with comprehension and a touch of respect. "So that's how it is." He declared before folding his arms. Hovering in place, the Akatsuki member allowed Gaara the time he needed to shove the sand out towards the uninhabited desert. Releasing the sand when it was safe, the redhead watched through blurry eyes as it crashed to the dunes. He shook and closed his eyes wearily. Gaara wanted so badly to sleep...

Drawing closer, the blonde watched as the platform of sand the Kazekage was supporting himself
with lost cohesion. Sand flecked off, blowing away in the wind and falling towards the ground as if Gaara were contained in the top half of an hourglass. The redhead's eyes flickered, holding onto consciousness by his fingernails. There was some knowledge that if he slept, he'd never wake up again.

But he was so tired.

Deidara was painfully close to him as the blond reached out a black clad arm to drag the Kazekage forth from his support and into his custody. Teal eyes blinked at the blonde, blurrily trailing over his form. Black cloak and red clouds.

There was a sense of roaring in his mind, memory or dreams of dying and resurrection. Longing and fear, loss of individuality. Red eyes spinning –Sharingan? - Circle upon circle upon circle of tomoe. The moon? Malevolence.

Shukaku howled in his mind, madness and rage in equal measure. Gaara's head pounded, and he pressed a pain to his too hot forehead with a groan.

Deidara frowned at the odd behaviour, cocking his head to the side. The Kazekage's eyes blinked open again, staring at the blond.

Black sclera. Yellow four pointed stars.

"Fuck." They both said.

Demonic chakra slammed through Gaara's coils, and he knew. He knew the way the sun rose in the East and that the source of his mysterious sand shield was not the Ichibi but the living will of his mother andhowdidheknowthat?

Ichibi no Shukaku refused to be taken.

Throwing his hands forward, Gaara's sand exploded towards Deidara with renewed force.

The bomber's eyes widened in shock and fear as he wheeled about. A trail of sand barely missed taking his head off, the whip instead laying his cheek open to the bone. Swearing incoherently and pressing a palm over his face, Deidara lay flat against his clay owl to reduce wind resistance.

He escaped, barely, when he flew over the stone wall separating Sunagakure from the open desert and the jinchuuriki's mad strike withdrew. Peering over his shoulder, he stared back at where the Kazekage of Suna watched him impassively. Golden trails of sand curled about his form, thrown in crimson relief by the bloody dawn breaking over the horizon.

The message was clear.

The next time we meet will be your death.

Gritting his teeth, the blonde swallowed past the frustration and rage. This kid was no different than Itachi, watching him with those arrogant, impassive eyes. Shouting back over the wind, he howled out "Don't under estimate me you bastard!" pointing back at Gaara. The faintest hint of the blonde's voice reached the redhead.

Flaring his nostrils and full of the instinct of the bijuu within, Gaara raised his arm out and pulled. A small stream of sand tore forth from the distant desert, straining the jinchuuriki's limits of control.
Deidara screamed out as the sand wrapped around the arm that was outstretched and squeezed. His left arm tore from its socket with a bloody squelch, dismembering the man. Tears sprung into the blonde's eyes as the sand pulled away.

Lowering his arm, Gaara allowed the Akatsuki member to escape into the dawn. As the rush of danger fled, the Ichibi’s chakra withdrew, leaving the Kazekage even more drained than he had been. The sand platform collapsed beneath him, and he fell. Horrified cries penetrated his ears, but he was beyond caring. The blonde was gone, he could sleep.

The world darkened as his hold on consciousness fled, and the last thing he remembered before his mind spiralled away was the clattering of wooden arms as something snatched him from the air, and a face marked by purple paint and furious affection.

"You damned stubborn fool." Kankuro whispered into sweaty red locks. Pressing his cheek against his brother's pale forehead, he tightened his arms around the younger sibling. "Don't pull that kind of shit again." He breathed.

"Kankuro." Interrupted the moment. Turning away from Gaara's unconscious face, the brunette glared at Baki. "What." He growled, less of a question and more of a statement of annoyance. Eying the fallen Kazekage, the sand siblings' former jounin sensei continued "He's injured. We should get him to a medic." The instinct to snarl and clench protectively tighter to his brother warred with his common sense. The conflict must have shown on his face, since Baki waited patiently until common sense won out and he stood cradling the younger boy in his arms. The man motioned to a nervous looking young woman standing nearby. Giving the medic a distrustful look, Kankuro reluctantly relinquished his brother to the woman.

Unconscious Kazekage in her arms, the medic hurried away with a worried looking chuunin on her heel to ensure that nothing untoward happened in Gaara's time of weakness. Drawing himself up with a deep breath, Kankuro pushed away the exhaustion of a sleepless night and focused on the advisory council member.

"We need to send a message to my sister." The puppeteer decided before turning on his heel to head back into the Kazekage's tower.

Trailing after him with a sour look, Baki growled "The village is in a time of crisis. Temari can wait."

"No, she can't." Kankuro replied curtly as he stepped into his brother's office. Picking a blank piece of paper from the disheveled piles on the floor, he inked out a quick message to his sister:

Temari,

Shake your ass home. Gaara needs you.

Your brother.

Sealing the message with the seal of the Kazekage, he scribbled his sister's name on the front before striding back out into the hall. A chuunin ran by, and Kankuro's hand shot out to grab the man by his collar. The chuunin spun, prepared to snarl at the interloper until he found himself standing face-to-face with the Kazekage's brother. "Get this to Konoha." He ordered, shoving the letter into the man's hands.

As the man sped off, Kankuro turned to look at his mentor. "Now." He spat. "You are going to
send a message to the Hokage detailing exactly what went on."

"And what will you be doing?" the older man asked chillingly, not appreciating the younger man's attempts to command him. "I will be going to see the Honoured Siblings." Baki's face went confused. "What business do you have with those two at a time like this?"

"Deidara was the man my brother fought last night. Deidara's partner in Akatsuki is Akasuna no Sasori." The temperature in the room dropped. "Sasori of the Red Sand?" someone whispered as they scurried on by. "I will need all the information I can get regarding him." Kankuro continued grimly.

"Who better from than his grandmother?"

Then the cat suit wearing puppeteer was gliding away, rage and grief in equal measure squaring his shoulders.

"Your trial will be soon." Pearl eyes shone in the dark.

"How do you know that?" he asked sharply, black eyes cutting.

The teenaged Hyuuga smiled. "My father does not conceal these things from me. I was on the team that brought you in, after all." Sasuke crossed his arms, staring between the bars at his visitor. The Uchiha briefly considered Hyuuga Hiashi.

"What is your father's opinion on my trial? Will he rule in my favour or against it?"

Hinata shrugged, ebony strands flitting with the motion. "I would say that my father is neutral. There has historically been enmity between the Hyuuga and the Uchiha to a degree. Yet at the same time, he sympathizes with you. He will not say it, but I believe he sees much of Neji as he was in our childhood in you."

Chewing the inside of his cheek, Sasuke paced to the end of his cell and back. "What of the other clan heads? How do they see me?"

"Again, I cannot truly say," Hinata replied softly. "You know as well as I do. They are clans, and the Uchiha were- are" the girl corrected at his icy look "a clan as well. It will not excuse what you have done, but they are inclined to give you a fair hearing."

Sasuke grunted, deep in thought.

The Hyuuga watched him with unabashed interest as his face went from blank to thoughtful to pensive to agonized. The Uchiha visibly suppressed his emotional tumult before pinning her with a considering stare.

"There is something I need you to do for me." He stated, and clarified that "It's related to my trial" when she looked worried. The Hyuuga's face smoothed over, and she nodded in assent. "Go to the Uchiha compound." he ordered.

"Go to the main house, enter the front door and walk down the hallway." Sasuke swallowed before continuing. "Third door on the left, watch for the traps as you open the door. Head to the closet and take out the suit that is second from the right. You will know which one it is." He added when her mouth opened.

Pressing a palm over his eyes, he pointed down the hall. "Go." The Uchiha croaked.
Hinata went.

And when she returned an hour later, it was with wide eyes and a panicked look on her face. She held the bundle of clothes to her chest, hands clenched with white knuckles. "Sasuke-kun," she protested fervently. "You can't possibly do this to yourself!"

He wordlessly held his hands out for the bundle, and with great reluctance she handed it over. The members of Taka crowded the edges of their cells and stared with unabashed curiosity.

Slowly, he unfolded the bundle. Standard grey shinobi pants. A black shirt. A long black overcoat that reached down to his knees with white diamonds patterned around the bottom. One of Konoha's standard flak jackets, minus the spiral crest sewn into the shoulder and plus the sigil of a shuriken with a red and white uchiwa fan emblazoned.

Konoha Military Police Force.

Head of the Clan.

His father's uniform.

"They will remember who I am."

"You failed." the hunchback growled, staring down at the shaking blonde that leaned against his clay figurine. Deidara grunted and ignored his partner for a moment, taking the time to tie a tourniquet against his bleeding stump of a left arm.

"I should kill you."

The blonde snorted, shaking sweat dampened locks from his face. Blue eyes glared at his fellow artist. "Just give me the extra pouch, Sasori no Danna." Deidara hissed.

Creaking, Sasori regarded the boy with a blank look. With an exhalation, a pouch flew forth from the older man to thump against the ground. Turning away condescendingly, Sasori pushed northeast, leaving the blonde to follow or get left behind.

Gritting his teeth, Deidara snatched the pouch of his precious explosive clay from the ground and hopped back onto his animated owl.

His missing left arm hurt.

Deidara really hated that fucking Kazekage.

Heading southwest, the desert stretched out before Team Kakashi, wind whistling over the dunes. Yamato cast a glance a Sai, worried that the pale boy's exposed skin would burn horribly in the unforgiving sun of Kaze no Kuni.

Kakashi grudgingly pocketed his new green book. He'd rather not get sand in it and ruin the pages. Seeing the jounin stow Icha Icha away, Sai mirrored the action with his worn orange smut novel. The Hatake gave him a nod of approval.

Sakura fanned herself, mentally preparing for what travelling in the desert might require from her. Treatment for heat stroke. Treatment for sunburns. Treatment for windburns…

Uzumaki Naruko was for once, utterly silent. The blonde stalked at the head of the group, unbound
blonde mane waving in the breeze. Despite the fact that she hated getting up early, she loved watching the dawn.

The dawn that greeted her that morning was breathtaking. Fingers of the sun reached through the sky, staining the roof of the world a vibrant crimson. It reminded her of his eyes.

She liked that best of all.
"You may have the same eyes as your brother, but you perceive things differently. You do not value Itachi's sacrifice. Instead you just throw your anger at anything and everything. You have wasted the Uchiha clan's sacrifice." – Shimura Danzo.

Kakashi's voice was as cold and chill as winter night.

"Akatsuki".

Two men stood before him, wreathed in black cloth marked by red clouds. The hunchbacked one eased forward slightly while the straight-backed blonde one stuck a hand in a pouch by his side. Great straw hats obscured their facial features.

"We have no business with you." The hunched Akatsuki member growled out, voice low and rough. The blonde one hummed in assent.

Yamato shifted, plain brown eyes staring at the two nukenin, hands carefully loose. Sai's hand dipped into his pocket, wrapping around a brush and tiny bottle of ink, his pale face absent of his false smile. Naruko pressed her lips together, Kyuubi enhanced senses full of the cloying scent of blood and oil. Sakura took a single finger in her hand and cracked the joint, steadily going from finger to finger, each popping noise painfully loud in the silence.

The air was tense and heavy, Deidara's conspicuously empty sleeve flapping in the breeze.

A hand rose up to jostle a hitai-ate, pushing it up to reveal scarred tissue and a Sharingan eye. Deidara gazed with disgust at the doujutsu. A long bladed tail shot out from beneath the hunched cloak, swinging at the copy-nin with a gleam.

The Hatake moved, spinning to the side, whipping out a kunai and slamming it into the stabbing tail, sufficiently deflecting it with a shower of sparks.

Deidara smirked, right hand dipping into his pouch. Scattering at the nukenin's strike, the Konoha nin fell into battle-ready stances.

"Get out of here." Sasori growled at his partner. Glaring, the blonde pulled a lump of clay from his pouch and molded it in a single hand.

"I don't think so, Sasori no danna." Deidara replied flippantly, dropping a clay centipede to the ground.

Sasori's tail lanced at his partner, poison covered blade missing the younger nukenin's cheek by mere inches. "You are nothing but a liability to me here." The former Suna-nin spat condescendingly. "The Kazekage crippled you. Now you are nothing. I can't be bothered to protect your pitiful life."

Naruko's eyes cut across from the hunchbacked figure to glare at the bomber.
The blonde sneered. "Whatever you say, Sasori." Disrespect dripping from every word. Mounting back onto his owl sculpture, the blonde man slowly rose and wheeled to the north.

Naruko immediately bounded after Deidara, leaving Yamato calling at her to come back.

Kakashi couldn't spare a glance as he continued to lock eyes with the famous renegade. "Sai." The jounin muttered, Sharingan spinning. "Go after Naruko. Bring her back. Now is not the time."

Nodding silently, the Root member tore open a scroll before slamming his ink brush to the page and scrawling out the tapestry of a hawk. With a murmur of "Chōjū Giga" and a burst of chakra, the painting sprung to life. Leaping onto the back of the bird, Sai directed it after the two blondes and took off over the dunes.

Sasori rumbled. "I hate waiting or making other people wait. This ends now."

"Then go." Yamato hissed. "There is nothing keeping you here."

The legendary nukenin stared at him before giving a minute nod. "Another time then, little leaves." Scraping along, Sasori turned to leave.

"Oh ho ho!" a wizened voice giggled. "I'll admit antiques should be left up on the shelf. But I couldn't pass up the chance to meet my cute grandson's face again."

The long steel tail spun, deflecting a series of incoming kunai and smashing aside a clattering puppet. Sasori twitched with agitation. "If you're going to oppose me, then I guess I have no choice." The puppeteer growled. The black cloak shredded, ripping and tearing to blow away in the wind. A grotesque figure was revealed, crouching on four limbs with a garish orange mask adorning his back. The nukenin's steel scorpion tail arched from the gaping mouth of the mask.

"Will you become another part of my collection, Chiyo-baa-san?"

It was the echoing of steel on stone that roused him from tracing the sigil of his family over and over, picturing his father in his mind. Hinata's time of visitation had run out, Juugo had fallen silent long ago, and even Suigetsu and Karin's arguments were subdued.

Sasuke turned dry eyes to the door of his cell, giving a slow blink as he recognized a figure in red with long white hair. Jiraiya stared at him curiously, spurring Sasuke to hastily bundle his father's uniform in order to prevent recognition.

Narrowing his eyes at the motion, the Sennin gave a shrug before spinning to unlock Juugo's cell. Rising to his feet, Sasuke watched Jiraiya step over to release Karin before cautiously stepping out of his cell. Juugo mirrored the motion after a pause, following the Uchiha's lead. Karin and Suigetsu joined them, sending wary glances at the Sennin, tensing. The Uchiha shook his head in warning.

Coughing into his fist, Jiraiya drew Sasuke's attention from his team. "Tsunade has persuaded the Council to hold your trial tomorrow morning."

Sasuke ran a tired hand through raven locks, lips twitching in slight amusement. "I can freely assume that Team Seven is outside the village then."

Jiraiya snorted at his astuteness, turning to stalk down the hall. "Let's get out of here." The Sennin called, sending Sasuke into motion after him. Team Taka followed his lead, trailing at his heels.
with suspicious looks at the shadows around them.

The group was led back through the prison complex, Jiraiya stopping a moment to toss a ring of keys towards the warden.

The warden - a woman this time - Sasuke noted, caught them easily and watched the group with unabashed interest. Or perhaps - more accurately - stared at the Uchiha with interest.

Chuckling, Jiraiya dismissed the interest in his charge as purely carnal before pushing open the steel vault door guarding the prison and slipping out into ANBU headquarters.

Suigetsu smirked at Sasuke, and Juugo rolled his eyes. Karin glared back at the woman before pushing the rest of Taka through the door. Sasuke barely caught the warden's hand dart towards a brush out of the corner of his eye and he frowned.

The door screeched shut behind the group, Jiraiya huffing at their lax pace. Pushing Sasuke along with a hand on his back, the Sennin shoved him through ANBU headquarters in half the time it had taken Tenzo to get him through when he'd been brought in.

Sasuke didn't even have time to intimidate the rookies.

Striding through the underground labyrinth, Jiraiya chose a random side passage the group came across and stopped next to a ladder. Turning to regard the group with a glare, he spoke one order "Behave."

Suigetsu rolled his eyes before leaping onto the iron rungs and scrambling up towards the surface. Karin and Juugo followed in short order, but when Sasuke went to climb to the surface, a hand wrapped around his bicep and spun him to face the white haired man's dark eyes.

Jiraiya gazed at him silently, searching for something in the depths of the Uchiha's eyes before releasing him and nodding towards the ladder. "If you make her cry, I'll kick your ass."

Sasuke was proud of the sheer lack of twitch he gave at the Sennin's statement, only bolting up the rungs in record time.

Seeing the sun for the first time in weeks sent stabbing pains along Sasuke's optic nerves. Blinking away the pain, the Uchiha peered about. Suigetsu and Karin were still rubbing at their eyes, while Juugo shadowed his with a palm over his forehead. Grass rustled in the breeze and Sasuke frowned as he recognized a red bridge arching over a small stream.

As the Sennin heaved himself out of the hatch in the ground behind them, the Uchiha wondered if Jiraiya had chosen this particular locale to emerge into on purpose. The significant glance that the Sennin sent Team Seven's former training ground was not lost on the Uchiha, who scowled and folded his arms.

"Get moving." The Toad Sennin ordered the group, striding off over the red oak planks. Sasuke huffed and tucked the bundle of his father's uniform under his arm before he followed the older man through the streets of Konoha.

The glances the raven received as the group pushed through the streets were enlightening. The first emotion to grace anyone's face was usually surprise. Villagers and shinobi alike would draw away in shock and recognition, eyes darting to the back of his now worn white haori to check for his clan's uchiwa fan in confirmation. What they did after that was varied.
Civilians generally turned smug and elbowed their compatriots in the side. Murmurs of "I told you so" would barely reach the Uchiha's ears as they stared at him with covetous eyes. A smaller subset of civilians would turn away in fear or disgust, whispers of "snake" and "traitor" making Juugo's eyes narrow dangerously.

Sasuke was beyond caring, it was the reaction of Konoha's shinobi force that mattered to him. Genin would shove by his group and guide with nary a glance, most too young to even be aware of his existence. How the chuunin and jounin responded to his presence was worrying though. Dark murmurs and sparks of killing intent stabbed at them, making Taka tense and draw closer to their leader while Jiraiya's face went blank and cold.

It was a chuunin that stuck his leg out to trip up the Uchiha, single brown eye sneering and his empty left socket gaping. Sasuke stumbled slightly, and a hand shot out to grip his elbow and steadied him.

Coal black eyes pinned a chubby face framed in spiked brown locks before Sasuke nodded in thanks at Chouji. Straightening, he followed Jiraiya for ten steps before turning back to stare at his new follower.

The Akimichi clan heir gazed back at the Uchiha clan heir with a blank mien. A silent moment passed between them before the brown-haired chuunin gave a slow determined shake of his head. Sasuke blinked in surprise before a tiny smirk curled the corners of his mouth.

Your loss.

Team Taka plus two sprung back into motion, turning the corner and entering the main marketplace. Sasuke wondered again at the motives of his guide. It appeared the man was deliberately displaying his presence to the village at large. When Kiba shouldered up to him and began glaring back at his particularly loud detractors, Sasuke realized that was exactly what Jiraiya was doing.

A low hum of insect wings brushing against one another alerted the Uchiha to Shino's quiet presence.

With a squeal, a certain blonde Yamanaka leapt onto his back before being yanked off and engaging in a shouting match with Karin. Ino dragged along a reluctant Shikamaru, who took one look at the people staring at the last Uchiha before declaring "How troublesome", and falling in behind Juugo to stare up at the clouds.

Hinata and Neji glided out of a nearby weapons store, giving Sasuke regal nods before Hinata took a position by his side, with Neji a socially-expected few steps behind. The Uchiha matched their poised expressions, the three looking for the entire world like the heirs of two of Konoha's noble clans out for a stroll with a Hyuuga branch family servant. Neji's patently cold eyes made it obvious he was perfectly aware of the symbolism of it all.

Lee burst forth from the crowd, running straight towards Neji with an excited expression before Tenten snagged the back of his collar. Whispering furiously in the green-clad chuunin's ear, the weapons mistress jerked her head towards the rear of the group. The two sidled up to Suigetsu, who watched the show with a highly amused expression.

Kiba snagged a brown haired genin as the boy ran past, whispering something in his ear that made the genin go white with fear before gripping Konohamaru's shoulder in a clawed hand and steering him along.
When the Sennin sent a smug look over his shoulder at Sasuke, he confirmed the Uchiha's suspicions that what had happened was deliberate. By the time Sasuke and his group pulled out from the market and turned to head towards the Hokage's tower, the village was abuzz with rumours.

Konoha's clan heirs and some of the most talented shinobi in their generation had come over to the Last Uchiha's side in an impressive show of force. Said Uchiha doubted their parents would be pleased at how that would reflect on their clans. By having their heirs openly associate with a prisoner, it would appear that the shinobi clans were affording Sasuke some measure of favour and protection. To abruptly turn around in a day and reject him after that would reflect badly on the clans' judgement and conviction.

In the absence of overwhelming evidence against him, it politically predisposed them to pardoning him. And when Hinata's lips twitched in satisfaction, Sasuke realized that forcing that conclusion had been their plan in the first place.

The old woman looked nostalgic as she leapt away from a swinging steel tail. "Still playing with Hiruko, Sasori-chan?" she called playfully.

Kankuro pulled three scrolls from his back, rolling them out before forming a hand seal. "Karasu!" the Kazekage's sibling barked, a puff of smoke bursting from one of the scrolls. "Kuroari!" signaled a second explosion of smoke. "Sanshou!" The wind blew away the smoke, revealing three rattling puppets, two vaguely humanoid in shape with multiple arms, the last one resembling a wooden and metal salamander. Twitching his fingers, Kankuro sent Karasu and Kuroari into a circling motion around the legendary Sasori while shifting Sanshou into a more defensive stance.

Kakashi muttered to the remaining members of his team. "It would've been easier to fight him another day, but since Suna made a move we should reinforce."

Yamato nodded in agreement while Sakura looked slightly apprehensive at encountering her first S-ranked opponent that would seriously attempt to kill her. Orochimaru had simply played around with them when they fought him.

The white haired jounin circled around the engaging puppets.

Kankuro's motions were far more cautious now that he knew he was facing the creator of the weapons he was using.

Yamato focused a seal, whispering to Sakura before narrowing his eyes at the Hiruko puppet.

Kakashi drew up next to the old woman and the Kazekage's brother. Before he could begin to formulate a strategy, Chiyo spun to gape at him. "K-Konoha no Shiroi Kiba!" Several things happened in that moment.

Chakra flared and with a snarl of "Mokuton: Mokusatsu Shibari no Jutsu!" Yamato's arms morphed into wood before snapping at Sasori's puppet, binding the surprised nukenin with wood tendrils.

Kankuro clenched several of his fingers, Karasu's four arms and Kuroari's six arms detached from the puppets and spun to point their shoulder joints at Hiruko before hidden blades folded out and speared towards the nukenin.

Howling in rage, Chiyo dove at Kakashi screaming "You dare! I'll get vengeance for my son, White Fang!"
Sasori manipulated Hiruko's bladed tail into brushing aside Kankuro's attack before bringing the steel limb down to sever Yamato's wood tendrils. His movements were not enough to deter Sakura, who had charged in with her fist cocked back.

Punching forwards with all the strength Tsunade had become famous for, the pink-haired medic's fist shattered the Hiruko puppet in a single strike.

A shadow burst forth from Hiruko as the frame of his puppet collapsed. Sasori straightened from a crouch, the surprisingly young red-haired male regarding his destroyed puppet with some regret before turning to watch his attacking grandmother and the white-haired jounin she was attempting to murder. "Enough, grandmother." Sasori ordered, and the old woman ground to a stop in surprise, doing a double take at the young Sasori. "Konoha's White Fang died two decades ago."

Chiyo's face regarded him with surprise before growing pained and regretful. "Oh Sasori, it's been twenty years since I've seen you, and you haven't aged a day." she whispered to herself. "To have gone so far as to turn yourself into a human puppet?"

The red-haired man ignored his grandmother turning to regard Kakashi. "Allow me to introduce myself, Sharingan no Kakashi. I am Akasuna no Sasori. Your father murdered my parents." He stated amiably, as though discussing the weather. Pinning the group of shinobi arrayed against him with a blank look, he gave a slow smirk. "Allow me to show you my art."

With a burst of smoke, the nukenin revealed his pride and joy as a puppeteer. "This is my favorite human puppet."

Chiyo and Sasori breathed the name of the puppet simultaneously, one in pride and the other in fear.

"The Sandaime Kazekage."

"This is where you'll be staying." Jiraiya declared with a flourish, pushing open the door to the small bricked house.

Sasuke thought it was rather quaint; something a small family might have lived in. Sans the bars on the windows and the guards posted around the property.

"It's for the very special prisoners." The Sennin whispered theatrically, voice still loud and carrying. "There are even some helmets inside for those special people."

"Well it's good to know where you stay when you're in Konoha then." Sasuke replied tartly. "Thanks for lending us your home for the time being. Don't forget your helmet while you're showing us the inside."

Kiba guffawed as Jiraiya sent a scowl at the Uchiha. Shaking his head, Jiraiya fixed the non-prisoners with a glare before shooing them away. "This is as far as you go today kiddos."

Konohamaru fled as soon as the order left the Sennin's mouth, dashing down the street to reunite with his team. Yawning, Shikamaru scratched the back of his head before sighing at Sasuke. "Watch yourself tomorrow. Naruko and Sakura would be too troublesome if you get yourself killed." Kiba grinned, ruffling the Uchiha's hair. Sasuke slapped the hand away, and the Inuzuka barked in amusement. "Watch your ass, Uchiha. I want to fight with you someday."

Glomping the raven with a squeal, Ino pinched his cheek before rushing Shikamaru and Chouji out the gates. "Good luck, Sasuke-kun!" she called. Chouji chuckled before throwing in his own
farewell. "Let's go out for barbeque sometime Sasuke-kun." Team Ten vanished, Kiba on their heels.

Shino readjusted his glasses before nodding silently at Sasuke and departing. Neji gave him a blank look before nodding slightly. "Watch yourself Uchiha. I'd like to fight you as well."

"Yosh! As would I Sasuke-kun! Let us burn with the fire of youth!" Lee shouted, grabbing Sasuke's hand in a furious and one-sided handshake before rushing off to the training grounds. Tenten shrugged, not particularly familiar with the last Uchiha. "Good luck, Uchiha-kun." she offered, before leaving with Neji.

Bowing formally, Hinata gave him a small smile before departing. As far as she was concerned, words weren't really necessary any longer.

As the last of his escort vanished, Sasuke was left staring after them with looking thoroughly ruffled and confused. "I…what?" he muttered blankly, not used at all to the affection they had shown him. He knew he should have expected less hostility, given that there was no record of crimes against the villages hanging over him, sans desertion. And that no one had died because of him this time around. But he was totally not expecting the friendliness they were showing him.

Suigetsu bent over laughing at the look on his face before Karin punched the back of the Kiri-nin's head. The two started off arguing again, while Juugo looked up at the sky with a long-suffering expression.

Taking pity on the stunned Uchiha, Jiraiya set his hand on Sasuke's shoulder before spinning him and pushing him towards the house that they would be staying in. It was very cozy, all traditional architecture mixed in with the necessary additions to make the place an ideal building to hold important prisoners for trial with dignity.

The white-haired man abandoned the group at the door, leaving them to explore on their own. Suigetsu immediately stalked off through the halls, determined to find something to amuse himself with. Biting her lip uncertainly, Karin stared after the Kiri-nin and back at Sasuke before decisively nodding and setting off after the Hozuki.

Juugo stuck to Sasuke's side like a burr, silent presence comforting as the Uchiha wandered aimlessly through the halls. Stumbling into a study, Sasuke took in the couch pushed against a large window that overlooked a carefully tended garden. Sinking into the cushions, the raven kicked off his zori before sprawling and shielding his eyes from the sun with an arm over his face.

Juugo regarded him silently before drifting over to peruse the books. Selecting one that looked mildly interesting, *Dokonjō Ninden*, the orange-haired teen dropped into a leather armchair before cracking the book open and basking in quiet companionship. He almost missed Sasuke's contemplative murmur.

"Good luck, huh?"

He met her under the moonlight.

"It's been a long time Sasuke." The blonde stated, blue eyes watching him with an unreadable look.

He grunted in reply "Hn. So it has, dobe."

A spasm of pain flashed across her features, turning her face cold. "You don't have the right to call me that anymore."
Spinning red Sharingan turned to regard her. His pale face twitched into amusement as he stood, hands dripping moisture from the glistening stream he’d been washing them in. "I don’t remember having asked your permission in the first place, Naruko." He declared, watching her through lidded eyes.

Her expression turned painfully nostalgic. "Yeah." The blonde agreed. "You were always a bastard like that." Silence hung between them, only marked by the slow lap of water on rock and the chirp of crickets.

"Why did you leave?"

Sasuke blinked slowly at the question, taking the first of many steps towards her. Stalking in a circling motion, his crimson orbs never left her sky-blue. "I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean.” He answered in a low tone.

Humming, the girl shook her head and closed her eyes. Blonde strands arched in the moonlight, glittering pale. "You know what I mean, Sasuke." Naruko sighed, slowly opening her eyes to pin him with a glance. "Why did you run out on the war? What happened to Akatsuki?"

Lips thinned. He drew closer, still circling, tomoe lazily tracking around his dark pupil. Sharingan flared into Mangekyo, red starburst written into onyx. "These are Itachi’s eyes you know." He stated softly.

Naruko’s brow furrowed in confusion.

"He and I had different visions of the future. But now, nothing is really that clear. I don’t have a vision of the future. I see only the past now."

The blonde’s pale pink lips parted, eyes glimmering with realization.

He found his gaze drawn to the sight.

"Tobi comes by sometimes." The raven warned conversationally. "Never at night, since I warned him I didn't want to be disturbed at night. He tries to convince me to join his crusade again."

Naruko’s eyes shone in the dark. "And will you?" she asked.

Shrugging, Sasuke circled again, closer. "Who knows?" the Uchiha muttered, still staring at Naruko’s lips. Those lips opened again, pale pink tongue darting out to moisten her lips.

"Will you come back home?"

Blinking, he stared incredulously. "I’m an international criminal, dobe. That choice isn’t open to me anymore and you know it. Even if it was, I’m not interested in rejoining the village that destroyed my family."

The girl looked completely unsurprised, eyes trailing down to stare at his padding feet. "I just had to ask I guess. For old times' sake at least." She watched those feet glide closer and closer until they stopped in front of her. Turning her gaze back up, blue met crimson.

Breath mingling, Sasuke stared down at Naruko and mused at how utterly crazy he felt at the moment. Maybe the moon was turning his thoughts strange and fey. He was absorbed in the scent of green apples, and he silently applauded whomever had developed the shampoo she was wearing.
Pale light illuminated her face, whisker birthmarks feral and poignant. His eyes tracked a wayward blond strand that hung over her face. Sasuke's hand moved seemingly on its own to tuck the strand behind her ear, fingers tangling in her wild mane.

Naruko's eyes went wide, pink lips trembled slightly and he was utterly undone. The Last Uchiha leaned in, wrapping his arms around the girl to pull her closer and bring his mouth to hers in a searing kiss. A gasp escaped her, and Sasuke took the opportunity to slip his tongue between into her mouth, his tongue seeking hers. Naruko stood in the circle of his arms stiffly before completely melting, hand coming up to claw at his back and pull him even closer.

Sasuke would never forget the way Naruko tasted.

It was the first of many meetings in the moonlight.

Black cloak billowing in the wind, the red-haired nukenin smirked. "What's wrong, Chiyo-baa-sama?" Sasori tossed his head. "Are you so choked up that you can't even speak?" Crouching, the puppeteer drew his arms to the side. "That's okay. It's our first reunion in twenty years." The Sandaime Kazekage human puppet curled over his shoulder, joints creaking ominously.

"Sasori, what you've done is... how terrible." Chiyo breathed, eyes wide.

Kakashi tensed, turning his focus from the formerly homicidal grandmother to the Akatsuki shinobi.

Sasori merely chuckled. "So what? Are you telling me a retired old hag about to keel over is going to avenge him?" Nodding at the Sandaime's modified corpse, the redhead snorted. "How admirable."

Eyes narrowing, the old woman drew herself up to all her short height. "Even if I'm about to die, I just have to remember the past. I have too many regrets to die just now." Voice rising with every word. "Especially when I see that my grandson has become a villain! You betray the village and attack three Kazekage!"

"Three?" Yamato muttered, sending a sidelong glance at Sasori.

"Orochimaru may have been the one to kill the Yondaime Kazekage, but I know your companions were behind it." The wizened woman accused, pointing her finger at her grandson.

"Easy. I don't know anything about the Yondaime." Sasori teased. "It is true that Orochimaru was my original partner in Akatsuki, and we accomplished a lot together, but-

"You." Sakura interrupted, catching the nukenin's eye. "If you worked with Orochimaru, you must know all about him. I have a lot of questions for you!"

Sasori rolled his eyes, tracking back to watch the suddenly moving Hatake. Kakashi circled back and forth, Sharingan eye spinning slowly. Sasori smirked before declaring "I don't have time to talk about dead men to dead men. Now let's do this."

A hand arched forward, sending the human puppet at the copy-nin with an intimidating clatter.

Crossing the distance in a flash, Kakashi's eye widened in surprise when chakra strings attached to the back of his limbs and pulled him to the side. Glancing over at Chiyo in shock, the old woman only frowned before barking "Move!"
Sasori's arms crossed, chakra strings pulling at the human puppet and releasing poison-tipped blades from its sleeves. The suddenly dangerous arms swung at Kakashi before being intercepted by the broken Hiruko puppet's bladed tail by another jerk of Chiyo's hands. The steel tail shattered in a single strike. Then Sasori was diving to the side, dodging a wooden lance courtesy of Yamato. His Kazekage puppet retreated, hands slapping aside Karasu's new offensive with a twitch of its master's fingers.

"Don't let any of his blades cut you. They're poisoned!" the old woman warned the group.

Chuckling, Sasori gazed at his grandmother. "Not bad, Chiyo-baa-sama. But let's see how you deal with this." The nukenin swiped the air, chakra strings oscillating. The Kazekage puppet swung its left arm forward, panels opening along the limb. Seals inked onto the panels glowed blue before hundreds of wooden hands pushed forth, summoned from extra dimensional space. Traveling in a twisting wave, the hands darted towards Chiyo before arching in midair to strike at Sakura.

Yamato slashed his hand across, wood rising from the dirt to meet the rush of hands, delaying them long enough to give Sakura time to leap away before the hands crashed into sand. A cloud of sand sputtered up, obscuring the wooden pillar.

Crooking his finger, Sasori pulled pipes from several of the wooden arms and released a poisonous cloud of fog. A whistle of wind alerted the nukenin to an incoming blow, and he slipped under Kakashi's kick before pulling back on his strings and sending the Kazekage puppet leaping towards the copy-nin, blades gleaming in the sun.

Yamato was preoccupied with throwing up wooden walls to prevent the poisonous purple smoke from blowing across the battlefield while Sakura bit her lip in thought.

Kuroari intercepted the human puppet, the two colliding in a flurry of limbs.

Sneering at Kankuro, Sasori clenched his fist before reopening it and turning his palm in a circle. The Sandaime Kazekage lashed out, blades sinking in and destroying Kuroari.

Kankuro grit his teeth, sending Karasu around the human puppet and towards its wielder.

Sasori laughed, releasing the chakra strings from the human puppet and lashing them onto Karasu. His former puppet ground to a stop, making it easy prey for the Sandaime Kazekage.

Sighing in regret, Chiyo drew a small scroll from her pocket and slowly unraveled it. A burst of smoke and chakra revealed two puppets that made Sasori blink in surprise.

Turning his attention from the now broken Karasu, the red-haired man smirked. "I must admit, I didn't expect you to trot out those obsolete tools. I made those puppets Chiyo-baa-sama. I know all their secrets."

The old woman's lips twitched. "Not anymore. It's been a long time since you left these ones behind with me." The male puppet pressed its right hand to the female puppet's right, and the two drew apart, dark wire stretching between their palms. "You'll find there are a few additions to"

Nodding at the male, "'Father', and" Chiyo tracked her eyes to the other puppet "'Mother'."

And then the two puppeteers moved.

"Fast." Kakashi muttered, eyes tracking the puppets as they flashed across the distance, Father and Mother puppets whirling around the thousands of arms that stretched from the Kazekage's left. The wire between them sliced effortlessly through the arms, slicing around closer and closer to the Kazekage puppet.
Sasori frowned before yanking back on his chakra strings, causing the left arm of the human puppet to detach and the Kazekage to fly away from the offensive couple. Another finger twitch brought forth a spinning buzz saw in place of the left arm.

Father and Mother chased after the Sandaime, who fled until it was brought to a stop when a wooden wall rose from the sand and cut it off. Forced to engage, the Sandaime Kazekage met Father and Mother in a flurry of sparks.

Sasori and Chiyo hurriedly slashed through the air, making their puppets dance. Eventually the two separated, revealing the Sandaime's chipped and cracked selection of blades and saws. Father and Mother did not escape unscathed, Father's bladed whip torn and tattered, and Mother's katana broken off at the hilt. The two were still connected by the stretch of steel wire between them, and Chiyo drew them away.

Sasori sighed before the red-haired nukenin widened his eyes at the suddenly close sound of chirping birds. Spinning to the side, Sasori took in the charging Kakashi, who stabbed towards him with a hand wreathed in lightning. A slow smirk curled his lips, making the Hatake's Sharingan eye widen. Kakashi tried to pull away too late, blades exploding from Sasori back to slice along Kakashi's arm.

Clenching at his bleeding arm, Kakashi drew back to stand behind Chiyo.

"That's my special blend of poison." Sasori declared cheerily. "It will take you three long and painful days to die." Sweat beaded along Kakashi's forehead, the poison already taking its toll. The former ANBU pushed away the sudden exhaustion that burdened his limbs.

"Don't move too much, Sensei!" Sakura shouted. "It'll make your blood move faster and spread the poison more quickly!"

"Smart girl." The nukenin drawled. "But." Twitching his finger, the Kazekage puppet's mouth clicked open, a dark cloud crawling from the orifice. "It's not going to be enough to deal with this." The smog circled around the puppeteer and his puppet. "Let me introduce you to the Iron Sand. The most feared weapon in the history of Sunagakure. Will you witness my performance?"

"You should get out of here, Hatake." The old woman ordered her enemy's son. "You don't stand a chance against this. Especially in your condition."

Kakashi blinked away the darkness that hazed the edges of his vision. "In Konoha we have a saying: 'Those who disobey the rules are trash, but those who abandon comrades are worse than trash'."

Cutting her eyes toward the copy-nin, Chiyo chuckled. "Soft Konoha shinobi. It's your choice in the end."

Growling "You're too slow!" Sasori threw his hands to the side. The cloud of iron fillings convalesced into small compact balls. Offering his palms to the sky, the nukenin hissed "Setetsu Shigure!" and the iron pellets launched towards the old woman almost faster than the eye could perceive.

Forming a seal, Yamato gave life to a defensive wall that arched between the two and the iron balls. Colliding with a series of hollow thunks, the capsules reduced the wall to splinters before continuing to slam into sand where the copy-nin and old woman stood, throwing up a cloud of grit.

The dust settled, revealing the two crouched behind the Father puppet. A glowing blue shield was
formed in front of the puppet, and Sasori chuckled. "I see you've been messing with them. He's
gone through a few upgrades since he last played with me." Panting, Chiyo deactivated the shield
before twitching her fingers. The Father puppet shook in place, joints creaking and the old woman
frowned.

Calling "I've pumped his body full of iron sand. As long as I have the Sandaime Kazekage, he's
useless." Sasori turned his focus to Yamato. "And you are getting in my way far too often." Iron
fillings flowed back into a cloud, rising from the sand. "I'm going to attack all of you at once." He
warned, the cloud forming into a group of blades. "You won't escape again. One puppet can't
protect this many people. What are you going to do, Grandma?"

Iron lanced down, peppering the group with blades. Sand exploded upwards, hiding his targets
from his sight. "This is a technique that I forbid myself from using." Chiyo rasped from within her
cloud. "I swore I'd never need it again. But I guess life isn't that simple…"

Wind blew away the sand, revealing the group shielded by figures in white. Sasori grinned in
appreciation while Kankuro stared in awe at the white puppets, his Sanshou shattered by the attack
and forgotten at his feet.

"I'd heard rumours." The redhead admitted. "But to witness it in person! The technique that you
conquered a castle with..." It was Kankuro that completed his statement, voice a whisper.

"Shirohigi: Jikki Chikamatsu no Shū."

Suddenly, with a wrenching shriek the Sandaime puppet began to implode on itself. "What?" Sasori
shouted, yanking back on his chakra strings. The puppet refused to budge, splintering into pieces
and becoming useless. Tracking a furious gaze towards his enemies, Sasori's blood boiled at the
smug look Kakashi wore, his Sharingan mutated and twisting.

"Kamui." The doujutsu ended prematurely, Sharingan fading to three tomoe before the copy-nin
collapsed to the dirt.

Sasori's human puppet was rendered unusable, and then a fist slammed into the side of his face.

Sasori collapsed into a pile of limbs, puppet joints clacking as his body was separated and
dismembered. He didn't move. Sighing in relief, Sakura dashed over to her sensei before checking
the man's pulse. Kankuro was still peering at the white puppets in awe, not daring to get close
enough to touch. Yamato relaxed before wiping sweat from his brow and staring off over the
horizon.

"You know. If you were just gonna fight it out back here, you could've let me fight that guy instead
of sending this pasty bastard after me." Naruko rose from over the hill, jerking her thumb back at
the emotionless Root member. Sai smiled as Sakura jumped.

"Naruko!" the medic growled. "Help me get Kakashi-sensei up. We need to get him to Suna. He's
been poisoned." The blonde's face turned serious and she sprinted the distance, crouching beside
the Hatake with Sai standing behind her.

"It's useless."

Sakura froze, slowly turning her head to stare at Sasori's body. Wooden limbs rolled in the dirt,
reattaching to the man's torso with a pop. His head slammed back onto his neck backwards, before
rotating to pin the group with a scowl. "I'm not that easy to kill."

"He's become a human puppet." Chiyo stated in a tone of regret.
Beginning in a reverent tone, Sasori breathed "True art is beauty that endures the test of time. Eternity. I have become the greatest art!" he finished with maniacal laughter.

"Those puppets you inherited from the first puppet master, Mozaemon are certainly impressive… but," A lazy chakra strand snapped a scroll from a contained built into the back of his puppet body. Opening the right side of his chest, the cavity glowed blue with the hum of pure chakra. The scroll was opened with a flourish, red shadows streaking forth to darken the sky above.

"I used these to conquer an entire nation." Sasori declared with relish. "I surpassed you and Mozaemon a long time ago, Chiyo-baa-sama. Behold my performance of a hundred puppets! Akahigi: Hyakki no Sōen!"

"This will be the finale." Chiyo called out. "Are you prepared?" Sasori leaned forward, chakra string humming. "Here he comes!"

The red puppets leapt forward aggressively, Chiyo's white puppets deemed the most dangerous.

Gritting his teeth, Kankuro glared at the nukenin. Shouting "Don't underestimate me!" the brunette lashed chakra strings at the group of puppets, wrenching several from Sasori's control and turning them on their brethren. The heated look Sasori gave him told him the master puppeteer hardly appreciated the Kazekage's brother messing with his masterpiece. Kankuro sneered in reply.

Whirling through the crowd of swinging blades, Sakura punched out at the red puppets. They collapsed easily beneath her blows before dismembered limbs rose from the dirt to strike again. Scowling at the tactic, the medic dodged between the poison tipped stabs. Further punches demolished puppets to the point of uselessness.

Arching streams of living wood spun through the air, whipping out at any puppet that dared get too close to Yamato or the unconscious Kakashi. Panting at the exertion, the Mokuton user formed a series of seal before spitting "Suiton: Hahonryū!" Water swirled on the ANBU's palms, blades of water shooting out at Sasori's puppets. Wooden chests and weapon bearing limbs cracked underneath the concussive force.

Ink lions howled, biting down on the scarlet figures as Sai painted out various beasts and brought them to life. Black and white snakes slithered from the page of his scroll, wrapping around Sasori's puppets and binding them in place for his mauling lions to destroy. Sasori focused on the pale teen, the sudden swarm of puppets overrunning the raven until a blue-eyed blonde stepped between them. A lazy smirk curled about Naruko's face as she brought her hands into a cross shaped hand seal.

"So that's the way you want to play it?" the girl laughed. "Let's see how you like this: Tajuu Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" A veritable army of blonde clones flooded the desert plane. A cry of determined voices rang from the crowd of Kage Bunshins as they rushed forward to engage Sasori's puppets.

White figures smashed through the puppeteers red figures, old woman and unnaturally young man glaring at one another. Their hands were a blur of motion as they weaved the puppets back and forth. As Chiyo's ten puppets thinned the overwhelming numbers of Sasori's hundred puppets, she couldn't help but feel that with each destroyed puppet, his control and skill in using the remainder increased. The abrupt disabling of two of Chikamatsu's collection and the renewed pressure that drove her offensive into a defense confirmed her fears.

A red puppet dove past the barricade of white figures, poisonous katana spearing out at Chiyo. The old woman drew back reflexively, but knew she was far too slow to dodge. Sasori's puppet ground
to a halt, blade trembling before flying backwards to assault the redhead's puppets.

Involuntarily, Chiyo tracked her gaze to a sweating Kankuro. The Kazekage's brother shook with exhaustion, the struggle of seizing control from Sasori becoming more fatiguing with every destroyed puppet.

Yamato wasn't in much better condition, his jutsu entirely defensive. A wooden dome sprung over the ANBU and the unconscious White Fang's son. Regarding the other combatants with an apologetic look, the brunette took cover with Kakashi from the hail of blades.

Sakura and Sai crouched behind Naruko, worn down by the rigours of continuous combat. "This is too much." The medic groaned, wiping away sweat. Sai nodded breathlessly in agreement, his hand cramped from continuous use of his ink beasts. Even Naruko was beginning to show exhaustion, summoning wave after wave of Kage Bunshin draining her reserves. "This can't go on," Chiyo whispered, before her fingers twitched.

Bursting with laughter, Sasori regarded the battle with glee. He'd truly been worried for a while that he might lose the fight. The sudden appearance of the blonde who seemed to be able to summon unlimited amounts of shadow clones seemed to turn the tide against him. But he'd worn down the girl in the end. And if he was not mistaken, she was a jinchuuriki as well. Which was perfect for him, since it would free him from his obligations to Akatsuki to bring them a jinchuuriki. He doubted the organization would care all that much if he brought in a different one than the one he'd been assigned. A jinchuuriki was a jinchuuriki, as far as Sasori was concerned.

A sudden wrenching pain filled his mind, destroying the track of his thoughts. His remaining red puppets dropped listlessly to the ground, chakra strings fading as he staring in shock at the twin katana emerging from his chest. The blades had slammed through his heart, fatally wounded the only remaining mortal part of him. Incredulous eyes trailed up to stare at his grandmother. Her lips moved, his eyes reading them as they formed "I am so sorry that it came to this, Sasori." His head creaked on his neck, rotating to discover the puppets his grandmother had killed him with.

"Father and Mother."

"You let your guard down at the end, Sasori." Chiyo called as she drifted closer, guilt written into her face.

Blood leaked from his pierced core, poisoned purple. Smiling wistfully, Sasori leaned his head back to stare into the purpled sky of dusk. "So I die." He muttered. "An incomplete being. Not a human, but not a puppet either." Cradled in the arms of the makeshift parents he had crafted decades before, Sasori turned his face towards the pink-haired medic.

"There are three vials of antidote to my poison sealed in the top scroll on my back. Use it to save your sensei and your teammate." Blood trickled down Naruko's arms, shallow cuts littering her skin. Chuckling sardonically, the redhead blinked. "To the victor the spoils."

Sakura nodded slowly, stalking around to retrieve the mentioned scroll. Running over the wooden dome Yamato had created, the Haruno shattered it in blow. Glaring down at the sheepish ANBU, she unsealed the antidote before injecting Kakashi with one. Reaching to place her hand on his forehead, Sakura's hand glowed with green chakra.

Kakashi gasped as he was forcibly dragged back to consciousness, pulling his hitai-ate down over Obito's eye. Yamato pulled the copy-nin to his feet, helping the man limp over to the dying Sasori.

Sakura stabbed Naruko in the arm with the second vial of antidote before respectfully handing the
third to Chiyo. Sakura bowed to the surprised elder before slapping the back of the loudly complaining blonde's head. Naruko scowled before opening her mouth to shout.

"You asked for information on Orochimaru." Sasori sighed, and the blonde's mouth snapped shut.

Staring at the nukenin with undivided attention, Naruko motioned frantically. "Where's Orochimaru?" she growled, narrowing feral red eyes. Kakashi gazed at her in concern at the upsurge of Kyuubi chakra into the teen's system.

"Lying face down in a shallow grave I imagine."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means he's dead."

"Who killed him?" Kakashi interjected, giving Sasori a hard look. The dying man simply looked amused. "Itachi's little brother did him in. Uchiha Sasuke."

Sakura gaped in shock before grinning. Naruko laughed in relief. Sai twitched, wondering how such a development would affect Danzo. Kakashi slowly smiled while Yamato blinked in surprise.

"So where's Sasuke now then?" the blonde burst, reaching forward to shake the man before thinking better of it. Sasori gave her an unnerving look, staring at the leaf symbol carved into her forehead protector significantly. The silence stretched long before the nukenin brought it with a rasp, head falling forwards as he said his last words.

"Uchiha Sasuke was taken into the custody of Konohagakure nineteen days ago. He's on trial for desertion tomorrow morning."

Thus did Akasuna no Sasori perish, one bloody evening in the desert sand.

"What?" Sakura whispered, fists clenching at the feeling of sheer betrayal and disbelief that flooded her chest. Naruko's face fell carefully blank, whisker marks swelling and darkening. Expression filling with anger, Kakashi connected the dots and glared at the message scroll to the Kazekage.

"I'm going." The blonde declared, spinning to face the North.

Growling "Me too." Sakura did the same.

"You can't!" Yamato sighed. "We have a mission to deliver a message to the Kazekage!"

"Fuck the mission!" Naruko shouted, pinning Yamato with an enraged red-eyed glare. Yamato stood, slowly tensing as he prepared to summon Mokuton to subdue the bijuu's chakra.

"That won't be necessary." Sai stated expressionlessly. "I'm sure that Yamato-sempai and I can complete this mission alone."

Kakashi blinked at Sai in surprise before he cocked his head, hiding the flood of suspicion. "If we go back to Konoha without you, it's a crime of abandoning the mission. We could get in a lot of trouble."

Naruko shook in place, fists clenching impatiently.

"Don't worry about it. If it's a favour to Naruko, I'm sure Gaara can fake the excuse that he requested those two stay behind a few days." Kankuro offered.
"The only question is, are you going to rat us out?" Sakura hissed, regarding the brunette ANBU member. Sighing, Yamato shook his head before pointing to the North. "I won't, so just get out of here."

Throwing Kakashi over her back, Naruko ignored the pained gush of air that left his lungs.

"Thanks Yamato-taichou!" Sakura called. "You know what they say about teammates and the rules." Without waiting for his response, the trio bolted over the dunes, determined to make it home by first light.

"Those who disobey the rules are trash. But those who abandon their comrades are worse than trash." Sai quoted, a real smile stretching across his face. "Come taichou; let's help our allies clean up this mess."

"My grandson isn't a mess!"

Body surging with energizing red chakra, Naruko's strides ate up the distance before her. Slitted red-eyes gleamed in the night with anticipation and determination.

_Just you wait, Sasuke! I'm coming!_

A hand slapped over his mouth, jarring him from sleep. Sasuke tracked wild eyes to focus on three men crouched over him. Featureless white masks looked down at him. The Uchiha twisted, hands coming up to punch at his captors. Two of the three broke off; gripping his arms with iron force and shoving them back into the mattress.

"It would be better for all those concerned if you did not live to stand trial." The third one informed him, voice carefully blank. Sasuke eyes narrowed in fury as the man slowly drew his katana from its sheathe on his back. Aiming the glimmering point at the Last Uchiha, the man intoned solemnly.

"All for Konoha."

Then the katana lanced down, fire sliding into his flesh. Sasuke's eyes widened in pain, a muffled groan echoing from his throat. The man cocked his head at the sound before withdrawing the blade and stabbing forward.

Again and again, hot pain streamed across his mind. Losing count after the fifth stab, the world went dark. Sasuke heard the faint sigh of "It is done." Before the hands clenching his arms released him. The taste of blood was one the back of his tongue.

His mind skittered away into oblivion.

_He met her under the moonlight._

_Shfts of light stabbed through the cracks in the roof of the cavern, illuminating the dark with a corpse light. Sasuke stumbled forwards, legs shaking as he beheld a bed of blood. Knees collapsing under him, he crawled the remainder of the distance before cradling the side of her face with one hand. Her skin was cold._

_Dazed blue eyes fluttered open, tracking sightlessly over the ceiling back panic flooded her face. Her eyes darted about before settling on his features and slowly relaxing. "Sasuke?" she croaked, blood bubbling from the corner of her lips. A trembling hand reached toward his face, and he_
caught it with both of his, his hands fire against her icy skin.

"I'm here." He breathed, coal black regarding her with a hint of hysteria. The blonde chuckled, and the Uchiha slid an arm under her head to prop her up slightly. Grinning a bloody smile, she tucked her left hand into the warm embrace her right enjoyed within his grip.

"I never really expected to go out like this." She wheezed, eyelids fluttering. Sasuke jostled her, shaking Naruko from the grip of the sleep she craved so badly at the moment. Muttering "You're not going to die dobe." Sasuke gave her a fierce look.

"Yeah." She rolled an eye at him. "I kinda am." She had no idea why she felt like bursting out in laughter, morbid amusement rising in her throat. "No, you're not!" he hissed back, desperation in his tone.

"Alright." She chuckled, pulling a hand from her grasp to cup his face. "I'll promise not to die if you promise me something in return. I always keep my promises."

"What is it?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Promise me that you'll protect Konoha. That you'll finish this war." His eyes went wide and shocked.

"I can't, Naruko!" his tongue felt unusually thick, blood rushing in his ears as she frowned.

Naruko's face rippled in pain, and she coughed up blood, crimson trailing down her cheeks. "Promise me Sasuke..." A burble of blood as her eyes fluttered shut.

"Yes! Anything! Just don't you die on me dobe!" He choked out a sob. Shaking her slightly until her eyes cracked back open.

"Heh," A chuckle "You always came through in the end."

"Dobe!" he barked.

"I promise not to die." She breathed, blue eyes regarding him with a soft look. They both knew it for a lie, but chose to let themselves believe in it for a moment. Sasuke gusted a sigh, trailing a finger down the side of her face. Coughing again, Naruko rolled her head to the side to peer around the cavern. "Where's the boy?"


Sasuke gently lay her head back down before rising to his feet and stalking around her in a circle.

The Uchiha frowned in confusion before looking back at the blonde with confusion. He took in the hand sprawled over her stomach and had a moment of horrified realization. By the swell of her distended stomach to the spray of blood between her legs and the chunks of gore that splattered the ground, he knew.

Pounding echoed in his skull as his stomach clenched. Sasuke's hand shook as he pressed a palm to his forehead. NONONONONO rang in his ears, denial and realization warring within his mind before his track was shattered by a soft rattle. "Sasuke?" the blonde called desperately, shaking hands clawing desperately at the air.

Ice slammed through him, numbing everything. He was barely cognizant as he knelt down next to her, taking her hands in one of his before tucking an errant blonde strand behind her ear. "It's fine.
He's just sleeping." He heard come from his own throat. Pressing his forehead against her chilled one, he smiled. "Everything is going to be fine."

Naruko's face relaxed in pure relief. "That's good." She breathed.

Sasuke wrapped an arm around her, pressing a soft kiss to her lips before whispering. "It'll be fine. I'll make sure he ends up a good shinobi of Konoha."

The blonde's lips curled into a smile, blue eyes staring into coal black. "That's good." The blonde rasped again. Sky blue orbs gazed at his pale face with love and adoration until the life faded from them, turning them listless.

Sasuke drew away, staring at her body before blood trickled from his eyes. Black fire washed over her body, filling the air with the smell of burning flesh. The Uchiha ignored it, standing vigil until the body of the woman and the boy collapsed into little more than white ash.

Mechanically withdrawing a leather sack from his pocket, he knelt on the stone and slowly scraped the ash into the sack. It was a task that took hours, early evening fading into the dead of night. The moon shone directly overhead, pale mocking light shining directly down on him as he tied off the now ash filled sack.

Pressing his lips to the leather, he allowed more honest tears to run down his face, washing away the dried blood that caked his cheeks. His voice was a pained whisper in the night.

"I think I would have named him Itachi. Would you have approved, Naruko?"

Sasuke would never forget the press of leather against his mouth, ash shifting beneath the surface as the cremated remains of the mother and their son mingled.

It was the last of many meetings in the moonlight.

He woke up with his face pressed into the floor, cheek sticky with dried blood. By all the Ancestors, Sasuke was tired. Eyes fluttering, he wheezed out a sigh. Early morning sunlight streamed through the open curtains, lighting up his closed lids to a warm red glow. The Uchiha felt like he was going to die. But he'd made a promise. He'd fought and bled and died for a second chance.

Get up.

Fingers scrabbled on the hardwood as he fought to claw himself to his knees. Weakened from blood loss, his arm collapsed beneath his weight. Flopping down with a surge of pain through his gut, the Last Uchiha lay on the floor, life bleeding away.

Get up.

Again he struggled, pulling his knees under him. Succeeding in making it to his knees, he slowly pushed up. A wave of vertigo rolled through his brain, making him dry heave and collapse back to the floor.

Get up.

Just you wait, Sasuke! I'm coming!

"Naruko." He breathed into a puddle of his own blood, struggling to rise. The third time he rose,
swaying uncertainly on his feet. Pressing a hand to the wall, he leaned into it before taking slow halting steps to the door. Sliding the screen to the side, he stepped out in the hall before steadying himself with a hand on the frame.

Two doors down, a bleary eyed redhead wandered out of the bathroom. Scrubbing at her eyes, Karin replaced her glasses before turning to go back to her room. The girl took one look at the blood-soaked and shaking Sasuke before letting out an unholy shriek.

Suigetsu's door slammed open, the Kiri-nin roaring in anger, dressed only in his boxers. Sasuke stumbled slightly before righting himself, drawing Suigetsu's attention. Cursing, the white-haired nin pushed past the stunned Karin to search the bathroom for medical supplies.

Shaken from her stupor, the redhead dashed the distance to Sasuke. Rolling up her sleeves to reveal bite scars, Karin was just beginning to offer her arm to the Uchiha when Juugo rounded the corner. A panicked expression slid onto his face and the orange-haired man leapt the distance, crossing it in a flash. Steady the shaking Uchiha with a hand on his back, Juugo looked into Sasuke's room with a murderous expression.

"Here Sasuke-kun. Bite me." Sasuke immediately complied, sinking his teeth into the skin of her arm. Karin involuntarily winced, watching as the Uchiha lit up with a faint green shroud of chakra. Several of his cuts steamed closed, rapid cell division stimulated by the healing chakra. The effects of the healing bite faded more quickly than it should have, and Karin collapsed before being scooped up by and entirely silent Suigetsu.

"I can't heal it all." The redhead wheezed. "My chakra has been sealed." Sasuke straightened before tearing his blood soaked haori off. "It's fine." He stated. "You've healed anything that was life threatening." Juugo sighed in relief before taking a roll of bandages from the occupied Kiri-nin. "Have a quick shower, and then I'll wrap you up."

Sasuke nodded in assent before striding down to the bathroom. "Thank you, Karin." He called as an afterthought before stepping into the bathroom. The redhead smiled before Suigetsu snorted. The two glared at each other, though it was far less heated than usual.

The hot water stung his cuts, washing the blood away to cloud at the bottom of the shower and slowly drain away. Involuntarily wincing as he quickly ran a bar of soap over his wounds, he leaned his forehead against the shower wall. He hadn't been expecting an assassination attempt, and the list of culprits was reasonable motive and capability was not large. The Hokage, one of the council members, or a group of shinobi with a grudge. Of the three, he deemed one man more likely than the rest. Shimura Danzo.

That he'd been stabbed so many times and survived was suspicious enough. It could have simply been an accident of fate, but Sasuke had long ago stopped believing in coincidences. There was some greater plot afoot.

Turning off the blast of water with a sigh, the Uchiha dried himself off with a fluffy white towel. The towel quickly stained with his blood before he wrapped it around his waist. Stepping out into the cold hallway, he padded back down to his room before slipping inside. Juugo was waiting, and quickly wrapped bandages around his wounded torso. Silently frowning in concern, the orange-haired man stepped out to allow him to dress in privacy. The stained towel dropped to the floor, leaving Sasuke to shiver in the cold naked for a moment before he threw on his father's uniform.

Sasuke idly wondered if Itachi had allowed the coup to succeed, and given his brother's illness, if he might've ended up dressed in his father's clothes eventually anyway.
Gliding back into the hallway, he found the members of Taka hastily dressed and waiting for him. "I think you should go to the hospital Sasuke." Juugo rumbled, worry evident in his expression. Karin offered her vocal agreement while Suigetsu looked to the side and grunted "You should."

The Uchiha's hand slashed through the air, silencing the three. "I will not." He declared. Continuing at the rebellious looks they sported "I cannot afford to show weakness at this critical juncture. I must maintain the political momentum I garnered yesterday when the clan heirs rallied in my favour."

"Come." He decided. "It is enough for now."

"We are gathered today to discuss the crimes of one Uchiha Sasuke, nukenin of Konohagakure." Tsunade recited the tiredness of reading from a script evident.

Sasuke sunk into his chair, inwardly smirking at the burst of mutterings that accompanied that appearance of the Konoha Military Police Force uniform and the nostalgic black jacket of the Uchiha Clan Head. The room was arrayed with him in the center and a semi-circle of judges stretched from edge to edge of his vision.

The three members of the Hokage's Inner Council sat directly before him; Danzo's face was blank with Homura and Koharu mirroring him. Sasuke ignored the familiar burn of hate in his chest and only smiled mockingly at Danzo before raising his chin to stare the Hokage who sat on a raised dais.

"So gathered we sit in judgement: The Council of Konoha, the Jounin Commander, and the Hokage. Speak in affirmative if you sit in judgement, or declare your proxy." Taking a deep breath, Tsunade took up a brush to mark the responses for the purpose of the record.

"Representative of the Aburame Clan?"

"Clan Head Aburame Shibi present in judgement, Hokage-sama." A man in dark glasses and a high-collared outfit replied, spiked black hair and thin moustache evident.

"Representative of the Akimichi Clan?"

"Clan Head Akimichi Chouza present in judgement, Hokage-sama." The portly, spiky red-haired man answered, samurai outfit stretched around his frame. He quietly munched on a cookie, staring unreadably at Sasuke.

"Representative of the Hyuuga Clan?"

"Clan Head Hyuuga Hiashi present in judgement, Hokage-sama." Hiashi murmured, regarding Sasuke with a carefully emotionless façade. He could see the slight hint of pity in the man's eyes though, and the Uchiha knew that it would be to his advantage to play on it.

"Representative of the Inuzuka Clan?"

"Clan Head Inuzuka Tsume present in judgement, Hokage-sama." A feral woman barked, scratching her one-eyed canine companion behind the ears. Kiba's mother looked remarkably like her son, down to the red fang tattoos inked into her cheeks.

"Representative of the Nara Clan?"

"Clan Head Nara Shikaku present in judgement in both my capacities as Clan Head and Jounin
Commander, Hokage-sama." Shikamaru's father drawled, the lazy man's scars stretching across his features as he leaned back in his chair to stare at the ceiling.

"Representative of the Sarutobi Clan?"

"Jounin Sarutobi Asuma present in judgement in lieu of the currently underage clan heir, Hokage-sama." Grinning cheerfully at Sasuke, the man mimed vomiting. Sasuke repressed a glare before taking in other clan heads. The man was annoying, but more likely than not on Sasuke's side.

"I, Senju Tsunade sit in judgement as the last of my clan in addition to my duties as Hokage." Tsunade uttered, marking down another tick on the record before continuing down the list.

"In terms of lack of representatives and conflict of interest in this case-" the blonde Hokage began before Sasuke cut her off.

"Clan Head Uchiha Sasuke present as the defendant, Hokage-sama." His voice clear in the silent courtroom. Asuma sent him an amused look while the Inner Council regarded him with disapproval. Chouza paused with a cookie halfway to his mouth, mimicking the rest of the individuals in the room in staring at the Hokage.

Tsunade's blank brown eyes stared into Sasuke's equally blank black ones. Hey eye tracked over his form, absorbing the way he filled in his father's uniform. The room hung on the moment, fully aware of the history of enmity between their two clans. Finally, the blonde gave a sharp nod and ticked something off on her record.

"So recognized."

Koharu sputtered in outrage before Danzo set his hand on her shoulder and sent her a slow shake of the head. Homura readjusted his glasses in false nonchalance.

"Representative of the Yamanaka Clan?"

"Clan Head Yamanaka Inoichi present as Chief Interrogator. I delegate my voice in judgement to the Head of the Akimichi Clan, as is historical diction." A tall blonde man strode up to Sasuke's shoulder, voice reverberating clearly. Blue-green eyes tracked to stare down at Sasuke.

"Mitokado Homura, Advisor to the Hokage?"

"Present and sitting in judgement, Hokage-sama." The elderly man with glasses peered at the Uchiha, stroking his beard in thought.

"Utatane Koharu, Advisor to the Hokage?"

"Present and sitting in judgement, Hokage-sama." The old woman sighed, watching Sasuke through narrow eyes.

"Shimura Danzo, Advisor to the Hokage?"

"Present and sitting in judgement, Hokage-sama." Danzo rumbled out. His single visible eye met Sasuke's ice cold stare unflinchingly.

"All are present and accounted for." The Hokage declared. "Yamanaka-dono, if you would." Inoichi formed a series of hand seals with a quick nod, before his left hand lit up with a blue shroud. Setting the chakra wreathed hand on Sasuke's head; he turned to face the Hokage's dais. The Yamanaka's lie-detecting technique stretched over Sasuke's brain, settling into place.
"Introduce yourself for the record, Uchiha-dono." Tsunade ordered, watching Sasuke closely.

"Introduce myself?" he murmured, voice loud in the quiet room. A flare of dark amusement rolled up from his stomach as the Uchiha stared back at the blonde. "My name is Uchiha Sasuke. I hate a lot of things, and I don't particularly like anything. What I have is not a dream, because I will make it a reality. I'm going to restore my clan," he parroted his words from yesteryear when Team Seven had just formed, amusement colouring his voice.

Several of the clan heads looked indulgently entertained. His voice went abruptly cold as an orange mask flashed through his mind. Tracking his gaze down to stare at Danzo, he rose his chin and finished chillingly "and kill a certain man."

"Truth." Inoichi stated, surprised at the cold certainty that rung in the last statement.

"You stand accused of treason against Konohagakure. Records of defection to Otogakure indicate you wished to serve Orochimaru. How do you plead?"

"Not guilty." He stated firmly.

"Truth." The Yamanaka confirmed his belief in the statement.

"I hardly consider myself a servant of Orochimaru, considering I later went on to kill the man and confiscate his files to send them to Konoha."

"Truth."

A low hush of murmurs rose at the statement, and Sasuke was honestly surprised that they were mostly of shock. Evidently Tsunade and Asuma had failed to share that tidbit of information with the Council at large. Only the Hokage's Advisors looked unruffled, Danzo likely being informed by his spies and going on to inform his colleagues.

"You wish to state that you went to Otogakure for the express purpose of killing nukenin Orochimaru and stealing his research for the benefit of Konoha?" Tsunade questioned.

"No, simply that I am not and never was that man's servant." After all, a student is far different than a servant.

"Truth."

"Very well. You stand accused of treason against Konohagakure. Records of your defection indicate that you wished to gain power to revenge your clan. Is this true?"

Sasuke noticed the lack of question regarding innocence immediately. Tsunade's face was as blank and cold as ever, but the Uchiha had the feeling that the Senju didn't wish to see him buried in a shallow grave, despite personal disagreements.

"That is true."

"Truth."

"Explain." The Hokage ordered.

"As this council is well aware, when I was a child my elder brother destroyed our entire clan down to leaving me the last member in the village. I grew up hating my brother and wishing to avenge my family on him. When Orochimaru offered me the chance to train under him, and I, frustrated by
my lack of progress within the walls of Konoha, accepted his offer."

"Truth."

"So you were motivated by gaining revenge?" Several frowns had begun to crawl over the faces of his judges, and Sasuke knew the moment was leaning away from him. He shrugged.

"Itachi made it a point of his life to psychologically torture and scar me every time we met since the massacre. Even as a child, I was mentally scarred. Having received little to no psychological counselling as should have been provided to me within Konoha, is it so surprising what happened is what happened?" the Uchiha questioned rhetorically, purposely phrasing his statement to exclude Itachi's actions under Kabuto's Edo Tensei.

"Truth." Inoichi confirmed, the man's face squirming with the sense of shame that was evident to different degrees on the faces of the Clan Heads. Sasuke grinned inwardly as favour of the court swung back into his favour.

"So it is your life's ambition to kill Itachi?"

"It is not."

"Truth."

Frowning in confusion, Tsunade leaned forward slightly. "You declared that you wished to kill someone before going on to state your entire life was motivated by your intention to kill the man who betrayed you."

"Itachi has never betrayed me." Sasuke's statement slackening the faces of his judges with shock.

"Truth." Inoichi mumbled, caught up in his own surprise.

"This man killed your entire family and destroyed your life, how is that not betrayal?" Tsunade muttered rhetorically, cocking a curious brow at the raven.

"Ah." Sasuke hummed as he leaned to the side to prop his cheek on an open palm. The picture of relaxation. A poisonous smile twisted his lips, eyes lighting in morbid amusement.

"Well, allow me to tell you a story about the Kyuubi no Youko, the Uchiha clan, and the Konoha Council."

Voice toxically sweet, he began. "Once upon a time there was a very big, very bad demon that attacked the village. After the Yondaime Hokage heroically defeated the Kyuubi, the Sandaime Hokage took up his post again."

"Truth." Inoichi sputtered, looking disoriented. His expression was present at varying levels among Sasuke's judges. Hiashi was the most stoic, only quirking his eyebrows in question.

"Yet all the people of the village were confused."Why did this happen?" they asked. So the Hokage's personal advisors decided they were going to investigate the matter." Sasuke nodded with fake seriousness. "After spending a very short time thinking it over, they decided they were going to believe what was for all they knew, purely historical fantasy about a relationship between the Kyuubi and the Sharingan. So what did they do?" Clapping his slowly, his expression entirely false glee, Sasuke finished in a hiss. "You guessed it! They decided they were going to lock all the Uchiha up in their compound like a bunch of animals!"
"Truth." Ino's father breathed, staring at the Inner Council in shock. Even Tsunade's face was twisted in surprise as she drilled a hole through the back of Danzo's head with her eyes.

"Now Uchiha Fugaku was not very pleased with this development as you can imagine. For six years, he argued and pleaded with the Hokage's Advisors. 'We had nothing to do with it!' he said. 'You have no proof that the Sharingan could do something as mystical as control a bijuu'. 'What happened to justice?' Yet the Council ignored him, until he finally grew desperate and said 'I do not want my sons to grow up in a village where they are treated as second class citizens because of ignorant bias.' So he called together the men and women of his clan and told them that they must overthrow the Hokage. Only then would they be permitted to have equal rights like any other citizen in Konoha."

"Truth."

"Once the Sandaime Hokage learned of the coup, he was very eager to negotiate with the Uchiha clan. And Uchiha Fugaku was very eager to negotiate with him. He wasn't a traitor after all; he simply wanted a better world for his children. The Hokage and the Clan negotiated, yet a certain group of advisors continuously blocked every compromise they could come up with. They had made their restrictions and by the Will of Fire, they were going to stick to them."

Sarutobi Hiruzen's personal diary had been very enlightening in regards to the circumstances surrounding the downfall of his clan. It was one of the very few reasons that Sasuke had been glad to become the Hokage.

"Truth."

"Eventually, time ran out. 'This can't go on forever' Fugaku cried. And the Hokage's Advisors agreed. So Shimura Danzo summoned Uchiha Itachi before him, and gave him his final order. After much discussion by themselves, the Advisors to the Hokage decided to order in the name of the Sandaime Hokage for ANBU Captain Uchiha Itachi - a boy of thirteen - to murder his entire family."

"...Truth." A croak.

Instant pandemonium.

"Hokage-sama, this is outrageous!"

"What right-"

"Completely unnecessary!"

"Silence!" Tsunade roared, leaning back in her seat. The blonde's face was composed, but Sasuke could see the slight tremor in her fingertips. He knew the rest of the room could see it too.

"Continue." She whispered.

"But of course, Itachi loved his little brother very much. So he lied to Sasuke and told him that he had acted alone. He accepted disgrace in the place of honor, and hate in the place of love. And despite that, Itachi would likely die with a smile on his face. Because he had done what he thought he needed to make Sasuke strong and protect him from the elders."

"Truth."

"The last thing Itachi did before fleeing the village was to go down on his knees before the Hokage
and plead for his little brother's life. He was shocked to discover that the Hokage had given no order to exterminate his clan at all, and that he had been blatantly lied to by the Hokage's Advisors. Nonetheless, Sarutobi Hiruzen promised to protect Itachi's brother.

"Truth."

"Yet eventually the Sandaime died, leaving Sasuke unprotected. So Itachi returned to Konoha, warning the Council 'I am alive. And if you touch my brother I will spill any and all Konoha secrets I know to rival nations.' And so Sasuke was safe, for a time."

"Truth."

"So I ask you, Council of Konoha. Whom was it that betrayed whom? Did I, in my own pain and loss, betray the village by defecting from it? Or did Konoha, in allowing and perpetuating a gross injustice against everyone in my family, betray me?"

Furious coal black eyes stared murderously forward at the Inner Council. Koharu and Homura were stunned speechless. Danzo opened his visible eye before leaning forward to stare coolly back.

"The fact that Itachi told you such secrets makes him a traitor to Konoha."

"Don't talk you about Itachi!" Sasuke roared, rising to his feet. Inoichi's right arm came up to clench at his shoulder, holding him back. The heads of Konoha's clans tensed, but didn't look entirely sure as to who they should be prepared to fight.

"No!" he spat. "Let's talk about you, Shimura Danzo. Let's talk about the actions you've taken in regards to one of Konoha's two founding clans. Let's talk about what you've done to one of Konoha's four noble clans."

"I have only ever done what is necessary for the protection of Konoha." The elder defended, unable to respond to the authority of heritage Sasuke was drawing on.

The Uchiha choked in rage. "What was necessary?" His voice deepened to a dangerous snarl as he clenched his fists. Sasuke was repressing the instinct that hammered in the back of his mind. You killed him before, you can do it again.

"Is that so? Tell me then, Honoured Elder!" Sasuke made a sarcastic growl. "How necessary was it for you to harvest the doujutsu of my family for your personal use? I hear cousin Shisui's eye works especially well, seeing as how that was the one you implanted in your right socket. It holds the place of honour! The other ten merely wallow in your right arm!"

"Truth."

Hiashi gave a visible start, Byakugan activating as his shot his focus toward the bandaged man. The shock and disgust on his face, flooded into sudden hostility, hand coming up to brush along his forehead where a Branch Family seal would have been located if he was a Branch Hyuuga member. "How necessary was it for you to order for the death of every man, woman, and child in my clan? Not just the conspirators and not just the adults. But every single person, including me?"

"Truth."

Pointing his finger towards the blonde Hokage, who frowned in surprise before tensing in expectation of a barb her way. What came next shook the woman to the core.

"How necessary was it for you to play around with the grave of Senju Hashirama, the Shodai
Hokage, Tsunade's grandfather, making deals with Orochimaru, so you could have some of his cells for your personal use?"

"Truth."

"No." Sasuke decided lowly. "We're not going to talk about how necessary what you did was while we sit here in judgement of me. Shimura Danzo! I name you child-slayer and desecrator! Traitor and murderer!" The Uchiha declared, voice rising with every word to end in a ringing shout:

"How dare you judge me!"

Her feet hurt. Her lungs burned and her eyes ached. She wondered if her feet were bleeding. But that didn't matter, since she was home and nothing was going to stop her from finding him. Sakura and Kakashi had fallen behind, blocked by desperate Chuunin who had likely been warned on who to specifically keep away from the courtroom.

Naruko leapt around one man's outstretched arms, feet pounding along the wall as she ran along the horizontal surface. She was so close, she knew. Spying a set of double doors at the end of the hall, she lowered her shoulder and charged through.

The door burst inward, startling the individuals gathered within. A bunch of stuffy adults were arrayed in a half circle, Tsunade-baa-chan sitting on some sort of gimmicky throne. Sending her a look of pure betrayal, the blonde knew the Hokage got the message by how she went milk-pale.

Eyes darting about the room, she took in a tall blond-haired man that stood in the center who had a hand on his head.

Darting across the room, Naruko launched herself at Sasuke. Throwing herself at the raven, the two collapsed back in the chair with a loud whoosh of air from Sasuke. The Uchiha found himself going from a moment of confrontation to a moment with a very energetic blonde girl in his lap. Naruko grinned in amusement before freezing at his smell in her nose. Lightning and forest and the cloying smell of his blood.

Naruko went from energetic to territorial in a flash of red eyes, clawed hand slashing at Inoichi automatically. The man withdrew in a hurry, watching the red eyed blonde warily. Frantic fingers touched over his face, tracing around a black ink seal that she knew did not belong, before slipping into his shirt from below with absolutely no regard for propriety or their audience. Nimble hands slid over the bandages encircling his abdomen and Sasuke watched in fascination as her face went from worried to positively murderous.

A hand slapped a seal over the girl's forehead. The fight fled the blonde as the demonic energy that was fuelling her vanished. Blue eyes glazed tiredly but refused to leave his black ones, even when Jiraiya lifted the lethargic girl from his lap. Naruko squirmed weakly, watching Sasuke until the Sennin carried her back into the hall and shut the doors behind them.

Silence hung in the courtroom until Inuzuka Tsume coughed into her fist. "Right then." The woman grinned lecherously at the Uchiha. "Let's get this show on the road."

Sasuke settled in his chair, the interruption having settled his raging emotions. Face cold and expressionless, the Uchiha regarded the Hokage.

Pressing a hand to her forehead, the blonde squeezed her eyes shut and whispered to herself "What a madhouse." Snapping them back open, she stared down at her sensei's teammates with chilling brown eyes.
"Shimura Danzo." She declared. "Mitokado Homura and Uatatane Koharu. In light of the recent testimony given by one Uchiha Sasuke, I am forced to strip you of your position due to mental instability."

"Tsunade, you -" Koharu barked, spinning to glare at the Hokage. Tsunade interrupted, face especially merciless.

"While your actions have not been treasonous in and of themselves, especially given the Sandaime did not see fit to charge you in light of the Uchiha Incident, I cannot charge you with sedition. However, giving the order to slaughter the uninvolved innocents of one of Konoha's most treasured clans is clearly not the choice of someone mentally sound."

Clenching her fists, the elderly woman rose and flounced from the court in disgrace, followed closely by her childhood teammate. Danzo rose to trail after them, mind already spinning with counterplots before Tsunade shattered his thoughts.

Her voice cracked like a whip. "Shimura Danzo, you on the other hand have engaged in crimes against Konoha. Illegal experimentation in regards to the Kekkei Genkai of Konoha is treason of the highest order. I order ANBU to take you into custody, and we will sit in sentencing of you at a later date."

Nodding at a masked man hunched against a nearby wall, the ANBU nodded before shooting a senbon at the elder. The poison tipped needle sent Danzo collapsing into unconsciousness to be dragged away by a platoon of Konoha's Black Ops.

Sighing, the blonde Hokage massaged her temples before turning back to Sasuke.

"Due to recent information regarding the Uchiha clan and the involvement of Konoha in its destruction, I move that we dismiss all charges against Uchiha Sasuke and vindicate Uchiha Itachi. All in favour?"

A chorus of "Yea"s filled the air.

"All those against?"

Dead silence.

"So be it. Uchiha Sasuke. I, in my capacity as Godaime Hokage of Konohagakure declare you and your brother innocent."

Sasuke nodded silently before rising to his feet.

"There is one other matter to attend to." Wry amusement coloured Tsunade's voice. Sasuke sunk back down, staring up at the Hokage.

"At the beginning of Uchiha Sasuke's trial, he made certain claims in regards to recognition. Thus I move that we officially recognize him as head of the Uchiha Clan. All in favour?"

"Can we do this? Itachi-san is the elder brother." Shibi stated. Sasuke pinned the sunglasses wearing man with a stare before muttering:

"Itachi is deathly ill with an incurable disease and sterile because of it. Under law he cannot inherit the Clan."

Tsunade frowned before sighing. "I say again, all in favour?"
The clan heads responded in the affirmative before Tsunade asked for those against. None spoke up.

A self-satisfied look flittered over the Senju's face.

"So be it. Welcome, Uchiha Sasuke, to the Council of Konoha. I officially declare this court adjourned."
Reunions

Chapter Summary

"Ninja must look underneath the underneath." – Hatake Kakashi

A quiet sigh of relief blew from his nose, the blue glow around Yamanaka Inoichi's hand fading. The blonde withdrew his hand from Sasuke's inky strands, sending the new Clan Head an apologetic look before taking long strides to reunite with Shikaku and Chouza.

The scarred Nara had a contemplative look on his face, speaking with Chouza in low tones and occasionally punctuating his point with motions of his hands.

Setting his box of cookies on the table in front of where he'd been seated, the chubby Akimichi took in his friend's words with a focused air; interrupting him only when Inoichi drew up beside the two in order to draw the blonde mind walker into their huddled conversation.

Sasuke knew they were talking about him.

'As they should be.'

The thought amused him. In his childhood, the raven would have been quite happy to go without the pitying stares and whispering behind his back as he wandered the village. People had talked around him, not to him. It had only reinforced his feelings of inadequacy and loneliness.

Ironic, that now he would relish in the attention.

Tracking his eyes to the raised dais, he observed the last official Senju. Sasuke's lips pulled into a polite smile as he stalked across the courtroom to meet the blonde Hokage at the foot of her podium. The Uchiha brushed past Aburame Shibi, passing close enough to perceive the low buzz of kikaichu. Tsunade stepped onto the lowest level, honey eyes coming to rest on his approaching form. Voice a low confident purr, Sasuke acknowledged his superior.

"Hokage-sama."

Tsunade's eyes flashed, and Sasuke read a reluctant form of admiration there. The disbanding of the Senju clan into unaffiliated families had toned down the political battles that the Godaime had grown up hearing of. No longer did the Senju and the Uchiha clans maneuver day after day for the control of the village, Hokage position only barely more powerful than a ceremonial position.

The death of Hashirama and his brother, coupled with the defection of Madara had brought an end to those times. She wondered if Sasuke, skilled despite his inexperience and childhood as a second son, would have thrived in that environment. Shaking away absent musings, the Hokage blinked at the Uchiha.

"Uchiha-dono." She replied cautiously, still retaining the forced formality of the council chambers.

Smiling indulgently, Sasuke motioned to the chakra seal encircling his neck. "Now that I am vindicated, would you do the honour of removing the seal?"
Refusing to be embarrassed at his forward approach, the Hokage flared chakra from her palm. "Of course, Uchiha-dono." Sliding her hand across the inked markings, Tsunade turned away to engage Tsume in a conversation. The Inuzuka regarded Sasuke with an amused glance out of the corner of her eye before allowing the Hokage to draw her into an inconsequential conversation regarding hunter squads.

The black ring flared white around Sasuke's neck before flaking away. Linked to the seal in his neck through a network, the seals around his arms and legs lit up as well before crumbling into dust. A sudden increase of awareness filled Sasuke, restricted chakra freely flowing again. Relishing in the renewed clarity of his vision, the strengthened smells that met his nose, the perception of the slightest sound of brushing hair, and the heightened feel of the bite of his fingernails into his palms, Sasuke closed his eyes and breathed.

For the first time in nineteen days, crimson eyes fluttered open, three tomoe prominent. Sharingan flittered about the room, settling on a dignified man with white orbs. The Uchiha strode the distance, back ramrod straight, to come face to face with Hiashi.

Uchiha and Hyuuga.

Sharingan and Byakugan.

Historical enemies. But Sasuke was beyond caring about the irrelevant past of others. The only past he cared for was his own, and he was willing to do whatever he needed to prevent it from repeating.

"Hyuuga-dono." Rolled easily from his tongue, catching the man with a demand of respect while giving it.

Hiashi stared at him in silence before reciprocating. "Uchiha-dono."

Pleased at the acceptance of equal status with a man many years his elder, Sasuke decided to take the first of many steps in reconciliation. "I would be most beholden if you would be willing to convey my acceptance of his challenge to your nephew."

White eyes considered his face before a spark of amusement shot through them. "It would be my honour to convey your sentiments. Perhaps you would consider a similar contest in regards to my daughters? I am sure they would benefit from the experience."

Sasuke suppressed his surprise at both the man's suggestion that he spar with Hinata and her sister, as well as the roundabout compliment he'd been given. Giving a polite smile, Sasuke made a small bow. "That such a privilege would fall to me gladdens my heart. It would be my pleasure to accept."

Hiashi's amusement returned, interspersed with a measure of respect. "That is most welcome. Another time then, Uchiha-dono." The man replied before gliding away with a nod.

Instinct pulled at Sasuke to leave as well, fully aware of whom was out in the hall waiting for him. The Uchiha resisted the urge, determined to build a few more bridges before leaving. Stalking over to the Ino-Shika-Chou trio, the Uchiha smirked inwardly at the way their whispers guiltily trailed off.

"Akimichi-dono, Nara-dono, Yamanaka-dono." He greeted, Sharingan peeking through lidded eyes. The three men nodded in greeting, Sasuke perceiving the hint of shame lingering after his revelations during his trial. Biting the inside of his cheek, the Uchiha weighed propriety against a
demonstration of good will.

"If I might presume the cause of your distress," he declared. "Know that I do not hold your clans at fault of inaction in the downfall of my own."

An olive branch hung between them.

Nodding slowly, Chouza extended a slow hand. Sasuke took it immediately, gripping the man with equal force. Too strong would show ignorant bravado, too weak would show cowardice. A smile curled the Akimichi's lips, and Sasuke knew he'd passed.

"Address me as Chouza, if you prefer."

"Chouza-san." The Uchiha tested, before returning. "Sasuke is fine."

The Yamanaka and the Nara were quick to follow the Noble Clan Head, solemnly shaking Sasuke's hand. Drawing their hands back the four regarded each other before Sasuke spoke up. "Chouza-san, would you be so kind as to ask your son what time he would prefer to enjoy a meal together?" The grin that spread across the man's face churned amusement in the Uchiha's gut. It appeared the way to an Akimichi's heart was through their stomachs. Wisely, Sasuke refrained from mentioning that it had been Chouji to invite him first prior to the trial.

No need to remind the man of his son's political choices the day before.

The Akimichi offered his agreement, for which Sasuke offered his thanks before spinning on his heel. The wait was maddening, and he had no desire to prolong the separation of his first team.

Inoichi stared at the teen in his deceased father's uniform before the professional interrogator called out. "Sasuke-san. In my line of work I have participated in many cases where your father was a prominent presence. Fugaku was a hard man, but a good one. None of us blame him for the choices he made. I think I would've done the same."

Twin starbursts pinned the blonde man, spinning with a myriad of emotions before softening. "Thank you. I'm sure he would have been... grateful to hear that."

The Sasuke that had left Konoha had been cool and handsome, with an air of confidence.

The Sasuke that returned was powerful and striking, lethal grace written into every movement.

Or so Sakura thought, watching him glide forth from the courtroom vindicated. Sharingan eyes pierced through her, chilling her before settling on Kakashi. The silvery haired man rose from the bench they were seated on, limping over to the Uchiha.

"So I see you came back." The Hatake stated flatly, looking carefully at the raven.

Sakura frowned inwardly. What was wrong with their teacher? Didn't he see that Sasuke-kun was finally home?

Grunting "Hn.", Sasuke stared back at Kakashi before extending his hand forward.

Regarding the proffered handshake with a blank expression, the jounin shook his head with exasperation before seizing the hand and pulling.

Stumbling forward, Sasuke froze as his former teacher caught him with a hug.
"You Uchiha are all idiots, I swear." Kakashi rolled his visible eye. "Don't be a stranger Sasuke." The shock on the raven's face faded before he gingerly returned the older man's embrace. The two released each other after a moment, and Kakashi smiled.

Then he slapped the back of Sasuke's head.

"Run off like that again and I'll have to kick your head in. Team Seven does nothing by halves, but even we can't protect you from your own stupidity."

The Uchiha made a disgruntled face.

"Sasuke-kun." A soft voice interrupted the two, and Sasuke turned to face the pink-haired medic. "Sakura." He answered blandly, attempting to reconcile the nervous girl before him with the hateful woman he had grown used to.

Sakura bit her lip before throwing her arms around him.

Hands coming up automatically to push her away, Sasuke's hand stopped at the sound of a sniffle. "I was really worried you'd die or get hurt or never come home..." the girl rambled. With a sigh, the Uchiha hugged the Haruno back. "It's fine now," he mumbled. Drawing back, Sakura gave the boy a watery smile.

Then she punched him in the gut.

"You absolute idiot!" she shrieked as he doubled over, gasping as her fist irritated his hidden wounds. Sakura continued to berate him, vocabulary growing fouler. "What sort of crazy asshole runs off to a snake pedophile that wants his body, huh?" She ended with a murderous look. "Pull that sort of crap again and I'll personally make sure you never get around to the reviving your clan part of your life!" Sasuke winced at the threat of castration, straightening to give the medic a strained grin.

Crossing her arms, Sakura looked to the side and pouted.

Following her gaze, Sasuke found Naruko curled up sleeping on the bench. Jiraiya lounged against the wall beside her, watching Team Seven's antics with amusement. "She pretty much carried us the last leg here," Kakashi piped up. "The only thing that really kept her going in the end was desperate energy."

"Kyuubi chakra." Sasuke murmured, carelessly expressing his knowledge of what was still technically a secret in Konoha. Dismissing the knowledge as acquired from Orochimaru, Kakashi and Sakura witnessed in fascination as the Uchiha drifted the distance to the blonde, crouching down beside her. A tender expression they'd never seen on his features before flashed across his face.

In that moment, Sakura knew she'd lost any chance she had of gaining Sasuke's heart - if she'd ever had a chance at all - to the competitor she'd never known she had.

Trailing a slow finger down a whiskered cheek, Sasuke smirked before pinching her nose.

A long moment passed, before sky blues fluttered open and regarded him with annoyance. One tired hand came up to slap his grip away. "Once a bastard, always a bastard I guess."

"Maybe, but I'm your bastard." Sasuke purred huskily, and Naruko's face flared red as a tomato.
Jiraiya choked with laughter as the jinchuuriki shot into a sitting position. "Don't say weird shit like that, teme!" she squeaked. Sakura and Kakashi merely looked confused, not having been close enough to hear the Uchiha's low statement.

Smirking with amusement, the Uchiha rose to his feet before extending his hand to her.

"Easy there Takuo," the Sennin whispered, referencing one of his fictional protagonists from Icha Icha. A light dusting of pink lit up Sasuke's pale cheeks, and Jiraiya roared with laughter. "Well would you look at that! Here's a fan I never knew I had."

Naruko scowled at the elder man, blush subsiding before she took Sasuke's hand and allowed him to pull her to her feet.

The Uchiha squeezed her hand before dropping it, sparking another blush from her. Sasuke turned away to engage the Sennin in a conversation regarding prisoners that Naruko tuned out. Her hammering heart slowly calmed, flush fading away. The blonde regarded the Uchiha through half lidded eyes, taking in the mannerisms that had changed during his time away.

Feeling eyes on him, crimson Sharingan darted to met her gaze. The Uchiha gave a cocky smirk, tongue darting out to moisten apparently dry lips before he focused back on Jiraiya.

Her ears felt uncomfortably warm, and Naruko repressed a scowl. If she didn't know better, she would have said the bastard was flirting with her. Maybe he was? She wondered before pushing the thought away. No. Not her. Not a jinchuuriki. Sasuke was just being his usual bastard best friend self, teasing her.

"I'll need to go back and pick up the rest of my team." Shook her from her thoughts. "What?" Naruko blinked. "We're right here Sasuke. Are you blind now?"

Regret flashed across Sasuke's face as he remembered that his nearly blind brother was still wandering the wilderness with no idea that he could come home. "No, usuratonkachi. Not Team Seven." The Uchiha replied distantly. "My other team."

The fear of being replaced was remarkably similar to the feeling of curdled milk in her gut.

"Wait here." Sasuke ordered, holding his palm up to the rest of Team Seven.

Naruko scowled rebelliously. "Why? You got something to hide? Or do you just want to have a private moment with your team?"

Looking at the blonde in surprise, Sasuke took in her biting lip and slightly flared nostrils thoughtfully. 'Jealousy' he realized, and smiled indulgently. "No." Sasuke pinched a whiskered cheek, making the girl frown even more. "I simply have to ensure they're on their best behaviour when they meet my nakama." G

Giving Sasuke a brilliant smile at the label, Sakura grabbed the back of Naruko's jacket and pulled her out of Sasuke's personal bubble. Soothed at the implication of being more important, the blonde allowed her to. Kakashi simply turned another page in his Icha Icha novel, looking indifferent, but Sasuke easily caught the way the man's eye crinkled into a smile.

Turning the handle, he stepped into the bricked house that had been his halfway point from an ANBU prison cell to the courtroom in the basement of the Hokage's Tower. The door shut quietly behind him, and Sasuke drifted down the hallway in search of his errant teammates.
Suigetsu found him first, grinning at the sight of his activated Sharingan. "You magnificent bastard!" the Kiri-nin shouted, punching him in the arm. "I should have believed that you knew what you were doing."

"That hurts Suigetsu." Sasuke deadpanned. "Don't you have more faith in your 'dear leader'?

Snorting wordlessly in reply, the teen fell in behind the Uchiha as Sasuke continued his search.

Sliding open the door of the library, the raven frowned at the sight of an anxiously bouncing Karin and a worried Juugo. The two were locked in a whispered debate until Sasuke cleared his throat. Spinning to the door in shock, the two stared at him.

"He lives!" Suigetsu declared dramatically, motioning to Sasuke exaggeratedly. "Shut up!" the redhead shouted back, readjusted her glasses and composing herself. Rising to his feet, Juugo smiled at the two before crossing the room. Rumbling "It's good to know that you came out alright." the orange-haired teen came up beside him.

"It is." Sasuke agreed, before lighting up his fingers with a soft blue glow of chakra. Suigetsu blinked, "Wha?" Then Sasuke was poking his fingers into the Kiri-nin's throat. The chakra seal shattered, and Suigetsu burst into water.

Drawing the liquid into a tight puddle, Suigetsu drew himself back up into solid form with a wince. "Did you have to do it like that?" he complained.

Grunting in reply, Sasuke turned chakra wreathed fingers on Juugo and devastated his chakra seal with more care. It would be counterproductive to damage the orange tattoos that gave Juugo a measure of control. Even if Sasuke didn't think he could damage them considering his current lack of fuuinjutsu knowledge. Juugo hummed gratefully as sensation filled him, deadening senses resurrecting.

"Do me now, Sasuke-kun!" Karin pleaded, offering up her sealed neck to his shining fingers. "Yes, Sasuke-kun," Suigetsu crooned. "Do me." The redhead choked at the insinuation, kicking her foot at the white haired teen's groin.

The Kiri-nin jumped back, covering his precious parts before Sasuke's fist drove through his face. Suigetsu exploded back into water, and Sasuke turned back to Karin and gave her a tap.

As the seal broke, Karin fiddled with her hands before giving Sasuke a determined glance. "I think you should bite me again, Sasuke. Or at least go to the hospital." Reforming quickly, the Hozuki nodded seriously. Juugo set his hand on Sasuke's shoulder in silent agreement.

"No." Sasuke denied instantly, and Suigetsu glared. "Stop being such a proud prick and just go. So what if someone got the drop on you? It happens to the best of us."

Crimson eyes blinked before Sasuke pinched the bridge of his nose. Jerking his head back in the direction of the hall, the Uchiha ordered shortly "Come."

Stalking back through the halls, Sasuke directed them towards the room he had stayed in. Conversationally, he began "I must admit that I have had time to think about this. Too many odd coincidences have lined up for me to ignore it any longer." Stopping before the bedroom door, he spun to pin them with icy eyes. "This is your last chance to turn back and forget about what happened this morning. Politics is a dirty business, and I won't hold it against you if you decide you'd rather not be involved."

"Sasuke." Karin rolled her eyes. "Besides Juugo, we're all shinobi. Hired killers. You'd be hard
pressed to find a dirtier business."

"Shinobi politics, perhaps."

The Uchiha muttered, but allowed the matter to drop. Pushing the door open, Sasuke padded into the room and crouched down next to one of the dried puddles of blood that crusted the floor.

Juugo frowned; disappointed that he had failed to protect his teammate.

Extending the index and middle fingers of his right hand, Sasuke brought a star to life at the end of his fingertips. The tightly leashed electrical energy chirped, straining for freedom. Smiling grimly at his masterful display of nature manipulation, the Uchiha touched the electric star to the crusted fluid and released. Lightning arced forth, discharging across the puddle in bright streams. Reaching the end, the lightning bounced back, forking at random points in the crust. Back and forth, the electricity discharge until its form of energy dissipated.

The other three members of Taka watched in awe as Sasuke leaned back on his haunches, running an errant hand through his bangs. "There is a metal," Sasuke began, drawing on the not-so-useless tidbits of knowledge he had gained as Hokage. "That they mine in Kaminari no Kuni. It is renowned as highly chakra conductive, and especially conductive to lightning chakra."

Suigetsu shifted from foot to foot, sending Sasuke an annoyed glower. "Get to the point." He moaned. "I don't have all day." Staring back with an expressionless mien, Sasuke sent his Sharingan into a slow, intimidating spin. Subsiding with a mutter, Suigetsu folded his arms.

Sasuke calmly continued "Because of its valuable lightning chakra conduction, use of this metal in standard issue ANBU tanto has risen in Kumogakure and Iwagakure. Being natural lightning users, it allows Kumo-nin to rely on their strength. And being lacking in lightning users, it allows Iwagakure to cover a weakness."

Scrapping a sample from the dried crimson puddle, Sasuke rubbed the blood between his fingers until it crumbled into red dust. "However, while hard, this metal is extremely brittle. In order to get around this, blades that are forged with the metal in them are often alloys. Partially the conductor and partially a more flexible, softer metal. Despite this, they tend to leave a detectable residue in the body of one wounded by them."

"So you're saying that the ones behind the assassination attempt were Iwagakure or Kumogakure?" Juugo questioned, focused on the bloody smear on the hardwood.

Sasuke's lips twitched. "Would they state "All for Konoha" as they stabbed me if they were?"

"If they were trying to frame Konoha, they would." Karin responded shrewdly.

"So they would." Sasuke allowed. "But allow me to point something else out to you. I was stabbed no more or less than seven times, by men that are highly trained killers. My living speaks not of their failure, but of their success. How else would I have survived seven apparently random stabs, unless they wanted me to?"

Suigetsu scratched the side of his head, narrowing his eyes at the Uchiha. "They could have been trying to scare you out of Konoha. If you thought that the village was seriously trying to kill you, you would've gotten the hell out. And most Hidden Villages are greedy for kekkei genkai."

"Kiri being the exception a lot of the time," Sasuke goaded back, watching Suigetsu's wordless snarl. It was a pity the teen was so loyal to Kirigakure. Sasuke knew he would have been a valuable ally if he would have been willing to stay in Konoha. "In any case, something my sensei once
taught me comes to mind.'Look underneath the underneath.' Sasuke quoted. "The quintessential question of politics is who benefits? What party would have benefited had I burst into the courtroom with wild accusations of attempted assassinations by Konoha?"

Rising to his feet, Sasuke turned to face the rest of Taka. His Sharingan began to spin faster and faster, setting a wild pace. "Attempting to accuse Konoha of assassination would reflect badly on me. I would appear little more than a confused, arrogant, and petulant child. It would have been a simple task to convince the council that I needed to be taken in hand. For my own protection, of course."

Sasuke's smirk was poisonous. "And if after launching an investigation, it was deemed my life was under foreign threat, it would be prudent to attempt to force me to produce children for the village. The Sharingan is now an extremely endangered kekkei genkai. I am likely the only one in the world left that is able to propagate it. So in the end, who is it that would benefit from having me placed under their thumb, turning me into a breeder of weapons for the sake of the village?" The Uchiha stated rhetorically. "I would theorize that the Inner Council, or Shimura Danzo in specific, was behind this particular plot."

"So that's why you refused to go to the hospital!" Juugo breathed, orange irises trained on Sasuke. The Uchiha shrugged in reply. "In actually, I didn't think of it in those terms. I might have been slightly delirious, to simply dismiss it as a failed attempt at first, despite my instincts poking away at me."

Drawling "So you… just didn't want to go to the hospital?" Karin rolled her eyes. "Damn men, always having to show off their macho egos. Can't show a human weakness, oh no." the redhead moaned sarcastically. "Well anyway, there's no reason why you can't go now."

"There is. Hospitals lead to questions. How did this happen?" Shaking his head, Sasuke growled "I can't afford that now. Furthermore," he smirked "It would be investigated and the village would likely conclude it was an external plot by Kumogakure, leading to a breakdown in village relations. They have always been covetous of our doujutsu kekkei genkai."

Scuffing a foot on the floor, Sasuke gazed down at his crusted blood. "No." he decided. "We speak of this to no one. Now someone grab a towel, and we'll clean up this mess." The new Clan Head ordered.

"Only if you bite me first, you stubborn man." Karin retorted.

"Killer B has been captured!"

The door burst inward, startling those gathered within.

The man's message settled in their minds and the Raikage rose to his feet with a roar of rage. "Where?" the dark man demanded.

"He was taken from his hiding place in Nami no Kuni! We don't know where he was taken!"

The Raikage cursed, slamming a fist down on his desk in rage. The wood shattered, splinters filling the air. A low moan of voices hummed.

"The war is lost…"

"We're doomed…"
"I can't believe it…"

The new Tsuchikage strode across the room, followed closely by the other Kage. The five began to mutter among themselves. Each attempted to theorize a new hiding spot where Tobi might have taken the last jinchuuriki.

They couldn't allow him to unseal the Hachibi. It would be the end of everything.

Unnoticed and unmissed, a pale raven-haired shadow drifted silently through the open door.

He knew Tobi enjoyed grandiose gestures.

He knew Tobi enjoyed causing pain.

He knew Tobi enjoyed manipulation.

He knew where Tobi was.

_Uchiha Sasuke had a meeting with destiny._

And no one was going to get in the way of his one final vengeance.

Tsunade sunk into her chair, pulling out a bottle of Sake and drinking directly from it. Slamming the bottle to the desk, the Hokage pressed a palm to her aching forehead and sucked in a calming breath.

"Uchiha is good at what he does, you have to admit, Tsunade-hime." A voice drawled from the open window.

"How many times have told you Jiraiya, to stop calling me that!" the blonde hissed, sending a boiling glare at the Sennin sitting on the windowsill.

The man chuckled before stepping fully inside. A slow expression of pity grew on Jiraiya's face. "I have to say, Tsunade. You really did yourself in for this one."

"Don't even remind me," she groaned, knocking back another gulp of her rice wine.

Jiraiya crossed the room, gingerly taking the chair across from the Hokage and swiped the bottle from her. Taking a swig of his own, the man set the bottle firmly on the table and threaded his fingers. "It was really short-sighted of you to try and keep Naruko out of this. What did you think she was going to do when she got back and found out Sasuke has been cooling his heels in prison for weeks?"

Her hand itched to wrap back around the bottle and bring her another mouthful. The stern glare Jiraiya send her kept her hand at bay. When the Sennin got serious, he got serious. And even being a Sennin herself did not give Tsunade immunity to his intimidation.

"I just thought that she'd be so happy and distracted he was back to even remember to ask about that for a long while." The blonde admitted, palming her face.

"I still don't even know why you bothered to hide it in the first place." Jiraiya confessed, peering at her curiously.

Waving a hand at him, Tsunade answered exasperatedly "I thought it would have been obvious. That girl would have been in here day in and day out pushing me to just let him walk. And
knowing her, she would've convinced me to do it!"

"Speaking of 'walking'..." Jiraiya trailed, tracking dark eyes over her tired face. "What do you think about what happened back there?"

Tsunade laughed bitterly. "What part? Uchiha's sensationalism? Sarutobi-sensei's secrets? The way Sasuke forced himself into the favour of several clan heads right after? Or do you mean the way Danzo just bent over and took it like a little bitch?"

Snorting with amusement, Jiraiya's red tear track tattoos crinkled as he grinned. "All of those, I should say."

Leaning back, Tsunade propped her head on her hand before smirking. "Well, I have to hand it to Uchiha. He certainly knew how to play the game. Far better than I would've expected from a second son. Fugaku must've been a real hard ass to expect both his sons to be so politically astute."

"Oh, I agree." Jiraiya responded, crossed his left leg over his right knee and bouncing his leg. His right hand came down to tap a one fingered beat into the side of his wooden geta. "He went right after Hiashi before anyone else. Must've decided the man's sympathy for doujutsu kekkei genkai would extend to him. Smart play, considering the way Hizashi died for the safety of the Byakugan."

Tsunade closed her eyes, humming in thought. "True. And he went for Ino-Shika-Chou after that. Those three always come in a group. Uchiha and Akimichi. I'm surprised he didn't try to play the 'We're both noble clans' card."

"Are you kidding? Chouza is so informal half the time that it would've exploded in his face if he'd tried." Jiraiya muttered incredulously. "It was a better play for him to go after them through their children. Especially offering to go out for dinner with Chouji. Not a lot of people are willing to take the chance of paying for an Akimichi's meal."

Silence followed his statement, a lull in the conversation before Tsunade's honey eyes snapped back open. Regarding Jiraiya solemnly, the slug Sennin sighed. "I have to admit. Knowing that Sarutobi-sensei was keeping such secrets about the Uchiha clan is a real kick in the teeth."

Jiraiya grunted in agreement.

Tsunade leaned forward, eyes flashing and voice cold. "I never really looked down on him before, but I have to ask. What in the name of Fire was he thinking? Uchiha Itachi was ordered to kill his own family? And then he's exiled right after? By the Gods, he was just a boy."

"You know as well as I do that Sarutobi-sensei had next to nothing to do with that order." Jiraiya protested.

"I suppose." The Hokage admitted, brow furrowed. "But that doesn't excuse the fact that he just let them get away with what they did after. I know Koharu and Homura were his teammates, and he and Danzo ran a lot of missions together, but that doesn't mean they should have just gotten a free pass!"

Amused, Jiraiya murmured "You're awfully indignant for a boy you can barely tolerate."

Offense wrote itself into her face. "I might have had personal issues with what he's done to Naruko, but that doesn't mean I support destroying his entire family out of biased fear."

"Now that the truth behind the Massacre has come out, we can really expect that Danzo is going to
come after Sasuke." Jiraiya stated, moving on from the sensitive issue of personal feelings.

Nostrils flaring, Tsunade allowed him to. "I don't think he'll kill him though. Not right away anyway. Danzo is an extremist, but he's not stupid. The Sharingan is invaluable to Konoha."

Jiraiya admitted "I don't know, he seemed to be pretty trigger happy to have Itachi kill them all. Sasuke only lived because Itachi didn't have the heart to kill him."

Biting a lip in thought, Tsunade turned over scenarios in her mind. Finally, she asked "Do you think we should try and assign him some form of protection?"

Jiraiya shook his head negatively. "Danzo has Ne seeded all through ANBU. You and I both know he's only sitting in that cell because he sees a way to turn it to his advantage, or at least to reduce the impact of Sasuke's moves against him. Put Sasuke under ANBU guard and he'll be dead or abducted by the end of the month. No, the kid is smart. He'll be able to watch after himself now that he's unsealed."

"Which brings me to my original point," Jiraiya smirked. "Want to tell me why Danzo bent over and took it at the trial?"

The Hokage rolled her eyes. "You're not really into politics, are you? I guess there is a reason you refused to be Hokage, despite the fact most of it is on the job learning when it comes to dealing with those vipers." The Slug Sennin chuckled, before pining Jiraiya with deadly serious eyes.

"Now listen, what was Danzo going to do? From the way he reacted, I guess he never expected that Sasuke would know the truth about the Massacre. If he had known, Sasuke would likely be dead to prevent the truth from getting out. Those Sharingan he stole are valuable tools after all. But once Sasuke started wailing on him like he did, what choice did he have?"

Jiraiya opened his mouth to respond to the rhetorical question, but Tsunade cut him off. "Absolutely none. Sasuke's chakra was sealed, so he couldn't have cast a genjutsu. And even if there was one on Inoichi, Hiashi would have seen it near the end when he activated his Byakugan. Nearly three-hundred and sixty degree vision. He would've seen it."

Rubbing her palms together, the Hokage took a breath before pressing onward. "So without a doubt, what Sasuke was saying was at least reasonably true. While Sasuke might not have the whole truth, his testimony was enough to at least temporarily strip the Inner Council of their positions. They are free to appeal the matter, and likely will, but at that time they had to be removed to prevent a conflict of interest. They'd have been judging him otherwise after that."

Jiraiya chewed his lip, mulling the explanation she'd given him over. Sighing, the Hokage looked out the window for a moment before shooting back to her former teammate. "I hope you know what you're going to do with Naruko."

"I don't have to do anything at all." Jiraiya snorted. "I trust you to tell me what goes on in Konoha, so I don't have spies here. And I didn't find out Sasuke was here until you sent me down to see him. There was no way I could've told her before she left without running all over the place. I didn't betray her trust." Guilt curled in Tsunade's gut, and dark eyes pierced honey.

"I hope you know how you're going to make amends."

Naruko fidgeted in place, staring at the door in front of her. Sakura was glaring holes into her back, but the blonde was beyond caring at the time. Sasuke had gotten a new team while he was away. And despite being called Nakama, Naruko suspected the Uchiha was merely placating her. How
long had he been with his new team anyway? Did he like them more than he liked Team Seven?

… Did he like them more than he liked her?

Slapping her hands against faintly red cheeks, the blonde silently berated herself. She really needed to stop having *those* kinds of thoughts. Naruko was a *jinchuuriki*. Despite what Jiraiya might've claimed on the times she'd asked him about it, she *knew*. People would come to respect her for her skills. People might befriend her because of her personality. But nobody would ever feel *that* away about a jinchuuriki. Sasuke would never feel –

Naruko cut the thought off ruthlessly, strangling it to death. Or at least *trying*. Peering at Sakura, the blonde grinned wistfully. *That's right!* she thought. *I promised Sakura-chan that I'd bring Sasuke back. And even though he came back on his own, that doesn't mean I can't help push them together, dattebayo!* Pink-haired children with red spinning eyes danced through her mind.

She told herself the pain in her chest was just spoilt milk. Or maybe heartburn.

The handle on the door creaked, and the blonde jostled from her thoughts. Pasting on the wide-grin she'd grown skilled in forcing, Naruko watched Sasuke step out with three other people behind him. A white-haired guy with a purple shirt grinned back; displaying shark teeth and Naruko suppressed a shiver. The creepy teen was just like Zabuza and that Akatsuki shark guy Itachi hung around with.

A *really* tall orange-haired guy smiled at her, and Naruko decided she liked him. Whoever he was, he seemed like a super-nice guy. He was probably all living with nature and stuff, Naruko snickered inwardly.

Sasuke's last teammate was a redhead girl with glasses. Red eyes peered behind the glass, taking in everything with a vaguely superior look. A *girl*. Naruko's smile felt even more forced. *I must still be tired.* the blonde decided. She almost missed the introductions.

"That's Suigetsu." Sasuke jerked a thumb back at the white-haired shark boy, and Naruko committed the name to memory. "Juugo" was the giant nice guy, his orange eyes glimmering with good nature as Sasuke introduced him. The Uchiha pointed a finger at the redhead. "The last one is Karin. I'll let you find out any personal information they're willing to share."

Spinning around to face back at the members of Taka, the Uchiha announced Team Seven. Motioning towards the silvery haired jounin absorbed in his new green covered porn book, Sasuke rolled his eyes. "That old perv is Kakashi." Sakura waved a hand when Sasuke pointed at the pink-haired medic. "That's Haruno Sakura, she's a medical ninja." Sakura repressed the urge to question why Sasuke detailed more about them than he did about Taka. Sasuke was relieved at her silence, though he could see the query plainly. The Uchiha had no desire to explain the various unfortunate circumstances behind the lives of the members of Taka.

"And that's Uzumaki Naruko -" He was cut off by a sudden squeal by Karin. All eyes turned to her as she dashed forward and seized a confused Naruko's hand. Kakashi even peered up from his Icha Icha in curiosity. The redhead practically bounced in place. "I can't believe it! I never thought I'd meet another one!"

"Ehh?" the blonde breathed, sending confused looks at the Uchiha.

Sasuke shrugged in reply, watching the scene in amusement.

Karin abruptly stopped, readjusting her glasses before grinning. "I'm sorry. I guess you couldn't be
expected to know. I'm an Uzumaki too! Uzumaki Karin, little cousin!"

Gaping at her newfound relative, Naruko could only stare in shock. Karin snorted, placing a hand on the jinchuuriki's chin and pushing her mouth closed. "You'll catch flies that way you know."
The redhead stated idly.

Snapping out of her stupor, Naruko grinned before catching the girl in a bone breaking hug. This strange girl that Sasuke had brought back was her family. The word tasted odd on her tongue when she whispered it. The family she'd never known. Naruko was extremely grateful that Sasuke had given her the chance to meet the redhead, though he'd likely been unaware of her status.

Sasuke stared at the pair and felt like slapping himself in the face. He couldn't believe he'd forgotten that Karin was an Uzumaki. Dread rose in his veins.

What else was he forgetting?

Karin pulled away from Naruko, grinning at the blonde before poking Sasuke and hissing "Why didn't you tell me you knew one of my relatives?"

Because he'd forgotten. "I didn't know you were an Uzumaki." Sasuke replied blandly.

The redhead rolled her eyes before leaping back over to her newfound relative. Pulling gently on one ear, Karin sent a conspiratorial look at the blonde before whispering in her ear "Do you know who it is? Sasuke's princess?" Naruko choked at the nickname. "Princess?" Poking Naruko in the side, Karin huffed in amusement. "You know, the girl he's in love with?"

Wide blue eyes shot over to stare at the elder Uzumaki. "Are you crazy?" Naruko whispered furiously. "Sasuke hasn't shown interest in any girl ever."

The look Karin gave her was surprised, before it faded into exasperation. "Yes he is." Karin shot back. "I know because he told me himself that there was a girl! But if you don't know who it is, I guess you don't know."

Flouncing over to Sakura, Karin conversed with the medic in low tones. Suigetsu shifted awkwardly, staring up at the clouds. Juugo had long since drifted over to Kakashi, discussing the merits of Icha Icha against Jiraiya's earlier, non-porn work.

Naruko looked blankly at the mingling teams, dumbfounded. There was a girl? Someone that Sasuke liked? And why did that make her heart clench so hard? Sasuke was just her best friend… right?

Feeling eyes drilling into her, Naruko turned. Sharingan orbs looked back, tomoe tracking a lazy swirl. The Uchiha had nice eyes, Naruko thought, before strangling the sentiment. Crazy teen hormones, that's all it was.

"Okay!" Karin barked. "Sakura and I have decided that she's going to show us around the village. Suigetsu, get your ass over here and behave."

Rolling his eyes, the Kiri-nin pushed off the wall and meandered over to the pair, not deeming it worth the effort to argue. Juugo excused himself from the conversation with Kakashi, trailing up behind the two girls.

Snapping his book shut, Kakashi shoved it in his pouch before calling out. "Mah. I think I'll pass. I'm going to go get lost on the road of life. We'll catch up later."
"A very late later." Sakura mumbled, before the man trotted away.

Taka and their new guide turned to look questioning at Sasuke and Naruko. "I'm not interested." The Uchiha declared shortly. "When you're done, they can stay at my clan compound in one of my former neighbours' homes."

"Yeah. I think I'm just going to go home" the blonde mumbled before vanished. Sasuke cursed inwardly before nodding to Sakura and flickering away. Karin watched the interaction with knowing eyes, realization sparking. Hurriedly, she began to confer with Sakura on the subject of Sasuke's love life as they wandered out into the village.

Koharu and Homura knew what needed to be done.

They understood the trials and tribulations far better than those who followed Hiruzen's ridiculous Will of Fire philosophy.

It galled him to admit that the Uchiha brat had outmaneuvered him. Both in his failed plot and in learning of the truth behind the death of his clan. But he never gave up. Konoha needed him. Though he knew he would emerge from this trial diminished.

In the dark, Shimura Danzo plotted to bring Konoha to supremacy.

Naruko stumbled into her apartment, slamming the door shut. Sucking in deep breaths, the blonde strode over to the kitchen before turning on the tap with a vicious jerk. So what if the bastard had a love life! It was none of her concern in the first place!

Removing a glass from a cupboard, the blonde slammed the glass down on the counter before shoving it beneath the running stream with a murderous look. Naruko watched impatiently as the cup slowly filled. Gulping the water down, Naruko refilled it with a glare before downing the second glass. Her hand tightened around the cup.

"You know, the girl he's in love with?"

The glass cracked in her grip.

"I know because he told me himself that there was a girl! But if you don't know who it is, I guess you don't know"

Naruko threw the glass against the wall with a scream. Voice filled with rage and jealousy and heartbreak.

"I don't give a damn! I don't! He can do whatever he wants with whoever he wants!"

Her forehead felt unaccountably hot, and she leaned it against the dark wood of her kitchen cupboard. "Besides," she whispered, fists clenching. "I'm just a jinchuuriki. I should get used to it." She didn't even know why she cared so damned much. Why she wanted to sit down and cry.

"You know, talking to yourself is the first sign of insanity."

Naruko whipped about, spotting a pale face framed in raven locks regarding her. His coal black eyes unreadable. The blonde's face contorted in rage. "You bastard!" she shouted. Pointing wildly at the door, the jinchuuriki ordered "Get out! I don't want to deal with you right now!"
"Not a very warm welcome."

"Get out!"

Dark eyes flashed, and the Uchiha took slow steps towards her. Naruko drew away quickly, darting back. Sasuke's lips pressed together, and he increased his pace. Eyes widening, the blonde retreated back across the kitchen and into the living room.

"Why do you run?" the Uchiha muttered, piercing her with inscrutable eyes.

Paling Naruko pointed back toward the kitchen. "Get out." She hissed.

Sharingan flared, tomoe churning wildly. Following her back into the living room, Sasuke circled after her around the couch. "You seem to be unwilling to be in the same space as me. Seems a bit strange, considering you were all over me this morning." He stated.

Flushing, Naruko gave way to his advance until she bumped into a frame. Spinning her head to the side, her eyes widened as she spotted the door to her bedroom. Whipping back around, she flinched that he was too close. "Leave..." she croaked, being withdrawing into the bedroom. She couldn't deal with this right now.

It was too cruel.

"You know, the girl he's in love with?"

He was breaking her. Not even giving her the chance to compose herself.

"Sasuke, please!" she choked as he followed her into her room. The Uchiha circled back and forth, chasing her slowly across the room. He almost gave in at the plea, before pushing it away and pressing on.

Naruko tripped backwards onto the bed, landing staring up and the ceiling. Sasuke followed her down, arms placed on either side of her head. Looming over her, the Uchiha took in the sight of the blonde before him. She was biting her lip and looking off to the side with watery blue eyes. Her light flush intensified when his warm breath fanned over her face. Her blonde mane was askew. The sun streamed in from the window, lighting her hair and throwing her whisker birthmarks into relief. Pale pink lips trembled, and Sasuke stared at her side profile.

It was amazing, he decided. The power he had over her. Utterly intoxicating.

And it was even more amazing; the power she had over him.

Naruko was one of the most tempting things Sasuke had seen in his life. And certainly the most alluring thing he'd seen since his return to the past.

Uchiha Sasuke was always a man weak against temptation.

Chuckling darkly, crimson eyes watched as sky blues tracked unwillingly to meet. Hurt gleamed in them.

"I hope that you haven't found yourself a boyfriend in the time I was away." He purred.

"What?" she breathed, confusion warring in her face.

Sharingan flared, spinning into Mangekyo. And Naruko was caught up in the myriad of emotions she saw.
Such a dark murderous possessiveness.

"I will kill him if you have." The Uchiha promised.

And he crashed his lips down over hers, swallowing her surprised gasp before deepening the kiss.

Because she belonged to him.

And he...

He belonged to her.
"It's almost unbearable, isn't it... the pain of being all alone. I know that feeling, I've been there, in that dark and lonely place, but now there are others, other people who mean a lot to me. I care more about them than I do myself, and I won't let anyone hurt them. That's why I'll never give up, I will stop you, even if I have to kill you! They saved me from myself, they rescued me from my loneliness, they were the first to accept me as who I am. They're my friends." – Uzumaki Naruko

Naruko's mind fizzled.

What?

There was no way it was real, Naruko decided. It was just an impossibility. Because it only could've been a dream if Sasuke was pinning her down to the bed, kissing her! Teeth nibbled at her lips, making her give another surprised gasp into his mouth.

Sasuke's tongue dove into her mouth, savoring the way she tasted. As far as he was concerned, it had been far too long. Teasing her tongue with his, the Uchiha's wet pink muscle darted along her teeth, dancing over enlarged canines. Naruko finally responded, awkwardly and clumsily, and her inexperience showed as she attempted to wrestle his tongue with her own.

The former Hokage smirked inwardly. They'd have to work on that.

Separating slowly, Sasuke smirked down at the blonde. The girl regarded him through hazy blue eyes, an aroused flush evident on her whiskered cheeks. Tongue darting out to lick at her lips, the girl trailed her gaze down to his mouth.

Sasuke's eyes narrowed slightly as he gave Naruko a lust filled look, and by the way she blushed and lifted a trembling hand to touch her swollen lips, Sasuke knew he was getting under her skin.

"Sasuke... you... what?" Naruko stuttered.

Tangling his fingers through her blonde mane, the Uchiha ignored her confusion and tilted her head back before dropping down to assault her neck. Sucking the hallow of her throat, Sasuke grinned against her skin when she moaned out and locked her hands around his biceps. He left a series of love bits that the Kyuubi healed nearly instantly on her tanned skin, relishing in the ragged pace of her breath.

Sasuke buried his face in Naruko's golden hair and inhaled. Orange shampoo this time, he noted with amusement. Allowing himself to collapse onto her, Sasuke covered her smaller body with his own. Turning his slightly to the side, the Uchiha gently nibbled along the outer shell of her ear.

Naruko took a shocked gasp for air, lungs filling and her chest rose to press her breasts against him, and Sasuke grinned.

"Did you enjoy that, Naruko?" he teased huskily, warm breath washing over the shell of her ear.
Naruko went red, hands coming to rest against his chest. She was unable to decide if she wanted to push him off and end the moment, even though he'd see her embarrassed face, or let him linger and hope the embarrassment heating her cheeks went away.

"I don't have a boyfriend." The blonde mumbled, unable to come up with anything better to say on the spot.

Snorting at the evasion, Sasuke rolled off the blond to lay next to her on the bed.

Naruko tensed immediately, prepared to shoot up and run away until she could form an appropriate response to the way Sasuke had turned her world on its ear.

The Uchiha was having none of it. Reaching out, Sasuke wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her across the bed towards him. Drawing her up so that her back was against his torso, he threaded his fingers through hers and sighed in content.

It'd been several long years since he'd been so ease; since he'd known such simple joy.

"Why are you doing this, Sasuke?" Naruko asked blankly, staring at the wall. His hand over her's was warm, but she tried not to think about it. Some things were too good to be true. It was like she was living one of the embarrassing, heartbreaking dreams she'd refused to tell anyone about.

"Why do you think, Na-ru-ko?" he drawled back, blowing several golden strands from the back of her neck.

Biting her lip, the blonde narrowed her eyes at the wall. "I couldn't say, bastard." She growled. Men were men, so maybe Sasuke thought she was easy, or something like that. Well if so, it was too bad for him.

Uzumaki Naruko had more self-respect than that.

Sasuke laughed, long and low. The heat of his breath brushed over the back of her neck, and Naruko involuntarily shivered. Damn him! How could he do that to her so easily?

"What an insane, mystifying woman." The Uchiha murmured against her ear. "Every moment since we've met, you've spent your time forcing your way deeper and deeper into my soul. Sadness, joy, hate, loyalty, affection. It's your own fault for doing this to me."

Trailing a slow palm over her stomach, Sasuke's expression flashed with wrenching agony before he set his chin on the top of her head. Arms coiled around the blonde possessively.

Naruko trembled, filled with pain and agony and hope.

"I tired of regretting things unsaid." And Sasuke breathed the words he had never taken the time to say in a future gone wrong:

"I love you, Uzumaki Naruko."

Naruko's eyes went wide. And she stiffened like rawhide drawn tight.

Closing his eyes, the Uchiha mentally berated himself for pushing too hard, too fast. He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed wearily, then rose to his feet before tossing the blonde a glance with coal black eyes over his shoulder.

"Think about it. I'll be waiting."
Sasuke strode away, padding feet towards the door of Naruko's apartment. The soft click as the door opened and shut was unnaturally loud in the silence. She stared blankly at the wall.

Naruko's mind continued to fizzle.

*What in the world was going on?*

Everything had tilted. Irrevocably.

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Konoha was a lot different than Kiri. The air was warm, the day was clear, and the people didn't huddle in fear. Suigetsu liked it. But that didn't mean he was interested in staying longer than he needed to. He was loyal and determined. He *would* remake the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist into something greater than they had ever been. It was his dream.

Kirigakure needed hope.

Looming over Suigetsu's shoulder, Juugo took in the streets around them curiously. The sight of children running and laughing as they dodged around market stalls brought a fond smile to the orange haired giant's face.

Juugo's visible contentment made Suigetsu feel slightly bad for him, because it really drove home exactly what kind of person Juugo was.

Volunteering to be a shinobi was probably the worst possible career choice for Juugo. Despite his violent curse, the teen truly didn't like to fight. Trading service as a hired killer for a cage on his inner demon was something he was going to regret, because there would be blood on his hands either way. Juugo didn't have it in him to be an amoral murderer, and becoming one was going to consume him with guilt.

Suigetsu fully expected an eventual mental breakdown. He just hoped the blonde Hokage would figure out that Juugo was never going to be good for anything beside a protection mission before she assigned the guy blacks ops duty.

"And this is the academy..." Sasuke's pink-haired teammate chattered, motioning at a fenced in building.

Suigetsu peered in, watching the little brats scurry about and play ninja. Toy shuriken and dull kunai were standard fare. Some brown-haired kid shouted "I'm the Kyuubi! " and roared dramatically, chasing after his squealing classmates.

They were all too innocent, Suigetsu decided. The scene stirred nostalgia and envy in his chest, and he was reminded indelibly of his own childhood. What with all the toy kunai they'd played with in school before running home to hide from bloodline purges and evening raids against potential political dissenters.

Karin sighed, rubbing at her forehead.

Sending the medic a pitying look, the Uzumaki hoped things would work out for Sakura soon. It was obvious that Sasuke's pink-haired teammate harboured at least a crush on the raven, if not something even stronger. Karin had stepped aside for the princess, since it was obvious to Karin that the person Sasuke wanted to be with was Naruko. But that didn't mean she'd liked doing it, and it was probably going to be even more distressing for Sakura.

Which was a bit of a shame. Sakura was fairly nice. She was smart, skilled, and rather easy on the
eyes, if pink hair was what one was looking for. It was too bad for Sakura that the man she wanted to be with desired someone else. Karin fully sympathized.

That didn't mean she'd let the medic get in the way of her cute little cousin though.

Naruko excited Karin in ways she hadn't been excited since she was a little girl. The concept of having a family wasn't a new one, but Naruko was the closest she had ever since her village had been destroyed as a child. Maybe they didn't know one another quite yet, but that was something the chakra sensor intended to remedy.

Trailing after Sakura as they turned away from the Academy, Taka dove back into the busy streets of Konohagakure.

Towering over people as they pushed through the crowd, Juugo brushed a thumb over the ring of orange glyphs tattooed into his right wrist. It was all so surreal. He'd struggled with the curse of his apparent kekkei genkei all his life. And then he'd been taken prisoner by Sasuke's village and been provided a partial cure in less than a month.

So very dreamlike. And so very infuriating. Juugo had wasted years of his life as one of Orochimaru's lab experiments, praying for release. The old snake had smiled at him and offered him cheap platitudes. 'We're working on a cure' he thought sarcastically. 'I feel close to a breakthrough, yeah right!'

Taking a calm gust of air, the teen blew from his nose with a sigh. It's not like it mattered any longer. Orochimaru was dead at Sasuke's hand. Juugo couldn't criticize Kimimaro for his choices in life, but he couldn't help but wonder what had been going through his friend's mind when he pledged life and soul to the Hebi Sennin.

Sakura pulled the group into a small wooden shack nestled between two larger non-descript buildings.

Dragging a struggling Suigetsu through the open doors, Sakura grit her teeth as the Kiri-nin shouted "Hey! Get your hands offa me!" The medic scowled before lifting a fist. "Be polite or I'll bash your head in!"

Coming to back up Sakura, Karin glared at Suigetsu. "Sakura-chan is taking the time to show us around. At least you could try and keep your mouth shut!"

He merely rolled his eyes.

Juugo sniffed the air. It was full of the scent of… ramen?

A brown haired girl bustled over to their party. "Good afternoon! Welcome to Ramen Ichiraku!"

Smiling back, Juugo deliberately ignored the splash that alerted him to Suigetsu getting a fist through one part of his body or another.

The waitress eyed the bickering trio before grinning at Juugo. "I'm Ichiraku Ayame, and I'll be serving you today. Feel free to take a seat anywhere and take a look at our menu." Puttering away, the girl darted behind the counter and began to speak to an older man in low tones.

Dragging his eyes from the admittedly pretty brunette, Juugo scanned the restaurant before blinking in surprise at a familiar pale face. "Sasuke?" he called, striding over to sink onto the stool next to the Uchiha.
Sasuke grunted in reply, sliding dark eyes over to acknowledge the giant before they shot down to gaze into his bowl as if it contained the mysteries of the universe. He poked at a fishcake with his chopsticks.

"Save me dear leader!" a voice cried. Suigetsu retreated from the redhead-pinkette duo, taking cover on the other side of Sasuke.

Following closely, Sakura blinked at Sasuke in confusion. As far as she was aware, Sasuke never liked ramen. The only person who really enjoyed ramen more than once in a while that she knew was Naruko. Sakura crossed her arms and hovered next to Juugo for lack of a better thing to do.

Karin clapped her hands and sent Sasuke a sly look. There was no physical evidence on Sasuke that said he had gotten anywhere with her little cousin yet. "What are you doing here, Sasuke?" She left the end of her question unsaid.

"What are you doing here, Sasuke, when you could be somewhere else with Naruko?"

Slowly Sasuke wrapped a mass of noodles around his chopsticks and lifted it to his mouth. Biting down on the salty noodles, Sasuke munched on them at an unhurried pace. The clock seemed to tick until he finally swallowed and spun around in his seat. The Uchiha gave Karin a flat look, face entirely expressionless as he deadpanned "I'm eating while I get to enjoy the entertainment of you and Suigetsu attempting to resolve your unresolved sexual tension in ways that are beside the entirely obvious."

Juugo snorted with laughter, covering his mouth with one large hand as he muffled his chuckles. Suigetsu sputtered indignantly at the Uchiha, unable to string together a sentence in rebuttal.

Spinning to stare at Sasuke, Sakura gaped in disbelief. Sighing, Karin just readjusted her glasses before kicking out at Suigetsu.

"Hey!" the Kiri-nin shouted, leaping away from the violent redhead.

"She's being tsundere, Suigetsu." Juugo advised in a sage voice, hand coming up to stroke a non-existent beard. "You need to push harder to get to her soft, affectionate side."

Eyes bulging, Suigetsu glared at Juugo before splashing into a puddle of water on the tiled floor.

Karin's eye twitched, and she turned to lunge at the orange-haired teen. Leaning back, the teen dodged her swinging fist and guffawed even harder.

Sasuke rose, face bland as he abandoned his bowl. Giving a short nod to the group, the Uchiha turned to face Sakura. "Remember. When you're done showing them around they can stay in one of the homes in the Uchiha Compound. The main house is off limits." Tracking his eyes over to Juugo, Sasuke finished "You will be responsible for cleaning and upkeep of whichever home you choose."

Then Sasuke was drifting away, stepping out the front doors and vanishing into the crowd. Attempting not to disturb the suddenly pensive group, Ayame quietly retrieved Sasuke's half-empty bowl of ramen and slunk back into the kitchen.

Suigetsu stared after the Uchiha with a frown, before rotating to regard the others. Jerking a thumb at the entrance, the Kiri-nin asked the question that they were all wondering. "What's eating him?"

Karin bit her lip, eyes narrowing in comprehension before she blinked them shut and focused. A sense of other filled her, and the world behind her eyelids lit up in a burst of colour. Casting her sense out like a net, Karin's Kagura Shingan sought out a vaguely familiar fountain of chakra.
Locking onto the warm and bright, but rather confused signature, the redhead smiled grimly.

The first thing he noticed when he woke up was how thick and numb his tongue felt. Squinting teal eyes at the sterile white ceiling, Gaara pressed a palm to his pounding forehead and winced. He rolled his head to the side, the Kazekage wincing at the painful pull of stiff neck muscles. Peering blearily at a smudge of yellow and black that fiddled with a red bar, he croaked "Temari?"

Temari jumped, dropping the sealed tube missive from the Hokage. Snatching the cylinder from the air before it could hit the ground, she dropped it on the bedside table and leaning forward to stare into her brother's dazed eyes. "Hey brat." She murmured fondly, reaching up to give an absent stroke to his frazzled red strands. "You need anything?"

The Kazekage seemed to struggle with himself before wheezing in a dry voice "Water."

Her brother coughed harshly, the sound ragged, and Temari hurriedly grabbed a glass of water from the beside table. Frowning at the lukewarm temperature, she eyed her gasping younger brother before frowning.

The blonde slid her palm under Gaara's head and lifted it into a more vertical position. Pressing the glass to his lips, she slowly poured the precious liquid into his mouth. Gaara gulped greedily, and when he finished the glass she set it back down and released the back of his skull.

Rubbing his eyes, Gaara licked his lips before pinning his sister with an inquiring stare. "What has happened while I've been asleep?"

Temari looked back at him before sighing and shaking her head. "Stubborn brat." She mumbled. "Okay. So from what I've heard the last thing you remember is getting into a fight with one of the members of Akatsuki?"

Nodding slowly, the Kazekage waited for her to continue.

"Right. So after you fainted, Deidara flew off. The village was fine, I guess he was out of explosives or something." The blonde amended as the redhead gave her a panicked look. "So anyway, he flew off and you passed out. Kankuro had you sent to the hospital and told Baki to write a message about it to Konoha. Then he went to see the Honoured Siblings."

Pushing himself into a sitting position, Gaara leaned back against a mound of pillows before motioning for her to hurry it along.

"He wanted her advice about how to deal with her grandson. Akasuna no Sasori."

Silence hung like a pall after the statement, Gaara's face pensive. "I see." He whispered. "Kankuro is still alive?"

Temari grinned "Alive and unhurt, the little bastard."

Smoothing down a wrinkle in his white hospital gown, Gaara closed his eyes before shaking his head. "Bring him to me." The Kazekage ordered.

"Okay..." his elder sister trailed, before rising and leaving the room.

Minutes ticked by until a sprinting set of stomping feet echoed down the hall. Kankuro dashed around the corner, stopping short at the sight of his conscious sibling. Gaara snapped his fingers with an annoyed expression and pointed at the chair Temari had recently vacated. "Sit." he
commanded.

Snapping out of his daze, Kankuro strode over and sunk into the seat. Temari rolled her eyes before leaning against the wall next to the door and folding her arms.

"Tell me about Akasuna no Sasori. Start with what happened after you met the Honoured Siblings."

Kankuro blinked before glaring at Temari over his shoulder. "You shouldn't have told him already! He needs to rest." The brunette hissed.

Miming a fist, Temari sent her brother a homicidal smile.

Paling, Kankuro snapped back to his less-murderous brother. "Right. So after I met those two and told them that I was going to go after Sasori, Elder Chiyo insisted on coming with me after him. She wouldn't take no for an answer. The two of us packed up and left everything for Baki to handle so we could chase him and Deidara down."

Digesting his brother's decision for a moment, Gaara chewed the inside of his cheek before sighing "Are you an imbecile, Kankuro?" Kankuro flushed and opened his mouth to retort. The redhead cut him off, "You decide that you're going to head out alone to chase after two S-ranked nukenin with nothing more than a retired old woman for back up?" the Kazekage rubbed his temples before indicating for Kankuro to continue.

"We tracked them through the desert, only to find out that they had met up with Kakashi's team." Gaara's eyes cut towards the brunette. Kankuro scratched the back of his neck, purple face paint twisting as he grimaced. "Kakashi, Sakura, Naruko, and two other guys that I've never met before."

"Naruko and one of the new guys, Sai were gone off chasing Deidara when we showed up. Yamato, the other new guy, convinced Sasori to back off and go do his thing. Me and Chiyo didn't know this."

Gaara interjected absently "Chiyo and I."

Snorting in amusement, Kankuro continued sheepishly "So we kind of started the fight back up."

"I can give you more details later, but let's just say that by the end of it Naruko and Sai had come back and helped us beat Sasori." Running a hand through his sweat-dampened locks, Sabaku no Gaara continued his interrogation "And what next?"

Kankuro was silent, staring very intently at the tiled floor. Narrowing his eyes, Gaara prodded "Kankuro."

The puppeteer's mouth pinched as if he had bitten into a lemon. "Before he died, Sasori answered a couple of questions from Kakashi's squad. Turns out that Orochimaru was dead. Apparently that Uchiha killed him."

Tapping an impatient finger on the metal rail of his sick bed, Gaara exhaled. "I knew that already."

"I kinda guessed you did." His brother agreed. "It was a pretty big surprise for Konoha's squad though. What really bit them in the ass was that according to Sasori, Konoha had already taken Uchiha into custody and was going to put him on trial while they were gone."

"What was the official reason Konoha was sending Kakashi's team to Suna?" The redhead asked after a moment of thought.
Shrugging in reply, Kankuro glanced over at the red tube on Gaara's bedside table. "They said it was to deliver a message. That one actually."

Wordlessly, Gaara held out his hand for the container.

Kankuro pressed it into his hand, and the Kazekage shattered the security seal on the tube with a hand seal. Pulling out a tightly rolled cylinder of paper, Gaara unraveled it with a crinkle. Teal eyes scanned the characters written on the page, taking in the vague information regarding the capture of a criminal and a request for the Kazekage to delay Team Kakashi's departure by several days, citing concerns of a disruption in legal proceedings.

Lowering the page with a pitying expression on his face, Gaara palmed his eyes before sighing. "You have done a very stupid thing, Tsunade." The redhead breathed before turning back to his brother. "And what happened to Team Kakashi?"

"Ahh, well that's a story." Kankuro muttered. "Once they heard Sasuke was going on trial the morning after, Naruko and Sakura were ready to run back to Konoha. I don't think Kakashi would have been far behind them. Yamato insisted they complete the mission of delivering that scroll to you personally. I don't know why I wasn't good enough for him to hand off to…"

"It was probably because the purpose of the mission was to keep Team Kakashi out of the village while Uchiha Sasuke was on trial." The Kazekage informed him softly.

Nodding, Kankuro agreed "Makes sense, I suppose. That Sai kid volunteered to take the scroll here and let the rest of them head back to Konoha before anything too serious happened though. We all kinda pressured Yamato into agreeing." The brunette scratched his nose sheepishly. "The excuse we decided on for splitting the team was that you wanted Sai and Yamato to stay behind a day or two."

"That was a good choice." Gaara praised, his thumb brushing over the scroll in his lap. Rolling the page up, the Kazekage stuffed it back into the tube and passed it to his brother. "Destroy that. We have work to do."

Swinging his legs to the side, Gaara pushed himself to his feet against his siblings' protests. "I am the Kazekage. Do as I say." The redhead mumbled petulantly.

"Bring me the team members from Konoha who stayed behind." The memory of gold four-pointed stars flickered though his mind. "And prepare correspondence to Jiraiya of the Sennin on my behalf."

Konoha was being monumentally stupid if they thought he would side with them over his friend.

Sasuke stood alone.

Wind rustled through raven strands, sending them slightly askew as he waited. Blinking up at the full moon, he tracked his eyes across the sky and took in the stars. Gliding forward, he melted out of the trees and took in the bubbling brook and the wide empty meadow beyond.

Green grass stained dark blue in the night, stretching away into the horizon. Crouching next to the stream, he stared at his reflection. A pale face stared back, slightly weary but written in a sense of hidden peace. The tiniest hint of softness hovered at the back of coal black eyes.

The aqueous mirror rippled away into darkness as he dove his hands into the water and cupped a handful. Bringing his hands to his mouth, the Uchiha took a small sip. Delightfully cool water slid
down his throat, trickling into his stomach as he slowly consumed the water. He dipped his hands back into the stream, bringing up another handful of water to splash onto his face.

Sasuke rubbed any traces of dirt from his skin before peering about. Shrugging at the absence of any other person, the Last Uchiha stripped and lunged into the stream. Icy cold shocked his system, making him suppress the instinct for a startled gasp. Surfacing, Sasuke snatched a handful of sand from the bottom of the stream and rubbed it into his skin.

He cleaned his body until his skin was red from the force of his ministrations. Feeling blessedly clean, Sasuke dunked his head under the water and kneaded through raven strands. He worked out any knots he could find, before surfacing and looking about. Still, there was no one. Rising from the stream, Sasuke sucked in a gust of air at the renewal of the chill on his skin.

Shaking his hair out, droplets of water flew from his untangled a hand through his hair, Sasuke shook out as much excess moisture as he could before staring back into the trees. The Uchiha remained still until the warm summer night dried his naked body. Pulling his clothes back on, Sasuke sunk to the ground and rolled onto his back.

Folding his arms behind his head, he gazed up at the stars and waited for Naruko.

He would not see her again for six months.

His single visible eye burned in the darkness.

Sitting cross-legged on the bed of his cell, Danzo continued to turn scenario after scenario over in his mind. He still failed to see how he could retain his stolen kekkei genkai without leaving Konoha. And Shimura Danzo would never leave Konoha. But what if he were to-

The door to his cell slid silently open, a rabbit masked woman creeping inside and sliding the door shut behind her. The ANBU agent leaned against the wall and held her breath, turning her face away from the door. Her black uniform seemed to vanish into the dense shadows the hovered in that particular corner of his prison.

Two masked men walked by, muttering quietly to one another. One sent an absent, cursory glance over his shoulder into Danzo's cell. The elder's single visible eye stared back. Shrugging, the pig-masked man turned to his companion and whispered something that made his partner give a sharp bark of laughter. The pair disappeared down the hall, leaving Danzo and the ANBU kunoichi alone.

The elder's eye shot back across the room to pin the woman with a glare. The woman gave another peer out into the hall before whipping back to face him, dark brown waist-length hair streaming. She crossed the room slowly, kneeling down before him and touching the part of her mask where the rabbit's mouth was carved.

"We are the Foundation that supports the village." She whispered.

"We are the ROOTs that grow in the dark." Danzo replied, his voice a low rumble.

Reaching into her pocket, the woman drew forth an ink pot and a brush and held them out to the elder. Danzo took them after a moment, noting the contrast between his tanned left arm and his ghostly pale right. Setting the tools aside, the elder motioned at his neck. "It is time." He ordered. Giving her commander a short nod, the ROOT member's hand lit up with a dull blue glow of chakra.
The chakra seal branded into the elder's neck unraveled painfully slowly. The two dared not hurry for fear that the higher use of chakra inherent in forcing a faster deconstruction would be noticed.

Minutes crawled by until finally Danzo felt the internal snap the signified the restoration of his access to chakra.

Rising to his feet with an air of dignity, Danzo watched with detached interest as the partially closed eyelids over the Sharingan implanted in his arm fluttered open. Empty black orbs stared at nothing, until they suddenly flared red and sprouted a circle of tomoe. The red doujutsu twitched, and the Shimura felt the burn in his right eye socket that told him Shisui's implanted eye beneath his bandages was reactivated.

Nodding at the ROOT member, he silently motioned her to take a look back into the hall.

As the woman stepped out of the confined room and peered down both directions, Danzo formed a slow series of hand seals and concentrated. Branches grew from the milky flesh of his right arm with a creak, coiling into a pile of wood on the floor.

The growth of timber ended, and the mass of living wood quivered before drawing itself up and slowly forming into human shape. Colour flooded in, and Danzo studied his Moku Bunshin. The clone nodded at him before laying down on the bed and staring up at the ceiling.

Danzo picked up the inkpot, unscrewing the lid and dipping the brush into the dark liquid. Drawing the wet brush out, he pressed the slimy tip to the skin of his clone and began to swiftly trace out a series of arcane symbols.

He moved with the speed of a master, painting out and activating the seals with a burst of chakra. The clone nodded again,signifying the success of him sealing its access to chakra. Danzo internally relished in the feeling of relief. He hadn't been sure that the seals would take, or that if they did, there was a chance the wood clone wouldn't have the necessary chakra to sustain its existence.

Shoving the ink brush and pot into his pocket he stood and turned to face his subordinate. The woman silently reached under her cloak and pulled out a fold of dark cloth. Danzo shook the cloth out, revealing a satisfactorily sized standard ANBU-issue cloak.

Pulling on the cover, Danzo pushed his arms through the sleeves before snatching up the proffered set of black gloves. Shoving the gloves on, Danzo inspected them quickly. The glove on his right fully hid the abnormally pale colouring of the skin of his right arm, and the glove on his left matched its counterpart.

Looking at the mask the woman then offered him, Danzo nearly snorted at the irony of it all. The monkey mask.

Hitching the mask onto one of the hooks sewn into the side of the cloak, he turned back to face his clone. Reaching up with his right hand, the elder pulled the bandages wrapped around his face up and revealed the Sharingan implanted there.

Uchiha's Shisui's eye spun into a four point shuriken. Kotoamatsukami slid into the brain of his clone, laying down the foundation for the false experiences he would implant there later. Dropping the bandages back down over his suddenly aching implant, Danzo grabbed the monkey mask and pressed it over his face.

Drawing the hood of the cloak over his head, Shimura Danzo turned and left the cell.
Kakashi sat on his couch, feet propped up on his chabudai and turned another page of his green covered smut. It was too bad, he decided mournfully, that none of his cute little students could experience the glory of the Icha Icha series.

The door of his apartment squeaked open, sliding shut softly. The silvery-haired jounin ignored the scuffle as his guest dragged a worn chair from the kitchen table. His guest plopped the chair on the other side of his chabudai, sinking down into the rickety piece of furniture. Kakashi silently turned another page.

"I need your help." Sasuke interrupted after growing bored of waiting for the Hatake to acknowledge him.

Snapping the book shut, Kakashi slid it into his kunai pouch and regarded Sasuke with all seriousness. Sasuke asking for help was something that happened so rarely that it was almost guaranteed to be a severe issue.

The Uchiha stared back at him with coal black eyes before tugging on the stiff collar of the flak jacket he was wearing.

Feeling a stab of pity, Kakashi couldn't help but wonder what could have driven the boy to wear his dead father's uniform.

"What I am about to tell you is classified information." Sasuke stated bluntly, and Kakashi's visible eye narrowed. Deciding not to contain his curiosity, the jounin nodded for the teen to continue. "It regards the truth behind the Uchiha Clan Massacre."

Steeling himself with a deep breath, Sasuke leaned forward. "Uchiha Itachi killed my family under the orders of the Council of Konoha."

Kakashi jerked in shock, his foot dropping onto the floor with a heavy thump. Watching his reaction with a morbid kind of amusement, the Uchiha continued. "In order to end generations of discrimination my clan suffered, which only intensified after the Kyuubi attack, my father planned a coup d'eat against the Sandaime Hokage."

Rubbing suddenly clammy hands together, Kakashi attempted to form a response. "When negotiations went poorly, the Inner Council ordered Itachi to kill the entire clan. Itachi followed his orders, but was unable to kill me. Instead, he became a nukenin and blackmailed the Council for my safety."

"Why are you telling me this?" The jounin croaked. The self-depreciating smile Sasuke sent him turned Kakashi's stomach. "So that they cannot kill the truth. If I disappear, I doubt even the Hokage would raise the issue of the truth. My death would negate any gain from it. As a respectable jounin, if you bring forth accusations of conspiracy and murder, there are many who would listen to you. Plus, I may need to involve you in the game of politics, if you are willing."

"Why aren't you telling Naruko and Sakura about this?" Kakashi shot shrewdly at the raven. The look Sasuke sent him in reply was incredulous. "Sakura and Naruko might be ninja, but they're still too innocent in regards to the dirty business behind Konoha. I'd rather allow them to keep it a little longer."

Playing Devil's Advocate, Kakashi retorted "Doesn't that hurt them in the long run? Especially since Naruko wants to be the Hokage." Noticing the way Sasuke's eyes darkened at the mention of becoming village leader, Kakashi filed the information in the back of his mind for later.
"Because Sakura is too unimportant to have anyone after her at the moment, and Tsunade is backing her. I'm sure the Godaime will eventually give her some form of tutoring on the subject."

Kakashi nearly drew back at the sudden vicious intent that flooded the Uchiha's expression.

"And if Naruko has any political enemies, I will personally destroy them."

"That might not net you any friends." Kakashi pointed out, unable to formulate anything else at the moment.

Sasuke's face went colder than death. "If anyone else tries to hurt Naruko, I'll slaughter everyone they ever cared about."

The declaration was ringing, and left Kakashi staring at the Uchiha's vacant chair long after he left the apartment.

Naruko was staring into an untouched bowl of ramen when the door burst inward.

Whirling into the room with all the fury of a hurricane, Karin pointed an accusing finger at the blonde. Naruko was gaping at her in shock as Karin howled "What did you do to Sasuke-kun?"

Her mouth snapped shut, face blushing bright red as she stuttered "I... uh... he..."

Ignoring her distant relative, Karin brushed red strands from her face before calmly shutting the door. "Now that the obligatory pissed off response is taken care of, I want you to tell me why exactly Sasuke was moping about at a ramen stand after he chased after you."

"Where are your friends?" the blonde deflected, and the redhead rolled her eyes at the obvious attempt before humouring the girl.

"They're setting up their rooms at the Uchiha Compound," Karin answered as she pulled out a chair at the kitchen table and sat across from Naruko. "I blackmailed Suigetsu into getting mine ready."

She prefaced when Naruko's mouth opened again.

"Now, tell me what went on." She ordered, sending Naruko a stern look over her folded hands.

"Nothing at all." Naruko mumbled in reply, looking over at the fridge.

A slow smirk curled onto the redhead's lips. "Did he kiss you?" she teased, blinking in shock when Naruko's flush intensified and the younger Uzumaki shouted "No!"

Silence greeted her statement until Karin broke it by bursting out laughing. "He did, didn't he?" The older girl leaned forward and seized the younger girl's hands. "You're so lucky!" Karin squealed. "How was it? Did you like it? How many times did you do it? What did he say?"

Naruko tore away from Karin's grip and covered her face with her hands. Karin's excited outburst trailed off.

Sighing, Karin palmed her forehead and set her glasses on the table. "What went wrong?"

"He didn't mean it. He couldn't have." Naruko whispered through her fingers.

The slam of Karin's palm on the tabletop was deafening. "Bullshit!" the redhead declared. "Sasuke doesn't do things like that he doesn't mean!"
"But there's no way! Not someone like me! Because I'm a-" Naruko choked off, almost spilling her secret.

The gesture was pointless.

"Because you're a jinchuuriki." Karin stated quietly.

Wide eyes stared at the redhead, and Naruko breathed in shock "How did you know?"

Snorting, Karin tapped the wooden surface with a long nail. "I'm a chakra sensor, and I've met jinchuuriki before. Your chakra has a different tinge to it compared to normal people, no matter who you contain. That said, I don't know why you have that ridiculous theory though. I've seen you. You have lots of friends, people respect you, and no one is screaming at you in the streets calling you a monster."

"It's not the same!" a frustrated blonde shouted.

"It's exactly the same! I swear, all you jinchuuriki are the same. Yeah, I know you had a hard life. I know you grew up without friends. But that doesn't mean that people can't see past that. If your friends can see past what you contain and want to befriend you, what makes you think a man can't and want to love you?"

Rising to her feet, the pitying glance the redhead gave the dumbstruck Naruko was particularly stinging. "It's up to you. But I'd advise you to get your head on straight. Sasuke might not wait around forever."

She left a silent Naruko alone, long forgotten bowl of ramen gone cold.

Sasuke wandered the long empty halls of his childhood home.

Quietly flitting from room to room, the Uchiha cleaned out the accumulated dust.

Shaking the living room mat out in the backyard to remove the dirt, Sasuke pondered his next move.

As he stepped back inside, Sasuke slid the back door shut on the chirping of the crickets in the night and padded back through the public sitting room.

Slipping into the private family living room, he dropped the tatami to the floor, Sasuke kicked it back into place before taking a deep breath and preparing to enter the room he'd been avoiding all night.

His parents' room was stained in blood, or at least it was in his mind.

Suppressing the urge to gag, Sasuke threw open the bedroom's door to the outside and begun to sweep through the room. He deliberately avoided thinking about the dark stain on the wooden floor at the far end of the room, and about wondering whether it was an aged water stain or one left from a soaking in of blood…

Shaking the morbid thoughts from his mind, Sasuke strode over and yanked open the door to his parents' closet. The Uchiha fumbled through the nostalgic collection of clothes, forcing himself to consider everything with an impartial eye. He selected a few of his father's yukata, preferring the darker coloured ones that had lighter embroidery. Going to shut the door, Sasuke paused before turning back to dig through the clothing again. Drawing forth a few of his mother's yukata, Sasuke
chose those with bright colours and set them on the bed, especially those with hints of orange.

His brother's room was painfully easy to clean. It was nearly entirely devoid of personal effects besides a pair of small picture frames on the bedside.

Sasuke glided over to the frames, examining their contents curiously. One held a photo of their family. Fugaku's face was stern and proud, one hand wrapped around his wife and the other set on Itachi's head. Mikoto smiled happily, both arms curled around a baby Sasuke. Itachi mimicked his father's expression nearly perfectly, save the touch of softness around his eyes.

The other frame was blank, and Sasuke's brow furrowed. He struggled for a small moment before smiling bitterly. That frame had contained a picture of him and Itachi, the younger brother piggybacking onto his elder sibling's back. The two had smiled contentedly for the camera. Somehow Sasuke knew that Itachi would carry it in his pocket for the rest of his life, pulling it out on dark nights to remind him what he was fighting for.

Sasuke knew the moment the intruder stepped onto his property, familiar feel of chakra leashing towards his own. Spinning in place, Sasuke drifted from the room. Each step he took down the hallway seemed heavier and heavier, and the Uchiha struggled to come up with a way to deal with the new development.

He met the intruder in the kitchen, sending the man a short nod before stepping around him and filling a teapot with water. The man stood uncertainly in the middle of the room, until Sasuke sent him a blank look over his shoulder. "Sit down." He ordered curtly, turning back to tend to the pot.

The man stiffly obeyed, and the two lingered in a tense silence until the teapot shrieked with boiling water.

Lifting the pot from the stove, Sasuke poured two cups of tea. Picking both up, he strode over to the table and handed one to the man. The man sipped immediately, and Sasuke raised a brow at the man's gesture of pure trust.

The Uchiha took in the man's mud-splattered and ragged appearance skeptically.

Sitting in quiet, the two sipped their tea. The man finished first, setting the cup down and folding his hands on the table. Sasuke mirrored the motion a minute later, fixing his houseguest with a blank look.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

The man smiled faintly in reply. "I've always kept tags on you. I'll admit, it was a setback not to be informed by my former ally that you had been taken, but nothing I could not overcome."

Sasuke snorted.

"You've ruined a lot of my plans, Sasuke." The man admonished softly, voice chiding. Sasuke rolled his eyes in reply before sending a muted glare at the man.

"Your plans were foolish and would have achieved nothing." Sasuke declared bitterly.

The man's face was blank, and only slowly rising eyebrows marked his surprise.

"I'm curious as to how you found out that I knew everything anyway." Sasuke muttered.

The man's smile turned sardonic. "You need to be more cautious, Sasuke. I overheard you at
Kakashi's. You're lucky I found Danzo's maggot and disposed of him before he could get anywhere."

The Uchiha laughed. "That's unlike you."

"I do what I must." The man declared resolutely.

Sasuke's voice was bitter, and his eyes narrowed. "What you must?" he hissed. "What you did was idiotic. There were so many things you could have done differently. But you were always one to follow orders rather than think for yourself."

Shaking his head in slow denial, Sasuke's voice lowered to a whisper. "I'll admit that what I've done has been my own choice, but I won't deny your part in it. Because of the circumstances you chose, I spent eighteen years having lost everything I ever loved. It is only through the desperation of a bijuu that I sit before you now, twenty five years old in my sixteen year old body, trying to save what I care about before I lose it a second time."

Twin pairs of coal black eyes met, and swirled into twin pairs of red orbs that stared into one another.

"Let us speak frankly, Itachi."
"Forgive me Sasuke... Again, next time." – Uchiha Itachi

"That's okay... Just as long as we can be together sometimes." – Uchiha Sasuke

"I must admit." Itachi began, Sharingan eyes bringing the needed clarity for him to study his younger brother's face. "That is quite the claim."

Snorting in amusement, Sasuke sent Itachi a wry look. "That is the least of it all. Though I'm telling you the truth."

"Is that so? Alright little brother, I'll bite." The older Uchiha sighed, rising to his feet and heading over to the stove to set on another pot of water. Tracking his eyes after his brother, Sasuke poked at his teacup with a lazy finger.

"I killed you. Just like you wanted." Watching his brother's stiff back as he stood before the stove, faced away from his younger brother, Sasuke pressed on. "After I killed you, I passed out. And when I woke up, it was to a man in an orange mask."

Itachi noted the sudden harsh note in his brother's tone when he mentioned Tobi, but he remained silent and continued to stare at the slowly heating pot.

"He told me the truth behind the death of our family, and I realized that despite all you had done I still cared about you. Your death gave me a Mangekyo Sharingan."

Itachi's fists clenched beneath his voluminous sleeves. Those cursed eyes…

"I swore vengeance against Konoha." Spinning the elder Uchiha pinned Sasuke with a slightly heated glare before the younger cut him off with a merciless proclamation.

"You said it yourself when they resurrected you using Edo Tensei. 'I used the hatred within you… and that's why I failed. The only thing I did was giving the hatred to you and making you flee the village… I turned you into a criminal.'" The expression on Itachi's face was stricken, forcing Sasuke to soften his own. "I forgave you for what you did, despite the pain it caused me."

"I attacked the Five Kage Summit, and became an international criminal, before going on to kill Danzo. Did you know that he pilfered the bodies of our clan and stole Sharingan from their corpses?" Sasuke rose to his feet with an alarmed look when Itachi went deathly pale, his older brother steadying himself with a hand on the kitchen counter.

"I had no idea...". The nukenin croaked.

Starburst eyes regarded his older brother. "I pushed myself too far, and went nearly blind. In the end, I took your eyes. I made you a part of me." Striding over to Sasuke, Itachi leaned down to closely examine the Clan Head's eyes. The three pronged sigil of his one Mangekyo was present within Sasuke's six-pointed starburst, differentiated by the prongs being straightened out.
"Hnn." The Uchiha grunted.

"Hnn." The other Uchiha grunted.

"Yakushi Kabuto studied and refined the Edo Tensei. He used it to bring back a lot of famous ninja for Akatsuki's army, not just you." Narrowing his eyes at Itachi, Sasuke recalled something Naruko had briefly mentioned all those years ago. "It enables the user to fully control anyone under it, but somehow you got out far enough to turn on him and fight to end the technique."

A flash of comprehension slipped through Itachi's eyes before they went guarded. "And you?" he murmured quietly, searching Sasuke's face.

Shrugging, the younger Uchiha fixed his brother with a glare. "When I found your resurrected self, I demanded answers from you. Why did you do what you did? You promised to answer me after you had defeated Kabuto. I joined you against him, but in the end you died to bring him down."

Reaching out, Sasuke seized Itachi's sleeve in an iron grip. "Tell me, Itachi! Why did you make that choice?" The two brothers stared at one another in a silent tableau until it was shattered by the sharp whistle of the teapot.

Pulling away, Itachi stepped over to retrieve the steaming pot and pour Sasuke and himself new cups.

Sinking down across Sasuke, the Uchiha sipped at his tea before setting it back down and passing a palm over his face. When his hand dropped, the eyes that regarded Sasuke were black and glazed with cataracts. It made Itachi feel like a bit of a coward, but he didn't want to see his younger brother's expression as he broke the world.

"Did you know, that when the Kyuubi attacked Konoha our parents were absent?"

Sasuke's brow furrowed in confusion.

"It was largely this event, combined with the rumours that the Sharingan could control the Kyuubi, that lead to the complete segregation of the clan." Sighing, Itachi tapped an errant finger on the tabletop, purple nail dull.

"The main demand from the part of the village was that we would permit them to study our doujutsu, as respectfully as possible, in order to determine the truth behind rumour. Our father was smart," Itachi paused. "And refused to allow this. He knew that the rumour was truth, that the village would conclude one of our own was responsible once the ability was proven. But because of his denial, tensions would grow between our clan and the village."

Itachi's smile was bittersweet. "Chichi-ue was strong and proud, but more than that he was spiteful. He loathed the Hokage, firmly believing that they have done their best since the formation of Konohagakure to suppress and tame the Uchiha clan." Shrugging at his brother, he sighed. "Perhaps he was right. But even if the Senju had tamed us, was that so wrong? Our ancestors were warlike and ambitious. It has only been through forming this village that they have enjoyed safer, happier lives."

Sasuke silently radiated outright, and Itachi pinched the bridge of his nose. "In any case, Chichi-ue fought for six years to overcome the Council. Both sides were stubborn. They demanded to be allowed to study our doujutsu, while our father demanded the complete removal of all restrictions on the clan. And the naming of an Uchiha Hokage when the Sandaime retired. Preferably me. Neither side was willing to give an inch."
"Oh yes," the older brother replied sardonically to Sasuke's shocked expression. "Our father always named me the 'pipe that flows between the clan and the village'. He would only be satisfied that the biases against us were ended if Sarutobi named one of our clan his successor. The council rejected that particular demand quite furiously."

"Did you agree with it?" Sasuke asked quietly. "Chichi-ue's demands, I mean."

Bleary black eyes tracked across the room before snapping back to the smudge that was his brother. "I think, theoretically, the idea was sound. But since they could not trust us without studying our eyes, they refused. And since we could not give them our eyes with incriminating ourselves, we were at an impasse."

Tightening his bony hand around his tea, Itachi soaked in the warmth it provided his cool fingers. "After years of frustration, our father concluded the only way to solve the issue was to overthrow the council and the Hokage, and began to plan a coup d'eat. Once this became known to the village, offers and counter-offers began to accumulate, though there were none that satisfied both parties. The deadline for the rebellion drew closer and closer, and the Hokage and the clan became more and more desperate. Around this time, the Council began to confer in private more often. Eventually, time ran out, and Danzo summoned me to give me my last orders: Assassinate the Uchiha Clan before they rebel against Konoha."

Sasuke's lips pressed together, the clench of his hands on the edge of the table creating an alarming creak.

Looking faintly wistful, Itachi closed his eyes and quietly stated "You wish to know why I would go through with the order." Sharingan eyes slowly opened, staring at Sasuke half lidded. Itachi had no desire to see his brother's expression, but he deserved the agony of knowing his brother's hatred.

"The order I received was framed as though it was approved by the Sandaime Hokage. I believed it easily. Despite the Sandaime's desires for bloodless peace, he would do what was necessary to preserve it. I knew that if I refused the mission, I would likely be quietly killed and someone else would be sent in my place. It was only by murdering almost my entire family and exiling myself from the village that I could protect you."

Wincing, Itachi swallowed the last of his tea before continuing "I admit, that it was short-sighted of me to not have approached the Hokage beforehand to plead for your life. If I had done so, he would've told me he'd given no such order and perhaps things might have ended differently." Ruefully, the Uchiha shook his head. "I was too naïve. I called myself a shinobi, but I trusted that if such an order were given it would not be a lie."

"Why didn't you ask Danzo to spare the rest of the children? The ignorant ones who knew nothing?" Sasuke interjected.

"I should have." Itachi agreed. "Despite what you might think, Danzo isn't merciless." An amused look crossed his face when Sasuke glared at him incredulously. "Danzo is an extremist who is willing to do anything to protect Konoha. If I had tried, I could have probably convinced him to spare the children and raise them as loyal Konoha shinobi. But I was too afraid that questioning anything would destroy my chance to save your life."

"I should have died! You were supposed to kill me and our parents together! And yet… Why was I the only one! Why was I the only one to survive!" Sasuke shouted at his brother, agony colouring his voice. "Do you have any idea how much of my life has been nothing but pain?"

Sorrow filled Itachi's face, and he reached forward to poke two fingers at Sasuke's forehead. "Don't
cry, Sasuke. Your big brother is here to protect you, no matter what happens." He rasped, voice choked with emotion.

"That was the oath I made when the Kyuubi attacked. If I had permitted the clan to go forward with their plans, Konoha would have been so weakened no matter who won that other countries would have invaded. You would have died anyway. If I had stepped aside on the mission, you would have died at someone else's hands. Only by doing the deed myself did I see a way to keep you alive."

Sasuke stared at the palms of his hands, tracing the creases with leaden eyes. Watching his brother, Itachi relished in the agony that would surely be dealt out for his sins.

"When you died in the future," Sasuke whispered. "I was so lost and confused. I didn't know what to do with myself anymore. It all just seemed so pointless. How was I to make a decision without the knowledge of why you had chosen the future you did?"

"People change, Itachi." Raising his eyes to meet his brother's, the Uchiha stared at Itachi resolutely. "I'm not afraid to admit that Naruko lit my darkness, until Tobi murdered her and the son I never got to meet. I think I would have named him after you despite never having resolve our... disagreement."

Itachi dropped his empty cup, and it fissured on the tiled floor, shards scattering about the kitchen.

The smile Sasuke gave him was sardonic, and his fingers reached out to poke his older brother's forehead. "My foolish older brother. You and I are flesh and blood. I can't afford to focus on the peripheral, not when I need to focus on what's most important. I forgive you for your idiotic actions on my behalf. I think chichi-ue and haha-ue would have understood in the end."

"Sasuke, you..." Itachi breathed, eyes wide. Sasuke's smile turned bitter. "It would be hypocritical to hold what you've done against you after what I did. I've killed a lot of people Itachi. I've been stupid. I've been weak. It all ended with me sitting in the Hokage's chair having lost everything I ever loved, satisfying my vengeance on Tobi, and living only for a promise to protect the village that trampled the Uchiha underfoot for generations."

Sasuke's eyes flared, Mangekyo falling back to three tomoe and spinning. "I became a jinchuuriki and contained the Juubi. Years passed as such, until the Juubi managed to tempt me with a deal: It and I would be sent back to the past to fight for our chances for freedom, and everything else would end."

The blank look on Itachi's face stood under Sasuke's inspection for a smattering of seconds, and then one corner of the elder brother's lips twitched. "It would be hypocritical of me to hold what you've done against you, considering I might have even done the same."

Sasuke smirked. "I see."

"What now, Sasuke?"

"Now we have much to talk about. In the event of my death, it falls to you to save everyone."

Naruko laughed. The musical sound rang out in the clearing, and Sasuke rolled his eyes.

"The simplest of things have always amused you, dobe."

"Well what can I say? The bastard finally cracked a joke." She snorted.
"If you like, I could always get my hands on something shiny for you. Perhaps a bell on a collar? That way your friends could hunt you down while the ringing distracted you." He deadpanned.

The blonde howled "Bastard!", and dove at him. The two hit the ground, rolling through the grass. Amusement chuckled from two throats, until Sasuke twisted his fingers into the jinchuuriki's sides.

"That's ticklish!" she giggled, trying in vain to slap his questing hands away. Straddling her waist, the Uchiha smirked contemptuously and pinned her hands above her head with one hand, sending the other dancing across her ribs. Arching and twisting, Naruko attempted to heave off her tormentor. "Oi, stop it bastard!"

"Not until you give up, usuratonkachi." He told her smugly.

"Okay, okay! I give!"

Sasuke sighed in mock disappointment and ceased his ministrations. Leaning back, the Uchiha rose a slow brow at her triumphant face. Fisting her hands in his shirt, the blonde pulled. Flipping the raven over her head with a jerk, Naruko rolled with him shouting "Round two!"

Landing on Sasuke's stomach, the Uzumaki grinned foxyly before attacking his sides. The Uchiha spasmed, making a choking noise before his hands shot up to grab hold of Naruko's. Pouting, the blonde sent Sasuke a watery eyed glance. "It's not fair. I'm gonna cry." The blonde whimpered.

Rolling his eyes, the Uchiha sat up and pulled the blonde against him. He pressed a kiss to pink lips before trailing his mouth across to her ear. "All better now?" he growled huskily. Sasuke felt the smile that she made with her face pressed into his hair.

"Just a little bit." She declared, even as she arched against him. "Oh?" he exhaled, sucking the skin of her neck. "Oh yes." Naruko decided, drawing back to stare at him with half-lidded eyes, lust poignant enough to make his breathe hitch.

"You have to do that again and again and again until it's all better," she murmured, pressing her forehead to his. "Do you understand, Sa-su-ke?"

Sasuke responded by crushing her mouth to his, tongue diving in to meet her's in a tangle of passion. Their mouths separated, and Naruko kissed along his face before nibbling on an ear.

"I swear, Sasuke. You're gonna be the death of me."

Uchiha Sasuke rose from the depths of sleep, blinking groggily at the ceiling.

A moment of disorientation passed before he shook off the last dregs of slumber and touched a hand to the wetness trailing down his face. Drawing his fingers away, he squinted at the completely clear moisture before glaring up at the ceiling. "Water… a ceiling leak?" Lapping out cautiously with his tongue, the Uchiha tasted the liquid before yanking his hand away as if they burned.

Salty.

He knew what it was now.

Rolling off his bed with a groan, Sasuke stretched aching muscles as he pressed the palms of his
hands to his eyes. Evidently being up all night and making plans with his brother had taken its toll in both sleeping and waking worlds.

He hadn’t needed to dream about that particular night.

Sasuke padded across the wooden floor, trailing out of his room and down the hallway to the bathroom. The hot spray of the shower reddened his skin as he stood beneath it, scrubbing at his body with a dull glaze in his eyes.

When he turned the shower off and stepped out into the cold hall with a fluffy white towel wrapped around his waist, Sasuke frowned. Snapping his head to glare down the hall with narrowed eyes, Sasuke concentrated on the faint sound of a knock at the front door.

Rushing back to his room, the Uchiha hastily pulled on a sleeveless plain black hanten and drew up dark blue pants. Leaving the room at a more sedate pace, Sasuke stepped out onto the back porch of his home and breathed the morning air. He brushed a hand on his pant leg, he smiled morbidly at how similar he looked to the last time he had fought Itachi.

Sasuke raked a hand through his bangs, the allowing his hair to hang down over his forehead. Just to break the similarity to that painful battle, even if he looked more like he had when invaded the Kage Summit the first time around.

Sasuke padded along the wooden planks, admiring the lustre of the dew in his mother’s untended garden. Sasuke decided that he would hire someone to care for it, considering that he should have access to the accumulated wealth of his clan after being vindicated. It was time for the gardens in the Uchiha Compound to bloom again.

Rounding the corner, Sasuke ground to a heart shaking stop at the sight of blonde strands flowing carelessly in the breeze. Naruko’s expression was a mixture of impatience and pensiveness as she knocked on the front door again.

"Dobe."

Her head jerked about, wide blue eyes coming to rest on his form. Naruko took in the changed hairstyle and new clothes appreciatively before she flushed and dropped her eyes down to his feet, watching as they trailed closer to stop in front of her.

"Er. Umm. Tsunade-baachan wants to meet with Team Seven soon. Kakashi sent me over to let you know."

Biting the inside of his cheek in surprise at the actions of the lazy jounin, Sasuke wondered how much his former sensei had read from the Uchiha’s declaration in his apartment the day before.

"If anyone else tries to hurt Naruko, I’ll slaughter everyone they ever cared about."

Shaking his head to clear away the memory of his own voice, Sasuke examined the fidgeting blonde.

The girl glanced up at him before darting her eyes back down and to the side. Twisting her hands into the edge of her black and orange vest, Naruko bit her lip anxiously.

Struck by the sudden influx of guilt, Sasuke swallowed the knowledge that this was not the Naruko he had known. This was not the Naruko that had defeated Pein and become a hero to Konoha. This was not the Naruko that mastered senjutsu. This was not the Naruko that had tamed her bijuu. This was not the self-assured Naruko that was able to push past anything because she knew that people
believed in her.

This was the Naruko that had just returned from a three year training trip with Jiraiya. This was the Naruko that was still rejected by the people of the village at large. This was the Naruko that struggled for acknowledgement, attempting to ignore her crippling self-doubt of whether or not she could actually achieve widespread acceptance despite what she contained.

Sasuke had pushed at her too hard, demanding too much too suddenly, and it shamed him.

"Alright, we should get going." He heard from his own throat, and Sasuke was proud of the emotional control he displayed.

Stepping around his blonde teammate, he nearly winced at the awkward silence. Mentally cursing himself for his stupidity, he led the unusually silent jinchuuriki through the dead streets.

At the front gate to the Uchiha Compound, a delicate hand seized hold of one of his trailing fingers.

Skin unnaturally soft due to the Kyuubi's healing factor brushed against skin callused by long hours of rigorous training in pursuit of vengeance. Naruko stared at her own hand in surprise before wetting suddenly dry lips and tightening her hand around his finger. It was time to put Karin's words to the test.

The blonde attempted to convey her feelings on the issue.

Would you walk through the streets of Konoha holding my hand, despite knowing how people react to me and what it might mean for your own reputation?

Sasuke's hand pulled away slightly before threading back through hers in a more proper clasp.

Of course.

Tsunade took one look at her pink-haired apprentice and knew.

Sakura was absolutely pissed.

Sipping at a saucer of sake, the blonde Hokage dragged her gaze over and studied Kakashi. The jounin was peering into his book of smut, as per usual. Watching the man for several minutes, Tsunade noted and concluded that Kakashi wasn't truly reading it at all.

The way the White Fang's son clenched his hand in his pocket with visibly restrained force was telling.

Kakashi was absolutely pissed.

The door slammed inward, and a whiskered blond-haired girl stalked into the room and sent the Godaime a glare. Narrowed blue eyes burned into Tsunade as Naruko stomped across the room to stand next to Sakura with crossed arms.

Naruko was absolutely pissed.

Sliding the door shut with a vaguely suspicious expression, Sasuke turned to face the Senju. The tension slowly drained away from his face until he was carefully neutral. The Uchiha folded his hands behind his back and glided to hover next to Naruko. Kakashi sent Sasuke an inscrutable look over the pages of his porn novel.
Taking in three obviously angered individuals and one nonchalant one, the Hokage concluded that she was clearly the cause of anger for the three of them.

"Team Seven." She called authoritatively.

Kakashi’s book vanished into his kunai pouch as his single visible eye tracked up to stare at the village leader. Naruko merely frowned, while Sakura turned her heated look from the Hokage mountain out the window to the living counterpart of the edifice she'd been staring at. Sasuke blinked slowly, trailing his eyes from where he'd been studying the back of Naruko's head lazily.

"There are several orders of business we must address. First of all, where are the other two members of your team?" Tsunade demanded.

Kakashi replied in a blankly polite voice even as Naruko's scowl deepened. "They have remained behind in Suna at the request of the Kazekage. He informed us our presence was no longer needed."

An extremely annoyed look crossed Tsunade's features. Evidently Gaara had seen fit to deny her request. "Very well." She offered magnanimously. "Is there anything else of note that occurred on the mission?"

"In cooperation with Sunagakure reinforcements, Team Seven has engaged and defeated a member of Akatsuki. Akasuna no Sasori." Unnoticed, Sasuke's dark eyes widened slightly before darting across the room to regard the Hatake.

Tsunade blinked in surprise before raising a honey-gold brow. "Well that is certainly fortunate. Include the details in your written mission report. Is there anything else of import that occurred on the mission?"

"No. Hokage-sama."

"Very well." She nodded slowly, before switching to gaze at Sasuke with a considering look. The Uchiha's face remained stoic, coal black eyes regarding her impassively.

"Hokage-sama. Permission to hunt down and exterminate Deidara of Akatsuki."

Tsunade crossed her legs under the desk, containing the burst of surprise.

Kakashi narrowed a suspicious look at Sasuke, fully prepared to berate him for going off on his own.

Jumping in surprise, Sakura turned to glare at the Uchiha and crossed her arms.

Naruko's reply was loud and vocal. "Eh! What are you talking about bastard? Running off on your own again?"

"Denied. Though I am curious about your reasoning." Tsunade decided negatively, regarding the Uchiha closely.

Sasuke shrugged nonchalantly, ignoring the reactions of the group. "Deidara's explosive clay bombs are based on Doton techniques. Though my mastery of advanced nature manipulation and my lightning chakra affinity, my techniques are best suited for taking him down with minimal damage. Lightning will neutralize his bombs." Sasuke's eyes flickered to Naruko when he muttered 'damage', before snapping back to the Hokage resolutely.
Visibly considering the offer, Tsunade bit her lip before sighing "Still denied. And don't think about running off on your own, Uchiha." The Senju warned. "I'd have to put you on a kill-on-sight list."

Slitted red eyes widened at the older blonde before Naruko growled "You!"

Interrupting the girl with a hand on the top of her head, Sasuke stared at the Hokage. "This has to do with Shimura Danzo's trial, I would assume."

Nodding affirmatively, Tsunade tapped a nail on the wooden of her desk. "That's right. As of now, you're technically free to go. But if new information comes to light during his trial you might be needed around here to refute it. Don't worry about it, it'll likely be handled over the next few days."

Sasuke nodded curtly before shoving his hands in his pockets and staring out the window.

Reaching into her desk, Tsunade pulled forth two things. A new bottle of sake, and a gleaming metal hitae-ate with navy blue cloth. Setting both on the desk, she sent a significant look at Sasuke.

Thinning his lips, the Uchiha strode forward. "This is your choice, Uchiha Sasuke. Will you become a member of the armed forces of Konoha once more?" Sasuke looked at the hitae-ate with visible distaste before sighing and looking over his shoulder at Naruko.

The whiskered blonde gazed back with a confused expression.

Snatching up the hitae-ate, Sasuke tied the end of it to his obi on his right hand side. Palming at his face, the Uchiha ignored the vaguely pleased look on the Senju's face.

"Welcome back, Sasuke." She told him warmly, convinced that for once he had made the right choice. "I will be assigning you back onto Team Kakashi with the rank of Genin."

Looking extremely annoyed at the low rank, Sasuke pressed his fingers to his temples. To think he had once been the Hokage himself, and now he was only a genin?

"Yaata!" Naruko shouted before leaping onto his back. Stumbling slightly, the Uchiha automatically looped his hands under her thighs and readjusted the blonde's weight with a slight bounce. "Take that, Sakura-chan!" the blonde pointed dramatically at the medic. "Now I'm not the only genin from our graduating class!"

"Bet you didn't expect that, bastard. You and the dead last sharing the same rank after all these years." Naruko mocked, mussing Sasuke's hair with one hand. Sakura watched the interaction with amusement while Kakashi smiled fondly.

"Considering that I wasn't even a ninja for Konoha for three years while you were training with one of its most legendary shinobi, I don't think you have room to talk, usuratonkachi." He drawled back.

Covering her mouth with one hand, Tsunade waved at the door. "Dismissed, Team Kakashi. Go get caught up about what you've missed."

"See ya, Tsunade-baachan!" Naruko grinned, before remembering she was still supposed to be mad at the Hokage and scowling.

Sasuke turned and plodded across the room, making absolutely no effort to drop the blonde clinging to his back.
Kakashi whipped out his book of smut and cracked it open, actually reading it. The amusement on Sakura's face faded to slight envy as she watched her two teammates push through the door.

Wrapping her arms around Sasuke's neck, Naruko closed her eyes and dropped her cheek to rest on his raven strands. Maybe she was being stupid. Maybe she shouldn't be trusting what Karin told her. Maybe none of this was real.

But for now, it was enough.

Even if it turned out to be a delusion later.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

Kakashi stood before the reformed Team Seven. They'd unconsciously gravitated towards the red planked bridge that had been their original meeting place before Sasuke's defection.

Sliding slowly from Sasuke's back, the blonde jinchuuriki hopped forward and shook her fists in excitement. "Alright! So who's gonna spar with who first? Is it gonna be me? Sasuke? Sakura-chan?" Naruko chattered until the medic slapped the back of her head.

"Calm down idiot!" she growled.

Naruko turned on the spot and stuck her tongue out at Sakura, surprising the medic and deeply disturbing her.

"I must have hit her so hard she doesn't even recognize threats anymore." The girl mumbled.

Sasuke looked merely amused, leaning back against the railing of the bridge to stare up at the sky.

"Well since you two seem so eager to fight." Kakashi smiled. "The first round is Sakura versus Naruko!"

Pushing the two girls over into the meadow next to the stream and away from the easily destroyed bridge, Kakashi clapped his hand together. "Begin!" he ordered cheerily, leaping away.

The two wasted no time, Sakura's fist striking out immediately. Jumping back, Naruko formed a cross seal and barked "Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" Six shadow clones formed, sprinting around to surround Sakura. The clones formed spiralling blue balls of chakra in their palms, crouching to jump at the medic.

"Please." Sakura sighed, cocking back her fist. "Try a little harder." Then she slammed her hand into the ground, creating a small localized earthquake. The shaking of the ground threw the shadow clones off balance, creating an opportunity for Sakura to lash out a destroy two of them before the remaining four retreated with grimaces.

Naruko smiled before forming the seal again and summoning six more clones, who moved to surround the girl again. Drawing forth more Rasengan, the ten clones around Sakura hummed with energy before leaping at her with a shout. Sakura moved through the melee of limbs, dodging around chakra spheres and dispatching clones with quick jabs.

The jounin and the new Clan Head watched the spar with moderate interest, the older man glancing between his students and his book of porn.
Rolling his eyes at Kakashi, Sasuke muttered out of the corner of his mouth "Abiru dies at the end of that one."

The Hatake dropped the book in horror, leaving it to fall forgotten to the ground as he seized Sasuke by the shoulders. "How could you?" he cried. "I can't believe that you would just so casually spoil it for me!"

Then he stopped.

Sasuke.

Spoilers.

Icha Icha.

The sequence of thoughts connected in his mind, causing him to throw his arms around the Uchiha and sob dramatically. "My precious student has taken up the way of Icha Icha!"

Sasuke pushed the man off with a glare, folding his arms. He'd only ever read the series because Naruko had ghostwritten several of the books after Jiraiya died. It was an odd tribute to the woman he'd fallen in love with, but it was one of the few things he could do to feel like he was hearing her voice again.

Undeterred, Kakashi threw his hands to the sky. "Oh, I had been worried that I would never be able to pass on my ways! Thank you Kami for giving me a cute little student who shall inherit all that is Icha Icha!"

Sasuke choked in annoyance and kicked the back of Kakashi's knee, sending him tumbling to the ground.

The man bounced back up immediately, only sparing the time to snatch the green bound book from the ground and gently dust off the cover.

"It'll be pointless to match either of them against me." Sasuke interjected before Kakashi had a chance to continue his tirade.

"Oh?" the jounin queried, raising a silvery brow.

Nodding slowly, the Uchiha clarified "It's alright to have someone better than you to aspire to surpass. But to get beaten down so decisively by me would only serve to discourage them." On the outside Sasuke looked the same age as the two girls, and no one would expect him to be as strong as he actually was. Showcasing that strength would make his teammates question why exactly they were so far behind.

Rubbing his hands together with a greedy gleam, Kakashi eyed the Sasuke. "Let's make a bet then, Sasuke-kun," he offered in an amused tone. "If Sakura wins, you owe me the next copy of Icha Icha when it comes out, and you fight Sakura. If Naruko wins, I'll buy the team lunch and fight you myself."

"Done." Sasuke agreed immediately, shaking Kakashi outstretched hand with finality. Turning back to the battle, the two watched with assessing gazes. "I think that was a stupid bet, Kakashi." The Uchiha declared after a moment. "Naruko will obviously win this one."

"I don't know." The jounin disagreed with a shake of his head. "Sakura's advanced pretty far these recent years." Watching as the medic landed a back-handed fist on Naruko's arm, Kakashi grinned.
"She'll surprise you, I think."

"Perhaps." Sasuke allowed, smirking as the blonde glared at Sakura before kicking out at her knee. Sakura blocked the blow with her shin, wincing. "But you forget that Naruko has spent the last three years in dedicated training with one of the Sennin – nothing else." He clarified when Kakashi opened his mouth. "Further, Naruko has more stamina and more ability to take a hit. Her Kyuubi granted healing factor is a bonus as well."

Shooting a sharp look at Sasuke, Kakashi demanded with a frown "You know about that?"

Openly scoffing "Of course I know about it." the Uchiha fingered his new hitae-ate. "I don't give a damn." He reassured the man. "I'm not so stupid as to associate the prison as being equal to the prisoner."

The two girls broke apart panting, Sakura lighting up her hand with green chakra and pressing it to her split lip.

Wincing at the feeling of heat as the bruises under her vest faded through demonic chakra use, the blonde drew back and palmed a kunai.

Sakura's healing was interrupted when a group of blonde clones dove at her with a shout, punching and kicking. Eyelid twitching with annoyance, the pinkette mimicked her earlier tactic of slamming her fist into the ground. Setting off another earthquake, she rose to her feet and swiped a hand across her forehead. Then her eyes widened as a Naruko dove at her from above, falling through the sky with a kunai in one hand.

She had little time to react before the blond slammed into her, sending the two to the ground in a heap of limbs. Drawing back her fist to punch the other girl, Sakura stopped at the kunai point that hovered above her eye.

Naruko grinned.

"I win."

Kakashi groaned, slapping a palm to his face.

The two former combatants looked with confusion at their put out sensei and the smug looking Sasuke. "Kakashi's going to buy lunch today." The Uchiha called.

Slapping high fives, the two girls shouted "All right!"

"Sasuke-kun!" A shout echoed from across the river, causing Sasuke to turn and blink in mild surprise.

Red hair flashed in the sun as Karin and Suigetsu plodded across the bridge, approaching the group. The pair stopped in front of Team Kakashi, Suigetsu looking rather annoyed and Karin sending a sly look at Naruko. The blonde flushed but gave the redhead a short nod. Karin visibly repressed a squeal.

"Here, Sasuke-kun." Karin pressed a familiar scabbard into his hands, and Sasuke ran a fond finger over the hilt of his chokuto.

Thanking the Uzumaki with a nod, the Uchiha slid the blade through his obi and felt instantly better. Even when he wasn't fighting, there was something reassuring about the weight of his old blade at his side.
Trailing after Kakashi over to the middle of the clearing, Sasuke sidestepped the tired looking Naruko and slid around the exhausted Sakura. He took up his position across from Kakashi, and then he looked at the girls expectantly. "You two get out of here."

Naruko's face contorted in anger. "Oi, Sasuke! I want to fight you now!"

Shaking his head, Kakashi gave the blonde a sad look. "You're too tired Naru-chan, so now I have to fight against Sasuke-kun."

Sporting a rebellious look, Naruko stomped over to Sasuke and jerked him down by the collar. "Don't get beat up too badly, bastard." She muttered, insult nostalgically affectionate.

Smirking in response, Sasuke stared back with half lidded eyes. "Don't worry about it, dobe. Though I might have to do something about that dirty mouth," he leered, staring at her lips significantly.

The blonde dropped his shirt as if it burned, her face turning red. Spinning about, she almost missed the quiet "You did good against Sakura, Naruko."

The two girls left the field, taking up positions next to the members of Taka. Sakura was already analyzing her spar with Naruko, determined to come up with a strategy to win the next time around. Naruko was too tied up in her embarrassment at the things Sasuke would just say to her out of the blue to follow suit.

Yanking Naruko to the side, Karin began to whisper to her in low tones, causing the girl to redden all over again. Sakura sunk down and leaned her back against one of the red poles the supported the bridge.

Crossing his arms, Suigetsu stared at Sasuke's chokuto with an assessing glance. It wasn't a bad blade, he decided.

Kakashi studied Sasuke's pale face, tensed in preparation for whomever would make the first move.

"You won't succeed," Sasuke quoted lowly. "If you don't come at me with the intent to kill." The Uchiha curled a slow smirk.

"Is that so?" the Hatake drawled.

"Yes."

Then Sasuke stabbed down, fingers blazing with lightning even as Kakashi's shadow clone dove up from beneath the ground. Eyes widening in surprise, the clone only had a moment to feel shock before the Uchiha's hand slammed through its forehead and dispersed it into a burst of smoke.

"Try harder, Kakashi." He chided, leaping forward to punch out with Chidori at the man who had taught it to him. The Hatake leaned to the side, seizing the raven's wrist and throwing him over his shoulder.

Flipping through the air, Sasuke landed on his feet and leapt back at Kakashi.

"Fast." Sakura murmured as Kakashi vanished from in front of Sasuke, reappearing behind him with his Sharingan eye revealed.
Kakashi swung his fist at the back of the Uchiha's head, only to miss when Sasuke flickered from sight. Following without missing a beat, Kakashi stepped back into a Shunshin.

The two appeared and reappeared across the clearing, Sasuke's own Sharingan providing him the necessary insight to follow the jounin's movements.

Sasuke landed on his hands, flipping away and whipping out a kunai at Kakashi.

The jounin easily sidestepped the projectile, following Sasuke as the Uchiha slammed his feet onto a tree to retreat backwards and up.

Catching a powerful strike on crossed forearms, Sasuke gave way before the pursuing jounin. He blocked a roundhouse kick with one hand, spinning and lashing out at Kakashi with a kick of his own.

Kakashi leaned away from the strike before punching up. Sasuke caught the punch easily with his fist, and the two traded a series of blows as they continued up the tree.

When Sasuke back flipped, he managed to adhere to the bark with his palms and wrap his legs around Kakashi's waist. Those watching gaped slightly as he heaved the Hatake up and over. Crouching on the vertical surface, the Uchiha sent a glance over his shoulder before diving at the ground headfirst. Kakashi landed among the upper boughs of the giant tree before leaping across a branch and mimicking the Uchiha's plunge.

Karin nearly shrieked when the two shinobi flipped at the last minute to land in crouches. Rubbing her forehead with one hand, the redhead muttered "Stupid macho men."

The doujutsu users rose to their feet and regarded each other grimly before both formed a short series of perfectly synchronized seals. Lightning arched around their hands, tightly leashed electricity chirping. "Isn't this going a bit far?" Suigetsu mumbled, watching the deadly technique crackle.

Narrowing her eyes at the two, Karin pursed her lips before shaking her head. "No, it's not all that bad really."

"Chidori is an A-ranked assassination technique!" Sakura protested. Removing her glasses with a sigh, Karin bit the end of one of the arms. "You're not a chakra sensor so it's hard to explain to you. But think of it like a hallowing out. The structure of the technique is there, but not the substance."

Scratching the back of her head, Naruko stared at the bursts of light that the Chidori sent flickering across his face. "So like, all flash and no bang?" she ventured. Karin nodded in approval, peering down at her younger relative. "Exactly. I'd venture at most this would stun. They're both masters at the technique I guess, so that's probably what they're going for."

Launching forward with a leap, Sasuke took the initiative and drew back his hand.

Kakashi stepped in a moment later, and the two charged the distance. To the observers, the battle concluded startlingly quickly.

To the Sharingan users, it lasted a lifetime. Their doujutsu strained and stretched the moment, activating on its highest potential with the influx of so much chakra. Ten steps, nine steps, eight steps, seven steps.
Sasuke's hand began to arch forward, his elbow bending with a twitch of muscle.

Catching everything with Obito's eye, the Hatake brought his own lightning wreathed hand to bear.

Six steps, five steps, four steps.

Sasuke's right arm came up in preparation to smack aside Kakashi's Chidori-coated left, which would leave the path home open for his own strike.

Allowing himself to feel a moment of admiration for his pupil's ingenuity, Kakashi's lips twitched up in a smile.

Keen Sharingan catching the movement, the Uchiha smirked in reply.

Three steps.

Bringing up his own right arm, Kakashi mirrored Sasuke's movement. It was easier to give himself over to the copy-cat instinct of the kekkei genkai and move to counter the Uchiha's Chidori then it would have been to move independently in order to slap aside Sasuke's moving right arm. It was safer than allowing their Chidori to collide as well.

Two steps.

Smirking victoriously, the raven's right arm abruptly changed direction. Kakashi's eyes widened in shock, and Sasuke allowed himself to feel an inkling of pity for the man. Two Sharingan would trump one, and a Sharingan would always work better for an Uchiha.

One step.

Sinking low, Sasuke skidded to the ground. The Uchiha slipped under the Hatake's crackling swing. Passing through the gap between the jounin's open legs, Sasuke slid through while slapping his hand to Kakashi's chest and dragged down. He pulled away quickly with a wince before he would have shocked his sensei's crotch.

Kakashi might have been a pervert, but Sasuke had no desire to wish that on another man. Except Tobi.

Rolling in the dirt, Sasuke rose to his feet with fading Sharingan. Kakashi collapsed behind him in a spasm, before overriding his body's instincts to curl into a ball and forcing himself to stand.

Spinning desperately, Kakashi was forced to a halt by the end of a steel blade.

Sasuke grinned.

"I win."

The observers exploded into cheers, rushing over to the panting and sweating pair.

"So awesome, Sasuke-kun!"

"Not bad, dear leader."

"Amazing!"

"Nice one teme!"
Pulling down his hitae-ate over his implanted eye, Kakashi sighed mournfully. "So the student surpasses the master."

Naruko patted him on the shoulder with fake solemnity. "Don't worry ya old fart. It happens."

"Where would you like to go to lunch?" Sasuke interjected, raising a brow at the confused looks. "Kakashi-sensei already offered to pay. Wasn't it nice of him?" Punching a fist in the air, the energetic blonde led the group away.

Sasuke and Kakashi stood alone, the Uchiha stretching his neck to the side slowly. Pinning his mentor with an amused glare, Sasuke wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead.

"Next time Kakashi, don't hold back so obviously."

"You too, Sasuke."
Sasuke smacked Naruko's hand away from the plate of barbecued ribs.

Glaring at him, the blonde grabbed at the food again. And again, the Uchiha cuffed her hand away.

Meanwhile, Sakura and Kakashi watched the interaction with mounting confusion.

Team Seven was seated alone at one of the tables at Yakiniku Kyu, having met for lunch on Kakashi's wallet. Karin had long since pulled a protesting Suigetsu away, sending an amused look at Sasuke and vanishing into the crowded market, while Juugo hadn't even attempted to accompany them.

Naruko reached.

Sasuke slapped away.

"Oi! What the hell bastard?" Naruko growled, giving Sasuke a murderous look.

Smirking in reply, The Uchiha deliberately took a small bite from his own meal. "A Hokage must partake of a meal with the uttermost decorum." He declared solemnly, before growing slightly stern. "Mind your manners."

Fuming, Naruko slowly stretched her hand out again. This time, Sasuke allowed it, watching her movements through amused half-lidded eyes.

Glaring rebelliously all the while, the blonde took a short nibble before dropping the rib back to her plate.

"Bravo Sasuke. I never thought anyone could manage to get her to eat without food flying everywhere." Sakura breathed, voice stilted with humour.

Snorting at the byplay, Kakashi crossed his arms and waited for his team to become distracted before he'd try eating. It was one of his more childish pleasures to refuse to allow them to see his face, and doing so required the perfect timing.

Slowly consuming his meal, Sasuke glanced at Kakashi before staring down at his plate in thought. The Uchiha poked Naruko's big toe with his own, grinning wryly at the sudden flush that covered the blonde's cheeks. Then he sipped at his glass of water, allowing his mind to wander to the topic of Danzo's trial.

Tsunade had all but promised that it would but handled in the next few days. Reconvening with the other Clan Heads to try one of the former village elders would be something he'd never had to do before in the future when he'd been the Rokudaime. Sasuke had killed Danzo himself long before that point in the future, and by the time he'd returned to Konoha, Koharu and Homura had also

"People become stronger because there are memories that they will not forget."—Senju Tsunade
been buried.

That said, it would be a waste of time to delude himself. Intuitive grasp of politics and the shinobi world led him to believe that Danzo would have some form of a plan, whether it be an attempt to clear his name or to flee the village. Grinning inwardly with blood thirst, Sasuke dearly hoped the elder chose the second option. Murdering Danzo a second time would be delightfully cathartic. Doing it legally would be doubly so.

The Sandaime's former teammates were more of a wild card. The Uchiha knew next to nothing first hand in regards to their personalities. Only Hiruzen's carefully hidden record of the circumstances that surrounded the death of his clan gave any clue as to what sort of people they were - militant and authoritarian. Traits he could even admire himself, if not for their hands being stained with the blood of his family.

Swishing the glass of water in his hand, coal black eyes watched the swirl of liquid as Sasuke wondered how deeply the two were intertwined with Danzo's plots.

An "Umm, Sasuke-kun?" interrupted his train of thought, and the Uchiha turned slightly to regard Sakura.

"Hn." He grunted in reply.

Nostalgia flashed across the medic's face before she sighed. "What was that about a trial that Tsunade-shishou mentioned to you?" Sasuke didn't need the slightly warning look that Kakashi sent down the table at him.

Naruko watched intently as Sasuke turned away from Sakura and began to eat again. It was only the considering expression that he wore that prevented her from growling at him to pay attention.

"It's political stuff," he finally offered quietly. "Part of my new duties as Clan Head, don't worry about it."

"If I'm going to be Hokage, then I should know all about this sort of stuff." The blonde declared, staring at the Uchiha with a challenging look.

Poking her forehead sharply with two fingers, Sasuke smirked at the outrage she radiated. "Maybe if you learn to mind your manners well. There are a lot of other things you need to worry about before you worry about politics."

Kakashi stiffened as Sasuke finished his statement by stating with a slick smile "I can handle anything else for now."

_and if Naruko has any political enemies, I will personally destroy them._

Hanging in the air over the two men like a pall, the Uchiha's resolution made the discussion of politics more than slightly awkward for the jounin. Kakashi fiddled with a fork before propping his elbow on the table.

Sasuke took the moment to trail a slow toe up Naruko's calf while he stared absently at his plate.

Twitching her leg, Naruko bit the inside of her cheek and forced away the instinct of embarrassment. If that was how the bastard wanted to play, then that's how she'd play.

Sasuke nearly jumped when a bare foot pressed into his knee, dragging slowly down and scraping his skin her nails. Darting his eyes toward the blonde, the corner of the Uchiha's lip curled into a
lopsided smirk at the faint pink tinge on her cheeks. Buttressing his chin on his elbow, Sasuke turned to face Sakura and asked an open ended question regarding her training.

Skeptically looking down his nose at the Uchiha, Kakashi couldn't restrain his surprise at the random interest Sasuke was taking in his pink-haired teammate. The Hatake was anything but blind, and he hadn't missed the sudden friendliness Sasuke was showing Naruko above everyone else when he'd returned.

Choking in surprise, Naruko made a show of having accidentally inhaled a sip of water when everyone in the table peered over at her. The stares trailed away, and she gave Sasuke a wide-eyed look before narrowing it into a glare. How dare the bastard just grab her foot and start using his hand under the table to play around with her toes!

Oh it was so on.

"You're late, Sasuke."

"What are you, my mother?"

Itachi regarded Sasuke stoically even though the question made him want to wince.

Descending through the seventh Tatami mat, Sasuke entered the secret meeting place of the Uchiha clan below the Naka Shrine. Occasional torches faintly lit up the dark room, throwing the roof into shadows that seemed to stretch into infinity.

Pressing the warm bento into his brother's hands, Sasuke folded his arms and activated his Mangekyo Sharingan. Ignoring the nearly blind Uchiha, the Clan Head focused on the tablet set into the wall and re-familiarized himself with the portion of the Rikudo Sennin's tale that his eyes could decipher.

Itachi cracked open the lid of the box, inhaling the smell of rice and teriyaki chicken. "Noon was several hours ago." The nukenin pointed out, taking a small bite of his meal.

"Well that's unfortunate for you, I guess."

Humming in slight amusement, Itachi swallowed a piece of meat before pointing his chopsticks at Sasuke. "You're a skilled cook. Have you ever considered becoming a house husband? If I'm not mistaken, the object of your affection will become the Hokage. Though I shudder to think what your child-rearing skills would be."

"Oh fuck off."

Itachi finished his meal in silence, watching his brother prowl about the room.

Staring nostalgically at the clan crest carved into the stone walls, Sasuke tugged an ear and wondered what it would have been like if his father hadn't planned a coup d'etat.

Setting aside the empty bento, Itachi effortlessly caught the bottle of water his younger brother tossed at him and took a long swallow.

Sasuke stroke back over to Itachi, folding his arms behind his back and regarding the former ANBU with a serious mien.

Thinning his lips, Itachi pressed a hand to his forehead and sighed. "The plan is the same?"
"It is." Sasuke confirmed. "I'll expect you there. You're the prime witness and with you around it would be far easier to confirm whether or not Danzo is omitting things."

"I would think that my presence would be unwelcome."

Sasuke snorted. "That's just ignorant fear. You've been legally vindicated. Technically you could walk down the streets of Konoha and hit up the candy store." Pausing, the Uchiha noticed the sudden gleam in Itachi's eyes. "Not that I'd advise it, no matter how big your sweet tooth is."

"Unfortunate."

"Life is unfortunate."

Eying his brother's dirtied appearance, Sasuke sighed. "Do make sure that you don't come to the trial wearing that." The Uchiha pointed at the black cloak with red clouds. "In fact," he concluded wrinkling his nose. "You need a shower. And a change of clothes. I'm sure you can find something to wear at home."

"Why Sasuke, I never knew that you became such a fashionable shinobi while I was away."

"Fuck you, brother mine."

---

Tsunade stared at the crimson splattered Kitsune-masked shinobi before her. His white mask was stained red and she couldn't help but watch morbidly as blood trickled down his fingers and dripped to the floor.

Drip.

Drop.

"Kitsune." She began, and he snapped to attention. "I must admit, I never expected you to become so infamous in so short a time. Three hundred and forty A ranks, and fifty S ranks. Zero percent failure rate. Your high ranked mission count even exceeds the Yondaime's."

The fox masked warrior was near legendary. Any mission that he accepted was expected to be successful. Clients would often specifically request him for missions, even prepared to offer greater pay to ensure his assignment. It was the decision of the Konoha Council to give him the dirtiest, most difficult missions that crossed their desks. And it appeared the ANBU member supported the measure.

He'd never complained about it, at least. Tsunade doubted he ever would.

Kitsune stood rigidly, form lined with pure military discipline.

"What's your secret? What makes you so driven? So successful? Do your memories give you strength?" the Hokage baited, playing towards his childhood arrogance.

"It is my duty, and my penance."

"And your fame belongs to a mask, does that not embitter you?"

Kitsune stared at the blonde for a long moment, flecks of gore continuing to run down his mask. "Self-sacrifice..." the ANBU rasped, quoting a long dead cousin. "A nameless shinobi who protects peace from within its shadow... is the true mark of a shinobi."
Honey brown eyes gazed, face unreadable. Tapping a long nail into the whorled wood of her desk, the Hokage breathed "Unmask yourself." The fox-masked shinobi remained motionless for a moment, before slowly hooking red painted fingers under the lip of the disguise.

A pale face streaked with blood was revealed to the world, lack of sleep evident in bruised purple sockets. Kitsune lived for the mission. He refused to take any more than the most modest stipend for his work that was needed to replace and repair his equipment. After every completed mission, he immediately requested another. The only time he was not on a mission was when the Hokage forced him to take medical leave. And even then, he trained continuously.

People rarely, if ever, saw his face. And no one connected the legendary, revered ANBU member with the traitorous, reviled former criminal.

"Uchiha Sasuke."

Emotionless coal black orbs watched her. "After much discussion, it is the decision of the Council of Konoha that you be discharged from your duties within the Ansatsu Senjutsu Tokushu Butai."

Not a flicker of an eyelid on his dead face.

"In light of your service and the necessity of a replacement, we have decided to appoint you Jounin Commander of Konoha following Nara Shikaku's resignation."

The Uchiha twitched slightly. It was the only indication of his surprise that he gave.

"Furthermore, it has been decided that in order to facilitate your acceptance among the public, we will be releasing the details of Kitsune's identity to the public."

"You may keep the mask," she offered with a small poisonous smile, observing the way his hand had protectively clenched around his disguise.

"You're dismissed. Go clean up." She ordered, eying his gore soaked appearance with slight disgust. Sasuke nodded once, before turning and gliding from the room. He left a trail of red splatters behind him as he went.

As the door closed, he almost missed the Hokage's parting shot:

"Konoha thanks you for your service."

When Sasuke stepped into the courtroom, he didn't miss the odd glances sent his way. He'd set a precedent for making bold statements. Once again he was dressed in his father's uniform, long black jacket swishing about his knees. The other Clan Heads had probably expected him to appear in it again, proud Konoha Military Police sigil emblazoned into his shoulders.

What they didn't expect was the large black crow perched on his right shoulder, glaring at anyone who came too close with beady red eyes.

Reaching a hand up, Sasuke trailed a finger on the bird's head. "Hush, you." He muttered under his breath before searching for his seat. Sasuke found it halfway along the left hand curve of the semi-circle table, placed between the Hyuuga and Inuzuka seats, and he frowned at the sight.

Historically, the Uchiha clan head had sat in the seat immediately left of the Hokage, with the head of the Senju clan seated to the right. When the Inner Council was created, it had been wedged between the Senju and Uchiha, and the Hokage had been moved back and placed on a dais. After
that, the seating had remained the same from decades. Even when Tsunade had fled the village they maintained an empty seat for her clan should she ever return or assign a proxy. So his seat being moved seemed... odd.

Sinking into the straight-backed chair, Sasuke waited for the crow to regain its balance following the sudden shift of movement. It clamped its talons into the thick stiff material that made up Uchiha Fugaku's flak jacket, and Sasuke winced involuntarily, knowing that if he'd not been wearing the jacket, the sharp claws would have drawn blood.

Hyuuga Hiashi joined him almost immediately, folding his hands on the table and looking the very picture of posture.

Pale eyes gave Sasuke a sidelong glance that he met with red Sharingan before he focused away from the man. The crow shifted uneasily, and he calmed it with a slow pat.

Bursting into the room with a door-creaking bang, the Hokage wore an expression of annoyance as she strode over to her dais. Her appearance quieted the low buzz of muttering that had filled the air, the various Clan Heads ending their conversations and taking their seats.

"Bring in the defendant." The Hokage called, inking her brush to take a written record of the proceedings.

It seemed to take forever for the doors to swing inward, squealing as they did so. Shimura Danzo strode in, bandages removed and wearing a dark sleeveless vest. The bone white skin of his right arm was bare to the world, chakra sealed Sharingan gone dark and glistening like the carapaces of a swarm of beetles. Two black eyes met Sasuke's frozen obsidian chips, Shisui's eye gone dark enough to match Danzo's natural gaze.

Danzo held the Uchiha's stare as he stepped across the hardwood floor, flanked tightly by two of Tsunade's ANBU. The cat masked one looked slightly familiar to Sasuke, and when they started slightly at the sight of him, Sasuke remembered that the cat ANBU had been the one to escort him to his ANBU holding cell.

Lowering himself gingerly into his chair, the old man faced the Hokage with an expression of icy composure.

Tsunade looked back down at the disgraced elder with a frown before clearing her throat. "We are gathered today to discuss the crimes of one Shimura Danzo, for former elder of Konohagakure." Taking a breath, the blonde surveyed the room before continuing. "So gathered we sit in judgement: The Council of Konoha, the Jounin Commander, and the Hokage. Speak in affirmative if you sit in judgement, or declare your proxy."

The declaration had the dull sound of dry legalistic ritual, and Sasuke pursed his lips.

"Representative of the Aburame Clan?" the Hokage called, pressing her brush to the record.

"Clan Head Aburame Shibi present in judgement, Hokage-sama." Shibi stated mechanically, readjusting his dark sunglasses.

"Representative of the Akimichi Clan?"

Smiling benignly at Sasuke, who nodded, the porty man replied "Clan Head Akimichi Chouza present in judgement, Hokage-sama."

"Representative of the Hyuuga Clan?"
"Clan Head Hyuuga Hiashi present in judgement, Hokage-sama." A cool voice stated from beside him as Hiashi stared quite openly at Danzo, his eyes taking in the implanted Sharingan with a thinly disguised veneer of disgust.

"Representative of the Inuzuka Clan?"

Tsume elbowed Sasuke in the side, grinning at him before sliding a folded slip a paper over to him. Sasuke barely heard "Clan Head Inuzuka Tsume present in judgement, Hokage-sama." as he opened the paper, choking as he took in a quite accurate rendition of Naruko jumping into his lap during his own trial. Hastily stuffing the sheet into his vest pocket, the Uchiha glared at the crow who huffed in amusement.

"Representative of the Nara Clan?"

Pressing his cigarette into a nearby ashtray, the scarred jounin sighed "Clan Head Nara Shikaku present in judgement in both my capacities as Clan Head and Jounin Commander, Hokage-sama."

"Representative of the Sarutobi Clan?"

"Jounin Sarutobi Asuma present in judgement in lieu of the currently underage clan heir, Hokage-sama." The bearded man muttered, rubbing at his stubble as he stared at Danzo with a serious look.

"I, Senju Tsunade sit in judgement as the head of the Senju in addition to my duties as Hokage." Tsunade declared, pressing a palm to her already aching forehead before marking down another tick on the record. She could just tell shit was going to hit the fan in a couple of minutes.

"Representative of the Uchiha Clan?"

"Clan Head Uchiha Sasuke present in judgement, Hokage-sama." Sasuke offered, smirking at Danzo with pure malevolence. The sentiment was clear.

"I'm going to destroy everything you ever attained for yourself, one way or another."

"Representative of the Yamanaka Clan?"

"Clan Head Yamanaka Inoichi present as Chief Interrogator. I delegate my voice in judgement to the Head of the Akimichi Clan, as is historical diction." The blonde man affirmed as he rose from his seat. Each step made a click of his boots on wood as Inoichi wandered over to stand behind Danzo, leather trench coat sinister.

"Defendant Shimura Danzo?"

"Present, Hokage-sama." The old man rumbled, shaggy black hair falling into his eyes slightly.

Tsunade nodded before starting "All are -"

The crow gave a deafening caw, drawing the eyes of all in the room toward it as it leapt from Sasuke's shoulder. Landing on the table with a soft thump, the black bird burst into a cloud of feathers.

Uchiha Itachi emerged from the whirl of ashy plumes, seated on the table and crossing his legs. Dark blue standard issue shinobi pants matched the traditional high-collared black shirt of the Uchiha clan. The shirt was open at the front; the three rings of Itachi's steel necklace easily visible. He still wore the slashed forehead protector.
The older raven kept his face entirely neutral as he propped his chin on a hand before declaring in a soft blank voice. "Uchiha Itachi present as a witness for the prosecution, Hokage-sama."

Amusement coloured the blonde Hokage's face even as several of the clan heads burst into muttering.

Sasuke smirked triumphantly before trailing his regard over to Danzo. The former elder looked no less uncertain, to his annoyance.

"So recognized." The blonde woman breathed, a small smile curving her lips as she jotted down his name. "All are present and accounted for."

Motioning vaguely towards the scarred elderly male, the Hokage locked eyes with Inoichi. "Yamanaka-dono, If you would."

"Of course, Hokage-sama." The blond confirmed as his hands formed seals, calling up a blue glow around his left. Inoichi pressed his palm to the top of Danzo's head, and nodded as he felt the jutsu take hold.

"Introduce yourself for the record, Shimura Danzo."

The man's lips pressed together in the first strong show of real emotion before Danzo called out "My name is Shimura Danzo. I am here to set straight several inaccuracies regarding the knowledge of the events surrounding the Uchiha Incident."

"Truth."

Clenching the armrest of his chair, Sasuke leaned forward. Itachi looked at his younger brother over his shoulder before spinning on the table and hopping off to stand slightly behind the young Clan Head.

"You stand accused of treason against Konohagakure. Testimony indicates that you have performed illegal experimentation in regards to the kekkei genkai of Konoha, as well as conspiring with a known traitor. How do you plead?"

"I plead not guilty, Hokage-sama."

"Truth."

A look of displeasure crossed Tsunade's face as she crossed her legs and narrowed her eyes. "You mentioned inaccuracies regarding the Uchiha Incident, explain."

"Firstly, I have to state for the record that the notion that the Council gave the order to assassinate the Uchiha Clan is false."

Itachi frowned, shoving Sasuke back as the teen tried to rise to his feet and dispute Danzo's statement.

"It was I who gave the order alone. I made the autonomous decision. The Inner Council had discussed the possibility before, but in the end I acted alone." Danzo declared clearly, boldly meeting the Hokage's judgment.

"Truth."

"So you wish to assert that Utatane Koharu and Mitokado Homura are innocent of the matter?"
"I do not assert." He growled. "It is fact. I acted unilaterally. Your removal of their positions was impetuous and unjustified."

"Truth."

"I cannot contest this." Itachi sighed, passing a slow hand over his face. It wasn't a formal statement for the record, but everyone in the room heard it, and that was enough.

The Hokage's face was pinched with displeasure, lips sucked in as though she was chewing a sour lemon. "It seems then," she forced out, unwillingness obvious. "That I must reinstate Utatane and Mitokado to their former positions. Please bring them here before we continue the remainder of the trial." She sent a sidelong glance at Yamato.

Bowing in reply, the brown haired ANBU stalked from the room. Minutes ticked by as Sasuke seethed, his brother's hand a cool band of iron around the back of his neck.

Eventually the door swung inward, the two smug elders gliding in with Yamato at their heels. Tsunade silently motioned to their former seats, and the pair crossed the room to sit across from Danzo.

"Mitokado Homura, member of the Konoha Council?"

"Present and sitting in judgement, Hokage-sama."

"Utatane Koharu, member of the Konoha Council?"

"Present and sitting in judgement, Hokage-sama." The old woman smirked, sending Sasuke a cold gaze.

"Is there anything else you would like to add regarding the Uchiha Incident?"

"There is nothing I would like to add." Danzo decided, abandoning several plans due to the unexpected presence of the former ANBU captain. With Itachi in the room to call his conclusions and justifications false or half-truth, it would be pointless to attempt to slander Fugaku now.

"Truth."

"Very well. I say again: Shimura Danzo, you stand accused of treason against Konohagakure, in regards to illegal experimentation on Konoha's kekkei genkai and association with a known traitor of the highest degree. How do you plead?"

"Again, I plead not guilty."

"Truth."

"I resent the implication that I would willingly associate with a traitor to Konoha." The former elder cut the Hokage off, who frowned in discontent. "Any undertakings that I participated with Orochimaru in were indeed prior to his defection of Konoha, and as per such he was not a traitor at the time."

"Truth."

"Furthermore," he stressed when the Hokage leaned forward. "The notion that I have participated
in illegal experiments is fallacious."

"Truth."

Motioning at the pale white arm and dark eyes implanted in it, the Hokage sneered "Then how do you explain the Sharingan you've taken and the cells of my grandfather that you've apparently put to use?"

"I explain it by referencing the law regarding absent and underage clan heads without a designated proxy," Danzo spat, looking significantly at the empty Senju clan seat. Tsunade flushed at the obvious reference to her fleeing the village.

"When there is no individual qualified to make the decision on the behalf of a clan, whether due to absence or underage heirs with a lack of relatives and legally chosen executors, Konohagakure law clearly states that all such decisions fall to the discretion of the sitting Hokage."

"Truth."

"Despite the claims of unruly children, there was nothing illegal about what I did. There was nothing heinous. I did what I did for the sake of Konoha. I had the backing of the Sandaime Hokage in my actions." Danzo stated calmly, voice chill.

"Truth."

"Because of the clear absence of any sort of authority on the legal affairs of either the Senju or Uchiha clans, Hiruzen and I came to the executive decision that these clans were no longer benefiting the village in any way, so their genetic heritage should play a part in the protection and growth of Konoha." He declared, voice rising with fervent passion.

"Truth."

"We have a responsibility to our future generations! To be a shinobi is to sacrifice oneself. Closing your eyes to the sunlight, distinguishing yourself in the shadows. That is the true form of a ninja!"

Motioning at the experimental arm grafted onto his body, the scarred man glared at Tsunade. "Do you think I wanted to be so mutilated? That it somehow instilled in me a sense of pride and self-worth? No! I did not parade myself around, telling people I had successfully transplanted the legacy of the Shodai Hokage and the legendary Uchiha clan. I was silent, keeping the details of this new weapon from the eye of the public."

"Truth."

"Hiruzen was softer than many men I knew, but not so soft that he would not do what he needed to do for the sake of the village! He was Hokage! He knew more of sacrifice than almost any man."

"Truth."

"This is our legacy, and bearing it does not make me a criminal!"

The courtroom was silent following Danzo's speech. Several of the Clan Heads shifted uncomfortably, while the Inner Council looked triumphant. Hiashi distinguished himself by looking singularly displeased.

Scowling openly at the defendant, the Hokage trailed her gaze over to Itachi. "Uchiha Itachi," she demanded. "Do you have anything to dispute here?"
Slowly shaking his head, the Uchiha narrowed red eyes at his former commander. "I cannot." He answered softly.

"Very well, then it seems -" Tsunade started before Koharu interrupted her with a bored voice.

"Come Tsunade, has this farce of a trial not gone on long enough? Is it not completely obvious that the charges against Danzo are baseless?" Homura bobbed in agreement, pushing his glasses back up the bridge of his nose.

The Senju took a deep gust of air as she closed her eyes, frustration palpable. "It would seem there is no other option..." she muttered to herself. "In light of new evidence, I move that we dismiss the charges against Shimura Danzo."

Clapping a hand over Sasuke's mouth, Itachi held back his furiously raging brother from making a fool of himself.

"All in favour?"

"Yea." Replied the two remaining members of the Inner Council, relief and pride etched on their faces.

"Nay." Countered Hiashi coldly, staring down his nose at the two.

They bristled, and Sasuke hurried to back up the Hyuuga with his own refusal. "Nay."

The four glared at each other, tension hanging thick in the air.

Running a hand through his brisling strands, the Aburame Clan Head blankly offered up a "Yea." The Inner Council smirked at the suddenly fuming doujutsu users.

"Yea, in both my capacities as Clan Head and Jounin Commander." Shikaku sighed, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it.

Struggling with her decision for a time, Tsume froze at the hand that clamped around her wrist. She very slightly turned her head and took in Sasuke from the corner of her eye. A doodle of a fluffy dog was sitting on the table in front of him, and she grinned. "Nay!" the feral woman barked, startling several of the people around her.

"Abstain as both Akimichi Clan Head and Yamanaka Clan proxy." Chouza decided, looking fairly displeased at the whole turn of events.

Shrugging apologetically at the Uchiha Clan Head, Asuma regarded Danzo's pasty limb as slight disgust before shaking his head. "Yea." He rumbled, annoyed at his father's memory insisting Danzo had been a friend.

Tsunade grit her teeth at the slightly smirking disgraced elder. The odds were stalked against her and she knew it. As Hokage, she had to appear to be as impartial as possible. But she remembered her grandfather, and knew that he'd have never stood for someone like Danzo slithering through his village. "Nay, in both my capacities as Hokage and Senju Clan Head." She growled bitterly.

"In a contested six votes against five, I am forced to dismiss charges against you, Shimura Danzo. You are free to go."

With a countenance of pure triumph, the pardoned man rose. Koharu and Homura walked over to him to give him proud handshakes.
"There is one other matter." The Hokage's voice rang as she descended the dais, voice cold and barely leashed rage. Koharu and Homura spun to face her, expressions of annoyance growing on their features.

Honey brown eyes narrowed, deliberately focusing on Danzo's experimental arm. "You are familiar with the law regarding absentee and clans without proxy, Shimura Danzo." Her tone was poisonous. "Then you must also be aware that the Hokage can only give temporary permission in accordance with the law. This permission may be rescinded upon the ascension or return of the lawful representative."

"In other words, Shimura Danzo." Sasuke declared murderously. "As my first act regarding the heritage of my clan, I demand, as is my legal right, the return of the doujutsu of my clan. Immediately."

Standing stiffly, Danzo ignored the appalled growls of his childhood friends. "Very well." He rumbled lowly. "I shall proceed to the operating room."

The Uchiha looked intensely dissatisfied, before a flash of inspiration flared Mangekyo to life. Sliding out a kunai, Sasuke ignored the sudden tenseness as people prepared to forcibly disarm him. Flipping the tool in his grip, the raven pressed the edge of the blade to the flesh of his right palm and sliced. Blood welled furiously from the wound, and Sasuke fisted his hand. Droplets of blood welled between his fingers.

Suddenly flicking his hand towards Danzo, Sasuke relished in the slight flinch the man made when his blood splattered on his face. Hiashi looked at the motion blankly before his expression flooded with realization and vicious approval.

"Shimura Danzo." Sasuke began, Sharingan spinning blood red. "I, Uchiha Sasuke, Head of the Clan, declare you anathema. Your crimes against us have irrevocably destroyed any form of reconciliation between us."

Itachi's face was slightly saddened at the sheer malice his brother was displaying, but he was able to understand where it was coming from. The elder Uchiha had instilled it after all.

"I sentence you to live under our Curse of Hatred. We will oppose you in every endeavour. Let there never be peace between us, even if war should endure for a thousand-thousand generations, even if the world shall break and be born anew. You are our enemy. Thus do I swear by the blood of my ancestors."

Then Sasuke strode wordlessly from the room, his brother following closely behind him.

The adults in the room stared after him, before Asuma muttered "Wasn't starting a never-ending blood feud going a bit too far?"

"I have nothing so dramatic to state," Tsunade smiled at the shaken Inner Council. "Suffice to say that I agree with Uchiha-dono's opinion on our genetic heritage. I expect you to remove and return my grandfather's flesh."

Sweeping to the door, the Hokage's blonde pigtails streamed behind her.

"Tsunade!" Homura shouted after her. "The Shodai's Hokage's cells are so thoroughly integrated that in order to remove them Danzo would have to cut off one of his limbs, and possibly part of his chest as well. Surely you do not mean him to go so far?"

"That," she declared coldly over her shoulder. "Is no longer my problem."
Sighing slightly, Danzo motioned at the chakra seals inscribed into his neck. Koharu sent him a slightly apologetic look and destroyed the seals. Flaring white, the ink flaked away and the fanatic quietly departed, waving his two allies away.

Trailing down the hallway, Danzo looked over his shoulder, employing Shisui's eye to confirm his lack of followers. Then he stepped into a small, cramped office. A monkey masked ANBU nodded at him.

"The trial went as expected, though in the end there were little chances to discredit the Uchiha clan. Furthermore, the clans have demanded the return of their heritage, as expected." The scarred man confirmed.

"Very well." The monkey masked ANBU acknowledged before slamming a kunai into Danzo's neck.

The elder collapsed to the floor, skin flaking away to reveal a pile of lumber. Tossing the mask and ANBU issue cloak onto the pile of wood, the real Danzo incinerated it with a series of hand seals.

Rubbing at his aching eye, the brunette allowed himself a moment of annoyance at having to use the implanted Sharingan so much. Delicate layers of Kotoamatsukami had been necessary to implant the false memories to fool the Yamanaka mind-walker and to conceal the genjutsu from the Uchihas' eyes and the Byakugan.

Now he was left with a choice. Surrender his weapon to the village, or betray the village.

Danzo was nothing if not loyal.

Koharu and Homura were back in their former positions, and it would be a long climb back to the top. But it was nothing insurmountable for Danzo. He had arms to spare, and perhaps it was time to see about getting a replacement eye as well.

He doubted he could get away with using more of his stashed Sharingan, but there were other paths to power.

Becoming Hokage was Danzo's dream, and he wasn't about to let some wet-behind-the-ears brat take that away from him.

"Hokage-sama."

"Uchiha Itachi." She replied, leaning back into her chair and motioning to the seat across from her desk. "I must admit," she sighed. "I didn't expect to see you so soon."

Lowering himself into the seat with only the slightest bit of stiffness, the Uchiha steepled his fingers and stared at the Hokage through slightly glazed black eyes. "It was my brother who insisted on it."

"In regards to your illness, you mean?" She asked, taking in the obvious cloudiness of his sight. Biting her lip in thought, the Hokage cocked her head. "Are you going blind as well, Itachi?"

The smile on his face was sardonic. "Yes." He confirmed. "But it's unrelated to my illness." Itachi justified.

"And how do you know that? For all you know, it could -"
"It is a consequence of Sharingan overuse."

Silence hung in the office between them as the blonde digested that statement. "Will this affect your brother? And I don't believe I've heard of this blindness affecting Uchiha clan members. There are some old legends that date back to the beginning of Konoha about Madara stealing his brother's eyes, but I wouldn't place much stock in them."

"Sasuke is not vulnerable." Amusement flashed in his dark eyes. "And the rest are clan secrets, though I would advise you to take more stock in 'mere legends' in the future."

"I see, say no more." She paused, sucking the tip of her finger in thought before pointing at him. "I have taken the liberty of perusing through your medical files. They were sealed under some pretty high security."

The reply he gave her was flat and emotionless "I was of more use to the clan and the village as clan heir. So I ordered the doctor not to speak of it and once I entered ANBU and began working as a double agent, the Inner Council sealed my medical files to prevent anyone from finding out that I was legally ineligible."

"Tell me, has the disease progressed very far from where it was when you were in the village?"

Itachi stared blindly out the window, aristocratic features slightly wistful. "It has reached terminal stages. I had begun taking dangerous chemical cocktails to control the convulsions and maintain some level of active duty. Any doctor I could find would inform me it was sheer stupidity, but I had no intentions of living any longer than I needed for Sasuke to kill me."

"That was stupid." The medic confirmed, regarding the young man with pity.

Itachi hummed in agreement, not particularly caring about it. He'd made his peace long ago.

"Now," the Hokage stated definitively. "Even if you had not gone and done something so idiotic, I doubt I could have saved everything. This disease is wasting away your muscles. Your lungs will be too scarred for active duty by this point and you've gone incurably sterile. I hope you didn't want children, since you'll never be able to have your own."

"I was aware of all this."

"That being said, I may be able to help you. There is no guarantee of success, and I'm unsure how many additional years we could give you, but I'm not a world famous medic for nothing."

Itachi's head snapped back to her, eyes wide.

She grinned.

"It's a challenge now. I expect you several times a week for medical appointments. I'll be looking over this one myself."

It was dark as Sasuke padded barefoot down the maze of hallways that made up his childhood home. Itachi had gone back to the shrine to spend one last night hiding before the truth behind the Massacre would be announced in the morning.

The first thing Sasuke had done after the trial was to go the mission request office and submit an application for a renewing D-ranked mission: Caring for the gardens in the Uchiha complex. The first to draw it had been an incredibly loud team of brats led by the Sarutobi kid. The dustmite kept
asking about "Naru-chan" until Sasuke told him in no uncertain terms where he'd find himself if he thought the slightest perverted thought about a certain blonde.

The threat of being face-down in a ditch in Tsuchi no Kuni worked wonders.

After instructing the team as to which specific house they were responsible for, Sasuke had spoken to the receptionist regarding repair and construction. She'd advised him on a few companies to get in contact with over the next several days. The Uchiha Compound was empty and desolate, years of neglect having taken its toll on many of the buildings within.

Sasuke doubted he'd ever see it filled with Uchiha again in his lifetime, but he was wealthy enough that he could afford to repair the district. He owned it all as well, and was seriously considering renting out large portions of it just to fill the place. Otherwise it was a completely dead neighborhood. Sasuke had hated that silence as a child.

If he had children, Sasuke would never want them to experience the same things he had. Black-haired, blue-eyed children…

Shaking his head, the Uchiha pushed his stream of thoughts away and focused on his surroundings.

Reaching a slow hand back, he painstakingly withdrew his chokuto from its sheathe. The Uchiha lurked in the shadows, and neither he nor the blade reflected the slightest glimmer of light.

There was an intruder in his home.

And it most certainly was not Itachi this time.

Placing a foot on the wall, Sasuke gradually stepped up, adhering to it with the lowest amount of chakra he could. It was an exercise in control, and he nearly slipped a few times. The corner between the ceiling and the wall was cramped as the Uchiha crouched. Holding the blade at the ready, he waited.

A shadow glided along the hallway, meandering closer and closer to him. It slid open doors quickly before easing them shut. Not a common thief. Another assassin wouldn't surprise him, given what he'd said to Danzo that afternoon.

If it was an assassin sent by Danzo, he doubted it was to pretend to kill him this time.

The figure passed beneath him, and Sasuke tensed. A flash of blonde and the metal of a forehead protector, and he hesitated. But Naruko didn't have dark eyes, so the Uchiha dove.

His hesitation cost him.

A clang of steel and the sudden skitter of sparks filled the hallway as his chokuto was deflected by a kunai. The faint light the spray of orange lit up a face he'd never seen in his life before. Objectively pretty, with long blonde hair bound in a ponytail at the nape of her neck by bandages. Her features were exposed as a snarl before the hall went dark.

Red Sharingan narrowed, almost glowing with unholy light in the dark, and the woman shivered. They pulled away from one another, before the target dove back at her with his hand cocked back. She felt a moment of confusion at the pointed focus of his fingers, his fingers clenched together and slightly bent.

Then the chirping of birds.
Lightning blazed on his hand, the sudden bright light hurting her sensitive eyes, and he was too close.

Sasuke swore loudly as the air around her body filled with a tight, spectral blue fire. A purple ribcage exploded into being around him, shielding him from the outpour of demonic chakra.

"Jinchuuriki." He breathed, withdrawing warily. Partly formed Sasano'o hovered protectively around him. The woman seemed to struggle before shoving back the transformation.

Pushing back a strand of hair that had come loose during their short combat to hang in her eyes, the woman grinned wryly. "Now that I have your attention... I must admit that you were better than I expected."

He narrowed his eyes. "Why are you here?" he demanded.

The woman gave a slow, deliberate shrug. "Who knows?" she declared flippantly. "Even the boss didn't really care all that much about this at first. But sempai kind of convinced him it might be important. Then again, both the boss and his father were both fans of those fancy eyes you Konoha-nin have, so that could have tipped it."

"Sharingan." He began.

"And Byakugan." She finished.

She held a letter out to him, and after considering it for a long moment, he took it from her. His hands traced over the envelope, and he frowned. There was something familiar about it.

Sasuke held it forward slightly, allowing light to tilt over the press of wax. And he was shook to the core.

Nothing like this had happened the first time around.

The seal of the Raikage.

Nii Yugito smirked haughtily. "Kumogakure sends it regards, Uchiha-dono."

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