no time for survival

by sazzafrax

Summary

A 'What If' starting from the premise of Itachi's apparent demise at the hands of a rebel group attempting to overthrow the established shinobi system. Sasuke is quickly blackmailed into joining and thrust into a world of politics and hard choices, only to discover that his world is made of many threads and choices he could have never foreseen. Featuring the authors love of world building, deeply maladjusted protagonists and politics.

Notes

I've been writing this fic since January and am very happy to finally get it out there into the wide, wild world. Before we begin, a few notes-

- If you genuinely do not like Sasuke you're not going to have a fun time here.
- This is very OC heavy in the first Arc, if that bothers you it would be best to turn back now.
- The romance part of this fic is around 40,000 or so words away from where we are now.
- More tags will be added as we go along.

This is the first time I've attempted to write a piece of fanfiction like this and as such it's going to be a little bumpy. I'm open to comments on something glaringly wrong but I'd prefer to get the whole thing done before soliciting any real concrit. If you do see something and I really need to know you'll have better luck finding me over at my writing tumblr. It's the same as my writing handle here. AO3 has a really irritating habit of not alerting me to messages. Or maybe it's my email, who knows?
Arc I: Dark Horses (Or, The Woman In Lightning)

Chapter Summary

Aut viam inveniam aut faciam - I will either find a way, or make one.

The end of the Uchiha clan comes by way of an almost unimportant village sitting between the ocean and the almost impossible to defend Knife’s Ridge famous for having been the dying place of over fifty Konoha shinobi during the war. There is a woman waiting at a table for him feet up on a chair reading a copy of the Bingo Book. The place is empty for which he can only be thankful. If a fight breaks out the fewer people around to be a nuisance the better. He already walked in with a bad chance of getting out again. Sasuke is something of a scholar when it comes to warriors past and present and this has only been exacerbated by spending time with Orochimaru. Even if he hadn’t been there isn’t a traitor to kin and country who doesn’t know the bright brown eyes of Hashira Fuyuki.

Akatsuki are not the only loosely affiliated band of missing nin wandering around they’re just the most dangerous. In other places ruled by other people there are pockets of dissent and revolution hammering themselves out into something and that something is Hashira’s Giri.

But, Sasuke reasoned until about an hour ago, that was none of his business. An hour ago a man in a beaten to hell Iwa hunter nin uniform informed him that the leader of Giri wanted a word. He’d shed off Suigetsu, Karin and Juugo with a sharp word and followed him out. Sasuke rejected an offer from her some weeks ago in the same off hand way he’d rejected every offer work to come by since he left Oto. It’s not unusual for people in Hashira’s position to take exception to a rejection but that usually ends in rumors and a half hearted assassination order.

Hashira rises from her chair, long bare brown legs stretching out. Hashira Fuyuki is famous for three things: the battle at Knife’s Ridge where she successfully defeated an ill thought out attack from Kiri with nothing but ninja wire and the strength of her lightning, defecting from Kumo after an incident that would have rolled into the 4th Shinobi War and a tendency to wear a fairly revealing amount of clothing. He remembers a rare moment of camaraderie, lights low and dossiers on a table with all of the boys talking shit and drinking, of Kabuto saying it was more likely to do with her personal form of taijutsu than any love of nudity. He’d been just as viscerally disappointed as the rest of them that they’d probably never get to see all that flesh in action, although for entirely different reasons.

Hashira throws down the bingo book and straddles a chair. Her eyes are a bright, bright brown, long dark hair shaved on one side and plaited down the other. She has brought no weapon but her sword and that is more than enough to make him nervous.

When she reaches under the table to grab something his hand falls to his sword. Hashira looks at him, raises an eyebrow then lifts up a sack gone rusty with dried blood.

She drops the bag on the table. “What’s your next reason, boy?”

“Excuse me?”

“I offered you a good deal of money to do a job.” Her voice is low and reasonable. “You turned me
down because you ‘had a mission of your own’ which I have to assume was killing your traitorous brother.”

He’s not really following. “What’s in the bag?”

Hashira smiles. “Look.”

For a moment Sasuke has an odd sense of deja vu. The head in bag has long hair the exact shade and texture of his mother’s. He used to brush her hair for her on long summer days, when it was too hot to play and no one was in the house but them. His father would be at work or at his brothers; drinking and smoking and talking about when they were young. Itachi would be on a mission or with Shusui talking about tomorrow and whatever came after that. It would just be him and his mother, beautiful but unremarkable people, easily placed in the kitchen or the garden and not thought of again until dinner time. His mother always had strawberries out on the table dusted with sugar. He’s never liked sweet things but on those days the smell filled the house and made him hungry for something he’d never been able to name. His mother is most of a decade dead. Her hair has probably turned to dirt by now.

Sasuke sticks his hand in and turns the head around so he can see the face. It’s cut in half by a slash right across the eyes. The mouth is set and grim, not quite at peace with death but not so far from it to be called fear. It’s a soldier’s mouth. Sasuke can’t stop looking at the gash across the eyes and the grooves underneath them.

Itachi’s head.

Hashira observes him and then, quietly, “If you were worried about his sharingan he blinded himself rather than give it up.”

Every part of him feels cold. “I don’t understand.”

She shifts in her seat slightly, bringing his attention to her side where her sword lays. “I need you to do a job for me. Only you can do it. You said no to the current conditions so I changed them.”

“That’s- He’s-”

“Dead,” Hashira says firmly. “I had the pleasure of meeting your brother once sometime ago. It wasn’t exactly the most comfortable of exchanges.” She pours him a bowl of sake and pushes it across the table. “At that time I would have said the fight was as close to even odds as it gets. I turned down his offer and we parted ways very quickly. Not a cold man for all the things they said about him. Like you. I knew your eyes the moment I saw you.”

Sasuke turns those eyes on her, red and burning, she doesn’t so much as flinch.

“You know as well as I do that you can’t win in a fight against me.” She lets her power go, filling the room with ozone and blood, the scent of true lightning and killing. Sasuke looks her in the eye, defiant, even as he knows he’s caught. “You could decide to kill me for killing him, if you want, but I like to think I have the solution to that too.”

“What’s that?”

She throws a scroll on the table. “You can go home.”

He opens it and wonders if this is all some conspiracy to make him lose his mind. It’s Konoha standard, right lettering, right titles. He knows Tsunade’s signature and he can recall the elders barely. Across the bottom are the crests of the seven houses of Konoha: Akimichi, Nara, Shimura,
Aburame, Nara, Senju and Uchiha. He’s distantly surprised they haven’t taken his family off yet.

“This is a full pardon, signed by the current Hokage and her peers, dated last year. Before you killed Orochimaru or committed whatever treasonous acts you’ve gotten up to in the last few months. That’ll take any charges levied at you to dereliction of duty instead of treason.” No execution, is what he hears, Seppuku at worst. “And if you agree to work with me for at least the next 8 months it’ll have your name on it.”

There are so many conflicting thoughts racing through his head -I didn’t avenge them, I can’t go home. How dare he die that was my job how dare think he can die. Oh god I want to go I want to stop being cold. I was too weak and too late they’ll never accept me I’ve dishonoured them. How could he do this? How could he fall?- that instead of something cutting he says, “They won’t accept it.”

“They will,” she says serenely, “believe it or not there are many things Konoha is afraid of that have nothing to do with you or your jinchuuriki.”

“And that’s you?”

There's something blankly calculating in her eyes. Not a coiled predator waiting to strike. Something staring you down preventing any thought of running. “Not so much this would suggest.”

No, not so much. Not if Hashira has grown powerful enough to garner some sort of positive attention from isolationist, xenophobic Konoha of all places. “What’s the job?”

“Details,” she takes back the pardon and hands him a second scroll sealed with the silver edelweiss that represents Giri. “Have you ever heard of the dragon that lived in the mountains north of here?”

“No since I was a child. Why?”

“Burn your dead.” Her gaze falls on the severed head. “The rest of it was taken care of.”

Sasuke sits there, his brothers dead and decaying head in his hands, and for the first time in his life has absolutely no clue what to do next. His goal has always in some way been to best Itachi. Even in death Itachi is a step ahead.

A wave of anger, despair, grief floods through him and with the practice of near to a decade he swallows it down.

As a child Sasuke learnt to turn his mind off. For years after the massacre he’d freeze up randomly -a noise, a scuttle, the sound of a kunai hitting flesh, a knife gutting a fish- he’d freeze and his mind would tell him to stop breathing, to drop to the floor and play dead. He’d imagine his brother in the night coming for the elders and the children. The civilians in the family. The children. He couldn’t think of how to protect them, he couldn’t think of how to protect himself. Most of the time he’d lie still for as long as it took for the nightmares to chew him up and spit him out. This, more than any drive to grow stronger or more vengeful, is Itachi’s legacy.

He didn’t sleep the night through for three weeks around his 9th birthday. There was something in the air or a taste in the water. Something hit the scarred part of him forever reliving Tsukuyomi and told him to stay awake, stay alert and to never meet the eyes of a man he trusted. He slept during the small hours of the morning, when the patrols ran by and he could at least know that if he died his body would be found quickly. He ate quickly and plainly from bowls he washed himself. He trained less but spent hours and hours with a weapon in his hand; ready, waiting.
It’s exhausting, protecting yourself.

In the mindless drone of too little sleep and too much attention he found the quiet place filled with nothing but white noise and a calm eerie tiredness that never leaves. Apathy. Blankness. Later, when he’s Kakashi’s problem, he learns that this is a critical skill taught to ANBU level agents: how to keep going even when every limitation of humanity is begging you to stop. For a moment in Water Country Sasuke is faced with the irony of his brother still managing to teach him something. When the anger gets too much or the nightmares are too strong he turns the white noise filter on and falls into it letting the river sweep away everything but the basics of survival.

In that careful blankness he turns it over in his head. It’s as far as he can get from the bubbling, ugly venom of his anger. Most things can be muscled through on anger and perseverance but those that can’t can only be survived.

“Why would you want me to travel with you?” He asks carefully.

Hashira raises an eyebrow. “How many people did Orochimaru have under his command?”

There isn’t an exact number but- “A little under a thousand.”

“That’s control not command.” Her grin is all teeth. “He had close to 4000 people who’d have jumped had he said so. Civilians, merchants, spies. I need you to help turn them.”

Sasuke is baffled. “Why?”

“You’re the hero of Otogakure. Do you not listen to the stories people tell about you? That you’re a sleeper agent and never turned in the first place. That you’re an avenger of the taken for killing the Orphan Maker of Ame. Some say you ate him for his flesh because he marked you for yours. Some even say you embody the true Will of Fire and were brought back by the Shodai Hokage himself.” She shrugs. “The further you go from the source the weirder myth making gets. You won’t believe what I’ve heard about myself.”

“You want me to recruit for you?” he says slowly, “Recruit other S-class nin like Akatsuki?”

“Hah, boy, you are an A-class nin at best,” she grins again but his attention is still on her unflinching stare, “I am looking for a much more sensible solution than Madara’s damn superweapon. While the wheels of the world are looking to the Akatsuki and their plan to control the world with the beasts, I plan to undermine the structures of the shinobi world at its foundations. For that I need people, like you, who have proven themselves without village or treaty or law. This world is built on armies wearing allegiances that have no real meaning in the face of survival. Sell swords who won’t fucking admit it. When the world settles after this next war those old powers will find that they no longer have the control they once did.”

Madara? Genjutsu? War? “I should kill you for killing my brother and for making me listen to that speech.”

Killing intent spikes across his skin. “Alright then,” she says silkily, “when this next war ends I will have the ear of every major port, minor village, trade route, merchant family and lord, lordess or royal. I need an army to go along with that. I need an army that believes that this,” she taps her hitai-ate where it’s strapped around her arm, “is a crock of shit. That you’re not a traitor for leaving a corrupt system that does nothing but beget war after war. That your village shouldn’t kill you for your blood and it shouldn’t kill you for your eyes. I can appreciate your Shodai’s sentiment when he allied with your family and gave birth to this system but it hasn’t worked and I can only imagine what it would take to make it.”
“You want to end the Villages?”

“That would be silly.” She leans back in her chair, “I just want them to be accountable.”

“If I say no?”

“Then I’ll give Kiri, Iwa and Kusa a head start on carving your skull. Then I’ll let Kumo know, they are so desperate for a good dojutsu. The teams are pretty decent since I trained them.”

So an excellent example of what she hopes to destroy. “Hell of a threat.”

“I’m not one to mess around.”

“You want me to talk to people.” He smirks. What in the world would possess her to want that?

“Missing-nin are very impressed by pageantry. I just need you to show up.”

In the dim quiet of his mind Sasuke chews through the facts as he knows them. Giri needs him badly enough to kill one of the toughest shinobi on the planet. The leader of Giri herself has come with a pardon from the only elemental nation that currently has a warrant on him to bargain with him. She’s done everything to make this transaction as pleasant as can be given the content. He should be the one holding the power here.

So why is the only thing he’s holding his brother’s head?

Sasuke has only ever solved his problems one kind of way, so with his choice made he puts the bag on the table and spikes his chakra hard.

Her lip curls, eyes sparking fire. “Boy, I am going to warn you right now you do not want to use your eyes.”

Sasuke responds by clearing the space between them and drawing a knife from his sleeve. Hashira moves back, clearing a table and landing lightly on her feet. Sasuke picks his best approach and takes it without hesitation. He comes up at a slightly odd angle. She’ll be slower than him and he’ll be able to cut her down before she can do anything. Hashira holds steady for the attack and at the last moment takes a half step forward, hand glowing with lightning chakra- No, wait- Not lightning-

His sharingan spins to life, he see’s the chakra, the light arcing down and then-

“Fuck!” His eyes slam shut, light bouncing through his skull. The second Hashira touched him the world exploded. His ears popped, his nose started to bleed and his eyes turned off.

Hashira gives him nasty grin, fingers still ringed with white chakra. “Can’t spit in a crowd without hitting a dojutsu in Konoha. In Kumo we specialised in other ways.”

Sasuke can fight blind. He closes his eyes and follows the noise of her breath. Hashira waits for him, waits for the hit, and then redirects it, stepping inside his defense before he can mount it. His back hits a wall and he flicks though what he knows of lightning attacks. Hashira stops, the buzz of her chakra audible in the small space. She backs up until there’s a whole five metres between them before assuming a casual stance. Her eyes are at chest level in case he goes for a genjutsu. From the way her hands are hanging loose and calm Sasuke would put money on her using one of the Water forms. Orochimaru taught him a defense to that.

Carefully he pushes chakra to his forearm and palms a kunai. When he has a thin coating of it,
enough to deflect a blow, he throws himself towards her, pivoting at the last second to get his arm in for a strike. Like he anticipated she steps in to accept the hit again, instead of letting it connect he gracelessly turns his body so that her touch hits the chakra gathered on his arm. Lightning meets lightning, hers consumes his but the abundance means she can’t redirect it cleanly. Her eyes widen briefly. One of the few weaknesses of Water style taijutsu is it’s emphasis on defense and redirection. It works by disabling an opponent by disrupting their tenketsu, much like the Hyuuga’s Gentle Fist, but where Gentle Fist blocks Serpents Claw disrupts. Impede that by throwing a bunch of energy at it and the results are explosive.

In a second her arm is sweeping across her body and his chakra changes to something otherworldly he’s never seen before, before disappearing inside her body. Sasuke stops to reassess. Hashira looks at him with no small amount of consideration. After a moment she lowers her stance and returns to the table. Sasuke comes out of his, cautiously, inspecting the damage. The room is not really any worse than it was to begin with.

Getting back to that clean place in his head with adrenaline rushing through him is always a challenge and one he doesn’t usually bother with but Hashira has just shown her mettle. He can’t use the sharingan and he can’t beat her without the edge it gives him.


Hashira brushes off her left shoulder, which Sasuke was nowhere near. “I am going to give you exactly what I said I would. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“But what do you want from me?”

“Your service,” she makes sure to hold his eyes as she says it. He can see her conviction. “Nothing more, nothing less.”

But what do you want?

“Are you going to let me go?”

“I can’t make you work for me. If my offering you a way home to get started on popping out little sharingan babies isn’t enough to convince you I might as well lop off your head and collect your bounty right now.”

That sounds more reasonable. “You’ll kill me.”

“No. I’ll wait six months until the new bingo book is released and your rank and bounty go up then I’ll kill you.”

“Not if I got you first.”

“If you say so” she says calmly, “what’ll it be?”


He grabs the head off the table and leaves.

He hears Hashira’s baffled comment to the empty air but keeps walking. He keeps walking and then he’s running, breath coming out in harsh gasps. In and out. In and out. A river in flood. A fire burning down the mountain. The hissing stab of Orochimaru’s soul. In and out. In and in and in-

He throws up on a tree. The smell burns up inside him, igniting memories up and down his
lifetime. He’s three and his father is teaching him to kill a chicken. He is four and his mother is ill, Itachi is tending to her. He is five and Itachi tends to nothing but his father, his father no longer trains Sasuke no matter how many dead chickens the boy brings. Sasuke is six and it is Shisui’s birthday and this will be the last time he will ever be happy again. Sasuke is seven and he is alone. Eight and alone. Nine and alone. Ten and alone. Eleven and alone. Sasuke is twelve and loved again. He is twelve and hopeful. Sasuke is twelve and vengeful. Sasuke is thirteen and hoping for vengeance. Sasuke is fourteen and gorged on violence. Sasuke is sixteen now, he has come to snap his brothers neck as easily as those chickens and to lay it on his father’s grave. Sasuke is sixteen and ready to die for it.

Sasuke is sixteen and Itachi is a severed head in a bag.

He pulls himself together as he always does. He scrapes together all the half mad bits of himself and orders them into something almost like sense. He has to find shelter. He has to get food. He has to do something with the head.

(Itachi is twenty one. Itachi is twenty one and dead. Itachi was the brightest point between being three and sixteen.)


(Itachi is dead-)


Sasuke allows himself ten seconds to feel and then he buries it under his control. The only way to handle the Uchiha blood is to stopper it. It can’t be stopped or tamed. Only deflected or mitigated. Sasuke makes himself bury the tumultuous shift of his feelings as he turns himself back across the shitty rocks and sparse trees of Lightning, back to the warm inn he’s been staying in.


He packs his bags, stores Itachi’s head in a scroll and heads towards the highest point he can see. Avoiding the small pockets of people and shinobi he climbs one of the perilous peaks that hang out over the sea not stopping until he comes to a ragged outcrop that tips into the storm grey sea. He is brutally, violently aware that he is carrying the last of his kin in a burlap sack. The sea is a vision in front of him, endless and dark. He skids to a halt, nearly sliding right off the cliff. When he feels ready, less like he’s about to spin apart, he breathes in. The ocean air is intense and deeply welcome. It’s fresh and pure and nothing like the putrid stink of what he remembers of his old home after the massacre. Itachi is dead. He breathes out.

He sits on a rock, rubs his hands over his face. Itachi is dead. Itachi is gone. Itachi is just- He’s gone. Sasuke has to dispose of the head, just the head, and then he- He does what? What was the next bit?

Itachi is dead.

Logically Sasuke knows that the next bit is bury his brothers head and then hole up somewhere with someone strong enough to bear his children. That was the plan at seven. At sixteen it just feels kind of...stupid. What babies? What woman? What the hell was he even thinking? He hasn’t had the sort of life that would let him stop running. Could he do that? Just drag a baby and a wife behind him until he died, or they died, and the Uchiha clan ended anyway?

No. No, if he’s honest the plan was ‘kill Itachi and die trying’. There was never an after. There
was never going to be anyone after him. Kill Itachi, the end. Kill your brother and then die yourself.

Itachi is dead, Sasuke will live unless he does something drastic, and he’s in Lightning preparing to get rid of the last part of his brother.

This is not where the sons of fire are buried. Loyal blood, bound to Konoha and it’s free flowing river. Maybe it’s fair that the last of them won’t be. You can’t call them loyal now, can you? Sasuke always expected to be killed. He gave up thinking it would be for something worthwhile while still in Orochimaru’s care. As long as Itachi died too it didn’t matter. He hasn’t given much thought beyond the normal to taking his own life. Maybe he should. Maybe that’s the next bit.

Before that, though, he has to do something with the head.

He pulls out the storage scroll, removes the sack and then chuck the scroll into the ocean for no other reason than spite and anger.

His brother’s face was the spitting image of his mother’s. If Sasuke takes his life no one will remember that. It’s one of the worst injustices of his life that no one will remember how his mother smiled, that he had a little cousin his own age he was fond of, that she had a twin whom he hated. Cousins, uncles, children, elders. People whose names he never knew while they lived because he assumed he’d have time to learn them. Instead he learnt from the obituaries, from the houses he looted, from the estate manager who had him sign documents as soon as he was declared the official heir at age eight. A year after he’d seen the last body burnt.

It’s over.

He closes his eyes, lets his shoulders leak tension they’ve held for so long. He starts at his neck, loosening each successive muscle group until he’s only upright by chance. His fingers tingle underneath his nails, damaged nerves from where he’s learnt to weave electricity. His feet ache from years running and kicking, he’s broken his feet so many times now he has to do a physical check every few days because he no longer feels the pain. He can feel his chakra, pockmarked with death and damage but still strong, still growing inside his body for a purpose that is now past. The scars from Orochimaru stretch with every relaxed muscle. An entire body built for one thing and one thing alone. His skin is too tight and too big all at once. His heart is moving so fast his chest it’s a wonder no one else can hear it. It’s over, it’s done. It’s over. No more running towards a point, no more running into the dark.

Strawberries dusted with sugar in the heat of summer. Sun blaring through the window of a now burnt down house. The last time he had peace. There’s a kind of strawberry that is unique to Konoha. Fat and red and tart. It was tradition to have a pie made from them at weddings. Sasuke tried the recipe himself a few times since the massacre but it never turned out right. Too runny, too sweet, the pastry didn’t taste of his mother’s sweet perfume from where she’d accidentally rubbed her wrists against the dough. The last vials of it when up with her body because it was what she would have wanted. For weeks after it lingered in the air, wafting through the window at night.

It’s with this thought that he finally reaches down and digs the hole for his brothers head. He puts it in face down, a tiny act of cowardice, and piles the dirt high. He wants to tell his mother that he found it again, if only briefly and if after that he makes the choice to come back, to lay down here where the fireborn are scorned and feared he’ll do that. But first he will go home, he will face her first.

So he walks forward, down the cliff away from Itachi’s buried head. Down from the high of the cliff and back to the town. It takes a few minutes and a brief consult with Karin to find Hashira
again. He has only one word for her when he does find her-

“Yes.”

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The word comes at dinner time in a po-dunk village in the shit end of Ame. It’s almost like they’re getting pissed on by the sky and no one has felt warm in days. The camp just outside the village is filled with the sick, medic’s walking to and from tents with buckets of clean water and huge sealed containers of medical supplies. There are a half dozen of Giri’s combat teams, nearly a third of all those above genin, patrolling the village. Medicine is a valuable commodity in any day and age and Giri wouldn’t put it past the Hidden Villages to send someone to sabotage the relief effort.

Sasuke is standing by a herd of goats with Hikari, his translator who is unburdened with a sense of privacy or taste, watching the road for the newly turned chunnin from Iwa carrying the newest trade routes from a port city at the tip of Earth. The chunnin are a deep cover team and have not spoken a word of standard shinobi dialect in over three years. Hence the translator.

“You hear yet?” Hikari says approximately two inches from Sasuke’s nipple, “your leader took Rice the other day.”

Sasuke grunts. He’d heard a rumor of a rumor while in the shared baths last night. He’s neither here nor there about it but if he learnt anything by Orochimaru’s side it was the importance of reading a room and this is the sort of news that shakes one up. Rice is somewhat contested between Konoha and Yugakure; only one can insert a sympathiser as daimyo and guarantee itself eyes and ears over its borders. He finds it hard to believe that the connection between shinobi and country can be broken so easily. These people can’t all be like him.

Watching them mill around fires and makeshift cooking stoves he does wonder a little.

It didn’t take long for Sasuke to truly grasp the difference in Village training styles. He can recognise the odd ruthlessness of Suna in one of the negotiators, a woman in a long skirt and a head wrap who never, ever drops eye contact. She steps half an inch too close when she fights with the knowledge that her training will make the difference. She’s not afraid to bleed. When Sasuke has to work with her she’s respectful of the difference in power but asserts, quietly and efficiently, all the area’s in which she is superior.

The second generation missing nin turned merchant he’s been paired with more often than not has all the markings of a Kiri shinobi, right down to the pointy nails and reverence for authority. He talks shit constantly and is such a weird reminder of Suigetsu and Zabuza that Sasuke struggles to stay in the same area as him without cringing. There’s a dominance battle right at the beginning of their time together and when Sasuke stomps him into the ground the man just bares his teeth and moves on. Sasuke will say this for Kiri: no one can do what they do with a blade.

Iwa is a mixed bag of staggering talent and complete mediocrity that Sasuke is hard pressed to explain. They are easily the least represented in his sample of Giri and Oto because Iwa kills its missing nin as a matter of course. He can pick them by the prideful tilt of their chins, the way they walk in groups, the way they are either the last or the first to pick up a new formation. If he had to guess he’d say Iwa picked a mold for it’s shinobi and then hammered down until everyone fit. Consequently they’re a mess of limbs, teeth and painfully uniform incompetence.

Kumo is the largest percentage of Giri. The higher ranked who followed Hashira’s defection, the lost little lambs who needed a place to run to and those pushed out of the Raikage’s regime. There is a lot of ill feeling towards the current Kumo system that Sasuke tries to peer past when making
assessments. The Kumo nin follow Hashira’s example like it’s gospel and as such each Kumo nin has adopted her disdain for what Sasuke will politely call the Konoha Model and they will call Weak Bullshit. Kumo is nasty to it’s genin in a way no one else has managed to recreate without tipping too far towards the Bloody Mist, but it’s won most of the wars it’s been in and that does something to it’s people.

There are thirty Konoha nin in the entirety of Giri. As far as Sasuke knows this wasn’t planned, rather there is a sharp difference in what Giri accepts from its soldiers and the Will of Fire.

The Will of Fire says that you fight for your family, for your neighbours, for those who can’t defend themselves. You fight for your team, whom you love, whom you will never betray, who you will never walk away from. Your ferocity is the bear protecting its den. Your loyalty is to the other wolves who keep you warm in winter. You are a leaf on a branch and when the leaves turn and fall you do so together. Sasuke cut his teeth on this and most of it has turned to ashes in his mouth.

The minor villages are hardly worth mentioning. As are the merchants, minor nobles and samurai that float around the edges.

Sasuke can see the edges of the groups chipping away. As Giri makes headway into it’s dozens of plans and often mediocre but occasionally inspirational achievements become the norm old grievances are forgotten. There’s a Kiri-nin talking about his grandmother’s bloodline with someone from Taki. A Konoha genin practicing Kumo’s taijutsu. A number of small time Oto-nin floating around sharing stories and shitty wine.

He knows Hashira’s message, he knows the grit and grime of the shinobi world, but he finds it hard to grasp the concept that all these people are united by hope.

“Well,” Hikari says, blowing across his nipple, “I might take this party elsewhere, eh, boy?”

He gives Sasuke’s ass a hearty pat as he leaves.

Sasuke hates his fucking translator with the passion of a thousand suns.

He goes to find something to eat himself. The village is littered with Giri here on a medical aid mission. It’s actually what Giri does the most of. Some small piece of nowhere will get enough funds to peak the interests of a Giri scout. The scout will carry the request for medical aid to Hashira or whomever is in charge of the region. Hashira will say yes or no and subsidise the cost of aid with other more gruesome missions. The murdering, backstabbing, traitorous people who turn to missing-nin for aid are paying for the poorest and worst off of the shinobi nation to have a fighting chance at survival. Some part of him finds that deeply satisfying.

He settles on stew from a pot tended by a woman with an ample bosom and well fed stomach. Unlike the last time he was stationed out somewhere with no plumbing the food is good and plentiful. Between what Giri brought themselves and what the locals are all but throwing at them things are very comfortable. He takes a seat between where Hikari is set up and a group of men from smaller nations. None of them look at him as he sets himself up for the night.

“She’s taken Oto,” one whispers, “god, she actually-”

“You’re fucking kidding me.” Another replies.

“Fuck off I am not.”

One leans over to nudge his shoulder. “What do you think Uchiha?”
That it’s easy enough to fill a vacuum, harder to take a country. “Hn.”

“It’s proximity to Konoha is a problem.”

“No, Konoha is too busy with Akatsuki still. They’re not gonna worry about a little tussle between missing nin.”

“They will when they figure out who it is.”

“Pfft. You know Konoha infiltration is a joke.”

“You’re from fucking Kusa, you can’t say anything.”

“On the contrary I know every Joe your mother-”

Sasuke rolls his eyes and turns away. His stew is exceptional which makes up for the abysmal company. There’s even a little side dish of spiced bread still warm and fluffy inside. Nice.

He chews on that for awhile and considers what will happen next. In all likelihood it’ll be a march back to Oto to defend the new base. Sasuke leveled Oto when he left, burnt Orochimaru’s labs, burnt the body farms where Orochimaru buried his test subjects, burnt the torture rooms where Orochimaru was both teacher and tyrant. Oto lay in ashes when Sasuke called himself done with it.

And now he has to turn back.

A sharp spike of fire-water chakra has him turning his head. Round the corner comes a pretty head of blood red hair almost dwarfed by the pack of supplies on her back. She waves when she gets his attention. “Sasuke!”

“Karin,” he greets. “She get you too?”

Karin stops in front of him and puts her hands on her hips. She casts an annoyed glance at the other men around them some of whom are ducking their heads and blushing. “Scary, huh?”

Sasuke inclines his head to hide his amusement. “Yep.”

Karin scowls at the other men some more before sitting cross legged on the ground.

Sasuke’s first memory of Karin is wound up in the six weeks after he left the village to join Orochimaru. Contrary to popular belief Sasuke actually had understood that defecting to Orochimaru would involve giving up his mind, soul and potentially even his body to a madman who wouldn’t care for it in the slightest. What everyone missed was that Sasuke didn’t consider any of those things to be important beyond helping him to his goal.

So he wasn’t surprised that his greeting to Oto was three nights in a shitty hotel followed by two weeks of psychological torture. The room they took him to stunk of bile and shit. The rack they put him on was mottled with scratch marks and old blood. This won’t be like Itachi, personal and intimate, this will be something Konoha would have trained him for had he stayed.

He told himself it didn’t matter. Only being stronger mattered.

Orochimaru apologised insincerely when Sasuke was brought bleeding from his eyes and ears to the Otokage’s office at the end of his two week interrogation. He could have been a plant.

“Besides,” Orochimaru crooned, “it’s your birthday soon. I wouldn’t want you to miss it.”
Sasuke manages to spit blood on to the edge of his robes.

Orochimaru grimaced. “Now that,” rolling dark killing intent fills the room, “was rude.”

When he woke up again his shoulder was killing him and he knew he just signed on for a lot of shit he wasn’t prepared for. The room he’s in is stark. One window, one door, and a shitty chest of draws at the end of the bed. There’s a pile of stained clothes on top of it. Someone gasps. He turns to look at a pretty redhead with glasses holding a washcloth. Judging by the antiseptic smell she’s been diligently cleaning his wounds.

“I’m Karin.” she said, blushing.

Sasuke already has no use for her. He turns his head and rolls onto his side, showing her his back. Karin sighs and shuffles away.

He awakens again at least half a day later, Karin must have been and gone because he can no longer smell old blood. Next to a bottle of water is a hard baked cake covered in nuts and honey. It smells too sweet and nutty by half, but Sasuke stomach growls and he’d rather face his choices with something in him. There’s a note sitting underneath which he reads after he’s already downed half the water and the food.

*Happy Birthday,* the note said, *eat this before Kabuto comes by. -Karin.*

Later he learned that Karin invented a technique that allowed her to infuse her chakra into food the same way the Akimichi infuse it into food pills. Later he learned that Karin chose to look after him even though it was against the rules. This is the first but nowhere near the last time she does something like this for him.

He survived his brithday gift from Orochimaru with his mind mostly intact but judging from the sneer on Orochimaru’s face mostly intact was not what he was aiming for. In the back of his head where he keeps the memories of things that keep threatening to heal him he made a promise to pay her back. He has no intention of going to his grave indebted.

“Sasuke?” Karin says.

“Hm,” he turns away from her, “have you eaten?”

“Mmhmm,” she pulls her pack off her back and plops it on to the ground next to her.

“Why are you here?”

“Sensed you, talked everyone around to joining up. We can go back to Oto together.”

“Ah,” Sasuke hands her his canteen and sets about arranging for sleep. “You should meet Hikari, he’s the one I’m guarding.”

“You want me to get a lock on him.” Karin nods. She takes a drink and then hands him back the canteen. “Sure, in the morning.”

Sasuke nods at her and then turns over to go to sleep. He can feel Karin humming next to him.

Sasuke grew up around police officers. He has very little sympathy for those who flagrantly disregard the rules even though he himself does it constantly. As far as Konoha was concerned the village came first. Cut that with the dichotomy of his family, of his clan, eternal outsiders roaming the streets to protect and control those that lived entirely different lives...
Sasuke was raised a military man. His mother was a career woman until she got married and even then she worked between children. Itachi’s genius was a boon in that regard, no one minded the boy sitting in the office of T&I while his mother went downstairs to extract information from their prisoners. No one questioned the wisdom of letting a small child into that environment either. Sometimes Sasuke wonders what could have ever prevented his brother snapping. Most days he thinks nothing ever could.

His father entered the police force and shot through the ranks, his place at the top assured, but he was raised by grandparents who still remembered the Warring States Era. Sasuke’s home life was that of a warrior, a soldier, a defender. His parents, his brother, never let him forget where his blood came from. Structure defined everyday, rules were followed, goals were met. That’s how you lived with honor and brought pride to your family. That’s what every Uchiha was aiming for.

He’s roamed so far from that. There is no law in the wild. No honor among traitors.

He shuts his eyes and lets the rest of his thoughts drift away, slipping away to sleep.

He’s awoken a few hours later by Karin nudging his shoulder. She’s leaning back out of the way in case he decides to go for her throat. Sasuke blinks awake, scrunches his nose like always and sits up. The smell of rice and dried fish hits his nose and he almost groans.

She hands him a bowl and takes one for herself. She’s half awake and in her undershirt. He has half a mind to tell her that her scars won’t ever stop men from staring. They finish breakfast quietly while the rest of camp wakes and makes its preparations. Sasuke takes the bowls to the small washing area while Karin pulls her shirt and weapons on. She packs up what little mess there is from his camp and sets both of their packs up ready to move out with the group. “Where is this guy?”

In the commotion of Karin’s arrival he’d actually momentarily forgotten about Hikari. “This way.”

He introduces the two of them. Hikari is apparently an equal opportunity pervert because he’s just as awful to Karin. She doesn’t break his hand or his head largely because there’s a man higher up in Giri watching them closely.

“Wow.” Karin mutters as he saunters away. Now that Karin has a lock on him they don’t have to be so close.

Sasuke grimaces, “He’s-”

“Awful, yeah.” Karin shakes her head. “I’d stab him.”

He grunts. He has thought about it extensively. Instead of replying he heads to the start of the procession out of the village. In thanks for what Giri have done for them the villagers gather around the group and thank them. Personally he finds this deeply irritating both because it blocks exit points and contains a level of sentimentality he finds cloying. Coupled with the fact that he can’t quite get what they’re all so grateful for. Yes, Giri brought medicine and water filters and whatever else Hashira thought of but they’re being schmoozed. They’re another data point in Giri’s positive feedback network. It’s not altruistic.

Karin is a largely silent companion during the trip back to Oto. They talk quietly, he makes a suggestion about camp or she says something disparaging about their company. She makes a few passes at him but like always one sharp word from him has her backing off. He is well aware that she doesn’t exactly mean it, even if it does sometimes annoy him.
They flow over the border of Rice, a force a few dozen strong, across the wide empty fields and into the odd wooded areas. There are few towns left at this point but he notes the outposts and trading centres being built. He’s heard vague rumblings about Rice opening up its borders for refugees from other elemental countries with minimal checks. He wasn’t inclined to believe it but it seems he was wrong.

People cut off from the group at random intervals. A few to a guard change, a few more to hold up the wall at a strategic point, a few to homes and families. By the time they run up to the entrance of Otogakure it’s Sasuke, Karin and three others.

Karin falters, skidding to a halt with a flicker of annoyance passing over her face. “There are a lot of people up ahead.”

Sasuke stops beside her. “Specifics?”

“Ninja. All sorts. Nothing too big, or at least nothing bigger than Hashira herself. They’re congregated around the old stadium. It feels friendly, excited.”

Sasuke nods so she knows he heard her. She lets him lead the way into Otogakure.

There were three sections to Otogakure when Sasuke was here last. First there was the labs, some located underground, some in the nearby mountains. Then the above ground facilities as a show piece for visiting dignitaries and people looking for work. Lastly there was actual Otogakure where everyone lived and ate and worked located in weird little dots between the first two layers. You could take one street for five minutes take a right turn and end up in altogether different space. It made taking over the place kind of a bitch because you never knew what was real and what was window dressing.

Which was more or less why Sasuke just burnt it down.

A few of the larger landmarks survived, as did most of the roads, but the buildings are gone. Between then and now the main streets have been cleaned and the weather has drummed the ash into the ground. He hadn’t thought of Giri having a dedicated construction crew or anything like that but as it turns out all those little villages dying of dysentery pay in ways other than good reviews. Carpenters, plumbers, engineers, architects. Dozens if not hundreds of people are carrying wood and stone, hammering things, doing other handy work that has no earthy meaning whatsoever to Sasuke.

Karin’s face is enraptured taking in the smallest of details to file away for later. Sasuke can’t quite see the need for all the attention. It will be months before it’s worth looking at.

There’s a man running full tilt towards them, long cloak flapping behind him. “Oi you.” He yells pointing a finger at Sasuke. “You’re meant to be in the stadium! You’re meant to be giving a speech!” He keeps coming forward, far too quickly, and Sasuke reacts without thinking about it. He snatches the man by his wrists and twists to put pressure on it.

“Please don’t run at shinobi you don’t know.” Karin is suddenly by his side, hand on her hip. “It rarely ends well.”

Undeterred the man goes on, “Hashira wants him on stage.”

“And she’ll get him.” Karin reaches up to ghost her fingers along Sasuke’s hold. He lets the man go, noting that he will probably bruise. “We just got here.”

“Fine whatever,” the man says, “I’ve got to get like six other people anyway.” And then he runs
off like Sasuke wasn’t going to kill him ten seconds ago.

He flexes his hand trying to shake the feeling out. “What the fuck am I meant to say?” Sasuke grumbles.

“Hmm,” Karin purses her lips thoughtfully. “Something like ‘fear her, respect her, do as she says?’”

Sasuke frowns at her. “No.”

“What did she say to you?”

“She killed Itachi.”

“That’s your in, then.” Karin adjusts her glasses. “She killed Akatsuki. You killed Orochimaru, the Orphan Maker of Ame, the Snake Sannin. If you recognise her the others might too.”

It makes sense even if it doesn’t make him more interested in doing it. “Why are you helping Giri?”

Her face grows solemn. “There was a village called Uzushio once. That’s where my family came from. Giri is helping people resettle. I didn’t mind Orochimaru but it would be nice to have a home that wasn’t covered in dead bodies and Suigetsu.”

“You’ll have to dig him out.”

Karin hisses, “I’m very motivated.”

Sasuke suspects she is.

Suigetsu, Karin and Juugo are a different kind of loyal to him and he has a different kind of loyalty to them. In Oto he learned that safety doesn’t mean village walls or family houses. In the wild safety means knowing the exact nature of the beasts you’re trapped with.

Karin is kind at her core. She’s clever more than smart. More than anyone he’s ever met she understands that you are responsible for your own survival. Of all the monsters he knew in Oto she’s probably the one most likely to make something of herself once she gets going.

Karin knocks him out of his thoughts, “Remember,” she points to a group of men whom he supposes must have been part of Otogakure’s general forces, “they’re like you, they came for power and safety.”

Sasuke grunts. “Same thing.”

“Exactly,” Karin grins. She leans up, presses a quick surreptitious kiss to the side of his face and runs away before he can say anything more to her. “Good luck!”

He scrubs at his cheek still trying to think of what to say.

He’s saved from having to contemplate anything more by a team of rough looking men all dressed in black with a silver edelweiss emblazoned on the front of their shirts. Sasuke raises an eyebrow at the show but privately concedes that it’s probably appropriate for the occasion. One of the men, tall and dark with his head wrapped, nods to tell Sasuke to follow. The procession turns, leading to what Sasuke knows is an empty arena capable of holding thousands. It was built specifically for the daimyo who at times had seizures of grandeur at the idea of holding the chunnin exams. Since
everyone in any sane village loathed Orochimaru with a passion it was a fairly barren hope. The arena was designed to be hidden by the landscape around it; tall buildings, strategic greenery, entrances low to the ground and hidden by little side streets. This was Orochimaru’s compromise. Sasuke has seen it with maybe a few hundred people in it and even then only twice. Now the arena is close to capacity. From the outside can feel the press of people, the noise and the scent. The men drag Sasuke down a side street and into a back entrance filled with people. He’s frog marched down a long dark hallway that gets ever increasingly louder until they come to a big black door. One of the men knocks on it until it’s answered by an irate looking young woman.

The room is dark and damp, clearly underneath the arena. It’s filled with people in black running around, checking microphones. One side of the room is covered in crates, on the other side Hashira is talking to a group of men and women animatedly. She’s dressed in an elaborate ensemble. High boots over dark fitted pants, ninja mesh underneath a deep cut purple shirt. On her shoulders is a floor length robe lovingly hand stitched with layers upon layers of patterns. Gold cranes, sparrows, grass, edelweiss, camellia, peony, the forest and the sea. There’s something in the artistry, in the composition, that stops it from being garish. Her hair has been elaborately woven into an up-do, strings of small stones and pearls catching the light. Her face has been done as if for a wedding, lined and primped. Where the cultural tradition would be for a line of gold under the eyes she has placed red, the colour of disharmony in Lightning. When Sasuke enters she looks over her shoulder at him. She’s not disapproving exactly, more expecting to be disappointed. “Is he good to go?”

Hashira Fuyuki looks him over. “You look like shit. Try not to look like shit when I don’t need it, okay?”

Since that doesn’t require a reply he doesn’t give one.

Hashira sighs with disgust and strides off to do her own thing. Someone grabs him by the shoulder and drags him over to a set of stairs. He looks at it dumbly.

Someone punches his arm. “Go up it,” one of them hisses. Sasuke looks at the stairs, the blanket of noise from the arena is loudest here. One deep breath in and then he makes himself walk up the stairs, through the short hallway and into the arena. The light hits him first, right in the eyes, and he is violently reminded of his first and only chunnin exams. In the stands was Sakura’s pink hair, Ino’s blonde, even the Hyuuga dark. Next to him was Kakashi, thunderstruck hair, always smelling of dog and the medicinal healing balm given to ninja too stupid to stay in hospitals. In front of him was blonde hair and a smile. Too bright. Too focused on him. Always just a bit too much. Sasuke recalls his own blood lust, his own honed down battle hunger. With the intervening years he knows that what he felt he knew at thirteen is nothing compared to what he knows and who he is now.

The arena has been modified so that only half the stands are seating. The rest has been given to what Sasuke has to assume is elaborate staging. That makes about two thousand in front of him. Four steps forward, towards the people and the illusion that this is anything like his chunnin exam is shattered. This is more people than he has ever seen in his life and they are all looking directly at him. He feels exposed, vulnerable. He’s staring at the crowd so the crowd stares at him. He stands up straighter in response, buries an apprehension under his arrogance and strides to stand in the middle of the stage. Hashira follows behind him with her posse. The crowd, always at a dull murmur even when still, explodes into whispers and shouts at the sight of her. She bows as does her guard. She casts the next move to him with a quick look and a cut of her hand. Sasuke frowns, thinking it through. When Hashira blackmailed him into this she was using bait and hope as her line. Prettily arranged words that strung together a vision. He’s not a man of words and he he
hadn’t needed hope.

Hope is a thing of symbols. A thing bound by the need to believe in a bigger monster, a better world, a higher power. If he was down there looking up what would he want to see?

The memory of being trapped in the dark trees of a forest surrounded by death floats to the top of his mind. There’s a dead man hunting him for his bloodline and using Sasuke’s own need for vengeance against him. He knows this even then but he falls for it because the need for the shattering pain that drives him to end is stronger than the need for food, than the need for sleep, than the need to breathe. It has a stronger pull than the stars and the very universe itself. When Orochimaru offered him power it was easy to believe because he was a legend and a snake and right there in front of him. When it came to killing him Sasuke thought back to that first moment and made himself the legend he needed to be to do what was meant to come next. So Sasuke imagined himself back into a boy, back into the death forest, and found a way to kill the snake. That’s how he did it. That’s how he became the person everyone has come to see.

So she has to kill the snake.

Sasuke twists his fingers into the first seal. The guard to his right flashes forward and draws his sword, already swinging down to cut him in half. Hashira’s hand stops the blow, blade only cutting through her chakra enough to slice her palm open. Sasuke looks to her just once before continuing through the rest of the jutsu.

There are few consistencies in Oto. Those who came for power will know the labs. Those who came to be used for fodder will know the underground caverns, the labs and the few stores that weren’t just fronts for something else. Those who came in collars and chains will know the most, Orochimaru for whatever reason was most forgiving of the bound, but even they would know what it was like to be in the dark. Trapped and mapped for science.

Sasuke thinks of the second week of trials here when Kabuto was weeding out the weak from the herd. They were locked underground right near this very spot, packed into bunkers and crevices, standing so close together they might as well have been standing on each other. The first day there was a drug in the water and of the hundred trapped underground. Only forty survived. The next day the drug was in the air. Only twenty survived. In the night the earth began to eat people. The walls would turn to liquid and pull someone in until only their hands, their head, their fingers stuck out. Sasuke correctly assumed it was partly a genjutsu and with his sharingan managed to find his way out of it. There were four left in the morning. At noon the door slid open and one of the remaining four dashed for the light. Sasuke knew better by then, there was nothing good or kind in the light of day here. Before the man could even get one foot into that false promise a giant white snake snapped him in half. The great snake was made of skin, of eyes, of twisted fleshed and stretched bones. The people in the walls made sense all of a sudden; they went to making this thing. It slithered forward, filling the huge space with it’s rolling, rotting stench. It’s empty reflective eyes came down to look at them. It's rotting tongue tasted the air.

Only Sasuke and a girl from a small village near Takigakure survived.

Sasuke came screaming out of the dark hole and straight into Kabuto’s waiting medial facility. Kabuto grabbed him by the shoulder and forced him into a chair, already shushing him and checking his vitals. He ignored the medics and the food and the needles and pushed through the process as fast as possible. Kabuto clicked his tongue at him but eventually relented and let him leave. Don’t look so beat up Sasuke, Kabuto ruffled his hair as he passed, this is just to see what you’re made of. We do this to everyone. Sasuke said something flippant and rude and stomped off to throw up. He never forgot it.
A year later Orochimaru waltzed into his regular training area and threw his arms open. Today, Orochimaru said, I am going to show you how to create fear. With his arms open and his favourite almost soft, almost fond, mostly psychotic grin Orochimaru explained that it was time for him to start learning the classics. It was time to mold himself more in his mentor’s visage. Kenjutsu, summoning, endless jutsu and jutsu creation, tactical drills. And I’ve saved the best till last, he said like Sasuke should be grateful, I’ve saved this one until I knew you were ready. From Orochimaru’s hands a lifeless awful thing formed and then it grew, it shed, it grew again. It came from the ground made of bones and dead flesh. It came from the air with the smell of pus and bile. It’s eyes opened and there again was Sasuke’s horrified face staring back at him in empty reflective eyes. Yeah that’s it, Orochimaru laughed, That’s the fear I’m looking for.

Sasuke finished the jutsu perfectly, fear and wonder and sickness crawling up his spine: he knew he was just about out of time.

Sasuke looks out at the crowd again. Awful, hideous snake monster writhing in his hands, and sees that same sick, wonder, fear reflected back at him.

“Kill it,” Sasuke commands.

Hashira matches his gaze. He keeps the contact letting the chakra thing grow even bigger in his control. The snake twines above them ugly and obscene and twisted. Everything the cursed seal is on the surface. It’s dead skin and bones, yellow eyes in the wrong places, the rotting smell of all the dead buried in the walls.

Sasuke slaughtered Otogakure, he burnt it, he gave corpses to the fire that the Uchiha are so revered for. Still there is more than enough horror laying around and the snake grows bigger and bigger and bigger.

Hashira looks at it, concern and genuine horror crossing her face, before it slams down and the scent of lightning and ore fills the air. Sasuke will admit to cowardice here, he closes his eyes and doesn’t see exactly how she kills it, just feels the absolute pounding relief when it’s done.

Light headed, Sasuke again turns to the crowd. He casts red eyes upon them and then summons what remains of his chakra to form as large a fireball as he can manage. He sets fire to the corpse and watches as it burns. It’s eyes go first, then it’s skin, then it’s stolen rotting flesh.

Hashira meets his eyes, hers wild and grim. She nods once in thanks, Sasuke nods back.

Hashira’s bodyguards sweep him away from the stage, bundle him down the stairs. Two grab him by the shoulders, two more follow behind. It feels like at least three too many. In the distance he hears the scratch of a microphone and a great bellow of, “The snake is dead,” followed by “Long live the Grace of Lightning”. A great cheer roars through his aching head, the smell of smoke still caught in his mouth.

“That was fucked up,” one of the men hauling him through the back streets says. “Why the fuck can you even do that?”

Sasuke coughs. The bodyguard on his left hits him on the back. Sasuke coughs again.

“Wasn’t him,” the bodyguard behind him and to the left says, “that was one of the Snake Sannin’s specialties.”

“Were you one of those specialties, boy?” the one who hit him on the back asks.

“Fuck you,” Sasuke spits. Three of the men laugh, including the one who asked the question.
The one who didn’t speaks up, “You really kill him then?”

“Yes,” Sasuke slurs, his eyes are cutting in and out. The taste of blood in his mouth is getting stronger. “Yeah. I killed him.”

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He can feel himself coming awake long before he can open his eyes. His body is loose and limber, muscles utterly relaxed. The room he’s in is quiet but for the quiet whirring of nearby machines. There’s something thin and white over his eyes. Sasuke has woken up this way enough times to let himself relax, to feel out the injuries and the drugs before trying to get up.

He knows it’s primarily chakra exhaustion and over strained muscles, common to his time in medical facilities, and that the drugs are just to make sure he doesn’t run away.

With that thought he lets himself fall into a half sleep, eyes closing to half mast. Maybe a nap. Maybe something deeper.

The cloth is rudely ripped from his eyes. “Hello sugar plum.” Suigetsu grins. Due to some act of divine malice he has a squeaky swivel chair. “That was some show.”

Sasuke scowls. He tries to lift his arms to hit back but his left hand simply flops around a bit and his right one doesn’t move at all.

“Woah,” Suigetsu pokes his shoulder. “I can see why she picked you tough guy.”

“You’re disgusting.” Karin says to Suigetsu, she checks Sasuke’s chart and makes an unhappy tsks ing noise. “He won’t be moving for a few hours.”

“Yes,” Suigetsu spins gleefully in his chair like a toddler, “that’s why I’m here.”

“You’re a pig.” Karin pronounces with an air of disgust.

“Everytime you say that is just another declaration of the importance of our mutual dislike.” Suigetsu says mock-seriously just as the chair turns to her. “You’re just validating the relationship.”

Karin turns a shade of red better suited to beets, spinning on her heel and snatching stuff off a nearby tray. She shoves them onto another tray with unnecessary force.

“You’re working here now?” Sasuke asks, mostly so she’ll stop banging things around.

“Nah,” Suigetsu stops the turn of the chair, one foot pressed against Sasuke’s bed. “we’re heading out.”

Sasuke pauses. “Good for you.”

“Sasuke,” Karin frowns.

“It is good for us, thanks for noticing,” Suigetsu continues blithely, “we’re getting the hell out of here.”

Sasuke tries to exert enough control over his facial muscles to glare or roll his eyes. He ends up squinting at him.

“This is how I always want to remember you,” Suigetsu grins, all teeth. “Drugged and incapable of
“Hn.” Sasuke tries glaring again. “Karin. Let me up.”

Karin sighs and steps forward, tugging at the restraints across his chest. “I’m not sure I like either of you enough for this right now.”

“You let Sasuke bite you all the time.” Suigetsu points out. “You stab me.”

She crosses her arms. “Our relationship is not up for discussion.”

Suigetsu raises an eyebrow, clearly wondering who the our is. Sasuke feels his lips twitch a little, so is he. Karin scowls and returns to banging around the medical supplies in the name of getting this place sorted, no one appreciates a good lab anymore all the while shooting daggers at Suigetsu and something more complicated at Sasuke. They continue this way, Suigetsu throwing little barbs every so often and Sasuke trying to control his body, for another ten minutes. When Karin feels that her ire is sufficiently vented she sits on the end of Sasuke’s bed and says, “we’re going now.”

Sasuke blinks at her and with much concentration nods.

“And we were just getting started too,” Suigetsu says dejectedly. “Kind of wanted to see that one through.”

“It’s over with,” Sasuke says. There should be something next but he doesn’t know what to say or if this is the right audience to say it too, so he chooses silence. Instead, and he will absolutely chalk this up to drugs and his momentary certainty that he won’t see him again for a very long time, Sasuke claps Suigetsu on the shoulder and shoves him away from the bed. He nearly sends himself careening off too but manages to save himself from that indignity. Suigetsu clasps his shoulder with an air of confusion, as if he too is struck by the gravity of the moment and what might be the only bit of complete seriousness in their relationship. Sasuke assumes this is why he takes a moment to help him get comfortable in bed instead of any other more appropriate action. When the moment has passed Suigetsu steps back next to Karin.

Law of the Wild: Always know who the other predators are.

He smiles faintly, face cooperating which probably says something, and nods towards the door. Suigetsu snorts, picks up his pack not making a noise as he leaves. Karin is still standing still, staring at him. She rolls up her sleeve, steps forward and offers her arm. Sasuke counts the bite marks already there and tries to choose a spot that’s not too scarred.

“This isn’t the last time.” Karin says stubbornly. “This isn’t.”

“No,” Sasuke bites down, the familiar rush of chakra wrestling lucidity from his drugged head. It can’t be the last time. There is something monstrously unfinished between them. Even if all that, that turns out to be is misplaced circumstantial trust and trauma tinged nostalgia. “It’s not.”

Karin nods unhappily but picks her pack up too and heads across the room. Sasuke isn’t worried about them, they’re survivors, but some days it’s harder to put aside what he learnt as the second son of a noble man. There are a million little sayings and truisms that come with the Uchiha name: Power is knowledge. Illusions are not a foundation for choice. A hot enough flame will burn through anything; even reality itself.

And his mother’s favourite: You’re responsible for what you create.
Sasuke hunts Hashira down after he’s dismissed from the medical center. She’s standing at the centre of a crater where there was once a tailor and a bookshop and nothing but ash after Sasuke swept through. She doesn’t acknowledge him for several long minutes. Sasuke has already picked this as her favourite dominance game. She makes it drag as long as she can before she gives him a nod of acknowledgement. “You may speak.”

“Fine.”

“Fine? You already agreed.”

“Just...I brought people with me.” What, leave them out of it? “Whatever.”

“Guess you can’t get all the Konoha out.” She snorts. “Anything else?”

He can’t quite leave it there. “Fuyuki.” Lightning cares about titles, places importance on career accomplishments. He has to take something from her here, something to even the field.

Hashira, now Fuyuki, looks at him like he’s a tiny insect she’d like to slap about. “I’m not going to kill your pets, boy.” She swats at him. “Go away. Go do some work.”

Sasuke smirks but sets off in an aimless fashion down towards the old buildings where he lived before. They were shitty rooms. Dull, pale, few too many stains, few too many memories. He always got the feeling that Orochimaru wanted him to feel special, chosen, but not too important. He roomed near the high level chunnin and eventually the elite but he always got the smallest room, the one with the worst heating, so on and so forth. If it was meant to curb some tendency towards arrogance it failed dismally. He’s rarely proud of his choices. Guilty, driven, occasionally regretful, but never quite proud.

Now there’s a series of food stalls, a weapons store and a small massage parlour that probably doubles as a brothel. He laughs to himself at that one, that’s the true turn of the world. Knives and food and prostitution. It was the same in Konoha, in Oto, in every major city and backwater dive he’s ever been to.

He forgoes the sex, sets a new order of knives for collection in three weeks and gets some lunch. He’ll need money after buying the knives so he follows the press of people down into the mess of construction, narrow unpaved paths leading to wider cobblestoned ones, buildings being erected three stories high and more. When Otogakure rises this time it will be something modern and unrecognisable.

The mission office takes one look at him and offers three low risk missions, all solo. The first starts in a week, the last in twenty minutes. He picks the second which leaves in three hours. The man at the desk writes down his name, assigns him an ID number -00397- and stamps it with the Hashira Clan symbol before handing the collection slip to him. The money will be issued on return. Sasuke takes his orders and goes.

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In a bar, twenty minutes from a satellite town near Kiri-

Fuyuki taps her beer glass and squints at him. “Grow your hair out.”

Sasuke takes a huge gulp of his own beer. She’s been looking at him like that for a half hour already. “…Why?”

“Because it’s a tradition.”
“Why would that apply to me?”

Fuyuki plants an elbow on the table and rests her chin on her palm. “This is more of that Konoha touchy-feely bullshit isn’t it?”

“Hn.”

“I’m your commanding officer. If I tell you to shovel shit you do it. If I tell you to storm a castle you do it. If I tell you what to do with your hair you do it.”

Sasuke crosses his arms in front of his chest. None of that sounds compelling. “So there isn’t a reason.”

Fuyuki stares at him. Her mouth does this weird twist like she can’t tell if she should press ahead or abort. “It’s honestly like talking to a very pretty, very dumb rock.”

Sasuke scowls, unimpressed.

“You see anyone around with short hair?” Fuyuki asks.

Sasuke points a finger at a man a few tables away. He’s quietly eating a sandwich, bald head twinkling in the light. “Hotaru.”

She rolls her eyes. “Is 55, you absolute shit.”

Sasuke frowns even more in that way only his blood can manage. There must be some sort of point to this. Sure, most of the higher ranked in Giri let their hair grow out but it serves no practical purpose. In fact Sasuke spends more time than ever picking other people’s hair out of his food. He uncrosses his arms and takes another sip of beer. If Fuyuki really cares she’ll probably mention it.

When he looks over at her she’s giving him an almost-soft, almost-thoughtful once over. It makes him feel a little naked so he hisses, “what?”

“This is touchy-feely bullshit,” she turns to the room, long hair sweeping across her back, and yells out, “Hey, Usa! What do they teach you as kids in that backwards dump?”

Usa, who is apparently from Konoha, waves his meaty hand, long bright green hair swaying slightly. “We are all special unique blossoms that burn with the youth and vitality of fire, ma’am!”

Sasuke snorts. “Only if you’re Maito Gai.”

“I’ll forgive him, he’s a fucking monster.” Fuyuki says cheerfully. “Are you aware that I don’t give a shit about your individuality?”

Usa nods. “Yes. ma’am. That’s why my hair is long and silky and my knives are sharp!”

Fuyuki points a finger at him. “You following?”

“...Fine.”

“I don’t tolerate feelings Uchiha.”

“Neither do I.”

Fuyuki laughs at him. “You are all feelings “
That gets some tired chuckles from the room. The men and women are exhausted. This is a pit stop before Fuyuki marches them across Kiri down to the point of Land of Water. From there they’ll take a boat to the Land of Waves to make a deal with the local leaders to choose Giri over Akatsuki for protection on missions that might otherwise require an A or S-rank payout. Then they’ll take a contract to take builders back across Water to a small boating village that’s willing to start a direct trade line to Land of Waves, hopefully bypassing the stranglehold Kiri has leveled on them. No one has suggested that Fuyuki not take the most dangerous route through Water so Sasuke supposes there’s a point. Sasuke’s job is to run point on the way back, scout ahead and deal with anyone they encounter as quickly as possible. It’s the first mission with a standing kill order. He’s memorised the maps backwards and forwards, planned his pit stops and breaks and he is beyond ready to have some good hard work to do. They’ll pass by the Naruto Bridge. He’s still trying to decide how he feels about that.

“Why did you defect?” Sasuke asks.

Fuyuki gives him one brief assessing glance before sitting up in her chair. “Betray.” She corrects. “Ah, it would have been most of ten years ago now. For a long time after the end of the war Kumo was on the brink of coming apart. There was a war of attrition between two factions that had it got out to the other elemental nations would have immediately undone the peace efforts. I was posted to a high priority target deep, deep into the mountains. It was near impossible to get to, supposedly easy to defend, and I was hemorrhaging men and women trying to keep it.”

Fuyuki tilts her chair slightly so that her body language is more open, a concession to the fact that everyone is clearly listening. “At the turn of the fighting I had maybe less than a third of my soldiers left but I had a plan that if executed properly would allow me to defeat my enemy and deliver the heads of their leaders to my Kage. I was perfectly willing to do that. It was, after all, my duty. Three nights before I was ready to enact my plan one of my attendants told me she’d found a man freezing to death in a river. I told her to kill him because no man was coming back from that kind of chill. She said ‘I would ma’am, I really would but he’s from Konoha’. And then she handed me a mask with a badger painted on it. Somehow,” she says sardonically, “you lot had figured out we had a war on.”

A few of the men, ex-intelligence he assumes, laugh quietly.

“So I said to strip him and then kill him. She said ‘Ma’am I really would, truly I would, but he’s not alone’. So I told her to take some men with her and kill all of them. She said-”

As a group they chorus, “Ma’am I would, I truly would but-”

“But,” Fuyuki laughs, “Ma’am I truly would but they’ve got two injured men, one in the enemy's camp, and they won’t listen. Ma’am I would, truly, but the Captain is a man with white hair and a red eye.”

There’s silence following that. Some of the men are wide eyed staring at their leader. Not for the first time Sasuke comes face to face with his sensei’s legacy. One of the men, tall and blond with the kanji for bull on his arm, stutters, “The Copy nin? The son of the White Fang-” He stops abruptly and casts a look at Sasuke.

“Kakashi,” is all Sasuke says.

Fuyuki inclines her head. “The world of truly elite ninja is very, very small. We have all at least met at some point. Especially if there’s a war on,” she closes her eyes and continues, “Ma’am I would, I would, but it is the Wakahashi brothers on watch tonight and they will attack the son of the White Fang. They will kill all of the Konoha shinobi, mount their bodies for trophies and we
won’t be able to stop word reaching the other Hidden Villages. I followed her to the river where, yes, the legendary Man of a Thousand Jutsu’s was knee deep in a freezing cold river trying to keep his teammate alive. Removing him from the river would have meant instantaneous death and keeping him there meant losing a limb or brain function. I told Miyu to go back to the command tent and tell everyone it was just fine. We argued for a good five minutes before I reminded her that I was her commanding officer and I could definitely kill a bunch of half dead leaf nin no matter what fancy masks they were wearing.” Her nose scrunches up. “I think the captain laughed at that, though he did strike me as an odd fellow.”

Sasuke snorts. “You have no idea.”

“After she left we went a few rounds of the old ‘tell me or I’ll kill you! I’ll never tell you!’ and I was fucked off enough to just let them die in the bloody river. Then the Captain says he won’t leave because those who break the rules are trash—”

“-But those who leave their teammates behind are worse.” Sasuke finishes.

“Utter nonsense,” Fuyuki sighs, “unfortunately for my career as Commander of the Northern Forces, I happen to believe something along the same lines. Instead I agreed to go get their missing man and they would sneak out of Kumo, no one the wiser that Konoha had broken the treaty or that Kumo was falling apart. I couldn’t give a satisfactory answer to the Raikage and he told me to ‘put up or shut up’ more or less. Hunt down the ANBU team, retire, or marry his brother and breed another demon vessel. I said no to all of this. We tussled for a bit. I left.”

“Is that it?”

“Yes.” Fuyuki picks up her beer and takes a sip, “I went and got the ANBU their missing weasel and got them the hell out.”

“Why?” Bull asks. “Have you seen the bounty on that man—”

“I would have brought a war on us.” Fuyuki says bluntly. “Sharingan no Kakashi? Of all the trophies to pin to the Raikage’s wall. It might have bolstered Kumo’s reputation, added a sense of prestige to the campaign, but it would have revealed that we weren’t stable. Why else would Konoha be there? More importantly the people of both our villages would have demanded a war. You don’t go around killing legends if you can help it.”

“Think of the money,” someone says wistfully. Another begins a lengthy diatribe on what exactly they would do with that money, then someone offers an opinion and it all snowballs into quiet conversation. Sasuke is still looking directly at Fuyuki trying to put together what he wants to ask.

She raises an eyebrow. “Any questions?”

“You see his face?”

“No.”

“No.”

She shrugs and goes back to drinking. Sasuke downs his still unsatisfied with something.

“Didn’t,” he tries, “didn’t the sharingan scare you?”

“No.” she answers firmly. “You were a dime a dozen, then.”
It’s still not what he actually wants to know but it’s enough of an answer to mollify him.

“Oi, nadeshiko!”

Sasuke grimaces. One of the men noticed that Sasuke looks eerily similar to one of the more famous entertainers in the Cactus Court of the capital city of Wind. Since then Sasuke’s face and delicate hands have become something of a running joke.

“They’re calling,” Fuyuki says mockingly.

Sasuke rolls his eyes. “Who would win?”

“Not you.” Fuyuki nods at the group of men who called Sasuke over, “now get.”
Occhiolism (Or, Heaven Through the Eye of a Pin)

Chapter Summary

occhiolism
n. the awareness of the smallness of your perspective, by which you couldn’t possibly
draw any meaningful conclusions at all, about the world or the past or the
complexities of culture, because although your life is an epic and unrepeatable
anecdote, it still only has a sample size of one, and may end up being the control for a
much wilder experiment happening in the next room.

Chapter Notes

I want to never look at this chapter again so long as I live.

A few notes: I have had a truly awful couple of months including but not limited to the
death of a beloved pet. I originally meant to set this at updating once a month until we
hit the second half. That is super not possible now but I hope to be into the bulk of the
second arc by January. Luckily the next chapter is much shorter and the next is
already written so if I'm timely we should see the next chapter mid to late next month.

I originally said this was canon typical violence and it is...no longer so. There is some
amount of body horror but if the skin-bone-flesh snake didn't throw you too far off this
shouldn't either. I prefer to warn ahead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After Kiri it’s an embedded encampment in a historical city in Earth. They dig out a bunch of
POW’s from the Marsh Mines of the steppe that runs up across the edge of Earth furthest from
Iwa. Sasuke is given custody of six men, all dating from the 3rd war, and takes an absurdly high
profile route back to Oto. Everyone but him and two POW die. Then he takes to the skies on a solo
mission to find a lost object for one of the holy temples in Frost, he causes two international
incidents getting it out of the hands of the corrupt Daimyo’s favoured concubines, but it’s not like
he was buying a timeshare there anyway. Then he lives in the bowels of a cavernous dead
something for three weeks in the nameless country north of Fire, digging out sulphur and bone for
weapons and trade, and another three weeks after that killing everyone who saw them do it. He
walks back into Oto covered in shit and irritated all over again that the Village isn’t the smear he
made it. He makes it all the way to Fuyuki’s apartment-cum-office before his fraying temper
snaps. This is the flung together, ill thought out abomination that killed Uchiha Itachi?

He holds it in, barely, until after the debrief at which point he snarls, “I’m taking a week off.” And
goes to do exactly that.

Five days later Fuyuki strolls into his room. She says he’s being permanently reassigned to a team.

“It’ll be good for you.” Fuyuki throws a scroll down by his bunk. She’s followed into the room by
four people, three men, one woman, who all read as at least jounin level. Sasuke looks at the
scroll, then back to Fuyuki. She looks back and inclines her head towards one of the men: tall, lithe and dark skinned under a head wrap. “This is your captain. His name is Dosa.”

Teams. “No.”

“This is Hiki, Yumi and Haru.” Fuyuki continues blithely pointing to the man, the woman and then the last man. “This will be an S-rank mission.”

“I work well alone.” He’s learnt to not say anything about being or doing his best. Fuyuki wasn’t actually kidding when she said she didn’t care about individuality. As far as she’s concerned she gives you a position and then you excel at it.

“This mission requires a team.” Fuyuki repeats. “This is your captain, his name is Dosa.”

Sasuke glares at her.

Dosa sighs. “I think I deserve better.”

“You’ll be fine.” Fuyuki pats him on the shoulder. Dosa grimaces.

“Follow me.” Dosa says turning on his heel and walking away. The other three turn and follow him.

Sasuke makes a note of Dosa’s chakra signature because he is not, in fact, wearing any pants.

When Sasuke is sure they’re gone he rolls out of bed and throws on the first clean pair of pants he finds and a shirt he suspects was Suigetsu’s once given that Sasuke is somewhat broader in the shoulders. There’s a leftover bit of bread and cheese from last night so he stuffs that in his mouth and leaves. He finds Dosa and the rest by the outside fountain. Two of the men are standing. The woman is lying down on the stone seating surrounding the fountain, one foot in the water. Dosa turns to Sasuke and nods.

“Alright introduce yourselves.” Dosa says. He points at the woman. “Yumi first.”

Now that he cares to notice Sasuke can see flat, delicate features, a very slim build and a mass of dark hair piled up into three buns on her head. Her skin is faintly blue cast. “Second generation missing-nin. Parents came from Kiri, they defected at the end of the 3rd war. Poison and small knives specialist with a side of explosives. I eat men for fun and profit.” Her voice is deceptive in it’s softness, gentle and refined.

Assassin.

Dosa points to the next one. He is red haired, tall and built with a gut. At about 30 years old he’s the oldest of the group. Fine skinned, deep set eyes, full mouth. His beard is neatly trimmed but Sasuke can see the faint tan lines around his neck.

“Hiki.” His voice is deep and melodic. “Suna born, parents were civilians. Intelligence, infiltration and interrogation. I specialise in espionage and extraction. I like food.”

Spy

The last one speaks up surely without any prompting. His sharp green eyes swing around the group, pale orange hair glinting with woven beads. His hands are notched all over with scars from traps and knife work, muscles lean from agility training. This one Sasuke already knows. “Haru. Defected to Oto from Iwa. Brawler. Remote wilderness survival and tracking are my specialties. I
have minimal medic training. I have two dogs.”

Hunter

Sasuke nods and takes his turn. “Uchiha. Konoha to Oto. Ninjutsu and kenjutsu specialist. I have no particular interests.”

Enforcer. Sasuke’s never liked being the muscle of an operation but he’ll make do for now.

Dosa nods at him and points at himself. “Dosa. Captain. I’ve been with Giri since the beginning. The land I come from is outside the Elemental Nations. I am the medic and will take lying about your medical condition poorly Yumi.” Dosa glares at the woman, Yumi sticks out her tongue. “We’re the heavy team. You will be working together frequently so don’t shit where you eat. Since you’re all adults I expect you to figure out how to use your skills in tandem. I do not accept lone wolves in a fight. Be here two days from now so we can head out.”

Dosa leaves without another word, long stride taking him out of the courtyard presumably to have a stern word with Fuyuki for dumping Sasuke on him. Yumi sticks out her tongue at his retreating back. Haru cuffs her over the head. She hits him back. Before it can turn into a scuffle Hiki steps between them and claps his hands, “My pick.”

Haru sniffs. “I’m paying for nadeshiko’s breakfast.”

Sasuke frowns. “I’m not going and I’m not eating.”

“Too bad,” Haru taunts, he’s grinning so wide it hurts to look at, “so sad. Come on Uchiha, if nothing else I owe you for scalping that bastard.”

“I didn’t scalp him.”

“You think anyone gives a shit how the freak died?”

Sasuke did, in a way. Perhaps Jiraiya or Tsunade.

“Oh?” Hiki crosses his arms and looks Sasuke over. The way his body moves suggests raw power carefully concealed under padding. “Not what I expected.”

“He’s pretty the way I expected.” Yumi shamelessly leers at him. “You ever actually been to the House of the Scorpion? I’m sure Lady Akemi would love to know she’s got competition.”

Sasuke first thinks to ignore her but then remembers that they have to work together. His mouth opens on something that’s not quite a scowl. “No.”

“No.” Haru scoffs. “You were never stationed at Shinouchi?”

Shinouchi was Orochimaru’s favourite Wind hideout. Not quite a bolt hole, not quite a base of operations. Very close to a resort town. “Main bases only. I travelled with Kabuto if I left base for reasons other than a mission.” And Kabuto rarely spent time in Wind.

Yumi’s nose scrunches up. “How many words was that?” She wags a finger at Hiki. “Betcha I get more out of him than you do.”

Hiki sticks out his hand, waggling his fingers. Yumi grins as she takes it. “I accept your wager.”

Sasuke frowns. Haru laughs at his frown.
Sasuke really, really hates teamwork.

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Sasuke is four minutes early to the rendezvous two days later. The morning is dark and unhappy par for the course this time of the year. He’s the only one there. He stands there, hands in his pockets, looking like an idiot for five minutes while he waits. Just as he’s getting really annoyed he notices a small scroll wedged in the fountain. He has to actually climb into the damn thing to get to it. He opens it standing there in the fountain drenched to his knees. They’re meeting somewhere else and the mission parameters have changed.

Sasuke walks home dripping water. Originally he’d pulled on whatever happened to be closest to him but now that he has to get changed he grabs something more to his own liking. Dark pants, mesh underclothes, a sleeveless blue-purple low cut shirt he suspects was Karin’s doing and one of the hardier cloaks he has at his disposal. He takes two of his swords, a balanced pair. He repacks and heads for the meeting place up near one of the more surreptitious paths out of Oto. It’s carved into the side of a mountain. The paths underneath can deposit shinobi in most of the strategic points in nearby countries. Orochimaru primarily used them to move supplies and test subjects, preferring to use his shinobi more like a real Hidden Village would have. Sasuke is familiar enough with these passageways although it was Orochimaru’s preference that he not use them. Idly he wonders who left can actually open them.

Yumi is filing one of her teeth with a senbon when he arrives. Her pack seems to mostly be blades complete with oversized battle axe. She grins at him with bloody teeth. “Nicked a gum.”

“Lick it off,” Sasuke replies, sitting cross legged on the ground.

“Rude.”

“It’s blood,” Sasuke leans back on his hands and stretches his back. The light is dappled through the trees and the sun is promising a temperate day. “Lick it off.”

“You’re gross,” Yumi says as she wipes her bloody senbon on her shirt.

Yeah, he’s gross. “I’d heard,” Sasuke begins carefully, “that only the Seven Swordsman filed their teeth.”

“Yeah,” Yumi shrugs gracelessly, “granddad was one of ‘em. He quit. I could use his sword and he figured that was good enough to show me how to. That and I got ‘em drunk on shochu and these frozen mix cocktails. Couldn’t see ass from tits.”

“Because that’s the sort of condition you want to be in when performing detailed dental work,” Sasuke mutters.

Yumi squints at him. “You are almost fun.”

No, he’s just used to this.

Dosa and Hiki arrive together, packs over their shoulders. One of Haru’s dogs, a big black shaggy thing, nips at his heels. The other one is absent.

“Overslept,” Haru mutters. His dog snorts derisively.

“In your own bed or?” Hiki says suggestively.
Haru gives him the finger.

Dosa puts his hands on his hips, somewhat ridiculous for a man with a few inches on Sasuke’s not insignificant height. “Well?”

Sasuke raises an eyebrow. So that’s why they needed him.

Dosa taps his foot impatiently. He looks like someone’s mother.

Sasuke shrugs off his bag and takes a step closer to look at the array. Orochimaru’s are designed to respond to Sasuke without much fuss, Kabuto’s on the other hand are a nasty mess. After a few minutes deduction he concludes that it is one of Orochimaru’s but has been modified by someone else. Karin, probably. He flicks his sharingan on and follows the thin lines of chakra embedded in the seal. The Lotus seal, Orochimaru’s own invention, followed by the Six Rising Tides, which is Karin’s, done to keep whatever is inside from getting out. Sasuke can’t recall there being a laboratory in these tunnels but of course that doesn’t mean there wasn’t one. Sasuke prepares himself to unseal it, flicking through the correct disarming seals in his head a few times to make sure he’s correct. Seals aren’t quite like jutsu and Uzumaki seals, of which Orochimaru is fond, are less so than most. They’re a living language, a storytelling device all on their own. Misusing them is as easy as a misspoken word and they’re temperamental and obstinate. One of the few times he can remember Orochimaru being seriously injured was when he miswrote one of the seals on a containment barrier. He was blown halfway across his laboratory destroying months of research.

He steps back from the door and places one hand on the hilt of his sword. Immediately Haru has a knife in his hand and Yumi hefts her battle axe onto her shoulder. Hiki stands perfectly still humming a tune to himself.

“What?” Dosa asks. His hands are still on his hips.

“There’s something on the inside. One of the wardens put a seal over the top to keep it sealed up.”

“Whose seal?” Haru asks.

“Karin.” Sasuke grunts.

“Fuck,” Haru hisses, “this ain’t playtime then.”

“Hm,” Sasuke takes a breath, puts one hand on his hilt and with the exhale performs the release one handed. His chakra slides through the seal still faintly coated with the awfulness of Orochimaru’s chakra. Karin’s is stubborn and unresponsive so Sasuke twists instead of pushes, popping it open instead of sliding it out. They won’t be able to reseal her part of the array. The door shimmers into existence exhaling a plume of old dead air.

“What kind of warning was that?” Haru jumps back. His eyes are bleeding a dangerous sort of yellow. Sasuke contemplates what kind of curse seal he has before deciding that it doesn’t matter.

“Oops,” Sasuke says blithely. He walks into the passageway without another word. The ensuing passage is dark and dry smelling very faintly of medicinal herbs. Sasuke stops thirty metres in and flicks his sharingan on. After a moment there’s a shuffle of feet behind him as the others catch up.

“Fuck me,” Haru hisses.

“Oh knock it off,” Yumi strides in too, coming to stop on Sasuke’s left. She has a few senbon in her hands, wrist loose and ready. “What we looking at?”
“There’s something down there,” Hiki mutters, “I’m not getting alive exactly.”

“Incubators.” Sasuke says. “If it’s not dead around here it’s growing.”

“Incubators,” Haru repeats. “Like babies? Scary babies with teeth?”

“Not likely,” Sasuke rolls his eyes. “Experiments that have a long maturation time. If it was something that needed to be checked often it would be in one of the main labs.”

“Is it...done?” Yumi asks.

Sasuke shrugs. Dosa sighs and puts a finger to the bridge of his nose muttering in some language Sasuke doesn’t understand. Since that’s a lost cause he goes back to considering what’s in front of him.

Karin prefers a three level system. That way she always knew what was fucking up, where it was fucking up and what steps she had to take to unfuck it. Level two alerts are active which means something woke up when it shouldn’t have, there’s a biohazard, or one of the less stable of the menagerie is having a psychotic break. Level two is fine, Sasuke has dealt with level two before.

He unsheathes a short sword and steps forward. “Stay behind me. If you’re in front of me I will kill you.”

The list of things Orochimaru would have just left alone to grow is at once short and long. People he could never stop tinkering with, things he’d relegated to the status of object could be left to their own devices for months if not years at a time. Every four months Kabuto would call all the higher level soldiers down to the Otokage’s office. They’d stand around bumming cigarettes and talking shop while the compounds and labs were divided between them. The first time Sasuke went into one of his appointed areas he was shut in with something that was once a spirit and something that was once a man. They’d come to Orochimaru for aid and had largely been given it. The two had been separated at great cost but they just hadn’t bargained for their freedom. That had been an easy kill, more mercy than malice, and he’d had the vain hope that the others would be the same.

It’s been far too long now for Sasuke to know what’s down here. He never visited much before Oto was laid in ruins and it’s been ages since then. Anything could have crawled in.

Easy steps down the hallway, the sharp smell of metal and medicine giving way to something soft, fleshy. It smells putrid.

He locks on one thing it could be and another half dozen he hopes it’s not. The smell says it’s in a bad way, it doesn’t say if it’s human or not. The hallway gets darker, and smellier, and he decides it must be the first thing. Four jutsu occur to him and he dismisses them for his sword. Small space, littered with metal medical equipment, three or four tanks of super conductive liquid.

Last few steps he’s sure of what he’s facing so without hesitation he moves forward. It was a person once but now it’s the failing byproduct of Juugo’s transformative abilities. It’s in pain, it moves slowly on the left side, it has half a chest and one half blind eye-

The next part is a choreography of violence. He knows what’s coming. There’s a sister place in his head to the white noise generated by experiencing too much too young. He’s never named it, never given it that power, but as the white lets him think, keeps him cool headed in a situation where he’d be anything but, the other place lets him feel the way he thinks he was supposed to. Violence is an answer to every question if you do it right and some days he wants to answer with something else. He was born to fight, born from warriors, and he loves the competition of a fight. It’s the
mundaneness of killing that leaves him cold. Killing doesn’t give him pause nor joy or fear or relief. It’s just an end to a problem.

Sasuke resheathes his sword and steps back to take in the damage. Twisted metal, spilled chemicals mixing on the floor, organs and viscera. Sasuke wipes off his sword on a nearby cloth. No one was going to use these labs anyway.

“I’m done now,” he says.

“Holy fucking shit.” Haru whispers.

He can hear Dosa regretting not fighting Sasuke’s appointment to the team more. “Right, then. Uchiha. Lead the way.” Dosa grounds out.

Sasuke does his level best not to smirk.

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He doesn’t exactly like the way Giri runs its missions. They’re back to back, diplomatic to combat to aid and then around again. He finds out on the ground, or on the run, when it’s far too late to change course or even to make sure he has the right gear. He can’t tell week to week what he’ll be doing or where he’ll be going, who he’ll meet or where he’ll be living. Younger ninja relish it, the freedom, the sudden openness of the world tinged with that do-good attitude Sasuke just can’t stomach. He’s older than that and he’s served more than one master. The smoothness with which his service extends in front of him unsettles him. Mission after mission, team after team, no knowing where or why or what they’re doing until they’re doing it. He can stomach it, he can do it easily, but the monotony is disturbing.

He trades small talk with Haru when he has to trying to leverage their shared past in Oto into some insight of the personal dynamic of the team. Haru sighs and directs their conversations into the main hub of the group trying to connect him to the team as a whole. Hiki and Yumi form a game out of irritating him hoping for some response deeper than an eye roll or disgruntled sigh. Dosa remains impassive.

The conversations annoy him. He’s aware that his team is made of true believers. Hiki and Yumi have that twice bitten look about them. Dosa is a longtime close friend to Fuyuki. Haru, he already knows, came with one of the fringe anti-establishment youth movements flowing out of the stricter parts of the world. Each of them, he’s sure, has a very legitimate gripe with the world they live in. He just seriously wishes he didn’t have to listen to it.

They’re sitting by a fire in an unpatrolled section of country, winding down, eating a rabbit for dinner, getting ready for the real mission. Dosa has told Sasuke exactly jack shit about why they’re heading to River and like a good boy he’s sucked up his questions. He has also refused to be even remotely communicative and he’s willing to admit, at least internally, that these facts are related.

Yumi kicks off her boots and directs one long toed foot at Sasuke. “So what did you do, anyway?”

Sasuke squints at her through the light of the fire. “What?”

“To get kicked out.” Yumi squints back as if this is a completely normal conversation and Sasuke is making it weird. She drops her rabbit leg onto her plate with an audible splatter. “It’s hard to get Konoha to declare you a missing-nin. Usually you guys just get disappeared.”

Sasuke grits his teeth. “I stuck a fistful of lightning through my teammates lung while defecting to Otoagakure.”
“And?” Yumi raises an eyebrow. “What did they kick you out for?”

Isn’t it obvious? “You don’t hurt your teammates. You don’t hurt other Konoha shinobi.”

“Kid, I don’t know if you’ve noticed,” Haru says, leaning up on his elbows to look across the fire at him, “but pretty much no one follows those kinds of rules. I mean shit, Kiri basically made a sport of it, and not even Kumo has a genin survival rate worth talking about. Sure we die on missions too but there’s a whole lot of us that get dead at the hands of our Villages. And not just the in house clean up crews.”

“Do you have any idea how many people the Kazekage has killed?” Hiki says dryly. “Seriously, guess.”

Haru spits into the fire causing sparks to flare. “You can’t really trust ‘em.”

“I defected.” Sasuke amends. He really isn’t interested in the sell. “To Orochimaru.”

“That’s not what you said though.” Haru replies doggedly. “You think they’d do it for hurting a fellow comrade. I say that the system does the damage. We’re basically set up to fail.”

Dosa nods along as does Hiki. Yumi keeps chewing her meat but her eyes are on the flicker of the fire, mouth pensive. After a beat of silence she says, “It’s not that we wouldn’t want to, trust them, I mean. It’s just that it’s not feasible.”

There’s a murmur of assent from around the fire. “These don’t mean much,” Haru taps the Iwa symbol still embroidered, albeit defaced with the symbols of rebellion on his shirt. “Not when you don’t believe in it.”

“People are just people.” Yumi shrugs. “Especially when you’re killing them.”

“They might be your comrades but that doesn’t mean you have to agree with them,” Hiki adds solemnly, “that’s how most of us end up on the outside. Especially old dogs like me and the captain.” Hiki smiles brightly, age apparent and irrelevant at the same time. “There aren’t a lot of options, though, for the disagreeing.”

“I won the argument.” Sasuke protests. “He had a hole in his chest.”

“Doesn’t matter. Not the point.” Haru dismisses. “That’s why you put your hand through his chest. You were trying to get out and he was trying to keep you in.”

“I.” Sasuke starts. He has nowhere to go with it except for the knowledge that he is utterly unprepared for this line of questioning. He stands up abruptly throwing his disposable plate into the fire. “Am going to bed.”

“You know I’m right!” Haru calls out, but thankfully they leave it there. When the mission truly starts the next day they still leave it alone.

Dosa reads out the mission parameters in the morning. Essentially: do what he tells you to, don’t do anything he doesn’t tell you to. For now the instructions are ‘follow the leader’.

Sasabuchi is a little fishing village in River that lies at the end of a series of waterways starting way up in the mountains of Lightning, passing through Frost, Hot Water and Fire before coming to gently ease into the ocean. There are sister waterways travelling down from Earth that also empty out here. It’s somewhere between a mid-sized town and a future trading hub. Lying as it does between many Hidden Villages it has regular contact with shinobi making it either very
comfortable or an absolute nightmare depending on how paranoid you happen to be.

They arrive in the middle of an out of season heat wave. The streets are bare of people, the greenery lush but withering, the drudgery of constant heat melting away the facade of peace. Pretty much immediately Sasuke can see the problem.

“Is it contagious?” Hiki asks, squinting down at the now familiar sight of an infected town. There are three watch towers, an infected zone, medics on the ground. He sighs, quietly, already lamenting the sheer drudgery of looking after the ill.

“Nope.” Dosa replies, eyeing him speculatively. “I know you thought this would be exciting but it’s an aid mission.”

Hiki groans. “I got pulled off one of those.”

Dosa shrugs, uncaring. “Sasabuchi is experiencing a bit of a dry spell and a wee bit of plague.”

“Dude.” Haru leans against a tall tree, brushing the dust off his shoes. One of his dogs, huge shaggy black thing that it is, huffs and collapses at his feet. “I haven’t had any vaccinations since I was like, five. Do you have any idea how many secondary infections are just going to be passed around like candy?”

“It’s your responsibility to take advantage of the medical benefits of your current position.” Dosa replies flippantly, flipping open a pouch to extract four vials. “This will help with whatever is going on down there.”

“We don’t know?” Sasuke says disbelievingly.

Dosa hands him a vial of nearly clear liquid and produces a medical pack from a scroll. “Yeah, we aren’t run by a psychopath with a fetish for biological experimentation. Or the Village with the only medical core worth talking about. You’ll find us a bit more pedestrian as regards our diagnostic ability.”

“You’re a medic.” Sasuke continues to protest. “Why don’t you know?”

Dosa takes his vial and a needle from the pack, taking Hiki’s arm in hand. He quickly goes through the necessary procedures and injects it. Haru does his own, does Yumi’s, and does a check on Hiki. Dosa produces the last needle and yanks Sasuke’s sleeves up so he can get to the right vein. Dosa rolls his eyes at Sasuke when he flinches at the sharp sting on the needle. “And you’re spoilt. I can make sure you don’t die, reasonably tell when others might die and treat field wounds. That’s literally what being a combat medic means outside of Fire, nadeshiko. I don’t have the first fucking clue how vaccines are made or how these diseases operate. It was considered less important than making sure I could use a chakra scalpel and know what organs I shouldn’t hit.”

Sasuke grunts, pulling his arm out of the others grasp. Haru checks him over quickly and efficiently healing the puncture. “Why are we here if you’re so useless?”

“Little of this, little of that.” Dosa flips his little pouch closed, collecting the needles to be burned. “A lot of things go into the behind the scenes on these routine aid missions. Lucky you getting to see it first hand.”

“Lucky them. An aid mission is the same everywhere. The stink of the sick, the poor, the homeless. Giri has set up its usual efficient stations, separated by the washing areas, rounded off by the bunks. The team set off for the bunks without any prompting setting up for a proper night’s sleep whenever they get the chance to get it. Mid-morning finds them standing in front of a green tipped
tent waiting for Dosa to exit his briefing with the man in charge of the operation. It’s too big, the town has a population of less than 500 and Sasuke is counting one Giri for every three people. A town with this little fire power shouldn’t rate half of this.

Haru is fidgeting with a lock of hair on his dog’s ear. “This feel a little...off?”

“More than a little.” Yumi murmurs back. “There are too many medics. And old Yamaguchi is here too, he’s a poisons expert.” Sasuke eyes her, she’s pensive but not outwardly uncomfortable. There is something in the way her words fall that unnerves him.

Hiki grunts. “Makes you wonder.” He shakes his head, red hair moving about, “but I wouldn’t wonder too much, yeah? This isn’t the time to start asking questions.”

Sasuke takes that on board, as does Yumi and Haru. If the intelligence man in your squad thinks something shouldn’t be bandied about it is wise to consider it.

Dosa exits the tent. “Haru and Sasuke with me. Hiki, you’re looking for a purple tent, you’ll know what you need to do when you see it. Yumi take a nap, you’re assigned to Old Yamaguchi just as soon as he finishes his lunch.”

They disperse, Haru and Sasuke tailing Dosa around the camp as they gather supplies. Haru being here makes sense, he has rudimentary medic training, but Sasuke is a bit of a mystery. Surely he’d be more use guarding something or muscling patients out of beds and back to their houses. Dosa lets him wonder about it, taking his time looking at the sick, throwing little medic talk comments at Haru. Eventually he sends Haru off to do his own rounds.

At a little past the middle of the afternoon Sasuke makes the mistake of grunting too loud.

Dosa casts him an annoyed glance from where he’s kneeling by an old woman. “Is this not thrilling you?”

“No,” he answers, casually crossing his arms. The old woman looks at him distastefully. He levels the same look back.

“Too bad.” Dosa smiles at the old woman telling her to look after herself before addressing Sasuke again, “but I think we’re getting close now.”

To what? He doesn’t ask, opting to continue following along. Dosa carries on for another hour before grinding to a halt at the bed of a young man, skin riddled with faintly green sores. He drops to his knees and runs a quick assessment. The boy’s chest rattles with forced breath, brown hair stuck to his forehead. The boy mutters something and Dosa replies too low to hear.

“Down here Uchiha,” Dosa pats the patch of dirt next to him. “You can do a basic pulse check, right?”

Sasuke scowls and leans forward, recalling what he’s seen Kabuto and Karin do a thousand times. For some reason when he does it, it doesn’t work. He runs his hands all over the thin feverish skin of the boy’s neck trying.

“Put your finger here,” Dosa murmurs, moving his hands to cradle his neck, chakra pulsing heavy under his fingertips, “this is the proper pulse point. I need you to use your sharingan and follow the chakra pulses around it. That’ll determine whether or not the chakra is too poisoned for the antidote to work. Seven pulses of poison in half a minute is the maximum.”

He flicks the sharingan on and sets a count in his head. One pulse, two, three, four...
“Six,” he says at the two minute mark. Done thrice more for good measure.

“Just in time.” Dosa loads up a vial of something and has Sasuke hold open a tenketsu near the boy’s heart. His breathing deepens within ten minutes allowing him to fall asleep. Dosa writes down everything in a small green book, taking care to check his work with another medic and to inquire after the boy’s personal details. By the time Sasuke has gone through this process four times more he is dead tired. Yumi stops by once with a wizened old man Sasuke assumes is Yamaguchi, Dosa tries to get their attention but the ignore him. They break after six patients and head back to where they will be bunking for the night. Yumi and Haru are already there.

Dosa nods at them. “Hiki?”

“Yeah, here.” Hiki waves a tired hand, coming in from a small door that has to lead to the bathroom. He picks up a pile of files and passes them to Dosa. Since the morning he’s gained bruised knuckles and a dead set to his eyes. “Took an arm and a leg to get. First look has me suspicious. That and how damn hard they made me work for it.”

“Oh?”

“No reason for this kind of traffic at the end of the river, sir.” Hiki sinks into the nearest chair with a grateful groan. “No reason for this kind of traffic at all.”

Dosa thumbs the edge of the paper. This lasts long enough for everyone to settle, waiting.

“The catch,” Dosa says wryly, “is that this is a man made disease.”

“Like a bioweapon?”

“That’s just dumb.” Yumi marvels.

Haru nods. “Seriously, I thought since the Summer of Sun we all agreed to lay off that.”

Sasuke grunts in agreement. The Summer of Sun is the name given to an event that occurred a few years before his birth. At the height of a humid and wet summer the world bloomed. Orange flowers sprung from the ground letting off a plume of noxious gas that incapacitated whoever was near it. The event lasted only thirty six hours and took less than a hundred lives but lives on in infamy because it is the first and only time a Hidden Village succeeded in creating and implementing an effective bioweapon. It also marked one of a handful of times a Five Kage summit has been called outside of a declaration or cessation of war. The effectiveness of the weapon threatened a fine balance between the Kage and the Daimyo. Hidden Villages were just that - hidden. The damage the wars between them did could be immense, could end thousands of innocent lives, but very little of it would touch the truly powerful. But, the Daimyo reasoned, those cheery little orange flowers didn’t care about the wealth and importance of those they killed. They just killed.

Whatever earthly power the Daimyo have over the Hidden Villages Sasuke can’t imagine. Although, he thinks wryly, Giri would be the place to find out.

At the end of the Summer of Sun several things were agreed upon and the Villages decided that none of them would use bioweapons as part of their arsenal and that anyone have found to would be stripped for parts by the other Villages.

“So where did it come from?”

“The barges. Transporting illegal goods. Something that could contaminate the water.”
“With poison? That only affects chakra?”

“Suppressants.” Sasuke says instantly.

Yumi claps her hands. “I see where you’re going with this. Most of the cheap ones work by releasing a small amount of a synthetic irritant that causes the user’s body to suppress the circulation. It’s extremely toxic long term but it only has ill effects for people with a certain amount of chakra to begin with and it’s easy to produce so that’s easy money for peddlers. The high you get is intense but brief and it’s quick to get addicted to.”

Hiki chimes in. “End of the river. This is way too much stock to have if you’re selling as you go.”

“Oh that one is easy.” Yumi buffs her nails on her shirt. “Slavers.”

“What?”

“Slavers,” she repeats cheerfully. "Sorry boss. It's in those meetings we don't invite you to."

Hiki and Haru look unhappy but not startled to find out that their teammate has information they don't. Taking note of this Sasuke quells his immediate irritation.

“Slavers.” Dosa throws his hands up with a scowl. “Goddamn black ops. What the fuck am I meant to not know for the sake of plausible deniability?”

“Kusagakure has recently joined the skin trade. We’re opposed to it.”

“That all?” Dosa shakes his head with amusement. “Which bit we opposed to?”

“Trade through to Iwa. Usual shit from them; another stream of revenue, they ‘catch’ the slavers and resell the product.” Her face sours. “We follow the money and get rid of it. Providers, sellers, the whole thing. Non-lethally where we can because we’ve got them legally on contaminating the waterways but if it was too tricky to just rely on the law...”

“We take them out.” Dosa nods. “What flipped it?”

“Too much traffic. It should have been one small group we could round up and drop off with someone who gave a shit but this is four times the people and four times the drugs. Not to mention if this is weaponised then this is really goddamn big. Like galvanising the Villages big.”

“It’s too soon for that. We aren’t ready yet.”

Sasuke opens his posture bringing their eyes to him. “How do we stop it?”

“Thank you for staying on topic.” Dosa casts an accusing glance at Yumi. “Are they alone?”

“Kusagakure isn’t who I’d expect this from.” Hiki adds. “It’s a bit ambitious for them. And the amount of people is unrealistic for their population.”

“Iwa, duh.” Haru shrugs. “Look we all know that Oonoki makes his own trouble just so he can clean it up. That sort of thing creates a lot of people that he needs to, you know, get rid of.”

Hiki shakes his head. “I wouldn’t put money on Iwa here this looks like independent contractors selling to a new market. Selling people is the easy bit procuring them is harder.”

Haru waves a dismissive hand. “So they take all the old whores after they’ve had a run on them-”
“Haru,” Dosa says mildly.

Haru scoffs. “They’re from Kusa. You could grab a sack of flour, bolt on some tits and as long as you cut a hole in there somewhere they’d be fine.”

“That’s fucking disgusting,” Yumi snaps, punctuated with a slap to Haru’s shoulder. “These are nice fucking people.”

Haru grins. “Nice for fucking—”

With a twist of her wrist Yumi produces a thin blade and presses it against his throat. She flips her body so that she has him pressed to the ground, blood already welling on his skin. Hiki rises a little out of his seat, hand reaching behind him for a weapon. Sasuke catches his eye and shakes his head. Whatever this is, it’s best sorted out between the two of them. Yumi lowers her face til she’s a breath of air from Haru. She snarls something at him. He jerks once, eyes wide and angry before muttering, “oi, I was joking.”

Yumi spits on the ground, snarls, “Some shit isn’t funny, Iwa.” and then gets off him, throws open the door, striding away furiously into the marketplace.

“Ah, hell,” Haru sits up, fingers rubbing the cut on his throat. “I can never tell with her.”

Hiki sighs, looking speculatively out the door. “Her aunt—”

“Was a prostitute?” Sasuke hedges.

“No, tried to sell her.” Hiki leans down and brings thin, barely useful medical chakra to his fingers. Haru will scar. “Big market through Water for that, you know?”

“Into the outer countries.” Sasuke murmurs. Giri has a strong presence in the midlevel black markets, mostly trading off the end of supplies and resources from Orochimaru’s strongholds with a little work on the side synthesizing medicines and drugs. It would make sense if recruits came from there too.

Haru slaps Hiki’s hand away and brings up green chakra of his own. His healing is much cleaner. “Yeah, Iwa.”

“Hey, we’re the capital of child experimentation.” Hiki says good naturedly. “Despite Konoha’s best efforts.”

Sasuke smirks. “Hn.” But this seems like the sort of conversation he should contribute to, so, “fewer overpowered maniacs.”

“Nope. Yumi would win that one.” Haru rises to his feet, steadied by Hiki. He takes one look at the door and pulls his long hair over his shoulder. “I’m going to go apologise. Be back with dinner.”

Both Yumi and Haru return in the late evening. They have huge bowls of soup and new information.

Haru drags out all their maps and lays them on the table along with stolen copies of shipping manifests and permits. They gather around the table to look it over. “They’re taking the girls as collateral. Seems this started as a simple protection racket that got out of hand. When the brothels couldn’t pay they took the girls. The real business is selling off the undesirables from the small villages along here.” Haru draws a finger down a nonlinear path, criss crossing country lines but following the path of the rivers. “They’re using boats to take them out to the ports on Wave. Some
are cut up for organs, others are sold whole,” he throws a hesitant look at Yumi, fingers twitching, “some go to the clubs. You know the ones-“

“To be killed, raped and mutilated for the titillation of others.” Yumi says grimly. “I can tell you which girls they’ve marked for that. They’ll be the ones who’ve gone through the process multiple times, been beaten a few too many times by their owners, too mouthy. They’ll have a few buyers rather than the ones set to become body fodder. They’re our best bet at a paper trail.”

“Can you do that?” Dosa asks gently.

Yumi grins at him, all of her perfectly pointed teeth on display. “You betcha.”

Sasuke suppresses a strong urge to shiver, Haru and Hiki don’t manage it. Looking at the papers he notices an inconsistency. “The ship manifests haven’t been doctored.”

Dosa blinks, still staring at Yumi. “What?”

Sasuke points to the few copies of the shipping manifests they have. “These are legitimate manifests. We used to doctor them for the Otokage’s less...legitimate pursuits...that still needed to pass civilian hands. These are stamped with real ink from real nations and real Villages. They’re chakra responsive. That can’t be faked.”

Yumi scrunches up her nose. “What does that mean?”

Sasuke glances at her. “That the Villages are in on it.”

“Oh,” Dosa says with an odd amount of enthusiasm. “Oh that would be bad.”

“Terrible.” Haru grins. “It might even prompt people to turn to alternate forms of survival.”

Dosa nods sagely. “That it very well might.” He claps his hands. “Better get to it then. Turn in for the night. In the morning Haru will aid the medics. Hiki, Sasuke, Yumi, you’re with me.”

The evening passes with no new news. They bed down early and spend the night either asleep or quietly contemplating the events of the day. Hiki and Yumi, Sasuke notes, are both avid smokers. In the morning Dosa insists that everyone but Haru dress in their best clothes.

“We’re off to see the head boss.” Dosa grimaces as he says it. “And he already has a poor opinion of us.”

Yumi acquires presentable clothes for the lot of them. He doesn’t know how but he’s polite enough to be grateful for it. The village leader lives in a solid but bare building right down by the river. He’s a tall thin man standing behind a too small desk, cheeks already red with anger. Dosa introduces them all and begins his speech with, “sir, I can’t imagine how difficult this must be for you-”

“Imagine!” The man bellows back. “My people are dying and all you people do is walk around humming under your breath!”

“The infection is slowing, we’re seeing a marked improvement now that we know the cause of the illness.”

“And what is that, exactly?”

So Dosa explains.
The village leaders anger explodes from reasonable to apocalyptic. “So you mean to tell me that several Hidden Villages have been using the waterways to carry slaves up and down to be sold off?”

“Drugs, mostly, the skin trade is new.” Yumi interrupts. “It’s not unusual for smaller Hidden Villages to do this, especially if they’re in the middle of expanding their influence.”

Dosa casts an irritated look at her. “Thank you Yumi,” he adds placidly, “Giri is here primarily to relieve your medical situation, and once we’ve done that we will leave. However when information of this nature comes to light we have a policy of offering a small protection detail to give you time to recuperate. It will take mere weeks for them to resume operations.”

“For fucks sake, how often are you freaks doing this?”

“Not us, sir.” There’s a brief pause, a gathering moment, then, “would you like that?”

“What I’d like is for you fuckers to stop endangering the lives of people who’ve done jack shit to you. Oh, you’re all so high and mighty with your abilities, but what about us, huh? What do we deserve? I’d like for all of you to burn in hell, you deserve it, if you ask me.”

“Would you like that?” Dosa asks gently. His eyes are serious.

Hiki looks up in surprise, he meets Sasuke eyes with a questioning eyebrow. Sasuke looks at him just long enough to convey his own lack of understanding. Beside him, Yumi grins.

The village leader stares at them. “You can’t possibly be offering...”

Dosa straightens to his full impressive height, out of sheer habit Sasuke backs him by straightening his own. “We aren’t the Villages, sir. We have a vested interest in stopping things like this. Giri is capable of and willing to stop the Villages from utilising your waterways to trade people and drugs. I’ll ask again. Would you like that?”

The man visibly gathers himself together, trying and failing to match the intensity of Dosa’s posturing. “We’re a small village.”

“We know, what we ask for is simple. When the time comes remember us and that we’ll look out for you.”

“So there’s going to be a change in the pecking order, hmm?” He replies with more than a touch of anger. “You’ll topple a few bosses? Be the new kings?”

“There won’t be a ‘new order’. We live in a world where the rich and powerful can and do strip those around them of their rights, their lives and their dignity. I myself have never been a shinobi but those I’ve brought with me come from these same Villages. Any one of them could tell you how much money they’d ask for the lives of you and yours.” Dosa pauses for emphasis, glancing at all of them in turn. Unbidden, Sasuke thinks, 50,000 for the transport, 7,000 a head. “We aim to insure the basic human rights of those who can’t fight back and protect those who seek to.”

“To what?”

“Fight back.”

The moment stretches long and profound. No one moves an inch.

“Yes,” the village leader eventually says, “I would like that.”
It’s settled remarkably easily, Sasuke thinks, and then they’re off and on to the messy business of shinobi. As it turns out there’s already a plan in place for this occurrence. Dosa and Hiki will travel to a nearby Giri hideout to confer with other teams and plan extraction. Yumi is off to ensure that the legal proceedings end up with the right people and to presumably dispatch a few obstructions along the way. Haru and Sasuke board a rickety old wagon and head up the river, closer to Kusa. They end up in a shity two storey apartment kept as a safe house in a tiny nothing town an hours run from the river. They’ll lie in wait for a few days and when the necessary arrangements have been made they’ll strike precisely to find and disable the hideouts, free the people, stop the drugs, whatever else they’ve been roped into.

Haru takes one look at the apartment; it’s shity bright green kitchenette and plastic dining set, an old music player, a bunch of dirty rags on a free standing table, and drops his bags with a sigh of disgust. “At least there’s working water and a music player.”

Sasuke takes his bags upstairs, peeling off his shoes to take a shower. It’s one of the few virtues of these places that he doesn’t have to think about water wastage.

Afterwards, as he dries his hair with a moth-bitten towel, he quiets his thoughts down.

A swell of memories and thoughts -about the mission, about people, about tactics and motivations- move to the front of his mind. He’s never had a naturally quiet mind. He’s had to discipline it just as thoroughly as his body. Thoughts come from the depths about his family, they always do, and his mind circles the ever present enigma of Itachi. How, what, why did he do it? Why, when, how did he die? Some nights he lets them run through his head like a dog chasing a rabbit but he already knows he’s not in the mood for that. That proverbial rabbit turns into a less divisive family member. A woman in the kitchen handling chicken for dinner, a woman practicing with her sword backed by autumn light.

Here is the last thing his mother taught him: a warrior is a warrior by virtue of what they do. Man, woman, child, the make is all the same. The eyes don’t matter, the blood doesn’t matter. If you can’t hollow yourself out, if you can’t put your heart aside, you’ll never make it. She used to look at them as they fell asleep with a well of sorrow in her eyes. Two sons with too big hearts.

Picture: an autumn day, his mother on the living room floor stretching her legs and fingers. The details of the room have long since left. Sasuke is on the floor next to her toes stretched towards the ceiling. His mother carried a small scroll, standard issue. She opened it and dumped the contents on the floor. Two hairpieces, two locks of hair, two broken shards of porcelain. She presses her fingertip to each, turning the locks of hair. Solid black and blue black glinting in the sun. Sasuke reaches out to finger one of the hairpieces. This one is blue, green and gold flowers. Its sister piece is plainer but covered in pearls and winking shards of red. “Why two?”

“I’m two natured,” she said with a wink, “I think you’re like me.”

“What do they do?”

“Nothing,” she replied bluntly. “They’re dead metal, dead hair, dead rocks. The blue hair piece was from grandmother Michiko to her last remaining female heir, if you have a sister it will go to her. The pearls are from Uzumaki Mito also as a gift to Michiko’s heir. The hair is the first lock cut from you and your brother.” She rolls the two pieces of porcelain in her hand, blood welling in her palm. “When I was told I was to marry your father I was furious. My branch of the family was promised...ah, perhaps when you’re older. It’s tradition for the woman’s family to give a gift of acknowledgement-”

His eyes widened. “Oh no-”
“-So I took the pretty vase his aunt had given to us the year before and I smashed it-”

“Oh no.”

She laughed. “I found the longest, sharpest shard and I jammed it into his favourite training post. I was a chunnin, and he was already climbing the KHMP ranks. It was something of a scandal. We weren’t married right away, I had at least until jounin to get to know him. Live with him, understand him.” She smiled, the same way she did just before bed, when they were all fed and happy, Itachi taking Sasuke away to give their parents space.

“Ew,” he said very seriously. Itachi made a face every time their parents go off alone. It must be gross whatever it is.

“Quiet.” His mother tumbled him into her arms fingers reaching under his shirt to tickle him. He wriggled around until he could get away. His father was home and any lack of discipline would be met with punishment. She relented with a kiss to his crown. “Alone time is how little boys get made.” He settled in her lap holding the two shards. Both are white but for a fine vein of gold that runs through one and fine vein of blue through the other.

They’re solid, earthly. “How?”

“Not important.” She takes both and throws them back into the pile. “The second one was his proposal to me on the night of our engagement. He said he’d accept as much of me as I wanted to give and if he ever forgot to be the sort of husband that I’d be proud of I should take him out. Then he handed me this shard.”

“Gross.” Sasuke said for emphasis. “Very gross.”

“Is that your word of the day?” She squeezed him tight. “Every ninja kills, Sasuke. Hopefully for their kin or in defense of what they hold dear. At least in defense of themselves. You must remember to take your own heart out first.”

“I don’t think sensei would like that approach.” He cast a skeptical look at the pile of shiny things. “I don’t think you’d win.”

“The greatest weapon the Uchiha have are our hearts. The easiest thing to turn against us is our passion. We are fire, Sasuke. More than Sarutobi, more than Hyuuga, more than Senju. We are the fire eaters. None compare to the strength of Uchiha.”

Sasuke rolled his eyes. This is something he has heard everyday since he was born.

His mother squeezed him too tight for a moment. “You will be asked to do the impossible. To kill the impossible.” She turned him in her arms, said, “you must cut your heart out. And then when you come home, to me, to your father and brother, you must be able to put it back in your chest.”

She cradled his face. “These remind me that I love you. That I married a man who will always honour me. That I am the daughter of one of the most respected lines of one of the greatest clans on this continent. I will always know who I am so long as I have these to guide me. When the time comes you’ll pick yours and you will carry them to your grave.” She smiled, eyes watering. “Not too soon, though.”

Sasuke blinked back emotion of his own. He felt like he’d been let in on a huge secret. “Gross,” he pronounced surely for the third time. His mother cracked, smiled. She packed up her scroll and continued on with the day. Every question she asked he answered with gross.

His mother laughed and talked and laughed until Itachi came home. She left to go distract his father.
from his home office, Itachi sat down to play. Sasuke remembers asking Itachi for his scroll. After a long look, Itachi produced three crow feathers, a string of beads and bits that Sasuke gave him when he was three and a small figure of a goddess carved of a bright yellow stone, the sun shining through her.

Itachi let him touch everything but one of the feathers. “The feathers were a gift from Shisui.”

Shisui had died a week earlier. The mourning banners still hung outside his home.

When Itachi killed his family he took their mother’s memento’s. His fathers were left with the body. Sasuke has to assume that Itachi’s died with him.

Sasuke has a small silver scroll made for him on his fourth birthday. In it is one kunai he picked up from the Valley of the End. A bookmark he stole from Kakashi. Two perfectly preserved flowers on an ivory string. The hilt of the first sword Orochimaru pressed into his hands, the blade shattered fighting Juugo. A fistful of dirt from the Naka in a container he bought from a street vendor. A few well worn volumes of poetry. Two ledgers from a distant cousin, three sealed books from the home of one of the elders. He has his father’s old notebook; old receipts (three orders of sizzling pork, two bottles of sake, one order of assorted sides. One pair of boots, repaired), old case notes (three incidents of domestic violence in the Aburame quarter, two murders taken over by ANBU, lost cat), old poems printed out lovingly (but through the scattering light, the flower falls. I, too, long for your summer). His mother’s name is written over smudges of food, over shopping lists, over random things he thought to tell her later. He loved her inmeasurably, Sasuke learns over and over, he also had a terrible sense of humor.

His father wrote I am proud of him on the back of an old newspaper clipping, a week before the massacre. Sasuke doesn’t know which son he meant.

He picks an old volume of musings from sometime before the Warring States Era and packs up the rest of it piece by piece. Downstairs he can hear Haru putting together things for dinner, a soft noise he’s never heard before floating up the stairs.

Music.

“You like it?” Haru asks as Sasuke appears in the kitchenette.

“I-” Sasuke scrunches his nose. He does, but there isn’t an accurate way to describe what it makes him feel. “What is that?”

“The music?” Haru asks. “It’s a friend’s band. They stole a bunch of instruments off the local police. If they were going to be taken any way they might as well go to someone who would appreciate them, right?”

“I’ve never heard anything like this.” Most of the music Sasuke’s heard is traditional. Slow, placid, or the height of war drums. Music that’s a tale or a warning. “What’s that noise?”

“Guitars.” The music hits a fever pitch and keeps going up and up and up. The noise -guitars, Haru said- combine into something faster than his heart. “Never seen one but it’s pretty cool sounding right? Nothing like that back home.”

Nothing like that anywhere, Sasuke marvels. “In Oto?”

“In Iwa. In Oto. Anywhere really.” Haru taps his fingers along to the beat. “You know there’s this really cool music scene coming out of the ports? Like the ones up near the top part of Lightning and down near River? All this shit is being imported like -these drums, right? These drums aren’t
like ours. They’ve got them like. Fuck, here listen to this-” Haru changes his tape out.

It’s the guitars again. Like a rumble of thunder that just goes on and on. He hears those drums next, they take over the rush and keep it steady. Still intense, still teeth rattling. Then there’s this soaring noise, like flutes but sharp as a knife, two repeats, three, and then-

Nothing. Absolute silence.

A woman’s voice, deep and controlled, spins out across the blank space. She’s singing about her voice, about her plans, about what she’s got and what she needs to give. She hands the story over to a man, the drums following him in, twisting around the background noise of her voice singing _gotta run, gotta fight, this is my night, mine mine mine_. It’s all drums and then in a crescendo the guitars come again, rattling in Sasuke’ spine. The man hands the music back to her, now his voice is the background who are you, what are you doing here, what do you stand for and how do you fall? All those sharp notes, the things that aren’t flutes, sharpen like strings, like the sounds his strings make when he pulls them tight and it’s so, so loud. So loud, and they’re still singing. _I won’t die for you but I’ll win for me. I won’t die for you but I’ll win for me. I won’t die for you but I’ll win for me._

It shuts off at the top of a roaring raging run. _I’ll win for me_. He’s been tapping out the rhythm too. “I like this one.”

Haru is grinning too. He switches the tape again and plays something that starts slow. Sasuke hasn’t got enough of an opinion yet to call it for sure but he thinks slow isn’t his style. He’ll trust Haru here, though. “Yeah? Well then, have I got some shit to show you.”

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It all goes to shit when the guy with the bombs shows up.

Good news: they’ve centered their operation in an annexed section of land that diplomatically Kusa has no knowledge of but through the intelligence networks they know is part of the deal between them and Iwa to end the occupation of the third war. The land is by the river, a mid sized town with good infrastructure provided by Kusa and predictably trained ex-shinobi courtesy of Iwa. Haru explains offhandedly that this is what Iwa does sometimes when it has a glut of useful, expendable soldiers -they get permanently ‘retired’ in a little hell hole until they die off or they get killed. This nameless little town is a final home for people the regime no longer want to deal with but are otherwise loyal. The town is evacuated of willing civilians when Haru discovers that the slavers have been tipped off. Dosa dispatches Yumi to take care of that which puts them a man down in hostile territory. At that point it becomes a matter of _when_ things get serious. Haru is taken off the initial attack when Hiki sends notice that they’ve captured the main boss. This is good news. The bad news is that the slavers are part of a very large, very nasty syndicate so deeply embedded in the economy of the surrounding areas it will take both Haru’s skill as a hunter-nin and Hiki’s as an interrogator to get the right information. The really bad news is that failure here, in an unacknowledged but politically contentious country, will expose Giri as a politically motivated force. An unacknowledged series of social tenets protect Giri from retaliation: they have no Daimyo, they have no Hidden Village, they do no economic harm, they threaten no major power. So long as any migrant force holds to these rules it is something of a social taboo to attack them. If word gets out here their will be no hiding behind aid missions or escorts. Failure will mean an opportunity for a Hidden Village to take real action against Giri.

This is not ideal -and then the guy with the bombs shows up.

He’s blonde, he’s got too many mouths, he’s already destroyed three buildings by the time Sasuke
got close enough to stop him. Not that the man deserves it, but Sasuke will admit to some culpability. He’d been checking homes, stepping into shops, making sure to find and kill any occupants who hadn’t heeded the leave or stay inside your home order. It was a rookie mistake, crossing a threshold too quickly, not checking his back, that had him trip over the man’s trap. He goes flying, knocked about by an explosion. He rights himself just in time to throw up a block. He’s flung into the street and just as he’s righting himself the street moves under him, exploding outwards. With agility he jumps up and through into a tall apartment building six stories high, lands in a bathroom. Out the door, into the highway, he navigates it quietly coming a few stories up. Every few seconds he hears the soft swoosh of wings. Aerial summon.

In any other situation he’d call his summons give this asshole something to really think about but his are distinctive in every way. The traditional bird summon of his clan, the traditional snake of Orochimaru’s.

The asshole makes the choice for him. The floor disappears the same way the street did.

Aerial bird. Explosions. No summons. His strongest jutsu are fire or lightning aligned. Lightning might point to a Giri connection but there’s a strong smattering of fire through Kusa. He has a sword, some wires and his katon. He goes down and out across the street, up the next tall building, looking for height with fire on his lips. When the next explosion comes he clocks the angle, the likely route and shoots true. The man yells dodging round. This is when Sasuke gets his first good look at him. Blonde, grinning, Akatsuki.

His bird is made of the same clay he’s been throwing around like candy. Taunting. Sasuke gets the feeling that the blonde really isn’t putting his back into this. “Shit.” The blonde spits out around a grin. “Ya know, this is not what I meant to do this evening, but when life gives you inspiration-”

Sasuke strikes first, a katon from his mouth and wired kunai from his hands. He dodges down into the building. On his heels comes the loud pops of the blondes clay just enough to keep him running. Yeah, this is just a diversion.

And that pisses him off. “I don’t care.” He throws far more chakra than is reasonable into a katon. Twisting it into a pillar and making sure that he, his sword and his bad mood are coming at the blonde full powered. He nearly makes it onto the bird ringed in flame like some demon from an bedtime story. He sees the moment the blonde comes eye to eye with the sharingan. The flinch. The morbid fury. The resulting resolve.

Sasuke grins. Using that split second of turbulent emotion, he strikes slicing the blonde's face deep. With a snarl from both of them the bird goes up and Sasuke goes down. He dodges into the apartment complex again.

“Aw, come on.” The man yells. “I’m trying to give you a real show here!”

Sasuke swings around a corner and jumps up stairs. The rooms give him snippets of cover, just long enough to get by dodging the little bits of exploding shit this asshole throws through the window.

He bursts through the roof rising high in the air spinning into position to throw a few giant fireballs. The blonde man snorts and rises higher still into the air. From his lofty position he leans down to wave mockingly. With his other hand he throws a spray of exploding shrapnel. Sasuke jumps off the roof and down into an alleyway. He hits the ground hard on his knees, rolling to a stand.

The clay bird is circling him. “Ah, well.” The blonde shrugs. His clay bird rises into the sky. “See
you next time kid! Have fun with what you find in there!”

“What the fuck,” Sasuke asks the empty alleyway around him. “What the fuck was that?”

The alleyway says nothing back.

He trudges through the bomb strewn streets towards a prearranged meeting place. He has no idea who, if anyone, will be there and he barely cares anyway. The town isn’t so big that they missed the commotion and it annoys him that they didn’t think to offer aid even if he would have refused it. He finds Yumi and Dosa chatting by a busted up bakery looking perfectly presentable next to his charred up visage.

Dosa holds one hand over the other miming stacking something. “It’s a doll inside another doll, like, nestled inside-”

“That’s fucked up, sir.” Yumi says.

“I mean, yeah, but it’s like a kids toy? You can’t tell me you don’t have toys-?”

Sasuke waits them out, the burn on his shoulder hurting something awful. He growls.

Dosa waves a hand at him. “Yeah, yeah, nadeshiko.” He turns back to Yumi. “You’re late. Seriously, no toys?”

His patience snaps. “I just fought a member of Akatsuki.” He jabs at Yumi. “So if you’d like to maybe tell the rest of us what we should have known at the start.”

“That’s not on me!” Yumi throws her hands up. “Honest, I take our fellow group of miscreants too seriously to not tell ya.”

Dosa scratches his chin, paying no mind to Sasuke’s animosity. “Would make sense though, a lot of their money is in selling bodies. Dead or alive.” He shrugs. “We must be close to it, come on.”

“We’re just gonna go find it?” Yumi asks, to her credit she walks gingerly over to look at Sasuke’s wounds. Sasuke bats her away when she makes to poke one.

“Not if it takes too long.” Dosa replies. “We stumble across it, fine. We don’t, also fine. Akatsuki aren’t our business.”

It doesn’t take them long. Haru wasn’t kidding about how deeply embedded human trafficking was in the area. Yumi spots a series of signs with well known markers, well known enough that even Sasuke recognises them as directions to a flesh market, sitting right there in the street. They follow them down Sasuke flipping the sharingan on and off while they look for secret passages, hidden messages, anything. They find it, three spinning red clouds, sitting out in the open right next to a post office. It’s a simple red door set below street level, swinging open easily enough when the push in.

“We doing this?” Yumi asks.

“Yes,” Dosa says, “lets go.”

The smell hits them first. Acid. Rot. Medicinal. In the notes Sasuke can scent something familiar setting a rolling in his stomach he doesn’t care for. Yumi slides to the front and lowers her stance, ready for an incoming attack, in response Dosa and Sasuke flank her as well as possible. After a few beats of silence Dosa relaxes his blade and signals at Sasuke to back off. Yumi stays on alert
but her shoulders lose tension as they come around a corner into a wide room. Yumi flashes in, flashes out, shakes her head. Dosa indicates for Sasuke to stand guard and, with a deep breath, steps in.

From the doorway Sasuke listens to them bustle around. Metal sounds, flesh sounds, things being dropped and picked up. When he’s given the all clear Sasuke turns and enters. It’s a very wide room, high ceilings, small windows, well lit. There are two sections of wall dug out stacked with jars of...something. In the centre are exactly what Sasuke expects—people, laid out on tables, mostly dead, preserved by medical jutsu and an odd grey moss. He recognises it for what it is: fire moss, the unholy side effect of some biologists experiments with native Wind fauna. Kabuto raved about the stuff although no one else thought much of it. It’s expensive, hard to keep and the side effects are horrific.

“Ah hell,” Dosa mutters, nose stuck firmly in the crook of his elbow. “Why’s it always gotta be a freak show?”

Yumi comes to stand beside him, scrunching up her nose. “Gross.” She reaches out to touch the moss. “What-?”

Sasuke flashes forward grasping her shoulder. Yumi tenses, hand flicking down. Sasuke knocks her hand. “Don’t. The moss is reactive, it keeps the organs alive to be harvested.”

“You would know.” Yumi drawls. Her hand is still reaching for a knife. “Captain, this is freaky as hell.”

Dosa looks around the room, once, twice. “Yeah it is.” He shrugs. “Uchiha, anything to add?”

“We should leave.”

“Besides that.”

Sasuke considers the bodies. He sat by Orochimaru’s side a few times as he and Kabuto argued about the best way to preserve bodies. There were demonstrations. “Are we trying to save them? Or are we trying to destroy the operation?”

“Can’t we do both?” Dosa asks.

“No.”

“People first, then.”

Sasuke bodily shoves Yumi away from the bodies, rolling up his sleeves, sharingan on. “I’ve never done this before,” he warns, “this is speculation.” Then he reaches down, forcing lightning through the thin tendrils of dirt wood rot flavoured chakra. They crumble away slowly and he takes his time, knowing what comes next. It falls away in clumps revealing a perfectly preserved woman. Her eyelids are thin, breath shallow. She has a weak pulse but he can see some signs of the disease in Sasabuchi. Slower, slower, he works his way around her. The air charges with static.

“Any time this year-” Yumi drawls.

The woman bolts up right through the last of the webbing on her body screaming.

Yumi jumps back already three quarters of the way through throwing a kunai when Dosa takes it off her.
Sasuke sighs pinching the bridge of his nose. Fire moss, very good for suspended animation, but with the nasty side effect of causing an intense burning sensation upon skin contact. His second year in Oto they lost their body supplier and his chemicals. They had to find another way to preserve the bodies - and the people - that were sometimes trafficked through. Flesh was never Oto’s focus but sometimes you didn’t have a choice about what jobs you took. The Otokage took it in stride. *People are our business* Orochimaru chuckles in his head, *I believe in good business.*

He moves to the next body.

Around him Dosa does his best to console the woman. Sasuke tunes it out and concentrates on spinning lightning and not thinking of worse times.

Time goes on, he reaches the last body. He can feel his control flagging, it was never a strong suit, concentration flowing to the occupants in the room. Distantly, through the tiredness, he hears Yumi yell, “what the hell is this?”

Sasuke finishes clamps his hand over the man’s mouth before he can scream turning to ask for clarification. Dosa clamps down hard on his shoulder. “Uchiha.” The hand holds him in place. “I’m going to give you the choice not to see this. Everything in this room must be destroyed regardless.”

Sasuke raises an eyebrow letting the man on the table go. He stops just long enough to get his feet under him and then bolts for the door. Smart guy.

Sasuke tenses his shoulder pulling it from the other man's grasp. “What’s that then?” With a few shakes he gets his body back, chakra falling down to a level that’s lower than he'd like. The room comes back into full focus, empty of people now one of the metal tables is covered in jars and knick knacks. He moves towards them, a prickling sensation starting on his neck. Jars, bones, organs floating in liquid. He picks a jar up, shaking it a little. The contents spin around and he sees -

Dosa grimaces. “Four pairs of sharingan eyes. Spares.”

*Have fun with what you find in there. ...Akatsuki.*

“There are other people who would...”

He cautions his hands against shaking, turning the jar to look for, well, anything. On the bottom is an acquirement date, some twenty years passed, and a neat little pictograph. “I’ve seen these before,” in his grandmother’s books before she passed, “they’re genealogical markers.”

“Can you read them?”

“No.” And isn’t that a queasy thought? “Even if I could the appropriate records are in the Hokage’s possession.”

Dosa picks up another jar, shaking it thoughtfully. “How much older than you was your brother? Ten years? Twenty?”

“Less than a decade.”

Dosa blinks, visibly taking that in. “These predate me.” He shakes it off and continues. “Very well sealed but the tech is ancient. The dates are listed on the bottom.”

Yumi holds up a pair, swirling red and marked with a strange degeneration around the iris. Sasuke tenses almost involuntarily. “This pair is the most recent, from around ten years ago.” Yumi frowns, she doesn’t miss the tightening of Sasuke’s hand. She puts down one pair of eyes to pick
up another. “And the furthest one back is from...nearly 70 years ago? Shit. And the writing is
different. At least they initialed it. S, T. Right next to the date of harvest and the date of sale.
Classy.”

His brain does the math without thinking about it. Some of these must- they must be from the
massacre, sure, there are hundreds of Uchiha over the course of Konoha’s history, and many all
those years before, but the sharingan has to be bred, then activated, then trained. A random pair
with only the first level of power and training is barely worth anything. Barring Kakashi it has
never been successfully transplanted outside of the bloodline. He catalogues the rest, quickly,
refusing recognition of who they could have belonged to. They range from the first level to a
distinctive pattern. They range from decades to around nine years. The ones from before ten years
ago have dates of purchase, the location, the condition-

Surely they would notice if Uchiha were going missing? Surely someone would-

“Something’s not right here,” he murmurs to himself.

“Yeah, all of it.” Yumi shrugs.

Sasuke flicks eyes, red ones, at her but lets it lie. She’s flippant, not necessarily rude.

Dosa drags their attention back to the fire moss. “What would this do to someone?”

Sasuke cocks an eyebrow. “Scare them, mostly. It feels like your skin is on fire.”

“Harvest it.” Dosa rubs a very small portion of moss between his fingers, obviously cataloging the
feeling. After a few seconds he drops it, fingers flexing off the itch. “The parameters of our
mission have just changed. We’re taking this back for Hiki.”

Sasuke halts for a moment, mind flying through the actions and their consequences. It’s not that he
cares about the torture, persay, but it seems an offbeat tactic for a supposed peace group.

Yumi catches the gist of it, putting a hand on her hip, says, “It’s still a fight, Sasuke. We still have
to win if we want to decide how things run.”

“If you did win, would you do this?” He asks, mostly for clarification.

“Crack a few eggs, get a few omelettes. Do you feel that because you think it’s wrong?” Yumi
asks. “Or because the option to object was never presented before?”

That’s an escalation. “I don’t need to be convinced.”

“I’m not trying,” she says in a patient, coaxing tone, the same one you use on babies to convince
them to take their medicine, “just wondering how long it’ll take to shake that good Village boy shit
out.”

“I haven’t been anyone’s boy in years.”

“Then why are you arguing? It’s us or them, right? The Village or the wild. The outlaws, the
fucking traitors. I was born outside those walls. I was born a traitor. Tell me, is that right? Before
Giri I never did a thing to anyone but my last name’s on a bounty list so any fucking one from any
fucking village can do anything they want to me. Kill me. Sell me. It doesn’t matter. I’m
not human.”

For some asinine reason he thinks of the Will of Fire. Summer children playing in well maintained
streets. An irrepressible sense of community and goodness. But he can’t defend it, can he? Orochimaru came from there. He’s standing a room of missing eyes. He’s seen the barges full of slaves come in people marked and tagged with the Land of Fire’s symbol. Konohagakure moves masses of addictive substances under the guise of herbal remedy into the poor lands around the borders. A destabilizing tactic to keep them from forming an effective barrier to shinobi movement across the border. It’s old warfare. Feeding the barons and the cartels generates work for the lower ranks. Kill a few, put others in their place. That way you can control the borders without having to put an army on it.

All of that is easy to justify, he was taught to justify it. You can’t fight a war on that many fronts. The enemy will come over the line if you give an inch. You are never truly at peace only preparing for a new war. Some he heard in the academy some from the mouths of soldiers.

He tries to clear his throat in preparation to say something, anything, as a defense. “I left,” crawls out instead of something more impressive.

Yumi places a small boned hand on his elbow, her face the picture of sympathy. “It’s not that easy.” She squeezes once, relenting and comforting.

Isn’t it? The thought of trying to confront everything he was ever taught as a child is dizzying and confusing. It’s not all wrong, it’s not even all relevant. Does he have to understand something to do it? Somehow that thought seems wrong too.

“I’ll do it.” He knows he doesn’t sound convincing but lackluster is about all he’s got.

“Thank you.” Dosa answers sincerely. “I know that this isn’t what you would chose to do.”

What on earth does that have to do with it? “Orders are orders.” There’s even less enthusiasm than before, not even the blank acceptance he usually experiences. Odd.

Dosa steeples his fingers together and hums thoughtfully. “Your part of this mission will be over after this. I think it’s time for you and Yumi to head home.”

Sasuke still doesn’t get it but he moves out anyway. The town is quiet as they cross back. Silent, deadly, full of the promise of something wicked. He moves away from that thought too. By now the city is empty and full of the necessary dead.

The run head long into company right near a set of old warehouses. Almost classic old school espionage shit. Yumi darts ahead. “Haru?”

He grunts at them, face covered in a thin layer of grime. Hunting was good then. “We’re blowing it.” He wipes at his face wanly. “They’ve got their claws too deep in here. This is decades worth of rot even if we spent a week here we wouldn’t be able to stop all the ugly shit flowing through.”

A somber moment. The end of an era for Giri. No one will mistake their intent now. “Where’s Hiki?”

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“Doin’ his job.” Haru growls, he’s striding off toward the warehouse, shoulders set angrily. “Don’t stay too long. This place is set to blow as well.”

They enter the ruse of a warehouse. Inside is empty but for the three men standing guard around a hole in the ground. They descend into the basement of the warehouse. The walls are made of prison cells, the unmistakable scent of human piss and vomit describing their exact purpose. A few cages are inhabited, Sasuke assumes, by the leaders of the operation. Eventually they’re let into a poorly lit room. Hiki sits to one side, beer in hand, looking for all the world like a bored
houseguest. His lip is split, his beard is uneven, but other than that he looks fine. The man tied to the chair is doing far less well. His eyes are unfocused, his ribs are clearly broken, and every time Hiki moves his abdomen tenses. Most likely jarred nerves and poisons. A Wind speciality.

Hiki winks tiredly at them. “Whats up boss?” Dosa shrugs in reply, throwing him the moss. “This some kind of glowing moss?”

Dosa grunt. “Sprinkle it over our guests. We’re running out of time for your zen horror shit.”

Hiki raises an eyebrow flipping the knife in his hands. “What’s this?”

Sasuke shrugs. “Pain like fire.”

Hiki looks at them flatly, the thin blade in his hand is bloodless despite the lacerations on their informant. “I like to use the Kazuhira method.” Hiki says mildly. “I find pain is less effective.”

“Try it out kid,” Dosa insists, “never know what you’ll learn.”

Hiki turns it over in his hands. With a great heave he stands up. The man tied to the chair trembles. “Will you give?” Hiki asks. The man shakes his head, no.

Hiki sighs, resigned, and with a flick of his wrist throws the entirety of the moss into his face. The man screams, the sound echoing down the hallway to his followers. In the distance bombs go off.

Huh, Sasuke thinks, this is terrorism and then he blanks it out.

It draws on and on and on. Sasuke counts the beats between. The man screams, his eyes swell, Sasuke counts the beats between a mortal wound doomed to infection and what Dosa’s minimal medical ability and willingness to intervene will prevent. He’s tired, they’re all tired. It’s a shit job and it’s gone on too long.

“But if you must use pain a large and sudden amount is best.” Hiki murmurs. Sasuke feels a weight start behind his eyes, a clench in his jaw. Hiki is tired, so is Yumi. Fuck, so is Dosa. They’re overworked and exhausted, for what?- Why are they-

“Uchiha,” Dosa says thoughtfully, “go be distracting.”

“Excuse me?”

Dosa steps forward, moving around Sasuke the long way, getting in the bound man’s periphery. “You’re distracted, so go be distracting outside.” He grabs Sasuke’s arm as he passes by, holding him still. “You’re going home after this, remember that.” He pats his arm as he lets go. “This is nearly over.”

More bombs go off, this time too close. Sasuke runs out, past the scared men. He comes up through the door, out of the warehouse, sword out, ready to fight.

First, in the distance, bright green smoke indicating a safety zone way outside the town. Ten minutes for a shinobi, three times that for a civilian. The buildings have fallen inward. Tremors rock up through his legs. One of the buildings in the centre of town, a huge tower of bricks, falls onto its side. A few people, those who stayed behind, dash for cover.

Up on the precipice of a brought down apartment building a boy is tugging on the arm of a buried body. His little hands fail to grip, sliding off the skin, leaving trails of ash and blood. The arm rips free with a sickening pop and Sasuke can only watch as that sound is etched onto the boy for the
rest of his life. The boy sits down, befuddled, still holding hands with the severed arm, and begins
to wipe the blood on his arm as if he can’t understand why it’s there.

Sasuke gets in close, slowly, so as not to startle him. The boy doesn't notice, too intent on the
ground, on the rubble, on what he just lost there.

Sasuke crouches down next to him. “Hey kid,” he puts himself between the boy and the buried
body, takes up his entire line of sight, “kid, look at me. We’re going to leave.”

The boy tilts his head. His eyes are so big.

At a complete loss, Sasuke extends his arms. Palms out, fingers beckoning. “We’re leaving.”

The boy looks at the arm. Looks at him. Looks at the arm again. After a long drawn out moment
he drops the hand and reaches for Sasuke instead. Palm down, fingers shaking.

He wastes no time gathering the boy in his arms, tucking his chin down, ignoring the shattered
weeping pouring out of him. “Sorry,” Sasuke says, already moving quickly towards the green
flares of the safety zone.

Behind him, the bombs go off.

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The mission is, in the end, a resounding success.

Akatsuki is given the lion’s share of the blame. They have a well known history of trafficking. The
blonde that Sasuke fought is called Deidara. Ex-Iwa, part of their elite corps. Iwa calls for a
stronger show of force along its borders trying to regain the ground it just lost. They try pressing
their boot down on Kusa, accusing them of knowing, of hiring Akatsuki because Deidara is so well
known. Kusa backs off supporting Iwa diplomatically. Of course they didn’t know, of course
citizens in their borders are safe from slavers, of course they will let Giri lend aid. Whispers say
that Kusa won’t agree to drop its trade with Iwa but they approach Giri more and sometimes first.
Iwa scrambles to recover. It sunk too many old loyal dogs into its operations there and it’s rank and
file are getting antsy. The youth revolution has seen a big boom there.

What few civilians hold enough power to descend upon the little villages like Sasabuchi and try
and build their case for some sort of action against the Villages. Against anyone. Sasabuchi, at
least, listens, and from what little has trickled out Giri comes off great.

It’s not what he thought it was. That rattles around his head as he and Yumi journey back to
Otogakure. They board a boat and travel up the long stretch of river they’ve just saved, if that’s
what you’re going to call it. It’s not the lap of luxury but it’s far more comfort than they’d usually
be provided. Yumi sits by him or at the stern of the ship trading cigarettes for little bits of
information from the crew. Who’s at war with whom? Where’s the newest place to buy and sell?
Standard intel gathering that Sasuke would never get away with by virtue of being six feet tall and
carrying a giant sword, but Yumi carries off with ease because at any given moment she looks frail
enough to fade away on the breeze. Even her sharpened teeth don’t bother anyone as long as she
smiles close lipped.

It’s not what he thought it was. He was, and still is truth be told, very sceptical about this whole
endeavour, but he has to admit they’ve got some balls. The evacuation, the bombing, the fact that
Giri is still there providing a level of immediate aid no Hidden Village can match, no matter that
they’re somewhat responsible in the first place. What they just did will rattle up and down the
major Villages, not enough to make them come down on them but more than enough to make them uneasy. As long as Akatsuki can boast exclusive membership of S-Rank criminals the work of mongrels and traitors will be beneath notice. As long as Akatsuki underestimates those around it they won’t bother to interfere. Giri sits between the two reaping the benefits of both. As long as Giri plays it’s cards close to its chest it won’t get caught out. No one will care if the smaller Villages get hot and bothered over this, there are bigger fish to try and catch. He may or may not believe in the work but he’s beginning to believe that the people doing it are determined enough and skilled enough to pull it off.

So, yeah, not quite what he was expecting.

The prevailing theory has always been that true international cooperation is impossible. The Warring States Era is too close in memory for true forgiveness. There’s never been a uniting force strong enough to make people of every creed and bloodline stand together. Alliances are broken or forged in the moment with the unspoken understanding that it’s never truly binding. Even individual forces like Orochimaru are prone to that kind of thinking, if one man can topple a country why would you bother cultivating true allies?

Although...his followers were different. Half of them followed him because they wanted power and the means to survive. It’s no coincidence that Giri built out of Oto but Sasuke had assumed it was more to do with the image of killing someone internationally reviled. It hadn’t occurred to him to think of what it meant to the runaways. The weak band together. The survivors survive together. Those who were cast out, looked down upon, abused, they fight back.

They cross through the top of Fire and around the back of the Valley of the End, for a few minutes in the middle of an otherwise unspectacular day Sasuke stares at the tops of Uchiha Madara and Senju Hashirama’s heads. He wonders what they’d think of the world they created.

They sail into port, make their way to Otogakure, check in with an official and are sent home to await the rest of their team for a debrief. When he walks into his current home there’s a bulky thing on his floor. White and brown paint, grey buttons, dented metal. A music player.

You owe me a drink, the attached note says also, got you a mixtape. Here’s a player for your room. Be careful though, technically we’re not meant to have this.

The unwieldy thing ends up on the top of his dresser. On the front there’s a note with an arrow pointing to a large red button. With nothing else to do he presses it. The first song is too scratchy, too big for the moonless night he’s having. The next starts promising, all slow and dark but it breaks in the middle with the crack of hope and hunger. Skip two, listen to another. Look at the track list Haru left but has not explained. It says written by my mate with two fingers, fucking pigs took the other three ; ) ; ) ; ) not despite popular belief it is possible to make a noise so unpleasant you shit your pants with nothing but human vocal cords and a will to rebel. He skips and listens all the way through. Then fourteen. Fifteen breaks him, a little, because now he has to tell Haru that screaming isn’t a genre. Sixteen opens slow, one voice, sure of itself. At the bottom of the sea, he sings, you’ll find me drinking deep.

Sixteen calms him. Seventeen is better. He likes eighteen best. After the mixtape finishes Sasuke spends a solid five minutes fiddling. The radio springs to life in the middle of some man’s radio show. There’s a war brewing between clans in Forest. There’s a new royal baby in Bear. The sky over Fire will be clear. The star of a popular movie franchise is getting too fat. An outpost for a renegade group has been razed to the ground. Many are injured. Four are dead. The Daimyo of River would like to reassure you that the situation is being handled. You can trust in them and their
agents. He stops for a few minutes just to marvel at what civilians must listen to everyday. With a few more bits of fiddling he hits pay dirt. *I've been running from it all my lifetime* rings out and Sasuke is a little closer to calm again. He leaves the music station playing long enough to shower, to eat, to stretch. He sets it low as he looks out the window. His faces another building but for a crack between it and the next one that lets him see the night sky. The moon is gone; in his head he says goodnight to his mother, he says nothing to his father. He has nothing but questions for his brother, and he’s too tired besides. The station switches to requests, two pop tunes and a real downer of a love song.

*That’s not the beat, man.* A woman’s slick voice says over the radio. *Play me another.*

He falls into bed. He closes his eyes. He falls asleep.

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On solo missions he was afforded time to simply do as he pleased. In Giri he has to go through a three step process every time he completes a mission C rank or higher, kills someone who isn’t an intended target, or is away from the complex physical and mental health services for a period of a week or more. Step one is talking to his appointed handlers all of whom report directly to Fuyuki. He see's the same people each time and there is a direct relationship between what missions he’s assigned to and what his handlers report. Step two is two sessions -a check in and a check up, time allowing- with a spiritual guide or non-denominational equivalent, time allowing, to insure that the work isn’t taking a toll on him mentally, emotionally or spiritually. His is an old priestess at a nearby shrine. She was here when it was just a small village in Rice, here when it was Orochimaru’s, and Sasuke suspects she will be here when it’s all done and dust. Step three is a thorough written report with an optional section down the bottom for critique and review. *Do you have any questions about leadership? Do you have any questions about the content of your mission? Is there someone in your chain of command you would trust to answer these questions? If yes then who, if no then how can we accommodate you?* Sasuke knows these reviews can’t be taken into consideration when operating a large scale military operation, but occasionally an answer will come back down the line, an explanation. He’s never had such a clear check in system. Kakashi’s borderline uselessness at reporting always struck him as more par for the course than exception and Orochimaru never cared. Maybe that laissez faire, *as long as it doesn’t blow back on us* attitude of debriefing and oversight was something unique to Konoha.

He’s ejected from a more formal review with Fuyuki and her advisors after several hours of going over the same details. *Did you have a problem with local intelligence? Did you find anything else in the Akatsuki hideout? What did you see? What did you hear? What did you feel? What happened to the boy, would you like to know?* Over and over and over again until his brain is so numb he can’t think about it anymore. He takes a very long route home, winding through the new streets, past the cafes, past what he assumes must be a new school, abandoned swing set and all. He trudges out to the skeleton of the city, around the edges where practicality and creativity twist together. The bones of unbuilt towers howl with wind in the night. Eerie. He takes a snap of it and moves on. Store fronts will pop up, a ramen stand, a repair shop. Then something random -a tea shop, a boutique. All these stores are fully stocked with new windows so shiny he can see the reflection of his tired eyes in them. He has his uncle's eyes. He has his brothers eyes; one small thing they had in common.

It’s funny, when he was younger he imagined having his brother by him all his life. Children don’t truly comprehend death, not even when it’s smothering them. Even now he’ll look at a reflection of himself in a window and see his brother smiling back at him. Pale fingers. Kind eyes. His gentle voice saying *too slow, little brother.* The image will break and there will be a red moon behind his brothers head. Red bleeds out of the dark, out of his brothers eyes, out of the thin breath of
separation between this reality and the illusion that his brother was that kind.

What happened to them?

He breaks eye contact with the boy in the window and continues walking. The uneasy beating of his heart tells him he’s close to not being much use at all. He calls on the white noise to carry him away but the waves of silence and detachment are wiped out, resting, waiting for something new to force them to grow even stronger in his head. Anger is resting too, sapped by tiredness and the pressing knowledge that he is gathering answers. Orochimaru, Kakashi, his own father and brother too, they all told him that knowledge was a blessing. There’s a hunger for it that lives in every man’s soul.

It’s discomforting to walk around without his twin shields of apathy and rage, two constants that can be applied to any situation but the one he’s in. When he’s questioned things before - why me? Why him? Why can’t I care less? Why aren’t I stronger? Why am I still alive, I shouldn’t be alive, I don’t deserve to be alive, why am I still here? - the answer has always been deafening silence. He lived alone, he trained alone, he slept alone. Something had to fill that chasm so he crafted monsters to fit it. The shambling nothingness of the white noise; a thing to lift him out of his own body when it’s too hard to cope. The rage, a generational blessing of the Uchiha heart; too many passions in too small a space. The cruel little voice inside him that he’s starting to think was always Orochimaru, something that sings constantly causing doubt and paranoia. These creatures live only because the silence is absolute. What happens if it’s not? It’s a new tiredness to look forward and wonder, if the eyes were older than my father. If the eyes came from someone who wasn’t Itachi. If the eyes are a sign of something else? This isn’t a nice world, and it’s probably just as cruel an answer, but what if it’s not? What if-

The thought is dizzying and too wide and too shallow. It stops him in the street. It stops his breath.

So he goes home.

Yumi is waiting when he pops open his door. She’s sitting on the floor, smoking, holding a beer. There’s an already opened bottle next to her. Music plays, spinning out of the record player at too low a volume for anyone but them to hear. Sasuke takes off his shoes but forgoes his weapons. He’s sure she’ll take it as some form of compliment. He takes the extra beer and a cigarette, settling on his bed.

On the end of a long draw Yumi murmurs, “this is sadder than I would have thought you’d like.”

He tilts his head back to listen for awhile, beer resting just out of range. The beat is slow, strings in the background. Over the top a man is relentless as he tells his tale; a boy was left at the bottom of a ravine and all the people walked around him. No one learnt his name, no one stopped to say goodbye. The words get sharp, the beat even sharper. “It has it’s merits.” His hair gets caught on the back of the bed head as he leans forward to take a drink. It’s too cheap by half and feels odd in his body.

Yumi burps, shaking her half empty bottle. “You ever fight in a war?”

“No.”

“My grandfather always told me to stay out of the way when the swords started swinging.” She huffs out a laugh. “Dumb girls get caught up in other people’s shit.”

Sasuke raises an eyebrow, already shaking his head. “You’re sending mixed messages.”
She snorts. “I’m not. You’re not here because you believe, alright, we can work with that. But you might want to listen before things get serious. There is a war coming regardless of what any of us here do. It’ll be a big one too if all the rumors are true. International cooperation, tailed beasts, Akatsuki. I never would have thought we’d get the opportunity to have a Uchiha in our ranks but here you are. You can’t blame anyone here for wanting to take it.”

“What do you think my problem here is?”

“You’re ambitious with no direction. Given what you’ve seen now it might be good to start thinking of what you’re going to do next. This doesn’t have to be a waste of your time.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

Yumi doesn’t rise to the bait, instead she relents, returning to her spot on the floor. “I’ll ask Hiki to have a word with some people.” She tilts her head back, eyes closed. “We’ll know if any others turn up.”

“Tell him to destroy them.”

One eye cracks open, her eyes are pale in the low light filtering through the window. “And if it’s just words?”

“I want to know.”

“Oh of course.” He watches her stretch her legs out, idly wondering when on earth this is going to end. “The next mission will be a little more straightforward.”

That is a very low bar. “Then convincing several of the small Villages to turn on us?”

“They didn’t turn. In fact we turned them.”

Sasuke scoffs. Unlikely. He finishes his beer in a few quick gulps, half watching the girl on the floor, mostly letting himself assimilate the facts of his new situation.

“Did you expect that?” He phrases it as a question, something a little softer than he’d usually bother with. “What we did?”

“No. Did you?”

“No.”

“Was it bad?”

“...I don’t know.” He is abruptly entirely too tired for this. His head feels like it might come off his shoulders any second. Doing too much, for far too long.

“Hell of a job.” Yumi blows out a ring of smoke. He watches it as it forms, dissolves, floats out into the still moonless night.

Chapter End Notes
Next time on Survival: Three missions; two successes, one resounding failure. After the pressure cooker of Sasabuchi, Sasuke gets some space to breathe and promptly uses it badly. Even more politics.

Fun Facts-
- It is super important to me that everyone thinks of Sasuke's musical taste as the living embodiment of every cliche scene kid High School AU written in 2007 -New Found Glory lyrics included- who grew into an Morrissey shirt wearing caricature of a hipster, only to evolve into a New Indie/Hayley Kiyoko loving lesbian once they finally learn to have some goddamn fun. Yes this is specific.
- In actual seriousness due to 8tracks shitty international streaming policy you are all robbed of the many, many playlists that exist for this fic. Hollow Moon by AWOLnation is in fact this fics themesong. Both thematically and in terms of the main character. The other song quoted is Dark Horses by The Getaway Plan, a band that was a staple of my own shitty coming of age story and was also playing on repeat when I wrote the first chunk of this.
- In the time gap between Haru meeting Sasuke and the events of the next chapter, Sasuke is forced to attend at least three Ninja Anarchist meetings. Now that people know he's politically undecided he is on everyone's pamphlet list. His room is a mess of communist newsletters, radical leftist pins and the odd desperate grab from a Village loyalist.
- The original layout of this fic had Sasuke go on nine missions total, the three mentioned at the beginning were still in the plot but had to be cut due to the length of the work. I might still write them because they were fun.
- The fun thing about writing someone who lives on a dissociative scale of 'a solid 4 at all times, what are hands really?' to somewhere around 'dear fucking god' is that they miss a lot of shit. The unfun thing about that person being a ninja is that they still fight stuff.
- This chapter is wildly different from any given outside POV. I might write that sometime.
Chapter Summary

...and wisdom to know the difference

Chapter Notes

This chapter changed a lot over the writing process and is probably the roughest to date. Whatever you thought it was going to be it's probably not that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

4th Mission on Team Dosa

He’s crouched in what is probably animal shit, one knee down, back bent. Dosa is toying with a clump of dried mud next to him thinking over the possibilities. A lazy breeze passes over them dragging the smell of ore and hot stone that defines this rocky region near the mountains of Earth with it. It’s the two of them on this shitty not-quite-a-hill, debating the best way to get through the four dozen men guarding the two dozen men who guard the last six between them and their objective. Dosa taps a finger against the ground thoughtfully. “The usual method would be to entrench ourselves and establish a position and force them to fight us. Keep the high ground and sight advantage.”

“But we’re not going to do that,” Sasuke surmises. With the sharingan he can see the signatures, no higher than chunnin, stationed twenty five metres back, then fifty, then a long seventy five. His vision blurs a little when concentrating for distance, he’ll have to work on that.

Dosa hums. “No we are not,” he gestures between of them and then out towards the other men, “you and I are gonna butcher our way from here to our objective.”

“Butcher.”


“Ah.” Sasuke rolls his eyes. Dramatic. “How long do we have to do this?”

“I don’t want to spend more than about forty minutes on the in and out of it. Whatever is locked up in there must be special if they’re throwing bodies up to protect it.”

Getting past all those bodies ends being as simple as letting Dosa have at it. It’s not the first time Sasuke has partnered him, but it is the first time he’s seen him really dance. Within his specified time frame the two of them are standing in front of the entrance, Dosa’s bloody scythe and Sasuke’s crackling sword in hand. Sasuke cracks open the final seal. It’s a big airy room, like most Akatsuki hideouts. He sees it in snapshots. A child’s shoe. A piece of rotting fruit. Discarded clothes. Bloody wrappings. A backpack with a happy smiling face on it.
Dosa whistles as he takes a walk around the room. He stops at a scattering of papers and folders. Shinobi standard. “The hell is this? Names, dates, lists of injuries...” He flips the pages, flips them back, frowning. “Fuck me.”

“What?”

Dosa grimaces, full lips turning down. “Nothing.” He waves the pages around as if that will make whatever he’s found more palatable. “This is called a blackout where I’m from, I have no idea what you would call it. You dispose of the bodies of inconvenient people in strategic locations to incriminate other people while also getting rid of the evidence of your wrongdoing. Two birds, one stone.” He looks at the pages again. “I’ve never seen one on this scale.”

Sasuke flicks his gaze around. Dead bodies. Transport. Children. So many dead children. He detaches from them as whole concepts, choosing to look at them as a serious of woundings. Most are badly made, rough, unskilled. “These wounds are self inflicted.”

“Loads of people can make you commit suicide.” Dosa says dismissively. “They were just kids. Poor things.”

Sasuke notes that a few of them, better physical conditioning, have skin and blood under their nails. Good on them. “These are defensive.”

“Makes sense if the kids were the problem.” Dosa rubs his chin, walking around the room in a slow circle. “So they get attacked, something happens, instead of fighting back all the adults decide to kill the kids and then themselves.”

He cautions himself again. These people are a series of incidents, not full concepts. He moves his thoughts to the walls. “These are scorch marks. Explosions.”

“Explosion Corps.” Dosa crosses the room again, gaining speed. “So Iwa sends a team to meet them? To stop them? Something happens and they skip out.”

“There’d be more scorch marks with a team.”

“There’s only one explosion guy not in Iwagakure. Guess that makes this another Akatsuki base. If an odd one.”

Sasuke looks over the room and thinks of another filled with things he’d rather not think about. Perhaps not so odd.

Dosa calls on him to head out, which Sasuke does gladly. They got what they needed and perhaps what happened here was kinder than what would have happened next.

Dosa calls halt. “Wait.” He leans down to open the jaw of a child. Sasuke averts his gaze just enough to see it under his lashes, through a film of deniability. “What the fuck is going on with the tongues. Is that a silencing seal? Sasuke I want you to check-”

“Why?” He asks too harshly, too sharp.

Dosa looks up sharply. He processes the angle of Sasuke’s body. “Leave,” he amends, “I want you to leave.”

“It’s fine.”

“The dead mouths of murdered children are not fine.” Dosa replies. “I shouldn’t have asked.”
Sasuke shrugs. He leaves. It wasn’t something he was interested in.

He occupies his time by burning the bodies, then occupies more by wandering down a ways to where a group of Giri fanboys have been casually stalking them. They’re civilians, and Dosa thinks they’re the funniest things ever, so they haven’t been terrorised too much.

Sasuke appears next to one of them as he’s pissing away into a ditch, one hand on his dick, the other holding his cigarette. Without preamble, Sasuke turns and says, “got a light?”

The boy can’t decide between his dick and his cigarette, dropping the wrong one and trying to tuck the other into his pants. “What the fuck?! What the fuck is wrong-”

“You got a light or what?” Sasuke drawls. He’s a child, and a civilian besides, so his gaze is on his face. The boy splutters.

“So no, then?” Sasuke shrugs, pretending to walk off. “Figured you might since you’ve been following us for a few days.”

“You- You’re-”

“Giri.” He confirms. “Do you have a light?”

“Absolutely man.” The boy stops still. “Oh god. I just put a cigarette in my pants.”

Sasuke laughs at him and in the end gets his light.

When Dosa comes down he finds them sprawled around a too large fire in various states of disarray. Sasuke has swapped a tight shirt for an open one, rolling cigarette after cigarette for the group of boy-men around him. There’s no reason for Sasuke to be social or helpful except for feeling like it and having nothing better to do, and the boys are star struck enough about meeting any member of Giri that they forgive his lack of sociability. All they seem to want is an assurance that they can make a difference and for Sasuke to teach them to be quick fingered enough to churn out three smokes in under a minute.

There’s no reason not to and, dead children aside, things have been easy. He teaches the oldest how to stretch his fingers so they move quicker. The rest he holds court over, listening and watching, but directing things when the topic goes somewhere he doesn’t like.

Dosa takes a long sweeping look and decides to say nothing.

The boys come back with them slotting themselves into new Otokakure with ease. More boys looking to learn quick fingers and peaceful solutions turn up everyday and everyday the doors of Oto are open to them.

Sasuke speaks exactly three times about what they found. Once to his handler, once to Fuyuki, once to the old priestess who is his confessor. It’s the last one that’s easiest: the old woman couldn’t give a fuck. She’s sweeping her porch because she refuses to oblige him by meeting on his terms. Approximately ten minutes in, when he’s trying to piece together how to grunt an approximation of his feelings about it, she cuts in, “that’s enough of that.”

He scowls. “I have to tell you,” he grits out, “because you always rat me out when I lie to you.”

The old priestess smiles showing her perfect teeth. Her dark skin keeps her young but Sasuke knows the truth; she was spurned out of hell at the beginning of time and will linger here to torment him until it all burns away. He respects her enough to tell her the truth.
“Entertain me while I sweep, boy,” the old woman says, “tell me about your uncles.”

Wow no. “I could do the sweeping.”

“You’ve got no sense and worse luck,” she says sharp and gentle, “tell me about your grandmother.”

Both of his grandmothers were dead by the time he was four. He has no remembrances. Instead he talks about Grandmother Michiko, the long shadow of Konoha, who used her grace, wit and humility to forge a path for peace between the Hyuuga and the Uchiha.

Things are okay.

19th Mission on Team Dosa

The thing about having five very skilled people with multiple skillsets on the same team is that there just isn’t any need to fill the gaps with camaraderie. They can all do their own jobs and each others. There’s no friction from one person being over specialised or from one person being their weak link. Coupled with the fact that Giri vets their missions thoroughly, and since Sasabuchi he has never been on a mission he wasn’t prepared for, things are going well.

It hadn’t really occurred to him that Giri was still finding its feet and trying to manage its people when Sasuke was blackmailed in. Things are shifting around even now. They’re building a diplomatic core, expanding into abandoned hospitals and soaking up any medic they can. There’s even an outpost sitting in that little annexed county in Grass, an established neutral zone smaller countries are eager to adopt. More of other countries practices are slowly being adopted by his superiors instead of the steadfast Lightning way that was the norm when he joined up. Fuyuki even begins to very begrudgingly assign permanent three men cells the Ino-Shika-Cho way when they adopt a branch of misfit bloodline carriers who’d been terrorising some village.

For awhile they keep running into Akatsuki hideouts. All of them are clear of anything that could be used to track them and all of them are full of things designed to piss Sasuke off. Fuyuki decides that the solution is to split the team into pairs and throw the cast off at the solo rotation. More often than not, in a way that makes him very suspicious, he is assigned to a medium risk, high profile diplomatic escort.

This time an old warrior who grizzled by age and war and politics, chose to become a true pacifist; laying his loyalty down at the feet of his lord and only raising his enormous fists long enough to protect those who follow him. He asked Giri for safe passage to Wave for himself and thirty of his followers where they will build a temple and live in peace. Giri and Wave jumped at the chance for the positive exposure, bending over backwards to accommodate them. Including throwing in Sasuke, Snake Killer, remembered in Wave as a kind boy who sacrificed himself for the true hero of the bridge, as a guide.

Which would be fine if he’d ever spent any fucking time here.

Yumi travels with him. Her well known fear of horses means she spends most of her time in the cart with the followers. Sasuke has the dubious honor of riding beside the huge aged warrior, watching as he sits perfectly still on his equally giant horse, eyes scanning ahead and to the side with experience. Old warriors never die.

Pacifism is a dirty word in this profession. It’s a sign of weak will, waning strength. Old men
bargain for peace, strong men conquer for it. Riding beside Akiyama Sato, Sasuke ponders over what it would mean to live long enough to choose to rest. To look at your life and think it was something worth changing.

*This is what they do,* there’s an option for extreme petulance there he tries not to give in to, *why am I thinking of doing something else?*

The itchy thought sticks through the rest of the peaceful trip. The handing over will take place on The Great Naruto Bridge as some sort of comment on the powers gathered together. Low mist hangs over the bridge as they approach. People are gathered around fire bins, banging drums and selling food. Sasuke frowns at them, slightly, but picks out what he might want to eat on the way back out. A man past his prime strides across the bridge, long measured steps. He makes him as an old general, moving so deliberately and carefully because he has some injury to hide. Sasuke makes the introductions quick and blunt, Oshiro Haruta, former mercenary turned merchant turned leader of the people, to Akiyama, former samurai turned prophet turned savior of the people, striding off before anyone can trick him into sociability.

He catches sight of Yumi’s three buns waving over the top of the crowd. She’s tucked herself into a corner, near a fire bin. She waves him over, already blowing smoke rings from her lit cigarette. “This is tricky politics.” Yumi hands him her lighter, tipping the burning end of her cigarette towards the crowds. “They’re phasing him out. When freedom and commerce came to Wave he was one of the first to distinguish himself, now he’s failing to adapt and they’re looking for a kind way to kill him off. First they’re loading him up with problem cases, under the guise of experience, second they’re throwing him at problems he can’t handle, eventually they’ll demote him and under the weight of his failures he’ll crumble.”

“Cruel.”

“Politics. Civilians tend to think it’s less messy than murder but it’s cruel all the same.”

Sasuke finishes his cigarette. In front of him Oshiro lowers his head in deference to Akiyama. Two powers of an old world setting down their swords.

**32nd Mission on Team Dosa**

It starts in a diner off a bordello, just past midnight. Sasuke is with his team waiting for the nights work to wrap up. He has cold fried pork and a bottle of sake that he and Hiki are dutifully working through

“What the fuck does this mean?” Yumi hisses. “Not fit for duty due to insubordinate action—”

“You started a fight.” Haru replies.

“With some fucking loyalist. Who cares—”

“A fight is a fight,” Hiki says mildly, fending off Haru’s pork stealing fingers, “a fight, for instance, does not include hunting down the offending parties and challenging them to hand to hand combat. What were you thinking? They were farmers.”

“They were idiots.” She collapses dramatically across the table. “I’m an idiot. Ugh. And this was meant to be a peace mission too.”

“Well we know how those go.”
“You know what?” Yumi snarls. “You can all bite me, and then you can go on whatever clusterfuck mission this turns out to be without me to back you up.”

“Cool.”

“Ohkay.”

“If I must,” Sasuke says, picking out a stray piece of ginger from his food.

She sticks out her tongue. “You’re a fucking traitor nadeshiko.”

“Noted.” He replies. “He had a pitchfork. You almost took it to the face.”

“Ooooo,” Haru mocks. “That’a a harsh dig from a guy we once had to evac from a hot spring because, and I quote, ‘there are twenty of them and I’m out of ways to get out of handcuffs’.”

Sasuke grunts. It was not as clandestine or as fun as it sounds, but that is pretty much what his face gets him. “Pitchfork.”

Yumi lights up with amusement. “No, really, fuck you Uchiha,” she punctuates with a smile and a half hearted steal from his plate.

Sasuke is the first to notice when she arrives. He makes sure he’s squared so Hiki will be paying more attention to him than to the door. She walks around the long way, coming from a blind angle. Reaching one hand over Hiki’s shoulder she snags his sake and drains it.

Fuyuki burps. “What?”

“Uh,” Hiki blinks, “ma’am.”

“Hiki.” She nods at him. “Sasuke, Yumi, Haru.” She points at Yumi. “Yumi, you should leave.”

Yumi scowls, obliges, whines her way out the door. Fuyuki slides into her seat.

Fuyuki smiles indulgently then switches gears. “Here’s the mission kids.”

The Kimura are a region power, holding a small parcel of land entirely by themselves. They’re a conglomerate of likeminded families who have chosen to share the last name. They’re situated right near a major Lightning outpost, one Fuyuki has experience with, it will be a problem for them later on if they can’t establish a foothold here. The Kimura have agreed to a week long summit to hammer out a deal. It will be held on their land with minimal Giri personnel. Of what twenty or so people are allowed to attend under her name she can’t have more than six people who have been with Giri for longer than two years. This, as well as her poor behaviour, knocked Yumi out.

The land the Kimura live on is considered to be exceptionally beautiful. When they arrive the early morning sun is behind them and Sasuke finds himself in agreement. The buildings are tall arches strung with flowering plants. Their tendrils drip with white and blue flowers, tenderly swiping the edges of houses. They cross a marketplace filled with the scent of cooking and livestock. All the people are dressed colourfully, a mix of the regions genetics showing off unique hair tones and mixes of skin tones. On the corner of every street is a tall pole carved with faces caught in moments of emotion. Each shows a tremendous amount of skill, Sasuke takes a snap of one with his sharingan, a man caught by wary surprise.

They’re lead to where they’ll be staying in a few buildings sitting on the edge of one of the areas marvels. Dozens of little pools are carved out and filled with clear water. They track to the edge of a
cliff. The sight is dazzling in its simple beauty.

“Well damn.” Hiki says. “I guess this is going to go just fine.”

Sasuke nods With one last glance at the pools he heads for his job for the day.

Hashira’s chosen diplomat is not formally part of Giri, rather he belongs to a small group of nonprofits that help mediate between shinobi and civilians. He’s in his late forties, dignified in his handsomeness, strides toward them. At his heels is a thin woman Sasuke almost mistakes for an older Sakura. Her hair is pale as cherry blossoms and just as pink. Blue eyes, fair skin. A trophy wife.

“I am Daichi,” the man says in a strong sure voice. “This is Amaya.” His wife bows. There’s a stiffness in her spine.

Fuyuki nods. “Hashira.” She gestures Daichi forward. “We have a lot to discuss. You served, yes?”

“I did.” He answers warmly. “Do you need credentials?”

Fuyuki snaps her wrist out too fast for anyone without shinobi reflexes to catch. Daichi snaps his arm back but she catches him. “Your fists are enough.” His knuckles are bruised, split with dried blood. Below that are older scars, stiff fingers, a bruiser in a fight. Fuyuki beams at how she’s caught him. Daichi smiles, stiff now, and says, “well played.”

Fuyuki releases him. “Always.”

Daichi excuses himself to begin introductions with the Kimura.

Sasuke’s eyes circle back to the wife, still standing by herself with a bland smile on her face. Fuyuki notices and notches her eyebrow up, asking what’s wrong. “He’s-”

She cuts him off. “A good man according to his contemporaries. And he is, certainly, very good at his job.”

“He beats his wife.” She’s a civilian and he’s an ex-enforcer. There’s an unfair fight and there’s a landslide.

“It’s more complicated than that.” Fuyuki eyes him, then throws out, “She could leave him.”

A fire ignites in his chest. His father walked into more domestic disputes than any other officer in his precinct. It takes superhuman strength to stay, he told Itachi once, it takes twice that to leave. “That’s not how it works.”

Fuyuki sighs, long and drawn out. “What the hell am I going to do with you, kid? You get all fucked up about the right shit but then you do the wrong thing with it. Of course we’ll help her. But I need something from him first.”

Sasuke tenses his jaw.

“Seriously,” she adds with an ominous tone, “what am I going to do with you?”

Something in him tenses but all Fuyuki does is send him away. For the next week he finds himself walking people around, keeping his face still, well away from any action. He’s not even a show piece just a regular grunt during his standard working hours. He’s let loose mid-afternoon every day while Hiki and Haru carry on doing more important things. He can’t help but feel it’s a little
like being in the doghouse.

He’s at odds and ends circling the camp looking for something to do. He’s never been on a peace mission where his job was no more or less than to walk dignitaries around. Even his missions to Wave have had an undercurrent of stealth and subtlety. He’s just here.

Hurry up and wait had been a concept he’d passingly familiarized himself with on those D-ranks way back when he was a genin but since then there’s always been something, some goal he’d been working towards. His life has never just been stop-and-wait.

He crosses towards the beautiful pools laid out like skipping stones at the feet of the cliff. The water stops before the edge, letting the setting sun bounce rays of light across the still water. He takes a snap of it and makes to move on.

There’s a splashing noise, a gasp, a giggle. Sasuke sighs and turns to deal with it. There’s a woman, pale strawberry hair sparkling with water. Her pale blue dress is drenched with water. Amaya turns to him with a smile. “How are you?”

He ignores that. “What are you doing?”

“I like the water.” She turns, heedless of the splash and the cling of her dress. “What are you doing?”

He ignores that too. “You should go back inside.”

She shakes her head. “No I shouldn’t.” Moving back towards the edge she sits modestly leaving her feet in. It hides her thighs but exposes the long strips of bruised and raw skin. The lacerations on her feet so she feels it with every step. Her pain tolerance must be incredible. “Sit with me?”

His father started young with him. It was understood that Itachi was a prodigy and his involvement in the upper echelon of Konoha was a boon to the family. Sasuke was very good but near average in comparison. In a perfect world Sasuke would succeed his father as head of police. This Sasuke has pieced together over the years from observation, from the Konoha archives, from what little insight he had to a father long dead.

He would have been fine with that. He loved sitting by his father’s knee letting his drone of procedure and interpersonal kindness wash over him. He’s lost most of those memories over the years. They’re grimy with dirt and splinters of red moons and blood nights. No matter how much he tries to sew them together again the fact is he was too young and it’s been too long.

Still, he tries sometimes

He sits next to her. With a push he circulates chakra to avoid getting wet. “You can sever a man’s jugular with one of those hairpins.” Most women trapped in violent relationships with shinobi don’t get out. Almost never when the women are civilians. He has a near memory, maybe just wishful thinking, of his father recounting a death and his mother turning, her hair caught in the light, pale fingers twitching with anger. She should kill him first.

She blinks. “That’s not what people usually say.”

Sasuke shrugs.

Amaya shrugs in return. “He’s the son of our local police chief. His grandfather is a judge. His aunt and uncle serve in our military and law office. I’ve filed dozens of reports and they all say I’m crazy. It is more comfortable for most people to believe that then to believe me. If I leave him
they’ll make it hard for me. No one at the police will help me. No one at the courts. Even our local shelters are run by people who hold him in high esteem. I’ve tried, you know, and they make it unbearable until I go back. He’s a good man.” She shrugs again.

She’s right. And there’s nothing to say to that. Sasuke’s father taught him to believe the victim first, even when he himself failed to do so. Civilian crime records, excluding murders, become public record after ten years. His father covered up two break ins and aggravated assaults because the perpetrators were Uchiha. Sasuke was too angry to read once he realised that, and threw the records away.

Awkwardly he asks her about the pond instead. There’s something compelling him to stay; maybe it’s boredom, maybe it’s something else. Either way he stays with her through one of the most boring descriptions of rock formations anyone has ever heard. She’s clearly fascinated by minutiae and the effect of the moon on water. He is not.

He drifts in and out of caring, idly recounting his to do list and humming an internal tune, when she lightly grasps his wrist. “What do you think they’re doing?”

Sasuke looks over to where she points. A strange building he’d noted but had otherwise ignored as being of some religious significance has opened it’s doors. It’s huge, made of dark wood, scrawled with painted faces. It’s designed like a temple, a place of worship. “Those doors have always been shut.”

“Yes.” Amaya frowns. “My husband said it was always closed.”

As they watch a group of men is brought forward. They’re moving slow, slower than normal, but not so slow as to be remarkable. Drunk maybe. A few of the Kimura follow behind them faces eager and movements jerky. The Kimura stop and look at Sasuke and Amaya for too long. They talk amongst themselves, point, but ultimately decide to go inside, pulling the large doors shut behind them.

“They’re faces,” Amaya whispers when they’re very sure the men have left.

“They’re carvings.” Sasuke considers using his sharingan. On one hand ethics, on the other boredom.

Amaya squeezes his wrist. “Don’t.” She removes her hand. “You have a dojutsu, yes?” He raises an eyebrow, nods. “I overheard one of the elders tell my husband that those with gifts shouldn’t use them near the building.”

He nods his assent and very gently asks her another question about tidal pools. They sit together for another fifteen minutes whereupon Amaya’s husband arrives. He takes one look, nostrils flaring, and calls her over like a disobedient dog. Sasuke revises his initial assessment of his handsomeness; it’s bland and strong, but if they have children he hopes Amaya holds sway over them.

Sasuke very gently grasps her arm. “Jugular.”

Amaya smiles. In a graceful gesture she refutes any intimacy in their positions, turning the arm grasp into a show of physical help. Without looking at her husband she acknowledges him as she would someone who’d simply stopped to help her. When she casually walks over her husband grabs her. It’s her grace that stops it from looking like an assault.

Sasuke watches until they disappear, then transfers his attention back to the closed box building
with it’s crawling gold painted faces. They’re suffering faces. Faces of surprise. Of pain. None show joy or relief or laughter.

Strange building. Strange men.

Sasuke shrugs and moves on. Not his problem. He circles back around to Fuyuki and her diplomatic team. He swaps with one of Fuyuki’s guard ending up with his back against a wall. Kimura invites three arms of its governance to the meeting; the Clan head, the lead farmer and their police chief who also acts as the head of their small military force. A sample of others are present, local leaders.

Daichi smiles. “Let’s resume.”

Fuyuki isn’t the best diplomat. She’s an excellent manipulator and a good talker but these meetings show the cracks in her resume. She’s spent her life as the weapon of these types of people. When put in the lead chair she reacts wrongly. Not always, just enough to frighten and disturb. She’s well suited for the people she’s chosen but all that skill and tactics won’t get you far with the farmers guild or over ripened Clan heads. That’s a different skill set and one Daichi has in spades. Sasuke can’t put aside his distaste of the man but he can admire his verbal sleight of hand. Someone doesn’t want to give up a river so he gives them a lake. Someone else feels slighted so he talks them up and then lays them down. There’s no traction on the idea of the Kimura falling under Giri protection, but it’s not for lack of trying.

He gets the Kimura to concede the river for several shipments of blight resistant wheat. Several factions of the Kimura concede. A few more agree to side meetings.

Diplomacy is pretty cool, he decides grudgingly, even if he feels it could have been resolved quicker.

Fuyuki is beaming after the meeting, the first to go well, and she’s effusive with Daichi. The goodwill flows out towards dinner. Amaya, he hears, eats alone.

That good feeling lasts till after dessert. Sasuke is lounging with a few of the boys being fostered with the Kimura, they’re his age or thereabouts, prone to too much drinking but otherwise perfectly decent forced company. It’s not his job to keep an eye on them but he does it anyway. As he listens for little signs of dissent, loose talk, idle chatter, he notes someone who absolutely should not be here. He’s staunch, thin legs wrapped in black, strong arms wrapped in mottled gray. Night gear. Sasuke knows his particular scuttle as Kumogakure’s kill corps. Terrifying black ops - kidnapping, assassination, wholesale massacres.

Sasuke follows him. He enters Fuyuki’s personal rooms and leaves a note. When he’s sure the man is gone Sasuke enters. On the table is the making of a mission. Building plans, evaluations of security, names and occupations. Team lists. Team leaders. Their briefs, their weapons, their time limits. The evidence is black and white. If Fuyuki so chooses all seven hundred and eighty one of the Kimura will die.

Someone comes into the tent behind him. “What are you doing?” Fuyuki asks.

Sasuke steps back, around, puts distance between them. He can’t think properly right now. Seven hundred and eight one people. Has he ever even seen that many people on a battlefield before?

Fuyuki swears. She puts it together. “Five muses, did someone leave that there for you to find?” Irritation drifts to amusement. “Was it Arai, that sly dog.”
Sasuke seethes. “A massacre? An extinction order?”

“Do not,” Fuyuki holds on to her amusement by a bare thread, the fact that she’s trying is probably why his jaw isn’t broken, “try and get on some moral high ground Oto-nin. We are killers. All a massacre is, is a lot of it at once. Given your history I do not expect this to come easily to you, but it is your duty-”

“Why-”

“I do not want to kill them. I don’t. I’m doing everything I can to avoid that.”

Sasuke seethes even as he forces himself to think it through. Even as he grapples with dead school teachers and toddlers. It was folly to let Giri dull his sense of unease. Folly to let it dilute the rage and the dissonance that sits at the centre of him.

Fuyuki reshuffles her papers, airily she adds, “You and I can’t have the luxury of kindness. Let’s hope diplomacy works.”

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“What do you mean,” Fuyuki asks silkily, “that they refuse to sign?”

“Just that,” Daichi says easily, “there will be no deal.”

“Why?” Dosa demands.

Daichi shifts from foot to foot. “They’ve made a deal with Lightning.”

Fuyuki swears, crossing the room in a fit of anger. “What deal?”

“You.”

Dosa swears. Fuyuki just sighs. She chain smokes through the night, brainstorms solutions and future problems. This will fuck up what little leeway they have with Lightning and leave a huge stain on her legacy. Giri will recover but they’ll never have peace in this region. By the morning the mood is somber.Hiki, Haru and Sasuke eat while looking over the cliff. It seems poetic.

The death blow comes when Yumi arrives, out of breath, with a message. It’s not good news.

All of them have gathered in Fuyuki’s room. Sasuke stands with his back against the wall watching Fuyuki grit her teeth. “What do you mean camps?”

Yumi blows out a breath. “They take people off the roads, they throw them into these holes in the ground until they can be transmuted.”

Dosa visibly mulls that over. “They have a bloodline limit?”

Yumi nods. “It transfers whole minds between animate and inanimate objects, there’s no way to get them back.”

Carved faces. Streets lined with flowers, each street corner decorated with carvings. A strange building with strange men. Everyone realises the same things at the same time.

“They seem to be doing it for,” Yumi waves her hand delicately, “fun.”

“They don’t want peace, they don’t want diplomacy!” Dosa exclaims. “Why are we here again?”
“Why did we bring the leader of an divisive force to a people who want to make an alliance with the very people she’s trying to destroy.” Sasuke comments. “Who they put at a disadvantage with members of her people who were unlikely to be strong enough or have been around long enough to be a viable threat?”

The room stops. Yumi’s face is ashen. Realisation sweeps the room. Hashira Fuyuki, whose reputation they have built this house of cards on, is a hop skip and jump away from her homeland. Now she’s trapped with people who would hand her to her enemies at best and imprison her in a wood block at worst. She has twenty people she can trust but only twelve she can rely on. That those people are well trained and as good as any ANBU team is irrelevant, it’s not enough for a fair fight.

“Yeah,” Fuyuki says wryly, arms crossed. “Why did we do that?”

“Sir?”

Fuyuki shakes her head. “Plans change. How soon can we get reinforcements.”

“Hashira...” Daichi warns.

“Don’t,” she snaps, “just...they had to know I’m not much of a diplomat. That’s what you’re for. If they went to all this trouble they had to expect some push back. They had to expect me to push back.”

Daichi doesn’t disagree. “Yes sir.”

“We can’t get reinforcements.” Dosa says irritably. “I told you before we’re too close to the border. There’s no way they won’t notice-”

Fuyuki nods, changing pace. “Can we separate them out? Those with the ability from those without.”

“No,” Hiki shakes himself bodily, “interbreeding is a requirement of joining the Kimura. They haven’t allowed a new family in in twenty years. I’m sorry there’s no way to...”

“Okay. We make this quick. The element of surprise is our best advantage.” With a shake of her head Fuyuki steps fully into a new headspace. Gone is the pacifistic Giri leader, now she’s who she used to be. “No children, no elders. That takes it down to what? Four hundred?”

Silence. The teapot whistles. No one goes to answer it. Four hundred people in a night is out of Sasuke’s skills, even if they’re just civilians. It’s outside anything but a dedicated strike team. Sheer man power. Even with everyone they have right now it’s sitting just outside the realm of possibility. Sasuke feels that out; if it’s simply impossible will they find another way? It’s on Fuyuki’s shoulders now. Resting under her shaking fingertips. Waiting in the downward tuck of her chin with all that long hair drab and lifeless against her back. Her finger taps the table too lightly to make noise just enough to rivet all of the attention in the room. The tea kettle whistles once again.

“I can-” Dosa tries.

Fuyuki snaps up. A wash of energy, rising storms, flushes the room. “No. It’ll mean more if I do it.”

Dosa grimaces. “You left Lightning to stop doing this kind of work. Let someone else-”
“No.” She rights the paper on the table, moving her finger across the map, making plans. “I’ll do it.”

“It’s unjustifiable.” Hiki says hoarsely. “At best they’ll say we planned it at worst-”

Fuyuki laughs. It’s a horrible brittle sound. “At worst I am exactly who they think I am.”

Hiki shuts up.

It’s a matter of an hour for Fuyuki to decide the best way to commit a massacre. In this Sasuke is forcibly reminded that no matter how many high contact, high profile mercy missions Giri runs it is founded on the skills of a woman who is second to none at stealth ops.

“How are you going to explain this?” Someone asks.

“With the truth,” she says, “sometimes, no matter how much diplomacy you throw at something violence is still the answer.”

Sasuke is put on point for a strike team. He and his partner are set a number of targets: 60 for Sasuke and 40 for the other guy. They don’t have to be killed but they do have to be maimed enough to be taken out later. He and his partner take one of the inner sections near the police department. A high likelihood of resistance. They talk quietly as they approach the steps, as they take their position, as they wait for the first of it. Those that they can save are being systematically taken, that will draw out those they must kill. The signal comes. To the west of him explosions rock, to the south earth jutsu crumble the bridges. To the east those beautiful ponds he and Amaya sat in will boil. The police flood out of the station in their green and white uniforms. Sasuke has already drawn his sword.

He wants to say it took time, it didn’t. He wants to say it was a struggle, it wasn’t. He wants to say they didn’t see it coming, they did.

It’s work to get through them. They aren’t fighting, they’re just flooding forward in droves. Sasuke can’t count on jutsu in these kinds of close quarters so he has to just keep swinging. Just keep going. He’s forcibly reminded again and again that these men and women aren’t shinobi. Of all the things Orochimaru prepared him for Sasuke is near hysterically surprised to realise that this wasn’t one of them.

They finish it. 38 killed or injured for his partner. 48 injured and killed for Sasuke. The missing madea run for it. Sasuke can hear the oncoming fight; Yumi with her swords, Haru with his dogs. He can smell fire. They weren’t shinobi. They didn’t make it.

He moves to his next duty. Suppression. His flashier fire techniques go to destruction. The buildings he admired disappear, food rolls out of the market place fried and charred, the hanging gardens crumble and fall on top of them until, in a moment of pique, Sasuke looks up and spits fire bullets.

By the time Sasuke meets up with the rest it becomes clear that they’ve managed to meet the numbers. A few injuries here and there, a lot of blood on the ground. One person is missing, an old man from Iron. Sasuke counts him as dead. There’s a strangeness to the gathering, something Sasuke has never felt before. No jubilation, no comparison of injuries or fights. It’s a lull, as if everyone but him is simply waiting for something. Over the quiet he hears it: the last offensive.

Whatever forces haven’t been destroyed make a push, a last rally. Giri answers. Yumi’s blade swings, kunai are thrown. Sasuke prepares himself.
Instead of the clash of two opposing forces there is lightning on the air, across the tiny hairs on his skin. Fuyuki steps forward with her whole body ringed with thick white lines. That power he felt the first time they fought becomes something hungry. It whips around the room, looking for blood, hunting for bodies. Like a dragon rising from sleep it flows to her hands, to her fingers, and when she reaches out to touch flesh it disintegrates under sheer untamed power. It sounds like singing, he thinks, it sounds like dragons. He’s seen this power before, flowing through Juugo; nature chakra.

She dispatches people efficiently and without pause reminding him of Kakashi the few times he put an effort in. By the time anyone else thinks to move she’s pulling apart the last of the Kimura. She turns, eyes shuttered, and barks orders. Everyone but Sasuke complies.

She frowns. “Why aren’t you moving?” Her eyes travel all over him, as if trying to figure out the problem. “You’ve never fought a war,” sudden realisation lights her eyes, “this really is your first time isn’t it?”

He remembers the Sunagakure invasion. Hundreds of people fighting, dozens dying, but not like this. Not in beds, not in cradles. Not because of a last name. It was a fight. He’s killed a hundred people at once but they fought him.

Fuyuki sighs, that realisation still gentling her tone. “This is the right reason, boy,” she looks at her own hands dispassionately, flecked with red and flesh, “even when it disgusts you.”

She stares at him. He stares back. The wetness grows on his hands. When he looks down he sees - nothing really. Just red.

She looks at his hands. Shivers hard. “Leave.” She spits. “Go, swap with one of the guards - just, go, get out.”

He doesn’t need to be told again. He relieves one of the guards minding the few families they justifiably saving.

“They don’t even have the ability.” Sasuke ponders aloud. “They never will.”

“Doesn’t matter. Orders are orders.” The other man puts out his cigarette, resuming his position.

It’s just bodies. It’s just grey matter and blood. A mass is the same living or dead. Kakashi taught him that. A thing doesn’t have more weight in death. A dead body and a living one weigh just the same.

A child sneezes. His mother looks at Sasuke anxiously, weighing her motherly instincts against his assignment. His duty.

Several points form a line in his thoughts. You have a duty. You have a reason. You have a choice. Then it falls in on itself. How do you feel about your missions? Tell me about your uncles? What do they eyes mean? Further and further in until the space empties and he has an answer. You have a choice.

With one move Sasuke reaches over and knocks out the other guard.

“Get up,” he says, “get your children together.”

It’s maybe a fifth of the civilians. Too many to be manageable but all he has. He lines them up in rows and intimidates them into following him. Slowly the women and children realise that he’s leading them out. He has no idea where he’s leading them but he’s got a vague remembrance of a path. He can work with it, he just needs to get there. They come around a corner. His heart stops
Hashira Fuyuki, covered in blood, walks briskly towards him.

He presses the people behind him. Sword over his shoulder, feet apart. Like a reflection of their first meeting he prepares himself, counting space, making plans. Fuyuki walks relaxed, hands in her pockets. More like she’s stepped out for a smoke then paused in the middle of a wholesale massacre. One hand comes out of her pockets, Sasuke watches the first swirl of her chakra move in her body, feels lightning raise the hairs on the back of his neck. He shuts off his sharingan.

She pauses, pure surprise floating across her fine features.

Sasuke refuses to feel complacent. He pulls lightning up and works on turning it into wind in his hands. He thinks about the garrote he can make. Lightning cuts, and she’s a far better hand to hand combatant then he is, but it’ll buy time. He won’t win if she attacks but there is some peace in knowing that there is no dishonour in dying for this.

Fuyuki holds his gaze.

Gently, she turns her attention to the group. “Do you have what you need?” The mothers nod. “Then it’s time to go.”

Sasuke blinks, uncurling from his ready stance. When he’s steady Fuyuki nods at him, at the women and children, and then strolls forward towards the river barges.

They follow.

Fuyuki takes a meandering path, around buildings, through houses, over fences. Each time they come across an obstruction she patiently directs Sasuke through jutsu to raise bridges from the earth, to create mist to cover them, to cycle air so no one has to smell the blood. Half the time she shows him the finger positions herself. She’s careful and she’s quiet. Every moment of this strange, short journey she knows what’s ahead and what’s needed. It’s when she has them halt in a guest house of some civilian family away on vacation that the reality of it all pierces through Sasuke’s mind. This is a skill set he’s never honed but Kakashi, Fuyuki, Itachi, Orochimaru all came by honestly. This is war tactics he learned in theory but has never had to execute in a live exercise. How to understand a battlefield enough to avoid the worst of it. He feels almost humbled, a little, because there’s no way to learn this but to experience it. In almost the same thought he’s thrown off; it’s not how he imagined it would be.

A while later; between two buildings nearly half an hour from the Kimura homestead. “Halt.” Fuyuki holds a fist up. “Sasuke, how’s your genjutsu?”

“Excellent.” He moves forward to flank her. “What do I need to do?”

She gestures forward. In the early morning light he see’s two fat merchants standing by twelve or so carts. The men exchange a bottle of wine. Top heavy, no weapons, drunk. Easy picking. “Find out what’s in the carts. Knock them out.”

Sasuke nods once and moves forward.

Stalking behind them he uses a burst of speed to knock one to the ground and catch the other in a neck hold, arms pressed behind their back. “Don’t move. In a moment I am going to turn you around.”

As he does so he controls the man’s movements so he’s forced to meet his sharingan head on. The
man jerks in his hold, caught easily by the genjutsu. Inwardly Sasuke rolls his eyes with disgust. A decently trained five year old could get out of that one. “What’s in the carts?”

“Homewares,” the merchant slurs, “a few boxes of finery. Cloth. Six boxes of high grade opium.”

Opium. No wonder he’s so weak to suggestion. Still, a good haul for a new life. Sasuke knocks him out too and relays the information to Fuyuki.

“Alright,” Fuyuki turns and begins sorting the women and children by family groups. All of them, excepting Fuyuki, exchange startled looks when she rattles off names and ages. “This is simple. You stay in your groups. You get in your carts. You don’t come back for three or more generations. This is Giri occupied territory and I will not offer you any more mercy. All the wares in your carts are yours to divide as you see fit. There are two marketplaces half a day from here that you can trade for food in.”

With a casual flair she starts loading them up as easily as boxes or cattle. Sasuke does too, but where her ease makes them nervous his discomfort makes them grateful. It doesn’t feel like doing a good thing, it feels like stopping himself from doing something desperate.

When it’s done Fuyuki steps back next to him in the full dawn and lights a cigarette. “We aren’t going to tell anyone about this,” she says “and in ten years, when they come back to kill us, you’ll get to make your own choices.”

Sasuke startles. “What-”

Fuyuki draws deep, blows out. “The reason you kill the babies isn’t to send a message or to get even, it isn’t even to make it a neat job.” On the wagons the mothers crack with tentative smiles. One little girl whoops with joy. “Violence is cyclical, Sasuke. You cut off the head from the body or you accept that it grows new bodies and comes after you. In ten years you’ll be standing by yourself somewhere and a barely grown boy with a vendetta will try to take your head off. It’s happened to me. It’s happened to all of us who’ve lived long enough to be remembered.”

Sasuke stares at her. Stares and stares and stares.

She stares back. “This entire world is a self eating prophecy. I know how I want it to end and I know how awful I must be to get there. Question is: can you live with it too?”

“You didn’t kill them.”

“I can.” She already has, he realises, in her mind that’s what survival means for the strong: living with what you’ve done. “I will. A hundred years wouldn’t be soon enough for them to kill me assuming something doesn’t get me first. But just because I can doesn’t mean I should. Maybe they’ll forgive me instead. Maybe some good I can do will tip the balance in my favor.”

She’s trying to tell him something and she’s failing but Sasuke puts it in his head somewhere to be remembered later. “Maybe.”

“Eh.” She grimaces. “Probably not.”

The innocent sail away under their gazes: one apologetic, one resigned.

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The Kimura resign themselves to the heavy heel of Giri’s ire with only a touch of grace.
Team Dosa leaves before the blood is dry.

They load up. Half the families are coming - collateral, hostages, or free will, Sasuke doesn’t know. They’re loaded up too. Sasuke sits in his spot halfway down the procession and tunes out the commotion. God knows he’s got a lot to mull over.

Amaya appears, gently grasping his arm. She’s dressed in pale orange, hair twisted up. Her luggage sits behind her. She leans forward to whisper to him. “I took your advice.”

The hairpin pinning up her beautiful hair is clean. Cleaner than any hairpin needs to be. Her hands, when she offers them to him, are pale and perfect, nothing to betray her. She is a politician’s wife beaten and molded to compliance.

“I have something for you.” She turns and pulls something from a basket. The thing kicks and yowls, crawling up onto her shoulder. A cat with large green-blue eyes and striped golden fur blinks at him owlishly. She pulls him off her shoulder expertly tucking him in her arms. “My family used to do business breeding them.”

What the fuck. “I can’t accept this.”

“Sora is a ninja cat.” She lifts the cat’s chin to press a kiss to his head. He stays pliant and happy. “We bred the fighting aspect out of them and trained up the endurance aspect. He is as fast as any chunnin and can deliver messages across three countries. We lesser mortals use them when birds are too much of a danger. I’ve heard you have bird summons but I have also heard that a lack of adaptability is the mark of a dead ninja.”

Sasuke blushes until his ears go red. “Thank you.” He stiffly takes the young cat which turns in his arms and begins to purr.

From another cart Hiki laughs at him.

Word travels up the line. Fuyuki wanders down to mock him though he suspects it was more about petting the cat. Sora obliges her. Sasuke seizes the opportunity. “Did you know?”

“Mmm,” she hums, scratching between Sora’s ears, “not till after. Doesn’t matter. She took care of a loose end for me. We’d never have gotten him to keep his mouth shut.” She looks wry at the cat and amused at Sasuke. “A horrific brute and sadist he might have been, he was still an advocate for peace.”

Sasuke grimaces.

Fuyuki laughs. “Read some history some time I think you’ll find it’s not as cut and dried as good pacifists versus evil warmongers.”

He refuses to think about that too. At this rate his repression will break something. Fuyuki departs after a quick cuddle and kiss with the cat. Sora may be more popular than Sasuke by a long shot. As she walks back her people straighten themselves from a motley bunch to a deadly mob honed and guided by ideals and practicality and that alone.

Fuyuki looks back from the head of the procession. “Let’s head out.”

Sasuke closes his eyes, pets the cat, and thinks around it all.

They go over the details some as they travel back. Sasuke opts out of the discussion concentrating on the warm ball of fur in his lap. About a day from Oto they organise their stories for the records.
Yumi and Haru take staunch opposition to the Kimura. Hiki and Sasuke are not so sanguine about it.

“We didn’t have to do it that way,” Hiki mutters. He’s been quietly unhappy about the whole thing. Despite not being much of a smoker he’s been taking drags off the last cigarette they have.

Haru hisses. “Sometimes people just won’t let you save them.” Then he jumps out and leaves. Hiki sighs, following him. Everyone disperses until it’s just him and Fuyuki. She pulls out a flask turns it over and pops up a hidden compartment revealing one last cigarette.

Fuyuki lights it, draws, passes it over. “It’s not quite that simple. Fact is safe is a lot of things to a lot of people. You can only give them the option. Killing me and handing my head to Lightning as a peace offering? Pretty solid road to safety.”

“It’s still shit.”

Fuyuki blows out her smoke. “It is still shit.”

“Why aren’t you angry about it.”

“Did that already. Nothing I haven’t been ordered to do. Nothing I wouldn’t consider ordering someone else to do. Part of the job, part of the business.” She gestures to him, as if to say if it was easy everyone would do it. “People have the right to be assholes.”

He snorts. “This is asshole behaviour to you?”

“People have the right to disagree and they have the right to act on that.” With one hand stretched out she lets the fire burn out her smoke. Sasuke watches the ash float on the wind. “I can’t stop that and no,” she takes her cigarette back, considers, then crushes it under foot, “tyranny is not better just because you agree with it this time around.”

That’s too much to contend with. He turns away.

Sleep is a fire that night. The Uchiha compound is dark and quiet when he whispers through. Bodies line the streets. Bodies crawl forward from the mouths of houses. He treads up broken stairs each step making the ground bloodier. He’s twenty steps from the door of his childhood home. Seventeen. Thirteen. Nine. Three. The dark whips up a wind. Nothing but the cold smell of bone and wood washed over with water as if that makes everything clean again. He’s in the house. The dark is talking, as it always does, and it tells him things he never wants to hear again. Find power, find peace. The wood faces of the condemned scream at him from the floor. Find peace, find safety. If he turns the moon will be blood red. His parents will be dead. Find death, find Itachi. Lay this to rest. Now the front room that he spent so many years in is a ghost of itself. Spiderwebs. Dust. Eyes out of their jars lying on the table.

He goes to his brothers room. Crows line the way, like Itachi’s momento’s that Sasuke could never touch, like Shisui is here too. His brothers lifeline cut down too soon to be of any help. Shisui leads the way.

In his better dreams this room is absent. Here it is now; a dark secret that smells of sweat and his brothers abandoned sweets. When he crosses the threshold light pulses from the ground between the slats of wood. From behind the ceiling the night ends and the world begins. The room warps. From the dark, like a broken egg or a broken skull, something oozes out from his memories.

A bright point. Human. A brothers refuge. Sasuke lies down on his brothers unmade bed in his dream and feels the light shine down from the ceiling. He imagines the sheets might still be warm.
like the nights he used to follow his brother into sleep. The nights where Itachi would stare at him with eyes red. They would spill over with water. Sasuke would smile at his brother, and he would hold his hand, the only time Itachi would relax and let Sasuke be the strong one. A bright point in the dark. Hands held.

The dream drifts. He’s still staring at the ceiling.

Chapter End Notes

Next time on Survival: the end of an era. Sasuke really truly does get to catch a break, and then in fashion catches a few complications.

Fun Facts:
- Keep on an eye out for a lot of things mentioned this chapter. They'll be varying levels of important later.
- There isn't a lot to mention here, so have an announcement. Since the next installment is written and the one after that is somewhere around 3/4 done I've decided that in the spirit of Christmas I'm going to release two chapters next month which will take us out of this arc and into the next. I'll also be releasing three snippets in the as yet untitled missing scenes fic. All of these will be short; a few thousand words at most.
- A Day in Konoha: where we catch up with our favourite blonde bombshell.
- A scene from the now defunct Itachi fic -either the first anniversary of the massacre or the hours leading up to his first meeting with Hashira. Both of which would give an idea into how the original circumstances of this fic came about.
- A snapshot into a Giri meeting in which we get a clearer idea of how they think of Sasuke.
- I'm going to change the summary for this after the next big update. Feel free to shoot over any ideas.
n. the realization that the plot of your life doesn’t make sense to you anymore—that although you thought you were following the arc of the story, you keep finding yourself immersed in passages you don’t understand, that don’t even seem to belong in the same genre—which requires you to go back and reread the chapters you had originally skimmed to get to the good parts, only to learn that all along you were supposed to choose your own adventure.

Chapter Notes

MERRY CHRISTMAS. It's Christmas Eve where I am but lets pretend. I am going to make good on my promise of two chapters and some snippets. Instead of dropping some 20,000+ words of content on you all at once I'm dropping this chapter, one of the snippets, and another one tomorrow after some proof reading. The second chapter and the last snippet will come between now and New Years.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A year and a half into working for Giri and Sasuke is sitting cross legged on top of a boulder looking out at a clear blue sky. They're sitting by the edge of a huge cliff in Fire Country resting between assassinating some small time village leader and their next mission which promises to be heavy on full contact fighting. The sun is dipping towards the horizon, warm air ruffling their hair. Yumi is trying to throw Hiki off the cliff into the lake below, Haru is defleaing his dog and Sasuke is debating his next move in the long distance tactical game he’s playing with Juugo and Karin. It’s an Uzushio classic, like shogi but the board is made of three interlocked spirals and the movements of the pieces are based on the tides. Karin is slaughtering him.

Dosa hops down from where he was perched on a tree. “We have to leave right now.”

“Sir?” Yumi asks, she’s still got her foot on Hiki’s back, rope in hand.

“Oto was attacked last night. Mamoru was killed.”

Yumi sucks in a breath. “Where-”

Dosa shakes his head. “No. We’re leaving in ten. I’ll lead.”

Ten minutes later they’re off and moving as fast as they can. Dosa re orientates them frequently, doubles back, covers the land in odd ways, but after two days or so Sasuke realises that given their approach they’re heading deep, deep into Lightning.

Given the mountains and the thinness of the air there are very few ways to enter and exit Lightning that aren’t positively suicidal. Sasuke hasn’t spent a lot of time here apart from the initial meeting with Giri, it was never Konoha or Orochimaru’s favourite place. They rest in a small town four and
a half hours from Kumo in an inn that takes one look at them before shoving them through the back door. They step out into small cleared space with outhouses all along one side.

“What do you think happened?” Yumi asks in a small voice. Her face has reached a level of palor better suited to kabuki and corpses.

“It’ll be fine. Mamoru would never have let them get anything useful.” Hiki reassures her.

“I don’t feel fine,” Yumi says mutinously, “this is something you’d expect from a village or something. Shit like this never happens to us.”

Hiki offers her a weak smile, “the price of progress?”

No one replies to that.

The moon has already descended over the horizon by the time Fuyuki and a large group of Giri elites arrive. They fill the space up quickly and quietly, lowly murmuring to each other. Sasuke has never known the full extent of Giri’s might, the top end of the missing-nin hierarchy, and he suppose this is the closest he will ever come to finding out.

“Little ducks,” Fuyuki clicks her tongue. She is visibly exhausted, covered in dirt, customary bare skin wrapped in layers of mismatched clothing. She has a suspicious dark red gash down her face and very old blood in her hair, “hard run ahead of us. Piss or drink now.”

Haru heads off to piss and Yumi takes a drink. Sasuke takes a look at their current cohort. This is Giri’s top brass all together possibly for the first time ever. Something almost like sympathy rolls in his gut. This can’t be good news.

Fuyuki waits for all the pissing and drinking to end before assembling them into travelling groups. Once that’s done she leads the run up and across so much land and water that Sasuke simply lets his active mind take a backseat to his instincts. It takes a day and a night before they crest up a mountain near the sea. There’s a clear well worn path up the side. Hiki halts him with an arm thrown high across his chest.

“Be careful here,” Hiki frowns, “this would be a poor place to challenge Hashira.”

Sasuke raises a sceptical eyebrow, steps under Hiki’s arm and follows the rest of the troupe up the path. He does hear Hiki snort and call him a princess under his breath though.

They follow the path to the top of a cliff, spare with vegetation, wrought entirely with the blue grey stone that defines the Lightning coastline. The sun is clear and the ocean is a frightening shade of blue. The other people around him are sitting down or stretching. Sasuke takes a deep breath of pure ocean air and looks around.

There are seven graves by the edge of the sea with a bright blooming flowers planted in the centre spilling over the cliff. Tall markers stand as high as three metres in the air wreathed with ribbons in the colours of dawn and day. Fuyuki whistles high and light calling them to all follow her as she walks them around to the side of the graveyard, down the side of the cliff by way of rough stone steps, to a small rocky outcrop that tips into the sea. She forms a few signs and presses her hand to the side of a wall from which a door wriggles and writhes into existence. Sasuke spares a look back as he enters and sees those graves and flowers. The flowers have colonised the side of the cliff, growing strong and sure halfway down the rocks, slipping into crevices and tangling around each other as they race towards the ocean. Huge blooms of colour, bright reds, light pinks and creamy yellows are knocked about by the waves crashing against the cliff.
Sasuke isn’t the only one looking as they enter what must be Fuyuki’s home but he is the only one brave enough to gently catch her arm.

“I- The graves,” Sasuke asks.

“My sisters.” Fuyuki looks past him to where the flowers fall into the sea. A living memorial for those lost. “They were taken for our bloodline.”

“But not you?”

“No,” she looks away, “I was too...I was too young to be useful for what they wanted.”

“I’m sorry,” he says sincerely.

“The problem with choosing our leaders for their strength alone is that the strong are used to the crushing weight of their own power. They don’t tend to look around and see what they’re trampling. Big picture thinking, I’m told.”

Usually he’d brush that off as her proselytizing her own point of view. For whatever reason he hears her today. The strong do not have to care for the weak; they choose too.

He lets go of her arm, watching as she rubs some feeling back into it. She glances at him considering but chooses to go into the house rather than re-engage. Sasuke stares at the graves a moment longer and then follows her inside.

Inside is nothing like what he expected. The living space is completely open, kitchen is modern and elevated, backed along the rear of the house. The furniture is classic and old, embroidered heavily with traditional Lightning motifs. Dragons, sphinxes, everything that flies; storms, huge terrifying storms that eat the sky and leave something new in their wake. The low table is set for tea, traditional seating off set with plush pillows. The colour theme is warm and the floor is covered in well worn rugs. One huge window shows the grey sea moving sluggishly below them framed by intricate woodwork. There is one corridor that clearly leads to a personal space, the entrance of which is guarded by two wood carved stylised dragons. One holds a ball of smoke in its jaws, the other has a cracked orb and a split in its mouth like someone smashed it open. There are a million ways to get inside this house, there’s nowhere to hide, the way to her personal chamber is clear and unguarded. No traps, no seals, no watchers.

It’s clearly the house of a woman who fears little.

The art interests him more. On the walls eight women carved from white stone hang at set intervals. Eight sisters like in the Tale of the Broken Steppes; seven sisters and a renegade appearing in the night with unimaginable power, reforming the land into seven peaks and a valley. Sasuke knows it as a cornerstone in Earth literature, funny that it would turn up here in what is otherwise a testament to Lightning culture.

Something rattles in the kitchen. Once, twice. He checks the room to make sure he isn't hallucinating. Everyone else is relaxed so Sasuke feigns it, hand still itching for a weapon. From inside a kitchen cabinet cames a small child, a girl, no more than six years old. She’s dark haired, skin a few shades fairer than Fuyuki and Sasuke is left with the mind boggling idea that one of the great monsters of the 3rd war has a baby.

Hiki goes over to the child, bending one knee. “Hi little baby!” he holds out a hand to her which she gracefully takes. “What have you done today?”

The girl grins revealing a missing tooth. “We went up the steps!”
“How many steps where there?”

“So many.” The little girl sits down on the floor with a thwump. She casts a look around, taking things in and stops when she spots Sasuke. “Pretty.”

Dosa claps Sasuke on the shoulder. “This is our nadeshiko.”

Sasuke gives Dosa a baleful look. “Hello.”

The little girl hoists herself on to her knees and walks casually across the floor to fall at Sasuke’s feet. Two chubby hands rise into the air.

Longsufferingly Sasuke leans down and picks the child up. It’s awkward. The little girl puts a soft chubby hand in Sasuke’s hair and strokes it. He’s never had anything particularly against children, being small and slow isn’t exactly something they can help, but he still doesn’t want much to do with them.

He places her gently on the ground and steps back.

Hiki whistles. “Doesn’t bite children. You better marry Uchiha before everyone else realises what a catch you are.”

“‘Not scary to children’ is a low bar.”

“You would think, huh?” Hiki replies cheerfully.

Fuyuki takes the baby off the floor and puts her on a hip. She frowns gravelly, chakra rippling with agitation. All signs of weariness and merriment flood out of the room.

“It seems,” Fuyuki says into the silence, “that Sunagakure has decided we have a problem. I sent Mamoru as a goodwill ambassador to Wind a few months ago. It went well, and as Suna is a largely neutral player in most conflicts I did not see the problem in allowing a small ambassadorial group into Oto to further the relationship. At the fourth meeting one of the Suna delegation proved themselves to be a puppet and assassinated Mamoru. They were in the process of trying to loot us when they were killed.”

A man seated at the back jumps to his feet. “We have to respond—”

“I had the bodies of the shinobi mummified and staked outside Suna’s gates and the puppet burned. I’ll be taking the ashes with me should I ever have need to meet the Kazekage. As of now we do not have any trade agreements with Suna.” Fuyuki glances at the room. “Not us, or any other group.”

Haru whistles. “They are fucked.”

It’s a well known fact that the world runs on missing-nin. Every time one country’s Daimyo decides to have an issue with another they start with fancy declarations, proceed to pressuring their Hidden Village into action, and end the conflict by placing sanctions on each other, crippling trade and making wide sweeping statements about who and what can be forgiven and how much grovelling it would take. The Hidden Villages, who pay with blood and suffering, usually acquiesce to these arrangements to get even a few years of peace. Lightning is still taxing the shit out of Iwa for something to do with a glass merchant 55 years ago. Fire is bleeding Suna for their involvement with Orochimaru. Wind has been systematically gutting the smaller villages around it. Water is a bag of ruffled cats on a good day and before they destroyed it they were making life difficult for Uzushio. If it weren’t for the fact that most merchants simply decided to start using
secret trade routes and the masses of trained killers walking around to ensure they made their profits the entire continent would have gone under generations ago. It’s more or less how the world worked back in the Warring Clans Era and unless something drastic happens Sasuke doesn’t see a better system emerging anytime soon. Suna, in particular, relies heavily on this trade system since they cannot produce enough water or grain to sustain their population. Add to that, they haven’t actually won a war since the 2nd and even that came with heavy losses that Konoha decided not to help alleviate. Suna simply doesn’t have the resources to survive.

Unless Suna convinces Fuyuki or the Daimyo to lift their embargos it’s going to have a very nasty time come winter.

“What now?” Dosa asks. “We barely have an interest in Suna.”

“Awhile ago Suna lost it’s bijuu, the one inside it’s Kazekage.” Fuyuki shrugs. “They’ve decided to take a harder policy on missing-nin as a result.”

“Because we’re all Akatsuki deep in our hearts.” Yumi says dryly.

Fuyuki smiles briefly. “The Kazekage is a child and a sheltered one at that. I’ve decided to give him the benefit of the doubt here. We’ll recede operations to the outskirts of Wind where it would be a hassle to push us out while I find someone in their council to talk to. I don’t want anyone to starve because Suna’s ruling coalition can’t seem to get around their own asses. Konoha will at least take note of Suna’s actions in regards to us and I enjoy having a cordial relationship with one of the most stable villages around. Uchiha, you and Hiki will be deployed there for awhile. Stay behind so we can go over things. The rest of you will be cycled back into other operations. Dosa, I need you to return to Oto.”

Dosa frowns. “Alright all those leaving with me are out in ten. Piss, shit or pray before we get going because I have no intention of stopping for anything longer than a nap until we reach Kikofurano.”

There’s a lot of muffled talking as the room empties. Yumi throws a cross look at Hiki and Sasuke before an exasperated Haru kicks her out the door.

Fuyuki gives it ten minutes and then says, “You’ve met him, what can you tell me?”

Sasuke blinks, not realising she means him. “I tried to kill him.”

“Yes, child, we usually do attempt to kill the other shinobi we meet. He’s not dead, though, so what do you know.”

Sasuke grunts. “Fucked up childhood, probably has a kill count in the hundreds by now. Used to enjoy it, too, until Naru.” he grimaces, “someone got through to him. He’s level headed, all of the Suna-nin I’ve met are. Your taijutsu won’t do anything to him. Maito Gai’s direct apprentice used the Eight Gates and barely made a dent.”

“I heard about that.” She makes a thoughtful noise. “You and Hiki will be making a series of normal low risk deliveries to a section of Akatsuki and River’s old cabal network we recently acquired. You’ll slowly circle around to a resort town about a half day travel from Suna. We’re setting up a holding there. Your job will be to hold it if Suna gets aggressive but fall back if another village shows up to aid them. If someone shows up to watch, give them a show.”

Sasuke makes the mistake of grumbling a little too forcefully.

Fuyuki gives him an exasperated look. “You’re good PR for me.”
That seems very unlikely but if she’s not willing to say he’s not willing to ask. “Okay.”

When they leave the moon is high in the sky. It’s light hits the grave markers of the Hashira sisters with impossibly clear light. The flowers have closed to the cold and all Sasuke can see are the ribbons twisting in the wind. Hiki begins to chuckle as they make their way down the path.

“What?” Sasuke asks.

Hiki laughs at him. “You are so high maintenance.”

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Wind country is actually one of Sasuke’s favourite places in a broad strokes kind of way. It’s kind to Katon jutsu. It’s array of food is varied and tasty. He was never experimented on or tortured here. It has really top notch travel accommodations because of it’s capital city’s status as a civilian merchant hub. Suna on the other hand is a sandy, miserable shithole that ranks somewhere on the lower half of his shitlist. After that turtle soup he had in That and above cleaning up after Kabuto’s failed experiments. Thankfully their trip into Suna itself is short. It’s a grab and go involving Sasuke’s acrobatics and Hiki’s deceptively slight fingers. Their cargo, whatever it is, is rolled up into a rug and stowed in a shitty wagon Sasuke liberated from a family of four who were using it to store their pots and pans in. Since he couldn’t figure out why on earth they were doing it he decided it didn’t matter enough to worry about. Hiki insisted on waiting till morning to move out because as the only espionage agent around he wanted eyes on them as they left.

Now it’s leaving time and Sasuke is walking fast downtown, faces passing him as he’s bound for home base. They have hired muscle leading the wagon through the streets. Sasuke and Hiki are walking behind, ready for action if it becomes necessary. Neither of them think it will.

The downtown market between them and freedom is littered with stalls and people and shinobi but none of them are looking for any trouble. As long as Sasuke doesn’t give them any it’ll be fine. He clocks a few people watching them from the shadows but it’s not important enough to mention yet. Soon they’ll be out of Suna proper with their merchandise and on their way to their deliveries/intimidations.

“We’ve got a few more for today,” Hiki murmurs from in front, “and then we’ll head to the inn, okay?”


Sasuke opens his mouth to be cutting when there’s a ping against his chakra. His hand is slipping towards a weapon before his brain catches up. He turns his reach into a grab for his water bottle at the last moment. Hiki frowns at him but keeps moving, his gait changing slightly from untrained civilian to something more watchful. Sasuke shakes his head twice and takes a gasp of cool water, washing it around in his mouth before swallowing. He still has the taste of lunch in his mouth and has learnt the hard way to not mix katon jutsu’s with leftover bits of dried fish. He checks his surroundings again and comes up with what he already knows. Suna nin at an appropriate distance, a few missing nin known to Giri probably considering a grab for Hiki, a few merchants and samurai way over their heads. He wets his lips, what is he missing?

He’s not a tracker, not at all, but Karin has shown him a few little things. He imagines a circle of chakra in his chest, holds it the way he would a fireball but instead of turning it to fire he pulls on barely there yin chakra to form a rotating wisp just on the edge of becoming something. He throws it out and holds onto a thin end as it spins, hitting the metaphysical centre of everyone in his immediate vicinity. Hiki stills in front of him, hand on his short sword. The air is tense for a
moment before collapsing. Sasuke’s little tracker hits dead against something earthy, the end crumbling away. An earth affinity.

Sasuke holds in his sigh and does the tracker again to be sure. This time that earth chakra slaps at his. It’s a familiar pulse against his side. Earthy, firm. The recognition is child like, instinctual and non-threatening. Sasuke looks up.

Shikamaru raises a hand and waves.

Sasuke waves back.

Shikamaru looks at him expectantly across the crowd. Distantly Sasuke notes that he’s the taller of the two. Head’s bob and weave around the marketplace, someone drops an avocado which is swept up a child and her friends, the scent of cooking spices drift down from the top of one of the buildings. Sasuke and Shikamaru stare at eachother.

“You know him?” Hiki asks. He’s got his eye on their wagon still but his energy is wafting around, drifting across the sand on the ground.

Sasuke nods. “Yes.”

“Problem?”

Sasuke shrugs. “No.”

Hiki looks at him dubiously. “You gotta let the boss know.”

“Hn.”

Hiki rolls his eyes. “Whatever nadeshiko.”

Sasuke looks behind him, Shikamaru is still standing there. There isn’t a real reason to tell Fuyuki. He’s not doing anything illegal. He’s not Konoha’s business, except as a mistake to be corrected. Maybe there’s some political nuance he’s failing to account for but that would still not be his problem.

Briefly he considers asking Hiki but dismisses that based on how much of an ass the man will be. He never takes Sasuke’s paranoia particularly seriously, considering it a sign of immaturity and bad life choices. Hiki, in his own words, considers Sasuke ‘a bunch of charmingly undersocialized cats holding hands underneath a very pretty human suit’ so Sasuke is not taking his judgment to heart.

Shikamaru shrugs after a moment and goes on his way. Sasuke adds ‘avoiding Konoha’ to his to do list. Although unless Shikamaru has had a complete personality transplant he’s got a week or so before he bothers to inform his superiors. That’s a week and a half to disappear into one of Giri’s hidey-hole’s before Naruto comes bearing down on him with the force of a hundred incredibly loud hurricanes. That’s more than achievable.

“We’ll be done inside a week.” Sasuke states.

“You’re such a fucking weirdo.” Hiki replies. “Three deliveries and then over to the base.”

Sasuke shrugs and the day goes on. Sasuke isn’t involved at all in the human interaction. His job is to stand around and look at people with his sharingan. This was very explicitly stated to him.
They arrive at the meeting point about five minutes early. A group of muscle bound men with weapons casually lounging outside a residential area populated primarily by grandmas. Hiki hasn’t stopped chuckling since they arrived. Sasuke tilts his head back against a sand wall, staring up at the curtain blowing above an open window. Hiki is next to the door looking down at his nails. The sky is blue and clear today. Almost peaceful looking. He catches a snap of it with his sharingan. Blue sky and the yellow curtain blowing into the air.

Hiki kicks his knee, hard, and points to a small approaching group. Three people in heavy dark red cloaks not even trying to hide their training.

“I hope you don’t mind the intrusion,” a familiar voice announces, “but our business coincided.”

Hiki jumps off the wall. “Not at all!” He makes a show of waving her towards the abode like he doesn’t know exactly who she is. Sasuke figures that’s the game though, whatever their business is no one is to know it’s related.

Fuyuki pulls down her hood, shaking out her mass of hair, calling out, “Grandmother, let us in!”

“Oh,” a wizened old voice replies from the window above his head, “still making demands of people? Don’t you ever learn?”

Fuyuki chuckles, holding up one hand to shield her eyes. “I was never hell bent on etiquette.”

“Come in before you bring those damn puppet corps down on your old auntie. Don’t mess about.” The old woman manages to inject the venom of fifty swears into that one damn. Sasuke is reluctantly impressed.

The door blows open with a huge gust of wind startling the hell out of Hiki. Sasuke chuckles a little so Hiki flips him off.

Fuyuki winks. “Grandma doesn’t like to swear.” Then she sweeps inside. Hiki follows her with a terse look at Sasuke. He nods in reply and assumes sentry by the door. It takes nearly a minute of staring at the rest of Fuyuki’s entourage before he says, “Juugo.”

“Sasuke.” Juugo waves happily from underneath his cloak. “I’m assisting Hashira.”

He nods along. “You’ve got similar abilities.” Energy techniques.

“Enough that some of her techniques work for me.” Juugo steps forward, pulling him into a one armed hug. Sasuke stiffens and pulls away but it’s mostly for show. “It’s good to see you.”

“You too.” Juugo is one of the kinder people he’s met in his life. It’s rarely hard to spend time with him. “You’re one of our stops?”

“Suna called, they want to negotiate.” Juugo states matter of a fact. He’s frowning so Sasuke has to assume he’s thinking the same thing he is. It’s a trap.

“It’s too soon.” Sasuke murmurs. “They’ll look desperate.”

“Unless the Kazekage is a lot more politically inept than we think,” Juugo points out. “He’s very young and all the reports say he’s eager for peace. Maybe he just hasn’t grasped how this will look to someone like Hashira.”

“He’s not that peaceful.” Sasuke replies, but maybe he’s wrong. He changed after what happened at the chunnin exams. Maybe it stuck.
Hashira sticks her head out the window just long enough to dismiss them with a harried wave. Sasuke and Juugo look at each other, shrug. The third man huffs a sigh and assumes Sasuke’s abandoned sentry position. Juugo promises to get him some exotic food stuff which seems to mollify him some.

“We passed a bar back this way,” Sasuke says, leading them back towards the centre of town.

“Unless you want to be caught and trussed up by the delegation from Konoha I’d suggest we head towards the embassy for Ame.”

Political relations between Amegakure and Sunagakure are basically a joke, falling apart completely at the end of the last war. The embassy is simply a relic of that. “Why?”

“There’s a production of the *Son of Nobody* playing today.”

Right. Juugo’s fondness for overdone romances with reckless heroines.

“Do I have to pay for this?” Sasuke asks cautiously. It’s one thing to go see overwrought, inaccurate portrayals of shinobi life, it’s another to be expected to hand over his own money for it.

“Of course I’ll pay.” Juugo laughs. “I know you wouldn’t see this if your life depended on it. But the acting is meant to be very good.”

“You’ve been here a few days?” Long enough to hear about the play. “The negotiations have been going that long?”

“Truth be told I’m not sure what’s going on. Karin-”

“Karin is here?” Last he’d heard she was following a diplomatic envoy to the Land of Bears.

“I’d leave it Sasuke.” Juugo smiles warily. “I would really leave this one alone.”

“Fine,” he relents, hands up and everything. “I’m not paying.”

Sasuke leads the way to the old section of Sunagakure dedicated to its brief diplomatic ventures. The old embassy for Amegakure has been turned into a tourist trap with street vendors peddling interpretations of Ame’s food and culture. Despite the tackiness of the place the actual building is a marvel of architecture. Designed to reflect the world around it, the walls are covered in mosaics. At the ground it starts with the oranges and browns of the sand, edging into the green of a desert winter and the beauty of the flood that covers the land every few years, before finally twirling into a star studded night scape so dark you can’t see the end. Sasuke opens his sharingan at the highest point, when all he can see is the endless dark and the glint of false light.

The play is just beginning when they arrive.

It’s a tale as old as the dust of the desert or the mountains that divide the nations. There is a boy who loses something. His honour, a cow, a sword. He has to leave his home to find it. He has to grow strong enough to do what has to be done. In the *Son of Nobody* the titular Son has to journey to the city to meet the princess and while he is away his family is murdered by a group of wandering bandits. Along the way he meets a beggar girl, the princess in disguise, and he allows her to tag along. There are many twists and turns, the Son becomes a noble shinobi protecting the princess and falls in love with the beggar. He finds the bandits that destroyed his home and avenges his family. But! Disaster strikes! The samurai have been told a lie about the princess and feel that their honour must be avenged. A group sneak into the princess’ room one night and defile her. One of the samurai is late to the scene and feeling so sick and ashamed of their actions kills
them and ignites a real war between samurai and ninja. The disgraced samurai takes his own life in front of the princess as appeasement. When this doesn’t work the Son goes on to win the war and marry the girl.

Suffice to say that Sasuke is all but dying from boredom by the second act. Juugo takes pity on him and lets him wander to the back of the room. He listens intently to the dialogue, the way it rises and falls with the movement of the actors. They reach the apex of the play, the death of the samurai that will be all for naught, and the princess collapses in grief delivering one of the better speeches written in the last decade or so.

“Legend says the character of the disgraced samurai was based on a foreign shinobi from the war.” Hiki remarks casually from behind him. He showed up sometime in the second act but stayed away from them. “I did the delivery on my own but we should head out soon to get the last one.”

Sasuke acknowledges him and heads over to let Juugo know he’s going. That done they exit the old embassy and head for the entrance to Suna. “You weren’t there for that?” They stop to let the guards check them over. Hiki flashes the permit at them as Sasuke tugs a headwrap over his distinctive hair. “The third war, the one you said the samurai was from.”

Hiki looks at him, speechless. “I...Sasuke, I am 26.”

“Huh.” Sasuke looks him over from red hair to indignant face to beaten up sandals. “I thought you were older.”

Hiki splutters. “You... I am in my mid-twenties! How are you this bad...are you blind?”

“You look older.”

“I hate you nadeshiko.” Hiki says heatedly. “I truly do.”

Sasuke shrugs.

After Hiki wrestles with himself and decides murdering Sasuke would cause more problems than it would solve he picks up the pace towards their final delivery. “This one will be more difficult.”

“Why?”

“Because the man already knows you.”

Many men know him, it’s not that surprising. The list of men he’d be truly bothered by seeing again is much shorter.

The run falls between too long and too quick. Some of it he supposes must be the alien passing of time in the desert. The sand is warm under his feet even as the sun makes its journey to the west. They move even faster towards an edge in the distance that breaks into rocks covered in sparse foliage. The ground cracks and drops beneath them and they go down a steep descent into a canyon. Hiki slows down when they come to a barely burbling river that turns into woods on the other side. From this point Sasuke can just make out a cabin hidden away in the trees and backed onto a wall of rock. They approach cautiously, Sasuke in the lead, and open the door with trepidation. The cabin is dark but he knows someone is here even if they haven’t made a noise. He catches a strong medicinal smell which at least answers the question of what they’re delivering. Sasuke has his sharingan on, scanning the one room cabin for traps and weapons. He doesn’t see anything immediately but that’s no reason to stop.

There is one cot, blankets tossed about and pillow on the floor. One low table next to a refrigerator
bracketed by chairs. Scrolls litter the floor, some open, most closed. The little snatches of writing are familiar to him somehow. Hiki taps his shoulder once and then flicks the light on. Many things are revealed with the light; the spoiled fruit on the table, the thin black lines of script on the scrolls, the homemade medicine on the table.

He’d had a suspicion, he is unsurprised to be correct. “Kabuto,” Sasuke murmurs. The man in question stirs from his place at the head of the table, rotting apple in his hand.

“Oh, there you are,” he looks at Sasuke with a faintly bemused expression, like he was something momentarily misplaced. “And a friend.”
“My name is Hiki. And you know Sasuke.” Hiki smiles, cheeks and all. He pays no mind to the staring contest going on between the other two.

Sasuke will always remember Kabuto not as the snake in the grass he appeared as in Konoha but as the neat mortician he played in Oto. His memory of him is caught in one crystal clear moment: there is a body on the table, bodies all over the room. Something bloody falls off the table to splatter on the floor. It’s a warm day outside and the iron floods the hallways. The one on the table can move still. He screams until Kabuto cuts the chord.

‘Heart, liver, eyes ’ Kabuto says when he’s done, ‘and put the rest in the garbage.’

And Sasuke did.

He blows out the breath he’s been holding.

“So,” Hiki lowers himself into a seat across from Kabuto. The legs of the chair squeak. “Where’s the cargo?”

“Hiki was it?” Kabuto asks softly. “I wasn’t aware of your...association with Sasuke.”

“It was not and is not any of your business.” Hiki says testily. “Your medications are in the bag.”

“Isn’t it my business?” Kabuto replies mildly. “We’re all here because of me.”

Something quick and mean flashes through Hiki’s eyes. Something that makes Sasuke reconsider him. “You remember what Hashira has in her possession.” Hiki rocks forward in his chair. “She has you by the short and curlies.”

“You got what you wanted,” Kabuto looks pointedly at Sasuke, “and what you needed.”

“And like always it’s not enough.” Hiki says wryly. “There’s an offer going around.”

Kabuto is still looking at Sasuke. Ever so slowly his attention shifts. “Is there?”

“Akatsuki is battening down the hatches. We’ve...acquired certain sections of their operations.”

“Oh?” Kabuto hums a little, like a taunt, “these certain sections. Do they need someone with a certain skillset?”

“Among other things.”

“You’re an exceptional intelligence operative all by yourself Katsurou,” Kabuto smirks at the way Hiki’s face doesn’t shift an inch, “but surely Giri doesn’t need two?”

“No,” Hiki’s smile slips on like a knife already flying through the air. Kabuto’s smirk falls by the wayside. “It needs you, Yushiro.”
Kabuto makes a sour face. He holds up both hands in front of him. Sasuke’s hand slips nonchalantly to his sword, he’s already pulling chakra to his chest. Kabuto gives him an exasperated little shooing gesture before holding up seven fingers. Slowly he lowers two. Raises three. Lowers four. Raises one. Hiki continues to smile, holding up one hand and one middle finger in response. Kabuto laughs, a sharp bark of sound like a trapped animal rattling a cage, before holding both hands up in supplication. He waves them about - *what can you do?* - before saying, very quietly, “Wind. Whistle. Bird.”

“Ah,” Hiki scratches his head bashfully. “That’s a rather *old* way of looking at it.”

“Am I your whispering wind, or your high pitched whistle? Surely not a well trained bird. I have proven *very* disloyal in that regard.”

“Less a trained parrot and more a carcass eating vulture, yes, we *had* heard.” Kabuto bristles. Hiki tilts his head. “Come now Yushiro, I may not have managed your roots and branches but I am not a sapling. Wind. Whistle. Bird. Your wings are clipped if not by your most recent betrayal then by the way they’re all catching up with you. A bird that can’t fly won’t survive long enough to talk. And I’m rather afraid I’ve taken the wind out of your sails. You are right, Giri does not need two spymasters and we come with more or less the same qualifications. But I need a little whistle, just the one, to sit tight and keep watch.”

“You expect me to take this?”

“I expect you to be a survivor,” Hiki says imperiously. “I expect you to mold yourself to the best advantage.”

Kabuto laughs. “If I don’t?”

“You know what monster she is,” Hiki says solemnly. “I don’t want you to die that way, old friend.”

Kabuto grimaces. He looks to a dark corner of the room, eyes roaming the black like it can tell him secrets. Hiki looks into the dark too, more like he’s keeping someone company than looking for answers. Kabuto comes back to himself with a great heaving sigh. “Here is what you’re looking for.” Kabuto writes down a few coordinates. “If you get confused or don’t know what to do next ask Sasuke.” Kabuto raises his head and fixes a mad grin on Sasuke. “*Nadeshiko* will know what to do.”

*Heart. Liver. Eyes.* Sasuke thinks. *And put the rest in the garbage.*

“Your cooperation has been noted.” Hiki rises and dusts off his legs. “A representative will be by within a fortnight. You will be taken to your new position. You can guess what the terms of your new contract will be. Meet them. Hashira is nothing like Orochimaru.”

“Not as ruthless?” Kabuto says with a touch of disappointment.

Hiki shakes his head a shade shy of sadly. “You just have limited value.”

Kabuto’s lips thin but he says nothing. Hiki leaves the room without a glance behind so Sasuke lingers a moment to check. Illuminated in the light of the lone flickering candle, bundled in odd cloth and grime, Kabuto looks faceless and formless. His skin has no color, his hair is limp, his eyes are turned completely inward searching himself for an some answer, some lodestone for the next leg of his journey. He looks like an orphaned version of himself. Sasuke has a brief moment of complete self-awareness. He stands above himself and looks down at the length of his hair, the
uneven tan on his hands. His own eyes look at his boots, his non-descript travelling coat, the way he is never carrying more than enough money to carry him to the next town. He recognises nothing original, nothing remarkable. He’s as interchangeable as any soldier capable of swapping hands at a moment's notice. Many tools, many masks, many uses. He realises that that shifting formlessness is as much a part of him as his burning rage. It forms him just as fully.

In a breath Sasuke is inside himself again, thoughts of form and make completely wiped away. He leaves the room, closing the door gently behind him, and strides over to where Hiki is tiredly rubbing his eyes looking almost sheepish about the show he just put on. The wind is about to coming howling through the little valley and a very eerie night is upon them. Hiki opens his mouth, presumably to apologise, but closes it again with a shake of his head. Sasuke is not sure what, exactly, that apology would have been for but he is almost certain he did not need it.

“How are people finding out about that, anyway?” Sasuke muses. He moves first, leaping to a nearby tree branch.

“How indeed.” Hiki sighs and stretches out his back. With barely a thought he too rises up into the trees. He looks cranky and accomplished like Sasuke does after a hard but barely rewarding mission. “How does anyone hear anything? Wind, whistles and birds.”

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It’s something innocuous that eventually knocks him from Giri’s grasp.

A storm takes up half the sky. For weeks the dark clouds roll in and over, the rain starts, trees shake in the ground with every lash of thunder. Days pass in the rain and mud, his hands prune and his hair becomes a wet tangle down his neck. Dosa, whose word they’re following to his homeland far beyond the borders of Wind, tells them stories of shapeshifters, time travellers and a demon princess that ate them all before she herself was consumed.

“We called her the Fruit Eater after the foul seeds she planted in others which grew into giant poisonous fruit trees. When they’d plundered and destroyed the world enough for her foul tastes she’d eat the fruit from the trees and crush them to bone and blood under her feet. Her own children plucked out her organs one by one and cut them up into pieces. What they couldn’t eat they threw to the animals who turned into nine ravenous demons. They brought the demons together and sealed them into the form of a beautiful princess who was coveted by all.”

“Kinky,” Haru says.

Dosa rolls his eyes. “Like you have anything interesting to say. The princess became the first ruler of our countries and was eventually overthrown by a horde of men angry that she hadn’t paid them favor.”

“Sounds about right.” Yumi mutters.

“You be quiet especially.” Dosa scolds. “I still haven’t forgiven you for what you did the last time we were here.”

Fuyuki leads them through it all the way to the edge of Sasuke’s known world. There is an edge to the map and as they cross it all of them tense. Nothing happens. In unchartered territory there is still a storm and they are still soaked to the bone.

They take shelter in a cave before making the final journey to an encampment that Dosa swears will deal them what they need. When they finally make camp Sasuke dumps his shit and begins
wringing out his hair. It’s long enough to hit him between the shoulders. He had been wearing it in a low ponytail, then a braid, but both meant unknotting his hair at the end of every day. The problem is that the Uchiha are predisposed to have thick hair and the main branch, the one that descends directly from Madara’s betrayed brother Izuna, comes with a tendency for...unruliness that Sasuke has gotten threefold. At this length it seems to be largely growing up and out, gravity be damned. Eventually he compromised by pulling as much of it as possible back into a high ponytail, weighing down the pointy bits at the side with braidwork and using the unscented hair wax that Yumi uses to keep her hair tangle free. Between the two of them they go through a tub every two weeks.

Fuyuki is amused. “Perhaps I made a mistake with the hair.”

“No.” Sasuke wrings out another section of it. “This is fine.”

“You look like a hedgehog.”

“A half starved hedgehog.” Yumi chirps.

“Hey, that’s the look in the Capital right now. He’s making his money.” Dosa clasps his shoulder. “In that artsy shit Yumi tries to bring to porn night.”

Yumi scowls. “Are you watching that shit you always bring? Two bottle blondes scratch each others clits off for a half bloody hour. Excuse me for wanting something with more depth.”

“It’s porn.”

“Oh no,” Hiki says deadpan, “you want artsy pointless porn checkout Uchiha’s slutty shirt/dripping hair combo. Yummy.”

“Award winning.” Yumi says blandly.

“Why, I’d give it four out of five wanks.” Hiki grins. “Yanks. Stars. Whatever, it all comes to the same thing in the end.”

Sasuke can’t hold back his indignant squeak. Fuyuki looks at him pityingly. “Alright boys, Uchiha is everyone’s paper bag, let’s move on.”

“I’m a girl, Commander.” Yumi whines. “I can show you if you like.”

“Shh,” Fuyuki waves in Yumi’s general direction, “naps.”

Teams. Ugh.

They travel to a settlement with people Dosa knows. After a short introduction and welcoming meal they’re taken to a series of run-down houses sitting by a weak river sectioned off from the main settlement. There’s little to no vegetation around. No trees, nothing but weak shrubs and stone. There’s a strong smell of ammonia and decay emanating from them, covered by a sweetness like crushed berries.

“Oh fuck,” Haru whines. “I hate these ones.”

Sasuke grimaces, silently agreeing. Sometimes chakra reacts oddly to people. Some of it turns into special abilities, some of it just means a weird genetic quirk turns up every so often, like Sakura’s pink hair or a family suddenly changing hair colour between generations like the Hatake. This is how abilities develop over time. Sometimes this reaction goes horrifically wrong. Orochimaru had
a fondness for the ones gone wrong. Over time Sasuke learnt to tell by the smell. Ore meant a blood mutation. Licorice meant bone. Sweet ammonia meant parasites growing fat inside their hosts.

Hiki walks straight up to the settlement, arm over his nose and knocks on the doors. He only needs to knock on two doors before people start coming out on their own. Hiki makes a big show of running back over and gagging. Fuyuki pats him on the head consolingly. Sasuke feels the muscles in his back tighten and release. Whatever this is he wants no part of it.

They stand in neat rows, families together. Their bodies are jaundiced and puffy around the eyes. The fingernails are falling off the men and children. The women are incubators, what for Sasuke doesn’t want to know. The rest of his team gets to work. Hiki, Dosa and Fuyuki set off to negotiations. Yumi checks their palms and crosses their ID numbers off a checklist, then Haru takes a needle and pricks their thumbs to check the blood consistency. He’ll be looking for good coagulation otherwise the...donor...will not survive the extraction process.

Sasuke knows better than most how these parasites are harvested.

After a long time, in which Sasuke does his best to separate himself from his current reality, Yumi hands him her clipboard and starts loading the people into the carts. One of the elders, a man in his late sixties, slips and falls. Sasuke almost takes a step towards him but balks at the last moment. Luckily Yumi sweeps in and helps him to his feet, gently helping him into the cart with a beatific smile.

“They’re good to go!” Haru calls, he throws Sasuke his clipboard too whistling as he aids Yumi. How can Haru have been so easy to condemn Orochimaru and so at ease here?

Sasuke turns his head, more to get away from what’s in front of him than anything, and finds himself staring at a series of carts carrying vegetation and ore. The food will go to the poor and the needy as per Giri’s beliefs. The ore will go to bribing the small mining towns buried along Hot Water, silencing those that oppose the introduction of foreign power to a section of the world that has never needed it.

There’s a light whip on his chakra. Fuyuki is paying attention to him. She strides into vision, hip cocked and eyebrow raised.

“Are we good?” Her eyes are unsettlingly bright. Sasuke never quite forgets her reputation but he does let her lack of obvious monstrosity dull his sense of disquiet.

He bites back bile. “Guess we have to be.”

Fuyuki shakes her head like a parent would, like Sasuke’s disgust is childish. “It’s an opportunity,” she says neutrally, “we have to make the most of them.” We don’t have the same means and opportunities as others, the silence says, we have to build from ruins and carnage. This is the right reason, boy. Even when it disgusts you. As if that makes doing something they’d kill someone else for doing right. Sasuke looks, and thinks, and looks again, and although he can understand it he can’t justify it.

He nods, he stays quiet.

“Good,” she smiles, “take a break.”

He does. Sasuke’s break is spent staring at the sky, mind overlaying Dosa’s homeland with his years in Oto. The smell of half rotting people is the same.
Later he asks Yumi for a hand getting the sickest of their donors into the caravans. Once he’s tagged and boxed in a twenty something mother and her brood of three, all of their faces dropping around big sad eyes, he and Yumi saddle their own horses. At first light the procession moves out back to somewhere Sasuke is having trouble reconciling.

“Do you know how these are harvested?” he asks.

Yumi shrugs. “Yeah?”

His hands clench on the reins. “And that doesn’t bother you?”

Yumi laughs. “You left Konoha for Orochimaru. You can not be getting squeamish.”

A chill races down his spine. Orochimaru was power. He went because he needed to, not because he thought the man had the right idea. Yumi hasn’t seen men eat their own flesh, turn to stone, be consumed entirely by madness and the power locked in the Curse Seal. Sasuke highly doubts these people agreed to being used this way. At least Sasuke chose what happened to his body.

The doubt settles in him. Sasuke accommodates it by adding a degree of wariness to the kinship he feels with his current teammates. He’s not sure if he was taught this or if it came naturally. For a moment he thinks of two bright smiles he trusted implicitly, pink and yellow and firm in their resolve, before he reminds himself to step back from that too.

Yumi comes along side him. Her horse is dappled and pink-red. It would be an extraordinary contrast if both horse and girl weren’t clearly moments away from leaping apart. “So guess what I found out last night while trawling the bars?”

“What?” He feels it. Warm, wary, growing distant. Before Yumi was ’kunoichi, dangerous, fun loving’ she now has a little box in his internal checklist that says ‘caution: complicit and unrepentant’.

“There’s a porn parody of that demon princess story.”

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Giri leaves him be for a month.

If Sasuke was inclined to pick it apart he’d think it was a test. There are degrees of inhumanity in the shinobi life. It’s inescapable. Sasuke has murdered children, wives, civilians. He’s used the sharingan to torture. He’s got no remorse in him for that. He has chosen his path at every turn. And there’s a reality to revolution, what about those who don’t choose? Giri is fighting for a better world with the worst tools of the old one. He’s one of those tools. When he tries to get away from that thought it gets stuck, a whole lot of but if this and what about that. There’s no focus point of fratricide here. He can’t delete everything that isn’t get stronger. If he stays with Giri it’s because he wants to. He can have a life without Konoha. There are other ways to get what he wants. He can have a life outside of the Elemental Nations if he needs to. Will he freeze? Will he run?

He doesn’t know yet. He does know that he never, not when he was six with a family and not when he was thirteen with a vengeance, wanted to have his hands stained by this. There can be honour in killing. There is no honour in Oto.

He packs his bags. He slips out the window.

Oto is quiet as he walks its streets for what he hopes is the last time. Wide streets and a weird silence that’s more threat than comfort. Long lines of buildings reaching into the sky, some higher
than he’s ever seem them go. They’ve cut out sections for parks and gardens. Storefronts are appearing all of it touched with metal and shining wood. Kumogakure is the current pinnacle of human ingenuity and he see’s their lofty ideals, their progress, reflected in this new and rising place. He tugs out an old and abused scarf and ties it around his face, tucking his hair underneath to give himself an extra few seconds of anonymity should he be caught. The few people he passes have their heads down but you can never be too careful.

He’s a half block from the walls, just about to take the run and leap that will get him out of here, when his stomach falls out of his body, a spike of harsh killing intent dragging him to the ground. Fuyuki appears in front of him holding out a hand to help him up. He takes it fully intending on running the second she lets go. He’s been here before. Back in Konoha the first time with Naruto on his tail and then again with the sure knowledge that he was only getting out of Otogakure if Orochimaru was dead.

She pulls him forward and places a cool hand against his forehead like a mother checking her child’s temperature. She tilts his head from side to side, taking in the bags under his eyes. All the little signs of stress. “I do remember,” Fuyuki remarks mildly, “telling you to not look like shit when I didn’t need it.”

“You’re going to stop me.” He’s prepared to fight for it.

She pats him lightly on the cheek, stepping back to give him some space. “You have my full and free permission to leave at any time. No member of Giri is forced to hold to an allegiance they feel no longer reflects their ideals.” With a wry smile she shakes her head reaching down to pull something from her pouch. “You always had an out.”

He watches her hand. “What’s that?”

“For services rendered.” With a deliberate showiness she flips the object in her hand -a scroll- and holds it out to him. He blinks at her, taking the scroll from her outstretched hand. It’s thin and blue tipped, the personal seal of the Godaime Hokage glows in the night. The future in his hand.

He smooths his hand over the seal, fingers tingling. “Why now?”

She shrugs. “You went as far as you could here. No shame in that. You are a full grown butterfly now. It’s time to fly home on the wings of youth and blossom your passion or whatever pathetic shit you Konoha nin try to pass off as grit.”

Sasuke almost smiles. Apparently he is now more trouble than he’s worth. “Am I really that high maintenance?”

“Yes,” she smiles to lessen the blow, “the terms of our agreement have been sufficiently met. You should find an official witness to get that signed off on, Uchiha Sasuke of Konohagakure.”

Sasuke says nothing. The pardon is cold in his hands, shame rolling through his gut. Truth be told he never actually thought he’d get it. Truth be told he’d forgotten about it. There’s never an out, there’s never something given without something taken away. She was honest. She did say what she was going to do. She never offered a single promise. Betrayal is a reflexive emotion for him, though, and he still feels it like a punch. Leaving is a choice. One he has made more often than any other. Being let go of is something he isn’t used to.

“It’s time to go Sasuke.” Fuyuki says in her most reasonable voice. “We’re done now. It’s time to go home.”
He decides to take Suigetsu for a ride. Sort of.

“We have legs.” Suigetsu whines again. “Why aren’t we on the ground?”

“This is the fastest way to Ishigakure.” Sasuke says bored already, “and you want the Kiba.”

Suigetsu’s hands clench. “Yeah I do.”

“Then shut up.” Sasuke turns and walks away. If he’s being honest he’s not thrilled about being hundreds of metres in the air either. *The Tengu* is a merchant fleet that Giri has finagled into becoming the fastest delivery service on the continent. Despite what might be whispered in bars or brothels Giri is not founded on the fact that Hashira Fuyuki has the best ass on any kunoichi to have ever lived, it’s powered by a ruthless business sense coupled with an understanding of all the little loopholes of shinobi practices. For instance when travelling merchants cross from one country to another the rate at which they’re taxed is measured in weight over distance. Because of this those who can afford to use storage scrolls to transport large amounts in comparatively small weight. Others use the untaxed shortcuts favoured by bandits and hire missing-nin to protect the cargo. Some use the delivery options offered by port cities like Wave to carry it over the ocean where tax is still being hotly debated.

Giri have flying ships.

Sasuke had heard wild rumors about *Tengu* prior to joining Giri. His personal favourite is that the ships are powered by the hearts of wayward virgins tricked from their marital beds before the marriage could be consummated. Sasuke has no idea what nutcase came up with that one.

Along with the pardon, Giri has gifted him with a set of limited use passes through their network. He has three flight passes, two over water, one for safe harbour and one for safe passage. Most of this is simply to make life easier should Konoha not go so smoothly. Dosa had been very clear that they could not and would not extract him but should he get to a designated Giri holdout they’d take him back no questions asked. It’s a pretty standard promise. Missing-nin who band together have to look out for each other not to mention that reintegration is close to impossible.

Suigetsu stalks back over to him, no more put together than when he left. “We are going to fucking land soon or so help me I will not be responsible for my actions.”

Sasuke gives him a dour onceover. “We could just put you overboard.”

Suigetsu rolls his eyes. He’s never been impressed or intimidated by Sasuke’s sarcasm.

If extremely pressed Sasuke will admit that he picked Team Hebi based on a wild mix of comfort, usefulness and poorly placed boundaries. Orochimaru collected a bunch of weird traits and weirder expressions of trauma in the kids he lured to Oto; Suigetsu, Karin and Juugo are some of the best examples. Perfectly capable of respecting his needs and following his orders, completely incapable of acting like competent human beings the rest of the time.

They begin the circling descent into Ishigakure. It’s a common enough stop with a little wooden platform set up to receive them a few hours walk from the village itself but near a well stocked town. People mill around below them, carts of oxen and important looking officials. Suigetsu keeps a wary eye on it as they spiral closer. Sasuke is looking over the small crowd. Brown hair, blonde hair, no hair. Too tall, too short, wearing too many clothes. A small pale hand shoots up and Sasuke raises one in acknowledgement.
Karin gives a little wave.

Sasuke will never in this lifetime be the kind of sensor Karin is.

She’s standing by Juugo when they depart the ship. Sheer presence parts the crowd between them. That and Suigetsu’s huge sword. Instead of her customary purple she’s changed into a long sleeved rose coloured shirt. Juugo is wearing a similar shirt in a warm blue tone. He raises an eyebrow at the choices. Juugo shrugs, Karin preens for the three seconds it takes for her to notice Suigetsu.

“Why is she here.”

“Why is he here.”

Sasuke smirks. “He wants the sword.” He steps around the two of them, drawing a little ring with his movements so he’s standing next to Juugo.

“Oh hell no,” Karin hisses, stepping in too close to Suigetsu. “I’m taking that for Uzushio.”

“Fight me you fucking bitch-” Suigetsu snarls back.

Juugo crosses his arms, humming thoughtfully. “Perhaps this was a bad idea.”

“Hn,” Sasuke rests a hand on his sword, casual and authoritative. Juugo makes a quiet noise before assuming his ready position. Sasuke is going to try waiting out their stupidity.

Juugo coughs politely.

Sasuke rolls his eyes, crosses his arms and clearly announces, “We won’t work together again after this.”

Karin and Suigetsu stop squabbling to turn to look at him.

Sasuke shrugs, “I’m going back to Konoha, Suigetsu is going to Kiri, Juugo will stay with Giri and Karin will go to Uzu.”

Karin sniffs delicately. “Back to Konoha?”

“That was my deal.” Sasuke replies. Karin is frowning at him, which is only minimally better than the unhappy hunch of Juugo’ shoulders. If Suigetsu does anything other than be his crass, annoying self Sasuke may abandon them right here. “We should start scouting out those swords.”


Karin shrugs thoughtfully. “I think I’ve got one.”

“No sushi.” Suigetsu grumbles. “I am sick of the sushi.”

“Because you’re a tasteless ingrate who only eats it raw.”

“It’s a fucking fad.” Suigetsu crosses his arms. “Fish is raw.”

“Isn’t it fucking cannibalism for you anyway? Who cares how you eat your cousin Kaito or whatever-”

“I actually have-”

“Oh, fuck off.” Karin huffs. “That is not the point. The point is dumplings.”
“Dumplings?” Suigetsu says with less ire and more interest. “I could do dumplings.”

Someone told Karin there was an inn that did the best dumplings on this side of the continent. Team Hebi are totally willing to put that claim to the test.

In Oto there were war orphans, normal orphans, freed slaves, second or third generation missing-nin, the odds and ends of clans that had died off, those who had seen their entire families exterminated and those who did the exterminating. In Oto there was no safe dinner conversation.

Except, of course, for the food.

Orochimaru confided to Sasuke one day that he found it fucking hysterical that he’d put together a legion of food snobs. Sasuke learnt to find it funny too.

Juugo knows the inn and so leads the way with one big shoulder and a small bird tucked into the hood of his coat. Suigetsu snorts and looks pointedly at the bird. Birds like that one have given away their position more times than not, not that anyone would dream of trying to separate Juugo from it. Mostly because he’d physically separate their heads from their bodies.

They find themselves a low traditional style table at the inn. There’s sake in glazed cups and fancy complimentary entrees that offend Suigetsu immediately.

Suigetsu eats his fried and battered fish head mulishly. “It’s a trap. This is cheap filler.”

“It isn’t dumplings.” Karin says almost agreeably. She’d sniffed at hers once before sliding it to Juugo who appears to be the only person at the table who does not care at all. Sasuke slips his in front of Juugo too. The sake at least is excellent quality if not particularly interesting.

Juugo smiles, pleased, and turns to Karin. “What do they have you doing in Uzushio, Karin?”

“I run it.” Karin says defensively. “Orochimaru had me running his base you know.”

“Yeah,” Suigetsu waves a hand dismissively, entirely so Karin can take her cue to growl at him. “But they don’t do his shit do they?”

“No. But we do a lot of sealing, forging and advanced chakra techniques.” Her eyes go dreamy at the thought. “When we finally recover all the sealing techniques that have been looted we’re going to set up testing labs and rebuild the Great Library.”

“That sounds nice.” Juugo says sincerely. “Will they appoint you as Kage?”

Karin blushes. “Me? No way.”

“You’re the last pure blood Uzumaki.” Sasuke points out. “And you have the power reserves.”

Karin blushes again, waving her hands. “Even so-”

“You’re shit in a fight.” Suigetsu muses. “But you’re good back up.”

Karin scowls. “What the fuck Suigetsu.”

“See,” Suigetsu says with complete confidence. “That’s the attitude I’m talking about. Don’t let anyone ever tell you you’re too nice for the job.”

Sasuke and Juugo watch as they descend into chaos.
With a smile on his face Juugo leans over to whisper, “I think we’re doing okay.”

“Hn.” Sasuke smirks, “could be worse.”

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Travelling with Hebi is different from any other team Sasuke has ever been on. For one he picked them they weren’t picked for him. Because of this he finds himself more willing to overlook character flaws that would otherwise drive him to violence.

Take, for instance, the horror that is Karin and Suigetsu actively working together.

Karin can’t track the man they’re tailing because ‘I don’t fucking know Sasuke he decided he didn’t want to fucking exist today and also fucking eat me this is the fifth time you’ve fucking asked’ and Sasuke does not want to know what happens when he asks again. Suigetsu followed Karin’s shitty temper by revealing that he knew who they were looking for just not where. Karin could give them where within a fairly large radius. Since for once they were on the same wavelength they elected to work together. Sasuke hopes no one was hoping to have a nice day.

Karin leads Suigetsu to an area covered in forest, huge trees spreading up towards the sky. There’s a split in the path ahead, just past a small town they’ll stop to refresh themselves in. Karin and Suigetsu have been accosting people they come across, interrogating them and then disposing of them appropriately when they have no useful answers.

Karin says with the air of someone to bored to go on. She’s looking at her nails rather than the small man they’d accosted on his morning walk. “I’ll cut you in half.”

Suigetsu grins at the man. “I’ll pickle your tongue in your mouth.”

“I’ll take your tongue and cut it in half and put it back in your mouth.”

“I know things.” Karin says deadpan. “I know so many terrible things.”

They glare at each other. The person they’re intimidating looks ready to expire on the spot. When they stop glaring at each other they return to glaring at their victim.

“That guy eats people,” Suigetsu points over his shoulder at Juugo. “Do you want that?”

“Karin. Suigetsu.” Sasuke says irritably. “Juugo is not going to eat anyone.”

“Why not?” Suigetsu whines.

“Because,” Sasuke replies, “I do not want to upset his constitution.”

Suigetsu scowls but returns eagerly enough to knife based threats. Sasuke sighs internally, no one appreciates his humor.

“Look,” Karin says irritably. “We just want to know which village this guy lives in.”

The guy throws up his hands. “The next one! The one after this! Please leave me alone.”

Suigetsu scowls. “You could have just fucking said.” He pushes the other man away from him, striding forward while muttering under his breath.

“Sorry,” Karin says insincerely. “He didn't get his vitamins today. Also, he’s an asshole.” Then she starts after him.
Sasuke shrugs, more to loosen his shoulders than to apologise to the man sprawled on the ground. Juugo helps him up but puts a little too much force behind it. The man scurries off in the opposite direction from them the second he’s let go. Flexing his hands, Juugo frowns after him.

“What a dick.” Suigetsu says when they’ve all caught up. “I had some great lines in there.”

Sasuke tells them to shut up for the rest of the walk. He is thoroughly sick of the talking.

Karin brushes him when they’re approaching the village they’ve been looking for. “There’s one signature that feels right. I’ve got him.”

Suigetsu grins. That’s as good as a death warrant.

“Suigetsu.” Sasuke pauses, he doesn’t want him to go too far, they’ve got to get away from here and it’s almost nice to not have to think about who’s trying to kill you. “Don’t make a mess.”

Suigetsu shrugs -no promises- and takes Karin by the elbow. She spins on him with a kick and off they go. Juugo trails behind Sasuke humming to himself. The village is small and sleepy, populated by women in aprons, vegetable gardens and crying children. He’s almost sorry for what’s about to be unleashed. Juugo passes him, walking faster towards the other two. Sasuke keeps up hands jammed in his pockets. Karin and Suigetsu have stopped outside a non-descript house with a beautiful garden in front of it. There is a man of some 30 plus years, swords in hand, calmly waiting for them.

“How did he know?” Suigetsu whines.

“Maybe it was the people you kept threatening.” Sasuke answers. If they don’t want people to see them coming they need to stop yelling their arrival.

The man takes his stance, chin tipping up with defiance. “Come, you filth.”

“Well alright then,” Suigetsu grins maniacally. “We’ve got ourselves a show.”

“Worst,” Karin spits but dashes out of the way taking her position behind Juugo. She’ll be their tactician, like always. “Just let them at each other, maybe one of them will die.”

“You’re a peach Karin,” Suigetsu says, sword coming over his shoulder. He squares his stance. It’ll be a quick one. The older man has a wealth of experience but he doesn’t have Suigetsu’s drive, his need to kill. Most times wanting it more clinches the win.

Juugo frowns, shrugging off his pack. He’s staring at the near fight clearing deciding how to get in it.

Sasuke raises a hand to stop him, “No.” It’ll be over in a few moments anyway. “Let him do this himself.”

The fight begins when the man takes a swipe at Suigetsu, one sword up the other already moving to defend the parry that Suigetsu makes. It’s almost interesting, in that the older man has an amazing amount of skill predicting Suigetsu two even three moves ahead. Suigetsu is keeping pace, making ground, carving chunks in the other man’s defense. Sasuke has already called it for Suigetsu though, so he pays as much mind to the process as he would the workings of a kitchen appliance. The older man flicks a hand up between strikes and flips through familiar hand signs, finishing with a finger to his lips. Ah, a katon.

Sasuke dutiful signals to his team and leaps back out of the way just as a huge plume of fire heads
straight for Suigetsu. It’s a spinning fireball technique, wide range, and Sasuke is somewhat sorry he wasn’t paying attention. Suigetsu grins, water bullets flying, pulling his sword up to block the worst of it. A fireball bounces of his sword, still lit and rains down at an odd angle towards the house.

The fireball bounces off a tin roof, off a garden statue, rolls through a row of vegetables and comes to rest in a patch of knee high weeds tipped with purple flowers.

“Is that?” Karin squeals.

“Sparkweed.” Juugo groans.

They all jump back as the weeds catch fire. Suigetsu meets his opponent again, sending out a huge clang of noise. At the same moment the weeds release a noxious plume of smoke, sparks emitting and raining the area with little embers. Neither of them acknowledge the sudden building fire sweeping around them. The house is sparking up along with the carefully potted plants.

Juugo sighs.

If asked Sasuke doesn’t quite recall what happens with the rest of the fight, he doesn’t care and everything was on fire. In actuality he had a very wary eye on it should one of them produce something more headache inducing than a forest fire, but it simply wouldn’t do to let anyone know he was the least bit worried. It’s over at the same moment the fire hits a fever pitch. Suigetsu cleaves the man’s head from his body with an ugly squelching noise adding a lovely metallic note to the woodsmoke. Suigetsu rips the Kiba off the dead man’s corpse, tucks one onto his hip and hands the other to Karin. She pulls out a thin scroll and seals it away.

Suigetsu shakes his head sadly. “Fucking figures this’d end up with a village on fire.”

Karin leans against Suigetsu’s side for a brief second and then rounds on him so they’re face to face. “Put out the damn fire you lazy piece of shit.”

“Maybe they will give you the hat.” Suigetsu says suggestively. It’s an awkward time for the tone so Sasuke has to assume it’s some undercurrent he’s missed. Either way both he and Juugo look at both of them with no small amount of bafflement.

“Get fucked,” Karin pokes him in the chest with a red nailed finger. “And put out the fire.”

Suigetsu gives her the finger and then goes to do as she says.

“Not a bad ending considering how we started.” Juugo stretches his arms above his head then drops them. His hand falls down heavy on Sasuke’s shoulder. “I’m glad to have you as a friend. I’m not sure I’ve said that enough.”

Sasuke smiles briefly and clasps Juugo’s hand where it rests on his shoulder. “I’m going to leave while they’re occupied.”

Juugo chuckles and waves him off. Sasuke is dead certain they’ll meet again. Maybe he’ll find them himself in a few years. He takes one last look behind him, sharingan on, and then leaves quickly and quietly. It’s not a bad snapshot to have. Karin has resorted to using her chains to manage Suigetsu, who is either helping the fire or taking the longest possible route to putting it out, Juugo is calling the small woodland animals and pets out of their homes. There’s an enterprising rabbit on his head. Suigetsu has one sword and Karin has the other. They’re all smiling.

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He starts the long walk from Ishigakure to Konoha by collecting the bounty on a few chunnin level missing-nin. Killing them is easy work for a decent amount of coin.

Walking is in itself a refreshing experience. For the first time in his life there’s nothing to rush to. It’s a free sky: so high, so blue. So filled with things that he’s never seen before. He flicks his sharingan on and off. At sunset the sky fills with the lush pink and orange of change. At night the stars are so bright it feels like he’s counting the freckles on some great dragon’s back. At dawn he lies in the grass and lets the light wake him. He takes a long path winding his way down and around to his birthplace. He has one goal left, one last thing to do before it’s all done and he never thought he’d get this far. There is so little between him and the freedom to finally, finally put this all to rest.

So for the first time he lets himself linger.

The stars lead him into the mouth of a valley, green and bright with flowers. He doesn’t put people to places very often. People are memories. He sees them clearly enough. But he’ll cast a look onto the calm water and think Juugo, onto the high point of a knife and think Yumi, onto the twisting branches of an out of place blooming flower and think Sakura. In darker moments he names the other things. A tree changing out of season, riddled with the beautiful but deadly rings of a strangling vine earns Orochimaru. Just as a black expanse that appears in the middle of night is called father. Just as the ephemeral falling of flowers, the scent, is mother.

The clear sky is called Naruto. The fading mist of dawn is called Brother.

Eventually the wild loses its appeal and he wanders into towns. Twice he stays with acquaintances from Giri, twice in the rooms of people he’s bedded. The money starts to run a little too low so he takes odd jobs here and there. On the fifth job he knows he’s attracted bad company. He was never taken out of the Bingo Book but once Giri claimed him the little edelweiss next to his name kept him from being the target of bounty hunters. Freedom comes with costs.

The smart thing would be to head straight for a major city, find himself a notary and get his ass to Konoha. He chooses to travel to an out of the way town recently hit by a landslide.

Relief work is its own pain in the ass. It’s a surprisingly common job even for higher ranked ninja. What the people are looking for is quick effective use of jutsu and other skills, the faster the better. No small podunk village wants any more attention than necessary, they certainly don’t want the hassle of ninja politics. He can’t say he blames them.

It is a disaster when the arrive. A whole hillside has fallen, rocks and dirt and broken houses. There is nothing to save. It is Sasuke job to clear a path from the houses at the top to the ones at the bottom. There is a thick mass of mud and trees between them and the worst affected areas. He begins with fire, then water and when none of the works he switches to the earth jutsu that tend to work poorly for him. It’s slow work but with every step of progress he finds something new. A piece of broken vase, A broken hand. Even a puppy that had survived the catastrophe by hiding inside a sturdy box. He places each find behind him and keeps moving, sharingan on while he looks for survivors.

“Help.”

His eyes widen and he scans again for life signs, for survivors. There, by an outcrop of trees-

The woman is on her front, half crushed underneath a tree. She has just enough maneuverability to twist her arm out from where it’s pinned.
“Please,” the woman begs, “please, my child. Take her. Please.”

The woman turns on her side pushing a small tangerine clothed bundle out from underneath her. She pushes and pushes even though Sasuke can see that it’s killing her faster.

“As you wish,” Her fingers are growing weaker on the bundle, a small pink hand reaching out to grasp at her fingers. “Please.”

He can’t stand it. He can’t stand looking at it. He gathers the bundle in his arms. A small thing, with blotchy skin and a mop of mouse brown hair. It matches the mother’s. Ever so slowly he stands up, checking his weight and adjusting to the new vulnerabilities.

“What do I do with her?” he asks. “What do I-”

“Thank you.” The woman says. She breathes out, one chest rattling gust of air. Her hand stops moving.

Dead. Fuck.

Three chakra signatures flick on and off, rushing away into the wild. Shinobi. Double fuck. He’s just been made rescuing a fucking baby.

He stumbles back down the path he cut. Into the trees, baby tucked close, making his way through the woods. When night falls the baby gets hungry. It’s an awful thing to listen to, this small thing all alone but for him, all alone but for a boy incapable of being the thing it needs right now. He never spent time with the youngest Uchiha, always thought it beneath him. He feels that mistake keenly now. The baby cries on and on and although they’re warm and safe, they’re hungry and scared and there is nothing he can do to change that. Orphans don’t do well. They just don’t.

People need families, children need families. Maybe it would be better to-

No. Not yet. He’s a lot of monsters but he’s not that one. Not yet.

He tucks her closer and hums some pointless pop tune, then a long dirge from his own childhood. It’s by a stream later, his finger in the baby's mouth to give it something to chew on, that his life is hit by yet another thunderbolt.

“So he’s dead then?”

Sasuke bites his tongue to stop the instinctive flinch. Maybe that was what Team 7 learnt all those years ago, not teamwork but the instinct to duck for cover when Kakashi snuck up on them. Sharingan on and he can see that Kakashi’s posture is relaxed but his chakra is rolling. Sasuke flicks it off, wrinkles his nose at the headache thumping behind his eyeballs, turns to face his old teacher.

“Sasuke.” Kakashi says.


“Yes. We’ve established that.” He smiles, eye curving up, “maa, is she yours?”

“How can you tell her gender?”

Kakashi blinks, reaching up to scratch his nose. “Do you need, uh, assistance?”

“Yes,” Sasuke adjusts the baby. “Yes, he’s dead. I didn’t kill him.”
“Who did?”

“Well.” Actually, he’s not entirely sure still. The obvious answer is Fuyuki but after spending so much time in her company he’s not sure she’d do it herself. Even odds are bad odds in this line of work. Itachi and Fuyuki were cut from too similar cloth to be happy with a straight up fight. “Giri.”

“Oh,” Kakashi says intelligently, “and you?”

“Holding a baby?”

It occurs to him that he still has the damn pardon with him. He shoves his hand into his pants and rumbles around earning a disapproving look from Kakashi. Since Sasuke isn’t the one to read porn in public he doesn’t give a shit. Once he tugs it free he lobs it at Kakashi’s head. He sidesteps it at first picking it up very gingerly when he realises it’s not a weapon. Sasuke rolls his eyes as he says, “Here. You’re a jounin.”

Kakashi rolls his eyes as well, because he’s a real princess, and snaps open the scroll. His eyes go wide.

“I see,” Kakashi says softly, “I’ll escort you back, then.”

“I have to do something first.”

Kakashi snorts. “No you don’t.”

Sasuke scowls and shakes his head, looking down at the bundle in his arms. “This is a goddamn baby Hatake.” Then, softer, “It’s a baby. I have to take it somewhere safe.”

“Why didn’t you leave her with her mother?”

“Her mother’s dead. Landslide.”

“I can’t let you go.” Kakashi says solemnly. He’s looking at Sasuke trying to convey some deeper meaning, unfortunately for him Sasuke isn’t interested in anything but getting this baby somewhere warm and safe. Whatever bone Kakashi has to pick with him can wait.

“Then don’t.” Sasuke snaps, the baby is getting really wriggly, small hands grasping and grabbing at his shirt. How do women stand this? “Just don’t blame me if someone tries to stab you for being an asshole.”

“That’s mean,” Kakashi comments, stashing away the pardon, “but, I suppose, fair enough.”

Travelling with a baby is insane. She gets tired, she cries, she’s hungry. It takes a day and a half to get to the nearest Giri outpost and by the time he does he’s ready to let the clan die out. Who knew they were so much work. He dumps the baby with Kakashi while he tries to find someone he can leave her with more permanently.

“Seriously?” The man keeping guard at the Giri owned spa squints at him. “A baby?”

“An orphanage.” Sasuke asks completely harried at this point. “Anything.”

“Well, you could just give it to the boss. She’s got like a thing about babies.” The man replies helplessly.

He’ll take it. “Is she here?”
The man nods. “Little commune at the top of the hill, can’t miss it.”

When he gets back to Kakashi and the baby his former sensei takes one look at him and dumps the squalling mass on Sasuke. For some unknowable reason the baby has taken a firm liking to him, calming every time he holds her. Still, it takes him a whole half hour to calm her down again. By the time they reach the commune the baby is peacefully asleep. Sasuke knocks on the door and waits anxiously for someone on the other side to open it. He thanks any gods still talking to him when it swings open.

Fuyuki is holding a baby bottle with a cigarette in her mouth. Sasuke is too glad to see her and confirm that she might know what to do with a baby to comment. She looks at him as if she’s never seen him before then slowly takes the cigarette from her mouth and crushes it underfoot.

“You’re fucking kidding me, Uchiha. Am I the only person you know with a baby?”

“Take her from me Fuyuki or so fucking help me-”

“That is a baby watch your language.”

Kakashi laughs. Fuyuki gives him a look acknowledging his existence but not his right to talk to her. She takes the baby from him and coos at her. The baby waves her little fist. Sasuke had liked her for not making much noise on the road, he might love her a little for reaching out now.

Fuyuki’s cool gaze levels on Kakashi and takes a slow meandering assessment. Since Kakashi isn’t a baby killer and Konoha has no actual beef with Giri, Sasuke isn’t foreseeing much trouble.

“Well, Hatake,” she says at length. “You look better not dying in a river.”

“Hashira Fuyuki.” Kakashi smiles and turns to Sasuke. “Is it her baby?”

Sasuke recoils. “No.”

Fuyuki gives him a sly glance. “Is it his baby?”

Both Sasuke and Kakashi pale and shout, “No!”

“Would someone, other than the baby, like to come inside and explain their actions?”

Sasuke grumbles but steps past her The house is halfway between an actual home and a boarding house. There are paintings on the wall, sweeping black lines and red prints. Mismatched rugs and far too much of the wrong furniture. The house itself is shaped oddly, sweeping far too low at the back and warping awkwardly into an open kitchen. He finds the main room with little trouble and stands listening to Kakashi and Fuyuki awkwardly try and give each other enough space. He doesn’t quite turn when they enter just allows his body to drift towards the biggest threat. She places a warning hand on Kakashi’s arm and after a few terse words he follows Sasuke into the living room. He thinks he hears less than five minutes but he wouldn’t put money on it. Kakashi takes up an odd space of wall, crossing his arms and leaning back so he can see the whole room. Sasuke throws himself into a mismatched blue and brown chair, crossing his ankles on a low wooden table.

Fuyuki follows after him, stopping to grab a bottle from a cabinet and pouring herself a glass. She doesn’t offer to share. “He took a contract.”


“That’s his story to tell, I think.”
“Shouldn’t we talk about the baby?” Sasuke interjects.

Kakashi and Fuyuki hit him with identical dismissive expressions. Sasuke huffs and tucks the baby closer to his chest. Oblivious, the child brings a chubby little hand to its mouth.

Kakashi looks back at Fuyuki. “And you have no responsibility for him at all?”

She scoffs. “No more than any of his other commanding officers.”

“Is that what you are?” Kakashi says softly.

There’s no air in the room. The baby in Sasuke’s arms quiets down, hunkering down into the folds of his loose shirt. He knows how the baby feels.

“You know,” she says voice sly, “he’s house broken now.”

A glimmer of amusement flickers across Kakashi’s face. “Oh?”

“Works well in a team, bathes regularly, pisses where and when you tell him too…”

“Oh my,” Kakashi says faux-breathless, “my cute little delinquent?”

“Mmhmm.” Fuyuki looks smug. “You should go.”

Kakashi nods already beginning to stand. “That’s all we needed. Come along.”

Fuyuki is still radiating smugness as she lets them out. She plucks the baby from his arms, tucking it into hers. Sasuke almost groans, Kakashi is approaching a sulk at break neck speed. As he crosses the threshold of her home Fuyuki grabs him by the end of his hair and yanks, “Oh, Uchiha?”

Sasuke scowls as he pulls out of her hold. “Fucking what Hashira?”

She smiles, baby stuffing the length of her hair in it’s mouth. Sasuke looks at them both and feels an odd sense of accomplishment. Fuyuki mimes a scissoring action. “Cut your hair.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time on Survival: the beginning of a new journey, not without it's complications. Kakashi suffers, although Sasuke would say it was him.

Fun Facts:
- The cat is not in this chapter, nor the next. It hasn't been forgotten about, don't worry.
- The watchword for the next arc is legacy. The watchwords for this arc were: conscience and choice.
- Fuyuki is not Hashira's first name. She also has fourteen siblings.
- Shikamaru suffered A LOT during this chapter. I might put that in as a side story.
- Kakashi tried to make it seem cool but it was literally sheer coincidence they ran into each other.
- 'A bunch of charmingly undersocialized cats holding hands underneath a very pretty human suit' is one of the cornerstone pieces of characterisation for this fic.
- Can you believe this entire fic was going to be 40,000 words long. Can you believe
this whole arc was going to be 10,000 words long. Can you believe I briefly thought about dropping it all as a 50,000 word chunk. Wow. 2016. What a wild year.
Arc II: Bone-House (Or, Sons of Nobody)

Chapter Summary

From Old English bānhūs (“the body, the chest, breast”, literally “the bone-house”), equivalent to bone + house. (plural bonehouses) A building for holding the remains of the dead.

Chapter Notes

What a fun title right?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Both Kakashi and Sasuke have lived with the knowledge that should Sasuke come home it would be Kakashi’s duty to kill him. Naruto might nominally be his closest bond but Sasuke is Kakashi’s responsibility. This is the Will of Fire. This is the spirit in which Hashirama killed Madara at the Valley of the End. Some days Sasuke would even be willing to admit that it played a role in why he stayed away.

On the 5th night as they sneak past the border patrols on the border of Sky, Sasuke makes a remarkable discovery: Kakashi is old. He is old and he is tired of Sasuke’s shit.

Sasuke already knows he’s not going to be what Kakashi imagined mostly because Kakashi is dead wrong about what happened to him while he was gone.

Sasuke dealt with Orochimaru by accepting him for exactly what he was, moving all of his morals to the right and settling into a twilight existence. When he finally got to Oto a lot of what made that power hungry boy had to go away. He had to go from being an eagle to being a snake and to do that Sasuke had to accept a kind of blindness. Where Orochimaru opened up the world in a way Konoha couldn’t the cost was every last thing Konoha might have tried to protect him from. Power has a cost and with Orochimaru it was every last thing he wanted and then some.

That was never Kakashi’s style.

“It would have sucked.” Sasuke remarks as they’re lying down for the night. Kakashi has decided to stay on watch all night. Sasuke doesn’t really care. If he wants to be miserable with paranoia so be it.

“What?” Kakashi says suspiciously.

“If you had to kill me.” Sasuke clarifies. “That would have been bad.”

“Yes.” Kakashi agrees. “It would have been.”

--

“Who the fuck are you?” Hiki says instead of hello.
Sasuke flashes one of his passes. “Two rooms.”

Hiki carries on as if nothing had happened at all. “See, I know a pretty fucking princess by the name of Uchiha Sasuke but I don’t know any men with actual fucking jawlines.”


“You gonna tell me where to go nadeshiko? Where’s all your pretty hair anyway? That was some beauty catalogue bullshit.”

“The actual princess told me to cut it.”

“Huh,” he scratches his chin thoughtfully, “you ain’t with us anymore?”

“I’m doing what she told me to.”

“Well, your pretty boy companion is going to run into Suigetsu’s phallic metaphor if you’re not careful.”

“Oh fuck,” Sasuke turns and dashes for the galley where, yes, that is Suigetsu

He stops with his sword an inch from Kakashi’s throat. For his part Kakashi is nonplussed, hands up, comfortable with being threatened. Sasuke did not miss this about him. “Who is this prick?!”

“Really?” Kakashi pouts. He sounds almost wounded.

“Suigetsu.” Sasuke tries.

Suigetsu waves his huge ass sword around. “Shut up. Here I am thinking your pretty boy ass is going to be wrapping flowers around flag poles or whatever shit-”

“I don’t think I’ve ever gotten to do that.” Kakashi pouts even more. Somehow.

“-and I find out that you’re, what, taking a fucking vacation? Akatsuki is still hunting your dumb fuck ass-”

Kakashi’s eyebrows bolt up. “What.”

“Yeah! Because they think he killed Itachi and stole their magic fucking lighter! Any fucking way-”

“Shut up.” Sasuke snarls.

Suigetsu snarls right back. “Fuck you! Karin’s worried, Juugo’s worried, and I was closest so-”

Sasuke draws his sword and runs Suigetsu through the shoulder with it. He obligingly turns into a puddle. In the two seconds it takes Suigetsu to figure out what to do next Sasuke flares his chakra and glares at the other occupants of the room. They flee.

“We’re not going to come back here.” Kakashi sounds mournful.

“Suigetsu,” Sasuke sheathes his sword, “on the off chance that Akatsuki for some reason decides to prioritise bothering me over hunting the bijuu I think between myself and Hatake Kakashi we will be able to evade them long enough to get to one of the Giri settlements. Not to mention that until you started screaming everyone thought I was still with Giri. Akatsuki does not want to fight the only other rebel organisation on the continent with multiple S-Rank shinobi. They certainly don’t
“I want to do it for something I don’t even have.”

“I’m not sorry.”

“Never said you were.” Sasuke rolls his eyes. “Whatever. You’re paying for the first two rounds.”

Because Suigetsu has never learnt to stop arguing, he folds his arms and mutters, “You don’t know they wouldn’t torture you.”

That’s a laughable statement for so many reasons. As if Sasuke has no resistance to torture. As if he wouldn’t cheerful tell the first black cloaked figure he saw to have fun fighting across the continent just to get the opportunity to fight Giri’s elite. Sasuke shakes his head and heads for the bar. “They’ve got umeshu.”

“Neat.” Suigetsu drops his arms and follows after him. Kakashi disappears upstairs, possibly to write this new and fascinating development down in his diary.

He and Suigetsu talk shit for a little bit. Who went where, what did they eat, what did they say, has anyone heard from so and so recently. Suigetsu and Karin are playing a long game of mutual aggravation that will end in marriage or death; either way it will take up a significant portion of their lives. Juugo has possibly found a something-friend. He’s been tight lipped as regards to gender and orientation. It doesn’t seem serious but Suigetsu is watching it keenly, still unwilling to admit that Juugo is a close friend and not a timebomb.

“You went to Kiri.” Sasuke says, drinking his beer. The umeshu is better but too sweet for his tastes. The beer is okay and it has never been beers job to be more than that.

Suigetsu grimaces. “It’s different. Terumii was a rebel, right? But she likes the system. She just likes it best not run by a bunch of crazy murderous fucks.” He downs his drink and pours another. “I don’t get that. It’s literally exactly the same but we don’t kill everyone, which, frankly, was the best bit.”

“Giri rubbed off on you.” Sasuke muses. The Suigetsu he knows would never have been for peace and amity. No one lets you cut people up with a giant sword.

“Nah,” Suigetsu shakes his head. “That shit was- It’s all ideas and ideals. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“I suppose not.” Sasuke comments.

“But here we fucking are,” Suigetsu mutters, “drinking in a new age.”

Sasuke snorts. “Not quite.”

“Yeah?” Suigetsu drains his cup and points one long pale finger straight up. “Who’s taking you home right now? The last sharingan on the continent, once a traitor now a hero to the downtrodden. Ain’t that a new age?”

“Fuck off,” Sasuke replies. He’s not a hero to anybody. “Besides I thought you believed that bullshit about Akatsuki.”

“Not quite.” Suigetsu shrugs. “But there’s something funky going on there you gotta admit. How long were we with that weirdo? And how terrified was he of attracting their attention? I mean, I’d be afraid of the big bad Uchiha Madara too.”
“He wasn’t afraid.” Sasuke muses, although it isn’t quite right. For a man made of so much hubris he was diligent about not aggravating Ame.

“Right.” Suigetsu says, clearly not buying it. “I’m just saying secret Uchiha isn’t bad odds.”

“It’s not amazing ;” he mutters to his cup, but grimly manages the rest of Suigetsu’s mocking anyway.

Suigetsu leaves with his current team. By his own accounting they’re a ‘bunch of lily livered assholes with no respect for swordsmanship’ but otherwise not too bad. Kakashi finds Sasuke while he’s changing into a new shirt; at some point Suigetsu got umeshu on his.

He leans on the door finding no problem with watching Sasuke change. “You explained yourself.”

Sasuke has his arms in the air, his head stuck in the hole, and of course Kakashi would choose this small indignity. He refuses to answer until they’re both wearing shirts. “What?”

“To the boy. You explained yourself.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I was...” What would Kakashi actually understand? He can’t really think of an analogous grouping in Konoha. “He was part of my team. In Oto.”

“I see,” Kakashi murmurs. He rubs at his nose as if he does.

...ANBU, maybe. Maybe that’s the closest thing to what his team was. He picked them for a suicide mission he didn’t get to run but the thought remains the same. He thought they were good enough to die with.

“...good.” Sasuke nods tersely to him and then exits the room.

“Oh my god.” Kakashi mutters.

Sasuke ignores him. Downstairs he finds tension in one of the larger sitting rooms. Doing his best not to upset whatever balance has been established, he takes a seat with his back to the wall. He pulls out a flask and pours out the last of his drink. Fuck. There’s no chance Kakashi will let him restock. He was bad enough about the smokes.

Next to him is a group of five shinobi all clearly from the same village. Four of them wear chunnin vests, one man the leader, wears a jounin uniform and a stark orange and red bandana. On the other side of the room is an assortment of Giri. Some are fighters, although not many, a few look like trained up civilians -always hell in a fight with shinobi, dubious competency makes for a lot of wild cards- and a few others are skilled enough that Sasuke has worked with them. One of them, a woman from Suna, inclines her head at him. The shinobi are outclassed and it looks like only some have the sense to know it.

Sasuke makes the mistake of catching the eye of one of the Giri contingent. He snarls, but the woman from Suna drops a word in his ear. In a flash his snarl turns to a smirk. “Don’t mind them, ” the man says with a sneer in the direction of the shinobi, “they’re still pissed we took their terribly run medical facility and turned it into a neutral settlement.”

One of the shinobi snaps up. “You’re fucking stealing money from us.”
“We are a benevolent organisation, here to bring a better world,” the man replies nastily, “maybe you should look a little closer to home, huh?”

“Maybe not now,” the woman from Suna says, flexing her thin tanned fingers. She meets Sasuke’s eyes with a nod. “Uchiha, good to see you.”

Sasuke nods back settling further back against the wall. The Giri contingent pours out in fits and starts. He really wishes he remembered the Suna woman’s name because she’s a hell of a manager.

Sasuke manages to stretch out his last drink until the room is clear. He turns to the shinobi table and without ado pours himself a drink from their pitcher. It’s shit. “What’s the real problem?” Blame curiosity, but that was weird, and if he’s going to be trapped here it would be better to know what he’s in for.

The jounin spits, literally, on the ground. “The fuck do you think you are? You’re the fucking Uchiha that’s flying the flag.”

Sasuke cocks an eyebrow. Now that doesn’t sound like him at all.

The jounin sneers revealing a badly healed split lip. “Like you don’t know,” he says disparagingly, “you took important historical artifacts from Frost that lead to the rebels overthrowing the fucking Daimyo. Water no longer has control of the cloth and jewel trade after what you did in Wave. All that shit has your name on it boy.”

Sasuke snorts. “I’m not hearing a problem. Corruption is bad, trade is good.”

“Yeah, pretty boy? You think that was the good of the fucking people? Frost was holding out against Giri until you did that, now with the rebels in power they have almost all the border countries between the major nations. Water relies on cloth and pearl trade to make up a significant portion of their capital. If they can’t maintain self sufficiency they’ll have to reopen negotiations with other nations. They’re fucking banned from trading with Fire and Lightning for another six years. It would have to be with the minor nations. You’ve handed Giri fucking hostages.”

“Again,” he drawls, “your problem is?”

The other man deflates. “I don’t want someone who spent her time in the war running black ops against civilian settlements with that much fucking leverage,” he replies wearily. “The same way I was fucking terrified when a man who could kill a thousand people in one afternoon got a Kage hat.”

It takes a moment to make the connection, ironically the Fourth Hokage’s war record is a closely held secret in Konoha. “Namikaze?” Fastest man alive, deadliest man in the 3rd war. Rumors that Konoha still has his signature jutsu make a significant bulk of why they haven’t had a serious takeover attempt.

“Yeah, fuck you Konoha for that one. Can you kill a thousand people before lunch? Can you kill all the wives, husbands and children of your enemies in the middle of the night without a single soul hearing it? ‘Cause they fucking can.” He shakes his head sadly. “Then we put them in charge of shit.”

“You’re not the only person who thinks that’s a bad thing.”

He snorts. “I got my men to look out for. This is a shitty fucking world but if you know what you’re doing you can get through it all right.” He glares accusingly. “Stop fucking with that.”
Sasuke refills his glass. “I’m no longer a part of Giri.”

“Yeah? How’d that happen?”

After a moment, he says, “there are some things you didn’t know you had a problem with until you had the option to have a problem with it.” He drains his beer with a grimace. It’s basically pig swill.

The man stares at him for a long time before he tips his glass. “I’ll drink to that.”

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Kakashi ditches him for whatever it is Sasuke assumes he was originally sent here to do around noon. After a brief flirtation with the thought of running away he instead chooses to dedicate himself to washing, brushing and maintaining his hair. He has dinner with the Giri contingent trading hair care products for bits and bobs that he misses from Otogakure. Someone has charms from the old shrine. Another has little red bean rolls that keep for months in the right conditions. He collects as many little things as he can and stores them away for later. He gleams a few things: a partisan mission, accompanying a diplomat, stronger ties with Frost and Water, but leaves it all alone. No business of his.

He finds Hiki sitting by himself on the porch overlooking the gardens. “Hey pretty princess,” Hiki grins over his bowl. “Have I got something to tell you.”

“Do you?” Sasuke flops onto the ground next to him. The sun is setting on a beautiful day. Through the trees the last rays of light are flickered onto the ground, the buds of flowers are curling up to sleep. There’s a strong dirt and water smell. Like new growth, like overturned earth.

“There was a woman once who gave birth to two sons, who both also had two sons-”

“So help me, Hiki, if you tell me that demon princess story-”

“You enjoyed the Tale of Sakane how am I meant to know where your taste levels even start. ” Hiki says snottily. “Do you know who Tatewaki Kazue was?”

“Warring States Era cartographer and poet. Her most famous work is *A Thousand Knives, A Thousand Leaves* from which the Land of Honey takes its personal motto. Her best work is widely considered to be *In the Electric Marshes* but most people find it too sinister. That, and it borrowed techniques from foreign works when a minimalist style was preferred at court.” Sasuke answers without missing a beat.

Hiki stares at him, dumbfounded, “...could you recite it?”

“In the west of ways, I found my passage. Light falls from our three shadows: the here, the now, the future past, that immovable pine that makes the cradle dance-”

“That was a joke!” Hiki holds up his hands, “Woah, slow down. Do you know what her name was before it was Tatewaki?”

Sasuke shakes his head.

“Uchiha.” Hiki crosses his arms triumphantly. “What do you think about that!”

His first thought is that the great crow monster described in the *Electric Marshes* must have been a cousin she hated. His second thought is that Hiki is never this free with information. “Was there
“No fucking fun at all,” Hiki scowls. “Someone found a cache of her work and is auctioning it off. And before you get snippy,” he says just as Sasuke is opening his mouth to blow him off, “you should know that among the manuscripts of poems you have apparently memorised there are four sealed scrolls with your clan crest on them. They were presented and checked for authenticity by our Kabuto. That is not, of course, a perfect measure, but it’s better than we would get from anyone who isn’t you. The auction will be in Tawatsukawa in five days.”

“That’s a resort town.” Sasuke balks. Full of casinos and bars and brothels. Everyone knows what goes on in that town. Sasuke can’t imagine a worse place to try and hold a secret auction.

Hiki grunts in agreement, “I don’t tell the black market what to do.”

Sasuke nods, already figuring out how he’s going to manipulate Kakashi into this. After a few moments Sasuke realises he hasn’t actually ended the conversation. He looks at Hiki who is calmly looking out into the gardens eating his half melted ice cream. He must sense Sasuke’s contemplation because he turns. With a smile and a wave he acquits Sasuke of social responsibility, “no thanks necessary, kid. Just a small kindness.”

Sasuke considers this, and leans back to watch the gardens as well.

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In the end Sasuke just goes to Tawatsukawa, Kakashi be damned.

It’s as easy as walking out in the middle of the morning, hopping onto a cart and keeping to himself. There’s a strong chance Kakashi would have understood why Sasuke has to follow this. He’s the last Hatake after all. But Kakashi is also a proven asshole and fucking difficult on top of that. Arguing would have sparked Sasuke’s minimal fuse.

Tawatsukawa is as gaudy as he recalls. The buildings are all level and made of the same shape and material. To distinguish themselves each proprietor has painted their building a different colour. The one closest to him is pale pink with bright orange birds on it. Compared to the lime green and shit purple brown atrocity across from it, it’s a blessing. Blue, red, orange and yellow, teal and neon. The silver lining is that Sasuke knows exactly what building he’s looking for. Down past the gold gilded casino and its pink marble doors, past the taupe brothels and yellow restaurants. All the way to a seedy little alcove that houses three things: accommodation, information brokers and the informal hit list that the Bingo Book occasionally draws from.

Sasuke heads straight for the one grey building in this colourful hellscapε pausing only to admire the bulletin board that houses all the wanted posters.

The Giri announcement covers a wall by itself, pages and pages overlapping. Some have been torn away and replaced, others have been pasted over as their bounties have been collected. At the tip is Fuyuki, an old rendering of her in her jonin uniform and an expensive scarf printed with dragons wrapped around her neck. She’s been graffitied to hell and back but her eyes remain untouched. Too full of power, of potential. Around her are legacies. Some Sasuke knows from before: the Mountain Boar, the Blue Viper, the Travellers, all of them a little closer to folklore. What was it she said to him, all that time ago? You’d be surprised by what people made up about you.

Sasuke falls somewhere in the bottom half of the middle.

It’s a strange picture. His hair is tied wrong, for starters. They have it in a low ponytail spiking up
and about. Instead of his carefully slicked and braided sides they’ve drawn conclusions based on older photos, spiking it down one half of his face. He’s frowning openly, an approximation of his sharingan spinning in the uncovered eye. Under his eyes is shaded in exhaustion, bruised and purple. His skin is perfectly pale. Sasuke has a thin scar that stretches from the corner of his lip to his ear. It’s obvious when he moves his mouth. It pulls.

This Sasuke has no such mark. Under his picture it has bare details: sharingan, fire aligned, kenjutsu specialist. Killed Orochimaru. Considered a medium-high risk. No preference for dead or alive.

Exactly the same as it was when he left Oto-gakure the first time.

He’d understood intellectually that Giri held him in stasis, like an insect in amber, but he hadn’t realised what it would be like to see the difference. Yumi’s name is up the wall three rows and six places over. It’s been changed recently; a new picture of her filed down teeth. Haru is a row down and nine places back: newer still, barely dry, he’s got a new nickname. Hiki is highest up the wall, below Dosa by two rows. Sasuke had guessed he’d been somewhat fearsome but he’d never checked the reality. Capturing and returning him to Suna is enough to retire on.

When no one was looking he was forgotten about. Like choosing to go, like being let go, he has no real reference for it. He’s always been Uchiha, and that has always been enough to keep him at the front of everyone’s minds. No new heads on his wall, no new victories, and he’s been shunted down to the same level as a high-level chunnin. With a gut full of misery he realises that some of his cocky bullshit was in fact just bullshit.

He turns his eyes to Akatsuki.

Far fewer of them have survived then he first thought. Their notices have been left up. Half out of infamy, their killers names sprayed across their posters. Half out of respect for what Akatsuki used to be: a hope for peace. Sasori is dead and it’s Haruno Sakura’s name sprayed over his face. They used pink paint, too; the curves of her name covering the young, sad looking boys features. Kisame was collected by Kirigakure, in conjunction with Konohagakure. The personal symbol of the Mizukage wipes him out. Kakuzu was killed, Sasuke presumes, by a fistful of lightning. The silver paint of Kakashi’s name is shared here and there in places. Deidara and Konan have defector and traitor written across their foreheads.

Itachi’s face is clear. All it says is deceased, uncollected.

The rest are still alive doing whatever it is Akatsuki is doing.

“Oi,” a man calls out, “if you’re done gawking everyone else is here.”

Sasuke raises an eyebrow. As he approaches the man grabs him by the arm. “Your way’s been bought boy.” He slides a small bundle into Sasuke’s shirt. “With regards from that silverfish of Giri’s. That’ll get you into the bidding.” Then he pushes Sasuke towards a door.

Sasuke cocks an eyebrow, nothing about Hiki suggests he has problems following through but he can’t exactly think of another meaning. Maybe a sex joke at his expense.

He enters into a cliche bar all low ceilings, smoke and the ground in smell of too many sweaty, bloody shinobi. There’s an empty stage. He isn’t the only one in the room. He spots two woman and a man lounging at small tables equidistant from each other. One of the men is wearing a strange mask, Sasuke glances him over, catching a strange red glint in his glass, but nothing more suspicious. Sasuke seats himself in a booth, back right to the corner, and takes out the bundle. Two
bidding cards: one for the initial auction and the other for the secret one. Winning the first bid is only half the battle whatever you win isn’t considered yours until it crosses out of Tawatsukawa. The second auction is for the information of the guy who wins the first. A head start.

There’s a second bundle inside the first. Three red cards one with Hashira’s name on it, two with the regular Giri stamp. The two stamped one’s are safe passage through Giri territory. The one with Hashira’s name on it is a one use direct contact.

“This seat taken?” The orange masked man slides into the booth in front of him. Sasuke makes brief eye contact, noticing his one eye, before sweeping down.

Sasuke pockets his spoils. “Does it matter?”

“Nope.” The man grins. “I’m Tobi.”

“Sasuke.” He does not grin back. “Do we have some sort of business?”

“Nah, but those guys coming in the door are a little freaked out by you, so I thought I’d keep you company.” There’s something off in the way he says it, all come hither and playful.

“I’m not looking for company.” Sasuke hedges. The room begins to fill with people, if Tobi doesn’t leave soon Sasuke will be stuck with him.

“I’m not offering it.” Tobi continues to give off waves of friendliness. “But I’ll buy you a drink anyway.”

Whatever. Sasuke jerks his head in a not un-positive way.

Tobi rocks from side to side as the auction gets underway. A pair of beautiful swan necked vases go up. They go high. A pair of books bound in red silk go too low for their value, but by the looks, the second auction for those will be fierce. Six tokens that Sasuke belatedly realizes represent three pairs of kids goes on and on and on. Judging by the symbols on the small pieces of porcelain the children are up for breeding rights. That sickens him, but he’s glad to see one of the women bidding furiously, and when she’s outdone, there is pure murder in her eyes. He notices a small symbol on her neck, a brand, the same as the one on the tokens.

“The entire collected works of Tatewaki Kazue,” the announcer pronounces boredly, “first bids?”

Sasuke raises his hand, showing the first of the free passes.

No one else bids.

Sasuke lowers his hand, feeling like an asshole, and lays it palm flat. Final offer.

Still no one bids.

“Oooo,” Tobi mock-whispers, “not that pop-u-lar.”

The announcer clears his throat, with a pointed glance at Tobi, he announces, “If there’s nothing else, sold. Collect your winnings.”

Sasuke rises, moving slowly he takes in the rest of the room, appearing for all the world as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened. He passes the woman from earlier, the one who was trying to save the children, and slips all his passes and a hastily written note directing her to the closest Giri hideaway into her pocket. If she notices she doesn’t give it away.
Tatewaki Kazue’s entire life work, incomplete works and personal diaries included, fits into a medium sized box of dark stained wood. The sides of the box are panelled with beautiful, expensive renditions of the Water Wife’s Dance, an extremely famous passage from her work The Crane’s Falling. That alone would fetch someone a pretty penny. He glances around the room. No one is even slightly interested.

He sits down with the box in his lap. In a slippery motion Tobi flinches the box from his hands. “Eh?” Tobi turns the box around and around as if it will summon more interesting. “It’s just poetry.”

“No.” Stiffly he replies, “Thank you for your help.”

Tobi frowns, “Did you arrange rooms?”

Sasuke sighs. “No.”

“Well I have a place.” Tobi holds his hands up, all good will. “I don’t want your boring box just a bit of company.”

“I’m not going to sleep with you.”

“Ew, you’re not my type. I like you know,” he gestures at his chest, “you know.”

“Yes.” With another great sigh he repeats, “yes. I’ll take it. Let’s go.”

Tobi leads him to a standalone inn on the edge of town. He dodges and darts through alleyways, into and out of shadows, if he was less of a bumbling idiot Sasuke would be a little wary of him. He adjusts his internal threat assessment accordingly.

No other rooms are being rented. The owners -two idiots who can’t seem to agree on anything and crack one too many poop jokes to make Sasuke think well of them- hand them a key to a single room. Sasuke almost protests, then he remembers the poop jokes. After a quick light dinner from individual ration sacks -Tobi smiles and chatters while Sasuke eats- Sasuke turns in. Tobi, either unfamiliar with the delicate dance that allows two shinobi sleep in the same room, does not strip down to his basic weapons, leaving Sasuke with no other option but to wear his full kit. Despite that he is tired enough to relax his shoulders perhaps a touch too much and let his thoughts wander. He and Tobi sit across from each other pretending comfort, watching for sudden moves.

Why did no one else bid? It’s not a huge catch of an item outside of academic circles, but it’s not as if scholars don’t also use the hidden markets. Sasuke was provided with more to bargain with than an academic could muster but far less than a minor lord who wished to add to his collection.

Maybe they knew who he was, and in a moment of kindness decided to let him have it.

He snorts internally. Yeah, not that.

Watchers? Someone else keeping eyes on what product moves where? Intelligence is not his strong suit but from what he knows of those who excel at it -Kabuto, Hiki- this is well within some sort of tactical play. A little bird with a little rumor is sometimes one of the strongest defences. Is there an advantage to someone having Kazue’s work? And is that advantage less than simply knowing who does? If the scrolls require the use of the sharingan, an understanding of it, what do those who know he has it stand to gain?

Giri is using him. The obvious advantage to them is if these scrolls have some weapon, some technique, he is more likely to be disposed to use it for them. What sinks under his skin and itches is the idea that they used the turn of his face, his name and his legacy, and he never really noticed.
Did it matter that he was the one to steal from Frost? It did matter that he as the one to symbolically give Otogakure to Fuyuki. Symbols matter.

The question becomes: now what?

“What if the sharingan didn’t exist?” Tobi asks.

Sasuke had almost forgotten about him. “Excuse me?”

“You know,” he twirls his hand expressively, “all these fancy jutsu and abilities. What if we all woke up tomorrow as architects or chefs?”

“You want that many shitty ramen stands?”

“Don’t mock me,” Tobi pouts, “but you get it, right?”

He does. But there’s an obvious question- “Who would lead?”

“The strongest.” Tobi huffs, as if the answer is obvious. His voice wobbles dangerously in the air. Something pops near Sasuke’s ear. He reaches up to rub at it.

Since he won’t let Sasuke sleep, he begrudgingly humors him. “How do we know who that is?”

“He’ll make himself known.”

“And what about those who had power and now don’t?” He muses somewhat rhetorically.

Tobi looks at his own hand contemplatively. “True leaders stand at the top of the world and speak of how things must be. The losers have to live with the consequences.”

“I suppose.”

True night falls between them. Through the window the moon stretches a long slice of light. It’s almost too full. Without thinking about Sasuke takes a snap with his sharingan, the long haunting stretch of white caught in dirty glass.

He falls asleep, he wouldn’t be able to say when, but one moment he’s thinking about the moon and the next he’s standing in the Uchiha stronghold barefoot.

Without thinking he walks down the wisteria strewn path, down paths that slick with more and more blood the closer he gets to his home, and enters his childhood home. His mother is in the kitchen singing along to the rainbow. A wound cuts her back. His father sings with her, sitting at the table drinking coffee. His chest gurgles blood as he slurps his coffee. His mother admonishes him, as he laughs his reply his face pales from bloodloss. Sasuke looks on sadly for a moment, then turns to complete the mangled memory. Itachi will appear, catch him in the entrance to the hallway, he’ll ask him what he’s doing home so early and sasuke will say working on his fireball technique, just you wait brother, I’ll surpass you soon! He can already feel the impact of the finger on his forehead.

Itachi deviates from the plan, stepping around Sasuke, not touching. His movements are liquid, his clothes bloodless, and some screaming instinct has Sasuke paying attention.

“Silly boy,” Itachi mutters.

Itachi has never spoken in his dreams.
Behind him, from the edge of his eye, he sees his parents jerk to a stop. Orange covers their faces, except for one madly spinning red eye. “This isn’t a dream.” Sasuke announces, too loud. With jittering certainty he adds. “This is a genjutsu.”

Itachi sits down carefully crossing his legs. He always did have a strange grace. “I don’t think this is having the effect he intended.”

“Really.” Sasuke jams as much sarcasm in as he can.

Itachi nods. “The sharingan can reach across time and bend space.”

“So then-” He can’t finish it. Is he real? Is he here? Hope and rage well inside-

“No.” Itachi shakes his head. “I am still dead.” He gestures graciously towards Sasuke. “You want to ask why I’m here.”

“Stop assuming,” Sasuke snaps.

Itachi’s lips twitch. “I can only assume, little brother.”

“Don’t.” Sasuke snaps again, at once tired and enraged. He hadn’t forgotten what it felt like, this twinning emotion he has for his brother, but he’d forgotten the edges of it. “Fine. How can you be here?”

Itachi purses his lips, another thing Sasuke had forgotten. The only bit of Itachi you can read are the corners and the tucks. His mouth, the corner of his eye, the twitch of his pinky that always betrays him. Sasuke learnt those tells out of love. He’s forgotten them every time they fought.

The floor shakes and shivers. The walls bleed colour and fall down. They’re flashing through the house, the yard. The front step, where Sasuke waited for his traitor of a brother with baited breath.

“Tsukuyomi,” Itachi breathes out, “I broke you.”

“Yes,” Sasuke breathes out just the same. He did, he did.

“Tobi has made a mistake,” Itachi smirks, “he underestimated the strength of your mind. It knows, even if you don’t, what is happening right now. Your mind is trying to protect you.”

“Ironic that you’re here then.”

Itachi inclines his head agreeably, sending Sasuke into seething. “When did you get caught?”

With more effort than he cares to expend Sasuke eats his temper. He’d just be giving Itachi what he wants. “When we were in the inn.”

“Really?” Itachi’s mouth twitches down. Disbelief. “You followed a strange man you met in a bar?”

Scowling, Sasuke spits, “I— a glint of red in his glass, the orange masked man sits down across from him making eye contact, “-son of a bitch.”

“Now don’t say that.” Itachi gently admonishes. “She could have been a very nice woman.”

The sound turns off in his ears, pitching low and then spiking up, it feels like having your eardrums burst but in reverse. Sasuke drops to a knee. Itachi, who is completely unaffected, kneels beside him. With his arms resting comfortably on his bent knees, he asks. “You remember genjutsu
theory, yes?” Gingerly he reaches out and covers Sasuke’s ears with his hands. “There are three parts—”

“Active, illusionary and passive.” Sasuke murmurs. His ears stopped ringing the second Itachi covered them. “Active is the intended reality altering effect. Illusionary is the method by which you achieve the active state. Passive is the connecting factor. To break a genjutsu we’re taught to cycle opposing chakra out in pulses to disrupt the illusionary factor.”

“How do you reject a genjutsu with a hereditary factor?”

“No idea.”

Itachi clicks his tongue. “You do know.”

Sasuke shrugs. “...passive. Members of the same family have a susceptibility to certain kinds of genjutsu. The illusionary factor becomes harder to dislodge and cycling is less effective because chakra of similar types tend to merge, particularly when they’re related, it’s too hard for the victim to differentiate between their own and their attackers. There are two genjutsu that the Uchiha are especially susceptible to when cast by another Uchiha: Izuna’s Shadows which works best with direct eye contact and The Crone’s Laugh which directly affects the first stage of the sharingan, disrupting the ability to correctly identify chakra, and, if used for too long, causes hallucinations of grief and despair.” He can’t manage to look at his brother near the end.

Itachi drops his hands from Sasuke’s ears and out his hands. “Good.” He loosens his shoulders the way Sasuke does, the way he was taught, and it looks odd. Sasuke has more muscles through the shoulders, more their father than their mother. “Crone’s Laugh works best through eyesight too, that first glimpse was what caught you, but hearing is hyper-connected to the way shinobi interpret their surroundings. It takes a master to bespell someone through hearing but here we are. Likely at some point you relaxed too much and he snuck in that way too.” As if commenting on an ant or the weather, he adds, “you need to work on that.”

Sasuke ignores that. “I have to figure out what the passive factor is and break it.”

From underneath their feet a harrowing noise swells. A dozen women chanting, then a dozen men. They wail together and from underneath a joyful swell of sound cuts across, it reaches higher and higher until, at the highest point, it’s cut by a laughing crow. It rattles in his brain, loosening a memory from childhood. The whole family was by the river and his mother was leading the dancers. Fire swam in the air, and they danced.

The Weeping Song. “Do you remember this?” Itachi hums along, fingers tick tick ticking away on his knee.

Fire Country has never had a strong musical tradition. That, like many things, has been deposited at the feet of the Uchiha. Bird songs are death songs in his homeland, and none are more so than the Weepings; lengthy, intricate musings on transience, on dying. Sasuke has never heard a full one because, like always, those that would teach him are dead.

He does remember one thing: the Weeping Song is also the Warning Song.

Sasuke turns and as he turns the room moves with him. He moves the other way. Same thing. The room reacts as an opponent would.

“You just keep reacting,” Itachi muses. “You see something and then you do something. Reflect.”

“What?”
“Anything.” He pokes Sasuke in the chest. “Stop reacting.”

Sasuke bats his hand away, glaring. “Fuck you.”


He does. Out the door he finds the swingset he used to see Naruto on, except Naruto is dead in Wave and Naruto is dead from his Lightning and dead from his betrayal. Sasuke turns but all he sees is family and kin and Konoha hanging from dead trees. Old pains he’d set aside in order to move forward but still rooted in him: impossible to excise fully. And then the trees are full of dead Kimura and live children who will hunt him then dead children with sealed tongues. Things he despairs of. Things it hurts to think of. Things he grieves, when he lets himself.

Tobi slings an arm companionably over his shoulders. This close he smells of sword oil and the good kind of bloodletting, shallow cuts that show prowess. “You went to a few of our bases,” he jeers, “did you like what you found?”

“Shut up.”

“The kids weren’t mine.” Tobi leans closer. “There’s so much you don’t know...”

Itachi moves between them.

Sasuke falters. His sword falls to the ground. Itachi steps between him and Tobi, hands already moving. The dark space breaks at the top, light falling through the cracks, and Sasuke is reminded of his dream. Just like that his hands grow warm, he remembers his brother holding his hand and meaning it.

“Itachi,” Tobi says warmly, friendly, “still such a brat.”

Itachi inclines his head. Then he moves.

Sasuke has every moment of fighting his brother etched into his brain. It’s like the whole thing is glossed over with fluidity. The blurry edges of a memory that let one sequence fold into another no matter how impossible.

Oh. That’s the passive effect.

“First mistake,” Tobi murmurs, “now let’s see if we can’t correct some mistakes.”

Itachi jerks. Slowly he turns, eyes downcast, hands apologetic. He pulls his hands up and fires a wave of ever burning flames at him. Sasuke flips back, narrowly avoiding him, what crosses his face is nigh unbearable. Itachi sets himself up to attack, telegraphing his intent, but all Sasuke remembers for a moment is being thirteen.

But Sasuke is stronger now. Sasuke can beat him.

Parry first. Fire, hit, hit, block. Itachi steps back to prepare a bigger attack. Sasuke takes the opportunity and changes the playing field. Water jutsu Itachi is forced to parry. Itachi halts, arms hanging by his sides. Like a shout from above Sasuke remembers that this is controlled by him. No matter what Tobi’s sharingan digs up ultimately Sasuke has control. He could crush him, he could destroy him like he deserves-

Sasuke pulls out wires and flings them up. With his mind he sees them immobilising his brother, he sees them holding him like a bird in amber. Itachi rolls, dashes, tries to avoid it but this isn’t his
playing field. It’s Sasuke’s. As they pierce his brother’s body there is no blood but light. Sasuke brings his sword up, imagines it clean again, and pushes between the ribs like he was taught. The noise of splitting flesh is familiar, as is the twitch and gasp. He’s cheek to cheek with his brother, light spilling out from Itachi’s body and down Sasuke’s hands.

It’s done. It’s over. He thinks, breathing hard. His body feels heavy, so do his eyes, he’s not relieved—He’s not—

“You didn’t break, did you?” Itachi whispers against his cheek, and that is his voice, as Sasuke best remembers: cool, calculating, but warmed by good humor. “This isn’t real and I didn’t break you.”

It falls apart: Itachi is twenty three and his hands are on Sasuke’s ears, he’s thirteen and ANBU, he’s twenty one and dead, he’s eight and Sasuke’s first real memory, he’s eleven and tired, he’s years and years away, doing things Sasuke can’t account for. These ages are connected by him, by what Sasuke can thread together. The last memory comes: Itachi’s head in a bag, Sasuke’s chest filled with clear air for the first time in years. The illusion breaks.

Itachi hits the ground and Sasuke remembers that a body is just a body. Even when it’s dead it remains the same. This body, the brother he killed, fades at the edges and bleeds light.

There is another sequence, flashes as clear as any burned into his memory by the sharingan: his eyes hurting, feeling like fire. His brother is covered in blood, he says his name - Sasuke, Sasuke, Sasuke- tremulous and grieving, then his voice - god I hope you’ll survive this- and then-

Mercifully the memory ends.

“You’re not going to do it, are you?” The masked man murmurs. In his pounding head Sasuke feels the lurch of something overcoming him. Tobi looks like himself and someone so much more. “Wouldn’t it be so much easier to just take my hand?”

“No,” he says, half to his brothers dying fingers, half to the man pulling his strings.

“Wouldn’t it be easier to give in? You have it in you. You have it in your heart. You’re my blood, boy. I know it burns within you. Just let go.” Sasuke can feel frustration bleeding off of him. “All you have to do is feel it. Stop fighting and feel.”

Red bleeds around his eyes. Little vines of blood and rage clouding his vision, getting choked and twisted. Rage, rage, rage. Compared to the monster Sasuke has nurtured this is a typhoon: uncontrollable, devastating.

Sasuke beats it back as best he can. Tobi doesn’t get it. He doesn’t understand. He can’t stop fighting. There is no stop. He’s like a shark, if he stops he dies. He won’t survive it.

Tobi advances black and red rage whipping around him. “Did you even love him?” He asks. “Did you love any of them? Where is your hate?” He sounds baffled. As if he was assured of something.

Idiot. No one is assured of anything. “Don’t worry about that,” Sasuke replies dryly, “worry about these.” He flicks his hand and more wires appear. There is just enough left in the jutsu to cause some trouble.

Tobi miscalculated. Sasuke needed to survive long enough to see his brother dead. He needed the determination to do that even more than the hate to drive it. And if Sasuke can count on anything it’s his own determination.
The game has changed.

Sasuke imagines himself healed of his injuries, and then he imagines them inflicted on his enemy. “You want to be the man on the empty throne.” He turns and crouches, launches, all while imagining Tobi wriggling and writhing with pain. It catches, Tobi goes up in flames, but he keeps attacking as if he can’t feel it.

That red sharingan flexes, disappearing it’s master out and back again at Sasuke’s flank. “Not quite.” Tobi dances into his reach. “Close but no cigar.”

Sasuke meets the kunai in his hand with his sword. “No?”

“Well kid,” the masked man drops all joviality, his movements smooth out. In a moment it’s a monster and not a trickster coming at him, red eye blazing, “no one likes a man on a throne.”

Sasuke meets him with his own monster, letting the curse seal uncurl over him. The genjutsu is falling apart now, all surface and no depth. The corners flicker with darkness. The corners flicker with pain. “I’m not interested.”

Tobi folds himself into the dark. His voice is still jovial and pleasant. “Aren’t you? You’re here for Kazue’s work, right? Why would a nice boy like you read an old shrew like that?”

Sasuke lances a chidori onto a wire and throws it. “I’m a revivalist.” Sasuke throws back. Tobi backflips and lands lightly, head tilted as if he can’t quite believe that Sasuke would sass him. “Now shut up and fight me.”

Tobi obliges. They dance across the floor backdropped by Sasuke’s memories, by his feelings, the scenes broken up by descending reality; the patches of the forest Tobi transported him to cutting it apart. Tobi cuts him across the nose. Sasuke slices a leg. Tobi folds into a little ball and appears somewhere else completely healed. Sasuke is suffering from a collapsing lung. He pulls it altogether and concentrates on forming a dragon of fire and lightning, one of his strongest attacks, when he’s cut down from behind. His knees hit the ground. His hands are moments behind. He manages to turn onto his front so he’s at least looking Tobi in the eyes. He has a moment to feel regretful. He never got to see his parents graves again. He never got to tell them the truth. Above him night is falling and he has a brief blissful moment to feel grateful that his last memory will be of stars in the sky-

And then Kakashi is there.

Fist full of lightning, he positions himself between Sasuke and Tobi. He scratches his nose with a finger. “Mah, the things you get into on your own.”

Tobi flinches. No witty response.

“Who are you then?” Kakashi asks. Tobi jerks, all contained anger. More anger than he’s shown Sasuke. Interesting.

“No one to you.” Tobi growls. Sasuke waits for the attack but strangely there is none. Tobi’s menace, his trickster spirit disappears. He turns to Sasuke. “Last chance boy.”

“Fuck you.” Sasuke spits.

“You heard the lady,” Kakashi moves his fingers lazily, forcing everyone’s attention to him, “why don’t we have a chat?”
Tobi flinches again. His chakra rises menacingly before blowing out. Sasuke can feel himself disappear from Tobi’s attention all of it concentrated on Kakashi instead. In response Kakashi tightens up. After a long taunt moment Tobi laughs hollowly. “One day soon you will pay for what you’ve done.”

And then Tobi is gone.

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He cracks the seal on the first scroll while lounging in a hot bath a few towns north of Tawatsukawa. His feet are beaten to hell and stinging in the hot water but other than that it might be the smartest thing he’s done in years. Kakashi is AWOL, probably at a bar. Sasuke has no intention of leaving without him again, it’s not worth it.

The remnants of Tobi’s jutsu are still rattling out of him. He’d chosen not to tell Kakashi out of a need to keep both secrets and dignity. He’s not sure it’ll be accepted long term but there’s a strange reluctance to talk about what happened to his family.

Kazue’s writing is neat, archaic and sparse. She’s flowery in her descriptions but sharp in her insights.

She writes: Today I found new berries and a stream. I had thought luck was with me this time. The last time those damn Akimichi were already at the head of the stream diverting it to flood the down hill Hyuuga settlement, and I had to stop them, really, it would be ridiculous for them to die when we’ve just reached an understanding about what happened with cousin Michiko. Haruto thinks I’m crazy for believing we can have an alliance but I think he’s just jealous. She didn’t want to marry him. I heard the men talking about how they were going to keep her. Four of her brothers have the sharingan. They’ll cut her ankles if they have to. I wish the stream had worked instead it was bloated with dead bodies. I went nearly a half day downstream but there was shit in the water as far as the eye can see.

I’ve thought of new poems lately. I think I’ll ask Michiko for her thoughts.

Haruto is right. The alliance with the Hyuuga ends barely two years in, when a group of Hyuuga string up a Uchiha family, cut them up for spare parts and sell them. In the historical record that Konoha keeps this was in retaliation for a destroyed statue that was considered a great treasure by the main branch. If there’s one trait that has not been bred out of that family in some thousand years its sheer ruthlessness. The head of the Hyuuga family decided that an equivalent measure should be taken and with the Uchiha lacking in wealth they demanded a woman or an infant, something precious, to be defiled and destroyed. The Uchiha reject this and instead of allowing the two clans to come to blows the Uchiha leader talked them down to a higher ration share. The Uchiha were never so far from starving as to forget it.

This was accepted until it was not and the current era of Hyuuga-Uchiha enmity lives on today. Almost lives on, he amends. Sasuke would have to have an opinion on the Hyuuga first.

The next few entries are dull slice of life type things. He skims it until he comes across something interesting. A new technique, a family secret, a new way to harness the sharingan. Kazue was a woman in a time when they didn’t know much but she has little moments, little insights that tell him more than lectures from his father ever did. Eventually he see’s fireball and weapon and finds the top of the entry.

*I drank fire today! It was like dirt to ash at first, since I was the 1 in 100 to get a non-fire affinity. But I did it! A fireball right across the edges of the trees, kissed the sky, fell to embers on the*
leaves. Father was proud, I’m the fourth girl to do so since they decided the women needed to fight. He doesn’t think I’ll need to. My cunt is my weapon, he says, and I will wear my blade well. If I didn’t have three siblings I’d think he had no idea how fucking works. Shinobi rules say the stabbing partner wins. We travel all the time, anyhow, how is my cunt meant to use its magical stabbing powers here? It’s misty and by the pallor of the men’s skin they prefer fish fucking to woman fucking.

Sasuke frowns. The Uchiha have no record of ever settling in Kiri. Abruptly Sasuke recalls the twin swords hanging above Uncle Kagami’s office at the KHPD. Sasuke always wanted a story from the man; Shisui’s father and a man renowned around the world for his actions. Kagami was old when he was young, old enough that Shisui lived with his death for years before he died. Sasuke remembers him as kind, as never having enough time, as one of the few men his father spoke proudly of. They met twice, only one of which Sasuke can recall. Kagami was born at the beginning of Konoha’s history, Kazue would never have known him. It’s funny sometimes how other people tell your stories.

Kazue never gets into the details of what they do in the mist. Just that they didn’t enjoy it and it will live in their souls forever. He wonders what happened to those swords.

The Land of Fire is our forever home now. Fire, fire, fire. The daimyo wants to talk to the Clan Head. His newborn son is called Kazuo, he has a younger twin called Tajima. Both are sick at the moment which is why the leader will not go. His wife is already dead. They call us blood eyes for this, because we won’t put aside our babies to meet the whims of fat lords. All we see is our kin. There will be no demon blessed babies to kill their concubines if they get rid of us. No raven cursed devil men to rip out their hearts. They call us blood eyes because we kill too easily. They call us blood eyes because we won’t let our kin die when they don’t have to. Are we so awful?

Kazue argues with herself here. Are we awful? Are we awful? Are we awful? Somedays she agrees -when her cousin Haruto cuts Michiko to hobble her, to capture her- and other days she couldn’t think higher of her clan. When they kill the Senju, when there’s enough food for a feast, when a tiny baby comes into the world whole and healthy. Sometimes she speaks on the epics her elders kept, the stories of battles long past, and he feels it too. There’s so much in his history that makes him proud, so much more he doesn’t know. It does something to him to read these thoughts had over a century ago.

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It takes nearly a week of Kakashi’s tactical evasion travelling methods before the blood settles between them. Sasuke doesn’t want to rush it, he can recognise when he fucks up and that was a fuck up by anyone’s standard. He spends the week quiet and almost deferential. He suspects Kakashi knows that this is his way of apologising. The fight with Tobi set them back a fair way on their journey to understanding each other but of this is how things are going to be, Sasuke wants to at least try for neutral. They’re travelling very slowly right now, taking the backways around a bunch of near city-states, laws unto themselves, that Sasuke hadn’t frequented all that much as a missing-nin. Orochimaru prefered his own bolt holes and Giri maintains a pointed disinterest in civilian crime. The first not-city the stop in they stay right up against the edge of the shipping district. They find the first decent inn and book one room. On the way in Sasuke clocks enforcers, slavers, buyers. Their room overlooks a quiet bay filled with boats and murky water. Sasuke could probably pinpoint the exact nature of each evil, some he recognises from his days in Oto, but others are new. Kakashi dumps himself onto the bed and Sasuke unseals his sleeping bag. It won’t be long in this place. Soon Konoha will send word and Kakashi will know how much longer they have to stay on the run.
Sasuke kicks open the roll of his sleeping bag. “Shisui liked that town.”

“Hmm,” Kakashi says absentmindedly. “I remember.”

Kakashi is not absent minded. Sasuke narrows his eyes. “How did you know him?”

“Classified.” Kakashi replies.

ANBU. Huh. There were a lot of Uchiha in ANBU.

Sasuke narrows his eyes more. “He liked their festivals.”

“And their girls.”

There’s a fire-fast response to that. Something sarcastic. It falls apart in his throat. “Hn.”

“There was also a boy in my team.” Kakashi says uncomfortably. “He died in the war.”

“...which one?”

“Obito.”

“Obito, huh?” It has honestly never occurred to him that Kakashi knew fuck all about the Uchiha’s.

“That was the Senju kid.”

“Excuse me?”

“Before all the Senju died off one of their half cousins or something had an affair with a Uchiha girl and she got pregnant. The mother and the kid were shunned by the clan, the mother died when the kid was four. Someone was meant to take him in but it never happened.” Sasuke recalls. “Aunt Tomiko raged about it for years. Came up at every party.”

“Why?”

“The girl was her sister. They never let her adopt the kid.”

Aunt Tomiko was a small woman and she breathed enough fire to put all the dragons in the world to shame. Obito died long before Sasuke’s father made his ascension but Aunt Tomiko’s grief was a spectre among them until she passed a year before the massacre. He can’t recall the features of her face just the stories that made up dinner table conversation between his parents. Most of his memories of his family are like that, anecdotal and barely there. Aunt Tomiko was wrong, his father said, because the ritual of the clan said so. Tomiko’s own sister Noriko managed the archives and called their late sister’s child an abomination. The third sister’s name was struck from the records but with the childish determination that defined his childhood Sasuke found her and every struck down or missing Uchiha for ten years before the massacre. Hoshiko, mother of Obito, who died from a hereditary disease.

“The Senju and the Uchiha were never meant to mix.” Sasuke muses. That’s a refrain from his childhood. The Uchiha set their boundaries early.

“That’s dangerous thinking.” Kakashi says sharply.

“No, it’s women’s magic.” Sasuke shrugs. “The women of the clan kept the archives and the medical work. We don’t marry Hyuuga, Yamanaka, Karasu, Omori or Akimichi because the sharingan is less likely to be expressed. With the Nara, Kitabiyashi and Hatake it’s dominant. In all families without an expressible ability it’s neutral unless there’s a catalyst.” He can hear the Elders
voice clear as day in his ear, he can hear too his mother’s exasperation with it all. “You never mix with a Senju because the genetic quirk that allowed the expression of the Mokuton is something like a million to one, but within the Senju clan is one in fifty, and it always trumps the sharingan. Pretty much all elemental bloodlines do. Once a different bloodline gets into the clan it’s pretty hard to get out.”

“He had it though.”

“Then he was exceptional.”

Sasuke lets that lie, mostly because he doesn’t care, but when he casts a glance over Kakashi’s eyes are solemn and something close to desperate.

Kakashi covers his sharingan eye with his left hand. “Yes. He was.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time on Survival: In which, emotionally speaking, Sasuke is one of those half deflated chew toys that squeaks sadly when you press really hard. He attempts, however poorly, to fix this. Featuring: recurring characters, international politicking and the slowly dawning horror that Uchiha Sasuke may be the only one capable of getting them out of this mess.

Fun Facts:
- This is no way the last time we'll be visiting Itachi and his effect on Sasuke. Healing is a non-linear process that I believe in and unfortunately our local emotional train wreck will have to deal with that.
- Kakashi's disappearance was basically him running around trying to verify Sasuke's pardon and then doing his best to throw a wrench in the Konoha political machine. We're going to see how successful he was.
- Chapters are veritably flying out right now, and I originally though this arc was going to be the longest and most difficult. I expect we'll be out of it near February which is...novel.
- Another character from another manga that ended inexplicably with contentious pairings and Plot Children is quoted in this chapter and I am still fighting the urge to write the villain swap AU.
- If you're waiting for the romance I totally lied it's still like 30,000 words away but you've come this far, right? What's another 30,000 words of ninja politics?
Chapter Summary

Stepping stones, turning rivers

Chapter Notes

This one has been a long time coming: firstly I’ve had internet troubles and secondly the oncoming wave of fascism has been nigh unbearable. I can't say that it hasn't influenced this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He really does mean to go straight to Konoha, really he does but-

“Get him!” A man yells from the other side of the pub. He has three friends, four shot glasses in front of him and a nasty looking farming implement. “That’s Giri’s dog right there! He’s a fucking terrorist!”

Sasuke sighs and presses his cold beer against his black eye. Across from him Kakashi has his feet up on the table and Icha Icha dangling from a loose grip. He’s looking at Sasuke as if to say your problem, you fix it. Sasuke has lost count of how many things are his problem, fix it. Maybe it comes with crossing the line into eight or nine digits in the bingo book; suddenly you’re granted the ability to look at lesser shinobi and make demands.

So he fixes it. Turning in his chair to face the pitchfork-and-shovel mob, Sasuke says, “Woof.”

Kakashi sighs and disappears his book, “Your tab.”

Sasuke slams the rest of his beer back, fishes out his wallet and throws down a few blood sprinkled notes.

Kakashi raises an eyebrow.

“It’s not illegal.” Sasuke shrugs. “I’m a terrorist.”

Kakashi shrugs his shoulder to rattle down a shuriken into his hand. “You’re a pain in my ass.”

And then the fight is on.

--

They cannot get a damn drink in any damn backwater shithole and it’s pissing him off.

They’ll hang around for maybe 20 minutes and then some asshole says hey isn’t that and it is, it’s the Copy Nin or the Snake Skinner or, in hilariously poor taste, wait, I thought the White Fang was dead why is he tramping around with a rent boy? Between that and Kakashi’s frankly baffling
route back to Konoha Sasuke sees his chances of good ale in the next six months slipping away. He’s gotten use to drinking regularly. It’s almost what you do as a missing-nin.

They’re speeding across open ground that’s about to give way to dense woods. Sasuke adjusts his chakra for the transition and brings himself level with Kakashi. “Is there a reason we’re avoiding Frost?”

“Yes,” Kakashi takes one giant leap into the canopy, “the bounty on you is really good.”

Sasuke takes two leaps to cover the same ground. “I’ve been there twice.”

“You left an awful impression.”

Fuck you, too. “We could always fake my death and collect the money.”

Kakashi scowls at him. “No one’s that stupid.”

They’d pulled it with Yumi twice. She’d been thrilled to bits to be buried. She always was a mite bit crazier than your average Giri member. “It can work.”

“No.” Kakashi says firmly, “I am not going to fake kill you.”

Sasuke clenches his jaw. It’s much better than pouting.

Kakashi rolls his eyes. “Run. I have a meeting to make.”

--

My aunt died of a broken heart. They say her blood came rushing from her lips. The roots from her garden still wrapped around her fingers. A posse of blue flowers, red thorns, made red lips. Her daughter’s family was hunted down by a group of ‘collectors’ today. They wanted the children for pets, her daughter for their cocks and her husband for bits and bobs and holes to use when they were done with the girls. They were very clear about this when the patrol caught up with them. It was too late for the children, the husband was dead and the daughter was never taught to fight so she killed them all rather than give up. Their bodies were burnt and prayed for. It’s time to look for another alliance, that’s the only time no one hunts us for our eyes. I’ll go myself once this wretched bleeding is over and done with, who knew killing an unborn could be so messy!

Red thorns made red lips is the opening line of The Saga of Foxes, a collaborative work between Kazue and a member of the Water Court rumored to be one of the great beauties that belonged to the long tradition of courtesans that bless that country. Sasuke heard it read aloud by a travelling troupe while laying low in Water.

Tajima was disgraced today. He came down from a fight with Kaguya forces with a child on his back. The boy was half ours and very ill with the lung disease that plagues our line. There are ways to lessen the effects but the child was too far gone. Tajima asked his father to let him make the kill, to end the boys suffering. His father said no, that the boy was only half and must die as that half. Tajima argued and of course his father was strict. It would be an act of treason to help or kill the child. For anyone. Tajima left at night and killed the boy anyway. His line is struck from his father lineage. He, his wife and his future firstborn are now no longer of the main branch of the family. They are common soldiers like us. My younger sister went to Naoko with some rations this morning, to help her ease into the transition. She’ll never eat well again.

Uchiha Tajima means something to him, although he can’t remember why. Maybe one of the old stories, the ones from before the Founding. Either way it’s not so important.
There’s something to be said for cunt fighting. I have seen more of the world than my sisters, than my own father even. I have learned the edges of all our worlds. The Hyuuga do not travel far from the streams so they know more of river fish and moss than almost anyone. Laying with one I can see the whole world as the trout does. He will tell me of the world as the trout does. Poor boy. He should have kept his mouth shut. I’ve never managed a Yamanaka, they’re smart and this kind of warfare is their bread and butter. Isn’t that a funny phrase? Heard it from a travelling builder, he had this stuff to put over his food all fat and yellow. Isn’t it funny, almost, that a whore knows more of the world than her father?

And in the middle of a vicious winter, writing cramped and half mad-

Saya has lost her third child. Etsuko her fourth. Kaede is struggling to birth her fifth. Naoko has given birth to her fourth child and he is the first to survive a week. Michiko has had her seventh and she is dying and the men will not stop. Michiko’s oldest is a fighter. I am unwed still. I have too many uses as a spy and whore-spy to be bound to my marriage bed. Half the time the babies come out lumps of flesh with no heart, half the time the babies live and are killed when they’re still drinking mothers milk because it is all the food we can afford.

Months after that, when she’s written about the famine, the strange blight that has crossed the lands from east to west and crippled all but the wealthiest clans-

I can’t imagine being without war. I can see it, surely. A few months ago I had to steal land from a lord and I pretended to be the servant girl. I spent four weeks living with a family who had never seen blood, never starved. Their children still had life in their eyes, the lord was kind to his wife all the time not just when there was food on the table. I liked his wife, she was blonde! She fed me secret sweets and told me not to tell on her. He wouldn’t hurt her if I had, certainly I would have killed him first, but it occurs to me that this is a game they play. She laughed when he admonished her, he touched her gently when she talked back. Hurting and killing and raping are so far from what they know they can make a game of it. How sweet! I was meant to kill them messily but instead I poisoned the evening meal. They went to sleep in their beds, none the wiser that there was war in the room.

There’s a knock on the door. Sasuke puts down the scroll.

The chakra on the other side of the door flickers up then down. Indecisive, if Sasuke had to put a name to it.

“Yokokita,” Kakashi says.

“Alright.” Sasuke nods and shuts the door. Kakashi sighs and mutters, “That was probably my bad.”

A flicker of a smile crosses Sasuke’s face.

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Yokokita is one of the most beautiful places on the continent. It reminds him of Sasabuchi with its clear waters and greenery, but where one is a town with nothing to it’s name the other is a sprawling metropolis built into the arms of ruined cities. Years ago, long before Sasuke was born, a bunch of civilian families settled in this little dip of a valley. They found a ruined temple to a long forgotten goddess. Tall falling down arches, long stretches of mosaic, the faded remains of scripture and pieces of broken gold and bronze. As they excavated they renovated, building new homes and shops, planting rows of vegetables and fruit trees in fertile soil. It wasn’t the first permanent settlement; soil turned yearly and renewed every spring rather than the long travels,
abandoned towns and sparse produce of the wandering years, but it was the first successful entirely civilian settlement of the modern era.

For that reason it is a home to the arts and the educated, public libraries and wide open parks, and a home to the black market that also lives in the ruins underneath the city. There is no standing army or police force. What laws there are are enforced by a mysterious force no one quite names and no one quite believes in. It’s not a home to any ninja clan, nor does it fall in the direct jurisdiction of any daimyo. In fact the maps of the world are very careful to dot around it. There are reasons for this, Sasuke knows, but there are some secrets no one will ever tell.

Kakashi dumps him outside a Library for the Arts with a shrug about needing some time apart and a jaunty little wave. He expects Sasuke to meet him here in four hours, if not there will be hell to pay. Sasuke is no fool, he knows this is a test.

Luckily Sasuke has friends in this town. He goes down and around the temple near the heart of the town into the merchant hub heading directly for a little side street that houses one brothel and six or seven refuges. Yokokita is a well known refuge for those seeking passage or a new life. A woman standing outside the brothel makes a well meaning pass at him as she has since he was fourteen and here for the very first time. This time Sasuke gives her a coin and a wave because he never intends to come back. The woman raises an eyebrow at him but in the end just shakes her head and waves him on.

The first time Sasuke came here he was recovering from ripping his hamstrings to pieces in a fight to the death with one of Orochimaru’s experiments. He won, barely, but after he was seen to Kabuto told him that Orochimaru was pulling him from the shinobi rotation until he healed completely. Among other things that meant he lost food privileges. Kabuto handed him a small wallet of cash, told him to make it last and fucked off. No one in Oto was going to hire the Kage’s pet for work unless it was something that would really turn his stomach. So Sasuke starved for awhile, only a few weeks really, not long enough to really bother anyone. It builds character, Kabuto said while tending to his wounds, Sasuke was dirty and hunched over, feeling every inch of his skin and bones, you need more of that, honestly.

One of the jounin took pity on him one day when he was lounging around hungry and pissed off at his still shitty mobility. The jounin told him there was a small group leaving for Yokokita and if he went to the refuges and asked for the smoking man he might be able to get some low level jobs to make ends meet. It was common practice for those out of commision.

So he went. Among the beautiful walled gardens of Yokokita Sasuke found a small hidden away street off to the side of the refuges. The street descended at a sharp angle and Sasuke nearly twisted his ankles on the overgrown roots that litter the ground. The air smelled like rotting wood and flower smoke. The street was dark and lit with slants of light falling through the trees that twine above his head. When Sasuke looked back he saw the street and the women trading on it, when he looked forward he saw a dark space and trees where there logically couldn’t be any. He’d always thought himself brave, though, and when not brave he thought himself capable. He pressed forward. Eventually the street gave way to a small booth, like a ramen stand, with two seats in front and an old man behind the counter. Instead of cooking pots or pans the back of the stand is covered with boxes and plants. There’s a small figurine of a fox sitting on the counter. The old man was dressed in traditional civilian clothes, dark pants and shirt, but his shoulders were covered by a beautiful embroidered coat in red and orange and gold. In his mouth was a lit pipe. The smoking man raised an eyebrow at him.

Sasuke clears his throat. “My name is Uchiha Sasuke,” he said, “I am here for a job that will get me enough food for three months.”
“You’re an idiot,” the smoking man said, “and I’ll give you a day’s worth if you go weed Yukimura’s garden.”

Bristling, Sasuke opened his mouth to argue. The smoking man frowned at him, his old eyes very stern in his equally old face, and said, “Don’t belittle me.”

The smoking man tilted his head just so and tapped the seat in front of him. After a brief staring match Sasuke sat down. He continued to glare because that was who he was at fourteen. From this close distance the old man’s eyes are dark stones in his face, completely inscrutable. The wrinkles on his face make Sasuke’s hair stand on end. They’re soft, smooth, his skin is poreless like a mask. The smoking man tilted his head again and said, “No one owes you a thing boy.”

Sasuke looked at that strange face, looked back down the path to the light of the street, feeling his face pull into an expression it hadn’t worn since he was a child. Sasuke pouted, and pointed to a just noticed pile of ongiri by a pot on the counter. “Can I have one of those then?”

The smoking man rubbed his chin. “Usually the magic of this place makes people more compliant, breaks down their emotional barriers. More honest they are with what they are on the inside the more I can trust them.”

“Okay,” Sasuke replied, “but I am really hungry. Can I have one?”

The smoking man picks one up with long spindly fingers and hands it to Sasuke who wastes no time in eating it. The filling is tomato. When he finished he looked to the plate again. The smoking man smiled.

“It must have been a long time since you felt safe, boy.” The smoking man moved the plate to the counter so Sasuke had free access, “I’ll see what I can do.”

Since then Sasuke has been coming back irregularly to do little odds and ends jobs. He doesn’t think about why. What happens in Yokokita stays in Yokokita.

The smoking man is in a beautiful blue and green coat today, fabric spilling down his arms with violent waves of colour. His pipe is unlit but still sitting between his lips as he looks over a file. Sasuke pulls up a chair and stretches as the now familiar magic spills over him. Sasuke has ideas about what exactly the smoking man is but it would do nobody any good right now for Sasuke to be right. Instead he accepts the man as he is: crotchety, mean spirited and married to one of the best cooks Sasuke has ever met.

There are more boxes and trinkets behind the counter now. Little figurines from plays, scraps of fabric, the occasional scroll or bundle of herbs littered among piles of paperwork. They’re categorised, Sasuke assumes, by how much the smoking man hates the people they represent. He is somewhat mollified to see that the small blue enameled tengu figure the smoking man randomly assigned to Sasuke on a shelf above the mess.

Sasuke puts his head down on the cool counter for a moment. The weight of his hair is a pulse on his head. Reaching up he undoes the scrap of fabric pulling it back and lets it fall down so he can get his fingers in and massage his scalp. “Akatsuki put a hit on me.”

The smoking man grunts at him. He puts two bundles of herbs onto a shelf below Sasuke’s tengu. “Shocking. You’re such a nice person.”

Sasuke scowls. “You got anything good? Like food? Or beer?”

“Remember when you were innocent?”
“Somedays. They’re not my favourite.”

The smoking man stops his pottering to look at Sasuke. Sasuke stares back blankly. Deliberately he drops eye contact. The smoking man huffs and pulls out a match to light his pipe. He also pulls out a plate filled with food. He pulls the fire in the pipe and in a second the small area smells of floral smoke.

“That will kill you, apparently.” Sasuke comments.

The man is still puffing away on his pipe. He moves the plate further away from Sasuke because the smoking man is kind of a dick. “More like a retrieval. Strange if you ask me. I’d heard you were following that little Giri bitch.”

Sasuke shrugs and discards the thought of worrying about it. If Akatsuki wants to come for him let them. They have nothing to interest him now. “Anything good between here and Konoha?”

“You wanna go somewhere that’s gonna be a pancake in like three days when they go to get that cranky old nine tailed bastard?”

“No.” Sasuke says succinctly. “I want to be in that general direction.”

The smoking man grunts and turns around, opening a box and flipping through files. He mumbles under his breath picking and choosing ones that play to Sasuke’s strengths. Sasuke steals a few of the octopus balls lying on his plate. They’re good, nice and spicy the way the old man’s wife prefers.

The smoking man comes back and after a disgusted sigh at the way Sasuke is licking his fingers announces, “Farmer near Kusa bred a more sustainable strain of potato. Kusa wants it gone yesterday but don’t wanna do it themselves.”

Sasuke wrinkles his nose. Keeping the world at a rate of technological development the Hidden Villages approve of was one of the main things he did while in Oto the first time around. One of the most common missions was killing so-and-so’s uppity chancellor or someone else’s too smart farmer or the civilian who gets it into their tiny head to try and push technological progress on a nation that still pays people to run everywhere. The fact that all those people paying him to off people for making a better battery or running on renewables were funding his research which was just as forward thinking if much more inhumane just tickled Orochimaru somewhere inside.

The more Sasuke thinks on it the more he realises how much time Orochimaru spent doing things for shits and giggles.

He holds up a scroll edged in red. Courier job. “Got one from Uzushio.”

“It’ll do.”

“It’ll do more than that boy.” The smoking man grins, “be timely with that one. I’d hate to throw things off.”

He looks at the scroll and feels that magic work on him.

The smoking man frowns. “Something wrong, boy?”

“Do you dream?”

A wry eyebrow. “Do you?”
“Only about home. I’m beginning to suspect,” eyes in the jars, Itachi defending him, Tobi spitting angry that Sasuke no longer feels so much hate. The growing feeling that if he just moves everything around more something will fall out. “I’m beginning to suspect I don’t know everything.”

“So you don’t.”

He blinks up at the old man.

“Sasuke.” The old man’s face is as kind and open as he’s ever seen it. “Take one of the few gifts that comes from living the way you’ve been living. Go find out the truth and make your own choices.”

Sasuke bites down the urge to do something mortifying like cry. He flips him off and takes his leave, strolling up the dark passageway and out into the light once again. It’s been a bit shy of three and a half hours so he moves back to where he has to meet Kakashi grabbing food along the way.

Sasuke takes his dinner -sweet glazed octopus, seasonal vegetables and a small cake of rice and tubers drizzled with a salty fish brine sauce- to a park near the lip of a canal near the centre of the town. Kakashi will be able to sense him if he tries and the place is peaceful enough empty as it is of people and noise. The grass is green and soft underfoot, almost tempting him enough to relax, put his feet down and let go for awhile. All of Yokokita tends to remind him of the odd magic of the smoking man’s stall. There are layers upon layers of ruins, each piled on top of each other and peeled away by time, by history. The old temple walls are worn away and you can gaze into the dark of the abandoned temple. There’s something...peaceful about it. When he finds a seat he likes, perched precariously over the edge of the fast waterways, he can smell the odd sweetness of mountain water and feel the old seals woven into the walls. Taste the stone on his tongue and hear the crashing of the water.

For no reason at all he flicks on his sharingan and gazes into the dark.

The sound is the first thing to hit him, no one ever talks about how your senses are layered on top of each other when it comes to dojutsu. Sometimes his hearing will heighten for a moment or drop out completely. When the sound calms down the sight kicks in. Long spiralling lines from the still strong seals, looping and moving together in the gorgeous calligraphy of Uzushio. There are older things, things that flicker and sting his eyes when he looks at them. Solid lines, pure and perfect in how they move chakra. On one level they’re congratulatory and happy and then he moves his eyes and slanted down, breaking up the dance of Uzushio’s seals, is something that looks like graffiti. Beware the rabbit witch, it says. Beware the cursed fruit.

Maybe he should send Dosa a letter, he thinks wryly, and continues looking. It’s a strain to look into the dark for too long but he tries anyway. Carefully layering his chakra he extends his sight like an eagle would, pin point accuracy at great distances. There’s more joy, more warnings, roots breaking up rock, verdant leaves shining with life in the dark, stone embedded in the walls glowing like calcified fire. He has to remind himself to look away several times, there’s just something about that dark fire that calls to him.

After a point the walls dip into the water. He stares into that, the rushing movements making him queasy. There is something small, near unnoticeable just below the water line. A figure outlined in gold, ceremonial dress old enough Sasuke can’t place it. Pointed ears, long white hair, a sorrowful mouth turned down. He searches for the eyes and finds one wide open eye made of faceted moonstone. It glints in the water; a fat chunk that has to be worth tens of thousands. Beside it is that strange red stone glowing with captured fire, a thin black something rotating in its depths. Round and round and round the black goes. The red glows, the moonstone reflects beams of pure
light into the water. He meets it’s red eye-

A hand slams down on his shoulder.

Sasuke jerks, sharingan turning off in surprise. “Shit.”

“Oh? What are you up to?” Kakashi peers over him into the dark, squinting at how little light there is.

“Nothing.” Sasuke snaps. The food in his lap is barely lukewarm now, octopus on the edge on inedible. “I got a job.”

“What are you talking about.”

“This isn’t cheap. I’m burning through my savings travelling around with you.”

Kakashi cocks an eyebrow as if to say and whose fault is that?

Sasuke scowls, but accepts that he’s still in the dog house for the clusterfuck in Tawatsukawa. “It’s a simple courier job.”

Kakashi takes the scroll off him. His eyebrows raise as he reads. “No.”

“It’ll take a day.”

“We have to return to Konoha.”

“Uzushio is close to Konoha.”

“Uzushio is dead.”

Right. Because dead villages hire missing-nin. “I’ll be quick.”

Kakashi gives him a long stare. “You won’t be going anywhere.”

Sasuke opens his mouth to argue, but shuts it again with an audible click. Kakashi thinks of him as a runner, not as someone who has run dozens of courier and medical missions. “I know Karin. She was on my team, like Suigetsu.” And heaven help him if she hears him say that. “If nothing else she’ll give us a safe place to say.”

“You’re sure.”

Right. Like Karin would matter to him. “She’s an Uzumaki.”

“They’re dead.”

Sasuke doesn’t dignify that with an answer. “I already sent word back. On my honour as a Konoha-nin.” His lips twitch a little, it’s more effort than not to suppress. “I have to fulfill the obligations of my contract.”

That will weigh with Kakashi, who has proven time and time again his loyalty.

The man in question leans back, hands shoved in his pockets, looking towards the skies for aid. When nothing strikes Sasuke down for his insolence or crumbles from beneath to relieve him of his misery. Finally, when all hope is exhausted, he mutters, “I do not even want to think about any of that.”
Sasuke takes the victory.

Later, when the night is full bellied above studded with light, Sasuke spins on the sharingan to follow the long line of the night sky.


“My cousins used to do it. The ones old enough to be in a genin cell but not old enough to join the KHMP. I used to sit with them when my mother was out, sometimes we’d order a D-Rank and the Hokage would make sure a cell with a Uchiha was assigned to it. The ones who had their sharingan would compare who had the coolest image from their missions. I heard about temples in the north of Fire, the ocean at sunset in River. My father, his brothers, we all did it. I-” thought I could tell them about it, thought I could bring it home with me when I was older, and better, and my mother could be proud.

“I see.”

I bet you do, he thinks viciously. But he is man enough to realise the edge of his temper is not fair. Kakashi lost someone too; Obito, son of Hoshiko. It’s not the same weight, but he can bend himself just a little.

He’s saved from the emotional torture of having to find a way to communicate this by men dropping from the canopy. Four of them, bandits most likely, brandishing weapons. Two are bald, one has suspiciously silver hair, the last wears a bandana.

“Konoha.” The man in the bandana spits.

Kakashi whistles, leaning back on his left foot. A light stance that will allow him to anticipate multiple opponents. Sasuke matches his stance, moving the hilt of his sword down just enough for a quick draw.

No one fights Konoha-nin travelling in pairs.

Sasuke sighs. Why are other missing-nin so damn stupid?

Kakashi smiles in that who me? way he pulls off so well. “Ah. I don’t think it’ll be us you’ll be fighting today.”

Sasuke raises an eyebrow just as the feeling of an oncoming fire hit him right in the back. He grunts, turning it into something sarcastic out of sheer reflex. Whoever this is caught him by surprise.

He feels extra shitty about it when a large red and white blur runs right over the two missing-nin.

“I am going to defect.” Sasuke says very seriously.

“No,” Kakashi sighs, hand coming to rub at his temple, “you are not. That is an inappropriate reaction to this situation.”

“Why? Because everyone would just defect instead of putting up with-”

The red and white blur stops, swinging his hair over his shoulder as he comes up to his full impressive height. “Wow. Rude, kid. I see your time away didn’t make you politer.”

“I’m serious.” Sasuke turns his whole body away from Jiraiya. “I am going to defect.”
“I’m serious when I say no you won’t.”

Jiraiya stands beside them, watching with dark eyes. Sasuke knows his being sized up and judged by the way Jiraiya’s hands twitch, as if for a weapon.

“Where,” Sasuke asks snidely, “are we going?”

Jiraiya crosses his arms. Kakashi scratches his head.

Kakashi shrugs. “Nagazawa, I think.”

“Sure,” Jiraiya drawls, “he can come too.”

Sasuke rolls his eyes and sets off in the direction of Nagazawa. If either of his companions are surprised that he knows the way, he does not fucking care.

Nagazawa is a civilian settlement sitting in the centre of several contested regions. Tucked into a man made crop of hills, it’s the only way through the mountainous region. It’s a common area for shinobi business because everyone, regardless of who they’re aligned with, has to cross through the town. Assassinations are common.

Technically the settlement falls inside Fire’s borders. They’ve had a constant presence in the area for decades. Under the Shodai and Nidaime Hokage’s it was used as a training grounds for young shinobi. In recent years it’s become a symbol of Konohagakure’s illustrious military history and a long denied occupation. What Sasuke knows personally is small: it has an excellent onsen, a fantastic curry bar and has recently undergone a power shift, backed by Giri, forcing the occupation to give ground to civilian law courts. The daimyo is backing the move, undoing the restrictions Konoha has placed. Under occupation the citizens of the area are afforded legal rights at the leisure of Konoha courts, they cannot vote for their own representatives and they cannot form political parties of more than five members. For whatever reason the Senju brothers loathed them. It’s commonly assumed that Hashirama is the one who put the mountains around it in the first place.

They’ve recently gained the right to political assembly. Allowing someone to be nominated to the position of village head democratically for the first time since before the Founding.

It looks about how he expects: well made but worn buildings, neat streets. Konoha’s symbol is stamped on doorways and pavement. There’s no green. No flowers. What colour there is comes from fabric in the windows, murals of anti-occupation slogans, bright doors and abandoned toys. There are homeless too, whole families lying in bundles on street corners and alleys. Out of a habit born of a dozen or some aid missions he checks to see if they’re well fed, well looked after. Most must be new arrivals because they lack the hauntedness of long term refugees and homeless. Some are as old as the buildings, the way they huddle together out of the way of everyone else speaking to generations of living this way.

Jiraiya walks with great purpose leaving Kakashi to follow in his lazy gait. Sasuke pulls up the rear, deeply uncomfortable with the dropped eyes and scorn the locals throw at him. He almost wants to yell out I’m not the one who did this. He’s left to grit his teeth at the way the men in front of him walk as if there’s nothing out of place here.

They enter a courthouse. A huge high ceiling lifts the room out of the dull browns and greys of outside and punches him with nostalgia. This room belongs among the great trees of his hometown, in the green and blue spaces of Konoha. There are peonies in vases, great bursts of jasmine crawling over the wall. He even hears the tinkle of water coming from somewhere. It is all very beautiful and somehow deeply obscene.
The room floods with people. Immediately he can tell who is in charge. Four men and women stand tall and straight bearing the demeanour of seasoned politicians. Behind them he can see the village elders, the merchants, anyone with a fraction of power. He can also feel the hate pouring off them. He feels doubly strange in his worn in clothes, his well maintained but not ostentatious weaponry, his long braided hair hanging lank between his shoulders. Next to Jiraiya and Kakashi he looks like a bruiser.

There’s a wave of pale pink hair, the rustle of green and blue fabric, and before he thinks better he calls out, “Amaya?”

“Sasuke!” Amaya grins. “Are you here with them?”

“I am going to Konoha.” He manages to get out with some difficulty. He usually comes at the thought sideways: I am following Kakashi or I am going to Fire Country. In this room he feels like the other answer would have been better.

Her eyebrows pull together. “Oh? Oh! How nice. How have you been? Where’s Sora?”

“Between here and Wave I imagine.” Sasuke licks his lips, glancing away from his companions. “Delivering messages for a friend.”

“Ah,” she says happily. Pleasantries dispensed, she rounds on Jiraiya and Kakashi. “Jiraiya of the Mountain. And you are?”

“Hatake Kakashi.”

“Of course.” She smiles pleasantly. “We cannot accommodate your request.”

Jiraiya grunts. “Mrs-”

“Ms.”

“Ms.” He allows. “These are delicate matters. They would be better discussed elsewhere.”

“Do you not trust your companions?” Amaya asks guilelessly.

Jiraiya looks meaningfully behind her. Amaya continues to smile as of nothing is amiss.

Jiraiya snorts softly. “Fine,” he gestures to the assembly, “bring your two advisors. We’ll talk in the garden.”

Amaya gestures toward her left. “After you.”

Jiraiya stalks off, Amaya and her advisors follow. Sasuke rolls his shoulders and makes to go to.

Kakashi grabs his shoulder. “Not us.”

Sasuke pulls away, forcing his muscles to stop flexing. He needs to get out his agitation.

Kakashi sighs, betraying the slightest bit of unhappiness. “Go smoke.”

Sasuke works his way through half a pack. Stubbing out each one with gusto. He can feel eyes on him. He’s tense enough to snap when the doors of the courthouse open again. Kakashi and Jiraiya are deep in conversation as the stride off not a single look behind them.

Amaya appears after, a mean little snarl on her lips. Her dress flutters around her as she approaches
him, snags a cigarette and lights up.

“So-” she begins.

Sasuke shakes his head. “Catch me up.”

Five weeks ago Amaya was released from her job as ambassador for Giri. She was highly encouraged to ‘step in’ as interim leader for the town. After negotiating them down to a six month lock in contract she discovered why they didn’t want one of their own people in the job. Around ten months ago a group of shinobi has taken a note out of Fuyuki’s handbook and engaged in a stealth operation that left a hundred of the village dead. Who did it is under investigation: the town assume Konoha, Giri assume Konoha, Konoha denies it. Begrudgingly Amaya agrees with Konoha. It is far more likely an independent force framing Konoha. They managed to capture one of the shinobi but when interrogated he simply stood perfectly still and said nothing, eventually starving to death. The one useful piece of information they did discover was that the mission was an attempt to stop a rebel faction from overthrowing the occupation.

Three weeks ago Giri caught wind of a second operation to finally ‘extinguish’ the people in the region. A civilian reported the news to a mid-ranking Giri officer, who passed it on, who passed it on to someone else. By the time it reached the ears of someone in the position to do something about it, it had become a mess of rumors and speculation. Fire was planning an attack, Giri wasn’t in a position to stop it, and if a civilian from Nagazawa attempted to lead Konoha would burn the whole place down. Amaya was pressured into taking the posting because of her work with the Kimura, and the belief that she could talk everyone down.

Sasuke sighs. “So Giri got intel -bad intel- from someone that Konoha was going to mount an attack here? And they called you to mediate because of-” he grimaces around the memories of dead police men, dead civilians, dead people who got caught between a rock and a hard place, “and, what? You’re denying them the right to speak their piece?”

“No.” She sits on the couch, fanning her hair over a pillow. “They want our informant.”

“They can’t ask for that. You aren’t Konoha occupied territory anymore. You have the right to self-governance.” In theory, anyway.

“And you say you have no talent for this,” Amaya teases, “but essentially, yes. They have requested that we hand over our informant to be interrogated. By which they mean tortured. The poor boy is barely seventeen.” What little amusement she had leeches. “He thought he was helping.”

Sasuke refrains from pointing out that he was seventeen or so when they met and no one would call him a wilting flower. But then if the boy was a hardened shinobi and disposable enough they would have just given him up. In all likelihood it’s a civilian.

“And then,” Amaya’s face twists with distaste, “they send fucking Jiraiya of the Sannin, pervert extraordinaire and living army to a settlement made of peasants, public servants and lords with middling power. If he doesn’t impregnate all of them they’ll just expire from the stress. It’s like sending a bouquet full of swords that might grope you with a note saying don’t fuck with us, kisses, your heavily armed neighbours.”

Visions of delivering summons float through his head. For a moment he understands what he must have looked like with his red eyes and deep voice, Fuyuki’s words coming out of his mouth. Wryly, he comments, “Inexcusable.”
She pats his hand consolingly. “At least you’re here.”

“Not really a choice.”

“I don’t care why I get to see you, nadeshiko.” Amaya pinches his cheek. “I just care that I do.” She pats the soreness away. “Hell of it is, this region is slated to become like Takaki and Yokokita. The daimyo’s wife has cousins here.”

That gives him pause. If the homeless are refugees, and Giri has a stake in it too... It won’t end bloodlessly unless Konoha backs off. “I’ll talk to them.”

Amaya punches his shoulder. “I know you will.”

--

Kakashi is nowhere to be seen when he finds them in a local inn. Jiraiya complains loudly about something and leaves for a whorehouse. Sasuke mulls over waiting up but decides to get curry instead. When he returns some hours later both are in their rooms. He goes to bed instead of engaging. It’s easier, and he still doesn’t know what to say.

In the morning he wakes up just enough to grab his leftovers from the night before, jam some in his mouth, and roll over to grab a drink.

“God this is sad,” a voice rumbles.

Sasuke tenses, but continues drinking. There are only two people here who would bother to judge him like this, and neither is inclined to kill him.

“I owed her a big favor.” Jiraiya says, as if Sasuke has asked.

Sasuke mulls that over as he searches for pants. He is always pantsless when this happens. “Does she know she’s being set up?”

“Excuse me?”

“You know they won’t give you the informant.”

“Some half trained flea bit from Kiri?” His voice lowers. “They’d go to war over this.”

That’s a weird piece of misinformation. He makes an idle note to find out how Konoha-Kiri relations are at the moment. “An untrained civilian from this province,” Sasuke drawls, wondering how much of this he’ll have to spell out, “this province which has the ear of the daimyo through his wife’s second cousin, and whom he is on the cusp of giving permission to establish itself the same way Yokokita does. No allowances made for shinobi.”

Jiraiya waves his hand angrily. “Out with it.”

“Fire Country has no enmity with Giri, Konoha has not declared them terrorists. I have no idea why not, but I can assure you that if you take a member of their force, a civilian member in particular, they will retaliate.” Sasuke says thoughtfully. “The daimyo of Wind has come out as anti-Giri and the Fire daimyo responded by sending him a gift basket with delicacies brought to him by the head of Giri herself.”

Jiraiya’s eyes darken, but that’s all the response he gets.

Sasuke nods sympathetically, “if Tsunade sends you to suppress a civilian populace trying to claw
their way out of the draconian laws set on them under the rule of the first two Hokages, and you
not only fail but also ignite the temper of the only force strong enough to put up a fight against a
Hidden Village, don’t you think that will reflect badly on her? You might have been thinking your
impartiality made you better because civilians would fear you less but you’re wrong they’re twice
as scared of you, they don’t know who you stand for. In fact the only person they do know you
share a connection with is Tsunade. Most countries already think Konoha’s strong bonds make
them weak. Now they’ll think it made the Hokage foolish.”

Jiraiya stares at him, speechless.

“Apparently,” Sasuke squashes the strange urge to laugh, “apparently I am the only person here
that everyone is happy to talk to.”

“Well.” He crosses his arms with a big motion. “Good for us then.”

Debatable. “The question is,” he continues, “who told Tsunade about this in the first place and who
told the informant? I bet you’d find they’d crossed paths.”

Jiraiya loosens his shoulders and looks at Sasuke oddly. “I bet I might.”

Sasuke nods, already shifting gears to politely staring at the door.

“I can’t help but think,” Jiraiya mutters, “about how easy this would have been to leverage against
the Sannin. And how easily we might have walked into that trap had you not been here.”

Sasuke shrugs. “Yeah well.” He leaves it. Every other response is just unbearable.

Jiraiya surges on, “I expected you to be irredeemable.”

It sits jaggedly in his chest, this off hand estimation of Orochimaru’s influence. The man was
immoral, he put his soul into the bodies of children so he could use them like a change of clothes.
He was even tempered and clear eyed, making what he chose to do so much worse. He was never
safe in his Otogakure but he got to live with himself; his rage, his quiet echoing silences, and there
was something safe in that.

The Sasuke that stayed in Konoha might by the standards of the man in
front of him been a better person, but Sasuke can’t rightly erase his own existence like that. It was
his choice and Sasuke has always stood by his decisions.

“Maybe you didn’t understand as much as you think you did.” Sasuke replies quietly.

“I knew him better than anyone.”

And what about those quiet echoing silences? There were days in Old Otogakure where the walls
would quiet, the noise would cease, and all you could here was the even breaths of people who’d
stopped fearing everything. Fear still lived there but it was fear of a concrete thing. It was fear
given a form. It is a rare man who understands that without needing to. When Sasuke pushes
himself against the reflexive wall that stops his memories from overwhelming he hears odd things,
things Jiraiya would never accept. Like Orochimaru freeing every slave who came to him. Like
him teaching Sasuke how to use his sword in the courtyard when it was summer, how he answered
all questions patiently and gently. How when those silences came through the echoing hallways,
sometimes, once in a blue moon or rarer, he would sing the songs of humble dragons.

No man is one thing. “No. You really didn’t.”

--
It’s going poorly.

It’s a full assembly: Konoha representatives and civilians both. Sasuke bullied his way into the gallery and gamely sat between a middle aged mother and a farmer. They don’t like him but they can cordially accept his invitation to bite his ass. The meeting had started unpleasantly: Kakashi was late, a great dominance move that told the Nagakawa that Konoha doesn’t respect them. Amaya cut across Jiraiya every time he made a point with icy politeness. Jiraiya looks ridiculous in this room, too big and too angry to be here. Sasuke suspects that only he and Kakashi know that his discomfort is as much to do with his personal ideals as it is to do with intimidating Amaya. Sasuke knows she doesn’t fear him but only because he knew her husband.

A few hours in Amaya reaches down and pulls out a blue file. Sasuke watches the indecision fly across her face. With a practiced flick of her wrist she opens the file and lays out several black and white photos. The woman next to Sasuke tenses up with a sob.

Amaya has thrown down a gauntlet: dozens of images of the dead spread across the table.

The tension in the crowd is palpable. Amaya uses it to make her point. “We are not being difficult, Jiraiya of the Sannin.”

Jiraiya takes a long steady look at the pictures. He slides them back over. “They did not belong to Konoha.”

Sasuke applauds her gumption. If she wasn’t using that move on someone who has seen hundreds of dead bodies it might have worked.

“That does not matter.” Amaya hisses. “You showed them no respect. You showed no mercy. When the people of this town awoke to their dead they did not care that their tormentors were from somewhere else. They cared that their brothers, wives, husbands, uncles and children were dead.

“You misunderstand my point in showing you these. We will not give in. You will not take more than you already have. Do you think people flee here because they fear Konoha? No. They flee because here they know that their neighbours will not go missing in the night. They flee so that business rivals won’t have them killed in their sleep. They flee so that the powers of this world will not kill them for trying to make a better life for themselves.”

Jiraiya leans back, with hooded eyes, he asks the question that always halts the conversation. “And what about those who would do us all harm?”

“They live everywhere,” Amaya gives him an honest smile, soft voice she says, “in the faces of mothers, of police, of friends. Women of peace, men of war, in the hands and minds of children too.” She glances at everyone but Sasuke. “Evil lives even in the minds of beloved husbands.”

Sasuke holds his breath.

Amaya leans forward. “We cannot stop evil. You cannot stop evil,” so low he only just hears it, “but we can stop this.”

“I am sorry,” and he sounds it, heavy with aged grief, “but I cannot agree to these terms.”

Amaya smiles bitterly. “Will you return to the table?”

“Yes.” Jiraiya returns that smile. “Yes I will.”

Sasuke holds his breath just a little bit longer. Faces in the crowd fade to small facts: some are
glad, some are angry, some are merely waiting for permission to leave, uninvested in the process.
Without a word he turns on his heel and walks out.

No one stops him. He doubts anyone would’ve thought to. What is he right now but an outsider,
staying on the fondness of people he’s barely connected to?

He grits his teeth, discarding that thought. It’s both self serving and pathetic. He is far to angry to
be pathetic. Angry because he’s bored of seeing this. Angry because it’s one stick on a pile already
layered too high. Angry because there’s a part of him wondering why no one can see what he does.

There will be no discussion later, no chance for him to ask Jiraiya who told him to say no no matter
what the offer was. This was the wrong choice, and it feels good, vindicating to think it. But he
knows the system. He knows that what your elders say goes, regardless of who is on the other side.
Even if Jiraiya was the type to ask for his opinion he wouldn’t be okay with the kind of
conversation that would follow, Sasuke’s discomfort with it.

It sits at odds with what he’s almost gotten used to. By the time he was handed a new mission in
Giri he’d talked the old one to death, gotten feedback, and seen a psychologist. He’d understood
the point of it after heavy combat missions. Shinobi have a high rate of suicide, burnout and
domestic violence. It was lowering, very slowly, in Giri. He’s not naive enough to ignore the perils
of this life. Civilians are happier, less complicated people.

He understood it even better watching people who truly believed crushed under the weight of
waning hope.

He wishes he had the comfort of knowing he could go to the old temple, and talk to that old
priestess. It’s funny, but he got used to having to talk out his feelings.

But he does know what she’d tell him to do. She’d tell him to sit down and take his stick out of his
ass. Sit down and remember what beauty lives around you, without you, and find your peace with
that. Morbid old woman.

He pools his chakra in his hands. Loops it around his body, through the coils. Night falls over his
shoulders. He finds his mind quiets with the dark. Thoughts are easier.

Slowly the connection blinks to life in his head. Symbols matter. That’s why Jiraiya is here. That’s
part of why Amaya trusts him. Suigetsu was being an asshole when he told Sasuke he symbolised
something good but if there’s anything he’s learning untangling the myth made of him it’s that
intention only means what people think it does.

Bone snake. Grief, pain and suffering.

Another thought surfaces. A picture of Orochimaru; proud, looking at the room of Oto-nin eating
under his gaze. A picture of them sparring in the garden, Sasuke questioning him until he gave an
answer that matched what Sasuke thought. There were shades in his eyes. Flicks of darker colour.

The flesh-bone-skin snake shifts in his hands.

It’s not the knowledge that he wasn’t what he seemed. Sasuke knows that. He acknowledges it. It’s
that he’s thinking about edges. About change. About finding the truth. The simple truth is that
things are complicated. Picking a path and sticking to it as all well and good when there isn’t
anyone to knock you off it. Some of these thoughts are the endless merry-go-round of debate and
diplomacy and failed meetings between states and rebels and pacifists that all seem to end in the
same grim unhappy message: peace is not an option.
Some of it is knowing that Karin went home. That Juugo is happy. That even though Suigetsu can no longer kill on a whim, he can free others and be free himself. His first complex thoughts about what it means to truly seek power start with Orochimaru. It’s the legacy of their first meeting.

A better legacy, in some ways, than what his family has left him.

No. Not better. Easier to live with. The weight of one man versus an entire family of ghosts.

His muscles lock, a huge weight pulling through his body, through his chakra coils. He grits his teeth and holds true. Dry, dead skin gains vermillion colour. Flesh morphs into muscle, to fat and sinew. The bones become teeth.

A dragon.

It looks at him lazily, blinking one eye and then the other. It turns, shimmers, rolling its muscles as it stretches.

He’s about to speak, is in fact in the process of doing so, when a fluffy orange tail is shoved unceremoniously into his mouth. Sora jumps on his head, stretches, then tumbles to the ground in a flash of warm fur. Sasuke eyes the dragon, because it’s unavoidable, and ignores what he suspects to be a flash of disdain.

“Sora.”

The cat doesn’t listen, stepping right up to the dragon. The dragon blinks, one eye and then the other, but leans down to gently touch the cat’s nose.

Sora meows happily, retreating to a tree then disappearing up it. God knows what he’s going to do with that cat.

The dragon turns in its slow curling way to meet Sasuke eye to eye. Its claws are the size of his forearms. Its teeth are as long as his neck. He’s proud of it, even as he’s wondering how the hell he made it. The dragon rests gently on its belly, eyes still moving in that slow blinking pattern. Its eyes open and in it-

In it he sees fire.

It’s not the fire of burning houses. Or the fire of battlefields. It’s like lighting a match in a dark room, breathing ozone, and feeling that flash of bright warmth on your skin. It’s like that match being joined by another and another until you realise the room is big enough to reflect everything back. It’s realising that in the fire is the universe, and it always reflects back. It’s a warming fire. A ballast. Something that says, to something deep inside of him, we are still with you.

His eyes water. He blinks twice and his vision clears. Kakashi is standing across the river, watching. Slowly he approaches, walking across the water. Sasuke holds the dragon still.

Kakashi crouches down next to him, side by side. “What’s this then.”

Sasuke rolls his eyes. “A dragon.”

“What does it do.”

“I have no idea.”

The dragon blinks, curling and uncurling its claws, but settles in Sasuke’s control. It lays its head
down with a yawn, staring straight at the moon. Those fire bright eyes seem to absorb the light of it, and in his own head Sasuke sees the snap of the stars against the full belly of the night.

“It was Orochimaru’s first. Now it’s mine.” Kakashi stiffens, and Sasuke sighs internally because he can’t explain this to him properly. He knows the first step is making his voice sound confident and adult, rather than the small boyish quality it has now. “It was his, and it was a snake. Now it’s mine and it’s a dragon. I just took what he taught me and made it better.” Like Chidori. Like the fire techniques of his family.

Kakashi looks at the dragon. He looks at the moon. He looks at the way the dragon gazes soulfully up at the sky. He shrugs. “Okay.”

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When he gets up in the morning it’s to the news that the talks have failed.

He rolls over and goes to sleep. He has to really reach back to find a time when talks on this scale don’t sour in the first quarter. Everyone escalates until someone fires, and then the war starts. No one knows how to make diplomacy work when all sides are constantly pointing weapons big enough to end the world at each other. People have debated for generations whether or not Hashirama was right to give up the tailed beasts, but Sasuke doesn’t think it would have made much of a difference. Even leaving aside the fact that Hashirama could wipe the floor with all of them, he at least saw what generations of people raised on a one sided idea of power would do with it. They’d do their best to destroy each other.

Jiraiya and Amaya have found enough peace to hold a banquet. It is civil when they arrive, no one was holding out a hell of a lot of hope, but Sasuke does see glimmers of something good in the way that Jiraiya shows his respect. It’s met with respect. That’s something, then.

They walk in an informal procession. Jiraiya takes the same position Orochimaru always did. On point, shoulders back, head high. Same posture, same slouch. Kakashi takes the lazy guard position to the left, shooting the shit with Jiraiya; Sasuke knows in his bones that he is to stand a step behind and to the right as per protocol.

Never can get all the Konoha out Fuyuki sneers in his head. It’s something of a shock to realise how right she was.

Sasuke steps forward, steps back. It’s hard to choose. No one seems to mind that he changes position, just that he stays close.

Amaya gives her speech, talking about her hopes for the future. Jiraiya says something wise disguised as something inappropriate. They’re still not comfortable but maybe it wouldn’t be a mistake for Jiraiya to be the face of Konoha here.

Amaya catches his eye. He smiles, small and quick. Her returning one is tired. One of the diplomats turns to her and he watches as she picks herself up and carries on. Sasuke decides to take a note from her book and carry on too.

The urge carries him through the early hours of the evening, through the first few rounds of drinks, and into the dark dusty den of a club. A woman he knows is setting up her set, running through her notes, seeing how far her voice reaches in the dark. With nothing else to do and a bottle to drain, Sasuke sinks into a well pillowed corner and shuts down as much as he can. Kakashi comes and goes at points, Sasuke assumes it’s to check on him. When he realises that as long as Sasuke stays drunk he’s not going anywhere he liquors him up and leaves.
This drunk he carefully unspools his thoughts. Itachi sits at the top, and he feels bad and cold for how he still feels love. He keeps trying to sour it with his dead parents. The dead housewives, nurses, butchers. But when he tries that he sees dead policeman. He sees everything he mowed down while trying to face him. He tries to feel regret and none comes. He tries to feel self loathing, and there’s more than a touch, but it’s blunted by what he knows now: nothing he did was worse than what others have done.

Everything, absolutely everything, is more complicated than that. It has to be, or nothing about this world makes sense.

That hurts. Or it’s confusing. So many of his thoughts feel like missing links to something he can only see the edges of.

He takes his time coming out of his self imposed fugue only to find the music has changed.

Anger is just love, left out, turned to vinegar, she croons and Sasuke aches to tell her how right she is. You wake up a stranger to yourself and then you learn to live with her.

Jiraiya refills his glass. “You didn’t strike me as the type.”

Sasuke blinks. He had no idea he was here. “To like singing?”

“To like poetry.”

“My father and my uncles considered it a well rounded education.” He replies too quickly, words running together. There’s a burn in his cheek from too much poor alcohol. “Not many people know but the Uchiha produced many great poets.”

“Oh? You got any in you?”

“No.”

“Not even a little rhyme.” Jiraiya pouts. “Let me help you a little. I’ve got some great ones.”

Since Jiraiya is determined to be annoying he picks his time and joins in with the woman singing. He knows this song, he heard it with Haru in a bar once, when he couldn’t worm his way out of it. “You come as fragile, soft machines, and you’re bound to fast, you’re bound to grieve, but you’re built to balance on two feet.” He lets her have the next few lines humming along. Mouthing the words. “You learn to live on less, you duck some, you take some square, your luck runs out, you’re there in midair.” His voice sounds weird to his own ears; a little off pitch, too deep.

Jiraiya points his empty bottle at him. “Where’d you learn that?”

“Know a guy,” his eyelashes feel heavy. He probably should have stopped a few drinks back, “he showed me a few things.”

“Yeah, where did he learn it?” Jiraiya asks, oddly gentle. “You’ve got a good voice, kid.”

“In Oto.”

“In Oto. He learnt to sing in Oto?”

“Nah, but it didn’t matter, we all learnt.” As Sasuke tries to order his thoughts he stumbles, he says, “I’m not sorry for killing him.”

“It wasn’t all bad,” he tries to put Orochimaru’s poor jokes into words, his insistence on survival and overcoming fear, even if his articulation was horrific, “he tried to show me how to be kind.”

“You’re joking.”

“No.” Sasuke knows what he’s saying - what he’s thinking- is ridiculous, but it does not stop it from being true. “He wanted me to be like him but he kept messing it up. Never made me cruel. He could have. He made others like that.”

“He didn’t make you?” Jiraiya says incredulously. “Cruelty is a choice kid, he can’t make you.”

Sasuke made a snake out of blood and bone and bile once. True fear and suffering. “He didn’t make me anything. But he didn’t give many choices.” He made a better one out of something he doesn’t quite get yet. “Didn’t get many choices. But that was just being shinobi. We didn’t get many choices.”

“He didn’t make you?” Jiraiya says flippantly, “time for bed kid.”

He has whiskey dreams that night. He’s by a river rising over it’s banks. There’s blood in the water, swirling against his ankle.

There is a woman, thin and slight with nasty eyes. Her narrow hips are wrapped in dark robes. She holds a huge war fan in her hands dripping with something viscous. She’s no great beauty but he can’t say he’d look past her. Uchiha Kazue, the war poet.

From the ground the same dream flows to the surface. It is the compound at night. The moon is red. He begins his usual walk home, to where his parents will be dead. The trees are overgrown. There is blood on the ground. There is more murder to be found.

He hesitates over the archway to his home, one foot up, usually at this point he has to brace himself to remember. His foot hangs over the doorway and he realises: he doesn’t want to walk in.

He stands outside the door. He’s always crossed this. He’s always wanted the reminder of what he has to do, who he has to kill. Instead he remembers when this all first happened. When he would have done anything to forget, to move past it. He couldn’t, though, all he could do was make it something he could use.

What happens if he steps back? What if he leaves the compound? What if he goes to where he knows his parents are buried, he says his prayers, and then-

A hand lands on his shoulder. Thin, scarred, recognisable. Shisui turns him around bodily and beyond him he sees faceless people. He feels that if he reached out and touched them they could be more, but he can’t, not while he still has the house to enter.

Shisui guides him towards the left. A door opens, and out flows a man in a formal kimono. He sits perfectly still at the end of the walk. Blue cloth, wheat and birds sown on the outer robe, a hand-me-down. Itachi opens his mouth to speak, his brother listens, but there’s no connection.

Itachi keeps talking. No sound comes out no matter how much Sasuke strains to hear him. He walks through the crowd to get to him, then he runs, but no matter how close they come to touching he can’t make the difference between them. Mud, or old blood, falls from the sky and Sasuke can clearly feel his own frustration. He thinks his brother is saying Tsukiyomi, but he could be calling his youngest cousins, three year old twins, whose names ran together Tsuki and Yumi.

Flowers grow in the cracks of the pavement. The moon is no longer red. He feels like he’s
breathing again, like he just found out Itachi is gone all over again, and then he feels grief, like he just found out his brother was dead.

Long red nails reach over his shoulders. Kazue’s harsh voice whispers into his ear, nails drawing blood. Blackness falls over his eyes. “If he didn’t break you, and the eyes are real, and there’s another Uchiha, then there’s still more to find isn’t there?”

Like matches in a dark room, red sharingan light up the night.

--

He wakes up singing to himself. There’s a wealth of red fabric over his eyes and the taste of damp sweat in his mouth. He feels like he’s floating in a river; down the swirls, down the arches. Time passes. His body comes awake and if this is a river, it’s a rocky one, bumping up and down over stones.

He’s forced to action by the sun and the scent of passing trees. He pulls the fabric down just long enough to crack an eye and take stock of his surroundings. It’s the back of the cart. The horses are quick and light on their feet. Kakashi is sitting beside him braced against the slow rocking motion of the cart. Sasuke pulls the fabric all the way off, looks down the stretch of red at the two gold circles, lies back down with a groan, already closing his eyes. Kakashi laughs gently, nudging Sasuke’s side. Sasuke flips him off and covers his eyes again, gently rocking back to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Next time on Survival: the end of a much bigger era. Breakthroughs and reunions.

Fun Facts:
-This is officially the halfway point of this fic, and as such is fairly transitional. Not a hell of a lot has happened plot wise. I consider this chapter to be the last of the first part of Sasuke's character arc, where he's figuring out things, and the beginning of the next in which, he starts more actively driving things. So if that's been a frustration for you don't worry.
-Konoha-Kiri relations this chapter = bad. Not their fault, several factions are doing their best to ruin them.
-Sora the cat returns briefly, and will return permanently chapter after next.
-Sasuke had basically all his emotions at some point this chapter. Poor baby.
-My brain is dead, but the next mix is ready to go, and will be up sometime tomorrow. If you like fanmixes head over to my tumblr to see that. Same name as on here.
Chapter Summary

n. the post-distraction effort to recall the reason why you’re feeling particularly anxious or angry or excited, in which you retrace your sequence of thoughts like a kid wandering across the neighborhood gathering the string of a downed kite, which was likely lost in a romantic storm or devoured by that huge carnivorous tree that is Things Your Parents Have Said.

Chapter Notes

A warning for, eh, poor mental health. A brief illusion to suicidal thoughts. Be safe folks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With more glee than is possibly appropriate Sasuke spends the last hours on the cart from Yokokita to New Uzushio telling Kakashi all the things he doesn’t know. He would feel bad but really when is he going to get a chance like this again? He starts with a simple explanation of how they won back the land rights (Karín went as part of an ambassadorial mission to Suna, found out they were holding some of the last full blooded Uzumaki as political prisoners to hopefully one day use their land for farming purposes, wrecked them). Then he dips into Giri’s restructuring of the political climate (the areas that belonged to Uzushio on the mainland and the sea territories were returned to their custodians thirty years ago, with the promise of supplies and sovereignty they promised to bar access to and from Fire should it be necessary). And for his finale he details the interplay of criminal factions (numerous, well funded and littered with Orochimaru’s rejects). Kakashi looks equal parts weirded out by all the talking, queasy from the topic and angry he’s out of the loop. He narrows his eyes. “Why are you telling me this?”

Because I can. “I don’t want this to be more troublesome that it has to be. I’m here to do a job.”

Kakashi looks about to calling bullshit, but it seems he can accept it if it’s framed in Sasuke’s obstinacy and goal orientation.

Uzushio comes into view in the mid-afternoon. It springs from the earth between breaths a white stoned speck on the ocean surrounded by fields and huts. One moment Sasuke is on the back of a rickety old cart in a forest, the next he is staring at clear sky and farmland. Seal work, probably. He admires the curves and cradles of the land as they begin their final approach -green on blue, uncut stone waiting to become houses and roads, workers around coffee carts laughing- and misses the rise of the entrance to Uzushio: two great dragons, both with huge crystals in their mouths dance around an archway. Made of metal and studded with semi precious stones the huge arch stands lonely as a cloud in the middle of an otherwise empty road. Sitting cross legged on top of a rock is a red haired woman staring down at a clipboard.

“Sasuke!” Karín leaps off the rock. “It’s good to see you!”
Kakashi tenses, a small shift of chakra that might as well have been an explosion in current company. Karin throws him an assessing look but never stops moving toward Sasuke.

At that moment he realises that Kakashi has never met Karin, so to speak.

Karin looks at Kakashi in a terrifying predatory way that makes Sasuke passingly fond. Kakashi looks at her bored and put upon.

“Well,” she says after a moment of long deliberation, “it’s not as sexy as Sasuke’s, but not a lot is.”

“Karin,” Sasuke places a finger under her chin and drags her attention back to him, he produces the message scroll he was given in Yokokita, “where is this going?”

Karin waves them over to her rock before she opens it, reads it, and makes a note, grumbling under her breath. “Ah I’ll take you myself these bozo’s never do it right.” She rests dramatically on the nearby archway, leaning back so they can fully take her in. She waves herself with the scroll.

“Sometimes I think I should run this place.”

“You do.”

Karin crosses her legs, hitting him with a knowing smile. “I was pretty surprised when we got the confirmation. I thought you’d been back for ages by now.”

Sasuke shrugs. Karin accepts that as an answer. “Well, anyway, we’ve found a lot of the old alliance records and treaties, a few of those are still good, so if you want work from us you’ll have to get it soon.”

“Excuse me,” Kakashi leans between the two of them, “but Uzushio wants to resume its alliances?”

“Not yet,” Karin ducks a man carrying a huge pillar of stone under one arm, “we have basically nothing to offer. But I think in five years or so we’ll be able to do consistent trade. We have a few people learning the old ways and developing new methods based on what few elders we have left know. It’s a good thing this happened now, in another ten years the skills would have been lost completely.”

“I see.” Kakashi smiles but his body is so still it must hurt. “Do you intend to call on Konoha?”

“That depends,” Karin tilts her head just so, “see I don’t know Konoha very well, and while they were very kind after the fall of Uzushio you haven’t had a great policy toward missing-nin which given out political climate a lot of us are. We’re not in the position to resume shinobi services right away so we can’t be recognised under the exact conditions of our treaty. Not to mention that the last guy I worked for was one of yours and it didn’t end well. A lot of people remember that.”

Karin sniffs delicately, “Kiri has been very kind to make up for their abominable behaviour and it’s important that we rebuild our connection with them. They are physically speaking our closest allies and the most willing to make us comfortable. Unfortunately there are members of your bureaucracy that just weren’t interested in reconciling which leaves us with no one in Konoha we feel close too.”

Kakashi nods encouragingly. “Not even Sasuke?”

“Well we like Sasuke. His work with Giri is considered a plus. It depends entirely on you now.”

Kakashi hums noncommittally. “I have to see a man about a dog. I’ll be back in a week. Stay, Sasuke.” Then he steps back and in a plume of smoke disappears.
Sasuke rolls his eyes. Like he couldn’t see this one coming. “Thank you,” Karin’s hand finds it’s way to his, the way it usually does when they’re alone, “that wasn’t necessary.”

“I think you may have gotten the sentences mixed up there, eh, Sasuke?” she teases.

Sasuke scowls at her but doesn’t tug too hard when she takes him off to her favourite restaurant.

--

It takes Kakashi nearly six weeks to return.

Karin has him haul huge stones pulled from the ocean at low tide. They’re stacked, cleaned and assessed by a stonemason before they’re hauled off to the alpha site to be slotted and sealed into Karin’s reborn city. Karin is there from dusk til dawn touching and feeling the rebirth of something lost for too long. Out of respect for Karin and the memories his mother imparted of Uzumaki Kushina, Sasuke keeps his sharingan deactivated. Most days she makes him play strategy games against her the way they used to Oto. When it’s overcast or the sea swells are too strong for even the water touched to make it through they huddle together in the makeshift camp and play old games from their childhood. Sasuke’s are all about finger dexterity and memory puzzles. Karin teaches him High Tide Over Low a fisherman’s game that relies on knowledge of angles, basic math and sheer dumb luck. Away from Orochimaru, focused and unstressed Karin is hot blooded and forward but tempered by an unwavering calm as deep as the ocean she sleeps next to.

“It’s the chakra sense,” she says shortly one night when they’re both strung out on bad memories. “I’m so sensitive that living with all that...rage and pain was like being rubbed raw all the time.”


“You feel really nice when you’re not hopped up on adrenaline. Your personality is the problem here.”

“Not sorry.” Sasuke replies and tilts his leg out of the way so she can’t kick him again.

“Yeah, I know you, you big lump,” she sighs. “And I love you, although I don’t want you to do anything with it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I got a city now, I’ve got...I’m it. The last of the Uzumaki.” Her eyes roll once, “future Uzukage once I figure the chakra chains out.”

“Hmm,” Sasuke looks out at the vast dark blue of the ocean. The Uchiha are fireborn. What are the Uzumaki? “Did you know you have a dual affinity?”

“Do I?”

“Fire and water.”

“Huh,” she says, “I can’t feel myself that way.”

Sasuke nods and returns to watching the ocean.

“He’s coming back Sasuke.”

“Kakashi?”
Karin sips her tea. “Hmm, you are going to go home.”

“Hn.” He doesn’t want to have that conversation. “Why you?”

“For Uzukage? The title is hereditary for one, but also the political climate around here. The people we’ll get food from and eventually take missions from are very old school. There are people who are more competent than me but they’ll never convince the Uyeda family to follow them because their matriarch is old as hell and remembers the Uzumaki. We need the Uyeda family because the control all grain production. The Matsuhiro family control the water supply and their son is betrothed to the Uyeda families second daughter. So on and so forth.”

“Old school,” he murmurs.

Karin nods. “Right. So I show up with my red hair and my chakra abilities. I couldn’t use my chains then but I could do other stuff. I can be the face, so to speak. Internationally I’m a good choice because Konoha, by their own laws, should automatically accept us as their sister village. That means we get trade and military preference. They were going to use Suna but that bit the dust between Giri and keeping Uzumaki as prisoners. A full blood Uzumaki making peace looks really good on paper. The land went back to the farmers and most of the natural resources have recovered, we have food and certain skills that the Hidden Villages want. Everybody needs us so we’re in a good position.” Karin looks him head on. “Something to keep in mind.”

“Karin-”

“I love you,” she says seriously, “and I really mean that. I want you to be happy and safe and I don’t think Konoha can do that.” Her hands ball into fists. “I’m sorry I just don’t. When this goes bad I want you to know you can come here. You don’t have to be with me. But I need you to know you can stay with me.” Karin tenses in on herself as if protecting from a body blow.

More than once Sasuke has been touched by Karin’s ability to perceive what others miss, it is one of the things he values most about her. She knows, or he hopes she does, that he has immense respect for her. Any amount of it is hard won from him.

“Thank you.” He needs to stay polite, it’s not her fault he doesn’t love her. “I’m not in love with you. I don’t even know if I can-”

“It’s fine.” Karin hunches her shoulders, tears sliding down her cheeks. “Really Sasuke.”

What would his mother say about him right now? With a wry smile he covers her hand. “Karin. Thank you. I won’t forget.” That feels a little thin, his thumb stroking against the back of her hand, he needs to tell her the rest of it. Not just keep it inside. “I don’t know what I feel, but I respect you.”

She sniffs. “Bastard. I’m too pretty to cry.”

“Hn.” He shrugs, leaning back. Karin wipes her face but he can see her smile.

--

Kakashi seems the most surprised of all to learn that he had stayed.

He’s even more surprised by the odd acquaintances he’s made, many of whom come to the gates to see him off. “Don’t be a stranger,” Karin threatens backed by a chorus of well wishers, “or I will send someone to get you.”
Her men and women yell back. If pressed Sasuke couldn’t tell you half their names, he was a silent worker who kept to himself, but like in all demanding environments you make connections.

A long while from Uzushio, crossing into a civilian settlement known for its charity hospital, Kakashi asks, “Do you have any idea at all how many people want to save you?”

“Yes,” he answers honestly. It makes him uncomfortable so he shifts away.

“Why?” Kakashi asks. They aren’t looking at each other.

Why ignore it? Why not stay? Why did you pick revenge over love?

“Can’t change what you are.” Sasuke answers flippantly.

Kakashi lets it lie. This time they both know Sasuke is lying.

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Naoko has just passed. She leaves behind her three babes and her oldest. Three boys, one girl. Tajima has asked us to take in the girl, her name is Chizuru. She’s so tiny! Already she looks more like her brother Izuna than her own father. She’ll take after Naoko for sure! I only see her irregularly, gone as I am training new girls for my job and scouting for civilian families to bind to us. Recently the other clans have started bringing them in under the banner, protecting their crops from other clans and taking some food as payment. We are starving, as always, and I think this may be best for me. Another shinobi will not understand my purpose, he will think that my training makes me duplicitous by nature. He won’t ever let down his guard enough to give me the leverage I’ll need to kill him if I have to. If, like Madoka or Emiri or Fusae, he thinks I fight with my knives, he will forgive me and let me kill him. A civilian will merely think me a whore. He’ll think me stupid. He’ll think me ruined. I can be a whore so long as it doesn’t stop me from being useful to my people.

Holy fuck. Sasuke scans for more mentions of Izuna, who is presumed to be a distant ancestor and whom there is quite literally no information about, but there is nothing more on this page. Still he looks for other famous names -Setsuna, Hikari, Madara- eyes passing over little schematics of toys and bits of poems. He finds it jammed between two little bits about her chosen husband Tatewaki Souta -he has a sharp wit and a decent way in bed, apparently- but there it is.

There was some fuss today. Little Chizuru and I were looking over marriage offers when Madara came streaking through the tent, desperate to see his sister. There was something about a river and a friend and now he has the sharingan. Clever boy, if a little sad. Very imaginative. Chizuru was excitable and had no time for her brothers poor mood so that was put away very quickly. We talked some after dinner. What is the north like? The west? The valleys? What men are out there and do they live differently? I said ‘not so much, very warm and they die as easily so really what does it matter’, and that he could rearrange those answers as he pleased. The poor thing still looked troubled. Sometimes I forget how little these children suffer compared to my own youth. We’ve recently had a whole two years of consistent rations. Still we all have blood on our hands now. Poor boy.

It’s said that Uchiha Madara was born evil on a thunderous day in midwinter. His mother fainted from the sight of his already bloody eyes and his father wept for his family.

There are ghosts in Sasuke’s blood, spectres that hang across his history. He’s taken back to a moment in his childhood. He was five and Itachi was holding him tight to his chest, they were in Sasuke’s room which was closer to the kitchen. His parents were arguing about something, about
the Yondaime and legacy. His mother rarely argued, simply moved through life with an absolute surety. His father on the other hand was given to a bad temper. His father believed that the past was past and that remembering themselves by the deeds of the dead did more harm than good. His mother was not so sanguine. _If they remember then we have to as well_, she said, _if they remember us as Setsuna and Madara it will never matter how we change._

Sasuke remembers wiggling too much so Itachi pressed a kiss to his head and sang a song. The words are lost but he recalls the tune. It was a popular song at the time and had been adopted into a little tune by the children of the village. Itachi wouldn’t have known that, he had never been a child, but Sasuke was reminded of playgrounds with the other Uchiha children in their own separate area. His cousins were playing with a ball and some sticks all with one eye on Sasuke who was by himself trying to remember the signs for the fireball technique. For some reason he remembers the smell of spring grass, the clear sky above and the non-Uchiha children bowling each other over so they could put their hands over each others eyes and sing, _Blood Eyes, Blood Eyes, turn three times, Blood Eyes, Blood Eyes, your family dies, Blood Eyes, Blood Eyes, spit on his grave three times. Blood Eyes, Blood Eyes. Bloody, bloody eyes and noooooow you’rrrrrrrre deaaaaaaadaad._

Sasuke puts down the scroll.

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They roll into the famous Kuebiko Hospital late in the evening. Surrounded by a permanent encampment of refugees taking advantage of the hospitals politically neutral status it’s a regular melting pot of scents, sights and sounds.

Recently there’s been a huge shift of populations. Civilians are on the move. There’s rumors in the air that things are changing. Sasuke doesn’t know if that’s Giri or Akatsuki or the whispers of an impending Kage Summit.

To go with this shift there’s been an increase in civilian crime and shinobi response. Sasuke hasn’t been keeping his ear to the ground about it but hearing the big things is unavoidable. Akatsuki helped overthrow the smaller systems of governance in several small city states. Popular theory is that they’re throwing a spanner in Giri’s works. If that’s the case it’s not really working. All that’s happened in response is escalation. Giri have moved diplomats, resources, medics all over the damn continent to keep things at bay. The Villages are unhappy about all of this. They’re coordinating efforts to put a stop to all of this but are hampered by Fire’s sudden random interest in a contested area near Uzushio, Uzushio itself and deteriorating relations with Mist, who now back on their feet are spreading themselves thin trying to gain back what they lost. Amidst all this Iwagakure is trying to regain their lost explosions expert who has disappeared from Akatsuki along with Konan, one of the supposed leaders. No one is sure what’s going on there but the fact that the desertions and deaths of more than half their members has not stopped them from collecting tailed beasts adds extra tension.

Kuebiko, lucky them, is neutral but staffed primarily by on loan med-nin making it the only place most civilians have a chance in hell of getting specialist treatments. Located in six converted buildings spread across an entire valley the hospital is lushly decorated by trees and greenery. A seventh building is being erected and a path is being cleared for an eighth.

Kakashi walks him to a building with Konoha’s symbol on it. _Senju Midori_ is its name. Sasuke, who hasn’t lived under a rock all of his life, is staring at the entrance to one of the best medical centers on the planet. Without pause or invitation Kakashi leads them through the hospital, all the way to a break room.
“Wait here.” Kakashi murmurs. He slides open the door and then resolutely shuts it.

“Sensei, what the hell?” A recognisable voice says. “I’m on rotation-”

A bloom of chakra rushes out of the room, so strong that Sasuke can taste it. His first impression is the plastic of the hospital. On its tale is a brilliant note of green growing things and the taste of clearwater; medical chakra at its best and most pure. It’s all capped off at the end by something warm and hearth like. Redwoods and blooming flowers.

A rustle. Some murmurs, then -“What?! How-” She gasps. “Oh. Oh this is her handwriting. It’s not forged-”

The door slams open bouncing in its slats. “You!”

Sakura is seventeen now and it shows in every line of body, every pretty curl in her hair. Sasuke met his hormones in the dank basement of a man capable of slitting a child or corpse from tip to tail with the same amount of enthusiasm and he is astoundingly glad to know that it had no impact at all on his ability to appreciate beauty. Sakura’s green eyes flash. “You.”

He nods at her. “Sakura.”

“I-” She shakes her head. “You have so much explaining to do.”

Seems fair. “Okay. Where would you like to start?”

“I-” She blinks at him, overwhelmed. “No. Get out of my hospital.”

Kakashi holds up his hands placatingly. “Now Sakura-”

Sakura clenches her fist. The plastic of her gloves squeaks threateningly. “Out. Of my. Hospital.”

Kakashi folds immediately. “Right you are.”

Kakashi turns Sasuke around and all but marches him outside.

“That could have gone worse,” Sasuke remarks.

“Could have gone better, too,” Kakashi sighs and drags him in a different direction, “I don’t think you understand how difficult things are here right now-”

Sasuke is saved from a snide reply by the slap that sends him careening down the gravel path.

Sasuke turns the hit into an advantage by leveraging the force into a spin. His sword is drawn, lightning twining around it like a lover, before his feet even hit the ground. The only thing, the only thing, that stops him from taking his opponent's head off is the sight of tears he remembers too well.

Sakura stands tall and resolute. Her hair is even shorter than it was the last time he saw her, lightly feathered around her face, bringing out the sharpness of the angles. Her eyes are made bigger by anger and a fierce joy he can’t even begin to comprehend. Although dressed in the practical clothing of her profession he can see a more casual version of a jounin outfit beneath decorated only at the collar by specialist pins. Even with a filled out figure she’s lithe and muscled rather than the knockout her eleven year old self wished she would be. The benefit of that is in the turn of her head, the weight of her obvious tiredness and fatigue sitting gently on her features. She turns her body, palm coming down with an invitation to fight.
Sasuke is far outside of her league, even now, and a mad part of him wants to give her the fight she thinks she deserves.

But this is Sakura, who by the end of their time together earned the right to his kindness. She sits in his chest sometimes; a small light that never goes out.

He waits, dark eyes meeting bright ones, until she backs down. At length she loosens her stand, drops her palm, breathe out a ragged breath that surprises all of them. “You’re different.”

“So are you.”

“Itachi-”

“Dead for over two years. I didn’t kill him.”

“Who did?” She asks. Immediately she waves her hands, dancing in one spot to show her dismay. “You don’t have to answer that. I don’t want you to.” Her eyes are getting wetter with each moment. “Where did you get that scarf from?”

Struck, entirely out of his depth with only Kakashi of all people to help him, he squeaks out, “This? From a village west of Suna. We had some free time so we ended up helping the locals build a wall out of corpses.”

She wipes tears from her eyes, patting her cheeks down with her hands. “What? Why?”

“The dead protect the living.” It was a land locked village surrounded on three sides by empty dying farmland and backed by an inexplicably wild forest that still makes him shiver when he thinks about it. The corpses were carried out from the forest at night and had to be buried by morning, always, or the villagers would grow scared and fearsome of what they would see in the light. Hiki, Haru and Yumi dug the graves so Sasuke could stack the bodies. Dosa left on the first day because his homeland had stories too and he didn’t want to know if they were real. By the time they’d finished the forest was separated from the village, the feet of the corpses always pointing north. “It was a lot of work.”

Sakura looks at him suspiciously, even gaining enough composure to put her hands on her hips, like she couldn’t possibly believe him. “Do you have any other stories?”

Sasuke inclines his head, “there’s an abandoned city by the sea being rebuilt by people with Naruto’s last name. They haven’t figured out how to make it float but once they do I expect they’ll ask Konoha for help. The best tomato soup is made by a woman in River who incidentally thinks I’m a woman and married to a man who’s seven and a half feet tall and refuses to wear shoes. She’s very upset he won’t give me babies. There’s a network of cats that run messages between the daimyo’s of every country on the continent and they will happily betray their secrets for salmon roe and a good scratch. Tsunade owes every other S-ranked kunoichi currently alive at least 500,000 ryo because she bet that none of them could earn a higher bounty than hers during the war. As far as I know two currently have significantly more.”

He watches Sakura process all that. She bites her lip. “...The Hokage owes how much money?”

“The Hokage probably owes me money and we’ve only talked twice.”

Sakura glances at him with a wry twist to her mouth. She stays silent just long enough to make something awkward grow between them. “That’s the most you’ve ever said to me.”

He sighs. “I’ve never had anything to tell you before.”
“And you do now?” Sakura closes the distance between them. Her steps are dancers steps, light, cautious, but she comes anyway until the distance is barely a breath to cross.

Sasuke still doesn’t really have much to tell anyone about himself but if it’s the world, the places he’s seen and the people he’s worked beside, that’s something that’s easy to share. “About some things.”

“He doesn’t know yet, does he?”

“Hn.” His feelings about Naruto are complicated.

“Wow.” Sakura snorts. “Some things are still the same, then.”

He says nothing.

Sakura looks at him oddly but lets it lie.

Sasuke knows he didn’t have to hurt her. There are bits of him that regret it and bits of him that still have issues telling what the problem was. In the years since he left very few of Orochimaru’s personal views truly stuck but one of them was the quick kill. Sever the bond as quickly as possible to save yourself the energy of second guessing. When he’s thought to interrogate it Sasuke’s pretty sure it was Orochimaru’s version of genuine kindness. Every great shinobi will kill something they love at some point.

Sakura’s eyes are harder now. Maybe she knows that too.

*I have no idea what you like, I have no idea what pisses you off, I have no idea what makes you a person.*

Like many things that makes him uncomfortable. He turns his face to the sky taking in the failing light. In a moment he’ll incline his head goodbye and go.

“You always did that.” Sakura clears her throat, voice raspy. His gaze comes away from the stars, back to her eyes. “When you couldn’t...figure out what to do you just went away.”

“I’m not that different,” he says defensively.

“I am.” Sakura says shortly. “I’m a lot of things. Most of them are different.”

“Is this you telling me you don’t want to get married and have six kids?” Sasuke says flatly.

“Cause I have to say Haruno, I have it on good authority that I am excellent marriage material.”

“Look at you with that sense of humor. Jokes on you Uchiha,” she replies with a shaky voice. “I am in high demand. You’re a has been.” She turns her head slightly, what he suspects is a tear rolling down one cheek. “I hate you for leaving us but I’m glad that it worked.”

Sasuke swallows and nods to give her a way out.

Instead of escaping from the conversation Sakura looks him head on. Eyes bright, flyaway hair turning into frizz on her head, yin seal shining with power even without his sharingan on. Her jounin uniform is crumpled and stained but the small embellishments on the collar mark her as a taijutsu specialist, small blade proficient, adept with explosives and the two entwined Senju clan markings that brand her an accomplished medic. Green eyes in a pale face nearly burn with intensity. Sakura was probably always a pretty girl and Sasuke probably never had any time to notice it.
“I will kill you before I let you leave him again.” she says decisively. “Pack him in a bag, leave him a detailed map, I don’t care. Sensei and Naruto will do their best to save you but unless you come to me with a life threatening injury I will not be the one to heal you. I won’t save you.”

There’s only one response. “Thank you.”

“Go.” She smiles thinly. “I think this is as far as we can go tonight.”

With a smirk and a sharp incline of his head, he does.

He reads some more of Kazue’s memoirs as he lies in his bed. The words don’t mean anything, tangled as they are in the emotional wounds of the day, so he doesn’t register it when he comes to the end.

I am leaving my son now. He will have these scrolls to understand me by. I hope he can understand what kind of woman his mother was and that he knows I did this not for lack of loving him, but for knowing that I could not stay and be the mother he deserved. I have questioned too much, lived too little and dreamed too wildly to believe in this farce. There will be no peaceful village life for me. I, who slept in every bed, who went down every road and into the darkness too often. I who know where the bodies are buried and where the demons were made. I know who these men are. I leave my son to Chizuru and her husband. If he were older or my husband still alive I would take him with me but a woman alone is danger enough. I hope he can grow in peace (here the writing is smudged and rubbed about) because I can not. I can’t stop being what I am. I can’t change. And I am so, so sorry, Jinta, that I wasn’t stronger.

There is a drawing here of hyacinth, lily and magnolia wrapped with the stems of a bamboo plant. There is blood on the flowers. Sasuke closes the scroll and paces for a while, letting it all go through his body. There are two scrolls left. He could read it now, get it over with, but most of him is tired and jittery. A first hand account of the founding of Konoha, of the entire shinobi system. History literally under his fingertips. He knows what he was taught and with time it all seems to be less true. Less one direction and more starburst. There is history and there is history and Sasuke only knows what he was taught.

Thoroughly annoyed with himself he gets undressed, throws himself into bed and slips into a fitful restless sleep.

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He registers something coming at him from above while still asleep. It’s a testament to how much all this travelling has dulled his skills that he didn’t feel it earlier. He does manage to catch the projectile one handed, flipping it in his palm. It’s a scroll. When he looks up it’s to Sakura’s cool green eyes frowning down at him. Sasuke blinks stupidly at her.

Sakura points to the scroll. “Learn this.”

“What?” He blinks to try and clear the muck from his eyes. There may be some drool at the corner of his mouth. “It’s early Haruno.”

Sakura crosses her arms, unimpressed. “Girl’s giving birth two and a half months premature. She’s fifteen and panicking. There’s a low level genjutsu on this scroll that’ll keep her calm enough to let me do what I have to. You are the only person around who can learn it.”

“So do you know it?” Sakura nods. He sighs. “It would be faster if you showed me.”

Sakura nods again and readies her hands in front of her chest. Sasuke activates his sharingan and
watches the motions and the pull of chakra in the technique. When he’s sure he’s got it he turns it off and gets out of the sleeping bag.

Sakura looks him up and down. “Why would you sleep naked?”

Sasuke shrugs. It’s not like he spends time with anyone who cares.

Sakura looks again, nods to herself, and then leaves his tent.

Sasuke makes his way to the hospital at a speedier pace than he would usually bother with. He’s directed to the room by an irate nurse, right at the end near a courtyard. Inside is a long bed with a very small woman in it. Her petiteness is emphasised by the large belly, frailty by the wires, tubes and lacerations he can see on her body. She has a full head of blonde hair pulled back from startling green eyes.

He frowns. “Name.”

Her head turns like a whip, small boned hands with no fat and very little muscle whip to protect her belly. “Wh-what?”

Sasuke moves forward slowly, telegraphing every move he makes. “Your name,” Sasuke checks her pulse. It’s there, fast and whole, which is about as much information as he can get out of it.

“My name is Momoko.”

Extremely girly name. Wind country accent. Provincial. The scars on her wrists suggest long term confinement, probably to a bed. He’s certain that if he were to turn her over and look somewhere - her back, her inner thighs, her ankle - there’d be a brand. Sasuke looks her in the eyes, sharingan ready. “This isn’t to hurt you Momoko.”

“He’s helping.” Sakura says unnecessarily. “Now, Uchiha.”

Sasuke bites down on the urge to scowl at Sakura. He turns back to the girl, eyes spinning, and tries to imagine what would comfort a civilian girl. “Things will be fine Momoko,” and then he pushes her under to a place where it’s soft and warm and she can already feel her baby in her arms.

Sasuke pointedly does not recall the events of the next few hours. He’s seen fetuses in every stage of development, he’s seen things come spewing blood and mucus covered out of people before, but the context was Orochimaru’s inherent awfulness. Childbirth is a whole different kind of disturbing.

He does remember the wild gasp of Momoko’s breath as she comes out of the genjutsu far too hard. Sakura is already there with that soft cooing medics do to convince their patients that everything is alright. Sasuke turns off his sharingan and places one cool hand against a tenketsu near the back of the neck. Kabuto taught him how to suppress the nerves and chakra points along the spine as a form of torture and information extraction. He also taught Sasuke how to release them off to avoid long term damage, especially to civilians who may otherwise suffer from severe after effects. He gently releases and smooths out the three points he damaged with his sharingan. Sakura gives him a brief clinical look but otherwise doesn’t acknowledge it.

“Baby?” Momoko asks.

“In a moment,” Sakura smiles at her. “The nurses are just cleaning her off.”

“It’s a girl?” Momoko asks shyly.
“Yes.” Sakura presses a kiss to the crown of the girls head. The girl leans into her. Sasuke has to wonder exactly how much of Momoko’s pregnancy Sakura has been around for. “I’ll see if they’re done.”

Sakura leaves the two of them alone. Sasuke tilts his body and his attention away from the girl to give her a few moments of peace. Sakura had him keep the genjutsu up through afterbirth and the cleaning process so Momoko is entirely pristine and covered. Still, Sasuke is not a small man and there isn’t a lot of reason to frighten her. A lengthy not unpleasant silence builds between them with the early morning light shining through the window. He relaxes and starts a small meditative form, meant to align the chakras up the spine and around the eyes. It was the first thing he was ever taught by his father.

“Thanks.” Momoko says into the quiet.

After a beat Sasuke says, “You’re welcome,” and they return to silence.

Sakura’s return is heralded by her screaming match with the head nurse in which many parentages are slandered and verbal knives are drawn. If he hadn’t seen her start to grow her teeth Sasuke never would have believed the spineless child he knew grew up to be the sort of woman that stood up to battle hardened war nurses.

“Sorry about that,” Sakura says as she comes in. She’s got a small bundle of pink flesh wrapped in a green blanket in one arm. She closes the door quietly and pads across the room to gently deposit the baby in her mothers waiting arms.

Sasuke quirks his lips up. “Name?”

Momoko looks at him in confusion. “You know mine.”

“Hers.”

“Oh,” Momoko wets her lips nervously. “I-I was thinking Himiko. After the Last Empress of Wind. Aim big, you know?”

“I do.” he confirms. “I had an aunt called Himiko. Her husband was a diplomat. She went to every court and castle from here to Ishigakure to Kiri in her lifetime.”

“Really?”

“Every banquet and celebration. She learnt seven languages and could dance with courtiers from every country.”

“Thank you.”

Aunt Himiko was a Uchiha in name only. Like all women who married outside her clan she was struck from the records and shunned by her family. The only reason Sasuke knew about her is because like his mother she descended from one of the strongest female lines in the clan. His mother never forgot the family she came from, even when everyone else did.

Sasuke places a hand on her head for a brief moment. The girl tilts her head down to run a hand through the thin wisps of blonde on her daughter’s head. She’s muttering to her baby. Sasuke knows the story of the last Princess of the Sand who became the Empress and Guardian of Wind. It’s a huge story for such tiny shoulders, but a warm one. Watching her he tries to line it up with something from his own memory. The birth of a cousin, maybe. Like so much else it’s empty space he doesn’t know how to fill. Sakura’s chakra flashes outside the door. Sasuke steps out into
the hallway to join her, the look on her face is placid.

Sakura blows out a tense breath. “You didn’t strike me as kind.”

“You’re lying,” he replies. “And I can choose to not be unkind.”

“Not quite the same thing.”

Sasuke rubs his eyes trying to get even a little of the tiredness out. “Does it have to be?”

Sakura’s face struggles for composure. Conflict, passion, grief and anger fight for exposure on her face. Her lips press together once and then it’s all smoothed away under the tight fisted control of a kunoichi.

Sasuke rather gets the feeling that this isn’t about him.

“Well,” she puts a hand on her hip, “see you later, nadeshiko.”

Sasuke rolls his eyes. “Fucking Kakashi.”

She grins at him. “Didn’t hear it from him. Bye Sasuke.”

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Sasuke cracks one eye open. “We have to stop meeting like this.”

“You’re coming drinking with me.” Sakura announces. “I have had a shit of a day and I feel like going out.”

Sasuke remembers Sakura being demure and retiring. “No.”

“That’s nice,” she says unfazed, “but you’re going to put on pants and come with me.”

“Why’s that?” Sasuke sits up letting the blankets fall off his chest. Sakura doesn’t waver.

“Because,” she rolls her eyes when Sasuke stretches his arms, “because it is seven in the evening and I have to ask you some pressing medical questions if a man who’s not even twenty is in need of this much beauty sleep.”

“Seven is a little early to be drinking.” Sasuke taunts. “Not to mention unladylike.”

“I seem to have left my give a shit in my other pants. I trained with Tsunade. If I’m awake it’s late enough to be drinking.”

“That’s sad as shit.” Sasuke says thoughtlessly. Sakura’s eyes snap with genuine anger. “You are coming drinking with me.”

He holds his hands up placatingly. “Fine.”

He’d forgotten why he’s gone to bed so early: there’s a carnival on. There is nowhere he’s like to be less than this carnival. Sakura insists on walking around before they pick a bar, so he doesn’t even have the soft glow of alcohol to get him through it.

Eventually she stops at a tossing game. “How’s your aim.”

Sasuke glares at her.
“Win a stuffed toy.”

“Why that one?”

“That’s for me to know.”

Sasuke picks up a ball and throws it with deadly accuracy.

They win a huge stuffed bear that Sakura can not possibly want. She makes him carry it around on his back strapped on by chakra strings. It is actually, genuinely, the stupidest thing he’s ever used chakra for. He manfully ignores the stares and giggles as they collect food and drink. Sakura packs it away in methodical lethal doses. She never sways, never gives any indication of how drunk she is, but he sees the tense of her jaw, the loss of concentration in her eyes. She’s tired and she’s hurting from something.

Sasuke ignores it, it’s both what she expects and all he can give her.

They’re drinking their way through a bottle of 35% proof next to a temporary fountain. Sakura’s ditched her shoes and is balancing a plate of dubiously labelled okonomiyaki on her leg. Sasuke undid the section of braids that keeps his hair off his face and took off his overshirt. They’d both abandoned propriety early in.

“That’s bullshit,” Sakura says archly, “you did not stop a major outbreak of a social disease. You did fucking not.”

“Why not?”

“A little thing called the Medical Appropriations Act, Sasuke, that four Hidden Villages signed.” Sakura leans forward finally, finally beginning to slur. “No Village or appropriately sized force may stop another from letting the poor die and the unfortunate suffer. How else are we going to keep the edge in medical practice, huh? Let civilians run their hospitals without us? Develop their own medical techniques? Fuck no.”

He tips his drink toward her. “We did it.”

“No way.”

“Matsusaki province. Virus was passed by bodily fluids. Treated six communities and inoculated four more.”

“They’re going to fucking kill you.” she laughs. “I mean it, one day you’re going to wake up with some puppet corps asshole jamming sand down your throat because you cost them money they could have gotten from medical malpractice.”

“It is a risk someone had to take,” he says solemnly.

Sakura laughs harder. She pours herself another draining the last bottle on the table. “To Uchiha Sasuke, who is going to die on pure fucking principle.” She raises her glass. Sasuke drinks from his instead. After a moment Sakura shrugs and clinks her glass against the empty bottle. She plops both feet in the nearby fountain. “I can’t believe we’re doing this. I mean, look at this mood lighting.” She gestures towards the star strewn sky and the delicate glow of lights around them.

“Sakura-” he says, mildly alarmed.

“I’m not into you.” Sakura demures. “I was twelve. And I still thought...that things were better than
they are. And I still- Part of me thinks that things could still turn back and we could be twelve again.”

He watches the green glow of her eyes over the table. “But we can’t.”

“No.”

It’s not even ten thirty yet, but the way Sakura’s been putting it back, and they way they’re both staring at the sky suggests the night will be over soon. Sakura looks back over at him, at a point over his shoulder, her eyes blow wide. “Give me the bear.”

“What-”

“Fuck, fine, I’ll just.” She grabs the bear and runs. She’s jammed her feet back into her shoes but not done them back up. Got to love ninja reflexes, her walk isn’t even shaky. She descends upon a man with long twisted scars running down his face, his leg is twisted and hobbled and he walks with a cane. On his other hip is an equally scarred child. Sakura leans into the man, talks, then hands them the bear. If the man is upset at being accosted by a drunk girl his childs delight at the bear dissipates it. Sakura walks back cool, calm, collected.

“That’s kindness Uchiha.” Sakura taps the top of the next bottle thoughtfully, she pushes it aside and orders some water. “Going above and beyond for someone, even for a few moments, can change the whole trajectory of someone’s life but being there with a soft toy can give someone a moment to hold onto even when their whole life is going to shit. Kindness has no payback. You don’t get it back.”

The wind kicks up the loose strands of her around her neck. A little bit of him itches to get out a hair tie and fix it for her. “You know they stopped hiring prodigies?” Sakura eyes him distastefully as he pulls out a cigarette, the way someone who’s just quit would. “Burn out.”

He knows what this is. “How long have you been out here?”

“Since about five this morning.”

“Sakura,” he chides, “how long have you been stationed out here?”

“Too fucking long.” Sakura sighs. “They wanted Tsunade, of course, so they sent me. Now I know why she drinks so much. It was fun the first few months, after that it was just complicated. Everyone wants to be like the sannin, right?”

“Not anyone who’s ever fucking met them.” Sasuke mutters.

Sakura barks out a laugh at that. “I think that’s the most reasonable thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“I’ve said maybe a few thousand words to you ever, and most of it was instructions.”

She giggles, actually giggles, not that creepy shit she did when they were genin. “I can not believe you went and got social skills.” She sighs. “After my time here I might be the rustiest.”

“No.” At her arch look he clarifies, “Kakashi is on Team 7.”

“Ah, well, then I can never lose,” she replies mildly, “I’ve got more rounds in the morning. Talk later.”

He finally gets to put the cigarette between his lips, light it. “Whatever, Sakura.”
She punches him lightly on the arm, bare hesitation in her strength. “That’s more like it.”

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When I ask about my mother the first thing people tell me is that she never had the sharingan but the men respected her anyway. As much as men could.

This is the first line of Jinta’s record. This is history.

When I ask about why she left me they tell me to ask my real mother, the one that raised me. She says that my mother was the product of a thousand years of fighting and breeding and then refuses to say more. I think I annoy her with my questions but she always answers. Like my birth mother I want to keep a record.

Jinta’s record is sparse and haphazard, understandable from a child. He reads small things, things that tighten his chest with memories of his own childhood. Traditions he barely remembers are written in the excited detail of a child experiencing them for the first time. In this way Sasuke can experience them again, too: the Naka shrine priestesses in their robes, the eldest Uchiha woman performing the dance of the sun, the youngest boy performing the dance of the moon. The special spiced cakes on festival days. The first time Jinta carried a war fan. His mother marries below her social position, to a man from the outer branches of the clan, and they move out of the compound to his bakery.

He calls her sister only sometimes, like when we visit the Clan house so I can attend lessons. We’re only allowed into this part of the village sometimes because she married one of the outer families who hadn’t produced a sharingan in three or four generations. She’s happy with her husband though, and he’s nice to her in return. Her brother doesn’t mind but I think that’s just because it’s his sister. He cared when it was the cousins with the curly hair. Truth be told sometimes he scares me.

I told my mother that so she told me a secret. Years ago her brother made friends with a boy by the river. He dressed badly, had a horrible personality and was stupidly talented. Her brother loved him dearly and spoke of him often to her. He dressed it up as silly stories, she said, not quite enough detail to make out the identities but she knew. She always knew. He’d come home with river berries and smooth stones and once a small wild strawberry plant. My mother managed to keep it alive all the way through the wars and now it grows all over the backyard, up into the lattice. They’re always red and sweet and she makes a pie for every birthday.

Sasuke suspects someone taught him how to write like this, words proper and polite always distant from the subject. Every so often there’s a line that sounds more wistful, I hope I sound like her or I hate using fire techniques and a few lines later he’ll fall into more childish prose, whining about this or that unfair thing. He always corrects himself.

The recollections change to include all the other founding families, many of whom frequent the bakery. Anti-Uchiha sentiment was around from the very beginning. Most had problems with Madara, who Jinta said had the charisma of a wildfire: totalitarian and beautiful, still best viewed from far away. And those who didn’t either supported or opposed one of the Senju brothers. Here Jinta calls them alike in disposition but opposite in countenance which is such a beautiful sentence of nothing that Sasuke records it for future insult applications.

It’s an interesting take on a period of history he only knows the official byline on: everything was perfect and went very well.

Senju Tobirama suggests democracy -the idea that we vote for those that lead us. As many like this
hate it too. Democracy will be a victory for Hashirama, for he is all but unhateable. I know that my uncle holds him dear, I know his allies do too. But I can’t help but think that so many of us follow power—any power—how long until someone who lacks Hashirama’s personal strengths is held up above all others? Would it be so bad to continue the tradition of clan leadership in the face of such a worry? History is a better teacher, sometimes.

Hashirama is made Hokage. Sasuke knows this. Jinta writes uncertain about the political climate he lives in. Even knowing the outcome Sasuke is drawn in. The Uzumaki are gaining power, they will align with Senju but not with Uchiha. The Nehu rise and fall before they can join the Uchiha in Fire. Killed, Jinta says, by unkillable demons wearing the faces of the dead.

Mother is ill. I know this is the last days of her life. I know this the last record of her, too. She was erased from the clan when she married. I may even be the last who knows that she is of the same blood as our Clan Leader. We’ve made concessions with the Senju: we’ve moved to the far corners of the village, we’ve taken the worst houses and land. The others fear us too strongly to let us near their children. Reparations for what we all did to survive are being paid in calluses and bones. Blood eyes. We’re still blood eyes. My mother will be buried with her husband on the outskirts of our family. I don’t even know if her brother will attend.

The Uchiha were protectors and officers of the law in his time. Sasuke’s not sure how they got from one point to another.

A Uchiha has killed an emissary from Earth. The man tried to kidnap one of ours in his sleep. A boy. We knew it was for his eyes. The parents killed him for trying. Madara has gone to the Senju to plead our case but the tides are already against us. Many talk about leaving, many talk to Madara about taking over. Many talk about letting it go. After all the fight that lead us all here says that the Uchiha will lose. Some still take it into their own hands.

The damage the Uchiha do is disproportionate to the crime. They take two for one of theirs. The grind their enemies to dust. The loot and scream and destroy. Argue and dissent and cry. It’s only one loss, their retractors say. You have no idea what it means to be us, the Uchiha reply. You don’t love like we do.

The record stops for awhile. Skips around the creation of schools and shops. Then-

My mother is dead. Her brother lit the pyre. And I. I watched her burn.

Sasuke leaves it there for now.

He wanders the hospital grounds for a few hours. Eating, thinking, rinse and repeat. In the late afternoon sun he settles on a thought It’s not fair for a child to burn his family. He lets that go.

On his way back he looks up intending for a snap of the setting sky when he spots a flicker of pink hair on top of a half constructed building. Climbing up to get to her is more of a hassle that he expected but worth if for the view. Sakura doesn’t acknowledge him. She’s up to her elbows in blood, a purpling bruise covering half her face, split lip still oozing blood. The rest of her is covered in dirt, stinking to high heaven of shit and a chakra laced fist fight. She smells like medicinal herbs and someone’s spleen.

He sits next to her taking out his long abused packet of cigarettes. The sun is setting in front of them throwing yellow and pink light around. It would be beautiful if his company was less dangerous. With a deliberately slow motion Sakura plucks it out of his hand. She takes two cigarettes out of the packet and then lobs it—and his lighter—over the edge.
Sasuke carefully takes the menace out of his voice. “Was there a point to that?”

“If I thought you’d come to the same conclusion fast enough I’d let you figure it out yourself.” Sakura says. “Before you walk back into Konoha you need to decide who you are and what you can give him.”

“Sakura.”

“I won’t let you hurt him anymore. I won’t let myself hurt him either.” Sakura mutters. “We have to get our shit together.” She lights one with a touch of a finger and butts it up against the second. After a long draw she alternates so both are lit.

Sasuke gingerly takes a cigarette from her fingers. “It’s a shit world Sakura. We get hurt.”

“Why? Because we have an actual murder economy?” Sakura spits. “It’s what the civilians say. That we should all stop and become farmers instead. How are we going to do that, huh? As long as jutsu and dojutsu exists, hell, as long as chakra exists there will be shinobi. Do you have any idea what they’re doing out there? Chemical bombs were detonated in a school attended mainly by working shinobi two weeks ago and this is the only hospital rated for that in the country. Kumo sent out there sweepers to get rid of their political loose ends in Masusho, and then again into Fire to clear out an old cache of weapons and chakra boosters because an anarchist group used them to blow up ‘shinobi sympathisers’. All of these people end up in my fucking hospital, Uchiha, and I don’t know what to do with them. I still feel like shit when they die, even when they hate me. Even when I hate them. I still have to do my fucking job even though half the nurses here look at me like I’m scum and the other half wonder if I’m here to betray them. And that’s not even starting on the shinobi posing as nurses that I know are here to kill my patients. I have to let them do it because anything else would affect the neutrality of the hospital and then I wouldn’t even be able to save the people I hate.”

Sakura blows out a perfect ring of smoke. Her eyeliner is smudged around her eyes. He’s only really seen her in pictures but for a moment she looks just like her teacher. Beautiful, tired, ready to do it all again if she has to. After another ring of smoke she grimaces and hands him back his cigarette. “No wonder some of them hate us. I’d hate us.”

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No wonder they hate us, he thinks, and cannot decide who he means.

They’re all of them just people, and all of their weapons are just skills, but having never been on the losing side of history how can he say if they’re right?

Today is their last day at Kuebiko hospital. He’s in the nurse breakroom because Sakura doesn’t trust him to not cut and run. Looking out the window with his lukewarm coffee he realises he’s been seeing all the same sights for years. This hospital is just like a relief mission, just like Orochimaru’s labs. Everywhere he looks things are the same awful washed out colours.

He’s just...tired. He’s tired of being angry. Of second guessing. Of not knowing. Mostly he’s tired of being around. Of looking at things and being impotent about them.

The nurse skids to a stop, a complete halt, as her hands come up to her face. They’re balled up, stuck together, and she presses her lips to her knuckles trying to stifle her weeping.

He looks at her, and for a brief moment when she looks at him, it feels like someone struck him to his core. She feels it too, and turns away running down a corridor on squeaky shoes. He’s still
stuck with it: a perfect moment of someone else's grief ripping through his shields.

The light shutters into the room. Dull with mid-morning sun, ordinary in how it reflects off the floor. There are dust motes in the air, rubbish on the floor. He can see all the way down the hallway, and he sees that it ends shorter than he thought. It’s like his vision was tunneled, always pointing from one point to the next, and for the first time he sees everything around him as it is, completely ordinary. Completely without him in it.

In a week he stands before his parents. It’s coming faster than a knife, than a bird, than the passing of light through the window. There isn’t anything after that point. Nothing to plan. Nothing to fight. Just a short journey home.

*In a week it will be over.* His hands hurt. His heart feels like it might burst. He feels it distantly, the high point of anxiety warring with the sheer unrelenting nothingness that has been slowly moving over him his whole life. Without something to fight for there’s just that white noise he use to find so comforting.

If all his life, all his struggle has lead him to here; a week away from making his last confession, what was it for? His vengeance was had, but not by him. What about the eyes? What about a half dozen generations of sharingan in tubs somewhere? What about Akatsuki and their Tobi? What was meant to give him peace has left him with more questions than answers.

Bile rises in his throat but he forces it down. Nothingness is folding into terror. His hands shake like he’s a genin again. The nothing eats the terror. Then terror eats nothing. His stomach drops out of his body like he’s falling through the air. He’s reminded violently of the only other times he’s felt like this: finding his parents bodies, the terror ridden realisation that the only way to complete his goal was to leave his home, killing Naruto.

He takes control and tells himself stories of clean things: the way his sword sounds slicing through air, the pasta that only one stall in the fire capital makes, Sora on his chest late at night, music through his window in New Otogakure under a moonless night. The old Priestess wise and fearless. A perfect chidori landing true. Flowers falling in a night sky: the best purest memories of his parents.

And then he’s free. The panic ebbs.

Nudging a bucket out from under the table he gets it into his hands before he throws up. Once, twice, five or six times. It’s funny how little survives a change in perspective. All these years and the best proof he has of how they’ve changed him is a bucket full of puke.

He’s still bent over the bucket, breathing like he just ran a marathon, when Kakashi places a cool hand against the back of his neck. Sasuke rubs at his eyes but he can’t make the weeping stop. His body feels bent, like he can feel every broken bone he’s ever had, like his chakra is eating his body alive. He has too much of it in a body designed for destruction.

It’s not an *if* it’s a *certainty*. This is a body built for no purpose at all.

All of a sudden the map of his life unfolds and he sees mistakes everywhere. His faith in himself is shaken and riddled with questions and doubts. Like a great unveiling he realises two things: it was worth it, still, even with how it ended and he has no idea who it is that’s walking into Konoha. Certainty hurts, almost as much as doubt.

Kakashi pats him like he’s a small frightened child. Sasuke laughs at that, stuck between humor and horror at himself.
There are words in his chest that feel real, true, something crawling his throat. He looks at the patchwork of his life and feels horror and humor in equal measure. Things feel true, now, instead of possible. “I didn’t-” he sucks in his breath. “I know that you don’t get it. But there wasn’t anything else I could do.”

Kakashi places a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry. I don’t get it.” Sasuke tenses up. “But I’ll try.”

*Put your words into the fire,* the radio sings, then, minutes later, *On this warm summer night*

*Put those words down in the fire.*

No more fixed points. Next week he goes home. Tonight he gets on a cart with Sakura and Kakashi. He’ll let them learn him and in return he’ll try and make up some of the empty air between them. He doesn’t owe them that, exactly, but he wants to. If there’s only a little more time left he wants to use it.

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“Well, it wasn’t fun,” Sakura says dryly from pride of place on top of a break room table. The nurses sitting on the floor laugh. “But I have enjoyed working with you all and I’ve learnt a lot, even when I’ve been stubborn about it. So I’ll miss you. Except you Mio, you can choke.” Mio flips her off. Sakura returns the gesture with interest. “See you guys and gals.”

Sasuke helps them load up for the returning journey, even managing to bum a few packets of seasoning and some music off the guys milling around outside. They’re going back alongside a holiday tour. Why anyone would choose a hospital as a holiday destination he will never know, but it does mean they get to relax and enjoy the accommodations.

He’s sitting in the back of a carriage, legs thrown over a box listening to the radio when he catches Sakura staring at him. “What?”

Sakura glares at him. “You’re so much more easy going.” The carriage hits a pothole sending everything flying.

“...thank you.”

“Jerk.”

“Annoying.”

“Jerk. ”

From his position walking beside the carriage, Kakashi says, “Don’t bicker.” His nose is buried in his book.

Sakura grins. “Say what ever happened to that nurse you were seeing?”

Kakashi sighs, speeding up. “We stopped seeing each other.”

“Was it because she heard about the other nurse?” Sakura asks slyly. “Or the pediatrician?”

Kakashi walks faster.

“Pediatricians can’t sign you out of hospital you know! You’re a punchline at med-nin conventions!”
They are all adults now, with full opinions and the experience to back them up. Sakura still doesn’t believe him when he says anything about medicine. Kakashi thinks his taste in beer is plebeian and over exaggerated. Sasuke is aggrieved to learn that they both prefer their meat well done. They all laugh at the same tired jokes.

“Hey, Sasuke?” Sakura snickers. “Why did the emotionally immobilised copy-nin cross the road?”

Sasuke rolls his eyes, but smiles.

The civilians who decided this was an appropriate vacation mostly leave them alone, but Sasuke has already accepted nothing will keep eligible women of a certain age from pursuing him and has learnt to manage them as best he can. He tries being uninterested, then non-committal and when that doesn’t work he lets the dark roll of his chakra do the speaking.

Kakashi, who is not exactly unpopular- laughs at him. “Do you remember when I taught you chidori?”

They camped out under the stars for weeks. Kakashi was as he always was back then -Sasuke might as well have not existed when Kakashi didn’t want to see him- but there was a level of commitment and companionship they never managed to recapture. Sasuke’s betrayal warring with Kakashi’s loyalty. Kakashi had always assumed he understood him and Sasuke had assumed he was too complicated. For a week Sasuke didn’t say a word. All he did was train, eat and sleep. With hindsight Sasuke can see that Kakashi thought it was his drive vengeance. With things being twenty-twenty Sasuke can see that it was the comfort of the stars, the sharingan and the small half-lit hope that he wasn’t alone. Oh, vengeance was there too, but as he has been forced to admit many times, no man is one thing. Not even when he’s a boy.

Sasuke inclines his head with a small smile. “I do.”

Kakashi blinks, returning an equally small smile of relief. “I’m glad that boy survived.”

Sasuke’s not sure he did, but if Kakashi could see his reasoning for that, he’d probably be glad.

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Sasuke knows the exact moment they enter the redwoods of his childhood.

It’s a disease of is blood, this ground in knowledge of the dirt and rivers of his home. He was young the first time he left Konoha’s walls with his retinue of cousins and uncles. His mother lead the long walk to an abandoned camp -the camp where Madara and Hashirama made peace, the feasted and sang and danced. Sasuke was too young to do anything but remember it and watch his brother dance with their cousins. It’s in his blood for better or worse.

The bonds of water wash over him too. This is the only way into the village.

Thoughts of Naruto are always a hot knife in the middle of his ambitions. He can’t keep them in the same stratosphere let alone reconcile them. All the bits of him that are still there underneath, still bleeding from loss a decade on, are constantly screaming out for him. Like an eternal wound. Sasuke is the business of letting his goals set his needs. He needs power so he goes. He needs a way back so he stays. He needs a way forward so he lets Kakashi drag his ass around the continent for months on end. He needs, he needs, he needs. It kills him a little to use that word.

He looks to Sakura sitting calmly beside him and has half a mind to say sorry and run. He looks to Kakashi on his other side and thinks I’m sorry too but throws that thought away.
In front an oxen freaks out at the chunnin approaching it throwing rugs and other wares around. Sasuke has half a second to look at the shining Konoha forehead protectors on their heads before the gates are open and he’s swallowed whole.

Chapter End Notes

Next time on Survival: THE MOTHERFUCKING ROMANCE

This is usually where I'd put some fun facts but this time I'd like to do something different. I could go on for thousands of words about the structure of Sasuke's mental health in this fic, in fact I plan to once it's over for the sake of clarification since an unreliable narrator is not always a trustworthy vehicle. In constructing this character I chose to use dissociation as the backbone of his behavior, and also based it inside my own experiences with dissociation. How effective this is, is still up in the air, but the fact is there will be no easy fix. Dissociation is a bitch to work through and I'm not going to let him off the hook in that. The path to self healing is non-linear and complex at the best of times. The next couple of chapters are going to be rough in some ways and heartwarming in others, but for the sake of your mental health I urge those of you still reading -or reading for the first time- to take into account your own health.
Naruto finds out Sasuke comes home by way of the village hotspot for marijuana and low grade hallucinogens. He’s been assigned a shitty little C-rank to improve his stealth because subtle was more or less deleted from the Uzumaki genes. It’s a shitty C-rank because not only is it clearly a busy work mission to get him out from Tsunade’s feet, no one actually wants him to stop the drugs from coming into Konoha. That’s the difference between the police and the shinobi; as long as crime is convenient the Hokage doesn’t care.

Naruto’s got his own opinions and his future policies are probably going to make a boatload of old schoolers deeply uncomfortable.

Some guy who smells like fish is chatting up a working girl, mentions that he was on vacation with that ‘pretty boy pet of Giri’s and damn didn’t Konoha make them fine?’, and Naruto will swear to his grave that his heart utterly forgot to beat. There’s few Konoha-nin in Giri, only one whose beauty is so casually remarked upon. He won’t lie to himself: he did forget to breathe.

Sasuke came home.

He listens hard for more details. Sakura was on the cart, they laughed at this ‘sad old bloke with grey hair’, and now he has to wonder what else he can lose right now because he feels like some cut out his hearing. He came home, happily, with Sakura and Kakashi. He drops whatever he was doing and runs for the gates. There’s no way Sasuke would be able to just slide past the guards. He has a chance-

He’s wrong. Crossing through the food stalls right near the gate his hair stands on end. Like touching a ball of lightning an awareness of something primal, something even stronger than his connection to Kyuubi comes to life. A man, tall and broad shoulder. Built like a ranger, like someone who spends his time walking rather than fighting, nearly escapes his notice. He walks like a shinobi but one who has the ease of knowing where he’s going. Nothing like the controlled mania of the boy who tried to kill him.

Shikamaru said his hair was long in Suna. Mid-back when loose, riding his shoulders when it was twisted and tied up. It’s not that long now, loose it would fall to maybe half way between the nape
of his neck and mid-back, but it’s shiny and healthy. A point of pride. He’s still got those ridiculous bangs but the wilder parts are braided along the side of his head in a way that keeps it off his face. There’s a long scar that runs from his mouth to his ear. Another one curves around his neck all puckered up like it didn’t heal right. His sword is still over his shoulder, but his well fitted pants and sleeveless shirt make him look -not harmless, but Naruto wouldn’t expect him to throw the first punch. He’s still pale but there are patches of sunburn on his arms and down the deep vee of his shirt.

Naruto would notice him because he is beautiful and powerful but he wouldn’t recognise him.

Not least of all because of his voice soft and carrying with the wind. The half mumble of a song Naruto doesn’t know. Even at this distance Naruto hears the little refrain: I’ve got nostalgic pavements. I’ve got familiar faces.

Sasuke whistles the tune when he can’t be bothered to sing, not even a pause as he navigates the streets. He doesn’t make eye contact but his posture is relaxed and his steps are light and comfortable. Naruto had imagined the slink; a returning son looking at the kingdom with wounded eyes. They’d fail him and then they’d save him and when he returns Naruto guides him, guards him, proves that in this he can be trusted. He keeps promises.

Sasuke orders a plate of fried sweet potato and green tomatoes, a new introduction to Konoha, but by the way Sasuke pulls at the skewer it’s old hat to him.

As Naruto sees Sasuke again, walking free and easy, a part of his heart rips in two.

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Sasuke doesn’t enjoy self reflection. 90% of the decisions he makes are -in retrospect, while running from whatever it is he’s set alight- deeply flawed. He’s willing to admit to that only because he has yet to fail in using poor means to achieve great ends.

So when he turns his head he forgives himself for taking a moment to realise what he’s seeing. Kakashi sent him ahead to get food because his pardon and his appearance were so shocking to the on duty guards they just accepted him with little comment. Sakura stayed to smooth things over which he already knows she’s not doing. It’s so amusing to him he adds it to the list of reasons why he didn’t notice the man. He’s not too far away, less than five metres, and he’s got an intense look on his face. Blonde, blue eyed, tanned. Angular face, strong jaw with good cheekbones. Sasuke’s eyes travel down his lean legs and the soft taper of his wrists before he realises that those are scars on his face, not make up. Then his thoughts simply disperse.

His first thought is that Naruto’s hair is too long. His second is that whomever managed to pry him out of that orange jumpsuit and into a chunnin uniform should be given a medal. His third is that his eyes are broken and blue and somehow exactly what Sasuke needed to see in this moment.

Here is what you did wrong, he thinks, and he’s not sure what follows that thought.

“Bastard.” Naruto crosses his arms belligerently.

“Hn.” Sasuke contemplates, “Moron.”

Sakura slaps Sasuke on the back. Travel has made her immune to any of his attempts to create appropriate boundaries. “I hate men.” Sakura announces hooking Kakashi under the arm and marching him away. “That includes you Sensei. You’re buying me lunch to make up for your gender.”
“Maa, Sakura, that could take awhile.” Kakashi pouts, but he doesn’t run away.

They’re left alone in the middle of Konoha. Naruto keeps glancing at him, a disturbing amount of feeling on his face. For his part Sasuke is alternating between calm and a strange loss of feeling in his fingertips.

Naruto swallows, and Sasuke can’t really help the way his eyes trail it. “How’d it happen?”

Eyes blind, throat cut. “Quickly.”

Naruto cuts the distance between them. He raises his hand to maybe -to grab, possibly, or to wave his finger in his face like he used to, but instead all Sasuke gets is the graze of slightly pointed nails sliding over his cheek, resting under his chin briefly. Naruto is never subtle and he is much too close standing eye to eye. “You staying or I am going to have to tie your ass to something?”


“Great.” Naruto says cheerfully.

Sasuke awkwardly disengages from their stare down and picks up his pack. He checks it over to make sure he still has the package and then sets off in the vague direction he remembers the Red Light District being. Konoha’s is less infamous than some but he’s heard good things about it’s erotic dancing. Naruto is right on his ass the moment he starts walking.

But of course Naruto would not be any better at giving him personal space.

He ignored him. There’s really not much else to do.

Konoha is rebuilding. There was something, he knows, some sort of major attack, but it happened while he was in deep cover with Hiki. There’s an entire two month block there that he knows very little about. Konoha isn’t following the Kumo model of technology integration, instead it’s making itself an aesthetic throwback with parks and orange topped roofs. There’s the same almost-homogeny he remembers from growing up here, something that prickles against his skin making Konoha feel more akin to a small town than the huge citadel it actually is. Beautiful, pristine, untouchable. Even the Red Light District is old school with none of the blaring banners and neon lighting he’s seen popping up. It makes him feel shadier somehow. It reminds him of the forced ideality of Nagazawa.

And Naruto who is glaring at him accusingly every time Sasuke makes the mistake of glancing at him. It makes Sasuke feel shifty. As if he’s actually doing something wrong rather than what he’s been paid to.

“Why are we here?” Naruto hisses.

“I have things to do, I told you.” Sasuke waves his hands in exasperation. “I did tell you that.”

“You-”

But Sasuke has arrived at the seedy hellhole he was looking for. He budges Naruto out of the way, knocks on the door. A man stumbles to the door, looks at Naruto incredulously. When he realises Sasuke is the one who knocked his eyes light with recognition. “Ah, Giri.”

“No. Kameyo, right?”

“I am.”
He pulls a sealed scrolls from his pocket. The fire-water seal on it pressed with Karin’s signature.
“Express from Uzumaki Karin.”

“How?” Naruto snarls.

Sasuke levels a glare on him. “Dobe.” The man opens the scroll, nods, leaves them at the door.

Naruto grabs his arms. Is it his imagination or do his nails feel longer? “Sasuke, what are you doing?”

“My job.”

“You’re a shinobi.”

Sasuke squashes the urge to stick out his tongue at him. Instead he turns back to Kameyo who has returned with whatever it is he wanted to send back to Karin. Sasuke is relieved to see that it is the size of something he can attach to Sora’s back. The man all but throws it at Sasuke.

“Nice doing business with you.” Kameyo squeaks.

Sasuke rolls his eyes. Honestly, civilians.

Kameyo hesitates at the door. “You might want to try the Three Dancing Monkeys. Good price, good food, good girls.”

It’ll do. “Thank you.”

Kameyo nods once and closes the door. Sasuke pockets the message and turns to find the Three Dancing Monkeys.

Naruto screeches. “What is happening?”

Sasuke rooms at the Three Dancing Monkeys for six and a half days, during which he does nothing but eat, read and review what he can remember of the Uchiha estate, before ANBU make an appearance over his breakfast. Sasuke is about thirteen minutes awake and awkwardly eating the muffin that Juugo sent him. He’s not the type to get caught out but he seriously wasn’t expecting ANBU.

“Do you want some?” It comes out belligerent and taunting which may just be how he sounds.

The ANBU do not reply.

“Uchiha Sasuke, A-rank missing-nin.” One of them says in a monotone. “You are to be taken into custody.”

Sasuke tilts his head slightly. “I am certain I am a private citizen and not a missing-nin.”

One of the ANBU, a man in a falcon mask, hisses. “You are what we say you are.”

Alright then.

Sasuke nods in acknowledgment. “I’d like to get properly dressed.”

The process of being taken into custody is much simpler than he expected. He puts on pants and a
comfortable shirt. Collects a few pieces of ID and surreptitious weaponry. Pulls on his shoes and
goes out to where his jailers are waiting. One of the ANBU hands him a hair tie as they leave, he’s
patient enough to wait for Sasuke to put his hair up in a no nonsense bun before grabbing him and
teleporting to a jail cell. As these things go it’s nice enough and no one pays him much mind when
he produces a book and sits down to read. The ANBU take watch positions.

He’s at the end of a series of war sonnets when a familiar and irritating voice bellows down the
hallways. A woman –tall, blonde, breathtaking- marches in the door waving a piece of paper. Her
long hair whips behind her as she turns on the guards.

“What are you doing?” Ino hisses. “He’s been pardoned you morons.”

“It was forged-”

“Not according to the Hokage and anyway do you want to tell Naruto or Kakashi that he’s down
here. Or god forbid that bitch over in the public judicial office. Uchiha is a private citizen until he’s
reinstated as a ninja or formally takes up the mantle of Clan Head. As in we can’t prosecute him.”

“Yamanaka, back off,” the ANBU warns. “I outrank you.”

“Special Jounin outside T&I, full jounin when inside these walls. ANBU have no power here.”

“Just because you rode your way to the top-”

“Oh? Did I buy it on my back or because I’m my daddys daughter. Unless you’d like to suggest I
sucked my dad’s cock because I can just imagine the mince-”

A snort from the door. A warm voice says, “Bit loud there Ino.”

“Shut it Shika.” Ino snaps. “I’m warming up.”

Shikamaru sticks his head in. Sasuke raises an eyebrow but the other man simply shrugs. “Morning
Uchiha. Good to see you again.”

“Hmm.” Sasuke relaxes against the wall. “Suna didn’t suit you.”

“Some bits did.” Ino says cheekily. “Well, Uchiha, where’s my greeting? I’ve spent the last six
hours ensuring no one cut your throat.”

He looks at her. Strong muscled, well dressed and smelling faintly of iris. The ANBU is way above
her weight class but she’s keeping him in place with sheer power of personality. If he’d ever
thought about this is exactly what he would expect Yamanaka Ino to grow up to be. “Hello
Yamanaka.”

Ino snorts. “Sakura was right, absolute fruitcake.” Her tone is all affection. “Call Aguni down at
the KPD when you get out you’re actually not our goddamn problem anymore.” She turns to the
ANBU, “and you get him to one of the civilian holding cells before someone who’s a bigger pain
in the ass than I am comes down here and finds you.”

With a wink at him she grabs Shikamaru by the collar and drags him out. One of the ANBU makes
a noise of disgust -”fucking bitch”- but pulls Sasuke out of his cell regardless. The long walk to his
new cell is silent but for the awkward weight of the ANBU’s displeasure. Idly, Sasuke wonders
who told them to take him in the first place.

He’s shoved, quite literally, into an interrogation room. Much nicer than most he’s been in. There’s
a table and chairs, good lighting. No torture implements. No stains on the walls. As far as he’s concerned it’s just as nice as his last cell.

The ANBU leave him this time, but he’s close enough to some sort of staff room to hear voices. He sits down and pulls out his book again.

“Did you hear-”

“Stabbed his teammate-”

“Defected to-”

“-to Orochimaru? How could we ever-”

Sasuke hunkers down in his chair, knees brushing the bottom of the table. It’s stupid, really, how much talk like that pisses him off. He didn’t stab Naruto for fun. There was a reason. Just because it doesn’t make sense to random Konoha shinobi doesn’t make it the worst thing to ever happen. No other Hidden Village would blink twice at half the stuff he’s done. Oh sure, they might make noise about being united behind the same banner of village unity that the Shodai Hokage founded the system on, but the orphans and the mercenaries that trudged through Oto and Giri prove otherwise. People kill for power. People kill for safety. People kill each other all the time. There is just as much betrayal as nobility in this line of work.

After a long while the door opens. A woman in her late thirties, well padded and secure in herself comes in teetering on too tall shoes. She’s got a file in balanced on her arm as thick as his forearm, a precariously placed box on top of that and her glasses balanced on the end of her nose. She puts it all down on the table in front of him, taking the time to sit her glasses up against her deep set dark eyes.

“I’m Aguni Satoko, your legal advice.”

Sasuke nods. After a long moment in which Aguni clearly expects to be acknowledged in some other way she sits down, throwing her long red-brown hair over her shoulder. She opens the box to reveal a set of warm buns.

“Here son,” Aguni pushes the box over to him, “eat up.”

Sasuke takes one and bites off the top to inspect the filling. It’s meat and sauce filled, a great plume of sweet spicy steam blowing up his nose, which is...interesting. He takes a second bite and decides that not only can he live with this, he’s about to be a fan. “This has candied tomatoes in it?”

Aguni blinks at him. “No. It’s a chutney.”

“It’s good.” Sasuke finishes one and picks up another, pulling the top off to get a better look inside. The ratio of gamey meat to chutney is nice. There are little bits of peas or lentils in there too. He didn’t get to finish his breakfast and while Juugo might be an excellent baker he is the least fond of all of them of spices.

“Some people find them...experimental.” Aguni finishes arranging her files and sits across from him.

“There’s a province in River called Matsusaki, they do something similar.”

“Yeah,” she says softly, “similar how?”
“Goat, figs and flat lentils. It’s not as sweet.”

“Oh, well. Uchiha.” Aguni clears her throat. “Let’s get into it.”

Since she hasn’t said not to Sasuke keeps eating. “What do you need to know?”

“How exactly did you come into possession of the pardon?”

Sasuke tells that story leaving out the bit about how and where his brother’s body was finally scattered. When he’s delving into a sanitised version of what he did for Giri, Aguni holds up a hand. “Why did you agree to follow her?”

“Because she had the pardon.”

“And you wanted to come back.”

“It was something to work towards.”

“But you wanted to come back to Konoha specifically.”

“No,” Sasuke says firmly, “it was what was on offer.”

“Then why come back?”

“Because,” he says slowly, “it was what was offered to me.”

“And if, say, Akatsuki had gotten to you first?”

“Maybe,” he shrugs, “that’s not what happened though.”

“Would you?”

“Join Akatsuki?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

Aguni holds his gaze for a long time. Sasuke looks back. After what feels like an eternity she leans back in her chair and lets out a long, deep sigh. “I think, if we’re very careful, we might be able to keep you out of T&I’s hands.”

“Yeah?”

“That pardon is real. There’s a necessary statute of limitations on processing genin ranked missing nin that says if they aren’t returned within three years of their defection their status is either upgraded or suspended. When suspended, genin are kept on the missing nin books for individual hidden villages but formally returned to civilian status in outside countries. Upgrading you from genin to chunnin would suspend a lot of responsibility for this village. It’s expected for an individual village to try and find its genin since most runaways just get overwhelmed and freak out. When they return they can be reconditioned. Chunin, not so much. Your teammates worked hard to keep your status active so they would have an excuse to look for you without too much interference. Even so they could only push it another two years which you spent with Giri who in Fire are not a recognised terrorist cell.”

Sasuke nods to show his understanding. “And you’re here because?”
“Because,” here she smiles, “when that pardon was written it was specified that the recipient became a private citizen of Fire Country. You aren’t a shinobi under Fire law which supersedes Konoha law here. Giri isn’t a hostile organisation so they can’t claim you under the Nidaime’s Secrecy Act. Lastly there’s no one to formally recognise you as Clan Head until the Hyuuga, Sarutobi or the Shimura get their heads out of their asses.”

Sasuke flinches.

Aguni’s face softens. “That’s not to say you can’t be. I would wait a few years before approaching anyone about it.”

That’s...not the problem. “What does this mean right now?”

“I won’t be allowed into the Hokage’s office with you but my services have been retained for you. If they try to trap you into any non-verbal agreements say you can’t continue without your legal counsel. Do not let them provide it for you. Verbal agreements are binding for shinobi, especially to the Hokage, but I cannot stress enough that you are not a shinobi of Konohagakure.”

“Got it.”

“Good.” Aguni packs up her papers and stands up, pulling down her skirt as she goes. Sasuke stands as well. “We’ll meet again the day after tomorrow to sort out your citizenship papers and begin working through the Uchiha properties. Come on it’s time to let those old bags of wind try and blow you around.”

Aguni stalks out of the room, her heels striking the ground forcefully. The ANBU guards wince every time her foot strikes the ground. It dawns on Sasuke that it’s on purpose. He doesn’t hurry to catch up to her but he does increase his stride slightly. She leads him through a twist and turn of tunnels and staircases. She’s quite light footed when it’s just the two of them walking but the moment they come across ANBU or other shinobi her feet strike the ground like thunder.

Sasuke draws level with her as they approach what he assumes is a hidden entrance to Hokage Tower. It’s a single red door flanked by two mean looking ANBU. “Who retained you?”

Aguni throws him a vaguely irritated look. “Who do you think?”

“It was Kakashi or Naruto.”

“Or?” Aguni stalks right up to the door and hip checks it open. “Get in, get going.”

“Right. I call you?” Sasuke passes into the warm hallway of the Tower that houses the Missions Desk. He shivers at the temperature change. “Or the KPD?”

“Me,” Aguni rolls her eyes, “leave, child. That woman has no hold on her temper on a good day and believe me today is not the one to cause more of a fuss.”

“Thank you,” he says sincerely.

Aguni huffs out a laugh. “There is something about you Uchiha. Here, take these.” She dumps the rest of the buns on him. “You like them more than my lump of a husband anyhow.”

“Thank you,” he repeats.

Aguni gives him one last disbelieving look before closing the door in his face. The door shivers away into a genjutsu. He should look that one up, could be useful. There’s another pair of ANBU
there to escort him. One is a tanuki with green markings, the other a dragonfly with purple. There’s a deliberate sexlessness about them that would suggest a slender man or woman. They must fight as a pair because when they move they telegraph each other. They set a brisk pace that Sasuke follows two steps behind and a little to the left, closer to the window than the wall. Sasuke opens up the box as they walk. He has four dumplings left.

Sound picks up as they walk. There’s kunai being thrown, the thump of chairs and laughter. Several very high level chakra flicker as they grow closer. Sasuke has never had cause to be here but he suspects he’s passing the Jounin Standby Station.

There’s a tense moment right as they pass the door where someone whispers *Uchiha* and *traitor* and several people slip from jovial to battle ready. Sasuke takes a breath, reminds himself that he has dumplings, and slides right on by not wavering or responding. Both ANBU turn their heads to observe him. When he doesn’t do anything they pick up their pace.

It’s not a busy day by the Hokage’s office for some reason but the ANBU stop outside the door anyway. Sasuke can sense a maelstrom of chakra in the room. The Elders. Tsunade. Kakashi. Sakura. Naruto.

“Sit.” Tanuki says, so Sasuke does. The floor isn’t exactly comfortable.

“It might take awhile.” Dragonfly says. “Get comfy.”

“Hn,” Sasuke opens his box and eats a bun. It’s still good.

Sakura walks out of the Hokage’s office. She’s scowling. “Come in.”

He follows her in taking the time to lick his fingers clean. Kakashi manages to roll his eyes at him without letting anyone else see. Naruto is standing in place through sheer will, all but vibrating with need. The Elders: two old men and one equally old woman regard him with equal amounts disgust and greed.

Tsunade looks at him over her steepled fingers.

“I’m going to offer you reinstatement.”

What? “Hoka-”

“I don’t use it much, but my last name is the only way to get around the three Clan block. So, Uchiha, what do you want?”

Deep breath- “No.”

“No,” Naruto splutters, “after everything you’re going to say *no-*”

“Naruto-” Tsunade snaps.

“How can you-”

Sasuke turns just so, his hair frames his face so only Naruto can see his eyes. “I’m not a shinobi Naruto. Not for this village. Not for any village. I don’t agree with Giri entirely but I agree enough to know that I don’t want this.” He turns to level the same amount of intensity on the Hokage. “You were Orochimaru’s teammate and I know now that some of the things he did he learned here. This place...I don’t trust it. I have no reason or intention to hurt Konoha but I have even less reason to fight for it. At least Konoha as it is now.”
One of the old men, bandaged and crippled, snaps. “How dare you—”

Tsunade holds up a hand to silence him. The look he gives her is poisonous. “We can’t allow a dojutsu like the sharingan to pass into history. Perhaps,” Tsunade says smoothly, “you might consider changing your status to retired. That way if we need your...expertise you can be reactivated. Or if your position on the hierarchy of this village changes. I’m sure Aguni can work something out for you.”

“Okay.” It doesn’t matter anyway.

“Just like that,” Tsunade looks at him skeptically, “you’re going to retire just like that?”

Sasuke blinks at her, what does she want here? “I haven’t been a shinobi since I was twelve. I’ve spent the last few years working with a terrorist cell. I still have my skills so when you pass the hat to Naruto I’d be happy to work for him.” In theory, anyway.

“That’s unconfirmed.” Then, dry as the desert, “And I will try not to be insulted.”

Sasuke rolls his eyes. “I’ve done nothing anyone here would consider a mission in most of a decade. My ambitions have changed.”

Tsunade gazes at him for a long moment. “Why?”

“My family is dead.”

“Yes.”

“I would like to do something else now.” The words feel odd in his jaws. He desperately hopes no one asks him what he wants.

“I see. I assume that’s enough for you Danzo.” Tsunade leans back in her chair glaring at the bandaged man. She takes a sweeping glance of the room, barks, “get out!”

Danzo stiffens. “Hokage-”

“I have not forgiven you for Nagazawa.”

Danzo grits his teeth and bows. His motions have a near practiced stiffness as he leaves.

Tsunade takes a look at the rest of the room. “I wasn’t just talking to him!”

Sasuke lets the elders leave first. Then Kakashi and Sakura. It’s just him, Naruto and ANBU.

“For the last time everyone but Uchiha needs to leave.”

Naruto opens his mouth and Tsunade loses patience. Her palm hits the table, instead of it cracking under the pressure there’s a small sonic boom that rattles his bones and clenches his stomach. Chagrined, Naruto leaves.

With a gesture ANBU is also dismissed. After a long moment to regain composure Tsunade gestures in front of her. Sasuke stands in front of her, even as the irritation of being forced to stand at attention rankles. Tsunade catches his displeasure but chooses to do nothing. “You have to give me something.”

He understands although it does nothing for his mood. He’s not naive enough to think that they’d let him get away with coming back. Being dragged back, running back with his tail between his
legs, sure. But under his own power? No, there’s a unique psychological game that makes up unity in a Hidden Village, particularly this Hidden Village, and it can’t be ignored. He doesn’t want it to be either. Before he’d read Kazue and Jinta’s story he was well on his way to becoming like the more militant members of Giri. But whatever romanticism he might have had died in the water when he read the first hand accounts of how things used to be. The old ways are better off dead.

Speaking of. “There’s another Uchiha.”

Tsunade snorts. “Who told you that one?”

“Akatsuki attacked me-”

“Knew that, next point.”

“-and the man in the orange mask had a sharingan.”

Tsunade blinks, hums, stands. She fetches a chair from outside the door and a pot of tea. Only one cup. She passes him the chair before retaking her seat. “How do you know that?”

He sits down making a point to relax his shoulders. “I know my family.”

She taps her finger against her cup.

With a great blow of air she leans back in her chair. “I don’t take intel from people I don’t know or sources I can’t confirm. Head to T&I-”

“No,” he interjects, “I’m a civilian and I haven’t committed a crime.”

“You’re withholding information.”

“I’m going to give you what I know.” He holds his hands up placatingly. “But I won’t let you torture me for it.”

“That’s very straightforward. What do you get from all this?”

“Closure.”

Tsunade blinks, long golden lashes falling and rising evenly. “Huh, not what I would have gone for.”

“My family is dead,” he starts, and then he tells her a revised version of his runs ins while in Giri, Tobi and his specialised sharingan, the rumors that float around about missing Uchiha children. He lays it out for her, quick and clean, hoping that she does something he can live with.

Tsunade takes a long drink of her tea. And then another.

“This is hearsay,” she murmurs, “I cannot officially take a position on it. Un officially I can say that what you’ve told me makes sense. You’re going to stay out of it.” After a pause, she adds. “For the record I want you to stay retired. No one should have let you become a shinobi in the first place.”

What? “Hokage-”

“No I will not explain myself.” Tsunade stands. “Follow me so we can get this over with.”

At the desk outside her door she pauses. “Someone pry Aguni out of her hidey-hole and get her in
here for legal counsel.”

The chunnin behind the counter licks his lips. “Ma’am—”

“Did I fucking stutter? If I get pulled up again by some civilian ethics committee again I will find you and you will pay my bar tab for a month.” The chunnin dashes off. Tsunade casts an unhappy look at him. “Threatening physical harm against my subordinates will also make some trumped up asshole from the Merchant Council fuck up my day.”

Aguni trots back in with an arch look. Tsunade lays out her plan. In a flurry several important pieces of paper are produced, argued over, and arranged on the Hokage’s desk. She hands Sasuke a pen while she produces a recorder.

“You’re going to make a vow to me.” She presses the record button. “Here it is.”

“You have this on hand.” Aguni drawls. She takes it between two fingers and reads carefully.

“I was prepared for something like this.” Tsunade leans on her desk. “Your pardon does have my name on it. We’ll need to change the conditions. Unlike the person that pardon was intended for he cannot give us accurate counterintelligence on Iwa and Kumo, nor can he train our shinobi to evade and repel Kumo’s death squads. More’s the pity.”

“The stipulation against child bearing?”

“He can’t bear children and the sharingan is carried on the female side. Cut it out. We’ll need to add provisions against him being reinstated before say two or three years.”

“As Clan Head?”

“As an A-ranked jounin. There’s a provision in there for bringing across appropriate qualifications. Once we send notice to Giri and receive a sanitised copy of their records regarding his mission completion he’ll be given the appropriate retirement status and payout.”

“That seems nice.” Aguni frowns.

Tsunade snorts. “The original recipient wanted a stipend equivalent to their previous occupation. We are nowhere near as wealthy as their previous employer. This gives Sasuke access to health benefits and discounts. As well as disability and retirement allowance. If he’s modest he doesn’t have to worry.”

“I see.” After a half hour or so. “Okay, done.”

Aguni hands him the paper. It’s legalese gibberish to him. He repeats it aloud three times for their satisfaction. “I so swear.”

“Great.” The Hokage takes it from him solemnly. She looks pensive. “And for now at least the Great Uchiha clan is no more.” She hands the paper back to Aguni. “Make copies and get them to everyone who needs one.” Grief and loss. That’s what crosses Tsunade’s face.

“Not with a bang or a whimper.” Aguni mutters. Sasuke turns his face a little, the better to bare it. Aguni bows shallowly, taking her leave. Tsunade looks at him, opens her mouth to bark orders, seems to remember she can’t. He takes pity on both of them and walks out of the office under his own power. His shoulders feel yet lighter.

He passes the chunnin at the desk again, looks down -“I-” No way. “Strawberries.” He grabs a
handful and turns right back around.

If the Hokage is surprised by being interrupted she manages to hide it under a growl. “Uchiha.”

He holds out his hand. “Where did these come from?”

“The Senju estate.” She looks at him as if he’s grown three heads. “Anything else?”

“We have these on the Uchiha properties.”

“Not surprising since they came from your family. It was a re-gift to my grandfather. He used to complain about it. Said he couldn’t believe his love was being disrespected this way.” She points at the door. “Get out.”

He feels light headed because of course. He’d read Jinta’s journals, his accounts but he’d never dreamed-

Uchiha Madara’s best friend was Senju Hashirama.

--

He gets himself a house.

More accurately, Aguni turns up at the Dancing Monkeys and hands him the deed to a property once owned by his family.

“You’ll have to go see the Aburame in charge of title holdings. He should be in his office all day today.” She also hands him a week worth of food.

The man isn't hard to find. He’s tucked at the back of a crowded building full of his relatives, the low key buzzing noise making his teeth clench. He’s short in stature, a bit wider than he should be, with greying hair.

He squints at Sasuke. “Who are you?”

“Uchiha Sasuke.”

“Ooooooooh, finally a Uchiha deigns to grace me with his presence.” He stomps around the desk. “I’ve only been sending you messages for the last eight years.”

“I-” Sasuke rubs the bridge of his nose. “You are aware that the Uchiha are dead, yes?” He manages to say it with more irritation than anger, which is an improvement he’s sure.

“And?”

“And I did not make you wait eight years just for fun, sir.”

“Don’t get snippy.”

Breathe in, breathe out. Do not murder the man.

The man stomps back around his desk to pull out a few old battered boxes. “Here these are yours.”

“And they are?”

“All the belongings from the Konoha Police Department were released last year. These are all the
personal belongings not archived or taken as mementos.”

“People took my family’s belongings as mementos?”

The man has the good sense to look away.

“Great.” Sasuke says gruffly. “I’m sure there is paperwork for that.”

Out of nostalgia and an intense need to touch base with reality he looks for the bakery that Chizuru and Jinta owned. It’s located in what was once a general purpose area of Konoha but has since been bought up by the Aburame. It’s still a bakery and as far as he can tell the back of the building is still covered in wild strawberries.

_Holy fucking shit, he thinks, Senju Hashirama and Uchiha Madara were best friends._

He unpacks the boxes in his room, sitting on the floor and really spreading out. It’s not hard to find Uncle Kagami’s old swords. Even though he only realised their importance recently he’d have been livid if someone had taken them. Packaged along with them is an old book of tales.

_To Kagami, From Your Sensei_

The house is wonderful. A leftover investment from an Aunt who made a fortune selling paper plates, it’s situated just off the forested area given to the Nara’s, close enough to benefit from the Akimichi restaurants and Yamanaka retail stores. The property must have been bought before the big civilian boom because it boasts both private walls and a garden. While not overly large the garden runs around the ‘modern’ style two storey house.

Sasuke takes a moment to close the large wooden door behind him, locking the seals still etched into the door. The seal is a pun on the Uchiha name with a tricky bit of finger work at the end.

Standing at two storeys with a little rooftop terrace it’s a mixture of old school materials on a very new style home. Twenty years ago it would have been shocking. The front facade is an odd mix that looks rather like wet stone. It’s been painted a pale yellow shade that’s stood well against the weather.

He opens the door to a long wide hallway and then an open plan room. Kitchen stretching along the left to a living room that curls around a pair of wide stairs. The room is an odd mustard orange shade offset by the kitchen tiles which are drab mix of dusty blue and pink.

The furniture -what there is- is covered by huge blue-ish sheets. There are boxes and boxes of half packed things like the owners were halfway through and decided to go out for lunch, never knowing that they would not come back. He supposes that’s exactly what happened.

The kitchen is entirely packed away. One wall full of old cabinets. Two cupboards either side of a large window. Low wood topped benches. In the corner there’s a stain that smells faintly of green tea. The stove top is old but functional nothing Sasuke’s meager cooking skills could possibly overwhelm.

The feature is the windows. They open to a small classic style back porch that takes advantage of the forest just over the fence. From his place at the sink he can just catch the sounds of the village: soft conversations, food delivery, tradesman working.

There’s a plop and then a soft trilling noise. Something furry curls its way around his ankles with a loud unimpressed noise. Sora jumps onto the kitchen bench, misjudges and falls into the sink. He gives Sasuke a wounded look that suggests it’s all his fault.
“Sora.” He looks away from his cat to...

...All the other cats.

Two calicos on the covered couches. Tabbies on the stairs. Gingers in the kitchen. A cat so pale and blue it looks like captured moonlight twines around his ankles meowing a cheery hello.

“Did you bring cats home?”

Sora makes a trilling noise. He licks a paw.

Right. Sora brought home a bunch of cats. Good.

He checks out the upstairs. Three rooms. Two are clearly bedrooms and he supposes the third, overlooking the street, would be a study. Each room features floor to ceiling shelves along the inner walls boasting various knick knacks and books. It’s a strength of the architecture that it all feels roomy and bright rather than stuffy. The main bedroom has two full walls of windows looking out over the Nara lands. They sit just high enough off the ground to clear all the debris and chaos of the world, showing only the tops of trees and the hints of far distant civilization. It makes Konoha feel vast -natural and unending rather than the walled in, highly patrolled mecca he knows it to be.

After spending all his life on the road, in Otogakure or in his family's fairly traditional housing it's...nice.

There’s no furniture on this level only the faint impressions of where it might have been. There are, however, more cats. The house has three bathrooms. There’s a cellar downstairs and a defunct shrine in the backyard. Whomever owned this house before worshipped some deity he’s never seen before. The only clue to her identity a red eye, white hair and something rather like bunny ears. He closes it off and faces the pile of rubbish in the backyard.

With a final push of energy he walks up to the rooftop terrace.

There were plants here, once. Big wooden pots are full of dead soil and markers: tomato, celery, chilli. There’s nothing but an old lawn chair and a shitty side table. So he does what anyone would do when faced with a shitty lawn chair and a rooftop. He gets some beer.

His view from the rooftop chair is spectacular. In the distance the imposing faces of the Hokage, just over the way the forest and the Nara valleys. The real gift is in the old seal work that has kept this rooftop from becoming a traffic way for shinobi. From up here he can see the delicate, expensive way it disrupts chakra. He’s sure many people fell off before the figured out to just avoid the whole thing entirely.

With warm beer in hand he tries to think of one thing -just one thing he should do to this house. It may be dubiously painted and the house may be very odd, but it was clearly meaningful to someone. Clearly full of love. He doesn’t much mind living in a dead person’s house but something in him balks at disrespecting who they were when they lived. God knows he’s done worse, but if he’s learnt anything it’s that sometimes he can just do better. Be better. More than that -sometimes, most times- he wants to.

The furniture, he decides. He’ll buy new furniture. He finishes his beer, puts out water on the rooftop for the cats, and goes downstairs to see what he’s dealing with. The cats follow him down the stairs, pausing just long enough that he nearly breaks his neck several times trying to avoid stepping on them. He picks up two ginger cats which is a mistake because they all decide this
means they can jump into his arms. Whomever had these cats before him he hates with a burning passion.

Once down the stairs, holding only the moonlight cat -Moon Cat- he pulls off the covers to see what he’s dealing with. Two couches, a few chairs, a table that belongs in one of those science fiction magazines Suigetsu pretends he doesn’t like. Something that could be a small demon statue? And of course, of course, a stylised war fan in red and black that is just offensive to him as a warrior.

He looks at the furniture. He really, really hates it.

Luckily for him, and unluckily for anyone working retail, it’s friday and late night shopping. The novelty of picking his own furniture isn’t lost on him. It seems half the time the state of his furnishings has been a form of psychological warfare. Beds are easy. He simply lies on them until he finds one he likes. One of the sales assistants zeroes in on him, asks him all manner of questions about decor to which his answer is always I don’t know. In about an hour he does know. His walls be an off white with a warm-ish pale blue for the accents. How that sentence works he doesn’t know. He’s getting timber cabinets everywhere in the house, keeping his warm brown wood floors and picking one of the carpets on the other side of the furniture store. The carpet, the sales assistant informs him, will be a neutral mid-grey on the cooler side to offset the walls. Sasuke says yes because it’s easier than asking questions. The sales assistant is perfectly happy to pick his bed linens for him- the highest quality available in warm browns and yet more grey. Sasuke makes three choices: the bookshelves, the lamp and a beautiful expensive vase that would have looked at home in his mother’s collection. If the man is thrown off by his questions about designing weapons storage he’s not showing it.

“Best get a carpenter for that.” The sales assistant rings up his purchases. “I’m Kaito by the way.”

Kaito works commission. He abandons Sasuke near the couches, which may be the only part of the store he does not oversee. Sasuke is not exactly bereft without him but the novelty of making his own choices is certainly harder.

“Get the dark brown leather.” A woman stands next to him, a huge bag of vegetables in one hand, two buns in her hair and a stance that says I’m carrying, would you like to know what? That’s what her shirt says too. She’s clearly shinobi and equally clearly knows who he is.

“I’m sorry, you are?”

“Tenten,” she says mildly, “not surprised you don’t remember me. Don’t get your fixtures from that place near Ichiraku they leak. Buy the dark brown it’ll age better.”

Tenten waves goodbye. A bit bemused by her but unwilling to let go of such decisively given advice, he buys the dark brown couches.

Next is cushions and pillows. He learns about texture layering, the difference between suede and leather and how to build colour from a young sales assistant. Usually he’d have made sure she knew to fuck off and leave him be by her second sentence but he can’t help noticing her accent.

“You’re from Kimura.”

She grimaces. “Yes.”

He nods to himself. Some of them must have come down the coastal roads. “Nice place.”

She smiles tightly, eyes tense, but continues telling him about cushions.
He takes along time to make his choices -long enough that the sales assistant begins to side eye him- but eventually makes his choices. The delay wasn’t to make her uncomfortable, only to figure out if she works commission. He doesn’t have access to all his money right now but he can leave her a nice message with her manager and a promise to come back for more linens.

Cushions were the last thing on the list and only there because the couch lady insisted. By the time he carts all his purchases home it’s tipping midnight. By the time he showers, eats and puts on sweatpants it’s one in the morning. The paint guy said he had to sand and prime the walls, with a little bit of help from two shadow clones it’s done within the hour.

At three in the morning and he’s shirtless on his back in the living room of a dead relative he’s never even met. Sora is purring on his chest and Moon Cat is across his thighs. All around him are half done walls of paint.

At five in the morning the sun comes up. He hasn’t slept but he doesn’t mind it. The sounds of Konohagakure waft over him but never touch as he makes breakfast and sits on the porch. Moon Cat is sitting on her haunches next to him drinking in the sunrise.

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“Did you know,” Naruto says without preamble leaning precariously through the window of Sasuke’s second storey office, “that Lady Akemi has begun producing a show called Snake Killer: Great Adventures of the Last Uchiha?”

Sasuke moves his pot plant off the windowsill. “I don’t care.”

“It’s gotten pretty good reviews.” Naruto grins at him, blonde and gorgeous and about three hours too early for Sasuke’s ongoing health. He likes spacious breaks between dealings with the idiot. “My favourite one was the bit where you heroically saved three men from a Kiri death squad. There was a rousing speech about honour, I heard.”

“All but one of them died. It wasn’t that great a story.” Sasuke replies sharply. He puts a hand on Naruto’s shoulder to push him out the window.

“Woah, woah,” Naruto grabs at his hand, catching it in his own and pressing a warm callused thumb to Sasuke’s palm. The skin is too smooth underneath Naruto’s fingers. He’ll need to up his training. “That was real? Concubines in Frost?”

“Real.”

“Zombie plants in Rice?”

“Real.”

“Saved a little girl from drowning in River?”

“Real.”

“Giving a speech about liberty, life and the true way to an audience of thousands?”

“Real-ish. I didn’t do the talking.”

“Transporting a group of, uh, prostitutes while dressed as a-”

Oh, for fucks sake. “Yes, Naruto, it all happened.”
“Wow,” Naruto smiles, a little sadly, “you did a lot while you were away.”

Sasuke refuses to dignify that. He was training to get stronger of course he went out on missions. It was necessary. And it’s not like Giri was a stay at home desk job. Naruto went around with Jiraiya for two years, did he not learn anything? “Have you seen one of Lady Akemi’s shows?”

“Yep.”

“Well?” Sasuke gestures at his face, Naruto’s eyes following the motions of his hand. Sasuke clicks his fingers in Naruto’s face because he’s mean and he has so much work to do to get his taxes up to date. “Do we look alike?”

“Oh,” Naruto scratches his head, “yeah, like exactly the same but she’s blonde.”

Sasuke can’t even comprehend that. Blonde. Him, blonde. “That’s awful.”

“She’s really hot,” Naruto says wistfully.

Sasuke, being a tactful person who wants to have a nice day that doesn’t involve this clusterfuck, does not mention that Naruto has more or less just admitted he thinks Sasuke’s hot. Instead he tries to push him out the window again.

“Oi,” Naruto grabs his hand again but this time pinches it so the muscles seize. Which adds about three hours extra work for Sasuke since now his hand is going to be tender all day. Asshole. “Stop trying to push me out the window.”

“Why are you here?” Sasuke asks, pulling his hand back so can maybe loosen the muscles before they seize.

“Lunch.”

“No,” Sasuke grits his teeth as the muscles of his arm scream, “I’ve got shit to do.”

“Hire someone to do it.”

Truthfully he’d thought of that but Sasuke has been living hand to mouth since he was eleven, he has no spare resources to speak of until he can get the rent and taxes sorted on the Uchiha properties.

“No.” Naruto leans forward grabbing up a handful of Sasuke’s shirt. “We’re going to have lunch.”

And then they go out the window.

--

He will not eat ramen. Naruto pouts but he will not be moved. No ramen.

“Where would you like to go then?” Naruto snarls.

“You’re paying.” When Naruto doesn’t object quick enough Sasuke takes him to an expensive bistro near the public servant district. His mouth doesn’t stop flapping the whole way which mollifies Sasuke somewhat. He orders a very expensive meal and has an incredibly obnoxious conversation with the sommelier about the wine. Naruto orders something with more carbs than sense and a beer.

Naruto stuffs his mouth full. “So how’d he die?”
Sasuke dices his food and through sheer will power finds something neutral to say. He has an itchy feeling that if he gives Naruto too much rope he’ll hang them both.

A hard light enters Naruto’s eyes. “That’s not an answer Sasuke.”

Sasuke shrugs and continues sanitising his life. Naruto cuts in every time Sasuke gets comfortable. He’s circling in on every bit of being away that hurt. There’s about two refills before it would be polite to leave. Sasuke gives himself half a glass before he’s leaping over the table.

With a burst of clarity he realises the problem.

He still has all of his defences and reasoning and stubbornness it just doesn’t matter. Naruto considers Sasuke entirely surmountable. He wholeheartedly believes he can cover any distance between them. He knows that some part of Sasuke will let him.

His biggest problem with spending time with Naruto is that when Sasuke does he feels less like an odd footed puppet dancing to other people's strings and more like a flesh and blood man with all the uncomfortable urges that come with it. Sasuke likes his blood ice cold and his will immovable. It’s a practical way to live a dangerous life.

“Naruto.” Sasuke sighs. “If you ask me a question instead of trying to trick me into a confession I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

Naruto stiffens. “What was Oto like?”

There. He can answer that. Somehow the clipped brochure like answer that comes out of his mouth feels like a lie.

--

He still hasn’t finished painting his house.

He’s been waylaid by the endless amount of paper that come out of the woodwork, sometimes literally. Whomever lived here before was one of the clan record keepers. He has school transcripts, birthday reminders, awards and recipe books and wedding invites. He organises them and makes a note to call ahead and organise for someone to come by and pick it all up when he’s gone. One day these will mean something again.

He’s removing yet another box of photos from a secret wall compartment when it happens. There’s a pop and the sharp smell of smoke. Something stabs his finger.

Sasuke sticks his finger in his mouth. “The fuck?”

A black lacquer box sits, harmless, in the opening. It’s embossed with a stunning detailed Uchiwa made of flying birds. He picks it up cautiously, waiting for another stabbing, but nothing happens. He sits it next to him and continues sorting through Uchiha Sumi’s wedding album. Black and white pictures of somber people in dark robes, the bride in resplendent white. He recognises his father from his scowl standing next to a woman he would have called grandmother had she lived. The first three photos are calm and elegant. In the fourth everyone pulls a funny face. Even his stoic father sticks his fingers in his mouth and crosses his eyes. It’s hard, and very sad, to know his father was once young enough to smile.

The black lacquer box begins to smoke again being trained in all manner of fire safety methods he picks it up and puts it in the sink. Standing there debating about whether or not he should run some cold water over it he notices the long stroke of calligraphy appear on the top part of the box.
His mother? He turns the box over and over but nothing appears. Just his mother's name, *Uchiha Mikoto*. There’s too much to get done in the day to dwell on it. He puts it upstairs in a secure drawer and gets back to painting his walls.

Furniture arrives all at the same time, as does the guy who specialises in counter top grade stone. Turns out he’s an expat from Iwa who took his retirement and got the hell out. Now he uses his jutsu to create custom counter tops for exorbitant amounts of money. He’s happy to accept a beer while they talk over Sasuke’s choices. He was going to go for something simple and non-fussy - after all he can barely cook- but the man sells him on a blue brown mottled slab. The man stays for another half hour and another beer to arrange Sasuke’s couches and carry his bedding up stairs. Sasuke takes the mocking about his luxurious choices on the chin.

The cushions he picked are suede and linen in shades of autumn and summer. There’s no reason for that but comfort. Remembering the sales assistant’s words he arranges them how she would but acknowledges either he or the cats will wreck them. She insisted on a throw too, so he bought the softest warmest one he could find in a deep grey. He throws that over the end.

Next is a series of three pieces of art he bought from a refugee. The man was shifty eyed and pained at someone of Sasuke’s profile approaching him but the sale was too good to pass on. It’s three abstract renderings of his home. Soft colours married with strikes of bold colour. Which is more neutral than anything but he likes the way he can stare into them and not know where it starts and ends. Stare and stare but never figure out where it is. He only knows that when he looks at them he sees something of the traveller he used to be.

It’s nice. It’s really very nice. It’s the last place he’ll ever live and he thinks, quietly, that it’s okay for it to be nice.

Turns out you can’t use your bed linen for drop sheets though. He has to wash them all before he can sleep on them again.

He found an old school record player and a bunch of records beside it. Soft noise, gentle and breezy, blows out of it. He opens the windows and the back porch too. When he’s gathered his sheets he stumbles downstairs, tripping on cats all the way. There’s a soft noise, a cat landing most likely, and the sound of a hinge opening. He ignores it, a week or two with cats and he’s had to train himself to not react to every damn thing he hears. There’s a shuffling noise -feet in shoes, heeled, no grip on them- and he has to reassess.

Why the hell is someone breaking into his laundry?

He drops the laundry, pushes down with his own chakra creating a perfect soundless barrier between his feet and the floor. His small laundry window is thrown open. A woman stands in the light of it looking at a box exactly like the one he has upstairs. A long fall of beautiful dark hair swings around, pale eyes going wide in a sweet face. Sasuke tries to place her but comes up blank.

“U-Uchiha.” Then, soft as the breeze- “Fuck.”

Wait a fucking second. “What are you doing-”

She lights up with chakra pulsing out in a way meant to distract a sharingan. Fool that he is he gets caught. She leverages herself through the small window. She’s gone.

He considers chasing after her, dismisses it. He knows where she’ll be. Picking up the box through
the cloth of the bed sheets. The box is the same as the one upstairs right down to the Uchiha made out of birds. There’s a name Uchiha Reo on the bottom of the box. The box pulses with familiar chakra. It feels...angry.

He puts his washing on, takes the other box upstairs and places them next to each other. The box from the laundry seems to calm down. He can still feel chakra coming off it but it feels pacified. On a hunch he places a hand over the first box and closes his eyes. For a moment there’s nothing then the cool touch of a pale hand on his. His mother’s scent on the wind.

Nothing smells like her anymore.

He’s heard of chakra connections. Leftover seals that react to bloodties. It’s possible that whomever Uchiha Reo is he’s distantly related to Hinata. He searches his memories for something Orochimaru or Karin might have said, some clue as to what he needs to do to get it to open. Blood didn’t do it, would chakra? There’s nothing left of his mother’s. Itachi made sure of that. Maybe...

He grabs his momentos, things he has imbued with meaning and chakra both over the years and places them over the box. The jar of dirt doesn’t do it, neither does the sword hilt or the diary. It’s his father’s poems - through the scattering light, I too long for your summer. My autumn love who grows in beauty - that make the box bloom open with a sigh. There’s a soft noise and the distinctive scent of her perfume, inside are stacks of letters and tiny bottles of what looks like blood. Medical certificates, notes on genetics - he can tell what it is but not what it means. It’s written in a cipher. He tries the second box but it retains its surliness. Not opening at all until he cuts his hand palm to ring finger and lets the damn thing burn him. Uchiha Atsuko. His maternal grandmother. The box bursts open with a plume of acrid smelling dust. The sides are scrapped like someone forced it open. The insides have been rifled through, nowhere near as neat as his mother’s box. The cipher must, again, be chakra based, because part of it is solved. Personal files. Medical files. He can smell his mother’s perfume on them. All of them are locked to the female head of the family. No one but his mother could read them. Still Hyuuga has made a good dent in unlocking it. Her familial talent is good for something.

He’s going to have to have a word with Hyuuga Hinata.

--

Over the following days he finds several boxes.

He bleeds over all of them. The names of various female family members appear. Some are recent enough he recognises them. Some he has to find his old book of dead Uchiha to find. One box he sets aside Uchiha Hoshiko written in small silver print. Inside are pictures of her family, a tall handsome man with blonde hair and a boy with a shock of dark hair. Underneath is a list of possible medical difficulties written in many different hands. He puts the box aside and debates willing it to Kakashi.

The boxes contain information some in code most not about the Uchiha family. He organises it into piles. Some is financial, some is medical, some is sentimental. Then he gets to the gory stuff.

Uchiha started going missing almost as soon as there was a village. He knew this already from Jinta’s journals. The black market didn’t stop hunting them just because they had allies. Some disappeared on routine missions. The Uchiha took it to the council and the then Hokage -Tobirama- but it was dismissed out of hand. Some chose to believe it was Tobirama plotting against him especially coming so soon after the Uchiha were shunted to the police force effectively shunting them out of political, military and medical paths. A Uchiha joining the police that was the only real option. Segregation in medical centres and medical malpractice. Uchiha banded together when
travelling for what they felt was their own safety and the public felt was to impress their superiority. Tsunade saved the lives of three families kidnapped for breeding. Her mother had them detained without medical aid when they returned. Tsunade formally left the Senju clan.

*It’s not all of them,* one Uchiha woman writes, *but there is a sickness brewing in their blood.*

The Senju die off. Sarutobi comes into power. Everything gets worse. These documents are so thick with code Sasuke can decipher anything. Uchiha children are orphaned and then taken and when they come back they’re...wrong. They have empty eyes and the fire in their blood is all but gone. Namikaze rises to power and things get better. His wife is best friends with Uchiha Mikoto. He returns to his mother’s box and looks for evidence of it, looks through a boxed up albums of memories, until he finds his mother with her lips pressed to a tanned redheads cheek. There are three pictures: his mother kisses her cheek, they press their foreheads together, the redhead leans back laughing as a fox summon attacks his mother from behind. Love. He knows what love looks like.

Namikaze dies. His wife dies. One of the Uchiha elders leaves a note in her box: *If not for her sons I think Mikoto might have grieved herself to death.* And he remembers all of a sudden how often that happened. How often his mother would go visiting and find widows lying dead in their beds having willed themselves away. He understands.

Sarutobi comes into power again. The women fall silent. He sorts through the jutsu next. Many are medical for a range of issues related to the sharingan, burns and the hereditary disease that plague their line. Some could have helped him when he was younger he notes with amusement. Those he boxes up for Sakura.

The next box belongs to Uchiha Umeko. Her name is emblazoned on every piece of paper. She worked as an intern in Tobirama’s administration and worked her way up to just below ANBU secretary. Over the course of her career she took snaps of classified information. *That* he leaves alone. He opens up a blue file instead. It contains a detailed diagram of a sharingan eye from all angles. Diagrams of slices of the retina, diagrams of the connection to the brain. Speculation on what it all means. *A Clan possessed by Evil.*

Dramatic.

*Copied by Uchiha Umeko. From the study of Senju Tobirama.* Underneath are jutsu upon jutsu. He copies the notes out of habit. The man thought of everything. There’s a sealed file underneath with the words *If I die* printed on the front. There’s smudges of blood on it. Too much blood. Sasuke cracks it open. It starts with a letter to her family then pages upon pages of notes and scribbles by Tobirama on various clans and abilities, projects and requisition notes for bodies starting at puberty and going up to middle age. *I hope this will be enough to convince them to aid us. I hope it's enough to let them know that the Senju are not their allies.*

At the very back is a file labelled *Edo Tensei.* It’s sealed twice. Once by a Uchiha and once by someone else. A Senju. On the back: *Even they don’t want this. It started in the Garden but must end in the Pool.*

Sasuke sits with that for a moment, then he rises and goes to see the Hokage.

--

“Senju,” he announces as he climbs in the window. The ANBU is already swinging down when Tsunade knocks him off his path.
“Civilian.” She hisses. She tugs Sasuke all the way into the room. “Are you fucking kidding me brat? Get out.”

That could have gone better. “I have something I need to show you.”

“Out.”

Sasuke scowls and says, very condescendingly, “If you want me to leave you’ll have to do it yourself.”

“I cannot even describe how lucky you are that you’re a civilian and Naruto loves you.”

Sasuke shrugs laying out Kagami’s book of tales and Umeko’s notes.

Tsunade flips through them, eye hard. “Where did you get these?”

That doesn’t deserve an answer. “When the village was first created the two founding families settled in two separate ends of the village. The Uchiha to the river and the field’s. The Senju to the mountain’s and the tree’s. The clans that came settled between them because of a promise between the founders to always care for what lived between them.”

Tsunade looks at him sharply, “That’s an odd phrasing.”

“That’s what some,” Uchiha Michiko, “say.”

‘For what lived between them was the promise of peace.’ Didn’t work out that way.”

Sasuke is afraid of very few things and Orochimaru was never really one of them, but he did fear
that look. *That* look never failed to remind him that he was a child standing in the glow of a living legend. Tsunade raises an eyebrow. “And what is everything?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugs. “Not this.”

“Why are you here?”

Because someone has to know. Hope’s flimsy and he doesn’t trust it. He can’t see this through, whatever *this* is, but maybe she can. He pushes the file on Edo Tensei forward and flips it.


“We’re the last of them.” Sasuke says calmly. “I think we can admit the truth.”

“You’ll have kids someday. My grand uncle would be so disappointed to know I gave up the biggest Senju secret for a pair of pretty eyes and a half-baked story about Uchiha fucking Madara.”

If it was *anyone else* Sasuke would take the bait. “I think your grand uncle, of all people, would get over it. This is a third his fault anyway.”

“Oh?”

“Sectioning us off from the village was a bad decision. Making us the police force was a bad idea.”

Tsunade looks at him from half-lidded eyes, if he’s pissed her off he can’t tell. “Only a third?”

“Just a third.” some of it is the clan and he will burn in hell before he tells Tsunade that, “Uchiha fucking Madara takes the bulk of the blame.”

Tsunade snaps a finger to the door. “Leave.”

Fine. Fine, he was wrong to think he could give her this. He grabs the book and the file. Tsunade’s hand snaps out to stop him. “That stays.” She doesn’t meet his eyes.

Well. Sasuke waits for eye contact before he leaves when it doesn’t come he leaves without looking back.

--

Hyuuga finds him first.

She’s sitting on his doorstep when he goes to let the cats out. Moon Cat nudges her nose as she passes by. Hyuuga pats her. “If I could have a few moments of your time-”

Sasuke is still in his pyjama pants and nothing else. “What the *fuck*, Hyuuga.”

“Just a few moments.” She stands primly. “I have a proposition for you.”

“No.”

“It’s about-”

“I don’t care.”

“-reinstating the Uchiha clan.”

“Fuck off *Hyuuga.* ” He makes sure to put the emphasis where it belongs.
“Please.”

“You’re not going to go away, are you?”

“No.”

“Whatever.” He opens the door but stays right where he is. Hinata has to slide up right close to him to get through.

Once he’s closed the door again he turns to face her, looking so out of place in his barely used front hallway. She stands perfectly still, butter yellow dress grazing the floor. In a surprising move she leans forward until they’re almost lip to lip. “I need your help.”

“What-” he pushes her back. Doesn’t she have a thing for Naruto?

Her grip firms with chakra numbing his arm. “I need your help. You’re the only one I can trust with this.”

“Why is that? And what do you want?”

“You haven’t lived in Konoha for years so I know you haven’t been compromised.”

“You sound like a nut job.”

“I sound like I know what I’m talking about. You found body parts, possibly Uchiha ones, in Akatsuki hideouts-”

“How do you know that?”

“I have a proposition for you,” she hands him a piece of paper, stepping back, “meet me here. If you’re petitioning for reinstatement.” It reads

> Your house is bugged. Meet me at the tea house near the Namikaze grounds a week from now. I can tell you about Akatsuki. Do not tell anyone else.

He leans in a little. “You still sound like a crazy person.”

“Uchiha.” She smiles sweetly. “I sincerely wish you were right.”

--

Two days later he gets a summon to see Tsunade.

She doesn’t wait for him to sit down. “You said this Uchiha you fought had a memory manipulation ability.”

“Yes.”

“The last noted user was Uchiha Madara.”

“Okay.”

Tsunade taps her fingers against the desk. Sighs. “This came this morning.”

It’s a simple white paper. *Akatsuki formally declares-

Sasuke feels the room spin. “A declaration of war.”

“Kakashi is in the hospital.” Tsunade takes the piece of paper back. “The man you knew as Tobi
has chosen a new name. Or an old one. Uchiha Madara has returned.”

“And Kakashi?”

“Was the one to bring me that. Lodged through his eye.”

The spinning stops replaced by cold. “The sharingan-”

“The medic who did the original transplant was a prodigy. There was enough to save his sight in both eyes but he won’t be copying any jutsu for a long while.”

“What do we do?”

“What else can we do,” she says wryly, “but ask the ones who know?”

What the fuck does that mean.

Tsunade continues, “and congratulations. You’re officially a consultant.”

“What does that mean?”

“Don’t know yet I only just made it up.”

Great. “What do you need from me right now?”

“Your cooperation,” she murmurs, “and perhaps some blood.”

“Why do you need me.”

“If you can’t figure it out,” she slides across a file on him, “you’re not the man I was lead to believe.”

From the personal notes of Hashira Fuyuki: Formal Assessment of Uchiha Sasuke as Dictated. Competent fighter. With more training a formidable tactician. Overdeveloped sense of self reliance. Lacks emotional discipline and has mistaken his high level of disassociation for control. Ill suited to being a shinobi in some ways. I have no worry of his betrayal. The strongest driving force in his life is gone. Without a goal he’ll follow any lead that does not conflict with his base personality. Somehow that wasn’t destroyed through Orochimaru’s brutality or Konoha’s incompetence. Dosa believes his resilience score should be lowered and he should be stationed permanently with a team at a civilian settlement. I believe that unlike his brother he has a capacity for compassion and dexterity of thought we all sorely need. He’s not a quick thinker, nor a natural revolutionary, but he has retained a remarkable amount of personal charisma and compassion as evidenced by his relationships with his associates. He can be salvaged. Moreover I think we should try.

We would recommend constant psychological oversight however as he has shown remarkable su-

It cuts off there.

He swallows an unexpected lump. He’s smart enough to keep his mouth shut.

“Did Orochimaru ever tell you about Edo Tensei?” Tsunade presses.

“...yes.”

“Did he tell you my family invented it?”
“No.”

Tsunade’s lips twist. “Nothing you’d like to mention right now.”

He thinks of Giri’s assessment of him. “No.”

“No.” She repeats. With a wave of a hand she summons ANBU. “Find Tenzo.”

Tenzo arrives. Followed by Shizune. Tsunade lets them know what’s happened. Sasuke might be one of the first people to know they’re at war. He tucks that suspicious though away for later.

“We’re going to the Senju compound.” Shizune gasps. Tsunade rolls right over her. “Tenzo you understand why you’re coming?”

Tenzo bows.

He knows tangentially where the Senju compound is. No one lives there. No one has lived there for decades. It’s made of redwood and stone. He was expecting something more but it’s the same layout as the Uchiha compound. Houses and roads and dead flowerbeds. Tsunade walks briskly a large rock sitting by itself in an empty garden. She flies through hand signs then orders Tenzo to do something. The large rock disappears with a touch of Tenzo’ hand revealing a spiral of steps. They descend.

He already knows what this is. The Senju shrine. Baskets and boxes sit all along the ground. An abandoned altar lies covered in dust. Tsunade starts shoving boxes around looking for something. She pulls open a pale wood box and produces a scroll. She pulls out the file he gave her, cuts her thumb and presses her finger to it. “Your turn Uchiha.” He does as asked.

Tsunade compares the contents of both scrolls a dark cast to her face.

“Fucking Senju.” Tsunade mutters, thumb rubbing the clan symbol on the scroll. “Never did learn any limits.”

“Tsunade?” Shizune whispers.

“Yes, well. We have what we came for.” Tsunade casts a critical eye over the rest of the shrine, face mournful. “Lock it up, Tenzo.”

“Yes ma’am.” Tenzo mutters dutifully.

“There’s a box over there I think you should have, Captain.” Tsunade waves a hand towards a small green and pearl box sitting on a dias. “The original owner wouldn’t have minded.”

Tenzo’s eyes widen comically. “I’ll look after it.”

Tsunade snorts. “Frankly, kid, I do not care.” She lays both scrolls next to each other on the shrine.

Senju Tobirama was the kind of brilliant that has yet to be matched. He moved faster, thought quicker, struck harder than anyone but perhaps his own brother. But what he had in vision Tsunade has in well researched science and forty years of medical practice. To add to that, Tsunade has been out and about in the world learning from people her grand uncle would never have had access to in a million years. She may never beat him on sheer intellect but she has him on sheer applicable knowledge.

“There,” Tsunade points to a dense bit of script. “Edo Tensei is rooted in the chakra-soul
connection. The body is just fuel for the conversion.”

“What does that mean?”

“The flesh isn’t the point. In fact we could probably string up a bunch of leftover organs and knit together a chakra structure. Looking at this the Nidaime used the remains as a focal point to reconnect the signature of a person to an active chakra network then use a soul-sink anchor seal to bind them to the body. As the body collapses from the stress it’s converted into...something else. I’ll have to look at that again. As long as I make a stable system that accounts for the input- I think that’s what this elasticity network is about although it could be to convert there stuff to here stuff- Hmm, no, I don’t like that. It would be neater if it was to account for a sudden expanding in available chakra, also perhaps why they appear so lifeless compared to the original. Cells decaying too quickly. Maybe this is Mito’s work, then? Definitely not a conversion. Longform-”

Shizune looks completely comfortable with her muttering. For his part Sasuke is uncomfortably reminded again that this woman and his last teacher used to mutter weirdly at each other.

“You can just make one? A chakra network?” Tenzo says incredulously, “ah, I mean-”

“Well I can,” Tsunade replies, “Orochimaru maybe could, certainly he could do the theory, but his control is not as fine as mine. That’s about the extent of people with the knowledge and the ability to do so. I’d like your marrow, too”

“Mine?” Tenzo splutters.

“Yes. You have my grandfathers DNA just floating around in there. Might as well do something with it.” Tsunade’s voice and demeanour hit a place between fond and enraged that Sasuke can’t quite comprehend. He really honestly can’t tell if she likes her family or hates them.

“Grandfather’s cells for stability,” Tsunade scowls, “bound to me, I guess.”

Sasuke follows that through in his head. So no live sacrifices. Just body parts.

“I can get this done,” she says confidently, mostly to herself. “Give me half a day.”

“Half a day?” Shizune splutters.

“What?” Tsunade says irritably, “it’s not like it’s hard.”

“I- We don’t have extensive chakra maps for the Shodai or the Nidaime-”

“Yeah we do,” Tsunade says blithely, “it’s in the wicker basket behind me. Most of the theory in creating a stable expansive chakra network is contained in the diamond on my forehead. We have biological samples from all four of them. And we have the leftover body parts from T&I. It’ll take me an hour each to create each network, another hour to take a nap and drink, and a half hour to go get the mask from the Uzumaki shrine.”

“What’s the other half hour for?” Sasuke asks because he absolutely can not help himself.

“Bitching about your fool ass ruining my day, brat, what the fuck did you think?”

Sasuke scowls.

Tsunade scowls back. “Go find Sakura. I want her on hand. Shizune, prep to help me.”

“Yes ma’am.” Shizune says.
Tsunade points a finger at Sasuke and Tenzo. “Leave.”

Sasuke and Tenzo look at each other. Tenzo shrugs and goes off in a puff of smoke. Sasuke has to use his own two feet and the civilian exit. He gets groped by two guards on the way out. His dignity takes a lot of hits during these little adventures.

Tsunade said six hours so he goes for lunch at a new curry place in the Aburame district. He casts a discreet look over his food with the sharingan. It passes his bug inspection but not his high standards for beef curry. With that done he takes a meandering route in search of Sakura. His chakra sense is as good as always but even if it wasn’t he can feel the aftershock of her active chakra rumbling through the ground. Sakura moves mountains with every hit. It’s almost jarring sometimes.

He finds Naruto, Lee and Sakura going at it in a melee. Ducking, weaving, throwing punches and shuriken. Naruto is quick, Sakura is strong and Lee is immovable. God he misses that.

He waits until they slow down, a good half hour of flying rocks and rasengan and Lee literally beating the shit out of probability and other people’s bones. Naruto splits first striding over to Sasuke shedding his jacket as he goes. His shirt is stuck to his body, each muscle lovingly defined.

Sakura and Lee have bodies that must obey reality and so take a few minutes to cool down.

“What’s up bastard?” Naruto stops just short of too close, blonde hair defying sense and flying around his nose.

“Nothing much,” Sasuke mutters, “I need Sakura.”

“No you don’t.” Naruto says impassively.

Sasuke rolls his eyes and waves at her. Sakura frowns confusedly and waves back. Lee grins, but that’s just Lee.

Naruto makes a dismissive noise. Sasuke rolls his eyes. “What?”

“I’ve never seen you in real civilian clothes.” Naruto’s nose scrunches up. “Fucking weird.”

“They’re shinobi quality.”

“Pants and a shirt.” And no Uchiwa. Sasuke knows that’s being left off. “With a pattern.”

Sasuke notes the autumn coloured maple leaves and ocean motif along the edges of his shirt. It was a gift from Karin who would not know better than him usually but is imbued by some sense of aesthetic that Sasuke is sadly missing. “It was a gift.”

Naruto scowls. “From who?”

“Jealous?”

Naruto scowls even more somehow.

“Boys,” Sakura drawls. Lee has already decamped leaving Sakura to sneak up on them. “Don’t start something I have to finish.”

Sasuke opens his mouth to absolutely start something but snaps it shut when he remembers that technically saying something snide to Sakura is a criminal offense. Naruto will never count, no matter how low Sasuke goes.
“Tsunade is going to do a thing.” he says lamely.

“Shit,” Sakura hisses, “which way?”

Sasuke points in the direction of the hospital. Sakura takes off at a dead run screaming at civilians to ‘get out of the way right now’. Sasuke walks along in her wake, absolutely thrilled to not be a shinobi right now.

Naruto keeps pace with him for once respecting the thunderous cast of Sasuke’s face. He says nothing the whole way to the Hokage’s office. Shizune tells them that Tsunade won’t need them for hours yet. She ignores them while they sit in the Hokage’s study. She ignores them when Naruto kicks up a fuss about Sasuke paying no attention to him. She ignores it when Sasuke pointedly closes his eyes and naps. When Tsunade does appear Naruto has blown past anger and has landed in an awkward silent fury that Sasuke is also ignoring, more for his lack of ability to interpret it. Sakura walks in after her along with Tenzo.

Tsunade looks at Naruto for a long time. “It’s not time for this yet.”

Naruto’s mouth drops open. “But-”

“No Naruto.” Her mouth firms. “It’s not time yet. Everyone else follow me.”

Sasuke clasps Naruto’s shoulder on his way past. Naruto scowls and pushes him away. For a moment Sasuke looks back and raises an eyebrow. That was both the most physically confrontational Naruto has been and the quickest Sasuke has gotten annoyed. “Did you get what you wanted out of that?”

Naruto goes white with rage and embarrassment.

Sasuke shakes his head. “Right.”

Tsunade leads them to an abandoned room deep in the mountain. It’s clean. Tall ceilings. Grey walls. A holding chamber. The very air stinks of burning redwood. Tsunade twists her hands dropping a genjutsu. Piles of organs still fresh enough to smell of blood and ammonia are laid out on tables thick with seal work. At the top of each rests a skull packed with packets of strong smelling herbs. As they get closer each pile smells of individual chakra. Even breathing through his mouth Sasuke can tell the difference between each body.

Sarutobi smells like coals just before they burn out, the noodle shop outside the tower that piles their noodles with chilli and herbs and pure turned dirt after rain.

Next to him is a body made with sea salt and the black ice that forms on the roads in Frost. It’s saved from being caustic and unbearable by a breath of fresh growing plants. A burst of spring. Ink floats their as does the warm smell of good quality fabric, but never does it cut through the cold.

The body next to him feels like Naruto on his best days. Like sunshine and a small candle light that can never be blown out. It’s a smooth rolling western wind rolling through the world. Underneath it is an uncontrolled wildfire reaching up to takeover everything stopped only by will. He can smell Naruto there, he realises, but only because of something like the Kyuubi that twists and turns in the air.

The last body Sasuke would know anywhere. The redwoods live in his blood. In the blood of his family. It’s almost indescribable how quickly Sasuke knows down to his bones that the last body is Senju Hashirama. But he does know. He knows the way wood knows how to be a tree, the way fire knows when to end, the way he knows those strawberries would burst in his mouth. The way the
sun rises and sets; inevitable and still so surprising at once.

“How is it so clear?” Sakura breathes out. “It smells like...”

“Like a soul.” Sasuke adds.

Tsunade blinks at them. “My grandmother was Uzumaki Mito. I learned sealing direct from her.” Tsunade touches the skull of her grandfather. “More has been lost then we will ever know.” She forms a series of hand signs too quick for his normal eyes to follow. The skulls form bodies of wood and leaves. Tsunade grits her teeth, breathing fast. Perfect musculature grows over the bones and holds the organs together. Tsunade drops her hands breathing fast. She reaches for a terrifying mask.

She smirks at Sasuke’s raised eyebrow. “I don’t preform a lot of ninjutsu the same way I don’t spend a lot of time throwing kunai or using genjutsu. That doesn’t mean I can’t.”

Tsunade puts the shinigami mask to her face. Her pretty smile pulls into a snarl as she forms the seals.

Chapter End Notes

Next time on Survival: The conversation we've all been dreading. And then it gets worse.

Fun Facts will be added after I have a nap.
Chapter Summary

History is a set of lies that people have agreed upon.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is one of those weird ones that mostly exist to bridge gaps. I'm pretty sure I've messed up my own canon here and will come back to fix it later on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Within about an hour Sasuke decides that his biggest problem with bringing people back from the land of the Pure and Lovely isn’t that it’s completely immoral, or that said people would not be glad to be resurrected as undying zombies, or even the emotional horror of having to explain himself to Sarutobi (‘It all went to shit, I did too, somehow becoming a terrorist made it better?’). No, his problem is that the Shodai will not leave him the fuck alone and there is only so much space in the Hokage’s office.

“He looks just like Izuna.” Hashirama says, “It’s uncanny! Don’t you agree brother?”

Sasuke blinks and turns to look at Tobirama. Tobirama glares back. “This is clearly his fault.”

“Well he’s not wrong,” Sakura says from his shoulder.

“This is not my fault.” he says, then amends, “This particular thing is not my fault.”

Naruto gives him a sly look. “Are you saying that some things are your fault?”

Sasuke glares at him.

“Look at you. Learning to be accountable.” Sakura sighs dreamily, a frightening imitation of her entire personality from seven to the moment Sasuke left her unconscious on a bench. “Why, a girl could really fall for that.”

Sasuke pales. “I would sincerely prefer it if you broke my collarbone again.”

“It’s an option.” Sakura says cheerfully. “Do you need any assistance Yondaime?”

“Oh, no,” the man who is clearly closely related to Naruto, everyone must be blind, says, “you can just call me Minato, you’re the student of my student and my sons teammate.”

“Minato it is then.” Sakura turns to Naruto. “See I told you.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Naruto mutters. He hasn’t had eyes for anyone but his father. “You’re always right.”

Sakura punches him. He flinches.
“How are the Uchiha?” Hashirama asks anxiously.

That renders the room dead silent. Everyone, aside from the 1st, 2nd and 4th Hokage’s, look from one person to another. Sasuke is getting the lion’s share of pity, contempt and guilt. He firms his jaw, shifts his weight and tilts his head toward the 3rd and 5th Hokages. “I think the Sandaime can take this one.”

“So you know then?” Sarutobi sighs deeply. “Yes, I suppose it’s time.”

Sarutobi explains very calmly. Somewhere in the first third Sasuke’s vision whites out with a wave of emotion so intense it sends blood rushing to his extremities, forces him to bite on his own tongue. Control yourself. Namikaze, Tsunade and Tobirama ask intelligent follow up questions. All that comes to Sasuke’s mouth is a wave of saliva and copper. He makes the mistake of meeting Hashirama’s eyes, what’s there forces his hand. “What?”

Sarutobi nods at him. “Itachi would have told you.”

“Itachi’s dead.”

Sarutobi looks at him quizzically. “I assumed so if you’re here and asking me about this.”

“I- I wasn’t the one to kill him-” He never said anything- “Fuck-”

Sarutobi stops still, his face a picture of horror. “Sasuke. Oh, Sasuke, my boy, I’m so sorry-”

Sasuke swallows all the blood in his mouth. “Excuse me.”

He flees. It’s worse than leaving for Orochimaru, leaving Giri, leaving Kakashi because this time there is no outside justification. Like a fucking coward he turns tail and runs. The lynch pin. The one thing that he may not have ever understood but could at least rely upon has been tugged out of his life. The one thing he’s been able to keep as true, even when he didn’t hate his brother, even when he’s been making peace with his ghost, was that Itachi killed them. That at some point his brother no longer loved him back.

Itachi loved him more than the very village he was willing to kill his soul for.

It’s not enough. It’s not good enough.

His ears ring with faint noise hurting his jaw when he clenches his teeth against it. It’s like having his eardrums burst. All around him Konoha settles into night. People scuttling home. Lights going out in the windows. He wants to summon his dragon. He wants to pull it all apart and stomp it underneath his feet. How dare it, how dare they exist when he wasn’t allowed to. When a last minute desperate deal is the only reason he gets to go home.

If he could see beyond the film of rage he might very well do it.

Naruto chases him. He feels the grip of his hand on his shoulder, can see the shape of his mouth as he tells him they’ll get through it. They won’t. They can’t. Sasuke is writing down the last minutes of his life with a restless sort of resignation. Things have been over for a long time and it’s only now someone told him the fucking punchline. He can’t hear what Naruto says but he can guess and that makes him even angrier.

He throws Naruto off him, all the sound rushing back in. “Don’t touch me.” He spits. “You don’t have that fucking right Konoha.”
“Sasuke.” Sakura snaps at him.

Blood flows to his eyes, his chakra whirls, it’s great and ugly and black. An endless, endless rage that pushes against his throat, begs him to let it out. It stops everything inside him and holds him still with hate. He needs to let it out. He needs to make it fucking stop. His hand is rising with his full permission, there’s lightning and hate and an awful kind of need rising in him. He has to let it out. Give it form. He can see the desperation rise in Kakashi’s eyes, he can see the ANBU coming for him. He wants to show them that they were right. He wants to show them that Blood Eyes still means something.

Then the white hits. He’s staring right at Kakashi when it pulls him under, tugs him back into the safety net of distance and suppression. An old fucking hand-me-down from when Kakashi was his sensei and he still thought about what his brother could teach him. Tobirama told him he was full of evil just as Hashirama said he was not. None of his feelings right now are evil. They’re just painful.

He covers his eyes, the red hot pulsing driving him mad, falls to his knees in Konoha dirt. “Get away from me,” he gasps, “don’t come near me.”

Naruto is a picture of compassion. “Sasuke-”

He lets go of the thin rein on his pain. On his hate. Chakra whips around them toxic to breathe with his feelings. He pushes as much of his pain out as he can and is heartbroken when nothing but that old white noise fills it. There’s nothing but more nothing. The streets fall apart, people scream, he can hear children wailing. There’s nothing inside him anymore so he lets what he has go. Dirt rises from the streets, wood flies from buildings. Someone seals him up, boxes him in with Uzumaki seals, so he lets it all just...go.

He feels like his back has been broken. He can say that because it happened once. He sits on his knees in the dirt and lets whatever’s left inside his heart have him. It feels empty too. More people arrive, important people, still he does not move. He has no chakra left. He has no will left. He sits in the dirt with the broken back of his pride and lets them look. Let them look.

--

Kakashi sent the rest of Team 7 away when Sasuke had finally exhausted himself. He had two ANBU hoist Sasuke between them and carry him along. Sasuke was too tired and far far far past caring. Tobirama whispers something to him, Sasuke hears too much chakra loss and heart failure before he drifts off. His mouth tastes like blood again. The Uchiha compound can be sealed if one knows how. Kakashi shows him, physically lifting Sasuke’s hands when he refuses to follow.

Kakashi dismisses the ANBU and hoists him over the threshold himself. It’s a random house that Sasuke has no recollection of. The spinning lights and pounding headache don’t help.

Kakashi clicks his tongue. “You haven’t been eating.”

Can’t cook, Sasuke thinks blearily. His head rolls around. His eyes won’t stay open. His tongue is dry in his mouth. Every few moments he can feel his heartbeat, feel pink tinged saliva drip out of his mouth. He can’t use his own body. His legs are like jelly.

Kakashi swears. “Stay awake.”

Fuck you. He even manages to make his swollen middle finger rise.

Kakashi snorts. He carries Sasuke to the first bed he can find. He turns his face into the pillow and
breathes in the moth and damp smell. Underneath there is still a faint whiff of fresh wood and wisteria. The bed is up against a window it’s broken glass letting in the moonlight.

Kakashi sits down next to him. “Sasuke I-”

He rolls over on the mattress.

“I said I would try.” In the window’s reflection he sees Kakashi’s shoulders bend. “Someone should have told you. And I should have done more. I’ll do better.” Kakashi reaches over and grazes Sasuke’s pulse points. “For now. Sleep.”

Sleep is a river that night. A river of fire and regret and lost chances. Usually when he has these fever dreams they’re contained to the place he currently rests. The Uchiha Compound.

All the doors are open. All the lights are on. He walks down the centre paths peering into the windows and doors. People are sitting down to dinner, watching tv, doing all manner of normal things. Sasuke lingers on the home of Tsuki and Yumi, twin dark heads together reading a book. Their mother sends them off to bed and they go, holding hands.

He knows what’s in his own home. He knows he doesn’t want to face it. He’s tired of the swing of the sword. Even more now that he knows it was on the orders of cowards and traitors. He’s not going through the door. That door is the fucking lie he’s built his life on.

Every open door is a choice. Every open door is a chance.

So Sasuke opens all the doors. If all his choices were made for him then fuck it. Just fuck it all. He’s too tired to haggle, to argue. The world is huge and full of things he can’t fight. He can’t fight for anything. There’s nothing to believe in, not even his worst memories. So fuck it. Fuck all of this.

Sasuke opens door after door. Throws open every window in the Uchiha Compound. Opens cupboards and drawers. Rips open desks and secret hideaways. Light drips out of the cracks and the sills. Lightning strikes overhead. He can feel something pressing at him, trying to get him to stop. Fuck that too. This is his to destroy.

Someone pins his arms behind his back, tucks their arms around his waist, leaning their head on his shoulder. “Stop.”

Sasuke struggles against his brothers hold. “Let go.”

“Stop destroying yourself for no good reason.” Itachi let’s go. “There are plenty who would do that for free.”

Finally his rage has a target. “Fuck you.” He hits Itachi full force. Itachi grunts. “You didn’t say anything. You never fucking say anything. You’re so full of shit-”

He grabs Sasuke’s fist and holds it up high like he did when Sasuke was a child. “Still a figment of your imagination.”

The houses begin to shake. A great rumbling starts in the sky and grows. Light flashes overhead threading the sky with bright colours and rips of black. The sky fills with sound and fury seeming to crack and fall from overhead. Slabs of broken shy hit the ground with force. Up above there’s nothing but an endless pearlescent nothingness.

Sasuke shields his eyes, watching as the houses begin to shake. People stream out the front doors
in single file. They merge in the streets and walk towards the Nakano river. “What the hell is going on?”

A long lean hand reaches up high to ruffle Sasuke’s hair. Startled Sasuke looks down at his cousin Shisui who tips his head. “It’s time.” Itachi smiles at Shisui. He continues on down with the others.

Itachi offers his hand. Sasuke takes it, warm skin touching cool. Sasuke closes his eyes against the well of love and anger. Itachi smiles and begins to walk toward the river. The river where Shisui drowned.

Sasuke takes his hand back.

Itachi’s mouth opens then closes with an audible click. “You can’t choose again.” He grimaces. “You can only do this once little brother. Pick now and make your peace with what happens because you won’t get to choose again.”

Sasuke takes another step back. And another. The river is full of people. Of family. But there’s something in him that can’t go.

Itachi tips his head, considering. “Very well.”

His parents glide past hands intertwined. A pain starts in his chest and burns outwards. What did he miss not having them around? What could they have taught him about being a boy? Becoming a man? He aches and aches and aches with lost opportunities.

Itachi pulls their foreheads together. “I’ll see you on the other side.”

Sasuke closes his eyes. “I’ll see you soon.”

Itachi laughs wild and fleeting. “Foolish little brother.” He steps back. “You already know why that’s a lie.”

One by one his family step into the river. They turn to water and wash away taking the broken night and the stars with them. All that’s left is Sasuke’s bare footprints on the shore.

The sky is empty when he opens his eyes. It’s caught in that in-between of late night and early morning, warm morning light catching the grey clouds as they roll overhead. There’s safe sweet music playing from the radio. It’s 4.43 in the morning and he’s listening to Konoha AM. They’ve just covered the weather. The news is: Kiri has sent a new dispatch of ambassadors. A starlet has thrown her weight behind Frosts occupation of the land just over its borders. The new trend for the week is pork rolls and persimmon. New trade with Uzushio means an influx of new fruit and veg for Fire. The soft spindling tune of the radio station intro is the same as it ever was.

The world is the same. He turns over and goes back to sleep.

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Moon Cat and the Ginger Twins are lying on top of him when he wakes up. Black Lightning -large, black and fluffy- makes a point of stepping on him as he gets down off the window.

“What are you doing here?”

“We’re keeping you company.” Moon Cat replies. Her voice is deep and lilting. “We’ve found humans do better when you keep them company.”
Sasuke blinks sleep away. “You can talk?”

“No,” Moon Cat replies patiently, “you can talk. We were waiting for you to tire yourself out so we could teach you. The dog-man said you could bond with us now.”

“I was asleep.” He has a vague impression of Kakashi talking, blinding pain and a brand somewhere deep inside him. It was a nightmare. At least it felt like one.

“You were in a trance.” Black Lightning stumps over to drape himself across Sasuke’s arm. “Dog-man offered you to us. Too much snake before. You finally did the right thing and burnt it out.”

Sasuke closes his eyes and remembers losing himself in the eye of the storm. Of wanting everything inside him to disappear. “I don’t understand.”

“You don’t have to.” Moon Cat says. “You hemorrhaged yourself. Chakra comes from the soul, the balance of it, you opened too many doors. You lost too much chakra. Sora was running back for you. He was close enough to make an offer. We gave you ours in exchange for a permanent bond. Dog-man accepted as a blood brother. If we hadn’t you’d have fallen asleep and eventually to death.”

“Tsumi considers herself a poet.” Black Lightning grumbles.

“Nori thinks being old is the same thing as being respectable.” Tsumi counters.

Sasuke groans. “I didn’t ask for that.”

“What cat asks for things?” Nori stretches out. “We’re cats. We have our own wants. They require a living human and a bond.”

Sasuke throws an arm over his face and groans. “I won’t be around for much longer.”

Tsumi yawns stretching out too. “You would be surprised what you can get through. It’s nap time.”

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The Konoha Public Library is underfunded. Most of the really important texts are in the homes of important people or under the lock and key of shinobi. What isn’t is strangled by Konoha’s ethics and standards board which has no problem with Jiraiya’s work but holds to a ruling banning all work that sympathises with any country they may be at war with. The Konoha Library has one major thing going for it though. In the twilight days of his administration the Nidaime wrote a piece of legislation that was so perfectly worded that to this day the best and brightest in the legal world haven’t been able to find a loophole. All information in the public domain is the property of the public domain. The means of entering something into the public domain is as simple as forty five minutes and a thirty five dollar fee. No one is barred from reading. No one is barred from writing.

It’s biggest flaw is the mountain of bad erotica and pointless asinine tomes written by nobody in particular. Finding something worth reading is a monstrous task so no one bothers.

Lucky for him all Sasuke has at this moment is persistence.

More than can ever be read is written about the Uchiha. Most is bullshit, lies and propaganda. An almost equal amount of it is revisionist historical fiction frequently staring a time travelling maiden -occasionally a man- landing in the Warring States Era and falling violently in love with one of his ancestors. There’s a manual on the supposed ‘canon’ of these works- arguing the relative
plausibility of various pairings, who was definitely gay, who had children out of wedlock. The hills of Fire are filled with Hashirama’s love children coming to save Konoha’s virgins from everything beginning with famine and ending with homework. There’s a near equal canon dedicated to Madara which is hilarious. Maybe that’s how they’ll defeat him.

He finds it between the lines written by Umeo Hikaru. An ametuer historian with a nose for investigative journalism. Before his untimely death he posted twelve in depth stories about corruption in Konoha. He was half way through an expose on the Hyuuga when he died.

Uchiha blood comes with a bad reputation. Instability, delusions, insanity. All the beautiful things that Sasuke knows about his family, all the gatherings, the recipes. He has albums of smiling photos to prove that whatever monsters people thought them it wasn’t all. It couldn’t be all. When the Nine Tails attacked someone said it was the Uchiha’s fault. In response the Uchiha chose a double pronged attack of understandable outrage and overreaction. He’s read his own stories, knows his own people. The eternal problem of his blood is the fire that fuels them and the blood that binds. Umeo writes in spirals hiding insights in boring historical footnotes. His work is meticulous. It’s no wonder the Hyuuga killed him. Itachi is barely a footnote, he’s the first son of the Clan Head and nothing else. A name barely worth mentioning outside the twisting vortex of shinobi history. It’s relieving and terrifying to realise that the best articulation of his life, his history is written by a civilian he’ll never meet.

The Uchiha rose with the village. Grew into its darkness. Fell on its swords.

And that’s history.

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The bars near his house accept him as a regular. Every day at about four thirty he pulls up a chair with the crew doing work at a nearby construction site. At first they think he’s hitting on them but Sasuke is too persistent and too used to doing demolition work himself for them to think that for long. He misses working on New Otogakure sometimes. His hands hurt for something as simple as knocking down walls and hauling stone. He buys a round for the bar at five every night and again at eleven. No one knows why he’s there but hey they’re here too. He likes that they can talk shit and that no one calls him on it. He likes that when his eyes slip and flash red no one cares. Even likes that when he recalls those moments he’s either alone and miserable or looked after, laughed at by people who don’t know shit about him.

One day Hyuuga Hinata is there.

He’s well aware he stood her up. He was too busy walking across town with Michiru and her crew. Trade and street workers. He’s seen Iruka and others keeping tabs on him, questioning his choice in friends, but drunk and heartbroken he feels more at home with people who have never even held a Konoha headband. He won’t be judged by them and after he gets in a tussle with a chunnin he’s clear he won’t hear disrespect to his companions either.

Sakura bails him out. They don’t talk. He’s only sober when he has to be: for court dates, to meet real estate agents, to get his will updated and notarized. Otherwise he passes his days as blurrily as possible. Just moving from one point to another.

One day he walks into his favourite bar. He hasn’t shaved in four days, hasn’t washed in two. His hair is loose and unbraided around his face, the length of it clipped off his neck in a shitty half bun. Hinata is sitting perfectly still with a pen between her teeth, papers across the table with a genjutsu laid on top. She’s dressed in pale lavender, strong calves gripping the middle of the table. He only notices because when she flexes there’s an almost audible intake of breath from the men at the bar.
“What are you doing?”

“You took too long.” The pen stays between her teeth. Her shirt is off white and tight, her high ponytail and black rimmed eyes perfect cover for infiltration. “I came to you.”

Why the fuck she thinks she needs to infiltrate the bar down the street from his house he could not say. “Here I am.”

A blonde blur descends on the bar. Naruto shoots for the doors trying to slip in with a customer. The bouncers block him. He’s already yelling as he bounces back. Sasuke turns and slots himself into the seat next to her angling so he can’t be seen. He has not spoken to him since he found out. He wants to keep it that way. He can’t make the white noise come all the way back, can’t find any of the shit that helped him live through it the first time. He can not live with whatever Naruto will say, will do. He can barely keep living dead drunk surrounded by people he doesn't give a shit about.

Like a fucking coward he drops in his seat.

“So.” She draws it out.

“I’m avoiding Naruto.”

Hinata blinks, dark lashes moving slowly over her expressive eyes. She nods once and gestures with her pen to sit down. “You can join me.”

Sasuke hunches down in the booth “What’s that?”

“My lists.” She takes a long measured look at him. Her nose scrunches up. “You need to shower. These are suspected ANBU members. These are Hyuuga and Uchiha. The next is Akimichi, then Nara and so on. I’m making a timeline of when they were taken.”

Okay. “Why? Does it make a difference?”

“Yes.” She gestures impatiently at him. “There’s a no man’s land period between the death of the 4th and the reappointment of the 3rd. If this operation started during the chaos of the Kyuubi attack it would have been an excellent time to take the first set of children.”

“You could just go ask.”

Hinata frowns disapprovingly. “What if I hadn’t known that? And I can’t. The Hyuuga did not acquit themselves well with the Nidaime nor the Yondaime. I’m only the heir apparent, I can’t bully my way in the way my father might.”

He looks at her lists with a detached sort of interest. She has shipping manifests, lists of inheritable diseases, markers for breeding. Pictures of corpses tattooed with medical seals make up a bulk of the paper. Idly he notes that most have the unique attributes that slave breeders look for. Those that don’t are orphans. Over each picture is a sticky note with Hinata’s best guesses at what each tattoo means. He takes the pen out of her hand and corrects some of them. He’s seen a lot of these symbols before through Giri and Orochimaru. Some bare a resemblance to Orochimaru’s personal seal set, he notes that too. It must be horrific to someone as genteel as Hyuuga Hinata to deal with the human slave trade. His eyes flick to her forehead. Then again...

He hands it back to her. While she stares at his notes with disbelief he orders a beer. When he’s drunk half of it, he says, “I think this started earlier.”
“Why?”

“Because,” he points to her files, to a section of code that struck him as odd, “the consistency of these reports look like they had a well used code in place already. They use the same code consistently. It looks like it’s from at least the time of the Second War, if not earlier. These symbols are from Uzushio and were part of Konoha’s standard code before it’s destruction. Uzushio’s written language is connected to it’s use of seal work. It’s more like a living language then a set of symbols. It has many meanings. When Uzushio fell a lot of the knowledge fell with it, Konoha had to redesign its code. You can personalise it the way Orochimaru did. I wrote down translation of his work for you.” Orochimaru trading in people isn’t surprising to him but he’d always thought it was something he started after he defected.

She looks over the notes. “Than what’s the purpose? I can understand wanting to take children from influential families, but some of these are just random orphans. What would Konoha want with these random children.”

“Not just children.” He points to a picture. “Those are pictures from an adult male.”

She contemplates him for a long time, then, “Would you come for dinner at my apartment tonight?”

“...why?”

“I have no interest in you romantically but I think I might know what our missing link is.”

“Why do you want my help?” His eyebrows furrow. “I’m piss drunk in the middle of the day and as you’ve said I need to shower. Find someone better.”

“It has to be you.”

“The fuck it does.”

“It has to be...” She shakes her head. “I need it to be you. I need you.”

His teeth clench. He can feel them grind together.

“Please.” She looks him straight in the eyes. “Please.”

He doesn’t really care. He can’t make himself give a shit. What would his mother say? It’s impolite, it goes against the fundamental Uchiha tenant of protect and serve. He still can’t find the bit of him that gives a shit.

He puts his back into it. Pulls himself out of his own self imposed misery long enough to tumble the question around in his head. It’s a loose thread, sure. And it’s always bugged him that he couldn’t figure out what all those fucking eyes meant. But it feels like it’s half past too late. His affairs are mostly in order. He’s only waiting on approval from the Hokage to delist the Uchiha residence as a historical site, his accountant to fully determine the worth of his life and assets and the historian he set up to hear his biography to set a date. His will is set and he’s written what apologies he has.

Hinata’s jaw flexes. Her eyes drop, listless and helpless. Whatever this is it has her rattled. Idly he traces the line of her face. Years ago this would have been the face of an enemy. Long ago one of their ancestors split their path. Could it have been the Hyuuga instead of the Uchiha? Could they have been Ghost Eyes the way the Uchiha are Blood Eyes?
“Why are you really here?” He hears himself ask. He takes another drink.

Hinata refuses to raise her eyes, but her voice is full of steel when she replies, “please.”

Please. He closes his eyes against the grip of nausea. The sharingan pulses behind his eyes spinning on and off. His head feels like it could come off. Please. He remembers now, Tsuki was the twin he liked, and to say he hated Yumi is to be cruel to a dead girl. Tsuki never said please. She was a force of nature. Yumi was quiet, she liked birds. He feels depressingly, overwhelmingly sober and foulmouthed.

He spits into his glass just to get the taste out. “Alright.” He’d rather know the truth, the whole of it, so that no one can beg him ever again. “I’ll go have a fucking shower.”

His house is cold and empty of cats when he walks in. Not even Tsumi is around. That’s fine by him, he decides, he didn’t want their company anyway. He covers the mirror in his room. The thought of looking at himself makes him sick inside these days. He has to move unopened packages from Karin and Juugo to do so. They’ve been consistent in their missives. Juugo likes preserves. Karin likes sending him clothes as a reminder of Uzushio’s booming textile industry and her offer to let him move there. He almost smiles wryly, if only she knew.

He showers, rinses, does everything he has to. He pulls on an old pair of pants and a shirt that he bought on sale. He hesitates over the unopened packages. He’s too tired to deal with anything Karin would do. He doesn’t want Juugo’s quiet support. Frankly if he had to pick it would be Suigetsu and his brashness he’d choose. He can’t have any of them though, he has a date to keep.

He braids his hair carefully. Pulls it around his head and knits it into the back with care. He leaves his ponytail low. A memorial.

He still feels tired. Like his skin is covered in dried blood. He makes himself walk to Hyuuga Hinata’s apartment anyway.

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Hinata’s apartment is a reflection of its occupant. It’s an average jounin flat. Close to wherever she works with a window overlooking the street. There is only one window in the two room apartment but it runs across the length of the living space. Jounin rooms rarely come with windows in the bedrooms nowadays. The walls are a pale lavender and her carpet while old and stained by previous occupants is well kept and soft. Her furniture is secondhand probably from branch members. Or maybe she likes antiquing. It seems like something she’d like. The air has a surprising medicinal quality. The Hyuuga consider medical work beneath them. Many become specialists because it’s good pay but medic-nin are considered too lowbrow for the main branch. Whatever other surprises she has in store for him take a back seat to the small square dining table she sits him at. It has a knitted lace tablecloth over it. Hand knitted.

Hinata bows shallowly. “Thank you for coming. Dinner will be a moment. There’s a box next to you I’d like you to look through it.”

Hinata returns to the kitchen pulling out a large container of pasta from the fridge. He looks down at the box. It’s bursting with paper, worn at the sides. On top it says SI: C008367. Files from ANBU: Secure Information. Classification 008, file 367. Orochimaru used the exact same codes for his files. He picks up the box and begins reading.

Her filing and notation is impeccable: Starting from the beginning of Konoha’s founding there were high level security breaches. These caused a number of factions to evolve within the structure
of the system. Some were identified and taken care of, some dissolved on their own. Some grew into departments. The Yamanaka successfully took over T&I two generations ago just as the Akimichi took over most covert operations in other countries. Hinata doesn’t hesitate to connect the dots between the two painting a picture of divided politics that spans generations. The box may be labelled SI: C008367 but even skimming them he doesn’t find the namesake file. “What is 008?”

Hinata takes the pasta out of the oven before calling out, “It’s part of the intelligence act the Nidaime created between the Shodai’s death and his own. It covers what to do with prisoners of war, informants or hostages should they need to be naturalised into Konoha. This sub-section deals with people, specifically children, deemed to have sensitive information.”

That makes sense. Everyone has laws around how to deal with spies and hostages. “Specifically for children?”

She kicks the oven closed bringing the pasta over to the table. Sasuke hurries to move the papers. “The median age for fighters was still between about 8 and 14 at this point. The Shodai mandated blanket protections for all children under 13 but the Nidaime felt a loophole would be necessary. It used to be extremely difficult to obtain permission to use this act. After the last war it became commonplace because the redistribution of freelance espionage agents skewed too much to our enemies. You,” she hesitates over it, like there’s something left here that can still hurt him, “after what happened to your family it was deemed against Konoha’s best interests for you to be put into a position to...question its decisions. Three Elders, two Clan Heads, four prominent members of the community and the Hokage have to sign off on it, but yours was pushed through with half of that because it constituted an S-Class secret. The rights usually afforded to war orphans in peacetime -counselling, a dedicated social work representative, a pension in case of crippling PTSD- were revoked for you.”

Before he can reply she returns to the kitchen to gather the rest of the food. After she’s done setting it out -sheets of pasta in a heavy tomato sauce covered with cheese, a fresh salad of sharp greens, herbs, onion and fresh fruit- she grabs them both a beer and sits across from him. Sasuke does the polite thing and takes a few bites of his admittedly delicious meal before he asks. “How often does that happen?”

Hinata drinks delicately from her beer. “That extremely? Only once. In general, yes, we used to have a better system for orphans than we do now. It’s about funding: Konoha runs at a surplus currently but that’s because money is being cut from welfare services and dumped in ANBU. ANBU is running nearly three times as many missions as the closest equivalent period of peace with 3/4 of the staff. The clans are bearing the brunt of that. We’ve stopped taking in refugees and asylum seekers since Uzushio. Intake passes the Clans and the Council but three of four Village Elders have to agree and they never do. The clans will stop throwing people into ANBU and the specialist programs eventually which will drop the completion rate for ANBU and without new blood and new clans Konoha will weaken.”

“Who was the other orphan?”

Again she hesitates. “Naruto.”

Of course. He blows out a breath. “I can’t imagine Tsunade doesn’t know.”

“She’s locked out.” Hinata resumes eating her meal. “You need three living members of a clan to stand in Council. The Sandaime, for good or ill, let the Hokage position become more and more ceremonial throughout the second half of his reign. The power redistributed unevenly into the hands of the Elders and their sympathisers. The Clans are currently locked out of S-Class Village
decisions so even if Tsunade wanted to object that way she couldn’t.”

Enough to cause a coup. He swallows, feeling the food fall like a lump in his stomach. He turns over what he knows. “There’s a veto law.”

“Yes, but it requires three noble clans which before the restructuring the Yondaime attempted would have meant that the Hyuuga, Nara and Akimichi had to agree, between us we had around 68% of the votes, and a formal writ from the Daimyo.” She gets up to replace his empty beer before he can say anything. She grabs a glass of water for herself. A picture perfect hostess. “The Yondaime attempted to regain the 14 votes the Uchiha lost after Setsuna but opposition was too stiff. If he’d lived...”

If wishes were fishes. “Tsunade has three Senju now.”

“I imagine she’s making them repeal things left and right.” She leans back in her chair with a huge sigh, the first break in her hosting persona. “None of that will help us. These incidents occur in such a way that we need to go all the way back or very recently to find a viable case. Either when it started or when it restarted. The Sandaime reassumed his role of Hokage but he was never sworn in, so there’s a strong argument for plausible deniability on his part for the last two decades.”

“For fucks sake...”

“He didn’t expect to keep the position, Jiraiya was meant to take it up, when he didn’t I imagine he wanted the extra wiggle room. There were a lot of very scary ideas up in the air. A strong faction was making an argument for the sort of totalitarianism Iwa indulges in.” She frowns.

“What?”

“Can you imagine if the sannin had felt any real duty to us?”

“Or if the Sandaime had been less of a pushover.”

“Trust me there are a few decisions he made that would raise your hair. Discernment might have been a problem decisiveness never was.

He mulishly eats his cake. “What does that make me?” He elaborates at her blank stare. “Why classify me under 008?”

She looks down, ashamed. “A hostage,” she replies hoarsely. “It makes you a hostage.”

Of course it does. He wants answers. Maybe he can’t get all of them but he wants to be able to explain himself in the next life. Whatever comes after. He swallows with some difficulty. “What’s the file number.”

“It’s everything I can’t find.” Hinata shakes her head. “Your family’s execution order has that number on it, as does Kakashi’s file, several Hyuuga members and,” she swallows, “my cousin and my sister. Whatever 003867 is it’s everywhere. And whatever it is, it’s bad.”

He hesitates, because that sounds like far more than he wants to do for a place that has hurt him so badly, but, “I’ll help.”

Hyuuga visibly brightens. For a moment Sasuke takes part in her levity then he shoves it underneath the white noise. He neither needs nor appreciates it. She stares at him for awhile, blushing, and internally he groans. Why? “What?”
“Um,” she blushes, fingers knitting together in front of her, “how do you get your hair to do that?”

--

Life resumes at a civilian pace. Sasuke knows the Hokages are out there somewhere. In fact he has a terrible dinner date with Team 7 and Naruto’s dad at some point. He figures if he ignores it it’ll have to spring up on him and he won’t have time to stress unduly. He is equally aware that they have nothing to do with him now.

The Hokage agrees to delist the Uchiha compound in five years on the anniversary of Madara’s departure. His lawyer says that as long as Sasuke nominates a trustee he doesn’t have to be around for it. Kakashi is the obvious choice although he does linger on the cruelty of it. He lingers on it a lot, actually.

He could ask Naruto.

He hasn’t seen hide nor hair of him since...Since. He’d expected to have to pry him off like a barnacle. God knows Naruto doesn’t have the same respect for boundaries as he does. But beyond opportunistic near misses in public and an overwhelming sense that he’s being followed Naruto stays out of his way. When sober it pisses him off because what was all that bullshit about being his best friend if he’s not going to be here now. It also leaves him with a sense of relief like he just dodged a punch to the face. When drunk he has the oddest feeling that if he tried to name it he’d say he missed him.

The awkwardness of trying to figure out whether or not he should make Kakashi or Naruto custodian is undercut by their current absence in his life. Kakashi had dropped by once to make sure he was alive but had reluctantly admitted that Sasuke was both an adult and a private citizen. By the rules of the country they lived in beyond a certain point Kakashi wasn’t actually allowed to interfere in his choices unless he specifically invited Kakashi into his life. Naruto is subject to the same restrictions but would be unlikely to heed them.

So why has he?

The obvious answer to his question would be to make Sakura his custodian but she too is a civilian and for some reason properties owned by martial clans cannot be given to a civilian except in marriage. He needs her opinion on it. If she had to pick who would she choose?

The walk to the hospital gives his brain an unfortunate amount of time to knaw on the question of his relationship with Naruto. He can’t be both exasperated with him and irritated by his lack of boundaries and feel something almost like missing him. The duality of their relationship has always tied him into knots trying to get out of it while also trying to straighten it out into something that makes sense. They’re fundamentally different people, they find it hard to see eye to eye, and although Sasuke has developed a habit of giving him no more consideration than a passing thought when he isn’t immediately in front of him, he has to admit the places his head can go when he is are baffling.

Maybe that’s why his first question to Sakura when he finds her isn’t about the custodianship.

“How do you get your hair to do that?”

“No one else can give me an accurate answer.”
Sakura sighs, stripping her gloves off. “Do you know what the worst part of being on Team 7 was? Not being on a team with the dead last, not being on a team with my crush who hated me, not being with Kakashi who thought I was useless. No, the worst part was being on a team where I barely existed. Neither of you saw me once you understood each other. So do I think your relationship is weird? No. I was there to see it. Do I think you should be more careful with each other? Yeah, because when you’re not you destroy everything around you. And that includes me.”

Oh.

“Was there something else?”

Well. He’ll have to save the other question. “Do you...want to get dinner?”

Sakura bursts out laughing, tears still hanging at the corners of her eyes. “I have no idea what to do with you.”

“Dinner.” He holds out his arm to let her know he’s not holding anything like a grudge.

The nurse on Sakura’s rotation forces her to leave early. She thinks this is a date.

“Don’t get any ideas.” Sakura grumbles. “I don’t want to be in the hospital anymore than necessary but doing it myself means it gets done.”

“The famed incompetence of Konoha’s medic core?” He manages amusement around his sense of guilt. Sakura is one of, if maybe the only, person able to bring it out in him so sharply. He knows he’s been hurting her for a long time. He knows they’ve barely crossed inches of that distance.

Still, she lets him buy her dinner at an open air grill. The inside is decorated with candles and fairy lights. If only her thirteen year old self could see her now. They share a look, obviously thinking the same thing.

Her smile dies when they sit. The light is unkind to his features throwing the angles into relief, the barely cared for hair wrapped in a scrap of material he found on the way out the door. “What do you want?”

Sakura smiles without it reaching her eyes. “Whatever’s expensive.”

They slip a little, falling into the dynamic they could share on the road. It’s wrinkled by his inability to forget the headband on her head. Her inability to ignore the sallowness of his skin, the fact that she knows why he can’t trust her. Sakura knows that he knows how she’s struggled to reconcile her path with her duty. He knows she knows it’s so much worse than she’ll admit. He buys her dinner, they talk, and he can’t make himself ask which one of them should it be? He knows she knows that he’s selfish. He knows she can’t forgive him for that. The thought is both tiring and relieving, of all the things he might ask her he can’t ask forgiveness. She can’t offer it to him either. Not on behalf of her country.

She asks for more stories about elsewhere. Anywhere that isn’t Konoha. He obliges with careful stories from Otogakure both new and old. After a long one about the old priestess back before she became his confessor. She’d ordered a D-rank and Orochimaru had been so tickled with her wording he’d sent five of his best to trim her lawn. “Have you thought about going to see her? The old priestess?”

“No. Why?”

She shrugs.
“She probably doesn’t want to see me.” And part of him doesn’t have the strength to leave Konoha again. Not on behalf of himself, not if he has to come back again. “She probably forgot.”

“Okay.” Sakura says soothingly. Her tenor has been soothing all night. “You’re not sleeping. You’re listless. You don’t trust anyone here enough to talk to them.” She smiles bittersweet. “I’m not mad at you for that but it might be worth finding someone to talk to. You smile -your version of it- when you complain about her. You can miss people without the world ending.”

“Sakura-”

“Shh. We’re having a nice moment. I got used to missing you, and one day it was just a feeling. I had other things, other people.” She looks troubled. “You have other people too.”

He breathes in and thinks, sadly, that her face is beautiful framed by the light. That he’s sorry they only figured out how much they could have when it was too damn late. He’s putting one foot in front of the other right now because Hinata managed to find a carrot to dangle in front of him. Everything else in him is gone, burnt out. “I didn’t think about you when I was gone.”

Sakura flinches.

He shrugs. “I only ever thought about what was in front of me. You weren’t.”

“But we didn’t linger.”

“Nothing does.” One thing did. One painful thing that held no weight when he showed it to the light.

“Sasuke,” she reaches out to grasp his arm, “are you alright?”

He shrugs. The light is bright around her. It’s easier to look at that.

--

He runs out of luck on a lazy sunday. He’s in his laundry day boxers and nothing else bumming around his house. Haru sent him a huge box filled with tapes. After locating a tape player he learns that they’re all just random mixes of things Haru thought he might like. They don’t talk, the only correspondence he maintains with his old team is through Hiki, but it’s not because they left on bad terms. Haru and Yumi are disappointed in him but Hiki understood that Sasuke’s last stop would be Konoha. Once he got Haru and Yumi to understand too they sent him their own apologies. Instead of letters they send care packages because they genuinely don’t believe Sasuke has life skills. It keeps him in socks, dirty jokes and more music in more formats then he can keep track of.

Whatever Haru put on this tape has beautiful backing tracks and godawful nonsense over the top. The perfect thing to listen to while you laze around in bed. Haru calls it mumble rap. He has to assume someone else would gleam a genre out of this but hey, it’s nice to listen to it when you have a hangover. The beat swaps to something even lower tempo, soft sighs and a plea for forgiveness. He has none to give but he understands the want.

He listens as Naruto breaks in the door. He’s a fast lock pick and good dismantling traps. Sasuke can’t be assed to get off the bed and help him. Lets see how long it takes him to figure out where he is. Tsumi stretches out over his head with a sigh.

The first tape ends and the second begins. It’s far more like what he expected Haru to send him. How cruel is the golden rule. He closes his eyes and yawns, stretching out beneath the thin blanket.
Naruto throws the door open already in the middle of saying something. He stops, mouth open as his eyes rake over the bed. “Fuck Sasuke.”

He leans up off the bed to turn down the music. “What?”

His eyes drop half lidded. “Sakura told me you weren’t doing well.” His voice is rough and low.

Sasuke shrugs again reaching up to pull the hair off his face. The action drops the sheet down a few more inches. “I have a hangover.”

“Do you need a shirt.” Naruto says pointedly.

The only people who see him are his cats so, no not really. “I run warm. Did you need something else.”

“Right.” Naruto’s voice rumbles in his throat. It’s really quite unfair that he got the deeper voice. “I need you to convince Giri to fight with us. I know this isn’t the time but-”

Sasuke relaxes on the bed. Of course it’s something like this. Although it’s probably somewhat his own fault. He’s wanted distance and Naruto has done well respecting that. “Should I spin gold too?”

Naruto makes his don’t be a bitch face. “She has an army.”

“Her personal agenda is destroying the foundations of the political system we live in.”

“Whopdee-freaking-dee, we probably agree on all kinds of shit. I want her army.” Naruto snaps. “Tsunade says we don’t have the numbers. Konoha will be destroyed-”

“No.”

“Sasuke,” he growls. There’s a snap of chakra.

Sasuke throws his own back. “You don’t have a big enough carrot.”

Naruto makes an eyebrow.

He clenches his teeth at the sudden sweep of anger. “You need an incentive or-”

The player stutters and skips. Both of them turn towards the noise. Sasuke looks back first catching the tired, fraught emotion in the lines of Naruto’s face. He’s not sleeping, the edges of his cheekbones sharp enough to cut glass. Naruto meets his eyes unafraid of showing the depth of his feelings. The tension between them is cut with Sasuke’s sigh, the hand that sweeps over his face.

Naruto sits on the edge of the bed bare inches between them. “Sakura and Kakashi told me that if I let you come to me on you own you’d open up. You haven’t though. I’ve been trying Sasuke. I know that things are fucked up right now but you need people around you. Don’t.” He takes a deep breath. “I can’t watch you hurt yourself like this. I care about you too much. You don’t wanna talk I can do that but it’s taking a lot for me to leave you alone.”

“You wouldn’t have before.” It’s accusational. There’s a very bitter part of him that doesn’t understand what Naruto is to him anymore. He can gleam that it’s tied up in his feelings about Konoha but there’s so much more he feels that he can’t find where to begin.

He laughs sadly. “We all changed. Even me.” Naruto’s hand drifts towards his. “Talk to me.”
Something horrid and hopeful thuds through his body. He feels his nakedness, the paleness of his chest, his unkempt hair, the fact that his boxers are old and threadbare. Naruto’s eyes have darkened over time giving them a depth that’s endless. There’s more than a few inches of electric space between but some part of him he’d forbidden to see the light for far too long says there should be nothing forbidden between them at all.

So he changes subjects. “Would you loan me your dad?”

Naruto slides away still leaving his hand within tantalizing reach. “Why?”

“Because I’m going to need some flash.” Sasuke replies flatly. He sits up on the other side of the bed. He can feel the warmth of Naruto’s back from here. Grabbing a clean shirt he pulls it over his head.

Naruto twitches a little. Sasuke smirks because that is far more like the boy he used to know. Naruto turns in a motion, tugging Sasuke by his hair. “Fight me for it.”

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His first missive is returned with a simple no

His second comes with a bag full of candy because he’s a whiny baby.

His third gets him a diaper of baby shit, which is just rude, really.

His fourth he sends with newspaper clippings from Kiri, Uzushio and Kumo. they’re getting pummeled by a mysterious force best described as ‘creepy zombie plants’. This he sends to every goddamn Giri contact he has and some people whom he has no good reason to know about. Every single one of his cats is run ragged irritating the upper echelons of Giri. He doesn’t even complain when they force him out of his nice soft bed and onto the floor.

His fifth missive goes out when after a week no one has responded. All it says is Please.

After another four days he receives a long length of dawn coloured ribbon and a date.

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First things first: Fuyuki has another baby. It’s tiny and pink with a shock of red hair. Both Fuyuki and the baby are looking at the Edo Tensei Hokages like they’re about to shit their pants. Sasuke will never, ever experience this again and he intends to savour the shock on her face and the alarm in her chakra for as long as it lasts.

Secondly, well, convincing everyone to let him do this made him sound like a fucking lunatic so Sasuke is sure none of them are exactly putting their best foot forward.

“Well fuck me sideways.” Fuyuki puts the baby on her hip. “You’re actually the first fucking Hokage.”

“I told you it would be cool.”

“So you did nadeshiko.” Fuyuki laughs, the baby gurgling along with her. “Well, first fucking Hokage, following numbered Hokage’s, would you like a drink?”

“We would love to!” Hashirama beams. “But we can’t drink.”

She looks at him. He shrugs. “Zombies.”
“Ew.”

She won’t budge so with an aggrieved sigh he explains.

“Self replicating undead army?” she queries.

“Yes.”

“I see.” She turns around and retreats into her home. “You want Giri to fight Madara?”

“Yes.” He follows after her dragging the Hokage’s with him. The house is the same as it ever was. Open, warm and inviting. He takes a seat on the couch leaving the rest to sort themselves out. It’s not his job to negotiate space. He only wanted the one of them anyway.

She sits across from him. “You want me to fight Madara?”

“You won’t fight alone.”

“I’ve heard,” she says slowly, eyes burning, “that B has made friends with your boy.”

“Kumo won’t touch you.”

“I’d burn that place to the ground for precisely one bowl of rice and maybe a good beer. I’m not worried about A, B or any little fucker from my village. This alliance, will it last until after the war or am I selling my people out for someone else's fifteen minutes of fame?”

“It’s the end of the world.” Sasuke growls.

“And you think some two bit missing nin will make a difference? I thought you’d rethought some of that touchy-feely bullshit.”

Sasuke is for a moment absolutely incoherent with rage. He stuffs it back and grits out, “Of course it will.”

Fuyuki frowns at him. “Do you understand, boy, that bringing the greatest warriors to ever grace this continent to my home is a threat to me as a commander and an insult as an ally?”

Nope. Did not think of that.

Fuyuki sighs disgustedly. “Of course not.”

Sasuke shrugs.

“You are so, so lucky I like you nadeshiko.” Fuyuki groans. “I expected to see you weeks ago asking for exactly this. What took you all so damn long.”

Right, because he was avoidant.

“Nadeshiko?” Tobirama rumbles.

“Someone has a lot to answer for,” Sasuke mutters. “Giri loses too.”

He gears himself up for an argument so he’s surprised when she collapses against her couch. “I’ll consider it.” She grins. “If you do something for me.”

Sasuke snorts. “Of course.”
She shrugs. “Don’t get nothin’ for nothin’, kid. Bird blew a whistle. I was waiting for you, idiot. I told Konoha I’d only listen for proof of life. Kabuto, you remember him?”

Every day. Even when he doesn’t want to. “You had him on a job.”

“At first it was to dismantle and then restructure Orochimaru’s enterprises. When Kakashi came for you I had him move to overseeing our deployments in Fire. He requested you.”

“I don’t work for you.”

She frowns. “No. But you’re not so far from working for me that I don’t know how to push your buttons. Kabuto needs you specifically, so I will make sure he has you specifically. This isn’t a clean job.” “You won’t like it. It’s hard nasty work and you’re not reliable for that. If you’re going to be a problem say so now.”

“No soft handling?”

“You’re not mine. I don’t have to care.” Sasuke can feel Sarutobi and Hashirama move behind him, a thin feeling of dislike leaking out. Fuyuki bares her teeth. “Are you going to put your big boy pants on?”

“Are you going to stop pushing?”

“Never.” Fuyuki straightens piercing him with a hard stare. “It’s straight wetwork nadeshiko. It’s not anything else. It’s going somewhere and killing everything that lives there.”

“I can do it.”

Fuyuki stares him down until he blinks. “He has another request. Uzumaki Naruto.”

“You’re fucking kidding.”

She raises an eyebrow. He can’t help but laugh. “If you think I’m a bad fit he’s a disaster.”

“Not my disaster,” she murmurs, “Konoha will wear the blame for this and in exchange I will accept an invitation to the Five Kage Summit.”

“Cool, fine.”

“Cool, fine,” she mocks. “I’ll send the terms back with you. The mission has to happen before the summit. I want at least a week of warning. Please make your zombie props leave my home.”

Despite her mocking Fuyuki walks them out. He can see the ribbons of her sister’s graves hanging at half mast. There’s a fresh plot dug next to them. Without really questioning himself Sasuke pulls the dark ribbon tying his hair out and walks towards the cliff. The flowers falling off the edge move under his feet, a writhing mass of green and colour. He ties his ribbon around the new gravestone. Hashira Hisoka. Fourteen years old.

Fuyuki comes up behind him squatting down to trace Hisoka’s name. He lets the breeze pass over, lets his hair tug at his scalp. “I’ve never understood your aversion to Konoha’s ‘buddy system’.”

“It is a horrifying conflict of interest.” Fuyuki murmurs. “Believe it or not we all know teammates bond. No one expects you to not care about those you serve with, but you guys take it too far. Leaving alone the mess of your basically hereditary power system -don’t look like that, you have
never had a non-Senju aligned family in a position of power for longer than half a decade- can you honestly tell me, having met many people from different villages and walks of life, that any of them would tolerate the bullshit the Sannin have put you through? You’ve lost trade, good will and the respect of many brothels and black marketplaces due to the poor behaviour of three people who have all renounced their ties to you, yet you will not do the same. Orochimaru was basically considered Konoha’s bounty, no one would dare touch Tsunade for fear of reprisal and Jiraiya still enjoys the benefits of being considered on a long term ‘diplomatic posting’. You have an absolutely baffling belief that the bonds between teachers and students outweigh international politics. They don’t.”

She’s right. They shouldn’t have been given so much rope to hang everyone with. “Tsunade came back.”

“And thank god for that,” Fuyuki says agreeably, “she’s an excellent politician when she’s sober and a force to be reckoned with. That doesn’t mean we don’t all remember her slinking across the countryside wrecked by grief, healing anyone who paid her in booze. I like her, nadeshiko, but I can’t forget telling my girls to avoid certain towns because honourable soul Jiraiya might be, but fair fighter he is not. He might not be the type to force a woman to bed but god help us the day he is because those who have claimed responsibility for him are disinclined to curb his unsavoury appetites.” Then, gently, “And I do not have to tell you what Orochimaru might have done to irritate people.”

Putting it lightly.

“I don’t hate Konoha.” She can’t stop the way her lips sour around the name. “I don’t like them but if nothing else Giri has given me perspective. Even the good bits of this system, even the ‘nice’ village, has a lot of rot.”

“True enough.” Because she is right. “Why not hate Iwa, Suna and Kiri?”

“Who says I don’t? No one thinks Iwagakure is the pinnacle of ethics and sensible leadership. We also don’t expect it of them. Suna and Kiri basically pile drove their own economies into the ground long before anyone had to give a shit about them. But you, Konoha, hold yourselves up as this paragon of virtue.”

“We’re not.” He turns the conversation around. “Is the temple still around?”

“In Oto? Yes.”

“Good.”

Fuyuki hums. “What happened.”

“She’ll tell you.” He shrugs. It’s not an affectation today, he really is as worn out as he seems. “Or not. You’ll probably find out. Or know already.”

After a long weighted silence, she sighs. “I’m sorry.”

He lights his last cigarette and hands it to her. Eyes on the sunset: one resigned, one apologetic.

Chapter End Notes
Next time on Survival: Sasuke and Naruto go on a date. It's a mission. A C-ranked mission.

Fun Facts:
- The side note on this chapter was 'I'd like the sandaime to lower my casket into the ground so he can let me down ONE LAST TIME'
- The details of the massacre aren't covered because a) it's been beaten to death and b) no matter how many times I wrote it out I couldn't justify this Sasuke at this point caring about internal Konoha politics that intensely. He is just waaaaaay too depressed to go on a mission to kill Danzo.
- I don't know who Team Hebi/Taka are going to murder when they find all this shit out. It's probably everyone.
- Parts of this chapter where moved and if they don't get used in later chapters I'll post them anyway bc they're interesting but I can't, for example, justify Sasuke being in the room when the Hokages verbally beat Danzos ass at this point in the narrative.
- Things are pretty dark, and they'll get darker, but I guarantee that I will drag our protagonist to a happy ending.
- The next chapter is called 'The Heaven Through the Eye of a Pin Remix'. So like, get ready. It's a doozy.
Hindsight (Or, the Heaven Through the Eye of a Pin Remix)

Chapter Summary

Hindsight - Reconsidering the past with the knowledge one now has.

Chapter Notes

I've made the executive decision to split this part into three parts which means shorter chapters but sort of free's me from the shitty head space I get in about every chapter being similar in length. It also means I'll probably get them out a little quicker. Consider this a mini arc.

I put this on 'crashing tides' but if you want to use any ideas, write your own things in this universe you have my permission to do so. Just give me a shout out and a credit if necessary.

AND here (http://sazzafraz.tumblr.com/post/161915802929/no-time-for-survival-full-playlist-the) is the entire playlist on spotify. I change the order of the songs/add new ones sometimes because I'm an obsessive asshole who has it split into chapters and arcs in my head. It is far less important to listen to it that way as a reader, I think.

Edit: I've gone back and collapsed this into one chapter. I'm sad to lose the comments but it reads better this way. When I started this fic I made the decision that Sasuke would never have any information it wasn't logical for people to provide to him. He wouldn't end up in situations just because he needed info, he wouldn't overhear Plot Devices. Earlier in the work that was fine because he, frankly, was not paying attention, but it really fucked me over in this chapter and the next one. Plus my emotional exhaustion and a few other IRL things have meant I've taken a step or two back to rethink. There will probably be some changes because of that. There's a few things I want to rearrange in this chapter too, but I need to make sure it all lines up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There’s something pleasant about being on a run of the mill mission. It’s a breath of fresh air to be given his usual job of intimidation and menial labor. Almost like stepping back into an easier time.

Naruto seems baffled by his orders. He’s assigned to the same five man tent as Sasuke and slotted into kitchen duty. Giri has sent two full four man teams to guard some diplomats who happened to be going the same way. Giri also sent an infiltration team -six people- to do the leg work Sasuke and Naruto as a pair cannot. Konoha agreed to take the fall out but they only agreed to send the personnel asked for. They’ll be sleeping together, eating together and moving together for the first leg. During the second leg of their journey the diplomatic portion will split off and they’ll operating the way Sasuke is used to: small teams, minimal comforts. They whole thing will take until the week before the summit. Fuyuki will send specifics after the diplomats leave, also in line
with Giri’s modus operandi.

It’s at this point Sasuke realises that against all odds Naruto is actually a specialist. It makes sense given that he’s Konoha’s greatest weapon but the idea that someone as people orientated as Naruto has never done the kind of grunt work Sasuke took as a matter of course is startling. Naruto can convince anyone to like him but Sasuke is the one who knows how to make friends digging latrines.

He feels almost sorry for him. Naruto’s natural charm isn’t doing shit for him. He doesn’t drink, he doesn’t smoke and he doesn’t appreciate jokes at Konoha’s expense. He’s also never travelled without a dedicated team which, again, is sensible but means that the long hours of nothing much that happen are overwhelming for him. He’s used to having friends on the road, not finding a casual middle ground with whomever’s around. Sasuke does both of them the favor of bridging it but the casual arrogance of Naruto’s headband is hard for people to ignore. Kabuto never does anything without a reason, so Naruto must be important, but it’s a pain in the ass to make sure things go smoothly.

One of the men, a ranger Sasuke worked a few intimidation missions with, passes a lit cigarette.

“Did you ever get to see your namesake, princess?”

Sasuke flips him off then gestures towards Naruto. “He did. Apparently I’m blonde.” Naruto returns the gesture, finds his stride lightly mocking Sasuke. The men and women around him relax a little as Naruto shows that he may be a company man, but he’s not a stick in the mud. Sasuke hides a smile. Naruto, a stickler for the rules. He is here, by dint of wearing a headband, so Sasuke steps further away from him, lessening association and takes up a conversation with a woman from the Land of Bears. He leans into the well worn patterns of life on the road, life in Giri, and takes the space it allows.

If Naruto is unhappy with him he doesn’t hear about it. All he gets is a few unhappy glances and an awkward twist to the mouth. Sasuke grimaces inwardly. He may not understand it but this really is the best thing to do. Giri is quick to make an assessment and slow to change its mind. Sasuke can’t carry him through it.

They make camp at the halfway point before the diplomats leave. Sasuke makes sure Naruto is right next to him when the infiltration team arrives. In hindsight he should have shoved him into the bushes.

“Oh,” Yumi breathes, “your boyfriend is cute.”

“No.”

“You could have said you liked blondes.” She pouts. “We could have done a blondes only night.”

Naruto’s eyebrows draw together. “Blondes only?”

“Porn.” Yumi says at the same time Sasuke hisses, “shut up.”

Naruto looks about to ask a question. Yumi reaches out and yanks on Sasuke’s ponytail. “Your hair looks like shit.”

“Red doesn’t suit you,” Sasuke replies, “do you have any-”

She hands him a tub of hair wax from her pack. “Yeah, figured you’d be out.”

He manages a quick conversation with Yumi in which she only makes him vaguely uncomfortable.
She easily gives him information while also telling him she thinks he’s compromised and she’d rather die in a fire than trust them with more. Sasuke isn’t stupid. Yumi is here because she can work with him and no matter how powerful Naruto’s charisma is she will not be swayed. Yumi believes and she will happily kill to prove it.

He flips her off. She laughs as she leaves. When he turns to relay what he learnt Naruto is blank faced and unhappy. “What is your problem?”

“Nothing,” Naruto mutters. “Go hang out with your friends.”

“People are allowed to like me,” he replies, baffled.

Naruto waves a hand. “Sure.”

He leaves with a casual anger that just baffles Sasuke more.

“You know,” Haru hip checks him, “if you’d just said that this was what you were into—”

Sasuke refuses to do this. “No.”

“I’m just saying,” Haru throws a casual arm over his shoulders, “this is basically its own category, nay niche of weirdo romantic subplot. It’s weird but—”

“No.”

“- not unusual. We could’ve found this for you. We could have had a bunny boiler blonde night just for you. We care nadeshiko.”

Sasuke sighs, gesturing to the widening space between him and Naruto’s retreating back. “What the hell is this, anyway.”

“Aw, kid.” Haru squeezes him tight enough that his BO is unavoidable. “Kid, that is so fucking adorable you have no idea.”

--

He gets up the courage to ask Yumi after dinner. Haru and Naruto are on long watch furthest away from the camp. The other members of the team have neither introduced themselves nor told Sasuke what they’re doing. They’re around a fire eating off the same disposable plates as the first mission they ever went on. “Why did Fuyuki have that pardon?”

“Can it be? After all this time you’ve learnt to think for yourself?” Yumi ruffles his hair. “It’s not just decorative.”

“Why?”

“Because she was going to let them get away with it. Whatever it is. She decided that Konoha wasn’t the place to start overthrowing people so she let them pass through Giri controlled areas. Even gave them information a time or two. In return she wanted a pardon in case things went bad. She couldn’t provide them information on current Kumo politics but she could sure as hell tell them everything they needed to know about fighting them.”

That spins so many things in a whole new light.

Yumi frowns at him. “She gave you the pardon because you gave her more options. Oto would have been a chore without you Snake Killer. Not to mention your rag tag bunch of friends opening
“legitimate pathways to the entirety of the east coast.” She shrugs. “And she had a debt to settle.”

“With my brother?”

“Maybe,” she allows. “Konoha and Kumo have been intertwined for a long time. It could be a lot of things.”

But probably wasn’t.

Sasuke stares into the fire and thinks. He thinks hard enough to get sick of it. Finally he just says it. “I’m a hostage.”

“What.” Yumi sits up startled. “Sasuke if you need a way out—”

“No.” He shakes his head. “I mean- What killed my family isn’t…what I thought. I was kept alive as insurance policy for my brother. They promised they wouldn’t kill me but…”

“But they didn’t help either.” She sighs. “I’m sorry nadeshiko. You didn’t have to be so messed up.”

He manages a wry smile. “Neither did you.”

Yumi turns to him, face unreadable. “You never did believe, did you? No matter how I tried.”

It’s easy to reminisce. Yumi did her best to be his friend, a shoulder to rely on, but she never found the way in. Maybe he always knew she had her own motivations, maybe he was just too bent and too broken. “No matter how many times you tried to bribe me?” Yumi is a determined alcoholic and a three pack smoker. She is going to die of her vices if she can’t die for the cause. He’s not unhappy to say he helped her drink and smoke her way closer. “I am shocked.”

“Would it have made a difference?” Yumi asks. “Knowing.”

He blinks. He hasn’t thought about it. Would knowing Itachi was under orders from the very beginning have prevented him from going to Oto? Would it have kept him in Konoha? Would it have released the anger that has pushed and torn him apart his whole life? If you asked when he was twelve, or fifteen or six, maybe. But there seems to be no other choice or option but his slow decline at this point. His slow march back to Lightning to lay down with his family.

Would it have made a difference while he was in the belly of the revolution? Yes. But as life has taught him no man is one thing, one moment or one motivation. He can only answer for the man he is right this second. This man did go to Orochimaru. This man never believed in the cause. Either of them. “No.”

Yumi absorbs that in silence. “I wish it could have.”

“It would be simpler.”

Yumi hums. “I will kill you if I have to.” She relaxes her shoulders, tilts her head away. All signs of conflict and hard won resolution. “I would prefer you not make me.”

“I won’t,” he promises. “I won’t last that long.”

She spears him with a look. “Leave Konoha.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “I have to see some things through.”
Yumi shakes her head. “Your conviction will be the end of you.”

Sasuke smiles wryly. If only she knew.

--

Yumi is abrupt the next morning. She marches Naruto and Sasuke far away.

Naruto glances behind them every few minutes. This is all deeply suspicious. Sasuke has the benefit of knowing Yumi and knowing that this is just how things operate sometimes. You don’t know why you’re going, or where, you just have to trust that you can manage it. It is disturbing to be on the outside without even the comfort of a real debrief. Sasuke and Naruto are almost tourists, a disturbing thought.

Yumi skates down into a deep valley, a crack in the earth that leads straight into the dark. They scale down it to a small ledge carved out of the rock. The ledge leads to a door slathered in seals. Long strips of paper, black ink and carvings criss cross every inch. Yumi deftly pressed her fingers to one symbol -Kiri Hunter-nin for open - and pushes. The door opens with an audible crack, releasing a gust of stale air. Sasuke covers his mouth with his sleeve, in dramatic fashion Naruto leaps back almost falling off the edge.

Sasuke rolls his eyes at him. “Alright there?”

“Shut up.” Naruto blushes. “I have a sensitive nose.”

Naruto has frequently drunk rotten milk. Sasuke is unconvinced.

Yumi gestures forward. “Like old times, kitten.”

Sasuke draws his sword.

Using lightning to illuminate the way he strides forward. Lightning strikes down from the ceiling on to Kusanagi. He frowns and lowers the current. Conductive rock is littered throughout Lightning but to have such a quantity in one spot...he checks again and feels for the current in the rock. Almost as soon as he starts he feels it like a coiling snake, a dragon, all around him: it’s a faraday cage.

One of the continuing problems with combining chakra and technology is that a) only Lightning and sometimes Air take to it well and b) every metal that can conduct Lightning has a fifty percent chance of rejecting all chakra if made into an alloy. It’s part of why Lightning guards its metal smiths so carefully. Sasuke grits his teeth and holds down his own chakra. In a few more steps there’ll be a snap-

“Fuck me,” Naruto snarls. “What the fuck was that?”

Yumi makes a similar noise. Sasuke shrugs, not very interested in explaining. The lightning around his sword dwindles until it blinks out. The sword seems almost unhappy without it.

“Sasuke.” Naruto reaches for his shoulder. “What was that?”

He ducks Naruto’s touch, blinks to dispel the buzz of having his sharingan become basically non-active. “It’s called a faraday cage. From here on in you won’t be able to use chakra. Or technology, but the condensed Lightning chakra gathered around the cage probably would have fried it anyway.”
Naruto and Yumi don’t look anymore sure. Yumi in particular looks upset. Maybe if he explained it the way it was explained to him -if you create a vacuum chakra will accumulate to fill it, the accumulation will be directly proportionate to what is missing. Hence if you create a cage you will also create a dense field of chakra surrounding it- but instead he sits down on a rock and lays his sword across his lap. He closes his eyes for a moment to better feel the absence. Like peeking through a window at another life.

Yumi looks between them. Her dyed red hair is stuck to her skin with sweat. “And the two of you are just...okay after walking through that?”

They both shrug. Naruto scratches his head. “It tickled a little.”

Yumi swears underneath her breath.

“Where to next?” Sasuke asks. The door lead down a narrow corridor which has lead to another narrow area. It’s almost like a cave, if a cave had been carved by hand to hide another door. Yumi steps forward, frowning, and presses her hands along the walls. Naruto looks at her dubiously. Sasuke leans back to try end enjoy a little more of the absence. After a few silent minutes Yumi murmurs a word and another opening appears. Sasuke cracks an eye open just in time to watch the spiralling darkness emerge. It’s a dark inky well of black that can’t be a jutsu but unsettles him anyway. With sheer bravado Yumi steps through leaving Sasuke and Naruto following.

The other side of the darkness is a room so huge that Sasuke can’t make out the end of it. Tables covered in everything from clean skulls to baskets of paper flowers fill the space in neat rows. Yumi pulls a piece of paper from her pouch, checks a marking carved on the side of a table and begins walking down the rows.

He and Naruto follow. Naruto steps forward, asks, “What the hell is this?”

“It’s an old storage facility for Lightning’s Special Forces. This room is full of Lightning’s secrets. This one is specifically for evidence storage.”

“Blackmail.” Naruto murmurs.

“Only sometimes,” Yumi answers distractedly. “Sometimes it’s just so people can forget. Here we are.” She stops at a random table filled entirely with tags. Sasuke sighs internally. Yumi holds out a notepad to him and a pen. He pulls a small basket over and regrets it immediately. At the top is a nickname, the kind you’d give to a young teenager. Underneath is a black and white picture of a ponytailed girl, dark skin, bright eyes. She looks like she smiled a lot. He writes it all down anyway. Yumi likewise scribbles down her own notes.

Naruto picks one up turning it this way and that. “What the hell are these?”

Sasuke grimaces, taking the tag from him. “Breeding markers. From the top: gender, age, genetic information, whether or not they’ve had children, potential abilities, potential abnormalities. On the other side is the sale price.”

The information was bought for around fifteen percent of sale price. Under market value. If he were Orochimaru he’d start worrying about product quality. Sometimes black market products comes with a side order of hunter-nin.

Yumi leans over and checks his notes. “What does that one say?”

“Hashira Hisoka.”
Yumi reels back. “Hisoka? They killed-”

“Did you know her?”

“You remember that little girl you met?” Hashira’s girl, the one in her house the first time he ever went. “That’s her sister.”

He looks back at her marker, her picture. Gap toothed smile and long brown braids. “She was fourteen.”

“She hit puberty at ten. We knew there were head hunters but they’ve never gone that low before. The likelihood of miscarriage-”

Yumi seems to hear what she’s saying letting the end of it slide into an uncomfortable kind of silence.

“Why?” Naruto asks.

Yumi opens her mouth. She makes a noise and clicks her teeth shut. “You’re an Uzumaki, right?”

Naruto nods. Yumi presses her lips together uncomfortably. “Then you understand...why you’re the jinchuriki. Only certain bloodlines make viable containers.”

“It’s not like that.” Naruto shakes his head. “My parents loved each other. No one forced them to have me.”

“Maybe they did.” Yumi adds judiciously. “But, kid, there are four bloodlines on the planet that can handle birthing a jinchuriki and they all come from the same branch. Of those four only the Hashira and the Uzumaki are still viable. The other two are dead. They haven’t produced a shinobi in generations. The only other possibilities were the Uchiha and the Senju. Both bloodlines are strong but unstable.”

“My dad was-”

“Namikaze Minato.” Yumi finishes. “They’re an offshoot of one of those dead lines. I bet your Elders were thrilled.”

“How do you know all this?” Naruto spits.

Yumi sends Sasuke a wry look. “Because I was sold on the market. Only for a little while but it’s the kind of place where you learn quickly.”

Naruto shuts up.

“This look like Orochimaru’s work Nadeshiko?”

He sends Naruto a warning glance. Yumi hands him her stack of papers. “No. This code is-” Remarkable similar to Hinata’s file. “-the wrong structure for Konoha. I’ve seen parts of it on manifests for Oto and Konoha but as part of normal trade.”

“Could it be a Konoha-nin who was just remarkably lazy?”

Sasuke frowns. There’s something niggling in his brain...”No.”

Yumi sighs, dismissing them. Sasuke walks away with his hands buried deep in his pockets. Naruto is all tension beside him.
Sasuke sighs. “You didn’t know.”

“How the hell was I supposed to.”

“Kakashi does. Sakura does too.” He holds the curl of disgust he feels at Naruto’s surprise. “She’s a medic. They’re one of the first people on call for-”

“I know about the trafficking. I know about Konoha’s involvement.” Naruto cuts in. “But this is...this is experimentation.” Inhuman.

Setting aside all the uncomfortable things Sasuke has no choice but to know, he tries to see it from Naruto’s point of view. Transmutation as something out of a horror movie rather than an unremarkable side effect. He can’t really see it. “Orochimaru had to get it from somewhere.”

A device on Yumi’s collar beeps. She presses down on it. “What?”

A sheepish voice says, “we’ve, uh, got a problem.” Behind him something explodes.

“I am an hour away from you.”

“Ma’am,” the voice says, strained.

Yumi rolls her eyes. “Okay. Be there soon.”

Yumi gestures towards the entrance. “Shall we?”

An hour is generous. Even in complete darkness whatever they were sent away from is closer to 45 minutes away. The landscape changes from Lightning’s grey rocks and occasional lushness to a dampness that unsettles Sasuke immediately. The smell of the air is familiar which always makes him nervous. In the distance are muted life signs swirling red in his sharingan. They’re standing on an awkward outcrop, a sharp distraction from the inhuman flatness of the surrounding area. His legs feel heavy, like he’s moving through water fully clothed. The air is oppressive.

From one step to the next the ground is covered in black tar smelling so strongly of explosives Sasuke is momentarily propelled back to his childhood. They head straight for the outcrop. Hiki and Haru are pale. Haru has a wound dripping blind from his side. The other men and women behind them are tense. Haru steps forward and Sasuke realises one of the people, one he’d just assumed was a small woman, is a boy.

Holding a torch.

Everything shortens to the distance between the torch and the ground. Sasuke connects the dots. Explosives. Everywhere, everything, is covered in explosives.

Hiki walks towards the boy. “Give it to me boy.” His voice rumbles. “You just hand that here.”

The boy hesitates. His face is covered in dirt and blood. His eyes dart to the side, to a pile of black and tinder.

“Don’t!” Sasuke screams.

The boy doesn’t listen. The fire illuminates the darkness. Another fire joins it. Then another. The slow growing light joins the stars and moon above in illuminating the crater. Hundreds of grave markers just like the ones in Lightning on that lonesome cliff crawl down the sides of the crater. Rings and rings of ash strewn flowers crawl over them. In the centre of the crater are houses built
from sheets of wood and metal. Even from up here the place stinks of burnt metal and too much
chakra burn off.

They stare, speechless.

The boy runs away while the gape. In the ensuing noise Sasuke bends down and tastes the dirt. It
is explosive but for the life of him he can’t figure out why only the beacons lit.

bastard, what are you lying about!”

Yumi stares forward. Eyes blank and speechless. “That bitch. She wouldn’t.”

Hiki laughs hollowly. “I told you then, I’ll tell you now. Yes she would.”

Sasuke swallows. “Where are we?”

“Welcome to Hell on Earth, nadeshiko.” Hiki says. “This is Amida, once the entrance to the sacred
lands beyond the mountain. This is where our illustrious leader fell from grace.”

Amida. The Cradle of Light. The place where the Man Who Would burned down the bridge
between the afterlife and the living world. Sasuke has heard stories of stories, myths of myths, of
the things born from this place. The Man Who Came made the first of the great swords from the
metal. The Woman Who Reigned made her crown. These stories are so old, so long told that the
names are erased. Archetypes playing parts on a background. It was a valley, it was a river, it’s just
a way of making sense of power little brother, there are no dragons. There is no white stone sword
that cleaves the sky. Sasuke breathes in. Ash and dirt taste like history.

“What are we doing here?” Yumi’s voice cracks. “This isn’t what she said-”

“It’s time the dead got their say.” Hiki murmurs. “We’re going to document this. We’re going to
find the last of the survivors, and then we’re going to bury it.”

Sasuke looks over the crater, it’s dead bodies and feels very little. Maybe he’s come far enough not
to be surprised anymore. History is, after all, told by the victors.

“Why?” Naruto asks hoarsely.

“Because,” Yumi looks lost, “because we were ordered to.”

Naruto scowls. “Fuck that.”

“She was keeping you away too.” Sasuke interjects. There was no reason someone else couldn’t
have taken them to see those markers.

Yumi blinks at him.

Haru sits down with a grimace. “So not the easy way.”

“Is it ever the easy way?” Sasuke answers. “I don’t know what this stuff is but we passed a river on
the way here, let’s go wash it off.”

No one objects. Naruto boxes him away from the others ranting non stop in a low voice
about...something. For his part Sasuke is spun out by the overlapping images of Hashira’s carefully
tended shrine and this monstrosity. There is something almost pathetic in both. The funeral fire of
things that just had to happen and the memorial of things you regret. To step around the bones of
your blood everyday and have nothing but apologies. He allows a small rueful smile, not that he’s projecting or anything.

Sasuke turns his back on everyone and finds himself a serviceable puddle. He cleans off his feet first. Looks at his own hands. There is a strange clarity in resolution. Now that he’s drawn his line in the sand and said that this is where it will end. Now that the date is all but set. All he can think of is how sad this whole thing is.

Yumi shrieks, “Get down!”

He goes head over heels. Naruto is tangled up with him although he’s not sure how. Dirt, wet dirt, hits his mouth. A rock bangs his head and blood smears across his eyes. For some reason he remembers sitting in that shitty bar years ago. *I would ma’am I really would but—*

They fall in the damn river.

--

Cold. It’s cold at first. More than being thrown into a winter river, it’s the cold of low chakra. His family kept fire in their bodies. Tempers, hearts, bones and brains. They burn. Right now Sasuke couldn’t even light a match let alone start a fire. He’s soaked to the bone, bound hand and foot to Naruto. It’s another part of the mass graveyard. They’re lying out in the open surrounded on all sides by the kind of lodgings you build when you’re on a long term intimidation mission. It’s rough, metal buildings and hemp tents, but it’s quick to take apart and store and scary to people who don’t know better. Sasuke does know better. He shifts his hand and feels his palm shift against Naruto’s. He’s still out, and whatever they have that could keep him knocked out he wants a tonne of.

Just out of his direct line of sight is a cracked rock, huge from side to side it must have risen hundreds of metres into the air. His eyes twitch: a blood memory, something from some long ago ancestral place builds white stone and men with Karin and Fuyuki’s colouring pouring blood onto the ground. He has the terrible feeling the stone was to keep something in.

A shadow moves across his body staying just out of the mid-afternoon light. “You’re awake then?”

Sasuke makes a noise against his gag. He’s pulled up right and the gag is removed. Behind him Naruto stirs. His skin is overwarm and getting warmer. In front of him an old, old man stands. His skin is dark and weathered, what little hair he has is grey and stringy. His clothes are so threadbare that Sasuke can make out every curve of his body. He’s covered in mud, leaning on a cane made of gleaming metal.

The old man looks down at him. His gold eyes gleam. “So she finally decided to finish it?”

Sasuke nods his head. There’s only one she.

“And not even by her own hand?”

“She doesn’t do that anymore.”

The old man walks around to Naruto. Sasuke feels more than sees Naruto look at the old man’s thin pants, and begin to say what Sasuke was too smart to. Sasuke slams his head against Naruto’s.

“What a pair of comics.” His voice drops and Sasuke can hear the same formal, royal undertone that Fuyuki’s and Tsunade’s voices got when they were very angry.
“Why have you taken us?” Sasuke hisses out around his new headache.

“Restitution.” He replies. He redirects his attention to Naruto. “You’ve got dragon blood. What’s your name?”

“Uzumaki.”

“Of fucking course.” The old man squats down in front of Naruto. The stench of rotting cloth and mud is overwhelming. “You betrayed us little brother. When you walked off the mountain and buried yourselves at sea. Now my ungrateful niece is finally going to wipe her ass clean of her heritage. Stamp the last pure blood of our line into the dirt.”

“What do you mean-”

The old man rises. He spits on the ground. “She’ll come for you. She never could let anyone she was responsible for die.”

That matches up not at all with Sasuke’s experiences with the woman in question.

“You think the Black Banshee is going to come save some Konoha shinobi?”

Sasuke stamps out his sudden anger. He is not Konoha shinobi and that nickname is tasteless and inappropriate. No one outside of Fire would call her by it. A moment later he realises that Naruto is trying to goad the old man. Maybe into throwing a punch, starting a fight. It’s not the worst tactic even if it’s one he apparently hasn’t grown out of.

“I am not Konoha.” Sasuke spits out. He is not and he will not be roped into this farce. The old man is right, Fuyuki would never let this pass not because she gives a shit but because she can’t afford to lose the last sharingan and the Nine Tails. All he has to do is survive whatever is between him and the rain of shit that’s coming for this old man. He can do that.

“What the hell Sasuke?” Naruto growls. “It’s one old dude and some missing-nin, we can take ‘em.”

There are million things wrong with that, starting with his off hand dismissal of missing-nin and his assumption that Sasuke’s problem is the fight. “We don’t have any chakra, moron.” And this is not a fight. This is negotiating terms. When Fuyuki retrieves them it will be because it’s the best time. Not a minute sooner or later.


“Regular co-medi-ans,” the old man drawls. “Separate them. Put the Uzumaki in the hole. The Uchiha will enjoy the room.”

Naruto fights. Sasuke watches it with a peculiar distance. Naruto keeps fighting, screaming, as if it’s a life and death situation. Even if he could figure out how to get him to understand -someone will come for them because they’re necessary, symbolic, useful- he can’t get his mouth to move. Naruto’s world is very small in Sasuke’s mind. It contains things like his dream to be Hokage and his love for his friends. Sasuke’s world is big: it’s full of the reality that his whole life was decided for him by a century of politics and betrayals. The date is already set all that’s left is getting there. A few days, weeks, months of pain are meaningless now.

The room is a sensory deprivation chamber. They set him down on his knees and strap him into a jacket that binds his arms. He tips his head back to look at the ceiling and begins keeping time the way he was taught a long time ago. If he cared he might remember who taught him.
Three days pass. His eyes adjust to the light, his knees ache. This is a waiting game. He’s patient.

He falls asleep. It washes away his awareness of time, of space and leaves him lost in the white room. His hands are bound behind his back and the only colour in the room is his shirt. He starts to smell. He starts to curl up and die. They don’t feed him, they don’t wash him. When water appears it’s through a slit in the door between blinks. Maybe he takes ten minutes to blink. Shit. Maybe he takes a year to blink. He has to lie down on the ground to drink it. Half the time he barely gets more than a few mouthfuls. His shirt gets soaked. Only the one spot, though. He lies on the ground and ferments.

He cries, once. It doesn’t do anything.

Keeping time by his heartbeat slowly drives him insane. He counts dozens of minutes this way before he realises he’s talking just to hear his own voice. Funny but he’s spent years alone. Funny, but this is like how he lived everyday after his brother murdered everyone he’d ever loved. Funny.

He tries willing himself to sleep but his eyes snap open. Did he hear a noise? Was that another voice? He tries to count time again but all it does is remind him that he has no control.

For a moment he tries forcing his heart to stop. After all he wrote a will. Naruto will take his body back to Konoha and they’ll discover what Sasuke has known for years. You can never go home again, not really. Home is where your loved ones are and his are in the ground. He’s taken the long way round but he’s going to stay with them now. He can’t sleep and if he’d had any food he’d shit himself and then he’d have to die. He died when he was seven and this has been an elaborate funeral. His heart beats louder, just to piss him off.

Close your eyes; this is the end. It’s over, it’s over now. It’s a cold room, a cliff, a waterway with nothing around but you. It is over now, your body can rest.

This is exactly what you wanted, right?

You can never go home again. Love is dead in a hole you dug for your brothers head. You land badly, you crash standing, you get up again just to get shot down again.

He tries singing: anger is just love, left out, gone to vinegar.

Fuck but he’s had these thoughts a million times before. Who cares? Who fucking cares? He’s looked underneath the rocks and stuck his head in the dirt trying to find the truth. Well, here it is, the world is full of shit and so is his brother. The Kage’s are assholes. Hashira is an asshole. You give a man a fish and he has a meal, you teach a man to fish and he creates systemic abuses of power covered up by a thin film of patriotism. Fuck everyone.
He recites all of Kazue’s great works. *Light falls from our three shadows. The past and future are forever out of sight. Forever beyond your reckoning, beyond comprehension. There is only the living, and that ends. Are you still nervous, beloved? Do you still wonder?* - He tries reciting her diaries- *Are we awful? Are we awful? Are we awful?* No one answers.

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He tries begging. Same result.

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He dreams: he is holding someone’s hand. It’s warm. That’s it, that’s the whole picture.

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He sits up and pulls his arms against the fabric. Fucking shinobi. Fucking *idiots* who think that no chakra takes away from the fact that it is his *body* that is strong.

He rips the stitches in fits, ripping it away with his teeth where he can. He slams his body against the ground, grunts, rolls over. They’ve left him in a room by himself and it’s funny, because he has been so alone for so long that you’d think it wouldn’t matter, but it does. Kakashi asked once if he knew how many people wanted to save him. He does know. God does he know. He wondered why the distance between him and Naruto was the best and worst kind of pain. If he could go back now he’d tell them that all they needed to do was lock him in a room by himself. When he has nothing but his own thoughts he knows all the answers.

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The answer is that he’s going crazy. The answer is that he’s so fucking crazy he might have to admit that he knows who he loves and that he doesn’t deserve it. The answer is that if they don’t get him out of this room soon he’s going to lose it.

--

He rips the gag from his mouth and begins to scream. He punches the wall. He scrapes his knuckles and bites his own nails until they bleed. His blood. *Fuck* everyone who said anything else. It’s *his*.

--

The light never changes. All day, all night, all he hears, sees, thinks about is how he feels pinned out on a table. He feverishly tries to hold onto rational thoughts. Onto things in his future and past. But every time he blinks everything but the very next moment is erased. He lived like this for years, the date is set, so why is this so *unbearable*? Why is he so *angry*? His life is over. It was never his. He was a hostage. He was a traitor. Why-

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Screaming works. Turns out that he has a lot to scream about.

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Eventually they realise that Sasuke can scream and fight a lot longer than they can ignore him. Three burst through the door and hold him down. He laughs as he claws them, kicks, proves that his body is still a fine tool. He doesn’t need anything else.
When they drag him to the river, when they hold his head under, he keeps screaming. “You’re fucking crazy.” One of them says. “You are one mad fucker.”

Sasuke spits out the water and the blood. He is absolutely a mad, crazy fucker.

--

They put him in a room with a window. The clouds never clear but somehow Sasuke can feel the stars behind them in his bones.

--

Every time his head goes underwater he opens his mouth and screams until they’re forced to pull back. The thugs look disgruntled by how willing Sasuke is to nearly drown himself. His head goes down again, he screams until he can’t, and then they send him to bed without supper. They come back again when he’s too cold and flushed all over with how human he is. He walks steadily to his place by the water and waits-

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The next day his guard brings a radio in with him. He cuts Sasuke slices of citrus and sings with him: *The point your song here misses is that if you really loved me-*

--

He hallucinates sitting by the river. It’s full of bodies. He dreams of the open door that holds an empty house. He dreams of walking through it. He dreams of running away. He dreams for the first time that he walks to the river and wades in waist high.

*Fuck you,* he tells the river that washes away his family, *you don’t get a say anymore.*

He’s going mad but somehow when he looks down at the blood and death that lives inside his brain he feels like maybe someone should clean it up. Preferably before he’s too dead to do it. Hell, maybe he should do it. Maybe he should get up and go home and tell the Nakano that enough is enough but he is calling for a clean up in aisle three-

If he’s going to die- *If* he’s going to die, god- He is going to die, maybe they won’t pull him back in time, maybe Naruto won’t come, maybe it’ll happen in his sleep wouldn’t that be funny, *maybe he’ll die*- But it won’t be because he lay down. He’s done laying down. He’s done looking at the sky and looking away. Fuck it. Fuck, fuck, fuck, but if he has to go he is going screaming-

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The water is cold enough to make his lungs burn.

*Pull him up, the scary fucker is-*

He’s got shit to tell the water.

-*there’s no way he can keep doing this. His body will make him stop-*

An ever present, flowing pile of garbage that’s just built up around him.

-*we need him. We can’t let the silly fucker kill himself-*

His whole life is just an arrow right to the soul; a message
-oh shit-

He is not a person. He is a collection of choices other people made.

-get a fucking medic, get a medic, get a-

If that’s the truth he’s meant to accept.

-who is this crazy idiot anyway?-

They can all go to hell.

--

When he rises from the water again he looks straight up at the sky. A perfect smudging of grey under a moonless sky. He can’t add it to his collection. He’ll have to remember it instead.

--

At dawn Lightning bites his tongue, a thousand birds sing in his ears. He can feel Fire in his fingers, thumb and second finger touching as if to blow.

--

Four days later Naruto comes for him.

--

A boy opens his door. Sasuke sits on the floor listening to the radio one of the guys left him. Pretty good guy. Thinks Sasuke is cracked but he did freelance in one of Giri’s civilian hospitals and he believes Sasuke when he says he’s not a shinobi. Doesn’t stop him from torturing him but he’s pretty cordial the rest of the time. This boy must be from around here, his skin tone is right.

It’s just a kid. Sasuke closes his eyes.

“Sorry to interrupt.” A deeper voice says. It’s both familiar and completely new. “I thought you might like to, ya know, not be in enemy territory.”

Sasuke opens one eye. Naruto stares at him, one bandaged hand on top of the kids head. His right eye is bandaged and his arm hangs limply at his side as if dislocated. This is probably, Sasuke reflects, the first time Naruto has ever been really injured. His throat is purple and bruised. His clothes are muddy and ripped. Sasuke squints at him. He has had hallucinations recently.

Naruto smiles at him. It’s cracked at the edges. “Laying around?”

Sasuke cocks his head. He stands up, unsteady and heads straight for the strike of light revealed by the door. The kid runs off after saying something Sasuke doesn’t give a shit about. There is a light. There is an open door. It looks real-

“Woah, slow down.” Naruto grasps him gently by the shoulders. Sasuke shudders. “We can go slow.”

Just as Naruto lets go, as Sasuke steps beyond the door of his room, an alarm rings out. People come rushing toward them. Naruto swears, trying to push Sasuke behind him but something in him needs a fight.
When power comes it comes like the fury of a god. Some murky part of him is clear now. He sees clearly the girl who survived Orochimaru’s initiation with him. He sees clearly the crowds in Otogakure who came to see him lay the city at Hashira Fuyuki’s feet. He sees clearly the lost body and the man who could have been his brother standing by the river, wondering how to find each other.

He sees, clearly, why he survived.

He lets his fingers move, lets the sharingan come. From blood, from bone, from pus and steel and the dead taken too young. Kill the snake; let the dragon be born.

It comes from the sky; a glorious fury of lightning that strikes him full in the back burning, ripping its way into him. It is pure power and for the first time, the first time, it fills him with freedom. He forms it, pulls from the dirt and the sky and makes it into something fully formed. First the head with it’s glorious night toned scales and its spikes of blood red. Its eyes are his eyes. It’s fangs are his fangs. Snake fangs, piercing and moulting and only poison when they have to be. Snakes are healers too. Nothing is ever one thing.

The body comes from fire. From a dozen memories of watching his uncles light family bonfires. From breaking his hands against training posts. From watching Sakura diligently build a fire from sticks and scraps and watching Karin douse one with river water. A body is a body and can be made for more than a single purpose.

In his head he sees a dozen pictures of buildings, of night skies, sunrises, fog in a glass, a twisted tree and flowers on the breeze. His father loved his mother. His family ate strawberries given to them by the Senju. When he was four he taught Tsuki and Yumi to swim in a paddling pool while Shisui laughed at them. Itachi had thrown a kunai at Shisui’s broken leg for making Sasuke cry.

This memory is as true as finding his parents dead. It is as true as the fact that Itachi tortured him. It is as true as the fact that Itachi loved him. All of these things can be carried on his shoulders, and they will be.

Let the boy go, the man is strong enough to stand on his own.

He pulls the dead from the dirt and asks them if, once more, they’ll give themselves. Reaches beyond, reaches between, reaches with his eyes and his whole heart into the ground. If they will come he will build. If they will come he will release them from whatever it is that binds them here. If they come he will let this end for all of them.

The dragon flows forward from his outstretched hands. It’s huge, blocking the clouds around him. It’s body is not the cool dark night he imagined instead it curls with the colours of every memory he ever took with his sharingan.

He points the dragon towards those he would call themselves his enemies. It crouches around him and roars; a sound so deafening it rolls through the air and pushes back the clouds. The dragon roars again, flexes its claws and spreads its body.

Underneath his feet the ground blooms.

--

As Naruto tells it Sasuke caught fire just before he fainted.

His skin glowed from within as it reflected the light and fire of his dragon. He made a sword from bones he pulled from the air, he stood tall and faced his enemies -and then he fell backwards on his
ass, threw up and left Naruto to do all the work. The dragon hung around for a few minutes afterwards attacking whomever it pleased and generally being a nuisance to all. Naruto maintains they had an instant bond but Sasuke privately thinks dragons are just larger, fiery cats.

What Sasuke does remember is coming too slung over Naruto’s shoulder riding a horse sized frog. Naruto’s eyes are deep and dark around pale skin.

“What did they do to you?”

“Sensory deprivation.” Sasuke leverages himself to a seat next to him. “You?”

“Overload.” Naruto grimaces. “Made me...”

“Yeah.” Sasuke pats Naruto’s knee gently. He knows better than anyone what he’s feeling. A light touch, just for a moment, is better than a week in bed with a beautiful woman for relaxing the body after torture. Sasuke knows...But he’s not Naruto, is he? He doesn’t love touch and comfort. He cradles the back of his friends head and turns it, gently, towards him. Sasuke does not long for connection because it’s offered to him all the time. He places his fingers on Naruto’s face, pulse points that hold stress, and gently releases them. They look at each other.

Sasuke hold the eye contact long enough that Naruto blinks. He holds it a few moments after that, to underscore the point. Right here, right now, neither of them are alone.

--

Naruto loses the connection to the frog an hour or so after that. They press shoulder to shoulder and stumble across cold, arid country. No one is following them but they don’t know where they’re going either. Naruto’s hands skitter nervously over Sasuke’s back, gripping his thigh. His breath is hard and uneven, eyes flicking from blue to red randomly. Sasuke holds every breath carefully. Cradles it in his chest. He’s counting time.

At nightfall a light appears on the horizon. Without speaking they agree to ignore it. Right now everything is questionable. The light keeps creeping towards them however no matter what way they twist and turn. Naruto stops and forces them to sit behind cover when Sasuke wants to run and face it.

Noise ripples across the space. A low hum of feet and shuffling joined by the hum of sailors songs and dirty hymns. A palanquin in purple, gold and silver carried on the shoulders of tall men and women. There’s a women playing a tambourine in a slow morose tune behind it. It’s so freaking weird.

The palanquin stops a few metres away from them. A strong voice cries out, “I know you’re there, nadeshiko!”

Sasuke springs to his feet and dashes for the palanquin.

Dosa opens the elaborate door, squints. “Put him in the back.”

Naruto follows him, also squinting.

Dosa rolls her eyes. “Uzumaki goes in the back. Sasuke get in here.”

Sasuke climbs in. The inside is just as elaborate and weird as the outside.

After a few moments the palanquin begins moving again.
Sasuke rolls his shoulders and tries to relax. “What’s with all this?”

Dosa stares at him until he squirms. “We almost didn’t get to you,” he begins. “Konoha left us shitting in the wind. Uzumaki we were cleared to recover, you on the other hand were deemed...negotiable.” Her face is carefully bland. “You’ve pissed someone off Uchiha, or scared them very badly. I would’ve left you behind.”

Sasuke narrows his eyes. “Would you?”

Dosa stays silent. He begins again. “Hyuuga Hinata vouched for you. She pushed your Council’s hand. Your line is insecure with no heirs and no cadet branch to take over when you die. There is a strong faction that is vying for the Uchiha holdings to be absorbed by the Hyuuga when you die. For some odd reason the Hyuuga Heiress is in opposition. In fact,” Dosa’s eyebrow twitches, “she has reached out to secure your safety no less than four times. Is she beautiful?”

“Yes.”

“I thought so. Beautiful women love you. And so does that boy. Hyuuga and I came to an arrangement. She said that you would understand why she needs you alive to make the deal.”

“What’s the deal?”

“In two weeks there’s a shipment going from Konoha to the Capitol and then up through Earth to the outerlands. Kabuto, who has also been in communique with the Hyuuga, assures me we will all understand once we’ve secured our objective here.”

“You don’t know?”

“I don’t keep tabs on him like that,” he says idly. “Spymasters do poor work when you watch them closely. Ironically if you let them have too much rope they’ll hang everyone and themselves with it. Konoha is calling for an investigation into my work here. There has been suggestion that I am coming perilously close to terrorism. Amida has negotiated itself into becoming a prospective protected territory. That will mean that in a few days I will have no choice but to retreat. At nightfall tomorrow I’ll send an extermination order.” Dosa shrugs, as if to say, you know this.

Unfortunately, he does. “That’ll put you in a bad position with Konoha.”

Dosa shrugs again. That will not stop him. “What will your boy do?”

“He’ll fight you. He made friends with one of the local children” Sasuke mulls this for a moment. “He’ll see a three way war before he’ll see a sad child.”

“I guess that’s why you work,” Dosa murmurs. “And you? You’ve had a hell of a time nadeshiko.”

“How does this change things from your side?”

“Not at all.” The palanquin lowers to the ground. “Someone hits us we hit back harder. That’s how we play this game.”

“No negotiating?”

“Kitten, when in the whole history of our working relationship has negotiating worked?”

“First time for everything.”

He pauses. “Naruto needs to report in. I was hoping this could be a clean job. Nasty, filthy and
bloody, but still a clean cut. But it seems every time we end up here it’s like this. For what little it may be worth nadeshiko, I never dreamed the pieces would fall like this.”

--

Sasuke beds down with Hiki. Naruto is still rallying people together, instilling hope and controlling the wave of anger. He’s good at it, Sasuke will give him that. For his part Sasuke has held his tongue through too many bad orders...He’s been here before. Naruto may want to save everyone but Sasuke knows that if Fuyuki sends the order they’ll be dead by dawn. Hope doesn’t stop swords.

Hiki offers him a beer and a packet of dried meat. Sasuke chews on it thoughtfully. “Would she really have let it go? The trafficking?”

Hiki frowns. “No. It’s not- It doesn’t quite work that way. Remember, Fuyuki is a fucking terrible politician. She’s a brute force and blackmail type of person. Konoha has always excelled at the subtler forms of violence. Maybe it’s all that interbreeding with Uzushio. When that deal was struck no one could have guessed we’d gain Otogakure. That Akatsuki would crumble the way it did. That we actually could make the kind of change we’ve been making. All out mistakes too.” He rubs his face viciously. “Kid, five years ago we didn’t have a chance in hell. Fuyuki didn’t have many options. Konoha is good at that kind of politicking and she is bad at fighting it. Konoha has maintained strategic strangle points across multiple countries that we cannot for the life of us manage to free. What little in roads we made have been on Konoha’s terms. It was a choice between getting nothing at all done or limping forward.”

“That doesn’t answer the question.”

Hiki swallows a gulp of water. “No. No matter what she doesn’t have the temperament for it. They’d have pushed her too far with something and it would be the Kimura all over again. It’s a fatal flaw. But what the pardon give her, along with a neat little bit of influence from your dear departed brother, was you.”

Sasuke opens his mouth. Shuts it.

Hiki smiles grimly. “You gave her an out. She gives it to you, you give her Oto, she lets you go home to fulfill her bargain. They can’t argue: you’re the last sharingan and they’ve been using your family as a bludgeon since the beginning of time. What are they gonna say? That they actively colluded with an unstable rogue element that has negatively impacted the economies of their closest allies? That they’d rather have her than you, a son of their blood? You, who the pardon absolves leaving them clean of any of the bad press they got from your defection? Suna and Kiri know that Konoha is complicit but both of them need your protection. Once you’re home she’s free to dismantle the trade.”

“Thats...”

“Convoluted? Reliant on an exact understanding of your mental state and accurate intelligence of multiple parties? A fucking huge set of balls?”

Yes. All of that. He looks over at the far tent, -the command tent- the closed flap, and gets an idea.

--

Know thy enemy is such an easy phrase for a shinobi. Know their affinity, know their names, know their enemies. Knowing your allies is much harder. Friend, allies, even family, those are to be
trusted implicitly and divorced entirely when it fails. Real life is different. He’s thinking about this
the wrong way. Forget Konoha’s ‘ra ra togetherness’ bullshit, forget Orochimaru’s treatise on
weakness. What does he, as an individual, know about his allies?

There’s no reason for Fuyuki, by way of her trusted advisor who thinks that Sasuke is an unstable
moron, who believes that ignorance is golden when it comes to subordinates, to tell him half of
what she just did. No offense to Dosa but he is a follows orders type of man. Fuyuki knows how
far he can go on nothing at all. But when he does ask... She doesn’t value him very much as a
soldier. What does she value? What, when he’s shown it to her, does she respond to?

Initiative.

What does Naruto respond to? What do his teams, his friends? It’s strange to force his gaze out
from himself. For so long the only way to make progress was to set time internally. To stay
inwardly focused and only look at other things from a sideways glance. Squinting forward, trying
to see the turnings of wheels not his own, is blinding. If he opens his eyes wide enough, though, he
begins to see a path.

He finds Naruto lounging by his pack, mouth set angrily. He’s cutting his toenails with kunai.
Sasuke has heard through the grapevine that sowing dissent hasn’t worked. Too many are too
loyal. And yet...it took mere hours for Fuyuki to decimate the Kimura. She came prepared to kill
these people. She knows them. It should’ve been as simply as a word to the right people. Everyone
should already be dead. They aren’t. “Naruto,” he says. “Put on your shoes.”

Naruto opens his mouth. Sasuke pushes on his shoulder. “No. Follow me.”

He needs her map. He needs to find out where the camp he was taken to was, he needs to find
someone to negotiate with. He’s got an angle, bait, he just needs a place and a hook. He has half a
plan and a wild brilliant idea. A shard of light through the window that reveals that the room was
dark, yes, but not pitch black. Maybe the way out isn’t to throw open all the windows and throw on
a light. Maybe the solution is dusting off the dresser and turning on a lamp, then using the lamp to
find a torch. Maybe the solution isn’t in killing for, or dying of. Maybe it’s realising that things are
bad, but not impossible.

A tall woman has her back to him when he enters. Dosa is lounging next to her, his chair facing the
door. He’s whittling. When he notices Sasuke he simply tips his head and puts his things away. He
passes Sasuke on his way out, throws a cautious glance at the woman behind him, then claps
Sasuke on the shoulder. Dosa exits. She doesn’t turn. Sasuke licks his lips, already coming up with
an excuse in his head to get what he needs. Familiarisation perhaps.

She reaches down and pulls her sword off her belt.

Sasuke barely breathes but all she does is lay it down flat on the table in front of her. With a
flourish she turns. She’s not looking at him, shuffling papers, frowning at the ground. It’s so
fundamentally unlike her that Sasuke pauses.

She draws in a breath. “Fundamentally,” Fuyuki licks her lips, “fundamentally Uchiha Sasuke is a
survivor and a protector. His drive to honor his family by avenging them has only ever been altered
by his drive to protect. However brief that change was. Once I gave him proof of his brothers
demise the base core of himself reasserted itself. He is at once a credit to the Uchiha name and it’s
tenants of power and protection, and a rejection of the core elements that made them so feared.
Capable of being compassionate, analytical and adaptable. Capable of doing what is necessary
without resorting to cruelty. He’s consistently rejected the parts of our system he can’t justify and
balked at every attempt to make him into a better shinobi. He is a poor soldier but perhaps a good
man.”

He swallows. “Hashira-”

“Shut up. You always ask the wrong questions,” she snaps. Her eyes come up then, meet his. “That was my final assessment of you, made after you left. The one I sent to Konoha.”

It’s his turn to drop his eyes but he can’t - doesn’t want - to stop the wry twist of his mouth. “We’re going to fuck up your plans.”

“I know.” Fuyuki smiles. “Thank god for that.”

She gives him the maps.

Naruto is livid when he comes out of the tent. “We’re in the clear.”

“The Banshee of Black Lightning isn’t going to kill us?” Naruto shakes his head. “Let me talk to her.”

“Hell no.” Sasuke extends a hand. “Let’s go.”

Naruto looks at the offered hand like it’s a gift from heaven. Sasuke drops it after a moment briefly stunned by Naruto’s ability to make everything more difficult than it has to be.

--

It’s just. Stupidly simple when you get down to it. Stupidly straightforward. Hiki had said as much. Fuyuki is not a delicate politician. He’s got evidence of that from his own experience. When faced with a problem the choices are to escalate or lose because that’s what we did in the Warring States Era. That’s what we did during the wars. If it feels like there isn’t another option it’s not because it’s true, it’s because no one is willing to reach for it. Tradition is all. But, and here is the thought that’s been hanging around his head, squeezing like a noose, until there isn’t anything he can do about it: no one is one thing.

There is infinite possibility, as long as you’re willing to let go and look for it.

He is. He’s willing to look for it.

So here we are: a low table in a shitty tent on a graveyard. Naruto seated just behind him. The old man, the one who put Sasuke in a room and Naruto in a hole, is sitting across from him. His gnarled hands are curled over his cane like a lifeline. He’s not important to Sasuke, not really. He’s not Naruto to look at people and see not only the best of what’s there but the goodness of what could be. When Sasuke looks he sees an opportunity and a need. The old man gestures across the low-slung table at him. “Why am I not going to kill you?”

“Because I am Sasuke the Snake Killer, the last Uchiha. This is Uzumaki Naruto, future Hokage of Konoha. And we want to talk.”

The old man grunts.

“We don’t want to kill you.”

“Yes, this is what I think too when I see armies coming towards me.” The old man mocks. “I bet they just don’t mean it.”

“It’s what he thinks.” Sasuke nods at Naruto. Naruto’s eyes widen. “And I’m here to give him what
he wants.”

“What’s that.”

“A chance to talk.” Sasuke pulls himself to his full height, breathes in and out. “Amida...I don’t know much about the battle of Amida. I do know that it was interrupted, corrupted by foreign powers. That it led to Lightning losing one of their brightest. That it ripped the country in two. Is it really a victory if everyone is dead at the end?”

“Do you actually understand what happened?” The old man shudders. “The Raikage was prepared to wipe us out for keeping to the old ways. We were a threat to his power - us, his people. That boy might not have come from the old blood but he sure thinks like it. That bastard took what has been freely given by our bloodline since this country rose from the ground: we are the branch that forked from the younger brother’s wisdom in sorrow. We live long, we do not die easily and we must learn to be wise for we are powerful. We guarded the Gates of Amida, we allowed our daughters to become vessels for the greater good, we lived by the old codes.” The old man grows frantic. “Do you understand what he did? Do you understand what we lost?”

“Good question.” A soft voice says from behind him. Fuyuki. She shrugs at his glare. “Did you think I wouldn’t follow?” She faces the man on the other side of the room. “Grandfather.” Fuyuki bends at the waist, long hair flowing over her shoulders.

“What’s this then?” The old man rises to his full height. “You got bored playing kingmaker?”

Fuyuki stands on his left, one eyebrow cocked. “You’ve destroyed every force that tried to conquer you. You’ve stood up to every Raikage since the dawn of the era. You’re the only place left in this corner of the world that bows to the old gods and not the new ones of technology.”

“Yes.”

“It’s time to die.” She sounds tired when she says it. “There can’t be a new world until you do. He won’t- The Raikage won’t let what you’ve done go. And I can’t pretend I can either.”

The old man laughs. “Do you know what she’s so afraid of?” He gestures around the tent. “It’s this dirt stuff right here, the shit you’ve been breathing in. We lose power every generation we’re removed from the Otsutsuki. Instead of ninja growing more powerful we grow more dependant on technology. In big enough qualities over enough time it will restore the power we lost.” He points at Fuyuki. “Your great grandmother came from here, your sisters-”

“Are dead,” she interrupts. “And I need you to die. Your chemicals are going downstream through the rivers. In those not of our blood-”

The old man spits on the ground.

“-it causes mutation. Poor women and children. Families. It makes a great drug when cut with medicinal herbs. An even better chakra suppressant when you mix it with others. I know you’re selling. I know you broke your promise to me.” Fuyuki stalks forward. When she next speaks her voice is a purr. “Your promise to me: that you would keep the white stone here. That you would stop a thousand years of our blood from washing down into the world. We are the closest to our ancestors, not the Senju and the Uchiha, us. The Uzumaki and the Hashira. We keep the ways closed. We guard the stone that keeps the barrier between worlds from falling. Do you know where the vanguard is now? In this room. Rebuilding our sister city on the sea. There are less than twenty of us left now. No, A should not have tried to cut us out of the government. No, he should not have tried to end our place in Lightning’s culture. No, he should not have come with his army and his
technology and pulled the white sword down.” Her hiss turns to a whisper. “No. He should not have ordered my sisters be taken. But you cannot poison the world because another man is cruel.”

“He destroyed it,” the old man hisses, “you killed for him, you would die for that -”

“But I didn’t,” she replies calmly. “When it came down to it, I chose you.”

The old man’s back bends. “You’re old enough to know all promises are broken eventually.”

“I know.” Fuyuki points to Naruto. “That’s why the jinchuriki is here.”

The old man pales.

Fuyuki smiles, more a grim slash than anything. “You didn’t do a good enough job destroying him. This valley was created the first time someone of our bloodlines figured out how to contain a tailed beast. It’s a tear in reality, where the air between us and the spirit realm is thin. Unlike the Lands of the Summoned it is made of corruption. Everything that lives here dies badly. That’s why the Uzumaki left, old man.”

“And you still defended it.”

She ignores him. “Naruto. Do you have control of the beast?”

Naruto tenses. It occurs to Sasuke that he’s not sure they’ve ever talked. “Some.”

She nods, dismissing him. “You’ll know what you need to do.”

The old man’s lip curls. Seeing the same manipulation of power that Sasuke does. “So you win.” In a smooth move he stands. “Everyone dies.”

And just like that, Sasuke thinks tiredly, the time for honesty is over.

Fuyuki takes it in stride. “You agreed to talk to Uchiha,” she says quietly. “As a former agent of Giri he has our trust. As a valued member of Konoha and a member of the joint party between the Lightning government and the Fire government he can offer you a verbally binding agreement of safe passage to Yokokita. Amida will become a protected area - and no one, not even A will be able to erase you- but you can’t stay here.” Her voice takes on an urgent quality. “It’s over. No one won this fight.”

“And if I say no?”

She shrugs. They all know what happens if he says no.

“This is our home.”

“Was,” she replies. “If I’d tried to sell you on it you’d have said no.”

“So you engineered this.”

“Oh no.” Fuyuki tilts her head. “I was just going to kill you. I was hoping for divine intervention, actually.” She sits - actually sits - on the ground and folds her legs under her. Sasuke has to actually hit Naruto to stop him from saying something dumb.

“And these little shits brought dragons. Talk about divine.” The old man relaxes. He rests his hip on his cane. “What do you get out of this? Not killing me? You don’t care about that. Oh I know what that fuck in Kumo gets, and that banshee in Konoha has been up our asses for decades now.
She figured out what we were selling years before you did. What do you get out of this, little grass?"

Sasuke has just a moment to wonder what little grass means, then Fuyuki asks, apropos of nothing, “Who are you covering for? What did you let Akatsuki have?”

Naruto comes to full alert beside him. The old man shrugs. “They wanted a pure strain of mineral. For a power boost. Knowledge on...an old monster...a terror.”

“You gave it to them.” Naruto spits.

“We give nothing,” the old man protests. “He had a right to it. The man with the rinnegan.”

Diplomacy is neat. Diplomacy means Sasuke gets to have a nap while Naruto seals a crack in reality. Diplomacy is amazing.

The old man, possibly Fuyuki’s grandfather what the fuck, agrees to terms. Giri has to move out almost immediately so that Yokokita can send its own team, but the deadline is midnight and Sasuke is unimportant until then. This is all going so well that Sasuke eats twice as much at dinner, does Yumi’s washing for her and scares the crap out of Naruto by being a friendly guy over a few bottles of sake. Talking worked, who fucking knew?

He’s having such a grand time shooting the shit with his old team that Kabuto manages to sneak up on him. Kabuto folds himself down around their fire before Naruto can jump in and say something.

Kabuto passes Naruto a flat box made of pearl and green stone. “This is for you. I’d run away with it before Karin arrives.” Kabuto smiles. “Someone must have told them about the relics.”

Naruto looks at the box.

Sasuke carefully takes it from him. “It’s blood activated.” He hands it back to Naruto patiently ignoring his startled look. “The Uchiha have similar. Get blood on the seal.”

Naruto frowns and tucks the box away in a sealed scroll. Kabuto sticks around for awhile, relaxed and calm about everything. Sasuke looks at him out of the corner of his eye. Last time they talked Sasuke was...not himself. He was all over the place, half one boy and half another. Incapable of looking in a mirror and seeing a person he was certain of. In that moment Kabuto was like a revelation. There was a man willing and able to move in the moment. Like if he could figure out the shifting skin he had it would tell him something about himself. Kabuto is a working man for Giri now. If anything, he thinks wryly, their situation has reversed.

A small wave of warm water, a familiar tickle under his nose announces Uzushio’s arrival. He sneezes and wipes his nose. Leveraging to his feet and wandering drunkenly, happily towards Karin. Naruto follows behind him like a limpet. For no reason Sasuke cares to look he reaches behind him and grabs his wrist, tugging him along. He rounds a corner, pulls Naruto too fast over a bump and sticks his hand in the air. Karin is in front of him tapping her foot unhappily. He uneasily lowers his hand and takes a swig from a bottle that, hey, he must still be holding.

Karin knows. She’s pissed about it. And she’s ready and willing to throw down.

Karin looks blankly at Naruto for a moment. Then she surges forward and punches him in the face. Sasuke scoops her up around the middle. “The fuck Karin?”
“Let me go.” Karin spits. “Let me go so I can rip that motherfucker apart—”

He spares a glance for Naruto’s stricken bloody face. In a second he’ll get angry. “He didn’t hurt me Karin.”

“Bullshit. Bull- fucking -shit. Collaboration is a form of violence.” Karin whips a chakra chain around Naruto’s arm. “What do you have to say for yourself you goddamn coward!”

Naruto sighs.

Karin throws her head back into Sasuke’s jaw. He drops her. She flings herself at Naruto forgetting the chains. “You stay the fuck out of Uzushio. I see you or anyone of yours that’s willing to stand to the side and support this bullshit I will kill you.”

“Karin.”

“She’s right, Sasuke.” He smiles crookedly at Karin which Sasuke could have told him was the worst possible tactic. Karin loathes charm. “But all we can do is be better.”

She grabs him by the front of his shirt. “Fuck you. You can do more than be better. You aren’t absolved because you didn’t sign the fucking death warrant.” She throws him away and begins to stalk off. The whip of her anger is palpable.

Karin turns at the last second sending a hell of a kick right at Naruto’s temple. Sasuke doesn’t stop it, too shocked to move. Naruto goes down with a heavy sounding crunch. Karin’s limping as she rejoins her convoy.

At a loss for words he says the first thing to come to mind. “She’s your cousin.”

Naruto, understandably, does not appreciate this.

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Sasuke has just finished cleaning up his area when Kabuto finds him. It’s funny but even though Kabuto was never very tall he always seemed like he contained something bigger inside of him. It used to drive Sasuke up the wall trying to figure him out. Now he looks down at him and feels a calmness that’s been missing his whole life. It feels like that no matter how badly this conversation goes he’ll be fine. As if sensing his personal epiphany Kabuto presents him with a sack dried with old blood.

A very familiar sack.

“You were told to burn this.” Kabuto frowns.

“I chose not to.”

Kabuto sighs. “Dragons in the North. Sasuke did you even listen?”

“What are you talking about.”

“She would have told you to burn it. The Dragon in the North isn’t a myth Sasuke. It’s an archaic call sign for a type of retrieval operation.”

“Okay.”

Kabuto mouths Sasuke’s okay back at him. “One whose specific purpose is to retrieve body parts
or DNA from operatives in the field. They were named after the Lightning myth of the same name. Where the mother has to retrieve her son’s sword to bury him. In Konoha it’s a title for a shinobi that specialises in bloodlines. Hashira wasn’t giving you some aisine sentiment she was telling you to burn the body.”

He makes the universal sign for follow me. Sasuke shoves into his shoes and trails after him, deep into the night. They walk for long enough that Sasuke regrets not grabbing a jacket. Using chakra to warm himself could be a mistake if Kabuto has decided to get revenge for Orochimaru right this instant. Eventually Kabuto stops outside a small encampment filled with soldiers. This must have been Fuyuki’s back up.

The tent is viscerally familiar to Sasuke. He’s been here a dozen times with Kabuto. There are bodies on a table, covered in moss. Childrens bodies. Still not new. He looks around for something else he should be paying attention too but there’s nothing. He holds his breath and looks back at the pale children. Their eyes flutter beneath thin blue lids. Distantly familiar features tug at him - Tsuki and Yumi- but he tries to stop that thought. He is learning to let go, just a little. He looks again and one of the kids spasms, red eyes opening-

“What the fuck?”

“Cloning.” Kabuto twitches. “Hyuuga, Uchiha, a half dozen others.”

“Endless child soldiers?” When he looks again he sees Itachi’s ears, his neck, his only tell in the pinky finger. On the next time he can see the glint of Hinata’s hair.

Kabuto hums right over Sasuke’s freak out. “Not exactly where I thought he would have gone with this. But I guess he’s already perfected his brainwashing, why not machine make them right from the beginning?”

“Who?” Why, What, How?

“Shimura,” Kabuto murmurs, “Shimura Danzo. That’s the name you need to know.”

Chapter End Notes

I am sorry about the wait on this one. I only sort of realised how burnt out I was when I went to work on this chapter and had just, nothing, to give. I do try my best to ensure that Sasuke's emotional journey is as deep and thorough as I can make it without slipping into too much speculation I can't back up or fucking up my own mental health. I've been writing this fic for 18 months straight, as in without taking a break of longer than a few days working on some part of this universe, and although it hasn't exactly drained me emotionally there comes a point that the careful consideration I try to give becomes wearying. Particularly over the last few chapters where our protagonist has been slipping into such an empty, suicidal headspace I've been experiencing a weird sense of being trapped along with him. It's been weird to write someone into the tight spot he's in now and, even knowing exactly how it ends because I've written it, peering out from that dark corner and seeing the same lack of options. So that's why this is late, and why we're spilting chapters up. Sorry about the wait.

Also I totally know that's not what a faraday cage is, but there's an in universe reason
for it being called that we're probably never going to get to.

Edit the Second: So the Hashira were always meant to mirror the Uchiha in some way, this is briefly discussed in ‘Itachi’ over in the short stories. Although the difference between the Uchiha and Senju, who were always partners in some description in Konoha, and the Hashira and the Raikage, which was very much a see-saw for political and cultural power, are not exact dupes. The Hashira actually were undermining the Raikage and his administration in an attempt at a coup but unlike the Uchiha absolutely had the power to win. This was just after the end of the Third War, the region was immensely unstable, and Konoha was up Lightning's asshole with spies and collusion - Danzo at his ninja best. In an attempt to curtail his opponents, A destroyed huge parts of the bedrock of the Hashira's powerbase, both through rumor and actually physically destroying their homeland. Without, as we learn, understanding what exactly the Hashira were guarding: a large deposit of chakra enriched land that poisons anyone of the bloodline not born to it. This was the last straw in what was already a volatile relationship between A and Fuyuki and has lead directly to the events in this story.

The stuff with her sisters is not, in his opinion, related, but that is way more about the lack of reproductive autonomy that I feel must be present in Naruto for it to make sense.
“It’s not illegal.”

Hinata stirs her drink thoughtfully. She’d been attentive and silent through his explanation and, when he’d described the mission itself, gotten up to wash his dishes. After the dishes she’d collected his laundry and methodically worked through it. Eventually Sasuke forced a drink into her hand and sat her down so she wouldn’t do something insane, like make him dinner.


“Genetic material is exchanged through both the legal and illegal market all the time. And as far as I know there’s no reason for the technology to be banned. No one even knows about it.” Her hand twitches towards his unfolded towels. His hand twitches towards his knife. “We like to talk about the formation of Konoha as something idyllic. It was anything but. When ANBU was formed at the tail end of the Shodai’s reign a number of smaller cells cropped up in response. Mostly from the Clans but a few merchant groups threw in. It would probably have been worse if not for the presence of certain limiting factors.” She reaches down into her ever present briefcase with it’s endless storage, fusses, and produces a neat pile of paper. “This is some surviving paperwork from the first ANBU secretary. One of those groups, one of the ones I have good reason to suspect is still around, made an arrangement with a merchant called the Dragon to keep a direct sale line open.”

Sasuke frowns at the dragon seal on the shipping manifest in front of him. “Who?”

“No one knows who he is but he has something of a legacy in Intelligence circles.” Hinata hands him another piece of paper. “The other name is more familiar.”

That one is familiar. “Shimura Danzo.”

“He founded a small cell a few years into the Nidaime’s reign. It stayed underground but grew under the next Hokage. It was left alone to take root in the foundations of Konoha. A Black Ops unit inside ANBU, Root, operating wherever and however it wanted inside shinobi dealings. I haven’t found evidence of civilian involvement.”

“I don’t see how it’s connected.” Sasuke frowns. “Even if Root took kids the ones we’re looking at
where taken out of the country.”

“That’s where this comes in.” She produces a statement from her endless piles of paper. “Children, especially stateless ones, are considered the same thing as a cart of swords. Without the backing of someone bigger those kids...when your family died there was no one to advocate for them. When the Hyuuga children went missing they came from low families, one who would not ask for support or help, especially from me. It’s like losing lint from your coat, or buying a second hand coat to some of the elders. Transferring them from owner to owner is as easy as applying for a license, providing you know how to word your paperwork. They have no rights in a court of law but what is afforded at the leisure of the court. There is no international binding agreement that prohibits the use of children as weapons of war. The Shodai tried to get it to pass at the first summit, but, well, no one else was interested.” She rubs her eyes. “Konoha has many laws about the use of children in war and nearly all of them have been broken, with near to no consequences.”

Sasuke leans back in his chair and then, without thinking, says, “What about the Summer of Sun?”

Hinata turns, wide eyed. “Excuse me?”

“We need a precedent for the Hidden Villages agreeing on the cessation of a kind of weapon making.” He taps his fingers on his legs. “The Summer of Sun.”

“Of course!” Hinata whispers. “Oh my god. Oh my god how did I forget about? -and it was brokered by Tsunade too!”

“What?”

“Oh? Oh.” She bites her lip. “I think...I think you may have to ask Tsunade for something.”

Explaining it to the Hokage is the easier part. She knows this already but is hamstrung by bureaucracy, history and disinterest. The Summer of Sun part perks her up but enough for Sasuke to grow confident. Has she already thought of that? Has it failed?

“You realise without proof this is just nonsense.” Tsunade pours them drinks. “You have a trail, sure, but no actual children to show for it. You can’t take him down without it.” And evidence, Sasuke hears, is the crux of the problem.

Hinata hesitates. “I have a connection.”

“All that business with Kabuto, huh?” Tsunade crosses her arms. “Sure kitten, do you want me to pretend two of my assets aren’t seeking to undermine the stability of regime?”

“No.” Hinata draws herself up to her full height. “I would you like to overlook this as your predecessors have. Not only because of precedent but because it would be...unwise to accuse the heir of the largest noble house and the only private citizen of Konohagakure. It would be unpleasant.”

“I might as well go out topless is what you’re saying.” She laughs. “That’s ballsy Hyuuga. What about you Uchiha, you got balls?”

Sasuke raises an eyebrow,
“Alright.” Tsunade points at him. “But first you’re going to do something for me.”

“What?”

“Go to the Pool.” Her tone drops to something subdued. He can see shadows dancing at the edge of her eyes. “Tell me what you find. Before the summit preferably but I...understand if it takes awhile.” She dismisses them with a raised hand. “I’ll see you at the next meeting Hyuuga and you at the strategy session with the other Hokages, Uchiha.”

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Halfway through plan making Tobirama frowns and says, “we need to talk about the Uchiha.”

Sasuke frowns back. “I haven’t done anything.” He hands his papers to Sakura who hands it to Namikaze and so on. It’s just the Hokages and Team 7 now. All in the family, so to speak.

Tobirama rolls his eyes. “The other Uchiha.”

_He’s dead_, Sasuke thinks reflexively.

“Madara.” Tobirama says, perhaps following Sasuke’s thoughts. “I mean Uchiha Madara.”

“The Mangekyou.” Sarutobi frowns, “What can you tell us?”

Sasuke shrugs and relays what he remembers.

Sakura frowns. “So it’s a medical condition,” Sakura says.

Tobirama scowls. “What?”

Sakura ignores him. “You just said that the sharingan leads to the release of a special chakra that grows more powerful the more they feel. That’s the hatred bit. Unstable chakra can have a debilitating effect on the body, obviously. So this special chakra erodes part of the brain that regulates certain impulses? Or reactions?” Sakura says slowly. “That makes it a degenerative brain condition, not a preordained path.”

Tobirama snorts. “It’s possible to access it without causing insanity.”

“Right but the only person you know of personally who did that is Kagami and the only other person we know who did that was his son Shisui.” Sakura puts her hands on her hips and glances at Tsunade, “Shishou?”

“Sorry Uncle, I think Sakura has a point.” Tsunade laces her fingers together. “We no longer have access to many of the Uchiha clan records. So I don’t know how much we can confirm.”

“It’s passed through the mother.” Sasuke adds quietly. He expects his contribution to be rushed over but when it’s not he carefully meets Hashirama’s eyes. “That’s what I know.”

Tsunade frowns, looking to her grand uncle. “Do we know who Kagami’s mother was?”

Tobirama shakes his head. “No. His father was one of the Uchiha who abandoned the village with Madara.”

“His grandmother was Uchiha Michiko.” Sasuke says without looking up. “He was the child of her second son.”
“Michiko!” Hashirama says brightly.

“That would explain it.” Tobirama says a touch more happily. “Strong woman.”

Sasuke nods, marking down another point on the map in front of him. It is completely wrong and might be in the middle of the ocean. Naruto edges into his vision concern written on his face. Sasuke ignores that and corrects his mistake.

Tobirama shrugs his wide shoulders. “Regardless it causes insanity. We can’t afford to tread lightly.”

“That’s,” Sakura clears her throat, “that’s a terrible attitude towards mental health.”

Tobirama is borderline seething. Sasuke ducks his head to hide his smirk.

“Sakura,” Tsunade says chidingly.

Sakura shrugs completely unconcerned. “As a medical professional I don’t agree with his assessment.”

Naruto bites his cheek to avoid laughing.

Tsunade rolls her eyes, “and as a ninja of Konohagakure you’re going to shush because I said so.”

Sakura nods. “Yes ma’am.”

That effectively kills the session. As they file out -Sakura glaring at the Nidaime all the while, he has the decency to hunch his shoulders- Tsunade pulls him aside.

“You know he’s coming for you now?” Tsunade says quietly. “I can’t do anything for you. You’re protected legally by the deal we came up with Hashira but he can still have you killed.”

“I can handle it.”

Tsunade snorts the same as Tobirama. “Better men than you have said that.”

He has dinner with Sakura again. She banished Kakashi and Naruto for being too rowdy for the civilian night she wanted. She gets a weird kick out of his status in a way that confuses him.

Although it does keep him in good barbeque. Late that night a little sparrow in the pale purple Hyuuga shades knocks on his window. It has a little note attached to its leg.

Tomorrow, the note says.

The little sparrow jumps up and down impatiently. Sasuke absently strokes down its small head. It nips him. “I want a treat!”

Sasuke snorts. Typical birds. “Yeah, yeah. I’ve got some dried fruit around here somewhere.” He grabs the fruit and writes his reply. Tomorrow.

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Hinata knocks on his door with a timidity that annoys him.

He tells her so as they walk towards one of Konoha’s outer districts. “Why do you still bother with that gentle flower stuff. If you’ve got a spine, show it.”
Hinata regards him mildly. They’re both dressed as civilians today. Him in his usual pants and top combo, Hinata in a delicate purple dress and green cardigan. “If for all of your life you were treated as nearly sub-human, not worth loving or caring for, and one day you found yourself strong enough to prove them wrong would you? Would you just go out and prove it?”

“Of course.”

“Of course,” she repeats, tone just as mild as before, “but imagine you are a girl, not a woman a girl, and you live in a clan where the only reason you’re tolerated is because of your blood. Until just a few years ago you weren’t strong enough. You were beaten, you were hurt, you tried again but you could only see the gulf getting bigger. There’s someone else ahead of you who is better, who always will be, and you can’t make up the gap of gender. So yes, you can, but some things will still never change, and the only way to come at those things is with a veil. Even if that isn’t you, you don’t get to be you until the wheel of fate changes.” By the end of her speech that mildness is gone and Sasuke can see the depth of molten steel at her core. Hinata recovers, placing a gentle hand to her lips as if silencing herself. “I apologise. It has been a...rough morning.”

To his own surprise he finds he does get it. “Elders?” Hinata looks up in surprise. “I used to sit in my father’s office when he was going through paperwork. Every so often he’d get a report from some officer of elder abuse. ‘Elder abuse?’ He’d say. ‘More like the world spinning around right’.”

She snorts. “That is a terrible thing to say,” she replies, “even if it’s accurate.”

Sasuke shrugs. His father had never made a secret of how tiring he found the Uchiha Elders.

Somehow he’d expected it to go down in the middle of the night, like in a movie. It’s such a wild thought for someone who once did this for a living. It’s funny that some of it slid off so quickly. They walk to one of the edgier sections of town way past the red light district and step onto a boat. It’s a pleasant day. The river smells like fresh grass and sunlight.

They get off a little way out of Konoha, at one of its satellite towns. Hinata walks comfortably through the streets towards a brothel with a brown door. Sasuke frowns behind her, uncomfortably reminded of Tawatsukawa. The guard lets them in without any trouble only sparing the briefest of glances for their faces.

Inside the brothel is cleared out. Despite the open windows and the cleaning products the place smells of sex and alcohol. Hinata tenses beside him and he almost wishes he knew her well enough to make a comment. A tense teammate is a bad one. She settles herself remarkably well for someone so uptight. She doesn’t even flinch when the bar girl brings them refreshments. She’s a working girl with a working girl’s tired eyes and clipped gait, Sasuke pays her extra.

After a long enough period of time that Sasuke fears he may have to make small talk the door to the backrooms swings open. A slight man and fifteen or so children fill the small establishment to capacity. Sasuke tilts his head, “Kabuto.”

“Sasuke.” Kabuto replies pleasantly. He waves a dramatic arm. “Here’s the produce.”

Sasuke has no idea what the going price is anymore but he can’t imagine it’s changed that much. He’s looking at millions in potential revenue. It’s stomach curdling to participate in this bullshit but it is what it is. That’s what Sasuke tells his rolling stomach. This is the last time.

Hinata stands. The children immediately fall into two straight lines. She hesitates but pulls herself together enough to approach them. She pulls the heads off their heads one by one and asks for their names. They have none. Do they have families? No.
Sasuke holds his breath, even when Kabuto takes Hinata’s seat.

He hadn’t thought much about what meeting the child would mean. Each time Hinata pulls down their hoods and asks her questions he feels like he’s taken a punch to the gut.

Hinata pauses over the second to last child. He has a cleft palate. “What are these marks on their tongues?”

“Silence seals.” Kabuto slurps his drink. “They explode if you develop loose lips.”

“Wait.” Sasuke leaps to his feet. “I’ve seen these before, years ago, when I was working for Giri.” His solo mission with Dosa.

“Unsurprising.” Kabuto supplies. “Not disrupting this kind of trade was part of the deal.”

“They were dead.” Sasuke shakes his head. “Would he really kill-”

“Yes.” Kabuto slams his drinks down. “Don’t you know what kind of man you’re dealing with yet?”

Sasuke shuts his mouth. He sits down.

Hinata finishes her assessment. “Are we still agreed on payment.”

Kabuto pats his mouth dry with a napkin. “I’ll get my pound of flesh, so to speak.”

“After you testify.”

“After you skewer Danzo, yes.” Kabuto sighs. “After the war too. Good luck Sasuke, Hinata.” He leaves without so much as a glance at the children.

Sasuke looks at their small heads and feels nothing but panic. “I can’t-”

Hinata comes close enough to put a comforting hand on his shoulder. “I have arranged for carers. People I would trust to do this. They’re loyal, caring and can provide the kind of emotional care you and I cannot.” She squeezes. “Later on we can adopt them back or arrange a formal guardianship but I could no more ask someone in your position to do this than I could attempt to do it myself. Until such time as we have secured their safety we’ll see that they’re cared for.”

We. Our. Binding their fates with the children. It’s a neat trick. “You’re actually good at this.”

“Yes. I am.” It’s back to that mildness. That impressive self control. “This may be new to you but I have been planning this for a long time. It means something to me and you can rest easy knowing that I mean to see it through.”

He’d always thought she was weak. Naruto has always thought she was gentle. When compared to Sakura she is. Sakura’s strength may not have always been obvious but it is visible. A simpler person would mistake a lack of straightforwardness for cowardice. Weakness.

But Sasuke is not Naruto and even in his infancy he knew that power was many figured and didn’t care a bit about gender. Hinata has something in her that reminds him of Karin. Maybe it’s just emotional transference but it’s not hard to see a touch of red in her hair. Clever more than smart. Clever is adaptable. Clever he understands.

He likes Hyuuga Hinata, even if he doesn’t trust her all that much.
Trust can be earned, he counsels himself. God knows he’s had to, still has to.

The boy holds up his hand and grabs for him. At first he thinks it’s a plea to be held, which Sasuke can’t answer, but the motion is wrong. The boy grasps for his shirt and then further up, up to his eyes. Sasuke leans down to let the boy feel along. Small hands cover his eyes, close them, and when he lets the boy close there’s a spark of familiar chakra. Fire and grief. Fire and Uchiha blood.

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It’s with thoughts of the boy in his head that he goes to find the Pool.

Not hidden underground but near the ring of blossoming trees near a bend in the river. He was never allowed here as a child and in truth found it creepy. Tsunade told him that her grandfather’s place was as barren as the desert in high summer and black as the aftermath of a fresh fire. Sasuke knew down to his bones that Madara’s Pool was near the ever blooming trees where the elders had tea. There was something in the air, something too heavy for real life. Something that could be a story.

The way in is harder. He gets on his hands and knees on the forest floor and feels around. The dirt is cool, unnaturally so and he can almost feel...but no. No. It’s not running water. It’s still earth. He tries running his hands and eyes over the five trees in this little grove. Even wading into the chilly water. All that gets him is wet and irritated. Finally he gives up and has lunch.

It’s when he’s finishing up, haphazardly throwing an apple core over his shoulder, that he notices the shimmery space to the side of him. It’s about human sized, a fizzle in the air. He approaches it sideways, sharingan activated. He’s inches away when a noise like a foot out of mud rings through the air and-

It’s a barren room save for an altar on which rests a small bowl of black lumps. The walls are covered in script. Ancient war tomes, treaties, love stories. With a stuttering breath Sasuke realises that this is where his legacy was buried. In the ground, with the lost stories of it’s greatest traitor. He approaches the altar and it’s small stone bowl. Walks through the seals on the ground. He kneels before an empty wall, closes his eyes and breathes.

When he opens them again with his sharingan the wall is no longer empty. Instead there is a man with sad red eyes and a face Sasuke sees in the mirror. He has black wings and a Tengu’s stance. Indra. Between his hands is a glowing red stone, the same as he saw all that time ago in the eyes of the Rabbit Goddess, underneath all it says is be sure.

All Uchiha abilities are life and death. Mostly death.

He hesitates over the stone. What once was as easy as breathing -his whole life is just a risk, after all, one he was taking without ever knowing the cost of the roll- is complicated by the knowledge that he has someone like him, waiting, hidden wherever Hinata found for them. He can’t leave them. Children need families. He can’t- He can’t go. He has to stay.

But- That doesn’t change what’s down here in this tomb of his own history and blood. He grasps one of the black lumps, closes his eyes and hopes that whatever this is, he’s sure enough. It hurts. His hand spasms. The lump turns to fire in his palm. It hurts so much.

He opens his eyes. He swallows the red-orange coal whole. It feels exactly how you’d expect; he can’t swallow, it’s fighting to come back up. Instead of hot it’s ice cold, ripping the flesh of his throat as it goes down. It rests heavy as the world in his stomach, pulsing, heating him up from the inside.
There’s terrible glittering madness in his blood. Red on the back of his hands and the glory of flesh in his mouth. Tobirama had said that the fate of the Uchiha was to love until everything else gave way, to hate until reality swayed an unsteady beat at your fingertips. He was right. Sasuke sways with the enormity of what lives inside him. He wants it bad enough to beg, there is nothing but brilliance inside that madness. The power of a god. The power to be *everything.*

And to end it.

Somewhere in the village the Last Senju is eating the roots and dirt from her grandfather's legacy. The clans are two of kind. The madness of the Senju must be equally as brilliant. The power to create, the power to control. The power to leave things growing in your wake where the Uchiha will set it to burn forever. Something close to an absolute power here on earth shaping things with an ability that can’t be surpassed.

In one breath he’s the dream of Fire; Naruto’s will all but pried from Hashirama’s hands, shaped by loneliness and a passion that borders obsession. He’s pulling new life from the ashes, clearing the air and drinking the water from the Naka river. He’s the boy shyly hiding behind Itachi’s legs looking up at the towering figure of his Hokage. The boy who knew he’d walk from hand to hand, strength to strength, because the heart of his family would guide him.

The next he’s Itachi’s downfall; beloved and wrecked on the rocks of Konoha’s legacy. His family's legacy that once spanned a continent but now can only touch where Sasuke himself can tread. Madara’s will inherited through the eyes of his dead brother is the only thing he can see. *Come find me when you have these eyes* Itachi said, and Sasuke is still not entirely sure he wants to give up that poisonous dream. *He wants* power. He needs it. The Will of Fire killed his mother, his cousins, his aunts and the beloved children who’d done nothing more than be born. It would be *insanity* to not want to be powerful enough to stop that from ever happening again.

Sasuke takes one deep breath, then another, and tries to take this to it’s simplest form.

On the fifteenth breath out he lets himself think it.

It’s the Valley of the End. His hand is either through his own chest or Naruto’s.

Orochimaru’s mark burns with the memories of what he did that night. His actions, no one else’s. The responsibility of that burns in his chest right through to the heart. When he was a child Itachi chose vengeance for him but how Sasuke sought it is largely on him. Some things -Orochimaru, Sarutobi and Danzo, Itachi’s relentless torture, even Kakashi’s half-hearted attempt to teach him- were not his doing. But he can’t deny the man he is, the man his blood has partially made him, and that man is a survivor. Selfish and stupid at times, ruthless and reckless, always looking out for himself because there isn’t anyone else to do it for him. He can admit that, if only to himself, and take responsibility for it.

He’s a selfish man and currently unclear on what exactly he’s aiming for but there’s no point denying what he’ll choose in the end. Sasuke will choose himself. Just as soon as he figures out who that is.

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He wakes up in his own home. The cats are sitting on his chest. Pakkun is on the floor. Stuck to his wall is a note in Tsunade’s hand writing. *Guess you were sure.*

--
The day of the summit arrives on an otherwise unremarkable overcast day. They trudge into Kumogakure headquarters at the same time as everyone else. To say that Sasuke is not thrilled to be back in Lightning so soon is an understatement, but the Raikage formally called the meeting and is footing the bill. They’ve arranged special quarters for the open meeting, as it will involve several non-shinobi parties. They’ve already announced the date for the war: one month. The place for it: right here, a bare day’s travel towards the seaside.

The room is set up so that the five Kage are equidistant from each other. Because their platform is raised so far above the speaking platform they will have an easy view of whomever is below them and their fellow Kage. Anyone wishing to speak to them will have to look up and move around to make their best impact. It’s unsubtle and intimidating.

Sasuke...questions the wisdom of trying to intimidate someone like the leader of Giri.

And then Giri is there, silver edelweiss at their throats. Two men dressed in the traditional styles of their homelands. Dosa in a long tunic and the other man in a Water style top and pants combo. Fuyuki has dressed for the Festival of Twelve Singing Trees, hair twisted above her head, eyes magnified threefold by gold make up, the pale orange of a traditional Lightning kimono draped elegantly around her. Sasuke snorts, the climax of the Twelve Singing Tree’s involves a maiden dressed in orange making a fool of a king by having him dance in a river with the branches of the trees wrapped around his neck.

Tsunade’s mouth almost flickers into a smile when she too makes the powerplay connection.

Now that everyone is here the suspicious looks begin. The smaller Villages look dubious, the representatives of the daimyo’s look ill, the bigger Hidden Villages eye each other with expressions ranging from relief to anger. Iwa looks at everyone with disdain. Kiri is watchful and almost defensive. Suna is calm and easy. Kumo is ignoring everyone. Konoha is watchful, especially of Iwa.

Although none of it, not even the hot hatred with which Konoha hates Iwa, can hold a flame to the sheer uncomprehending rage with which A regards Fuyuki.

“Don’t I know you from somewhere?” Oonoki starts.

A snarls.

“Not recently, Tsuchikage.” Fuyuki looks up at him from half hooded eyes, “but I am more than familiar with many parties present here today.”

“Well, girl, introduce yourself properly.” Oonoki grumbles. “I need to know who you are and why I should give a damn.”

Fuyuki rises to her feet. The Giri-nin behind her coming to attention. “I am Hashira Fuyuki, former Commander of Lightning, current leader of Giri.”

“Oh? You’re the new Otokage?” Mei says, “I thought it was another boy.”

Fuyuki smiles with genuine warmth at the Mizukage. Sasuke is reminded all over again of how thin the lines are here and how much history is floating to the top. “No Terumii. Sorry.”

A snorts. “A missing-nin as a Kage?”

“Two missing-nin are already Kage, sir.” She puts a lot of menace behind the sir. “And again, I do not rule a Hidden Village.”
“Then what do you command?” A snaps.

“Giri.”

Tsunade leans forward to clasp her hands together. “Which is?”

“Your local friendly hostage negotiators.” Fuyuki says cheerfully. “For when hubris takes hold of those unfortunately afflicted with a sense of narcissism and a silly white hat, and you think of doing clever things like firebombing villages, kidnapping children or starting a whole war over something we can sort out at an negotiating table.”

Okay, he thinks, she’s got it. This is going fine.

She continues, “we’re setting up an intergovernmental organization to promote co-operation between the elemental nations. Instead of declaring war on each other, getting your civilians killed, disrupting the peace and all that nonsense, we will convene to discuss your issues in an open space with an impartial party-like, say, my Giri- to oversee matters.”

“We will not agree to this.”

“You don’t have a choice. I’ve already fucking done it.” “I already have the agreement of all the major Daimyo’s and merchant clans. Failure to cooperate will be met with serious sanctions.”

“You can’t be be serious.” Oonoki says. “We could kill you.”

“I am confident in my skills.” Which translates to I’m Kage level too, bitches. “And you will find life difficult both in the immediate sense of fighting Madara and the wider sense of my complex network that has absorbed and replaced Akatsuki and contains most missing-nin of significance. I will have what I want.”

Gaara clears his throat. “This can be discussed at length later.”

“It can be discussed now,” the Raikage growls. He leans forward in his chair. “How will you pull this one off, princess?”

“Raikage,” Darui chides.

“Some conditions should be set.” Oonoki leans forward too.

“Limitations of power?” Mei offers.

Fuyuki rolls her eyes.

Gaara spears her with his intensity. “Some sacrifices must be made.” He makes a careful show of glancing at Naruto, B and who Sasuke has to assume are the two jinchuuriki not collected by Akatsuki.

Fuyuki grins, leaning towards him with a mockery of intimacy. “That sounds like something a politician would say.”

Gaara inclines his head slightly. “We are all animals of one kind or another. I have learnt the folly of hubris, of assuming that my way is the right one. It took another boy, his hope-”

“Do you intend to make an alliance for a year or a day?” Fuyuki cuts in. Gaara blinks at her. “I’m glad this newest generation of leaders can hang their hats on the words of the Yellow Flash’s son but I’m rather afraid that doesn’t mean much to me and mine.”
Gaara tilts his head just so. “I'm not sure what you mean.”

“You think those of us you forced out give two shits what some legacy brat has to say?”

Tsunade snorts, unimpressed. “So says the woman with the only pedigree as long as mine, or did your family not literally build the foundations of Kumogakure?”

“And did our families not leave legacies we abandoned?” Fuyuki raises one hand to Tsunade beseechingly, one slim wrist extended, the knot work of the noose the king hung himself with glittering on her sleeves. “They are dead, and we are not. Don’t we choose?”

*They are dead, and we are not.* The room stills and settles. All eyes on the two princesses. Tsunade relaxes her shoulders, releases her hands and settles in her seat. Her brown eyes show her age, and in them Sasuke can see she is decided regardless of what happens next. Oonoki watches Tsunade, with a grunt he too relaxes. After a long drawn out moment, lines being drawn and redrawn by international powers, *don’t we choose* echoing around the chamber, Tsunade returns Fuyuki’s gesture. One hand extended, she says, “Continue.”

“You can’t be serious.” Temari hisses a shade too loud.

“Quiet, girl.” Tsunade mutters back. “This is to be decided by us.”

“Hmm.” Oonoki grumbles to himself. He gestures for the woman beside him to step forward. They confer, she nods, he raises a hand. “Seems to me the unknown is the problem.”

“A registration.” Terumii offers.

Gaara nods. “Channels of communication.”

A grins. “A fucking *leash.*”

Fuyuki smiles all the while.

Sasuke watches Tsunade and the way her face does not move. Her posture stays relaxed and she looks...perturbed by the proceedings. She glances just once, only once, at her fellow Kage as they decide the impositions to be put upon Giri.

Ideas, treaties, restrictions are thrown about by the other four Kage. The longer they talk the longer it becomes a matter of logistics and less a matter of life and liberty for people who are not their soldiers. Sasuke watches the crowd, the tightening of hands, the dropping of shoulders. Defeat, anger, fear. Respect, too, in the eyes of those standing closest to the Kage. Tsunade glances at the crowd too, her eyes meet his in a flash of acknowledgement. What of, he’s not quite sure.

A outlines the beginnings of an extensive list of restrictions. After a few minutes of patient listening, Fuyuki queries, “And these are the conditions?”

“Yes.”

“I see.” Fuyuki nods once to show she truly does. “No.”

Terumii’s mouth makes a surprised noise. “No?”

“I am not a bitch Terumii and it lessens you to try and treat me as one. After all,” she looks pointedly at Tsunade, Oonoki and Mei, “you know disgrace as well as I do.”

Tsunade frowns. Oonoki and Mei flinch.
“I am not a bitch to be commanded, brought to heel,” she smiles placidly casting a long unkind look at the Lightning delegation, “or bred. I will not so much as move my little toe for you let alone get on my back and let you **fuck me.**”

Sasuke’s breath cuts out as Fuyuki’s killing intent fills the room. Naruto shivers against his seat. He’s a creature of the wind, small cuts and severance, Sasuke can only imagine what lightning must feel like against that. He worms a hand underneath Naruto’s and gently pushes against it. Naruto’s fingers twitch, but he clasps back. When he’s satisfied Sasuke removes his hand and tucks it back into his kimono.

“Hashira-” Gaara starts.

But A is already on his feet, incensed beyond reason. “You insolent little curr. You traitorous bitch-”

Mei gasps. “A!”

“How dare you stand before me, before this delegation and tell me, **princess,** what I’ve done to you, what you will no longer stand for. How dare you slander the people we have bled and killed for. The men and women who died for you and your precious fucking sisters, the men and women who died in that godforsaken crater are on you-”

Darui bolts to his feet. “Raikage!”

A puts a foot on the ledge, face nearly purple with rage and opens up his whole body, moving past fury to a deep well of something that borders hatred. Fuyuki’s lip pulls into a snarl when A loses the fight with his chakra control and floods the room with his rage. Neither of them can see beyond whatever ugly thing lies between them. “Now you’ll stand here, **you,** of all those to have ever been loyal to Kumogakure, **you** will stand there and tell me I’m the monster-”

“ENOUGH.” Tsunade’s fist hits the table cracking it right down the middle.

“No.” Fuyuki snarls back, and then, softly. “No.”

That softness cracks whatever has a hold on the Raikage. He slumps into his chair, almost losing his bravado. “Damn you to the depths of hell, woman. Damn you there for as long as the mountains surround the home we have both given kin for.”

For a moment the two stare at each other, eyes fathomless and deep, then Fuyuki tilts her head once and takes her seat.

Oonoki sighs. “Well-”

“Don’t start old man,” Mei cuts in, “some things stay between a girl and the man she used to kill for.”

Oonoki scowls but subsides, after all, *The Beauty of Bloody Mist* is still one of the Mizukage’s nicknames.

It takes long agonizing minutes in which both the Raikage and Fuyuki struggle to regain their composure before Gaara stands and says. “This meeting is over.”

Mei nods. “Carried.”

Tsunade and Oonoki both throw one sharp glance at each other before rising and leaving without
preamble. The minor Kage and their attaches leave as well. Sasuke frowns. If someone doesn’t do something soon the only people left in the room will be A and Fuyuki.


If Sasuke was feeling less beaten down he’d probably say I told you so.

They exit quickly, loudly, and Sasuke grimaces at the familiarity. Negotiation is the only way forward. He tucks himself away from the crowd half following the bristling electricity of Fuyuki’s chakra. He follows the twisting corridors of the old temple out into a small courtyard. Fuyuki strides across the small green and stone place, pass the blooming shrubs and stone seats, to grab A by the back of his shirt. She spins him around and beats at him with her fists. He grabs one fist and pulls her forward. She stands her ground and hisses at him. A is a taller, bigger man than she is but he holds her wrist gently, the only admonishment in the way he pushes her fingers back too far. From here Sasuke can’t hear them. He can only read their bodies. A turns his hold on her into something almost intimate, not sexual or romantic, just a physical comfort with each other they must have earned. Fuyuki almost lets her shoulders drop, almost lets her guard fall against someone she must have once followed without reservation, but just before she falls A says something.

She slaps him. A stomps away with a grimace. And Fuyuki...Fuyuki just looks sad.

Sasuke waits until he leaves to come forward. At length she turns her attention to Sasuke. “Nadeshiko.”

“This should have been different.” Sasuke snarls.

“It should have been.” Fuyuki agrees, her head is still tilted away from him, eyes on the rapidly retreating line of her former Kage’s back. Her hands aren’t bloody right now but she’s just as far away as she was then. “But I am who I am, and this is what it is.”

Sasuke shakes his head. “You want this to be different.”

Fuyuki looks at him, power unchecked, for the first time. For the first time he truly sees the strong back of Giri, the woman who so terrifies people that they would agree to something as radical as her vision. He’s small in the face of that. A boy. A child. This is someone who fought the world and won. “I am what Kumogakure made me. I am...too far along this path to be the spot on which the world turns. I don’t want peace, not really. What would I do with it? I can be a fulcrum, a lever, I can make a place to stand and push, but this dream is not something I’ll see the end of,” she says peaceably. “I’ve kept any number of things from you: the exact nature of your missions, the whereabouts of those you cared about, other such things like that.” Now she turns so they’re facing each other. She’s soft, gentle, quiet. “Do you understand why?”

“Because I was an investment.”

“You’re a person,” she says firmly, “but you’re a shinobi too. We do not have that luxury.”

“I’m not a shinobi.”

“Oh?” Her face twitches into a genuine smile. She reaches down, past her sword, and pulls out a scroll. Sasuke’s heart speeds up. “Then I should worry less about giving you this.”

“What is it?”

She hesitates to hand it over. “The truth about what killed your brother.”
“I already know about-”

“I don’t mean that.” She shakes her head. “I told you, we met once. We had a talk, tactician to tactician, and we made each other very uncomfortable. Please, take this, and know that I am sorry he died that way. You deserved to see him again even if it was to kill him. You deserved that closure. He deserved...well, at the very least he deserved to see the man you became. I am sorry to have taken that from the both of you.”

“Why?” He snarls, the hot sting of tears behind his eyes. You too, this shit with you as well, you of all people. “Why?”

“Come sit over here.” She pats the seat next to her. “Come on.”

He stalks over and plops himself down. It feels absurd to do something as simple as sit next to someone he once massacred an entire city for.

“A knife is a knife is a knife.” Fuyuki knocks him with her shoulder. “What I’m doing -what this has always been about- is swapping one blunt object for another. I’m not trying to make lasting peace only force us to an armistice we can keep. You are the ones who can make peace possible. I don’t expect to succeed at even half of my aims, all I want is to put the idea in your heads, and hopefully gain enough ground that I can leave it in your hands.”

“Why are you telling me this?” He can’t keep the affront from his voice. When put like that it all sounds so simple.

“Still killing the messenger?” she chides. “That’s all I am, Sasuke. You do understand that? I’m just the messenger. Whatever else you are your own man. As was your brother after a fashion. I haven’t decided anything for you.”

You can hate me if you like. It won’t change what you lost.

Sasuke takes a deep breath. “Fine.”

She knows him well enough to call bullshit but chooses to let him stew in it instead. She walks away, down the same corridor A took. He imagines she’s still got some things to say to him.

“You know,” he calls out after her, “that’s almost the exact definition of the Will of Fire.”

Fuyuki flips him off, but he sees her shoulders shake with laughter.

He rips it open, takes one look at it with his sharingan and then throws it in the air making the hand signs for the grand fireball jutsu. It goes up in a moment of flame and anger and righteous rage at everything around him.

‘This was my backup plan.’

No.

‘I was dying. Every day I was alive was a fight to give you a chance at being the man I could never be’

Not good enough.

‘Mother and Father’s last words were to look after you. I can’t say that I was the son they would have wanted, and I don’t think they’d forgive me for what I’ve done to you.’
Still not good enough.

‘This world is for you, my dream is for you. You never have to forgive me. I will love you forever.’

Maybe that’s his big fault, then. Making a mountain out of molehill, fashioning an enemy out of a comrade, leader, friend. There’s the man at the centre of all that, the brother who was felled by someone else, who didn’t have the decency to wait. There’s the unshakeable, inescapable boy with a dream and warm hands. Goddamnit it all, but there is still Sasuke’s conviction to be a better man without sacrificing himself, without throwing himself away. Save yourself first, always, since he was a boy and lying in blood and shi, because there was no one else, they were dead.

That is not what Fuyuki believes. It is not what Itachi died for. It is hellfire and brimstone away from what Naruto will defend till his last breath. Those people changed the world. When it didn’t work they made it.

Sasuke is too damn selfish. He just wants it to make sense.

Why does the world turn on betrayal. Why do the Uchiha rise and fall by their hearts. Why is Sasuke always neck deep in other people’s shit. Why is he always at the short end searching for an answer or for power or for truth. What the hell is honesty, anyway, in a world where someone can choose to murder a boy’s family in the dead of night and wake up the next morning and pretend he never did? What kind of fked up universe allows for this?

--

“Why didn’t you tell us that Hashira was never going to agree?” Naruto demands hotly. “She made an ass out of Gaara and picked a fight with A.” He presses Sasuke up against the wall in their shared room with the heat of his body.

“A and Fuyuki have a very long, very bloody history.” Sasuke feels tired all the way to his bones. He doesn’t have the energy to explain, in a way that Naruto will understand, just how much Giri hates the Kage’s. “She doesn’t care about Gaara.”

“Why won’t she work with us?” Naruto throws his hands up in the air. “And what the hell was that about being a legacy brat? Just because my old man was the Yellow Flash.”

“Naruto.”

“What?”

“You don’t understand this.” He makes it as gentle as possible. Naruto might have an uncanny ability to grasp the heart of something but he’s never been much interested in the head. Sasuke has spent too long following the faults and failings of the shinobi system to care much about the heart anymore. “What she’s talking about is different.”

“I travelled too you know. I’ve seen what it’s like.”

“With Jiraiya,” Sasuke mutters, not quite stamping out all the derision. No one with an ounce of sense would take someone with Naruto’s heart into the dark soul of the shinobi world. “Whom I’m sure took you to all the sights. He has his own issues.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Just that,” Sasuke sighs. “he’s not innocent in this, neither is the Sandaime or anyone else. We are all fucking complicit.”
“Complicit?” He opens his mouth to argue.

“No, no just- Don’t justify this to me, not now-”

His hands shake, twelve thousand things living and dying in him at once. He’s stupidly, vitally aware that he’s half hard. One part of him wants to shove it away but more of him wants to take even a glance of a promise as proven gospel and touch Naruto.

He kisses him.

“Um,” Naruto’s face is flushed and his breath is a little bit sweet. “Okay?”

“Fuck.” Sasuke spits.

“Woah,” Naruto’s hand tightens briefly on his hair, when the fuck did that happen, both a scold and a comfort. “Let’s go through this one, yeah?”

Absolutely not.

“Oi,” Naruto frowns, correctly predicting what Sasuke is thinking. The hand in his hair pulls. “I’m not letting go.”

“Off.” Sasuke snarls.

“Sure. Let’s do that.” he says agreeably, then drops his weight fully onto Sasuke’s pelvis.

Oh, wow. He can’t stop the rush of feeling at the sudden intensity of contact. He pulls hard on his arrogance and self-restraint to do something other than respond. He won’t give Naruto the satisfaction of having it on his terms. “Fuck. Off.”

“Nope.” Naruto leans down to brush a chaste kiss against his cheek. His hips roll forward a fraction more. Sasuke breathes through it, hissing out, “Idiot-”

Naruto groans once and shifts so they’re pressed together properly, he sighs at the contact, hips picking up a steady rolling motion. His lips come down against Sasuke’s nose, his ear, hand pulling so he bares his neck. Naruto kisses along the shell of his ear and to a spot near his pulse that makes his whole heart flip in his chest with how much he likes it. His mouth is always gentle, with a touch of teeth and tongue to remind Sasuke who’s on top right now.

“Goddamn you-” Sasuke snaps, already shifting so he can get his hands on him. He tries to put one hand between them, maybe to shift the fabric between them, maybe to get himself off just to spite the idiot. Naruto laughs in his face, coming up just long enough for them to tussle. Sasuke ends up underneath with one leg over Naruto’s hips pressing, pressing, pressing down. He’s using what little leverage he has to his best advantage. Naruto’s kissing him properly. Happily, hungrily biting his way in.

Unless he gets himself healed he’s going to have some really pointed bruising tomorrow. Naruto spends a bit more time marking his face before muttering, “If you’d been less of a fucking moron you could have been here years ago.”

“Shut up.” Whether or not he’d ever admit it Sasuke has thought about being 14 and fumbling his way into Naruto’s pants. He has gotten obscenely, uncomfortably hard at the thought of being the first and having Naruto be the only one to know him this way. Single mindedness and possessiveness are Uchiha traits.
Naruto pulls his other leg up so that Sasuke has no leverage whatsoever. His head hits the floor with an audible crack, pain lancing through and confusing the ever loving shit out of his cock.

Naruto notes the hard buck of his hips by grinding down. “Good to know.”

“Stop being so-” Sasuke moans. He’s not close, he’s always taken an infuriatingly long time to come even when he wants it, but he’s a little terrified to know for certain what Naruto would do with that. “So fucking calm-”

“I am not calm.” Naruto hisses. There’s a hand back in his hair, checking for injury before it yanks upwards. Sasuke yelps, legs coming off Naruto’s hips. He tries to take the upper hand out of blind instinct, flailing around before Naruto solves it by getting a hand down his pants to squeeze his cock. Naruto makes an offended noise before he has Sasuke’s pants down. There’s no relief in finally being taken in hand. Naruto’s hand is too soft, fingers shaking as he touches from base to tip. His hand glides down a few more times as gentle as his kiss.

Naruto’s eyes are blown, his breath is too quick. If Sasuke’s dick wasn’t hanging out of his pants he’d assume the moron was about to die. Naruto fumbles pulling down his own pants, moaning far too loud when his cock hits the open air. Absently Sasuke notes that he underestimated the girth. Naruto licks his lips, hand on his own cock, hot and red at the tip, precum leaking obscenely. “I’m gonna get us there.”

“What? This year?” Sasuke drawls, leaning back casually to best display himself. Naruto growls and covers him again, contact so much better now if too dry. Sasuke attempts to get a hand between them again so Naruto bites him on the lip hard enough to bleed.

“This isn’t for you.” Naruto says as he maneuvers them so he can grip them both in hand.

Sasuke’s heart drops -what the fuck does that mean?- before he has to, absolutely has to moan at the hand around their cocks. Finally his hand is tight enough, finally there’s enough friction that he can feel it crest, finally the moron is doing what he’s meant to and-

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, dobe.” Sasuke gives him a congratulatory pat on the back then draws his nails down his back hard enough to sting. “You got us there.”

Naruto laughs. “Believe it.”

--

Itachi leaves breadcrumbs. He never was one for giving more information than necessary. But Sasuke isn’t a child anymore, he isn’t easily lead or running from things that hurt him. Itachi leaves breadcrumbs. And now Sasuke knows what he’s looking for.

If he’d gone to the library, if he’d looked, he’d have found dozens of papers written by the local papers about corruption in the police force. He might have seen the erosion of goodwill. The court cases and the television pieces. His focus was so inward that he never even stopped to think- It’s stomach curdling. Itachi truly believed that his family was past repair. From the oldest grandfather to the youngest babe. And- And- Sasuke might have agreed. He might have wanted- And suddenly, suddenly he’s grateful he didn’t read this when he was a child. This is- This is unfair to the person he was.
But then there’s Kagami. Then there’s Shisui Michiko. Tsuki, Yumi all the cousins he never got to
know. Jinta. He can’t ignore that, or Tobirama’s insistence that his blood is evil. Maybe they’re
looking at this through the wrong lense. If he takes what he knows and shifts, pulls away from
what he accepts so easily what does he have? They love too much. They grieve too easily. They
don’t ever bend. But they have and always will be guardians. For all their faults - and there are
many - you can’t say that the Uchiha aren’t loyal. You can’t say they don’t care. The sharingan is
driven by how much you care. That isn’t evil.

So what does that mean?

He slows his head down. Holds himself still and lets the thought bubble to the surface, past all the
bullshit, past all the bits of him that insist on living life around the singular principle of his brothers
betrayal. Itachi was wrong: there must be another way to obtain the eternal mangekyou.

--

They’ve been... off since Lightning. Not that they were ever really on but usually Sasuke can gleam
a little bit of what is driving Naruto. Lately Naruto seems as much a mystery to himself as anyone
else. He’s rabid about Sasuke, as usual, but rather than a need to control the world around him, to
push and pull until he’s by Naruto’s side he’s turned silent. They’re in Sasuke’s apartment, they’re
freshly showered and Sasuke is idling between getting on his knees for his best friend and doing
the dishes. That’s the other thing this relationship has a lot of: Sasuke is a domestic person now
and Naruto seems to crave it. Doing his bills, sorting out his estate has Sasuke at home with his
cats more often than not. He rarely gets more dressed than he needs to, to go to the market.

It’s in one of these lowkey moments that Naruto says, “You don’t need it.”

Sasuke stops washing the dishes, hands clenching and unclenching in the water. “You don’t get it.”

Naruto snorts. “What, that you can’t let the fuck go?”

“You don’t understand.”

“He’s dead!”

“It’s not about him!” Sasuke gets up in Naruto’s face. Nose to nose, eye to eye. “I don’t have
anything left. There’s no legacy! There’s just what I do! There’s just the clothes on my back and
my dead family –” he’s getting mixed up now. Anger at Itachi, at Konoha, at Oto for hurting him,
at Giri for disappointing him, at the shitpile of the world still fucking turning on betrayal. Isn’t
there anything else? Is this all there is? At himself for killing one of the few things he’s had in his
life for no reason at all. “I need power. I need to be the strongest I can be. There isn’t anything else.
I know you don’t get that. But I need - I need something from-” the past, from his blood, a bodily
anchor to something that seems to slip away the older he gets. Who is he if not a Uchiha? Who are
the Uchiha now, anyway? One is dead, one is a genocidal maniac, the other is Sasuke. They’re all
traitors. They have all killed for power when there was another way.

“I never-”

“Listen to me! For once in your fucking life just fucking listen to me! Don’t try to understand,
don’t try to commiserate. For once just listen,” Sasuke’s voice breaks, almost pleading.

“I love you.” Naruto says flatly. “I have done absolutely everything I can for you.”

Except listen to me. “It doesn’t make a difference. What I lost doesn’t come back just because-
you love me and I probably love you back. “It doesn’t come back. I had it and- You can’t be
everything, you can’t be all of it.”

Naruto looks at him, looks past him, looks through him. He nods once and then turns on his heel and leaves. He goes out the door, into the night and he doesn’t look back.

Sasuke can’t breathe. He knows he is because there’s this awful heaving noise coming from his mouth and he hasn’t passed out, but his brain isn’t registering anything beyond pure shattering pain. His eyes spin memorising the sight of the open door, the smell of wood and sword oil. The exact spot Naruto stuck his hand in Sasuke’s chest and repaid him for their fight at the Valley of the End. That asshole, to come here, to make him feel like that again and then to just, to not listen, to leave because it was difficult. Fuck him, anyway, it’s not his head-

There’s a thudding behind his temples and he may pass out. A horrific kaleidoscope of images: blond hair, blue eyes, skin he’s cut, bruised, kissed. All of it stuck in his fucking head. All the times he was a dumb kid and relied on that strength. All the nights, hands on himself, thinking about what he might have had. All those times he couldn’t get away from the pull, he had to question what he knows, what defines him and then Naruto just walked away.

Sasuke showed himself and he left

How dare he. Sasuke’s not weak. He’s not small or unworthy or forgotten. Naruto has to feel it too. The need to be closer, the need to be connected, he has to. How dare he. How dare he choose to be a coward now.

Tears don’t fall, he’s better than that he is not weak, but he rubs at his face regardless.

He can’t turn his eyes off.

--

The journey to Lightning is tense.

Technically Sasuke should be at the civilian headquarters but...

He looks over at Naruto who is still not speaking to him. When the pain in his eyes died down he went out to look for him. It took hours but eventually he found him in a shitty dive bar. They fought again, all they’ve been doing is fighting, but that one at least ended with handjobs in the alley. Naruto is the cagey one right now. Lightning rocked what he believes in down to its foundations and left cracks Sasuke is disinterested in healing. He can’t talk to Kakashi about it. Sakura is even worse. She’s Tsunade’s right hand and struggling under the weight of that. Naruto should be able to turn to him for reassurance about his world view and Sasuke just...can’t give him that.

So they walk beside each other on a mockery of Team 7’s first mission. All around them are supplies, shinobi and the trapping of a major military effort. Unlike the first mission they ever went on Sasuke is in new boots and civilian hardware. He isn’t cleared to fight. That hadn’t helped his and Naruto’s relationship any. When Tsunade had offered reinstatement all he could think of was what happened to the children if he died. Children need families. He’ll have to leave before the fight starts.

The cross section of armies is a small circle of boulders. Each boulder has the symbol of an individual force carved into it. Giri’s edelweiss is next to a blank circle, the symbol for the mercenaries who are throwing in. Behind each boulder is an open tent allowing everyone to see in. Sasuke heads for the whirlpool of Uzushio and steps quietly towards what must be their
headquarters. Intelligence and coordination is a joint effort between Uzushio and Konoha and they requested he come in for a last minute check of information.

A tall figure with long hair rests on a low couch, feet on a table. He’s reading a scroll looking perfectly at home in the land of the living.

“No hair,” Orochimaru says, which is exactly what Sasuke should have expected really.

“Nice entrance,” he replies.

“Always so cool,” Orochimaru admonishes. “Not surprised?”

Sasuke shrugs. “Nah.”

Orochimaru’s eyebrows hit the roof, making every bit of Sasuke’s too long hair and no longer worn in boots worth it.

Tsunade walks in followed by the Hokages and Kakashi.

“Orochi,” Tsunade says sourly, “goddamnit just die already.”

Orochimaru laughs. “I could say the same princess. Where’s the fool?”

“How the fuck would I know?”

“Ah,” he scolds. “Language, Lord Hokage.”

“Tsk.” Tsunade throws up her middle fingers. “I’ll language you.”

Orochimaru smirks, slithers to his full height and stops.

“Oh,” Tsunade says sweetly, “did you think you were the only one who could?”

Orochimaru hisses in displeasure. “Now you make peace with your heritage? Where was that drive years ago Senju.”

“Tsuna,” Hashirama says.

She holds up a hand to silence her grandfather. “Don’t.”

A familiar flicker hits Sasuke in the head announcing Karin’s arrival. She enters through the back. Orochimaru claps. “Ah, Karin, you brought it.” Karin scowls sourly still approaching with a bag in one hand. There’s blood on the bottom. She chuck the bag at his feet and stomps away, rubbing her hands on her palms as if brushing off something disgusting. Orochimaru picks up the bag. “I believe I’m about to one up you sweetheart.”

“Sweetheart me and I’ll put you in so many pieces not even you could slither together again.”

Sasuke tunes them out. He doesn’t need to listen to this shit. The war ground is barren and large filled with empty grey space. It’s so like where he was held when he was here a month and change ago that he feels discordant. He can see a dragon in the sky. See too much light. See Naruto next to him yelling at him to just keep walking. His hands flex and he is suddenly viscerally glad he isn’t allowed to fight.

“Holy shit!” Sakura gasps. Sasuke frowns, turns and sees his mother’s hair blowing in the wind. A mouth set grimly, ready for death and not at peace with it. Vertigo hits him like a punch to the
Sasuke is probably going to pass out.

In the battle between Itachi and the weight of the world the tumors covering his lungs win. He knows that now. He read it in his brother’s hand after his brother’s death from the hands of a woman who would never spare his feelings. In the battle for Sasuke Itachi took too many hits to keep going, some of them from Sasuke’s own hand. In the battle to save Konoha Itachi was a crucial but ultimately expendable playing piece.

In the battle between brothers Itachi won far more than he lost.

None of that is going through Sasuke’s head. All he can hear is a memory: ‘When there’s nothing else to burn set someone else on fire’, is what Shisui used to say as he and Itachi passed Sasuke by. Itachi would grab Shisui by the elbow, the hair, whatever was closest, put him on the floor and say ‘set yourself on fire. When there’s nothing else to burn set yourself on fire. Incidentally, Sasuke, don’t do that-’

There isn’t anything else to set fire to. With his heart in his throat, Sasuke raises a hand and calls. “Brother.”

Chapter End Notes

Next Time on Survival: War! What is it good for?!

Notes:
-I’m probably going to clean up Hindsight and collapse it but if I concentrate on it right now I’m just going to make myself quit writing this.
-This chapter contains one of my favourite pieces of writing, and the character moment I’ve been writing towards for eighteen months.
-We’re two chapters from the end, even if those two chapters may be uber long.
Arc IV: We Can Raise or Raze (Or, Responsible For What You Have Made)

Chapter Summary

Maybe the water's high but I can see the difference.

Chapter Notes

I originally meant to post this on the 27th because for some insane reason my brain was convinced that was Naruto's birthday? Since that's hella untrue I figured now???? Would work??? It's been a hot minute but here it is.

ACTUAL NOTE: this chapter contains a lot of references to a subplot I dropped actual years ago. To remove it I would have to drastically alter the emotional plot. As that's the point I just tried to stitch things together and hope for the best.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Sasuke,” Itachi breathes.

Against his better wishes Sasuke breathes along with him.

“Sasuke,” Itachi’s fingers, cool to the touch and trembling, brush across Sasuke’s face. “Sasuke what have you done.”

The eyes. He thinks you killed for the eyes. “There was another way.”

His brother doesn’t move. He doesn’t even breathe. “You’ll go blind.”

“Not today.” He reaches up to take his brothers hand in his own and feels...He feels. “And today matters more.”

It almost puts a smile on his face to see his brother speechless but they’re here for something else today. The yawning, stretching years of hate and love and desperation that knit his brothers soul so close to his own is held closed. Barely. By the skin of very thin skin. But still it is closed. Whatever he’s done, whatever he’s released into the world through his actions, for this brief moment before the war to end all wars all he feels is the absurd compulsion to be kind.

So he does. “You didn’t kill all of them.”

“You-”

“No.” Sasuke shakes his head. “But they survived anyway. And as much as I would love to fight by your side-” he works through the decades old lump in his throat. The names of dead people and the white out he never deserved to know, “Children deserve families. So I have to live.”

Itachi’s face falls slack. Emotions start ticking over his face. Guilty and hungry in equal measure. “I love you.”
“You too, big brother.” He realises they’re still holding hands. Noise from the outside filters in and he realises they must’ve been whispering. He steps back without letting go. And then he lets go, turns his back and goes to find Karin.

--

In the back of a tent buried amongst other less important ones sits a long beat up couch, a bottle of hard liquor on a nice table and Karin. The outside of the tent is pencilled in text. Some are well wishes most are swear words. Karin’s tent has always been graffitied and she won’t say why. Lying across the couch, drink in hand is how he finds her. The screen in front of her is linked into the same frequency as the civilians base. There are five armies milling along one side and just out of focus, just out of sight, is one lone man.

Sasuke is sitting down, lifting her legs to accommodate himself before she can object.

His hand plays across the skin of her legs, both familiar and not. Her breath picks up and he stops. He didn’t come to fuck with her head. Or to make sense of his own. He came to be away from the bloodshed. To be away from what he used to think was right. “I can’t.” He struggles to find the words to make it make sense. “Not while he’s fighting. Before I could have.”

Karin tilts her head. And of course it would be now, at the possible end of the world, that he would realise that he could love her. Not with the passion he feels from one brush of Naruto’s fingers but with the surety of the ocean. Here is someone who sees him even when he can’t see himself. He doesn’t love her and is more than sure that the path is closed now, but he could have.

Her eyes widen. “Sasuke-”

He shakes his head. “I can’t fight him.” To clash swords with his brother now would be to turn around, to refill the hate in him that has been spilling out inch by aching inch all these years.

“You can’t fight at all.”

He snorts. If Sasuke picked up a sword and walked out there all he would get is relieved sighs. This is Madara at full power. Any body between him and world domination is welcome.

“Is it because he’s your brother? Or because now that you have something you want to live for you’re afraid to die?”

His eyebrow goes up. “I’m not afraid of death.”

“But you’ve wanted to die. So have I.” She protests. “You know fear but you don’t feel it. Now you do.”

“I’m not afraid.”

She pulls her legs up, away. “You’re tired, you’re here because you have to be, you’re here because some part of you wants to be proven right. Or wrong. Proven, anyway. That’s why I’m here. This is a last stand but you and I? Everything we love would be better served with us at home.” She leans forward to brush his hair back. In her eyes burns a thousand years of power. Dragonborn indeed. “Why are you here, my love? Why come to the end of the world?”

He gives her a blank, tired stare. “Where else could I be?”

Karin laughs. “Right. Team Survival right to the end.”
Rule of the wild. Always know who you’re running with. He refills both of their drinks and leans back to watch the barely moving screen. Five armies. One man. One _Uchiha_. War starts at dawn and they’re all fairly sure who will win.

Not them.

“Do you think we should run?” Sasuke asks.

Karin gives him a startled, pissy look. “The fuck for? I believe in retreat but it’s not like there’s anywhere to go.”

“So we should stay.”

“You’re not going to stay.”

“No?”

“I bet you can’t get through the next forty-five minutes.”

It’s boring as hell watching the set up. Whole armies move into a loose formation of affiliates and allies. He keeps track of them until the bureaucracy of it all drives him nuts. It’s been years and years but the memory of being stationed in the middle fuck you, fuck off and hearing that Otogakure had been taken comes back strong. He looks at Karin. “Where’s Orochimaru?”

Karin grins around her drink. “About six hundred metres away annoying Jiraiya.”

Sasuke grunts. That seems appropriate. War starts in about twenty minutes. The very civilly agreed upon time for this very civilly agreed upon battle being very civilly adhered to. Last meals are being served, last prayers said and last calls for defectors and cowards ringing out. It’s a dreadfully civil affair, all told. He relaxes his body and waits, lets the steady increase of anxiety rock through him-

And sees himself walk onto the field.

It’s 5 minutes to the end of the world now. He isn’t on any drugs. “Karin.”

“Yes.”

“What is this?”

She’s quiet for a moment. He can feel her pick up on the dark roll of chakra. “It was necessary.”

His chakra flares. “To clone me?”

“It’s not a clone. Physically-” She stops, panting. “There needs to be a living Uchiha out there. Madara-”

He grinds the anger to a halt. “Whose plan was this?”

“Orochimaru and Tobirama. That’s why he had me retrieve your brothers head-”

“Where the hell did they get-”

“That’s what I’m saying! It’s not you. It’s someone else’s face and a body. Sasuke, I’m sorry, but they need another Uchiha out there and you said no. Tobirama had the remains of someone who strongly resembles you. You’ve never met Madara!”
We have met, he thinks, and realises that Tsunade knows. Whom he told without telling. Tsunade who could build a body in a day. Who would just need the knowledge of someone who has studied the sharingan. Like Orochimaru for years. Like Tobirama for decades before that. People who think of them as powerful before anything else, even human. Belatedly he thinks of the initials on that first cache of bought parts. ST. Senju Tobirama. Senju Tobirama who only ever loved one of them, and even then because of the way he was not kin to the rest.

“One chance, Karin.” He relaxes muscle by muscle. “Why?”

“Itachi has a plan to use a genjutsu against him. You have-”

“I know.” Sasuke closes his eyes. “I know.”

“It’ll work.”

Only because he’s angry. Only because he can’t break free.

He needs to stop this. He can see, from the outside, why they would want to do this. Uchiha are susceptible to each other. Izuna’s Laugh and The Crone’s Shadow. The former Madara would know, his brother invented it. The later was used on Sasuke. He might know it. What is he missing? There are five such techniques but Itachi could only know four. One you can’t even learn until after your 20th birthday or it leads to colour blindness. So two of them, neither one of them he knows. He needs to stop thinking about this. He needs to step back. He isn’t here to fight he’s here to witness.

“Does it need three sharingan?” He asks instead because he can’t help himself.

“...yes.”

“And they need to be related? From the same bloodline?”

“Yes.”

“It’s not going to work.”

“What? Why not?”

Because Itachi was the favored son who never learnt there was women’s magic. He didn’t read the history of their family for ten years before the massacre and most importantly he did not read the hidden works of Uchiha Kazue and Jinta. Itachi doesn’t know that he is of Michiko’s bloodline, that the sharingan is carried on the mother’s side and that they need to share that lineage for his plan to work. His brother doesn’t know that Naoko and Michiko carried indicators for a blood disease that the old clan could ill afford and so they took pains to keep the blood separate. Itachi doesn’t know that the only one who could have had children that would counteract Madara was a baker's wife named Chizuru. Itachi, horror of horrors, doesn’t know what he doesn’t know.

“Where is Orochimaru?”

“Annoying Jiraiya still. Why?”

“Get a message to my brother. His plan won’t work because he isn’t closely enough related to Madara. We get our sharingan from Michiko our grandmother, not our father.”

“What, Sasuke-”
“No. Tell him he didn’t listen to mothers stories close enough. He knows how to fight with the sharingan but he has no idea how it works. No one does.” I might, he thinks with astonishment, if I live long enough. “I need to stop this.”

--

The war started about fifteen minutes ago. It’s already not going well.

Madara just...slaughtered them. He stepped forward and ripped apart the ranks like they were tissue paper. He’s heard, they’d all heard, about the monstrous power of their forebears but this is a thousand shinobi. Surely, surely that’s enough.

It isn’t. By a lot.

He’s being kept back. Tsunade was insistent that he not engage with the first wave. They’ll need him, everyone said, when they found his weakness. From his perch several factions back he can smell blood and shit. He can just make out a familiar block of dark hair as it dashed forward in perfect formation with it’s brother. Why Sasuke lied about joining the fight he’ll never know. But that’s the relationship: this absurd push and pull of attraction, understanding and complete loss. When he holds Sasuke’s hand it’s like the whole world unravels but he’s had this awful certainty lately that they’re making each others lives harder. Sasuke is wonderful, secretive, stubborn and changing swiftly into someone he is proud of but not sure he’ll be allowed to love. That his twin dreams of his friend and the legacy he wants to build will diverge like forks in a river.

The dark head of hair shifts out of view. Naruto exhales longing and inhales more copper and smoke. Madara has started burning people alive. The fire is so hot he can feel it prick at his eyes. The screaming is somehow worse. It has been fifteen minutes and already war is something he never wants to experience again.

Naruto’s breath freezes in his chest. A new chakra thunders across the field. It’s strong, as strong as any kage he’s ever felt. In less than a moment it’s followed by dozens, hundreds, maybe thousands of little flickers. Standing in rows upon rows of dark robes emblazoned with bright silver stylized edelweiss are missing nin famous, treacherous and dangerous. And right at the point, with her cloak thrown wide open and her hands on her hips, is Hashira Fuyuki.

She lifts a finger to her lips and blows, wind whipping right across the field all the way to where Itachi, Sasuke and Madara are having their violent family reunion. The wind whips them apart, Itachi and Madara landing perfectly still facing each other. Sasuke lands with no difficulty but turns his body towards the mass of black still amassing on the ridge. Fuyuki raises a fist to the air. Her chakra hits it like a shot raising the hair on Naruto’s arms. “Hold it.”

From where he’s kneeling on the ground Naruto can see the jump in Kurotsuchi’s shoulders and the blatant surprise and anger from the Kumo-nin. A’s face twists into something truly ugly. Killer B hisses.

A man clears his throat. He’s tall with a bald head. When he speaks it’s with a long tone that sounds nothing like any accent Naruto’s ever heard. “Are you the true Uchiha Madara?”

Madara smirks. “I am.”

“I am Dosa, leader of the Western Arm of Giri, subordinate to Hashira Fuyuki former Commander of Lightning.” He rolls his shoulders. “I don’t suppose you will consent to disarming yourself and a period of imprisonment while we figure out how to try you for your crimes, the least of which is grave robbery and the most heinous attempted genocide?”
“No.” Madara continues to smirk.

“Excellent. I didn’t bring the army for nothing then.”

And then they move.

--

He registers the flash and awe tactics of his former captain and commander but all of them are less important than finding his brother. There’s a hilarious symmetry there he’ll care about later. Now he has to run.

Itachi is on the field, he knows, but before the explosion of Giri’s arrival hit he felt it flicker and move towards the west of the battle, to the end of the militarized zone. He slides around the right corner just in time to bodily hit the Commander of Giri.

“Sasuke?” She blinks at him. “What are you doing here?”

His mind puts together Giri-Tsunade-Itachi and comes up with provider of DNA for resurrection. He is familiar with Giri’s foray into hypocrisy and keeps his teeth gritting indignation moving. His brother is the one he needs to talk to.

“Where are they?” He manages to sound dull and tired, not burning with rage. “The Senju and the rest?”

Fuyuki frowns, the one that says she doesn’t care for his shit at all, but an achingly familiar sight comes around the same corner.

His brother and his...whatever Fuyuki is to him stare at each other for a moment. It’s genuine befuddlement: the way you look at something that’s fallen in to your line of sight by accident. *We didn’t like each other*, she said, *but we understood each other.*

Fuyuki frowns. “Uchiha Itachi.”

“Giri.” He inclines his head. “Yuuna. You’re still alive.”

Fuyuki gives him the vaguely incredulous look she used to give Sasuke. There’s a smidgen less condescension perhaps.

“Orochimaru brought him back.” Sasuke provides. So Giri-Tsunade, not Itachi at all. An opportunistic ploy not an intended one.

“Of course he did.” She sighs. “Why wouldn’t he? What a pleasant idea.”

The corner of his mouth picks up, mostly despite himself. “And you’re not taking advantage of any dead-not-dead people.”

“Why would I?” She smiles. “Because it’s silly to put all your eggs in one basket? Because perhaps some people don’t fall apart when I tell them no?”

“And some of those people may have also been princesses from lineages that utterly failed them and might be willing to talk behind someone else’s back?”

“Because someone isn’t stupid enough to miss that history doesn’t fade,” the pleased smile fades, “even when you are literally begging it to. Can we put this aside? Yes, Tsunade and Oonoki contacted me after the summit and we devised a plan without the Kages approval. Mei will get
over, I don’t give a fuck what Gaara thinks and A can—"

Itachi clears his throat.

“-have a civil conversation with me behind closed doors, really, Uchiha? You’re not a child. He expects a full frontal assault. Of course he does. He thinks of this as the Warring States Era but I grew up waging a series of cold wars. I don’t intend to be what he expects.”

Sasuke doesn’t actually know that much about Madara’s tactics. He knows about his heart, his history, his long shadow that covers all that came after, but he doesn’t know how he fights. Which pings as very strange in the back of his head. He does know enough that whatever Fuyuki’s planning won’t be enough. A Uchiha’s heart is such a liability it has to be cut out everytime you fight and yet it’s the very thing that has propelled them to become one of, if not, the most, powerful clans in history. A plan that’s based in tactics won’t defeat that. Hopelessness has only ever made them insane and powerful.

He suppresses a laugh. How many people have wanted to beat him? Or his brother? And all those people were asking the wrong question. It’s not about how strong you are at all. You have to know what the Uchiha are fighting for and then, horror of horrors, you have to understand it.

“It won’t work.”

“The Coalition, Giri and the Uchiha. All of which have enough variability that if a weakness exists we will be able to find it and exploit it.”

“Ahh.” Sasuke grins fully aware that he looks like a fucking maniac. “Won’t work.”

“Brother if you have something to add—” Itachi adds mildly. His brother, the genius, the only one of them to have ever been worth something from the way Sarutobi talked about him, and he doesn’t get it. The only way to understand a Uchiha is to find his heart -whether it’s his family, his lover, the roll of tokens that says that he is human- and there is no one left who has tried as hard as Sasuke has to understand the heart of the Uchiha.

“Brother what do you think Madara carries with him?”

Itachi scoffs. “He does not carry anything.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

He does. He has to. Sasuke has been to the end of the world, to where his family lay down their power. The warning was: be sure. He was. Madara is. To not want power is madness. To need it to be able to feel safe is grief. To grieve is to bottle your love and watch it acidify. And what is it but the deepest sorrows of love to bury your whole family?

“No. You’re right.” He feels peace settle over him. He understands, now. “You need to bring me Senju Hashirama.”

“What—”

“You’re right. He doesn’t need to carry them because the last of them is walking around with Tsunade’s eyes and his face carved on a mountain. You’re a better soldier than I’ve ever been, brother, but you’re not a better Uchiha. If obsession and destruction and pain is what we do then
trust me, I know better, and I am telling you that if you want to beat Uchiha Madara you need to bring me Senju Hashirama.” It took years of bleeding out for him to get it and he’s not sure someone with over a century of festering in him will be able to let it go, but he has always been too stubborn not to try. “If they were brothers, if they were more than that, then he won’t die until he’s done whatever he thinks will bring him peace.” Now he does look at his brother. “You have no idea how far a man can go on that.”

Itachi looks at him with that hunger and pain again.

“Alright.” Itachi says. “Alright. I will bring him. That doesn’t change the immediate plan.”

“And I need something from you,” Sasuke says suddenly. “Do you still have them?”

“Have what, Sasuke?”

“Mother’s scroll.”

Every intake of air is audible. “Yes.” Itachi chokes out. “I-

“I need them.” Sasuke doesn’t want to know- to hear- That scroll isn’t a holding space for trinkets; it’s the last part of his mother’s heart. The only part that isn’t still breathing.

Itachi doesn’t want to give it up. It’s clear on his face. He owes Sasuke this. He owes him.

“And,” he adds belatedly. “You need to let the others know you have a plan. Naruto will blow right through it otherwise.” He doesn’t say you have armies of people who believe they will die at that madman’s hand. We can all stand here and know that practicality suggests that the Konoha method is ludicrous but I wouldn’t want to be out there alone. At least let them believe there’s a chance. “You all know him. Fate seems to bend his way.”

Both Fuyuki and his brother grimace. They discount him because they don’t know him. “Ask Jiraiya. Ask him what happens when you set Naruto on something.”

Itachi sighs, put out. “Brother-”

“Ask.”

Itachi taps his ear. The message is relayed and acted upon. Sasuke can hear the arrival of Gamabunta.

Fuyuki takes a look at the averted eyes and shifting feet and decides a change of venue is in order. “Follow me.”

She has her own tent, of course, and it looks exactly Karin’s with the addition of a table map. The don’t expect this to be a quick war. He can see troops and evacuation routes. They expect to lose, to have to run, to let Madara chase them across the country at large. He has the tailed beasts minus Naruto and Killer B. They don’t think they can win. They’ll do anything they have to. Tsunade and Karin are marked as exit points as are Hashirama and Minato. Should this be lost they will lead the survivors out and try to buy time. On the screens Madara is burning people alive with the same effort one might swat a fly. Sasuke sees fake Sasuke approach a decent replica of Kusanagi in hand.

Madara takes one look at fake!Sasuke and kills him where he stands. He looks at him and the fake just keels over and dies.

He says something. The monitor plays it back: Senju tricks? Do you think I haven’t seen that
And then he subsides to boredly waiting for the army to come to him.

After a shocked, scared moment, Sasuke hisses, “Get me Hashi-”

On the screen Madara sighs and brings his hands together. Fine. I’ll do it myself. One moment he’s still and the next bodies are piling up. Itachi makes a strangled noise in his throat. Then he’s gone.

Madara rips through people like tissue paper. It’s awe-inspiring to watch in the old sense. He’s filled with awe at how easily he destroys. Years ago he would have hungered for that. God, he could have been that. Sasuke sits heavily in a chair and thinks, that could have been me.

Itachi returns long before Sasuke has wrestled that down. Long before he can do more than watch Madara kill with ease and no remorse. Hashirama comes to stand close enough he can feel his body heat. He seems to have reached the same conclusion.

“You have to be the one to end this.” Sasuke says, after a beat of silence.

“Now hold on a minute.” Tobirama steps between them.

“Unless you want to have a very exposing conversation about how you have eyes from an ancestor of mine that died well before the massacre step back, Senju.” Sasuke keeps his voice detached, mind still rolling with I would have wanted that to be me.

Tobirama turns on him. Hashirama stops him.

“Enough.” Hashirama says with power in his voice. “I will hear him out. We can do that much at least.”

You could one shot my great grand uncle into the sun. Sasuke thinks uncharitably as Tobirama slinks away. Hashirama takes a careful cross legged seat on the ground in front of him. His face is open and expecting.

Sasuke inhales. Looks away from the monitor. “Do you know what I know about you?” He pauses, licks his lips. “I know that my mother made strawberries dusted with sugar on the evenings my father spent being important with the other men of our clan. I know that they never ate sweets because Itachi would steal some to snack on while he learnt at my father’s knee. My mother and I weren’t as important as they were. My mother, the last of Michiko’s line and a reminder of one of our clan’s darkest times. Your brother said my grandmother was strong, you don’t know the half of it. You never knew anyone who could tell you.

“I was the second son. My future was assured, unglamorous and good. I wanted it. But this is about you, isn’t it? I know you have the Mokuton, that you gained it when you were young enough to play by the river. Our river. I know that you must’ve spent time figuring out the right texture, the best colour and a way to make those strawberries last through the harshest of winters. I know that you must’ve made them by the river because they always taste a little too fresh. Madara wasn’t a sweets person because -and this you couldn’t know, his mother’s mother was Akino. She hated sweets and so did all her children. But he ate them anyway because they were yours and you gave them to him. We all did, for that reason.” He pauses. “I know you because his sister inherited the plant after he tried to give it back to you. You fought over something transient and made it so big it literally split the world in two. Chizuru thought it was silly but she comforted him anyway. Madara couldn’t scare her even when he made the world shake. She died loving him, one of the few of our blood who ever did. She married a good man and raised a friends son. They planted those strawberries in the back of her garden. There are only two now. Sister plants. One in your home and one in the last place anyone who loved him lived. The third grew wild in my home
but died when it’s people did. I know you because my blood sings back your name when I walk in
the woods of my own home. We built the first fires on that bank with you before the Village
Hidden in the Leaves had a name. Before any Village had a name. Our blood never forgets. That’s
why we’re Blood Eyes. Demons. Whatever it is people want to make of us.” His voice is thin and
reedy by the end but Hashirama is still listening. Thank god.

He unrolls his mother’s scroll. Two locks of hair, two hairpieces and two shards of porcelain. Then
he unwraps his own. Whittled down by years it comes to this: his father’s note to his mother, the
receipt from the restaurant he ate at with Karin, Juugo and Suigetsu, the hilt of his old sword, the
mission slip from his first mission with Team 7 and a copy of Kazue’s last work, A Home Among
Birds. It will never be as clean as his mothers. He doesn’t think he can be that sure of himself.

If he has a heart it is here when it is not behind his eyes.

His hand drifts lovingly over his mother’s shards. He can see Hashirama look at the studded pearls
and red hairpiece with longing. “Some of it is because we have to cut out our own hearts to fight.
Have you seen this before?”

Hashirama shakes his head.

“This is my mother’s heart.” He says simply pointing to one scroll and then the other. “And this is
mine. This is so I never forget who I am. We can’t bring all we are to the fight because if we did
we’d rip ourselves apart. I know you because you’ve been apart of my life since the day you gave
my ancestor a part of yourself. It dripped down through the years until it was just part of being
Uchiha. Part of knowing where the borders of our homeland start. I might not always know how
but the blood does. It always does. Everything in my life, in the lives of any one of my kin you have
ever known, has been seen through the facet of a heart we can ill afford to break.”

There is infinite sadness. An impossible grief. But there is also this: a completely unselfish giving
of self. So much so that the self must be cut into symbols to survive. This is how Sasuke knows
him: through the parts of Konoha he can’t shake with the part of him that wouldn’t die. They only
love one way, so deeply and irrepressibly that it destroys the brain and brands their blood. There is
only one answer and it is always love. Acidified, filtered, purified love.

“Do you understand yet?” Sasuke whispers. “You can’t doubt your heart when it’s laid out like
this. What you’d die for, kill for and, most importantly, live for. It can’t be betrayed or unloved,
only dissolved into...” Rage. Trauma. A crucible of power in exchange for humanity. Hand over
heart, a choice they all made even when it wasn’t easy.

“I think I do.” Hashirama laughs in a brittle sad way. “All this time...”

Hashirama tilts his back exposing the long tanned line of his throat. He looks nothing like Tsunade
when he moves. The relation is in the stillness, inheritance in the soft silent way they consider
things.

“He asked once,” Hashirama whispers. “For a lock of my hair. I cut off half of it to give to him.”

Sasuke relaxes. Maybe he does get it.

--

War. He’s seen battles, he’s committed a massacre, he’s killed many for not very much reason at
all. And still war is so much worse than he could have thought.

Hashirama left abruptly, a serene look that stopped Sasuke’s heart and put ice in his veins on the
mans face. Sasuke has seen what it is like when the best of them put their back into it. He is horrifyingly sure that he is about to learn what it looks like when the best of them has something to prove. The part of him that loves the fight is enthralled. Unfortunately that part of him has been long denied the bulk of his personality. Hashirama moves much faster than he does and by the time Sasuke is in a position to see what his words have brought forth it is already too late to add addendums and culture notes.

A beast of a thousand hands rises over the battlefield. It’s large enough to drown out the sun.

With a triumphant roar a giddy version of his ancestor leaps out up to meet it. Below the both of them people die. By fire. By wood. It’s all they can do to avoid the two men fighting like the world has closed around them. Maybe it has.

They crash down near enough to Sasuke giving him just enough time to feel the roll of Madara’s heat and the weight of Hashirama’s earth. The blowback rattles his brain in his head. They’re talking.

“-you’ve always been a part of what I need- What I-” Hashirama draws in a deep breath. “What we built.”

“Come on now Hashirama,” Madara drawls, “don’t lose your nerve.”

“I made a mistake.”

“You made several,” he replies, “and look, here I am to burn it all away. Say thank you.”

Hashirama growls. “Must you make this difficult?”

“Yes.” Madara grins. He flips through hand signs. “Zetsu!”

And god. It got worse.

Sasuke had known, peripherally, that Zetsu was some kind of chakra monster. It came up in the intel Karin sent him that was meant to be classified. Thousands of them crawl out of the ground, scampering on one or two limbs for the leftover shinobi. The Zetsu open their mouths and begin to chew.

“Watch out!” Sakura throws him out of the way and throws a punch. It shatters all the Zetsu in front of her.

He looks at where the Zetsu are eating, where Hashirama and Madara are fighting and his brain clicks back over flooding him with numb white. All his limitations, the what if’s and the let’s be betters fall under the weight of his history on his feet fighting. His body is not what it once was and the pull of chakra reminds him of every broken bone and fucked up joint he lived with for years. A body made for one thing and now no longer used to the wear and tear of it all. He is still himself though. Congenitally incapable of dying before he’s done.

He ends up back to back with Sakura pushing out ream after ream of fire.

All around him he can hear the sounds of burning flesh and chewing bone. There’s screaming too, begging, all that and much more but shinobi can ignore that. It’s the…swallowing noise, the stench of black smoke and the clash of swords that he’s having trouble with. Their vision is so obscured that all they can do is turn slowly in place waiting for one of the Zetsu to attack first. Hashirama’s beast moves at the edges of his vision obscured as it is by all the noise but he can hear Madara yelling. He can hear them lock swords and meet blow for blow.
He just can’t see past Sakura’s back against his, the lightning and fire in his hands. The whole world is the smell of Sakura’s sweat and his trembling vision.

He grunts, throws the Zetsu off his arm, ignores the weeping wound it leaves and finishes with a terrible fireball. “This isn’t going to be enough.” He’s running out of fire. The smoke is getting too thick.

“Shut up!” Sakura hits out with a force of chakra. “Don’t you dare give up!”

He rolls his eyes. “Excepting reality is not giving up.”

His eyes hurt. They really hurt. The whole world is Sakura’s breath stuttering out along with his, the screams of people he wants to stop dying, his friends and his team scattered across a wasteland, his brother and his lover lost and probably hurt and he can’t breathe his eyes hurt they hurt they hurt they’re bleeding they hurt-

Oh.

The whole world locked behind a heart he can ill afford to break. The price for unfathomable power that comes with a cost. His eyes in his head.

He can’t see the battle anymore but he can see Sakura’s hair, pink and bright and still fighting. He can’t watch her die. Not if there’s another choice. He guesses he can understand how his family folded themselves into police work. Begrudgingly maybe, but a family with a heart like theirs would relish the idea of something to protect. The lens of history twists power into violence and violence into a famine of the soul. The world may not like them, the world may not ever trust them, but by god Sasuke will no longer let them think they didn’t care.

To accept that power means to be beholden to it always. He’s not a good man, he tries sometimes but it died in the house with his parents. Good is gone. There’s only trying to do better.

“I can do it,” Sasuke says.

“Sasuke,” Sakura whispers. “There isn’t-”

“You have to give to get,” Sasuke replies, “that’s what you were trying to tell me, right?”

Sakura looks at him with heavy green eyes. In someway he’s been trying to earn back her trust, not her devotion or her love, just the certainty that he could reach out to her and get what he asked for. Sasuke lost that, somewhere, and much like the weary set to her shoulders when she leaves a double at the hospital, he doesn’t think it was all his own doing. He can make some of it up to her though. He likes to think he has.

He meets her eyes steadily. She looks back and sees something she needs to because she smiles, quick and sad, before squeezing her fist.

“Gotta give to get.” Sakura reaffirms. “Let’s do it then.”

Sasuke smirks at her. Hopes it makes him look twelve again. “I’ll hold ‘em back. You get in there.”

Sakura is less than convinced but she gets going. Whatever she does next he won’t see, anyway.

He punches down past what he thought he could do and tries to find the fire at the centre of himself. There is something beyond this, beyond Susano’o, beyond the dragon, beyond the feral
edges of the sharingan itself. *That is* what he reaches for-
-and falls somewhere else.

It’s not unfamiliar. It’s a bastardised version of the Kyuubi’s cage. Dark and water filled and full of
a sense of grandiosity. He can feel the edges of something that *must* be sealwork, the ebb and flow
of chakra. The only problem is that it’s on such an unrepentant, massive scale that it becomes
incomprehensible that something as flimsy as *sealwork* could contain it.

*That’s because it didn’t,* some helpful hindbrain thing tells him, *we are from before your dragons
made voices. Not human in the least.*

He makes to turn, to look, but his feet begin to slide into the floor. Chains wrap around his wrists,
forcing him to kneel. A singular coil of silver wraps in his hair -the first time he’s regretted its
length on a practical level in quite awhile- and yanks until his throat is exposed. He can feel
something pricking at his fingertips. Crawl inside his veins in a way that is forcefully reminiscent
of Orochimaru’s cursed seal. It burns and pulses its way up him and it’s only the knowledge that
this is far from the first time that stops him from throwing up. Was it always like this? He can
endure, he has to, but the absence of that necessity, as brief as it’s been, has chipped away his will.

After long agonising minutes in which he can *feel* his throat squeezing with blood and vomit it
stops. The blood in his throat turns to molten heat, like swallowing a coal from a blazing fire.

Fantastic. Something else he’s done before.

Whatever it is, whatever weird metaphorical hallucination this is, he accepts it.

A long sweep of fire curls around the cavernous walls and the floor. The fire writhes with
malevolence and then settles into thousands upon *thousands* of red sharingan. It’s a burst of *deja vu.* Eyes in jars, eyes catching fire in the dark room that is his dream and now this: all that have
ever shared his bloodlines ultimate burden gazing down at him. Every single pair of those eyes is a
family member lived and gone gathered here in this place, whatever it is, to pass judgement.

There’s nothing to say to that, nothing to do, so he relies on the only trick he ever has: completely
unearned arrogance.

These in-between places are malleable so he pulls on a thread of memory. His favourite sword, not
special not Kusanagi, but a fairly cheap thing that was slightly off balance. It never was great for
killing but boy did he love the *woosh* of it. He falls to an easy stance. “Come!”

Silence. Then it’s complete and total opposite.

A blank moment of such intense pain he can’t even sob and then an open room so wide he can’t see
the edges. He knows it does end, it seems important to know that, but he cannot *see* it. All those
eyes are now in human faces from the furthest throwback ancestor -four inches shorter than
average, wide, face too delicate for a body built only to survive- to Tsuki and Yumi holding hands
in Uchiha blues. Their gaze is expectant.

He’s on trial. His goddamn family is putting him on trial.

*Well fuck them,* he thinks, *just a little.* There is a fucking war on.

As if in response a dark mass forms itself into a woman in front of him. For a moment he thinks of
Kazue as she is in his nightmares: crone-like and cruel. But for all of her beautiful cutting words
she is still unbearably, hauntingly human. This *thing* is not.
I’ll cut it away, the wraith says. Her long talons close around his throat, gouge his skin. Her face is full of teeth and a wide circling eye. Her robes curl around the both of them like a macabre hug. Even though her hands are claws he feels like he could hold them. Cut away all of his doubts. His melancholy.

No. He says it in his head, in his heart, with his bones. I do not accept.

And so it falls away.

Next the scent of lake water and stillness takes the form of his brother.

I’ll use it. The stern soldier says. His mouth twists the way Itachi’s did. Out of habit Sasuke looks to his pinky: his brothers only tell. Long and straight and sure are his fingers. The hands of the first son, who never needed to know the harsh truths and decided to damn them all anyway. It could be Itachi, yes, but his father and Madara too.

No. He wills again. Not them.

Wind kicks up and up and up into a figure made of Konoha’s fall leaves and the surety of a homeland. A people that you can die for, the very essence of an idea that blooms into The Will of Fire. Half lie, yes, but only because they aren’t good enough to make it real. He could be. He’s strong enough.

I will be it.

He hesitates, of course, but- No.

The eyes shudder and close. What else is left to offer? The sharingan comes with a cost and he must pay it if he wants more power.

With a thousand eyes upon him Sasuke reaches down below what he thought was the bottom of his power, below his own foundations and frees his own chains. With easy motions he makes a dragon: the one that freed Oto, the one that freed Kakashi from his guilt, the one that freed him from himself. He finds it strong. He finds it good. And instead of accepting the mountainous history of his bloodline he offers an alternative. His own Will of Fire.

See what I can be, he thinks, and make it stronger. If it turns to poison then purify: let it die.

As all things heal so must they poison. He can’t let go. Not now. Not ever. But he can’t afford for it to kill him. Children need families. And he needs something too. Maybe closure. Maybe to say a proper goodbye to the brother he loves more than anything. He can’t afford to let this kill him. He can’t afford to accept the terms as they’re written. So, this. As his mother would say: be responsible for what you have made.

The eyes widen and spin. The eyes spin and close. Lights go out and there’s only him, his dragon and a fading hope.

His feet release from the ground and he floats. Air and fire turning to water. And beneath, far, far beneath: the whole earth the size of a marble. He’s floating in some embryonic void long before humans had words to express ideas. Maybe long before there were humans as he knows them. There are lights underneath him, stones and carvings. A long mournful note as its singer emerges.

It belongs to me, the sad princess says. Her translucent eyes dip with sadness. None but me shall have it.
He can feel the edge of her reject him fully and totally. He isn’t strong enough to turn the tide of the whole world. Who is he to offer a new way, when the old ones are right there. Blood for sacrifice, sacrifice for power and at the beginning of it all; the selfish wish for more.

Who is he to question the way of things?

*Enough of that,* a sharp rapping noise and the water gives way to solid ground. He gets the absurd notion of a child scolding their parent. If even one more freaky thing happens-

The eyes return full force. All of his ancestors stare down at him accusingly. He tries to make the offer again, to *move the fuck on, be better, not drown in their own shit and blood,* but he has nothing left. No chakra just stubborn will.

The eyes close dropping him into an annoying, familiar darkness. He’s facing forward churning in his own *failure* when he hears the footsteps. One light and sure, the other pensive. Two boys who turn to men who turn to enemies who turn their backs on eachother. Brothers.

The older, taller one holds his hand out. Sasuke grasps it. He’s Uchiha blood for sure, if Sasuke shaved off his eyebrows they’d look eerily similar. He can hear a cycle of whispers in his ears.

*Power, power, sacrifice, power.* Obito, too: *You’re my blood, boy. I know it burns.* *Fire going down his throat and the knowledge that you must be sure,* always.

To not want power is lunacy.

In the end it’s all the little things that save him. Again and again it’s that, that reminds him: how bad the dumplings he makes are, the way he knew the tune to some stupid jingle after ten years of not hearing it, his dumb cats and his dumb teammates who he loves so much it scares him. All the power in the world and he’d rather have his weird little house and the assurance of family to come home to. Thank you but the cost has been paid, *god has it ever been paid.* By child and mother alike all the way down the line to him. He broke even and he doesn’t want to pay in to this anymore. He never would have if he’d known. He wasn’t a clever child but he wasn’t unkind either: if Itachi had asked he wouldn’t have wanted to pay for it.

Power seems less like a lifeline and more like something running parallel. He can make their courses meet. He does not have to.

The thing, *this shadow,* that feels like it’s been hanging over the family line recoils. Sasuke takes his chance and pulls, pulls for whatever is beyond even *that.* This may be the beginning of the obsession but it isn’t the beginning of who they *are.* Life is too absurd for something so thematically simple.

It pushes back. It pushes *hard* but it has nothing Sasuke wants. Even less that he needs. Sasuke pushes and pushes and pushes until, with a sigh, it gives way to a bone deep knowledge.

*Something so well worn that Sasuke would know a whisper of it in a lake of water.*

*I loved him.* Otsutsuki Indra says, almost wry. *And in losing him I lost myself.*

It falls away as so much before it has. Sasuke lets it, lets the grief and the love come and wash over him. He carries enough of it. Another man, maybe even a certain number one knucklehead, would try and hold it, but Sasuke knows this moment is a thousand years in the making. His kin can love forever, will grieve for twice that but sometimes what they need is a witness, to see the heart and let the flicker of it die out.

It is understood and thus no longer needs to burn.
The last thing before he closes the door on this: a woman, inhuman and inhumane. She’s dressed in
white and if she wasn’t so clearly something else altogether she would remind him of his mother.
She runs a hand down his cheek, eyes glowing with tears.

You looks so much like him. So much like...

The unearthly glow of her eyes pales as her hand falls away. Something gives way, gives in, and a
spectre seems to fall right out of his soul. The Rabbit Goddess disappears.

--

He tastes his own tears as he opens his eyes. The battlefield is burning. He can see Sakura close to
him, others nearby, but all that really registers is the Zetsu corpses littering the ground as far as he
can see. His chakra is so strong is burns the air he breathes, curling and coiling and clean. He can
feel it, feel that something came through him to do this. Something like-

Sakura coughs. It should sound pointed but she can’t breathe through his oppressive chakra.

“Sasuke. We need to move.”

He grits his teeth an tries to drop it. Tries again when it doesn’t work. Tries again-

Peace, little one. Indra’s voice pulls right through his body. What the fuck. It is not your chakra
doing this. Peace, or you will wake our grandmother, even after so thoroughly closing her route
home.

What the fuck.

“I loved you,” Hashirama says aggrieved. “And I have misunderstood you.”

I can’t. He thinks through gritted teeth. I am being possessed.

He can feel a thousand year old being sigh, ruffle his hair and let go. There’s the firm feeling that
they may talk again but for now the chain is broken. He is the first Uchiha to be truly his own
since the line started. Sakura is on him the second she can reach him without burning.

“Are you alright?” She frowns. He both is and isn’t, but before he can mention it a giant root comes
straight out of the ground. Hashirama slides along it with his sword brandished. Apparently
whatever Sasuke did it wasn’t enough to make those two pause for more than a moment.

Sakura secures him and leaps to a point further back so they can take in the battlefield. Everyone
else is creating space with the threat of the Zetsu clones minimised. He can make out Kakashi and
Naruto zig zagging around making little openings for people to escape what has become a two man
battle.

Madara screams something and then rips off what remains of his shirt. The pale flesh is marred by
scars, blood and-

Well, Sasuke thinks, uncharitably, that he probably didn’t need to expose the very essence of who
he is to Hashirama if Madara was just going to literally put his face over his heart like an asshole.

Something intense flickers across both men as they land less than fifty metres apart, the whole
world whittled down to the two of them.

“I loved you,” Hashirama says aggrieved. “And I have misunderstood you.”
“You think your mokuton can-”

“Be quiet.” There’s a harsh snap of power against the ground, heavy and unyielding. “It’s a seed. It’s a sprout that grows from love and care but also from suffering and death. It grows from blood. The world is a vine that wraps around itself always dying and always flowering. There’s a moment of stillness and peace, a kind of end. That’s the moment you have to live in: you know one man can’t achieve everything.”

“What bullshit,” Madara chokes on his words. Hashirama keeps a firm hold on his face but turns the grip of his fingers so that he has his thumbs near Madara’s eyes. Madara jerks back but Hashirama holds firm. There’s a paleness stretching from his fingertips down the length of Madara’s torso. “What the hell are-”

“No matter how much power you have you can only be a ripple,” he says gently. There’s a pallor to Madara’s skin that grows with every passing second, veins turn purple and yellow under his skin. “You can only change the flow of the river, you can’t dam it. Skipping stones, floating leaves, they’re all picked up and thrown away by the flood.”

“Fuck your philosophy,” Madara kicks out of Hashirama’s hold and begins the fight again. “What did you do?” A barrage of attacks so fast the eye can’t follow happen. And if the sannin can make Sasuke feel small it is nothing compared to how microscopic he feels watching this. There are a dozen moves, two dozen, that should have ended it, both the war and everyone still technically fighting it. There are moments Madara should take advantage of to thin the herd but he’s so focused on fighting Hashirama he’s falling into old habits, minimising surrounding damage and redirecting what he can’t take face on. God, what does that feel like, to fight someone so much that every battle could have happened today, tomorrow, a hundred years ago?

Hashirama says something, Madara doesn’t hesitate, and when they make their move two things happen. One, Hashirama loses a leg from a katon jutsu that comes out of nowhere. Two, there is a horrible awful wrenching noise and the space where Madara’s heart should be is opened up by a pure light that hurts to look at.

There’s madness here too, Sasuke thinks wildly, grabbing Sakura under one arm and jumping back as far as he can. He knew there had to be something grandiose and terrible in the Senju blood. He lands on an outcrop of rocks still too close to the action. Sakura gets to her feet and ends her jutsu, with the instant healing ended she drops again. Her knees hit the ground with a heavy thud. “What the hell?”

“I don’t know for sure,” Sasuke replies, “but I think that’s the Senju equivalent of the perfect Susano’o.”

“What?”

“An ability that eventually consumes you,” he says solemnly.

“Shit.” Sakura wipes the blood from her mouth. “We’re going to die.”

More to himself than those gathered, Hashirama says, “An empty vessel for the light to pass through. No more, no less.” Around his sage marks something like sunlight begins to glow. It is not the sun, it can’t be, nothing meant to give life could be that empty and cruel but it shimmers all the same.

Sasuke bodily forces Sakura behind him.
Hashirama’s flick over to him, his sword and the hold he has on his teammate. He looks consideringly at his hand and it’s strange light then drops any pretense about what he is. All the hair on Sasuke’s body goes up in alarm as the pinnacle of whatever it is the mokuton is at its core turns its back on him.

People begin to stream off the field all around him, as if they too feel the inevitable last blow oncoming. Sasuke settles Sakura more firmly behind the natural shield of the rock around them. Running won’t help them now, and besides he wants to know.

Hashirama leaps, turns and strikes at Madara’s left. Madara snorts and parries his sword cutting his hand along its length. Hashirama jerks forward running the edge deeper along his friends hand. He reverses backwards and lands a small distance away. Edo Tensei heals Madara’s wounds.

With a deep breath Hashirama brings Madara’s blood to his mouth and whispers a prayer.

Madara grunts, his just healed hand jerks. There’s a beautiful flower blooming in his chest. It’s red, tragic, awful. It spirals up and begins to eat the part of Hashirama that’s been grafted on Madara’s chest.

Madara just grunts, “I won’t fail.” And attacks.

“Neither will I.” The end of Hashirama’s hair shifts from brown to dirt. It’s littering across the ground behind him like tiny specks of diamond dust. He meets another blow, coming within kissing distance before turning away. Madara is falling apart just a hair faster and by the enraged fury set in his eyes he knows it. He makes another dash at Hashirama cutting his shoulder. Edo Tensei reforms it in a flash, holds together for a breath of a second before exploding apart.

Madara grins. “You’re crumbling before my eyes.”

“Then you’ll get your dream after all.”

“That was never...” Madara stops for a moment. There’s a bloom of red across his neck, along the curve of his jaw, curving threateningly towards one eye. Sasuke sees the bob of his Adam’s apple when his voice drops, longingly, “What have you done to me?”

Hashirama smiles. A real one not the overdone confidence of a powerful man. “If you think it came with no cost then I’m afraid that makes you the fool, my friend. You know better than that. And as long as you think you can control it rather than work with it, it’ll seek to control you.”

“Ridiculous.”

“I always thought so.” A horrible, peaceful light blooms from between the cracks of Hashirama’s skin. Sasuke can feel it calling Madara home. Calling all of them home. “We’ll have our drink this time, eh, Madara?”

Their hands meet, fingertip to fingertip, and the light flows outward.

There’s silence across the battlefield. No one moves a muscle.

Sasuke looks to Tobirama still kneeling by Sarutobi and Itachi. His hand is on the ground holding the barrier up. After a moment of sheer shocked silence he comes to life. Instead of shocked or triumphant he looks thoughtful and relieved. His right hand, the one on the ground, touches a stark scar against his throat. As the barrier fades Sasuke thinks he sees the first sign of loss on his face. He looks back at Sasuke and nods. Sasuke nods back.
“It’s done,” Sakura says. Her side is bleeding heavily. Sasuke can’t imagine why she let go of her technique now.

“Yeah,” Sasuke sits down so she can lean on him, “it’s done now.”

Sakura turns her head into his shoulder and cries. Across the battleground the armies begin to cheer.

--

Sasuke hauls Sakura into his arms and begins picking his way down the side of the crater to where he can see Karin and a group of Orochimaru’s new lackeys setting up a medical station. There are two tents and the rolling feel of in use medical chakra. They’re about fifth in line, after three broken legs and a jaw break that’s more like a severing, so Sasuke hauls her more tightly against him to keep warm. She protests a little before settling down into a low murmuring sleep. Usually her chakra is a warm sunned earth or a crashing wave, right now it’s more like a parched sea bed.

Sasuke clocks Karin’s approach a moment before she bursts out of the tent, sleeves already rolled up. She walks right through her other patients to get to them. She holds up her arm. “Bite down.”

“Sakura-”

“Geez, Sasuke,” Karin rolls her eyes, “I know not you. Oi, pinky. Bite my fucking arm.”

Sakura tries to sit up, since she can’t support her own weight this ends with her sitting awkwardly in Sasuke’s lap, his arms around her hips and her shoulders to hold her up. She gives Karin a loopy smile. “You’re really cute.”

Karin rolls her eyes again. “I’m adorable. Bite me.” Since Sakura is clearly taking too long Karin puts her forearm in Sakura’s mouth and forces her jaw. Immediately the chakra exchange starts. Sakura relaxes nearly completely in his hold and it’s only by the grace of Sasuke and Karin’s combined efforts that she doesn’t brain herself on the ground.

Karin removes her forearm from Sakura’s mouth. Sasuke swears that Sakura darts in and presses a quick kiss to the scar with a mumbled thank you, although a court could never get him to testify to it. Karin looks a little awestruck but with a flick of her hair regains her composure. She levels Sasuke with an unimpressed look. “Nadeshiko, you good?”

Sasuke tries to convey with his face that he’s flipping her off in his head.

Karin smiles tightly. “Then you should get over to the Konoha encampment. They’re about to release Edo Tensei.”

Sasuke heart stops in his chest. “Now?”

Karin gently touches the side of his face with one hand and calls for assistance with the other. “I’ll look after the girl.”

“Thank you.”

Karin presses a soft kiss to his forehead as a dismissal.

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The Yellow Flash is standing amidst a pile of ashes. His son is of a height and the heavy weight of
that dead-burnt-dirt crawls to his knees. From his approach Sasuke can hear wailing, shouting, the announcements of the dead. He can hear Hiki’s steady voice calling for a sound off: *Mitsu! Here! Natsu! Here! Goro! Dead, sir!*

He’s imagined fathers before. The answer to an age old hurt: *would he be proud of me?* But Sasuke has always at least known his father’s own face. Watching Naruto watch his own as if he’s never seen it before is...It’s something. The honored dead -those felled all around them in the service of a righteous cause- are peaceful and quiet and so very, very *dead*. Sasuke has been here before. At Kimura. At Oto. Anywhere he’s stayed long enough, really. Naruto’s image of shinobi honor is false and delicate, this Sasuke knows better than anyone living, but it’s always been his holy power to make you want to give it to him.

Sasuke moves his eyes to the father and watches him watch his son. Minato frowns once, quietly, then spins it into an open smile. “I am proud of you.”

Naruto -and this is why, even after all this time Sasuke loves him- brings back the shadows from his own eyes and smiles back. “Thanks dad.”

“Eat your vegetables.” Minato places a heavy hand on his son’s head, “that’s from your mother.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Naruto swats away the hand, grinning like a lunatic. “And stay outta trouble too, right?”

“You better believe it.” Minato smiles at his son one last time. “We’re always watching out for you.”

Minato blows away in a familiar spiral. For Naruto’s sake he hopes it’s to see Uzumaki Kushina and tell them how at what was almost the End of the World their son still found a way to smile.

Itachi stands beside him for a few moments. His presence is warm, nebulous. Sasuke nods once. “Brother.”

“I had thought we’d said everything we had to,” Itachi says slowly, “but no matter how long we talked that would never be true.”

“No,” he agrees around the strange lump in his throat. “I’m not sorry I tried to kill you.” Because he’s fucking *not*. “I’m...glad I didn’t succeed.”

“Ah,” Itachi exhales. “I had meant to...leave you with something. A gift. An explanation. I suppose it would be cowardly to give it to you the same way now.”

“What?” He turns his head to face his brother.


“Oi.” Naruto yells from over yonder. He’s clearly gesturing at Sasuke. It takes a few seconds to flip from what his brother said to what Naruto is demanding. Bright blue eyes burn into him as Sasuke gives him a dismissive hand wave. He’s been serious a lot in their relationship but rarely when they’re in the same place at the same time. Sasuke raises an eyebrow and hopes it comes across.

*You can promise forever, but will it be your forever or mine? Will you be with me the way I need or the way you promised? And will you understand that they won’t always be the same?*

Now’s not the time for that but by the way Naruto’s face turns from his it will be sooner rather
than later.

--

He’s at odds and ends at the end of the War to End All Wars. There’s body parts to picked over. Tags to be collected. Flesh and bone to be burned or buried as is expedient. The whole world used to be a huge funeral pyre for people like him. Just a procession of creating and disposing of bodies.

Karin collects him for funeral rites. They need someone with a large supply of fire to burn away the dead, after they catalogue and collect them of course. This is the provenance of lessers clans and med-nin. With a startled laugh he realises that the Uchiha clan, in what little way it exists, is a lesser clan. They hold no titles, little land and less respect. He prods that. There is hurt and shame and a weariness that feels stamped on his bones but he is done paying for the choices of his forebears. Let it be dead. There is no shame in trench work. Let pride be done with.

He looks forward and finds the horizon a shade lighter than it should be, maybe.

Not the War to End All, then. But not a pause either. Fundamentally there is a difference. The nations came together, other powers came too. The two figureheads who built the system are gone, appeased. It’s all ghosts from here on out. That’s alright. You can treaty with ghosts if you know how.

He starts stacking bodies the way he was taught; all in the same direction, heads in to keep away what might be lurking in the dark. He takes a machete from a helpful Kiri chunnin and starts hacking them apart at the joints where the death is too plentiful. It hurts somewhere deep inside but there is nothing to do now but move forward. It would be disrespectful to those who came and stood fast against the maddest of his blood. They came as shinobi, they died as shinobi and to try and take away the practicality of what that means now would serve nobody. They work quietly through a night and a day, his clean up crew. Far away, where the warriors are, there is drinking and carousing and singing.

He hears the first convoys of the deadly injured and the mostly intact leave. He stays his own course walking up a nearby slope to divert a river away from the mess of burnt dead and poisoned weapons. He hears the next convoy, messenger reports and Karin’s swift footed supplies coming and going. The first wave of gawkers comes in the form of the paper ninja who need to verify the dead. Sasuke stays until there’s noone left but the necessary and the victorious. Those too important to head home straight away.

Peripherally he knew that the Kage and their respective personal guard stayed behind to hash out the details of the war immediately. It will be done again, in Konoha, in four months time when there’s more data but too many misunderstandings occur in these first new hours of a world balance. Everyone is too keen eyed on the famous Konoha Death Jutsu, on Giri’s cooperation, on the utter failure of there forces to deal with one man, reputation be damned. And on Sasuke too. He didn’t get away with killing the Zetsu.

Team 7 is around. As is Team Dosa. Team Hebi is split to the winds more likely forever than not, for which he is mourning and grateful in equal measures.

God knows how he’s ended up with people who know to leave him alone. God knows why they care enough to do so.

In lieu of anything better to do and with the bittersweet knowledge that he will have to try to be worthy of all that he’s been freely given before, he sets off to find Naruto. This is easier said than done. Describing someone as ‘loud, orange, that’s it really’ isn’t netting him the results he thought
it would. A little Scribe from Iron takes pity and points him to one of the many man made ponds that are serving as wash-n-go’s. There, gold hair reflected in the dying streaks of sunrise, he finds his other half.

He stops to note the slope of his strong shoulders, the bend of his back as he stares into the water. There’s all the little things he has lost, loved and mourned in equal measure. The faintest start of smile lines, the way his jaw is just a little too canine for his face, the long eyelashes darker than the hair on his head -or anywhere else for that matter. He thinks that they’ve been role reversed. That look of vague horror and solemn denial is Sasuke’s bread and butter. Walking clean handed and clear hearted from noble and necessary work should be Naruto’s by rite.

Blue eyes move to him conflicted and wary. Sasuke waits for the words, for the demands, for the should be and the this must be now. Naruto looks back at the water.

Alright. He’ll go first. “We need to talk about-”

Naruto charges forward and sticks his tongue in his mouth. It could be called kissing if there was less force involved. It takes the work of a few minutes to gentle it, to turn it from their first mostly failure of a coming together. The world is disappointing and if you’re not used to seeing the ruins of what you thought true spread around you...well. Usually this is Sasuke when he’s alone and a lot crazier than he’s been in a long time. You can’t talk to someone when they’re like this, unless you’re Naruto, but you can shoulder a tiny portion it. Brace it. God knows more more people than not have done it for him.

Naruto pushes into his space. The kiss goes from desperate to coaxing back to longing. Sasuke opens up his body and lets it all tumble down from his heart. He’s grateful with the sweep of his tongue. Compassionate with every press of lips across his scarred cheeks. Demanding with the pressure on Naruto’s head. It’s freeing to give when your partner needs it. Naruto pays his own dues. His teeth draw blood when he nips over Sasuke’s lips. He murmurs, croons absolute nonsense when he draws air. It’s a whole conversation between people saying nothing at all.

And it’s strange, even stranger than the wildest imaginings they could have had for each other when they first met, to realise that they will never be the same again. Without saying a word to each other Sasuke has laid down his ghosts and, judging from that look Sasuke knows so well it hurts, Naruto might have found somewhere he can’t shine a light. It’s been most of ten years and a war and a terrifying absence. You can’t brute force whatever messed up idea of normalcy they have over that. Even if the connection between them is sometimes so strong reality is incomplete without it. At some point the two of them will have to learn what forgiveness means when it’s just them talking

Naruto pulls him forward and places a chaste kiss on his forehead. They still need to talk, but maybe they’re getting on the same wavelength. Together, or apart, it’s going to be something to work on.

“Woohoo you dirty boy!” Ino catcalls. She’s dressed in even less than usual, hobbling on crutches. She makes a waving motion over her shoulder. What was it he said, about being grateful?

“Oh my god.” Hiki mock whispers, hand over heart. “You defiled him right in front of us.”

“How could you.” Yumi joins in. “Our perfect, virgin Sasuke. So pure in thought, body and deed.”

“Pretty sure he straight fucked his way through the rear guard in Oto,” Karin adds, “but go off I guess.”
“I’d guard his rear.” Yumi grins but subsides. “In all seriousness-”

“And only minimal jokes about butt stuff.” Hiki adds.

“-we should all go home, yeah?”

There’s a sombre moment, as everyone realises that it’s time to find the other survivors and go back to the precarious balance of cold wars and skirmishes that is peacetime.

Haru bursts through behind Ino, grinning ear to ear. “Did I miss his first kiss?” He whines. “I was gonna take pictures.”

Sasuke laughs, and soon everyone else is too.

Naruto flips him off. “By about ten years, yeah.”

Sasuke scowls. “You can’t fucking count.”

“Does it matter?” Naruto grins maniacally, hooking his arm behind Sasuke’s neck to bring their foreheads to touch. “Does it actually matter anymore?”

Sasuke smirks. “No. I don’t think it does.”

Chapter End Notes

ONE MORE ONE MORE ONE MORE ONE MORE ONE MORE ONE MORE

I have a kofi now! It's the same as my user name kofi.com/sazzafraz

Fun facts:

-The only person who has any idea about who knows who and who's planning what is a fraught messenger in the middle of a small coastal town that's a knot in the political machine used to scrub messages of their origins. His life is Hell. Zombies???? Demons???? MADARA?????? And then crashing at his boyfriends because technically Danzo had his house burnt doooooooown.

-I am mad at myself for dropping that subplot actually. it was waaaay too ambitious for me two years ago but just within possibility now. Maybe I'll edit it in. Maybe.

-I'm going to autopsy this after it's done. Think a large scale DVD behind the scenes. I already plan to tag it on as an epilogue of sorts. Go over what almost made it in and what choices were made in regards to expressing themes. Feel free to ask for things. If you do leave a chapter and a few lines. I'll probably be working off how it is on ao3 and stop panicking my laptop with the word doc.

- Finally. If anyone can fucking remember what poem ’we can raise or raze this city' is from I will owe you an actual favour. It has been in my head. For years.
Arc IV, Part III: Soldier, Poet, King (Or, Once and Future)

Chapter Summary

to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,

Chapter Notes

I've felt, over the three or so years of writing this -from inception to completion, incredibly grateful for the support this work has received. I think writing this work changed me, as a person, a lot. I know it changed my life given that wanting to finish it, wanting to do the concept I ended up muddled up in the middle of justice, was a not insignificant part of actually taking control of my own anxiety and depression. And that thinking through the steps of recovery I wanted to show made my own thoughts on how to deal with trauma more nuanced. Which is a hell of a thing to come from a fic that was mostly me wanting to make amends to a fictional character I made fun of as a child.

I'm not sure that was accomplished. There are faults in my characterisation for sure and parts of this that make me want to rip my hair out. Even in this final chapter that I've known was coming for years there are gutted plotlines and sections that could really be better planned out. But I think the intent - to look at a PTSD ridden child soldier with serious autonomy issues and construct a path back to a sort of equilibrium, to not mock what feels like in my actual adult life a backstory I'm too close to- was met. I hope so, anyway.

To all of you who helped me finish this be it by kudos, comments or bookmarks, thank you, and I'll see you in the next one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One Week After the War

“I never thought I’d see this again.”

It’s the first time Itachi has spoken since they started journeying home. Orochimaru has a pardon to be in the village for two days for a debrief then he’ll adjourn for a brief time to Uzushio, then to where ever he is now. Until then his Edo Tensei are travelling with him.

It’s the ancient redwoods, not Konoha proper, that his brother is overwhelmed by. Sasuke has made this journey and is sympathetic but it has been a long time now since the brush of Hashirama’s chakra in these great still woods has moved him. It is a home. Their home. The woods will remain even when all the dust of them has found a home somewhere else.

“Not long now,” he murmurs. It is neither pleasing nor displeasing. That happens when you suspect you may have a future.
“What happened to you?” Itachi’s body rolls with his movement on the horse. Impatient thing rushing forward. His brother is a good horseman. Gentle hands. Sasuke is just out of time moving back when his brother moves forward. It’s calm. He feels calm. Itachi clears his throat but his question is still mostly gravel, regret and hopeful curiosity. “How did we get here?”

Like unhooking his soul, like spilling open the pages of a great unfinished novel: Sasuke begins to talk.

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**Two Weeks After the War**

He has forgotten nearly every single bad thing about living with Itachi. Thankfully his brother is happy to remind him.

Two weeks later and Sasuke’s body still aches with chakra burn. His skin feels like it’s drying out, taking all his flesh with it. Sakura has assured him that this is not bad, that it will take months for what Indra did to eek out, but until it does he is on bed rest. He needs salt and fruit and the tea that his mother made for the returning shinobi after they’d been gone from home too many months. Salt is easy as is fruit. The tea had been hard to procure and harder to make. Sasuke, for all the years he spent half forgotten with the women folk, never learnt to make the tea. Somehow Itachi did not learn that the sharingan is matrilineal. Did not learn the truth of the Uchiha heart. But did learn to make the tea.

Hot cinnamon and liquorice tea is the only thing that soothes his headaches. Of all the two sided gifts of his brothers, this is the one he is most resentful of.

The great blue-brown stone that makes up his kitchen counter is covered in icing sugar and the debris of Itachi’s sandwich. Being arrogant and infuriatingly right all his life Itachi has the silly idea that all he needs to do is try something to be good at it. Hence the sugar and the fruit and the bowls in the sink. Measuring cups sit on the floor, on the shelves and on the stone. Lying face down on Sasuke’s marble pastry slab is Itachi, arms crossed over his head.

Sasuke slurps his two minute ramen. That was all he was allowed to make in his kitchen.

Itachi groans. “Will you stop?”

Sasuke shrugs. Then he slurps louder.

“Such a brat.” His brother sits up, long fingers tap-tap-tapping on the bench. He looks grim, determined and unbearably himself. “Tell me how to make the pie?”

--

**Two and a Half Weeks After the War**

Hinata was at the War to End All Wars as a field coordinator. She told people where to go and what to do when they got there. She is famous now for refusing to follow the Earth Daimyo’s order to retreat directly into a trap. When the Zetsu came, when the whole world turned to cinders and the man next to you strangled in smoke, Hinata saw the only viable exit strategy. It was Ino who had it done but it was Hinata who saw. In the closing strokes of the war it was Hinata -with
Uzushio help— who constructed a sealing trap for one of the Zetsu for interrogation.

“I don’t suppose,” Hinata muses as she compulsively folds Itachi’s laundry because Sasuke is smart enough to hide his, “that anyone considers my preferences when writing marriage proposals.”

“Hn.” Now there is a topic he’s not touching with a ten foot pole.

“Hmm.” She reaches for a sprig of rosemary to tuck between the folds of Itachi’s one nice shirt. It is actually Sasuke’s by way of Karin but sharing is caring, and anyway, Itachi in his ex-whatever Karin is clothes is funny. “Do you want to go into law?”

“No.”

“No?”

He rolls his eyes. “Why?”

“We talked about it before the war.” She’s gotten his shirts, damn it. Now he’s going to smell like lavender. “You could just not use my apartment as a laundry stop then this wouldn’t happen. Did the war change something?”

“No.” He says without a care to what query posed. “I want this over with. All of it.”

Hinata nods and tucks sage into the bends of his sweatpants.

--

Three Weeks After the War

“You wanna what?” Aguni Satoko asks. There’s crumbs all the way down her blouse gathering on her very pregnant belly.

Lots of babies around right now. “I want to draft a law.” Sasuke says slow.

“You can’t.” Satoko replies. “Your citizenship is limited. And that’s not how law works.”

“No I do.” There’s a very un-shinobi gasp and slide across the wood floors of the Civilian Floor in the Tower. Hinata grabs his arm to steady herself shooting him an unimpressed look. “Sorry, his legs are very long.”

Sasuke raises an eyebrow. “Hyuuga Hinata will be the name on the bill but it’s my idea.” He outlines it in a succinct paragraph.

Satoko actually gasps. “I’m sorry you want to do what?”

“My family is dead because of these sorts of laws.” In a roundabout way. An Itachi that grows up to, who knows, take over Chizuru’s bakery, is not one who is asked to kill his entire family.

“There’s more, outlined in our proposal—” Hinata produces a folder full of evidence and speculation. It’s as thick as her wrist.

“Oh,” Satoko looks upon the folder as she has her pork buns. “I was going to say yes anyway? This is basically my wildest dream. But thank you. For the context.” She pats his hand maternally.
“Will that need to be entered in some kind of motion?” Hinata says intelligently, every bit the heir.

“No?” Satoko squints at them. “Neither of you have been to civilian court?"

He shrugs. “No.”

Hinata shrugs as well. “I’ve watched it? On TV.”

Satoko hides a smile behind her hand. “Right. So. This is a cross divide motion. That means that you need someone to defend it on the shinobi side. I have a few recommendations.” She reaches over for her notepad.

Sasuke stops her. “I have someone.”

“It has to be a Konoha native.” Satoko gently removes his grip with a look almost like wonder.

“He’s native alright.” Sasuke mutters. “I can do that.”

Hinata nods. “What do you need from us?”

“Access, time and money. I don’t know how to word this to get it past the Kage’s -and it’ll be more than one who wants a look, you’re both very popular.”

Forty five minutes they have a months worth of face to face time to discuss the finer details. Hinata bumps him gently on the arm. “Do you think I’m as popular as you were?”

He would love to say so, let that be passed on, but, “probably not.”

--

He sends the letter, a long mean thing with many pointed references to failures living and dead. It ends with-

_Do you want to actually make a difference or do you want to keep half assing this?_

--

Jiraiya says yes a week later.

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**One Month, One Week After the War**

One of the rescue kids collapsed at his remedial schooling. Nine more followed after. Sasuke remembers bolting for the door with white in his ears but nothing about the travelling. When he arrives to Hinata’s hideaway on the Inuzuka properties he remembers that a) he is not meant to be here ever and b) he is not wearing pants.

Hinata, Karin and Inuzuka Hana glare at him.

“You couldn’t put on pants?” Karin scowls. “It’s chakra burn, Sasuke. They're not working missions and they don’t have natural regulators. Danzo didn’t see a need, I guess. It’s burning them from the inside.”
He knows that feeling all too well. “I’ll teach them fire techniques.”

Karin’s brow furrows. “I don’t mean literal fire—”

A soft, feminine hand lands on his shoulder. He just about jumps out of his skin. Hana’s eyes are very, very soft. “I don’t think he did either. Don’t worry. I’ll get the tea then, shall I?”

Despite assurances Sasuke does not cease worrying. He takes Kiba’s pants without complaint, takes the tea without thanks and works himself up to such a lather that Karin politely tells him to stop making her seasick with his chakra. Even weeks after Indra used it to burn the Zetsu it remains potent and difficult to control.

Hinata schedules staggered appointments with the Hyuuga doctors against her family’s wishes. It will cost too much they say, as if you can put a price on a child’s life.

(You can, it’s about 270,000 for civilians.)

It’ll cost too much, they say, so Sasuke throws what remains in the Uchiha coffers behind it. What does he care? He’s eaten rat before and Itachi’s dead. Living Uchiha to spend it on is a blessing.

Each kid has the same problem with the same lack of solution. Little Amiko, one of the only girls in the Uchiha clutch, sits with her feet swinging on the table. She’s painfully of Naomi’s line, a twin to the one he receives from his father. Their sharingan is strong in healing.

She’s spent the entire time naming the creatures on the wall. Her voice is clear as a bell.

“What about the cats.” Karin says. When it became obvious that Sasuke was only going to get less stable until there was a solution she stayed behind in Konoha. Tsunade is furious. “Nadeshiko has the contract but they’re self sustaining summons, just give each kid a cat to take the edge off. They don’t even have to like each other, ‘cus it’s self sustaining and there’s no range problems.” Karin is a little drunk, due to meeting with Terumi for lunch. This does not make her wrong. Again, Tsunade is furious.

“Kitty?” Amiko asks and that’s it, she’s getting a kitten.

Of course it’s Moon Cat of the lavender fur and the pushy nature that takes to her. Amiko picks her up and shows her to Sasuke. “This is Tsuki.”

He bends down slowly -you can’t move quick around them, they scare so easy, and he would know- and pats Tsuki on the head. “Yes it is.”

Amiko beams at him.

“You cannot possibly have known,” he tells Sora later as he spoons sashimi onto a plate, the cats are eating better than him. “that I would end up with twenty two family members with post traumatic stress related chakra leakage.”

The cat preens and purrs and is generally unhelpful. Sasuke is required to be grateful because it is a save completely out of nowhere, but boy is it begrudging.

--

One Month, Three Weeks After the War
Last night Satoko filed her charges. This morning Danzo was arrested. This morning Sasuke sits in the Tower ready to give his statement to the investigators.

Karin approaches, also here to give a statement, a tall figure with dark hair and shockingly pale blue-green eyes following at her shoulder. Karin has a coffee in one hand, a pad in the other and her Kage coat draped over her shoulders. Underneath is a slightly more modest version of her usual attire. She still has the shorts and thigh highs but the shirt is a wrap style intricately embroidered with sea flora, high quality ninja mesh underneath. The hat is hanging down her back on a piece of green string.

“What did you do to yourself now?” Karin flicks a page disinterestedly. “Can’t take you anywhere.”

Sasuke snorts. “Aren’t you in love with me?”

Karin sits down on the chair next to him, she smiles at her bodyguard who assumes a ready position. Sasuke assess quickly. Three blades, scarred hands, he wants to say that they’re male but there’s a suggestion there of the kind of flexibility kunoichi have to use. Doesn’t matter. They’ll do.

“You take me to the worst parties,” Karin relaxes in the chair stretching out her legs. A nearby chunnin almost walks into a wall.

“I never took you anywhere,” Sasuke replies, copying her relaxed position.

“No shit,” she snorts, “I was always the one doing the leading.”

“Look at you now.” Sasuke says almost mockingly.

“I’ve got a standing army and you’ve got a nin-cat infestation.”

Sasuke laughs quietly.

Karin smiles at him. “I’m proud of you. This is- This is a good thing.”

“If it works.”

Karin falls to seriousness. “Sasuke if you don’t die before you walk on that floor we’ve already won.”

He struggles with that still. With the thought that success is not defeat of an enemy but confrontation of it. So he teases, “We?”

Before Karin can lay him flat for daring to insinuate that she is not 100% behind him at all times Sakura comes barreling down the hallway coffee in hand. She goes from determined kunoichi to vaguely distracted groupy in a second.

“Oh, Karin!” Sakura smiles brightly.

“Oh, you.” Karin says bewildered. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s good to see you!”

Karin takes her glasses off to rub them on her shirt surreptitiously. “Okay. Wow, no. Stop.”

Sakura pouts. “But it is good to see you.”
Karin frowns, putting her glasses back on. “I refuse to say the same to you.”

Sakura laughs good naturedly and continues down the hall. There’s a particular gait to her walk that eleven year old Sasuke still lives in fear of.

Sasuke nudges Karin, leaning down to hide his voice. No one would ever believe him capable of teasing. “Should I save the date?”

“You should shut your mouth.” Karin hisses.

--

**Four Months After the War**

Seven of the kids are safe to be outside of the Inuzuka compound. Amiko, Umeko, Hiroshi, Eito, Arata, Shunsuke and little Shisui, named for the cousin whose DNA he shares.

Sasuke’s house is not small but neither is it large enough to contain nine people. Still, they’re trying. Eito, the eldest at twelve, holds little Shisui in his arms. The boy is two and quiet. He’s bonded to Toshiro, a nin-cat whose warm brown coat belies both his age and his temperament. Shisui was too young to chose so the cats chose for him. Sasuke tried to have an opinion but was overruled via Sora’s tail in his mouth.

There’s finger food on the tables. Boxes of blankets and soft things to touch across Sasuke’s expensive chairs. Outside Itachi has been meticulously painting and planting a small garden. He’s also cleared a small place for target practice.

“Thiers was no peaceful childhood.” Itachi says mildly. “I would know.”

The kunai are real but so are the fat red strawberries and Sasuke’s dubiously composed ‘party mix’. He’d been treated to a terrifying yet inevitable non-consensual drinking party with all of Sakura’s friends. She doesn’t want him but she loves him and love means sharing your open living and dining space with five kunoichi and more on call nurses than he could count. There haven’t been any songs about sex or drugs but they will come. He knows they will.

Arata comes to sit quietly in the corner of the kitchen. He has a book He talks little and looks like a miniature of his father, eye bags and all. In twenty years he’ll look exactly the same as Sasuke’s father did when he died.

The kids are a mix of cousins, nieces and nephews and throwbacks to more than a hundred years ago. Danzo had Tobirama’s obscene collection of body parts, plus Akatsuki’s resources *and* Orochimaru’s not insignificant contribution. What they didn’t have is the knowledge hidden away in blood bound boxes. The sharingan is not insert tab a to slot b. It is hard to create, hard to avoid serious complications and hard to awaken. The women of his family have conferred for generations about what it would take to produce someone like Madara and then how not to lose that strength in the next generation. Sasuke’s prodigious strength comes from centuries of careful planning not some broken levelling system.

What all those men lacked was the ability to understand the mothers of his mother.

Not that Danzo cared. He burnt resources trying every combination possible. He has little clones of his close cousins. Three of Michiko: two girls, one boy. Near none of Naoko’s line, a frustration he’s sure for someone like Danzo who knew what it could do. He has a throwback to Misu, a line
thought to have gone two hundred years ago, and although he doesn’t give a fuck if any of the kids carry on the sharingan, he thinks the world might want that one. Misu of the Gentle Flame, the only sharingan that grew instead of destroyed. He writes down Hashirama’s words for that boy, *And this said by the God of Shinobi to our greatest ancestor: ‘If you think it came with no cost then I’m afraid that makes you the fool, my friend. You know better than that. And as long as you think you can control it rather than work with it, it’ll seek to control you.’ If you find the Gentle Fire remember it. I don’t think that power can come without that cost.*

“Uncle.” Severe little Hiroshi asks. “May we go outside with Uncle Itachi.”

“*May we,*” Shunsuke, a literal child devil, asks. “I’ve already *been.*”

And he probably has. Itachi can make penance by dealing with *that.* Eito carries little Shisui outside to watch Shunsuke drive Hiroshi into an early grave. He speaks to his siblings the least having already detached himself from the idea of family, but he talks to Shisui constantly. His constant stream of consciousness is the background to all the children’s laughter. He talks to Sasuke too but only about food.

Sasuke isn’t traitor, beloved, returned, redeemed here. He’s Sasuke: probably our Uncle, weird, with all the cool music and no job.

Someone told one of the other kids what work was. They’d been fascinated by the idea that if they did something they got something. Sasuke had apparently mucked it all up by being a PTSD riddled veteran with a pension who spent his days slowly reclaiming the lost knowledge of his clan and recording it for future generations. This was not a job, a rare solemn Shunsuke bravely told him, real jobs involved fire and damsels and orders to kill from higher powers. He seemed truly sorry to tell Sasuke this but Sasuke’s *bullshit* radar is pretty sensitive.

His music collection is vast now. Some he’s collected himself via Konoha’s music stores and second hand shops. Some he has received from far off shores -Haru’s continuing insistence on education. He got all of Naruto’s inherited record collection because Naruto doesn’t care for music at all. A fact he still finds baffling. Kushina had a box of loose leaved music sheets haphazardly saved that he sends off to Karin. Minato had a real wild streak: a box of early hard rock gathered *specifically* because Jiraiya found it grating and unpoetic. Kakashi is fond of audiobooks, shocking, and jazz. Sakura likes classical but has willingly gone to two metal concerts with him. Hilarious all around. Hinata likes very old fashioned pieces but otherwise prefers silence like Naruto.

Of his overseas friends Karin likes pop music, Suigetsu likes funk and Juugo doesn’t care but prefers music with folk stories over anything more modern. Giri is held hostage by protest music and Haru’s unseemly love of mumble rap. Sasuke listens, because arguing about what *good* music is, is their relationship now, but he has yet to receive a mixtape he didn’t want to argue about.

*Someday when your head is much lighter,* plays from his half broken cd player on the windowsill, *someday, yeah, we’ll walk in the rays of a beautiful sun.*

It is sunny in his kitchen, through the wide window he can see Itachi correct Hiroshi’s hold. On the table is a cup of warm jasmine tea. Arata mutters the words he doesn’t know under his breath. His cat, a tortoiseshell with notched ears rumbles next to him.

*Someday.*

The upstairs toilet flushes. Umeko holds her mirror images hand as they walk down the stairs. Sasuke’s first floor bathroom is out of commission thanks to one of Shunsuke’s infamous pranks. Less sure of herself than her sister Umeko hums - *um, Ami, careful on the stair, it’s slippery.*
Good! Another one ganbatte! - Amiko is a half year younger and holding up well under her elder’s overbearing insistence on help. Amiko has had the hardest journey to equilibrium, something Sasuke has heard at length about from Tsuki. All her kind-of siblings watch her carefully. It reminds him of his long lost home in the best way, the only way that doesn’t hurt.

He waits until they’re at the bottom of the stairs before he kneels down to talk. “Are you okay?”

Amiko smiles at him as she always does. “My sister wants to play the first tape again.”

That’s confusing. All his tapes are numbered chronologically but he can’t recall playing it. One of the cats -a buff thing called Bo- said they’d been ‘borrowing’ from it since the first time Shunsuke visited a few weeks ago. Sasuke had been in a mood to reminisce about years long gone, when the discovery of guitars felt like a whole new world. He could have been playing that first one. He’s played it a lot.

Umeko looks at the floor. She’s the softest of the lot for all that she’s named herself for the adventurer of the Uchiha family.

He cocks an eyebrow, smirks, but does as he’s bid. Umeko asks to skip the first song, then the second, then the third.

She huffs, “Oh, move!” And muscles Sasuke out of the way. With a nimble leap she’s sitting on the edge of the sink skipping straight to what she wants.

“There.” Umeko declares. A sure voice from years ago at a time Sasuke wasn’t sure of anything sings: *At the bottom of the sea, you’ll find me drinking deep.* “That’s what I meant.”

Shunsuke sticks his head in from the backyard where he has been diligently insuring Sasuke will sleep with one eye open for whatever terror lurks there. “What is it with you and this sad stuff! Uncle, tell her to play something happy!”

Amiko leaps to her sister’s honour. “She wants to listen! It’s fine!”

*There’s a hole in my ship that you’ll never fill*, Sasuke sings along, *And I’ll wait ‘cause I’ve got time to kill.* Umeko joins him, and if Amiko’s voice is bell like it’s her sisters that truly arresting. Haunting and low even at her age, like all the woman in the stories of old. Konoha has little use for musicians but there are courses in the Capital and even in Suna. If music is something that will make his nervous little niece happy there are ways to give it to her.

“Oh great.” Shunsuke makes a deeply disgusted noise. “Uncle likes sad stuff.”

From the backyard he hears the long disused noise of Itachi’s laugh.

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Five Months After the War

In Itachi’s story there is only one truth: Sasuke must live so Sasuke must kill him.

Paths fork and diverge. Enemies are found, allied and betrayed, but it is this that he comes back to. He did everything he could to keep Sasuke to his plan. And it was everything. Every pain, every torture, every doubt and lie pressed into Sasuke’s soul until the truth nearly killed him. That Sasuke didn’t die from it was an accident and partly a then-strangers disinterest in following Itachi’s plan.
So here they are now, a failed fratricide and a refused path later, watching the youngest Uchiha cautiously walk around Sasuke’s walled in backyard. Little Shisui is the only one here today. Hinata had gotten wind of another shipment even all these months after Danzo’s arrest. It’s a simple pickup, all above board, a crop from a bunch of civilians who thought they might buy an army of their own. The sameness of the children scares them and anyway, the age of shinobi is over now.

The eldest had insisted on going to show the children they were safe. As they are still considered shinobi of Konoha and not children of Fire they only needed the permission of the Hokage. Tsunade decided it would be fine. Might even be closure. Sasuke may disagree but he is a private citizen and Itachi is dead.

Eito had been livid about the order, the only one of them who didn’t want to go, but he went to support Shunsuke who still cries when he thinks about anything further back than the last year. Shisui was placed into Itachi’s arms with a firm nod and his favourite apple slices.

There is a pot of tea between them and their mothers pie waiting to be sliced into.

Sasuke pours for his brother. Itachi slices eleven identical pieces.

A kitten with black ears sits on his lap watching her partner. Shisui falls over. Sasuke almost leaps from his seat. Itachi, who had seen the fall coming, is still as water in his. Shisui gets up again and tries again. Upon the wall with a plush weasel toy in his mouth, is Sora, his golden fur reflecting in the waning sunlight. Itachi closes his eyes and takes one long final breath.

“I will miss you.” Itachi says. “And I hope I will not see you again for a very long time.”

“Don’t worry.” Sasuke promises, blowing across his tea. “You won’t.”

Sora walks the last metre of the wall with Shisui. Shisui completes his circuit of the backyard, falls on his ass and promptly sticks the ear of his favourite stuffed toy in his mouth. Itachi releases a breath and closes his eyes for the last time.

There’s a wind that blows across from the west every evening at sunset. It takes the ashes out into the woods to rest forever.

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**Five Weeks, One Day After the War**

Sasuke isn’t eating again. He’s day drinking. Again. The shape of his pain is different but the body knows the score. When he is lost this is who he is: a listless wandering drunk. The kids are on a trip out of Konoha today while Satoko does some lawyer badassery. He has fourteen hours before he has to try again to be a whole human. He is less messy than he has ever been but pain is loss is pain. One more day and he really does put it all down. One more day lying on his back by the river and he makes good on his promise to Itachi. No rivers, no booze, no what if what if what if.

Naruto, of course, finds him. He lies down on the edge of the river next to him. “You can’t carry their grief forever.”

“One more day won’t hurt anyone.” He whispers to the crook of his arm. Naruto doesn’t hear him, which is pretty much the point.
Naruto harrumphs. He lies still. The kind of still that means a conversation.

Today, huh?

“Did you think it all ended with you becoming Hokage?” He can’t help but smirk at that, for all of Naruto’s growth and conviction he still doesn’t account for the aftermath. “What do you do with the people you can’t beat up until they see your point of view?”

“Asshole.” Naruto growls out attractively. “I can beat up anyone.”

*But can you convince them when their heart truly is gone? When, like me, they needed space to be okay. “Your conviction didn’t bring me home.”* Sasuke places a hand on his best friend’s leg. Naruto looks up at him with wide blue eyes, almost pleading with him not to say it. “I did that myself.”

“Sasuke...” His wide blue eyes fill with tears. “I-”

“I brought myself home so that I could talk to my mother one last time before I went back to Lightning and killed myself where I buried Itachi. That was why I came back.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” It’s edging demand but not quite there.

So he answers. “Because between then and now I found enough to keep me going.” Sasuke sighs letting all his tension go. *Shavasana.* Something he learnt from their newest girl, little Hoshiko. “Some of that you will never agree with me on. I can’t shoulder everything with you and I don’t expect you to do the same for me. Can you accept that?”

“We’re stronger together.”

Depends on what you mean by strong. “Maybe. But what you want most in the world destroyed my family. That’s never going to change.”

“Sasuke. I can be a better Hokage-”

“No what I meant,” Sasuke shakes his head loose of Jinta’s writings, of the desperate hope of Konoha and the Uchiha. Madara’s lonely plea for them to protect themselves from their worst attribute: the ability to love entirely and unselfishly. “I know you can. I believe in you and I would serve you if that would fix it. The world is broken Naruto. Every last bit of it. Fixing this little bit of it will help but things like Giri will still be necessary. Checks and balances.”

Rueful now, he says, “Nothing I can say?”

“You know I can’t stay. Not the way you want me too. I never could.” Sasuke struggles with it. Like always. Even if Naruto had fetched him back there was no more *Team 7.* It’s not fair to any of them. He can say it now. He has to say it now. “But I’m not- I’m not leaving you. I need you to be able to tell the difference between what’s leaving you and what’s leaving *this.*” Maybe that’s what he always wanted, secretly. “You I couldn’t leave if I tried, you’re an anchor around my neck.” Naruto splutters, so he adds. “And I’m happy to have you. You, I want. But I wasn’t joking when I said I was done being a shinobi. I’m done.”

Naruto smiles solemnly. “I’m not.”

“Then we work with that.”

*Anger is just love, left out, gone to vinegar.* And forgiveness is water in the home river, looped...
around their joined hands. Oh, the things they could have been. Winding roads that have no end. But this is what they are. A man who burnt out the last of his family legacy on a battlefield, made lame by his love of poetry and music, with no weapons to raise that aren’t words. A once orphan who still holds the slipping strings of fate in his hands; the Will of Fire as it should have been. Too many dreams that came true in a way that means they will never be the same again.

Naruto sighs. “I want to bridge the gap between the shinobi and the civilians. My dad had some plans...but it’s hard to get them to listen.”

“I’m listening.” Sasuke says sincerely. Then adds, “but only for the next thirty minutes and then you pay me in dates and dinner.”

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Five Months, Two Weeks After the War

“But in a perfect world,” Hyuuga Hinata says, light bulbs flashing all around her. He forgets sometimes that they have a common ancestor. Not today, with her in a pale purple and red kimono, those flashing lights making fire dance at her edges. The wide pavilion steps of the Courthouse make a perfect podium. Around them are the shinobi of Konoha and, to his surprise, the people of Konoha. He spies his grocer, his florist, the sulky teenager he is in a bidding war with over a recording from one of Haru’s friends shows. Reporters, politicians and flashing winks of genin. “I would not exist. I would not be paid to murder someone. I would not be trained to torture someone. It would not be a matter of course that I, being of age at the time of my 11th birthday, be put into a position where I must fight for my life against people twice my age or, god forbid, against a child younger than myself.” Hanabi abruptly tires to stalk forward only to be yanked down by her cousin. Hinata’s eyes do not linger on the commotion. “In a perfect world my sister would never have beaten me to prove her own worth, in a better world my cousin would never have nearly succeeded in killing me to prove his right to his own existence. This has been a long time coming but now is the time to stand. Now is not just the time to say this far and no further, nor the time to condemn dead men for actions we have all suffered for, now is the time to draw a line, to build a castle on it, a legacy, and then to defend it as best we can.”

Dressed in an altered version of his father’s formal police uniform Sasuke feels if not out of place, certainly out of time. The old Courthouse was staffed by Uchiha and with their disappearance has fallen into the ever expanding hands of the Aburame. It was one of the deeds that Sasuke has spent countless hours worming out of the hands of real estate agents. His old plans to release the Uchiha properties five years after his death an unexpected boon. Now that he won’t be slitting his wrists on a mountain top people are willing to negotiate. Apparently his great-grandfather lived for well over eighty years and even though he has lived several lives Sasuke is only in his early twenties. He’d given it over to the Konoha Heritage Foundation on the strict condition it be made ready for use as soon as possible. He’d been willing to wait weeks. It had taken mere days.

Hinata gives him a look, gesturing at his hair. He’s styled it as he used to: his unruly bangs loose, two winding braids to pull the rest of the mass back from his head and one high ponytail at the back to keep it off his neck. Naruto has already, at length, made the usual nadeshiko comments.

The only difference, really, is his mother’s pearl hair piece reset into a hair cuff thing. A present from Kakashi who had somehow learnt of all he said to Hashirama. Wearing one’s mother’s heart in their hair is a nonsensical metaphor, even if it is probably a very Uchiha one.

Hinata, funnily, deeply fucking hates it. Ostentatious he’s heard. Impractical he’s heard. Funny,
from a woman who maintains ass length straight locks that smell just faintly of chamomile, the fucking hypocrite.

Later they’re squashed close enough together that Hinata’s tapping out an unhappy rhythm on his forearm and he’s spitting chamomile hair out of his mouth every third breath. It’s three hours with only Jiraiya standing for them. Danzo cannot be questioned in open court. Something that makes Satoko angry and Sasuke watchful. There is more here than missing children and child weapons and child sacrifice. Something that makes the Kage nervous.

Karin opens the door to allow them back in. As a Kage she is not his friend. As his pick for a once in a generation miracle she risks signing bad behind her back. If Hinata sees she is too smart to comment.

When they get to their side of the court Jiraiya is scowling. The table is a mess of papers and photos. On the other side Danzo sits quietly, table empty.

“We’re losing, badly.” Jiraiya throws his big arms around the two of them, drawing them close enough to murmur. “He’s got Wisteria Papers on at least two of the Kage’s. They’re going to need a bigger shield or a clearer way to conviction. Most of what could be in them will come up in the Madara investigation. They can spin that, but wherever it ties into this means they won’t risk it.”

“Can’t they be excused?”

“No.” He shakes his massive head, all that white hair making his tired red rimmed eyes stand out. “Simultaneous agreement or bust.”

Sasuke and Hinata share a look. They’d been hoping to save this, because when they’d laid it out before Satoko she’d decided they would have more luck with a series of cases rather than a definitive one, but if they don’t win this then what’s the point? Hinata sucks in air. “The Summer of Sun.”


Hinata defers to him.

He looks across the battlefield of the courtroom and sees the whole history of his people. A thousand years of standing across from each other as enemies and just as long staring at the backs of those strong enough to lead you through hell. Jinta is right. Pure democracy can never make you feel as loyal, as seen, as someone you have killed for. He chances a glance at A and comprehends the loss of someone like Fuyuki. If she were here he would tell her he finally, finally understood what it meant to her to stop being a soldier. No person is one thing but a knife is a knife no matter how well loved.

You can’t hold the world hostage until it stops spinning on hate and murder and blood but you can divert it a little, again and again, until all the rivers shape the world anew.

Behind him sits rows and rows of people affected by Danzo and his zeal to protect Konoha. Karin, too, sits just behind him. The only one of her stature not taking the more neutral seating in the balcony. Tsunade is centred, dressed conservatively with her signature lip colour drawn on perfectly. On her left is A blowing a bubble with some gum. To his left is Gaara quietly reading his papers, mumbling under his breath. To Tsunade’s right is Terumi eating nuts from a bowl keeping up a light conversation with Oonoki’s aid and heir, standing behind the man himself at the end. Oonoki is in the middle of handing over his hat so his chosen successor is allowed to sit in. There’s every chance it will be her that casts the vote. Dosa is here too, at a level seat to the side, being
neither a leader or a major power. He’s got a typewriter. The emissary for Giri who are using this to build their case against Madara. Behind all of them is the Yin Yang symbol of chakra.

The bell rings. Everyone but him sits. The Kage’s resume being the closest things their countries have to gods.

His mouth is dry with history. “You can’t say there isn’t precedent.”

“Excuse me?” Oonoki says, “Who are you?”

“Uchiha Sasuke on the floor,” Dosa says flatly, “recognised by Giri.”

Tsunade glances at him. “Konoha seconds.”

“Suna acknowledges.” Gaara frowns, eerie eyes flick between the other Kages.

“And who is this precedent, boy?” Oonoki glares at him.

“I am.” The Uchiha to the River, he thinks, The Senju to the Mountain. “And so are you.”

“Oh?”

“Our forefathers were bandits and mercenaries who decided to live their life by the ideals of peace and protection. What peace meant to the men of old is different.” He talks, a little, about Kazue and her fascination with civilians playing at war. What innocence means to those who weaned themselves on bloody mothers milk. “And we set the terms too high. It doesn’t have to be a leap into the unknown. It can be a, a cessation of a kind of power.”

A snorts. “That didn’t fucking work, did it, or did I imagine that war last year?”

He narrows his eyes and tries to take the sting out. “You don’t abandon something just because it didn’t work the first time.” It’s harsh, an indictment, but hell if he didn’t try to make it softer.

Silence resonates in the room.

“A Uchiha with political teeth,” A murmurs, “it’s been a damn long time coming.”

Sasuke does not say anything, although it is a struggle. “The Summer of Sun.” He nods to Hinata. She stands and speaks for them all.

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**Six Months After the War**

“I’m leaving.” Sakura fiddles with her necklace. It’s a pretty thing laden with charms. Ino threatened to have him arrested if he didn’t contribute. His is the pink-red ruby cut into a sakura flower laid in pale gold. It was expensive and hard to source and even Ino had to shut up after he presented it. Overhead the sunset paints her hair neon. “I took some time off and I’m going to spend two months down in Wave heading a clinic.”

“Clean living.” Sasuke says, sardonic. He’s happy enough for her.

“Shut up.” She smirks a little. “I think I’ll take one of the barges down from Uzushio. Won’t that be fun?”
Sasuke idly considers warning Karin. He idly orders Sakura dinner instead.

Sakura grins, all that light behind her. “Atta boy.”

Six Months, Three Weeks After the War

He is not present at the closing statements. Hoshiko falls from a tree and breaks her leg. It’s her first injury since she was brought to Konoha and told her pain mattered. According to a tearful Arata she sat shock still and then screamed for her uncle.

Sasuke spends the most important three hours in shinobi history braiding a tearful child’s hair. Hoshiko insists that he stay, that he sing, that they all tell her how brave she is. Shunsuke liberates a cake from the retirement party downstairs using Sakura as a decoy to keep the nurses from realising. He takes a cake filled Shunsuke home with him and lets him sleep in a hastily made up cot at the bottom of Sasuke’s bed.

Hinata is pissed at him when she shows up with a bottle of whiskey later that night. The whiskey is for her nerves and the empty bottle will be to beat him to death with.

(A year later the footage from court will be released and Sasuke will ache for Hinata’s terrified face in front of the whole world that wants to be as it is. He will watch her look to where he should have been and to the otherside where Satoko was not allowed to be and he will feel, for possibly the first time since Giri, complete shame. Hinata will look up, she will look to the stands filled with orphans, and she will stand. She delivers her speech not to the assembled heads of state but to the hollow eyes of children she’s desperate to save.)

At a little after two in the morning a chunnin knocks on his window. He knocks Hinata awake to listen.

A unanimous decision has been reached: in two years it will be official that no genin will fight on the front lines. In five years the Hidden Villages will begin to dismantle the offensive portion of their genin corps. In ten years no one under the age of sixteen will be allowed to be a front line shinobi. From midnight tomorrow it is completely illegal to experiment on, barter with, enslave or otherwise abuse any child, accepting cultural differences. Shimura Danzo will be tried in Konoha for treason and in Otogakure for crimes against children.

They make the 5th of May Children’s Day.

Eight Months After the War

Naruto signs him up as a guest lecturer for a new course at the academy -History of War. It’s a bad name for a good thing. He also signs himself up for History of Pranking proving that some things are truly immortal. Sakura is unknowingly signed up for a full semester of lectures on battlefield injuries. Because the curriculum will either start later or go longer there is now time to teach all of the students the basics of healing rather than reserving it for the girls. Kakashi, they all assume,
wanted in on Sakura’s Week of Farewell Dinners. She’s due to Uzushio in four days.

“Woah, woah.” Sakura snaps her fingers. “We’re back at the Academy boys.”


She doesn’t punt him down the hallway but it is, again, that free dinner she’s getting driving her
not any care for decorum or Kakashi’s well being.

She pulls an old style camera out of her bag gingerly. For all her posturing this must be something
she actually wants. “Which means it’s time for a new team photo, don’t you think?”

In all honestly it looks the same as the first: Kakashi has his hands on Naruto and Sasuke’s heads to
stop them from fighting over who exactly is paying for dinner that is not ramen. Sakura’s throwing
peace signs and arguing for the new place in that upscale Aburame neighbourhood. Kakashi is
telling them all to shut up but in a way that suggests he too wants the expensive option. The same
photo, really, but this time Sasuke and Naruto are working on being in love, Kakashi is nearing
retirement and Sakura is happy because she’s who she was always meant to be. And getting free
dinner.

The camera doesn’t disappear. There’s a photo of Sasuke’s face when he gets hit by a water
balloon. One of Naruto being pantsed by five year olds. Iruka crying from what first appears to be
stress but is quickly revealed to be schadenfreude. Kakashi asleep at the desks surrounded by nine
year olds descending on him with markers. Endless ones of Naruto and Sakura smiling, just
because. They get one of Sasuke’s genuine bafflement when Shunsuke’s teacher tells him he’s a
model student as well as one of his vindication when Shunsuke pranks him not ten minutes later.

True, he keeps all his memories behind his eyes where they can’t be touched by time, but these
ones he pins on to a board near the front door that houses notes to him, to the cats, to the myriad of
children living between his house, the Hyuuga’s and the Inuzuka. One day it will spread up the
walls, up the stairs and further beyond before it will fade out again. The children will grow up and
go different ways and Sasuke’s house will be somewhere they spent time long ago. That’s the fate
of family: to leave, to return, to be a vast thing that goes vast distances but calls only one place
home. But until then, until this well spring of hope falls fallow, let them live outside the
preservation of any sharingan.

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Eleven Months, Three Weeks After the War

It is Shikamaru’s idea.

The Nara have been, mostly accidentally, collecting census data on Konoha for several
generations. Their deep roots in the Intelligence community as well as R&D mean that any one of
them is walking around with volatile information at any given time. This is just part of being in
Konoha. That Shikamaru, mostly despite himself, has become a know in this knowledge, a
gravitational pull in the netting of the city-state is probably schadenfreude for his mother’s grey
hairs.

Despite not wanting to Shikamaru knows that the Uchiha owned every scrap of land they could get
their hands on. He knows that the Namikaze family made a de-militarized zone between the Senju
and the Uchiha. He knows that there is a small bakery that was part owned by every Uchiha and
given, until the end of time, to the kin of Chizuru, sister of Madara.

Shikamaru knows, more than anyone, what a hole the loss of the Uchiha would have been. Their history once lost could never be found again by one not of their blood.

So Shikamaru sits on Sasuke’s roof, in the shitty chair that he keeps his gardening shears on when Sasuke comes up for a late night beer. Shikamaru has a beer, one of the fancy ones that Chouji likes, and an irritated look on his not un-handsome face.

“You should think about writing it down.” Shikamaru throws back half the drink in one go, as if afraid Sasuke will insist on talking. I asked all Sasuke would insist on is Shikamaru fucking off. “What you know- I heard. Through the grapevine. What Hashirama said. And what you did. We didn’t know that. No one ever told us.”

Blood Eyes, Sasuke thinks uncharitably. Why tell you what are weaknesses where when you already wanted us gone?

“There’s an open co-op thing near Aguni’s office. It’s to write a ‘History of Grievance’. Danzo took a lot of kids and did a lot of damage we didn’t notice because we didn’t know how to look. It’s being entered into the library as historical record -under Tobirama’s name, even.” Now Shikamaru picks at the label on his bottle. “They’re afraid to ask you. What you would be willing to say.”

Sasuke looks up at the sky, at the stars that light up overhead. Mostly he wants Shikamaru to leave so he can turn on the radio and work on his beer belly. Mostly he wants to now do the washing up before Arata comes over tomorrow to help him sort out the glut of fiction books that got dumped on him after he started opening the old Uchiha storage units. Mostly Sasuke doesn’t care what Konoha knows as long as the kids do. History has its eyes, it’s voices, and one of them must be his as the last son of one of history's greatest names. That was once his actions, his failure, and is now his children.

So it’s easy, then. “I can’t promise you you’ll like it.” Sasuke says, “but I can try.”

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One Year After the War

Tsunade is eating lunch when Sasuke gets around to answering her summons. The greasy meat filling is falling out of her sandwich and she literally could not give a shit about it. Fair enough. Sasuke took a day and a half to walk the twenty minutes from his temporary office.

She shoves a stack of files at him, swallows obnoxiously and belches. Only then does she speak. “The families that control most of the farmland in Earth have annexed the region that borders with River. A new trade in live cattle has started operating with no regulation since the product comes from outside the Elemental Countries and we don’t have multi-national standards. Several revolutionary groups are gaining ground in contested areas between Giri and the establishment. A multinational ring of child sexual abusers has been uncovered, previously this was barely a crime, but with Otogakure setting precedents many are vying to have it considered a criminal offence. A populist leader has risen to office in the Mitsuhaku area, very influential, lots of money -and completely lawless. Someone has stolen a huge collection of art from the Ito family holdings in
“...no.”

“I can’t solve them.” Tsunade frowns. “Nor can any other Kage, or Giri, or anyone else. Each of these problems requires a multinational force with limited ties to an individual country who will have unprecedented jurisdiction over matters previously dealt with in-house. Giri might have been a contender but they’ve retreated to Otogakure. Until Madara’s trial is completed they will take on no new long term deployments. Between you and me, I don’t expect them to do more than they have. Otogakure is now a hub for international politics and keeping it clean will take much of their resources and ours. Solving these problems will require a completely new organisation. It will require that people like me hand over money, resources and cooperation in a way we’ve never even thought of. It will require that each person working on these cases be committed to justice over country.”

Tsunade drops the dregs of her lunch into the bin. She laces her fingers together in front of her face. “Do you want a job?”

“I’m not—”

“I put forward an idea at the meeting. One I think you might be better equipped than most to see through. This isn’t to police the world and define it by a narrow set of limits governed by pragmatism. Your job, if you choose to accept it, will be to find the fine line of ethics we will all have to live with. It will be years before you’re ready to try and enforce them and by then I hope...Well. I hope we’ll have more options. You’ve already proven that you will fight for what you think is right, against all odds and all common sense.”

Sasuke’s face twists with confusion. “With the new law?”

“With your brother.” She states blandly. “I will never approve of what you chose to do. But I understand better than anyone what it’s like to realise you are the last of your family and there is no one to blame for that but your family.” A shadow passes over her face, and Sasuke feels sorrow that whatever happened to the Senju left such a deep mark on their last descendant. “I understand that however misguided your choices were they were governed by love and a need to right a wrong. What is the Will of Fire if not an opportunity to do better?”

“I don’t have any legal training.”

“Neither does any Kage, at the start. Luckily there’s school for that.”

“I’m not a shinobi.”

“Don’t need that either. Just a good head and a sense of direction.”

“You can’t think— That this will work.

“I don’t.” Tsunade leans forward resting her chin gently on top her fingers. “But hell, kid, if I’m not just a little eager to see you try.”

For the third and final time a path is opened up to him. He says the only thing he can—

“Yes.”
Tsunade hands him a scroll. “Let’s get to work.”

Chapter End Notes

God help me somehow
There's no time for survival left
The time is now...
Cause this might be your last chance
To disco, oh-oh

fin

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