

Chapter 46: Guess who's back. Back again. This thing's back. Ow my shin.

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“Ugh.”

The first thing he registered as he slowly came back to consciousness was the full body cramp he was feeling. It was as if his entire being was one giant bed sore.

“Naruto!”

The second thing he registered was someone yelling his name far too loudly far too close to his aching head, which happened to be the third thing he comprehended.

“Inside voice. Head. Ears,” his halfhearted groan fortunately was understood as the voices near his bed lowered in volume.

“Welcome back to the world of the living,” Minato chuckled from inside his consciousness.

“Pity. I was getting used to the sanity.” Kurama mocked, only somewhat joking.

“Fuck me, I feel like I got hit by granny,” The time traveller groaned while going through the systematic self check that had been ingrained into him ever time he woke up. *“That’s the last time I use the giant purse for a demo on how fucked reality beyond reality is. How long was I out of it? Years?”*

“Three days,” Minato corrected with some pity, *“But considering the damage that Tsunade and Sakura claimed you had, you probably should have been out of it for a couple of years had it not been for your regeneration. You’re still in terrible shape.”*

“Having the Gobi and Rokubi in you helped. With the chakra of all nine biju in you to some capacity, your system’s reaching a unique equilibrium that wasn’t possible before.” Kurama supplied, **“The more you heal, the more your body can handle more chakra circulating, which will heal you more. It’s spurring on Kokuoh’s and Saiken’s recovery as well, which only redoubles the progress. The fact it took this long for you to wake up at all only underscores just how poor a state you were in.”**

“So long as I stop looking like a Danzo imitator,” reaching for his head, Naruto felt the wraps and gauze that still half mummified his body. “Ugh, my skull.”

“Hold on,” he heard Sakura move to his bed and began to work her jutsu on him, “Anything feel off?”

“I’m hearing voices.”

“**I can always knock him out for some more quiet.**” The fox offered within his soul.

“Don’t you mean rest?” Minato asked.

“**I know what I said.**”

He could literally feel Sakura’s dead stare, “You’re always hearing voices idiot. Work with me.”

Naruto couldn’t help but let out a chuckle of amusement. Even if he was still blinking to clear the fog from his eyes, he could tell his old friend was smiling slightly, “Only half kidding. Peering into other realities in bulk does that sometimes. Constant faint whispers like background noise. That thing.”

“Oh right, *those* whispers.” Sakura was less amused by the reminder, “You’re lucky that Tsunade-sama, Shizune, Hinata, and I were trained to deal with that. The Daimyo had night terrors the first night after your stunt, and the Raikage and Tsuchikage damn near walked out of any further negotiations unless we treated them that afternoon.”

“Well I couldn’t be the only person bedridd-ow!” His half hearted joke was cut short as his doctor poked his very tender chest.

“We’re still in Iron and negotiations haven’t been finalized. Don’t push it when you can still be overheard by people that aren’t willing to give you more benefit of the doubt than you’ve already somehow received.”

“Noted,” it always sucked when he was being treated by a doctor that knew how to hurt him without actually hurting him, “Fine. Fine. I’ll play along. Just give me a minute to actually remember what my body’s supposed to feel like in the first place.”

“Good. Now keep your chakra level for now. I need to see what your base is, not that I have much to compare it to seeing how often your insides have been screwed with lately.”

“And none of it by Hinata, surprisingly.”

“The sad thing is that I’m also surprised by that fact,” with his eyes clearing up, he managed to see the wry smile on his friend’s face, “I should remind her of that.”

Naruto’s amusement died right then and there, “please don’t.”

“She might even take it as a personal challenge.”

“I’ll be good. Please stop. Isn’t agitating the patient something a doctor’s not supposed to do?” He was breaking out in a cold sweat.

“No. But isn’t a patient that agitates a doctor someone that requires unorthodox methods?” Sakura smiled kindly.

“Can I switch doctors?”

“We’re unionized. We gossip and share standards.”

“Fucking unions... wait, we’re a military dictatorship. How did-?”

“Tsunade-sama helped set a couple up with benefits to attract more people to administrative, medical, and village security since they can’t tap the usual rewards from missions outside the village.” Sakura explained.

“... So when it comes to the old hag...”

“As Hokage and the village medical head, she double dips the system, yes. Shizune too as her assistant.”

“I fucking knew it.”

“ANBU managed to worm their way into the security union too, so Sasuke and Kakashi get a piece of the action as well,” you didn’t need to be a shinobi to tell she was enjoying rubbing this in.

Naruto was staring at her, blatantly unamused and betrayed at being cucked from the payout.

“Don’t be such a baby. I saw the paperwork that Scab sent you. You’re literally one of the most wealthy people on the planet.”

“But I wanna milk the system tooooooo.”

“Your very existence puts enough of a strain on it. No need to add insult to injury.”

“But you are insulting me while I’m injured.”

“Semantics.”

The door to the room opened to Tsunade and Shizune walking in. “Not even five minutes after waking up and you’re already moaning about something stupid brat. What is it this time?”

“I told him about the pensions.” Sakura looked at her teacher with an evil smile.

“He didn’t know about that yet?” Shizune asked obliviously, her words stabbing him in the heart further.

Naruto looked at her with wounded puppy eyes.

“Oh yeah. Sucks to be left out, doesn’t it brat,” The Hokage didn’t hesitate to smirk and look down at her patient vindictively.

“You guys are mean.” Truly the revelation hurt him more than his currently aching body.

“And you’re a pain in literally everyone’s ass.” The Hokage rolled her eyes and walked to his bed and looked at Sakura. “Well?”

“Nothing much yet, other than him hearing more voices than he already does.”

“Of course he is. Naruto, is that something you think we should help out with or is that another thing you don’t want us to bother with?”

“A little bit of help wouldn’t hurt. Unlike my damaged heart.” He cried melodramatically.

“That’s what Hinata’s for.” All three women flatly told him as one.

“You’re supposed to heal me! Not damn me!”

“Lungs are clearly functioning. He’s not coughing up blood yet, which is a good sign.” Sakura blatantly ignored his protests.

“Aaaah,” giving up, Naruto dropped his head back onto his bed and grimaced. “If you guys are going to at least keep this up, can you at least start with my head? The whispers from across the intangible folds are manageable, but they are making my headache worse

than it should. It's like listening to distant echoing nails on a chalkboard when you're trying to deal with a hangover."

"I'll take care of it. I've had plenty of practice over the past few days," Shizune stepped up to task.

"Is that with or without spending half of your time as a trainee dealing with Granny's hangovers?"

Fortunately for Shizune, Tsunade's cracking knuckles saved the woman from answering that question.

"Nevermind."

"Naruto, you just woke up. We need to have accurate readings on your vitals. Can you please stop doing things that will end with your blood pressure and heart rate spiking?" Sakura chided.

"Y-yeah. Sorry."

"Try to stay awake." Shizune, fortunately, was the least violent of his caretakers as her glowing hands braced the side of his head. "I know you just woke up and are tired, but we need to see how your body is functioning while conscious."

"Mmmm." He didn't bother with a full word this time, and allowed himself to relax. Despite being normally full of energy, he wouldn't deny that he was still aching all over and on the cusp of passing out again.

"We're going to ask some questions while we give you a lookover. You know how this goes. This isn't the first time we've done this." Tsunade stepped forward with her own hands glowing and started to inspect his chest.

"Naruto, your chakra's changed a bit more due to the biju in you. It's naturally denser than before, so it's harder for us to use some of our jutsu. Kurama helped us out when you were unconscious, but now that you're awake, I'd like you to help out with a few tests if you can." Shizune requested, getting down to business.

"Mmmm." Repeating himself with a halfhearted grunt, Naruto closed his eyes and allowed himself to fall into a meditative trance. His senses branching out not just through his body but through the air around him as well.

Through the hallways.

Through the compound.

Above up into the sky...

“... Damn.”

“What did you do now?” Tsunade grunted, sounding both further and closer than it normally did in his current state of mind.

“Sensory range extended. Chakra’s reaching further than it did before. Wasn’t prepared.” He muttered in a body that felt distinctly separated from his consciousness.

“Is it a problem?” Shizune asked warily.

“Just disorienting.” He calmed their fears. “Like growing an extra few centimeters overnight.”

“Exactly how far can you reach now?” Sakura asked.

He frowned for a moment and “looked”. “... Base of the mountains.”

“Which one?” Shizune asked.

“The ones next to the main ones surrounding the facility. Where most of the ground level fortresses we passed before coming up are.”

“But, that’s... way further than what you said you could look at before.” Sakura faltered in her inspection. The three wolves mountain base was at the peak of the area’s mountain range. The nearest “base” level fortress was over *twenty* kilometers away. “That’s reaching Hinata’s range with her Byakugan.”

“Can’t see everything at once. Muting it down to bare basics and chakra spikes.” Naruto grumbled, feeling his headache intensify from the momentary sensory overload. It was a good thing he was already lying down. The vertigo would have landed him on his ass if he had been standing.

“If it’s not one thing with you it’s another.” Tsunade shook her head.

“Your chakra’s spiking.” Sakura warned.

“Give me a moment,” with an annoyed frown, Naruto inhaled deeply to fill each and every membrane of his lungs with air, and held his breath for ten seconds... and then slowly exhaled from his mouth.

“Ah! W-What the?!” Shizune baked up as a literal wave of chakra saturated gas escaped the patient, immediately flooding the room and escaping through the doorway and vents to the rest of the building and then outside.

“Naruto! Some warning next time!” Sakura had also jumped back from the unexpected display and held back a shiver. The amount of power in the air was simultaneously invigorating and borderline suffocating.

“If I didn’t know any better I would have thought that a Biju passed gas in here. Ugh. Remember to brush before doing this again brat,” Tsunade made a face and waved the air in front of her face to try and get some clean-ish air in her lungs.

“Did she just equate a Biju passing gas to chakra powered halitosis?”

“When it comes to my son, the potential is technically there...”

If Naruto wasn’t literally spinning in his head, he would have actually bothered to be hurt by that.

“His chakra flow is stabilizing.” Shizune blinked in surprise.

“Too much chakra was in my body. Seventh Sense needs to be readjusted. Again.” The blonde grunted annoyed.

“It’s amazing and terrifying when you of all people say that you’re running too hot.” Tsunade shook her head in defeat before returning to his side. “By all rights you should have a chakra cloak right now.”

“Probably. Spreading the chakra out into the air.” His lips twitched up in amusement, “you could say that technically all the air around the base counts as my cloak.”

“How comforting. They always say that the calmest place in the middle of the biggest shitstorms is in the center.” The Hokage deadpanned.

“You make it sound like I wasn’t one to start with.” Naruto matched her snark with his own.

“You said it. Not me.” Sakura shook her head.

“And on the topic of shit storms, care to tell me what exactly happened while I was out?”

The room went quiet.

“C-come on Naruto. I know everyone rips on your terrible luck, but after those bombs you dropped on the Kage, do you think that anyone is willing to do something that stupid here?” Sakura tried to lie her way out of it, but she wasn’t doing a good job of it.

“Don’t play stupid. There’s an entire castle wall that collapsed. I’d be able to feel the change in air flow from here even without the Seventh Sense.” Naruto opened his eyes, his usual immature mirth completely gone.

It was only then that Naruto noticed that his friend had bags under her eyes, indicating that she had not been getting enough sleep lately.

He frowned, and then extended his senses to check up on his hunch.

And was left disappointed, for all the wrong reasons.

“... Oi.”

“Naruto, you’re in no position to bother with-” Tsunade tried to order him to take it easy and drop the matter, but the cold glance that had none of his prior childish mirth cut her off.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t notice Sasuke’s chakra after waking up?” His tone was flat and unamused.

“... I told them they should have started with the Ramen.” Shizune muttered under her breath.

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Kabuto breathed in deeply as he walked through the forests of the island that he had been using as a hidden base.

Well, rather, it had been one of Orochimaru’s more esoteric hidden labs over the years, but it might as well be his now.

“Ah. Being an introvert has its limits I guess,” the scientist stretched as he got exposed to daylight for the first time in over a week. Even he admitted that he was going a bit stir crazy from being cooped up for so long spying on the gokage summit.

Edo Tensei really was a marvel of a jutsu. It even worked on insects. Just sneak a few immortal zombie bugs on a few of the horses that were heading to the land of Iron and he was all set so long as he didn’t fly them in the open where people would notice them and wonder why there were insects flying out in such cold environments.

Nothing much had happened in the past few days other than the incident with Sasuke. While he was curious how that disaster would turn out exactly, he suspected it would all calm down once Naruto woke up again and took charge. His... tentative friend, was not a subtle person, but he was certainly capable of resolving issues that caught his attention. One way or another.

Rather than waste his time on forlorn conclusions, Kabuto decided he should finally head out and start his other personal project.

Explore. Meet people. And eventually find someone he believed was worth being called his student to discover what and who he really was.

Orochimaru had once told him that to find himself he'd need to gather more information about the world to do that. Obviously it was to play on his emotions and circumstances to spy for the man, but he wasn't completely wrong. Processing information was what separated man from animal in the end. But Naruto's advice had put a different spin on things. What he did with that information, and with others... it could be considered the following step to Orochimaru's advice. A step the Sanin had clearly neglected to tell him, or dismissed altogether.

Now all he had to do was find someone he thought could be a worthwhile student. That couldn't be too hard, could it?

Four hours later, Kabuto was sitting at the only tavern in the small fishing village that was on the island he was hiding out on, looking at the locals come and go living their own lives.

Yes. In retrospect, it probably was a bit harder than he thought. Especially when he didn't even know what he wanted in a student in the first place.

How old they were. How intelligent they were. How hungry to learn they were. Personal interests. Relationships. Backstory. Talent. Power. History. Lineage.

So much information. So many potential variables. He didn't even know what he wanted to begin with, let alone where he was going with the endeavor. So many factors to take into account... if they even mattered at all.

It wasn't as if he was unfamiliar with luring away orphans and kidnapping people. He had been Orochimaru's right hand, and even worked in ROOT for a time. If he had a resume, those activities would practically be at the top of his list of skills.

But this was for himself for once. Not for some experiment, but to try and... well, he didn't know what just yet, but he was sure that he wasn't going to be wasteful and kidnap someone just to dispose of them down the line. Not before he knew what he was looking for at least.

“Haaah. I guess I've really let my social skills go if I'm already having so much trouble,” he laughed to himself in a light hearted depression before a small commotion caught his attention.

Turns out that one of the new deckhands had hurt himself moving some of the fishing equipment being sloppy and had torn themselves a nice sized gash on his leg.

Kabuto didn't have much hope for the guy to make a full recovery with what was available in the village. The docks were well facilitated, which was a requirement for some of the equipment that sometimes went to the base, but otherwise the place was more or less in the boonies. More than half the men here had skin like leather from working outside all the time strut around with only fundoshis below the waistline. This wasn't the first time that something like this had happened here, and it likely wasn't going to be the last. The poor guy was probably going to wind up with a moderate limp for the rest of his life at best.

“Move out of the way! I can help!”

Much to his, and everyone's surprise, a vaguely familiar voice from the other side of the crowd shouted, and its owner pushed his way through.

“... Hoooh?” Kabuto certainly didn't expect to see that man here. Then again, if he was present on this island at all, then it was likely that Kabuto would have encountered the unexpected guest soon regardless.

“Amaru, I'm going to need extra hands with this one. The gash has cut deep.”

And he certainly didn't expect for an apprentice to be at his side at that.

Perhaps his journey would bear fruit sooner than he anticipated after all.

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A middle aged man looked out the wall sized window with a glass of wine in hand. Wearing a priest-like robe, monocle, and a near perpetual smile, he appeared almost kindly and genuine, if not for the fact that the smile never reached his cold eyes.

“So this is the land where the Gelel vein is hidden. How very... rural.”

“That is one way to put it, Lord Haido.” One of the three women in armor knelt behind him in deference.

“We’re in the boonies.” Another woman snickered with a cruel smirk. “Did you see those fishermen we saw earlier? They were walking around in nothing but their underwear and vests. We won’t even need the stone to take over this backwards shithole.”

“That would seem to be the case, had I not done some research.” Haido hummed out loud. “There are warriors here called shinobi that possess powers that might pose a problem. Chakra, they call it. Clearly they limit and control the knowledge of this power much like we do our own. The elite, these so called, Kage, in particular, are of particular concern, even to us if the rumors are half accurate. Fortunately, our spies have informed me that they are off on some political summit far from here, so we have plenty of time to locate the stone.”

“Humph. Is that why you had everyone wait even though we were ready to tear this place apart years ago?” The third woman scoffed.

“Mmm. Unlike our previous conquests, the land here is deceptively rich with mysteries and exotic abilities. How else did the original owners and powers that ruled with the stone manage to fail to the point of locking away their secrets and moving so far away from their kingdom. Those here cannot be underestimated. Why, there are even monsters here the size of mountains sealed into human beings if my sources are correct. They call these human weapons Jinchuriki.”

“Jinchur-what?” The second balked at the long and foreign title.

“A mouthful, I know. Roughly translated, it means “powerful human sacrifices”. Human monsters. Weapons used by the military of this land. I’d like to examine and take one myself eventually. Once we succeed in our primary goal here of course. No need for whimsical distractions just yet.”

“These monsters can’t be all that powerful if they can be jammed into some random mook.” the third scoffed.

“If the book of Gelel is any indication, the main cause for the original empire’s downfall was one of these monsters rampaging within its borders unchecked. A beast made of sand as tall as a mountain. The damage and casualties left in its wake were great enough that the empire did not possess the time or people to cover its defenses or protect itself before its enemies took advantage of the chaos.”

“Sand? Couldn’t they have been taken out by something more intimidating? Like a monster of fire or something?” The second asked skeptically.

“According to records, yes, there are two for fire as well. Three dwell in water. One flies in the sky unmatched and strikes like the weather unimpeded. One races across the plains like a wild stallion. And the strongest of them all destroys all that agitate it like a sentient cataclysm, reshaping the world around it as it passes be they mountains or lakes.”

“Sounds like a stretched truth if you ask me, my lord.” The first shook her head. “If the fools here are capable of harnessing such monstrosities, then they would have been capable of reaching out and conquering the lands outside this meager island decades ago.”

“They probably would, had they not been perpetually and fortunately at each other's throats to bother expanding their horizons.” Their lord smirked. “A pity for them. A boon for us. Once we have our claim on the Gelel vein, we can turn our sights onto other endeavors to further our horizons.”

“And what of Temujin?” The question roused a mocking chorus of laughter among the armored women.

“Now now. We are all on the same side. It’s not polite to insult a comrade behind their backs.” Their leader’s chiding would have been almost believable if a small cruel smirk didn’t escape his lips. “For now he’s doing reconnaissance on the locals. He’s strong enough to handle the base rabble and rank and file, but if we need to expedite matters, I may have to send you three out as well. Kamira, your mobility in particular will be of use here.”

“Tch.” The second woman clicked her tongue in annoyance, getting smirks from her teammates.

The leader laughed, like a father finding amusement in the nonsensical actions of his children. “Calm yourselves girls, and rejoice. Should everything go as planned, you should be able to do as you please and more with this land within the month.”

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“So why are you here in the first place? I thought you were busy in Iwa,” Naruto asked Sakura as they walked down the hallway.

“It was your fault mostly.” His teammate sighed, “Between the terrible shape you were in, political negotiations, and the esoteric after effects your little stunt had on everyone else, Tsunade-sama needed more help to deal with it all than just Shizune and Hinata.

Fortunately, I signed the Slug summoning contract, so getting here quickly was just a matter of playing with the summoning system. The longest part of the process was making sure that those taking care of Iwa wouldn't have a fit from my sudden departure."

"Ah summoning contracts. If the beast clans weren't so uptight about who used them, the things would be rife for abuse. No wonder dad's Hiraishin made such a big impact on virtually everything once he got the hang of it." Naruto sighed whimsically.

"More like they simply didn't want morons popping in and out of their homes all the time unannounced. Much less with unwanted weapons and explosives." Kurama materialized on his shoulder with a dry expression. "You know how much you humans stink of filth and chemicals to other species."

"I know I know. Filthy bloodsoaked monkeys." Naruto waved the fox off.

"I really wish you didn't treat your frequent injuries so lightly. You really are in a terrible state," Sakura frowned. "If you were anyone else, we would have written you off as a lost cause or at the very best inevitably crippled when we gave you the first lookover."

The blonde cringed, scratching the back of his head embarrassed as he used his left to hold onto the crutch he was using to walk. "Owch. Okay. I get it. I'll try to take it easy from now on."

"If only I believed you." The two made their way down the hallway, eerily not encountering anyone despite being a major military base.

"So other than the obvious shit show, what else has happened while I was out?" Naruto asked.

"Well, to put it in your words, a whole lot of nothing." Her shoulders sagged in disappointment. "The summit continued as far as it could given the circumstances. Everyone has agreed to go after Tobi and Danzo with utmost discrimination, to the point that messages have already been sent to the villages. But otherwise nobody can come to an agreement on other negotiations. They all relented to go with whatever you've come up with superficially, but they're all butting heads on the details. Money. Authority. People. Connections. The Raikage and Mizukage have both threatened to walk out at least five times every day from what I've heard. The Tsuchikage twice. Even Gaara and Tsunade-sama have had their patience tested to the limits."

"So about as well as can be expected then." Naruto laughed amused, getting a dirty look from Sakura. "What, like you expected this shitshow to go cleanly. With or without me."

"I expected you to at least try to not make it worse," she accused.

“Now that’s just wishful thinking.”

“We really should have just kept you under.”

“Love you too, Sakura.”

She huffed and shook her head before giving him an unreadable look. “... Can you really fix all this?”

“Nothing’s guaranteed, but my odds aren’t terrible.” Naruto avoided giving a direct answer.

Sakura knew better. His words were carefree and casual, but his expression and tone were notably blank. Even if he was being honest, it was blatantly clear that he wasn’t looking forward to actually going through with it all.

Not that she blamed him.

“Just don’t make more work for Tsunade-sama and the rest of us, will you? We barely managed to keep you together as it is.”

“Haaai.” Reaching the bottom of the stairway, the pair spied several guards standing in front of a room at attention.

“Ma’am.” The closest Samurai acknowledged Sakura with a nod, clearly indicating that the two had met before.

“I’m here to see the prisoner. Have there been any issues?” She asked calmly.

“A couple of attempted breakouts and scuffles, however the ones inside contained him before it got too serious.”

“Oh I can already tell how this is going to turn out.” Naruto grimaced and rubbed his temple to ease away the headache that was bound to come.

Sakura ignored him.

“Ma’am. We were given explicit orders not to let anyone other than specified guards and medical personnel in without clearance.” Another samurai held his ground firmly, his fist tightened on the spear in hand.

“Believe it or not, this idiot’s on the list. He’s just not in either category. I have a missive from the Hokage as well. With any luck, with his help, we won’t have to waste our time coming down here much longer.” Sakura waved off the guard’s concern.

“You can let go of the sword already. In case you haven’t noticed, in my current condition I’m more liable to bleed everywhere with or without your help than dodge anything.” Naruto deadpanned.

“Ignore him. Even the Hokage has trouble shutting him up.” Sakura rolled her eyes and played down Naruto’s disrespect.

“And he is supposed to help?”

“He has his uses. We wouldn’t have brought him all the way here otherwise.”

“So how do you guys identify each other when you have your armor on? Even our ANBU wear different masks to tell one another apart.” Naruto absently mused, trying to see if there were any differences between the two soldiers.

To be fair, it was a good question. The pair looked identical in height, stature, and apparel.

The other three in the hallway turned to look at him quietly.

“What? It’s a legit question.”

Sakura turned to the guards. “The sooner we get in there, the sooner you don’t have to deal with him.”

“Be that as it may, ma’am, we can’t let him in without clearance from at least two Kage or Mifune-dono.” The closer guard shook his head. “Unless Mifune-sama or someone with authority on the matter-”

His excuse was cut off as the door behind him opened with a loud creak, catching everyone’s attention.

And from behind it, a familiar scarecrow popped his head from the other side. “Oya? Naruto? You’re up already? I was told you’d be out of it for at least a few more days.”

Sakura’s eyebrow twitched. Judging from Kakashi’s far too casual and friendly tone, he had known who was on the other side of the door for a while.

Naruto must have been using his wind technique to privately speak and inform their teacher of their arrival ahead of time.

“And miss the fun?” Naruto played along innocently.

Sakura wanted to remind the annoying hypocrite about the five minute stream of profanity that tore his throat apart temporarily the moment he had learned about what had happened.

“Are you sure you want to do this now? It’s a bit of a mess in here.” Kakashi asked warily.

“I just slept for three days. I need to get moving and do something productive or I’m going to go more nuts than I already am.” Naruto shrugged, rolling his shoulders and limbs to the best of his ability while still bandaged heavily. “Worst case, I make some clones to help with the cleanup.”

The Jonin sighed in a “well what can you do” sort of way and looked at the Samurai. “Let him in. I’ll take the blame if anyone complains.”

“Sweet. Carte blanche.”

“You’re still being handed off to Hinata after this.” Sakura reminded him with a flat side glance.

“... Honestly, I’m surprised she hasn’t gotten to me already.”

“Not for a lack of trying, I assure you.” Tsunade had assigned her to mediate and help out with some of the other diplomats. The Tsuchikage in particular was surprisingly quite partial to her. Her Jyuken worked wonders on alleviating the aches of his old body on top of helping to address some of the omniversal headaches he was experiencing.

She was getting rather popular with the Daimyo, Mifune, Roshi, and Hiruzen as well for similar reasons.

“I’m starting to think it might be better off if I screw things up in there and fall into another coma.” Naruto smiled erratically.

“Do it and I snap your neck. Conscious or not.” Sakura brokered no negotiation.

“Yes ma’am.”

The pair walked through the door, ignoring the clearly uncomfortable Samurai that stood by as they passed.

“Kakashi, are you certain that it is for the best that they enter? Personality and reputation aside, that boy looks like he’s one hit away from falling apart entirely.” One of the swordsmen asked.

“It’s fine. If Naruto didn’t think he’d be able to handle the situation, he wouldn’t be here. He’s smarter than he looks.” The cyclops assured the men. “That kid can do things nobody else can. For better or for worse. He wouldn’t have been brought to the summit from the start if he wasn’t at least that interesting.”

“It’s getting him to stop that’s the real trick.” Sakura sighed behind him.

“Anyways, gentlemen. I’ll let you know how things turn out inside. Please continue.” Kakashi ignored his student and closed the door behind him.

Inside was a prison.

The sort of stereotypical row of stone and metal bar jail cell that most people envision when picturing a medieval “time out” pen. Complete with obnoxious cold and an even more infuriating drip of water coming down from the ceiling from somewhere in the vicinity to disturb the otherwise haunting silence.

At the very least, it didn’t smell too terrible here.

And sitting in one of the cells, was Sasuke Uchiha.

Not the ANBU.

The Traitor, runaway, and bane of the elemental nations that had studied under Orochimaru.

The two stared one another down.

“...”

“...”

“... Please don’t tell me you missed that stupid purple belt THAT much.”

FWOOSH!

In an instant, the traitor lanced his hand out at the injured blonde, a spear of charged lighting materialized in his grasp, extending and lanced towards the target through the bars without any mercy.

KSSSSH!!

Only for it to be stopped. Not by a jutsu or weapon, but by the blonde's open free hand, grasping onto the tip as though it was a blunt and soft toy.

"Easy Uke-chan. I get the mistake, but despite all the bandages, I am in fact not Danzo."

Crack.

With a flex of his fingers, the blonde's grip on the materialized lightning tightened, spawning fissures in the jutsu that rapidly began to splinter and destabilize the attack until...

BANG!!

The entire technique shattered under his grip, sending random errant bolts of electricity in every direction, scorching the stone and metal that they came across without discrimination.

No one there was harmed in the slightest.

"You..." The Traitor's sharingan took form and begun to spin.

"Sasuke."

And then he froze as Itachi appeared from thin air right behind him with a disappointed tone, causing the former to flinch.

"You took your time stepping in again, I see." Naruto smiled so widely that it couldn't be anything but sarcastic.

"I trusted you could handle yourself." Itachi ignored it completely.

"You know, it's that mindset that landed us in this shitstorm in the first place."

"I believe there are many that would beg to differ."

"Tell that to the rabid would-be "avenger" you made," Naruto pointed out with a dry tone.

“Don’t you dare talk back to my brother like that!” Sasuke snarled viciously, “He’s-”

“Alive?” Naruto cut in, turning his attention back to the prisoner with a knowing expression. “Redeemed? Outside of Akatsuki’s control? No longer being hunted down like an animal? What were you going to say? Oh wait, let me take a wild guess. “An Uchiha”. Right? That was always your usual cop out excuse for anything whenever you’re losing an argument and don’t want to man up with actual logic.”

Judging from the Mangekyo Sharingan forming, Sasuke was strongly tempted to use Amaterasu.

Actually, with the chakra spiking...

FWOOOSH!!

“Now now. None of that,” With an effortless flicker, Kakashi put his hand on Sasuke’s head and tilted it just enough to set some of the walls on fire instead of Naruto. “Itachi, if you could be so kind as to put out any fires for the time being.”

Itachi gave his former boss the slightest glance of mild annoyance before he used his own Mangekyo to vanish the black flames as quickly as they came.

“Let go of me Kakashi!” Sasuke snarled, his face contorted into an ugly image.

“Considering you were threatening to make a bad situation worse, I’m afraid I’ll have to err on the side of caution for now,” The Scarecrow failed to apologize magnificently. “We can’t have you running off and making mistakes, can we?”

“*Again.*” Was the unspoken word that pretty much everyone heard loud and clear.

“You...”

“I know. It’s almost like you intentionally look for people to bend you over and treat you like a whore.” Naruto cheerfully mused before counting on his fingers. “First there was Orochimaru. Who wanted you for your body. Then there was Akatsuki, who just needed to fill some spots in... and thus wanted your body. Then there’s that “Tobi” guy. Who just wanted you as a convenient pet more than anything. He was just so enticed with your eyes, so you could say he wanted those in addition to your body. Of course he dumped your ass for Danzo right at the end. Not a single care for your radiant personality at all. Such a shame. Are you sure you’re not a masochist? Seriously, I’m starting to think you and Sakura really are-”

“Finish that sentence. I dare you.” An ominous voice gave him an ultimatum from the side of the room.

“Everyone’s a critic.” The blonde rolled his eyes and shook his head before glancing at Kakashi. “Let him go.”

His teacher blinked in surprise. “You sure about that? You’re not exactly in any condition to work your usual magic.”

“I got it. Don’t worry.” With light taps of his crutch, Naruto walked to the prison door, opened it, shamelessly closed the distance to his former teammate and leaned down, just as Kakashi let go.

Surprisingly, Sasuke didn’t immediately attack him this time. Only glare murderously at him.

“Dead last.”

“Asshole.”

It was like nothing had changed after all this time.

“Why are you mad?”

Naruto’s question caught most of them by surprise.

“Are you serious? That’s what you’re starting off with?” Sasuke all but spat.

“I am. Why are you mad?” He held his ground. “You’ve had three days. I can tell you’re resisting fusing with your current self as hard as you can, but you must have caught on to *some* of what’s happened here. So tell me, why are you intentionally trying to be a pain in the ass for everyone this time?”

Naruto looked up and behind him to where Itachi was, “Your brother’s alive and healthy. So that can’t be it. The Uchiha name? Nope. We confirmed that Tobi prick and Danzo were behind it all for everyone, so that’s cleared up. Recognition? Nope, you’re ANBU, *with a pension*, and you are in a great relationship, and actually happy from what I know. Power? Got that too. Eternal Mangekyou Sharingan and everything, without the snakes and drugs admittedly, but that should be a plus in the long run. Akatsuki? Fucked. Danzo and Tobi? After this summit, those two will be hunted like dogs by pretty much everyone. The World Tree statue thing that holds the Biju? Gone. The shinobi system? I’m literally implementing a long term plan to drag *everyone* into a system that doesn’t use child soldiers and backstab one another as a form of saying hello as a start. With the Kage’s

and Daimyo's backing at that. So no more Uchiha Massacres. No more half assed logic starting wars. No more villages kidnapping for breeding programs."

He knelt down and stared directly into Sasuke's sharingan, his face showing nothing but genuine and innocent confusion and curiosity as though he was an oblivious five year old.

"So tell me, Uchiha Puppet that damned the world. Why are you angry *this time*?"

It happened instantly.

Which was to say, it went more or less as expected.

As talented and powerful as Sasuke was, he was predictable whenever his temper and pride got the better of him.

His Sharingan spun. His hand lit up with lightning and shot forward.

And Naruto's hand was already clenched on the attacker's face in an iron claw that would have made the Raikage proud.

"Let's change venues, shall we?"

o. o. o.

He stood in the middle of a wrecked and hauntingly vacant Uchiha compound. It was the middle of the night, and everything around him was tinged with the color of blood.

He was unharmed, and not surprised in the slightest.

"Fucking emos." He shook his head, disappointed that he had expected anything different. Not that he could complain much. His mind wasn't much better for the longest time, being a giant sewer of all things.

He first started with rolling his shoulders. Then stretching his arms. Then legs. A full set of calisthenics.

"Ahhh. It feels so nice not being a cripple for once." He smiled like a small child, bouncing on his feet and waving his arms around. "I should jump in people's heads more often... or not. I'd likely get blamed for their screwups afterwards if I did. Except for Hinata, but that's a hellscape for completely different reasons."

"YOU!!"

Naruto completely ignored the absolutely enraged Sasuke right behind him. “Yes yes. I get it. I’m part of the reason why she’s the way she is, but seriously I’m at best like, what, a tenth of it? A fifth at most. I’m calling bullshit on anyone that says more than that.”

Realistically, odds were that he was a third of it. The rest was primarily childhood trauma, an oppressive and repressive upbringing, and puberty hitting her like a biju.

“How dare you invade my mind like this?!” The Uchiha took out his sword, his eyes radiating with chakra.

“Says the guy that did the exact same thing to me how many years ago?” Naruto asked skeptically, turning around and casually side stepping the sword that would have cut his head off and hopping away on the second slash.

It was a vast difference from their prior encounters where Sasuke was overwhelmingly faster and more skilled than Naruto.

For once Sasuke was chasing after him in earnest, and Naruto was the apathetic one in the exchange.

“Head. Neck. Heart. Liver. Lungs. Kidneys. Stomach. Geez you’re just going for all the trademark kill spots aren’t you?” Naruto mused out loud as he swiftly side stepped and shuffled around every attack with mild interest.

“Get out of my head dead last!” Sasuke clearly had no intention of holding a conversation as a wave of electricity blasted from his body, lashing out viciously in all directions.

Naruto didn’t so much as twitch as it flowed around him like water without even ruffling his hair.

“Why? Because you had such a hard time doing that when we were kids and didn’t want to share the room with Itachi? You do strike me as a one-obsession-a-time sort. Clearly multitasking isn’t your strong suit.”

“Just because you got a little bit stronger you think you’ve earned the right to lecture an Uchiha?” Sasuke flourished his sword, lashing out at one angle before quickly changing sides and striking from the other.

Clang!

Only for it to be stopped by Naruto’s finger.

WHAM!!

Followed by a kick to his stomach, launching the irate Uchiha into a nearby building.

“First of all, for clarification, I got a *fuckload* stronger. Which you probably would have known by now if you bothered being social for once. Or at least interacted with the local Sasuke.” Naruto sighed and shook his head in disappointment. “It’s a genuine political problem with how overkill I am compared to everyone. You really don’t stand much of a chance against me now. I’m not joking. Stop for both our sakes. This is starting to get-”

Three fuuma shuriken glowing with lightning Chakra shot out like missiles from the destroyed building... and subsequently veered off course long before they got anywhere close to him.

“Embarrassing.”

Naruto sighed as he snapped his fingers, instantly spawning dozens of wind blades to sever the cables attached to the spinning blades. It was an old trick that Sasuke had gotten into the habit of using before even the chunin exams that worked well with his lightning element, but worked nowhere near as well against someone that knew the trick and had a kit to easily cancel it out.

SHINK!

Sasuke’s lightning charged hand erupted from his chest from the back.

Naruto’s bored expression didn’t change. “Clone.”

BOOM!

The impaled clone exploded with enough force to damage the buildings on either side of the road.

The next street over, both teens were standing completely untouched, staring down one another. One with rage. The other with apathy.

“So how long do you want to keep this nonsense up? It’s fun, old times and all that, but it’s going to get boring after a while.” Naruto asked with genuine curiosity.

“I said get out of my head dumbass.” Sasuke growled maliciously. “Do you really think you can outlast a master of the Mangekyou Sharingan in their own territory? No matter how much chakra you have, my power is limitless here.”

“Eeeeh. Limitless is a stretch.” Naruto gave a “so-so” gesture with his hand. “Genjutsu is restricted by imagination, and I’ve seen some absolutely *fucked* up things over the past few years to kill my ability to be shocked and disgusted. You’re a bottomless pit with a tap, and I’m an ocean with a firehose. Sure I’ll run out of power quicker than you here, but until then I got you outgunned in this contest.”

The Uchiha’s temper flared momentarily before receding just as quickly. He looked at Naruto almost as if he was a stranger. “... You’re different.”

“Well I did make a few changes to my wardrobe. You like? Say it. I look awesome.” Naruto missed the point completely, brushing off some dust from his hooded sweater.

“You know what I mean.” Sasuke didn’t fall for the teasing this time.

“Oh *that*? Turns out that the sealing of the fox in me was botched, so its chakra was more or less screwing with my head and putting me on the special needs spectrum. I was more or less working with a handicap the entire time last time. So, sorry for being such a pain in the ass back then as far as being an idiot that didn’t listen is concerned.” Naruto waved his hand dismissively, “Now I’m just a pain in the ass that goes about doing whatever I want most of the time just because... kinda like you in hindsight. Only I talk to people. And I’m not morbidly depressing to be around.”

The Uchiha had an odd look on his face. It was a mix of disbelief, confusion, and an inner conflict on whether or not he was actually hearing that properly.

“Fixed or not, I see you still won’t shut up.” Sasuke frowned.

“No that’s still there. Sorry. On the plus side, I’ve LONG since stopped with those annoying overly idealistic “bonds” monologues.”

THAT actually had Sasuke blink in surprise.

Naruto grimaced with some embarrassment. “Yeah, if at all possible, I think that’s a part of my life that we can all agree to try to pretend never existed. Honestly, I’d run away too if I was force fed that bullshit day in and day out.”

BOOM!!

A titanic fireball came down like a meteor right on top of where Naruto was and obliterated the area.

“Oi! What the hell was that for?!” Comedically burnt and ruffled, Naruto yelled at his opponent from the roof of a nearby building.

“There’s no way you’re the dumbass. He’s too stubborn and braindead to ever go back on those stupid bond speeches that he would never shut up about.”

“*THAT’S WHERE YOU DRAW THE LINE?! IS IT SERIOUSLY THAT HARD TO ACCEPT I ACTUALLY GREW UP AND BECAME THE SLIGHTEST BIT SELF AWARE?!?!*” Honestly, Sasuke’s words hurt him more than any of his genuine attacks did.

To be fair, looking back on how he acted before this whole time traveling nonsense, yes it kinda was.

Sasuke didn’t respond as several more meteor sized fireballs fell on his target from above.

Naruto in turn simply screamed like a small child and ran his ass off, dodging each and every mini nuke like explosion by the skin of his teeth, but never getting truly hurt and still staying in the area.

The pattern repeated for a few more minutes with one side attacking relentlessly and the other “barely” getting out of harm’s way while making a complete fool of themselves...

The Uchiha appeared in a flicker right in front of his comically charred target. “Enough. Stop this charade. Anyone can tell you’re playing around on purpose. You’re barely doing a better job of it than that masked bastard when he called himself Tobi. Whoever you are, take this seriously already.”

“But, I don’t wanna.”

The idiot ducked underneath a Chidori Spear.

“You come into an Uchiha’s mind with some purpose, wearing a poor imitated guise of my former teammate, and this is all you intend to do? Are the Gokage that desperate for my secrets?” Sasuke snarled, keeping up the attack, with no results as everything was constantly being evaded.

“Well, that. And because taking you seriously is what *you* want.”

It was the momentary coldness in that lone word that caused Sasuke to pause for an instant. The Naruto lookalike was still acting like an innocent fool, but he was... dismissive of his situation. Bored even. “What I want?”

“Last time you did whatever you damn well pleased. Remember? You ran off to Orochimaru. You hunted down Itachi. You joined Akatsuki. You hunted down the Hachibi. You became a selfish prick and pain in quite literally everyone’s ass. And surprise surprise. You ended up being a key factor in the *end of the world*.” Naruto shrugged helplessly. “So yeah. Everyone here that knows better decided that you, Sasuke Uchiha, emotionally unstable fuckup extraordinaire, are shit out of luck this time.”

Sasuke saw red, and not because half the world was bathed in red light from the twisted moon up above.

The bastard then had the nerve to smile cheerfully. “Why else do you think that you haven’t been brought back in this timeline until now? Me. Kakashi. Sakura. The old hag. Fuck, even Shikamaru have been here and being genuinely productive for *years*. Do you have any idea what it takes to get that lazy jerk moving? But *you*? Pfft. Fuck no. You’d just screw it all up the moment someone mentions revenge, and then excuse it all saying “Uchiha” ad nauseum like it’s the only word in your vocabulary other than “hn”. *Again*. Seriously you have no idea how hard it was to break the current you out of that habit here. At least he listened to people and learned to think for himself eventually.”

Crimson eyes began to bleed.

“Amaterasu.”

Naruto twitched a finger.

A massive gale of wind kicked up instantaneously, blasting a wall of dirt dust and debris between the two that immediately caught aflame. Neither were there two seconds later when the improvised wall was completely carbonized.

The two raced down the street. Sasuke sprinting, Naruto genuinely flying with his hands linked behind his head as if taking a casual stroll.

“So what’s it gonna be this time? Outright denial? Dismissal of any wrongdoing despite blatant evidence? Blaming Konoha for everything? Establishing the unfounded dominance of Uchiha supremacy? An incoherent grunt?”

With every question asked, at least one fireball and a dozen sharp projectiles flew at the obnoxious blonde with the intent to maim or kill, but all veering off course wildly at the last moment.

“What will it take to shut you up!? Even back then you were never this annoying!!” Sasuke snarled as he rampantly slashed with a Chidori Spear, only for it to be casually knocked aside effortlessly each time.

“I like to think that’s because I’m more on point than I was back then.” The invader shrugged, deflecting rapid fire slashes with a wind chakra covered finger. “That, and I guess I’m making up for lost time. Wait, does that mean you circled around and accept that I’m me again? Sweet. Progress.”

SHNK.

A blade of lightning pierced Naruto through the back right through his skull.

Poof.

“Gonna have to try harder than basic genjutsu, Sasuke.” Naruto casually sat on the edge of a nearby roof, his feet dangling like a child.

The house exploded.

“You know, there’s an irony in someone using rampant explosions trying to kill me off.” Another blonde walked absently out into the open from a nearby alleyway.

This one didn’t even bother to try and defend itself from being cut in half. Fortunately, it just poofed out of existence.

“So, on the scale of pointless fangirl Sakura to Itachi, how am I doing when it comes to fucking with your head so far?” This time he was grinning while leaning against a nearby store window with his arms crossed.

The entire building’s side collapsed in on itself as the titanic fireball hammered into it.

“I can do this all day.” He was standing in the middle of the air above the district now, hands in his pocket and looking down at the frustrated Uchiha. “You know how badly I could spam these things even before this time travel bullshit. Knocking these out one at a time is going to take forever. Might want to step it up a bit.”

“Anyone with chakra can do Shadow clones. Hiding like a coward and making one at a time proves nothing.” Sasuke glared from the roof of the tallest building in the area.

Naruto tilted his head to the side in confusion. “So, if I kick your ass, it will prove something?”

The transformation was instant.

One second they were staring each other down, the next the Uchiha's Mangekyou flared and he was enveloped in a massive chakra construct in the shape of an armored tengu with wings, wielding a sword as long as it was tall. The titan was so tall that standing on the ground, it was already towering over where Naruto floated, the latter not moving at all.

The sword, larger than any building there, rose into the sky, sparking with arcs of black electricity the size of lightning bolts that bounced up and down to the clouds above.

They both opened their mouths.

"Die." Declared Sasuke.

"Atlas." Naruto sighed flatly.

The Titan's blade swung down hard.

Along with the Titan itself.

Sasuke could imagine the power to do many things.

The incomprehensible raw strength to withstand the weight of the literal sky on his entire being was not one of them.

The monstrosity crashed face first into the earth hard, causing an earthquake that shook the entire district. Sasuke didn't fare much better, being rattled by the sudden invisible technique hammering down what he thought was his unstoppable ace.

The blonde floated down to the head of the downed giant. "Let me guess, you expected me to do the usual Rasengan clash with whatever you came up with, screaming at the top of my lungs against your mental construct before wearing myself out and getting torn up."

He suddenly held his open hand back behind him, manifesting a massive Rasengan ten meters in diameter, blocking the blade of a second Susanoo that came from out of nowhere.

Despite the cataclysmic clash that echoed throughout the mental replica of the Uchiha district, neither budged an inch.

"Right before you pull the usual Uchiha genjutsu bullshit asspull."

Sasuke's scowl deepened slightly. "... Since when could you of all people detect a genjutsu consistently? The Kyubi?"

"Nope."

The world quaked as the titanic ball of chakra immediately quintupled in size, nearly matching the size of the Susanoo's torso and hammering it back across the increasingly devastated district.

"Bask in my awesome glory and weep! This is all me!" Naruto smiled wide and proud, laughing not how easy it was to completely stomp on his former rival, but at himself for feeling relieved that he actually had the opportunity to do something in hindsight so pointless and stupid in the first place.

Worthless and meaningless unfinished business in its purest form.

He really hadn't grown up at all, had he?

"This might be your mind, Sasuke, but I sure as shit am not the underdog this time. I don't have any of my usual cop outs. No sage mode. No fox. No seal. No creepy stalker-esque speeches about bonds. No last second backup. You're at full blast here and I'm practically crippled outside with the shit shape I'm in. And in spite of all that, I'm going to wreck shit alllll over your insides with a smile on my face just like every other freak you've bent over for... so in some ways, it's like absolutely nothing in your life has changed in the slightest! What should I get you to do first when I'm done? Hmmm..."

"NARUTO!!!" The giant flying armor erupted from where it fell, this time completely engulfed in lightning...

"Atlas."

And face planted into the earth, tearing up three streets worth of buildings as it skid to a stop.

"Oh. Sorry. Wrong name. I mean, "SASUKEEEEEEE!!!"

A corrupted purple and black light shone roughly a kilometer away, catching Naruto's attention. He could just make out yet another Susanoo there with a bow, notching an arrow made of pure black fire from Amaterasu.

In response, the guest pointed his hand in the light's direction, making yet another five meter wide Rasengan... no, a Rasenshuriken with the core alone being five meters wide, and the blades extending well over five times that. The ominously spinning blades of the

technique and the eerily high pitched hum made it look like the ultimate nightmare in the form of an industrial fan.

One that was spinning faster with each passing second, and pointed straight at the oncoming attack.

The arrow was released the same time the titanic fan of chakra reached the apex of its rotation and unleashed a tightly concentrated spinning wave of chakra.

Whereas the arrow incinerated the world around it as it passed into ash, the wave seemed to contort it as though it was clay, bending and twisting reality into a malleable mess that was just as unrecognizable, looking more like a rapidly moving transparent horizontal pillar than anything.

The two disasters clashed with the impact of two natural disasters vying for supremacy. The wildly thrashing streams of corrupted fire and chakra supersaturated air devastated everything in its immediate vicinity, almost reaching back to the ones that fired the attacks in the first place... for the first few seconds at least.

The attacks had not directly met head on. The contorting column fired off by Naruto was set off at a slight angle. While the two techniques had made contact, it was one that would guarantee that they would deflect the other.

And given the nature of the moves in particular, the flaming arrow without question flew off course more than the column.

Before the offending Susanoo could react, the oncoming blast of air tore off its right arm and bow as if none of its power had been dissipated at all.

In contrast, the Amaterasu arrow was thrown wildly off course, missing Naruto by a wide margin and obliterating a seemingly random area with a wild explosion...

... One that didn't seem so random seconds later as the area itself rippled to reveal another impaled Susanoo hidden by an illusion.

"You really got to start positioning your ambushes better." Naruto smirked like a small child, clearly having done that on purpose.

This was the great thing about the Seventh Sense. Conventional hypnosis and genjutsu was catered towards conventional senses and interpretations of the world, but the irregular wind technique was an outlier that couldn't be accommodated for by those rules. If the seventh sense was showing something that the rest of his senses didn't pick up, the rule of thumb was to instantly rely on the former to stay alive.

Of course, simply ignoring the other senses in the middle of a fight was easier said than done by a wide margin, but that was what Ghost's "I don't give a fuck about conventional logic oh look something horrifically dangerous let's poke it" brand of training came into play. It wasn't a stretch to say that Naruto could fight a battle blindfolded with his ears plugged for three weeks straight if he needed to.

Because he did need to at one point. And it *sucked*.

Speaking of sucking, the world itself was starting to turn into a cheap horror caricature, with the details in the background starting to lose cohesion and the crimson light illuminating the environment growing more malicious and intense.

"Someone's getting testy." Naruto looked up...

Right at the small army's worth of identical armors flying in the sky with their weapons drawn.

"... I feel like I'm stuck in another one of those obnoxious giant robot monster movie remakes that make no sense. Evan-something something." He tilted his head to the side, completely ignoring the absurd levels of lightning chakra generated from the army that was literally ionizing the atmosphere, already hammering the abused land below with an unending percussion of rampant thunder.

The world above him was akin to a lightning storm with no clouds.

There was an irony to facing so many clones like this, but it was such a low hanging fruit that even Naruto didn't bother bringing it up.

He held out two hands to either side, and started to manifest a Rasenshuriken in each, only to cough at the last moment and pause.

He tasted blood. And it wasn't because of Sasuke.

... Damn. He must have hit his limits earlier than expected. Mental battle or not, he still wasn't in good shape for something like this.

Truthfully, what Sasuke was throwing about now was already well above the amount of chakra Naruto could produce in this setting. He wasn't lying when he said that Sasuke would eventually wear him down as things were.

He could fight back, put a severe mental strain on the traitor to give an opportunity for the current one to make a showing.

He could continue to play around, and wait for the impatient walking ego to screw up at some point.

He could try to “talk” things out a bit more.

Ah, but that would take time. Despite how he looked in the mindscape, he wasn’t going to last much longer at this rate.

The two chakra constructs in his hands faded away without any fanfare.

Oh well. It was fun while it lasted.

Now was as good a time as any to turn things around anyways.

“Hey Sasuke. Wanna see a cool jutsu that you can’t do?”

Naruto started to make some seals.

“It’s a super nifty wind technique. Problem is that if you don’t do it right, it’s designed to kill the user. The guy who made it is a real prick like that, but it is useful for making idiots that blindly copy techniques off themselves.”

The atmosphere's electrical charge skyrocketed.

“Anyways, it’s classified as a Mass Assassination technique. Spawns wind blades in a selected area and they just shred everything inside all at once. Have enough chakra and you can make it hit pretty much everything everywhere. Real convenient if you’re trying to nail someone in an out of the way spot you can’t reach. Or large numbers of mobs at once. Not so much with strong guys that radiate chakra or are covered in armor though.”

Naruto’s hand finished on the final seal. His smile turned dark and vicious.

“But the real secret to this move is that it wasn’t originally meant to tear apart *people*.”

Titanic bolts of purple lightning jumped between the hundreds of Susanoo flying in the sky around the blonde. The preparation for their own technique was ready.

They swung the beams of light that were their swords down.

“War Scars. (*Rending of the Established World*).”

The dream world itself became erratic and disjointed. It was as if it was witnessed through a piece of three dimensional glass that had just been shattered in no particular location, causing space itself to shift erroneously in every conceivable direction. Even the countless Susanoo radiating with unheard of power in the Elemental Nations were not exempt from this absurd phenomenon, their lightning, swords, and armor segregated in each and every direction possible.

And yet...

... Between the paper thin incisions that littered the world, slivers of dark blue could be seen cracking out from them.

Slivers of blue that were progressively glowing brighter...

“What?!” Sasuke hissed, confused and even stuck, trapped within his own mutilated chakra armor.

“I don’t blame you for assuming I wouldn’t notice, or be able to do anything about it. The rules for dealing with mindscapes and inner psyches are a pain at the best of times. But, you really underestimated just how much I’ve grown and the shit I’ve been through since we last met, Sasuke.” Naruto’s body posture straightened out and his demeanor took on a more mature image.

SHINK!!

Before the Traitor could respond, one of his clones was speared through by a beam of blue and red through the cracks in reality. The chakra armor was penetrated effortlessly, and was genuinely melting through the construct like a hot knife through butter.

“Everyone knew you were merely repressing the current “Sasuke” here, but the real standout about your current setup is there’s not a single shred of him visible here or outside. No doubt you had experience doing this with Orochimaru, from what Itachi’s told us from your fight. It’s why Sakura, Kakashi, and Itachi weren’t nearly as panicked as they rightfully should have been from seeing you do your usual nonsense again. Your stubborn ass rejected and repressed him so hard out of instinct, it’s actually impressive in a way. But did you really think that there wouldn’t be any repercussions for being a complete asshole? Again? Much less to yourself?”

The two Sasuke Uchiha were supposed to mesh together from the chain link. Normally the more mature or aware of the two would be the dominant personality, which was why virtually everyone that had received a link more or less became their prior timeline selves with their current self’s memories and hints of their younger’s personality. It helped that

the overlap between the pair's were almost one to one for the most part, which made the process easier and seamless.

Sasuke's case was an exception. The two's ages were nearly identical for starters, but far from the only difference. Their personalities, life experiences, desires, and intentions were nearly completely incompatible with one another's starting from when Naruto started his second try at life, and it made the process far from seamless.

The Mangekyou Sharingan only further complicated matters, not only enabling both variants to be extremely aware of the procedure the moment it started, but having some influence over it as well.

Itachi could have technically done the same thing when he got his link, but fortunately he wasn't a complete asshole. Much less to himself... technically.

It was at this point that the difference in personalities and experiences between the two came into play. As strong and skilled as the current Sasuke Uchiha was, he was nowhere near as paranoid and aggressive as his former counterpart, and was caught off guard almost as soon as the fusing process started.

But, by that same logic, the aggressive Sasuke was not prepared for how tenacious his current counterpart was, nor was he capable of penetrating and usurping the barrier supported by the ability known as Presence.

Ultimately, the Traitor came out of their initial encounter with the victor, but it was a shallow success at best. He could neither truly defeat, nor render his counterpart submissive and immediately become the dominant personality. Not if their personalities fused.

The best he could do was submerge and sublimate his younger self's consciousness and mindscape under his own.

Of course, merely describing what happened and implementing it are two very different things.

CRACK!

The amount of effort it took to keep the Sasuke Uchiha of this world under was not insignificant. With time and left unimpeded, perhaps the traitor would have eventually sublimated his other, but it would have been an endeavor spanning months if not years to make proper headway on. Not mere days.

An endeavor that is monumentally more difficult when trying to expel a notoriously powerful, and exponentially more annoying intruder.

And all but impossible when said intruder is capable of attacking the means of keeping the prisoner down in question.

SHINK!

Under a mindscape that was threshed and falling apart in front of his very eyes, pierced and shattering under the force of the army building up momentum from the other side, tearing apart his own forces.

The cracks widened. The world began to shard and splinter. The malice that saturated the world and sky itself began to groan under the unexpected strain. Until..

With a loud shattering sound like breaking glass, red became blue, night into day, the moon to the sun...

And the current Sasuke Uchiha's deep ocean blue Susanoo, a titan that dwarfed the the corrupted purple variants like a mountain to a hill, loomed over the landscape to the point that its head passed some cloudlines.

The peaceful, unfettered Uchiha Clan district in this land was bathed in natural light with a slightly cloudy sky. There was no overwhelming obnoxious weight on it, nor any scent of blood to clog the senses to oppress this suddenly homely locale.

Naruto looked up at the newcomer, clicked his tongue, and held thumbs up in approval. "Nice."

As if in response, the titan's crimson Sharingan eyes shone ominously, hundreds of bolts of lightning the size of buildings that were simultaneously on fire rained down from the sky and impaled each and every one of the traitor's constructs.

... And Naruto too if the latter didn't dodge out of the way at the last second.

"Oi! I'm on your side, jerk!"

"You'd live." Materializing from thin air, the current Sasuke Uchiha appeared next to his friend with crossed arms and an unamused expression.

"Well duh, but it would still suck." Naruto matched the expression. "Regenning from fourth degree burns is a pain in the ass."

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Current Sasuke’s Mangekyou Sharingan spun, and the world twisted on itself again.

This time they were in a prison. Not the one in Iron, but what appeared to be one of the many ANBU cells that “clearly didn’t exist”.

They were on the outside. The Traitor was handcuffed and imprisoned on the inside.

“Oh I don’t think you two have been properly introduced. Sasuke, this is Sasuke. Sasuke, Sasuke.” Naruto, all smiles, played the roll of the mutual friend.

“You’ve been waiting to do that since the start, haven’t you?” The local deadpanned.

“You have no idea.” Naruto momentarily became horrifically serious before returning to normal and looking at the traitor. “Sasuke? Do you have anything to say to Sasuk-urk!?”

“If you play nice, I’ll make sure he doesn’t come back.” The local pretended to not have just suckerpunched his best friend to shut him up.

“You’d let that walking mouth with legs back in our head?” The traitor snarled with mixed disgust and disbelief.

“Considering what you tried to pull, I consider the punishment worth it.”

“Glad to be of service.” Naruto, hunched over and grabbing his stomach in pain, waved feebly.

“Go back to bed Naruto. Don’t think I didn’t see what your condition’s really like.” The local Sasuke all but ordered his guest firmly.

“You sure? He already pulled one on you once.” The blonde rubbed his stomach tenderly.

“Once was already more than enough to see through his tricks. Watching how he tried to deal with you covered the rest.”

“Fine. If you put it like that. You owe me big if I have to deal with his bullshit again though.”

“I’ll put it on the list,” the ANBU shrugged dismissively.

“It’s going to be another bitch of an audit this year. Fun.” Naruto sighed, his demeanor shifting from eccentric man child to tired old man right in front of the two Uchiha’s eyes.

With an exhausted grunt, the Uzumaki stood straight up, stretched a little bit, and made his way to the lone exit to the room before pausing.

“Sasuke,” He didn’t turn around, but it was blatantly clear he was talking to the traitor, “I honestly don’t care that you ran away from Konoha anymore. Or anything else you did up to your fight with Itachi... minus shattering my spine and gouging out my chest. After what you went through, I get it. I really do. If you didn’t return to Konoha or even went to another village, I wouldn’t bat an eyelash in the slightest. Wouldn’t stop me from making fun of you for running into the arms of the guy that looks like a textbook child predator like you did, but otherwise I really wouldn’t have given you that much shit... eventually.”

The traitor looked like he genuinely didn’t know whether to laugh in disbelief or spit out some snarky response. Before he could say anything though, Naruto went on.

“What I can’t forgive is that you couldn’t stop after Itachi. You didn’t try to stop. You didn’t try to simply be happy. You didn’t try to be a better person like you claimed you wanted to be when we were kids. You just kept on looking for the next person to lash out at. And in the end, you became a key part in fucking up the world so badly that it took a *literal* act of god to even begin to fix. You wound up working under the single guy that screwed up your life in the first place, and were thrown away for the one that made it worse. You might think I replaced you in this world by not bringing you back, but I just didn’t want you to fall more than you already have. I really think it’s the only thing I could still do for you as a friend after seeing firsthand what you’ve become.”

He started forward again, not once looking back.

“For what it’s worth, it really was good seeing you again.”

The two counterparts stared at the doorway for several long seconds before they were certain that Naruto had left their mindscape entirely.

“... I told you he’d notice.” The current Uchiha stated flatly, leaning against the bars.

“Tch.” The traitor clicked his tongue in annoyance, pretending to ignore the fact that the last three fingers of his right hand were slowly fading away. “That idiot. You could count the number of times he was actually observant on one hand in our world with fingers to spare. Let alone put anything together.”

“So I’ve been told.” The ANBU glanced at his counterpart’s slowly decaying state. “Now he’s just insufferable and observant. Still better than Kakashi as far as I’m concerned. At least he doesn’t pretend like nothing’s wrong with bullshit excuses to your face.”

It wasn't completely the traitor's fault he had been an utter mess mentally, refusing to listen to common sense and constantly seeking revenge. Outside of his obvious trauma and twisted childhood, there was another factor that all but guaranteed his fall into disaster.

Orochimaru.

Sasuke's stay with the Sanin wasn't without repercussions. Not simply due to the training and drugs to enhance his body, but the more subtle esoteric drugs as well.

Specifically, the drugs were designed to gradually eat away at his soul and sanity over a long period of time to ensure that Orochimaru's eventual possession went as seamless and clean as possible.

Obviously, Sasuke didn't know about these particular prescriptions during or after his stay. Much like how the Sanin didn't expect Sasuke to turn traitor when he did, but by then it was too late.

By the time Sasuke killed Itachi, the stress between the revelations and the damage to his very soul had corroded his judgment and sanity to the point that his critical thinking skills were heavily impaired. His temper shortened. His anger flared more frequently. Eventually, between his observations and Karin's input, he realized what was going on, it was too late. He knew he was dying, and there was nothing he could do, which only further inflamed his temperament and rash decisions.

And now... the chemicals were gone, but the damage was still there. And it was too much.

"It's ridiculous how much power he's gotten. Why aren't you angry how far ahead he is? Ahead of you?"

"Power isn't everything. Look what it's done for Itachi. Hell, look what it's done to *Naruto*. Even you can tell he's a complete mess. I doubt anyone that's spent longer than five minutes with him will think that the power's worth being as unhinged as he is," The ANBU shook his head, "He was right about one thing though. He is trying to be happy in spite of the shit he's been through, in his own way. Give himself something to latch onto to ground himself."

"He'll make a bigger mess out of the world than anyone." The traitor grimaced.

"Maybe, but you're talking like the world isn't a mess already. Somehow I can see what he comes up with being a functioning mess. Fun even. He's gotten pretty good at pulling last second twists like that. He'll need help though. I wouldn't be going along with his

bullshit after all this time if I didn't think it had promise. Better and more sane than feeding the world to some giant alien tree lady at least."

"Why don't you change everything then instead of leaving it to him then?"

The Anbu shrugged. "... The thought's crossed my mind a few times. But every time I think about it, while what I might come up with might possibly work better on paper, odds are Naruto is more likely to just make his happen in general. He has a way with people sometimes. Plus, if I'm being perfectly honest, his way sounds more fun in the end."

"*Fun?* That's your excuse for risking the future of the world to that idiot?"

"Sure. As far as risks go, it's not that bad in comparison to what we just dealt with. Or the shitshow that *you* set off. From what I've heard it doesn't sound too insane in hindsight. Plus if we join him, we get away from Konoha. That's a win for you, isn't it?"

"..." The chamber remained ominously quiet, the Traitor didn't have anything to say to that. "... He really gave up on being Hokage?"

"Looks like it." The ANBU grunted, knowing exactly what his counterpart was getting at. "He's grown up and moved on. Sort of."

"That idiot dead last. He really can't shut his mouth, can he?"

"No. He's just gotten better at keeping it open. Fortunately. Pretty sure I would have run away from the village myself if he was spouting endless friendship speeches when we were kids."

"... Lucky bastard." The traitor scoffed in bitter amusement, looking at his fading hand where his index finger was losing cohesion.

"On that we can agree."

"How strong is he really?"

The ANBU chuckled and shook his head. "No clue. Every disaster that pushes him just seems to make him stronger once he's finally good to leave the hospital. And he's gotten the shit kicked out of him relentlessly from what I've heard. More than enough to body both of us at once if he was actually healthy though. Without question."

"Yeah. That does sounds like him. At least that hasn't changed."

The Current Sasuke Uchiha turned around, Eternal Mangekyou Sharingan spinning. The former Sasuke Uchiha's identical eyes peered back.

"I guess I'll see how different things are soon enough regardless."

"Yeah. I guess you will."

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"It's been a while. I didn't expect to see you again after all this time, Shinno."

"Strange times have a tendency to move people to strange places, Kabuto. Last time I saw you was when your master was still around." The smiling white haired doctor smiled, clinking his glass to Kabuto's at the bar.

They were both snakes. Their cheap smiles never met their eyes, but at the very least Kabuto had the decency to not look at essentially everyone like prey every passing second. The recent arrival would make a terrible spy.

"Master? You mean this guy is like me?" Amaru, Shinno's student, asked with confusion. The girl's attempt to match her teacher's look and hide her gender with a headband that held back her considerably red hair was adorable, even if it failed miserably.

"Was, Amaru. Young Kabuto was already a gifted talent when I met him years ago when he was a student. I long suspect that he's polished his craft to stand on his own by now." Shinno chided his student.

Ah, so the man wants his help with something after all. Or something of Orochimaru's.

"I've strived to excel where I can, but I still lack a genuine specialty in the medical field yet, unlike you Shinno. I still refer to your revolutionary works on human regeneration and foreign chakra adaptation even now. I'm more of an esoteric generalist, if you could call that a specialty."

"Feh. That's as good of a title as any for a wandering doctor as far as I'm concerned. Shinno waved him off.

"Good enough for what you're looking for, I assume?" Kabuto decided to push the main topic forward while taking a sip of his local alcohol. "There's not many rare specimens for study or people to heal on an island this far out, Shinno. Someone of your talents wouldn't make the awkward trip unless it was for something or someone special."

“Haha. Fine, fine. You got me. I’ve actually been looking for you for a while, Kabuto. Generalist or not, it’s hard to come by someone with your range of skills without taking unwanted hoops and risks.”

“Sounds like you have something fun in mind that’s taken a while to set up.” Kabuto pretended to ignore how Amaru was looking back and forth between the two with wide eyes in genuine curiosity.

The poor girl, she clearly idolized this cruel viper of a man, completely unaware of his true nature. At the very least, when Orochimaru lured in his prey as followers, he didn’t put on such an obviously fake mask to get what he wanted. Honestly, it genuinely made Kabuto pity her.

“I have a few associates and projects that need some extra supervision and care soon, the sort of thing that someone with your background has more than enough experience with.” Shinno shrugged as though nothing was amiss. “I’m not asking for much. Just some insurance to keep everything running smoothly.”

“You certainly went quite out of your way for just some insurance.” Kabuto chuckled into his drink while reviewing for the tenth time Shinno’s profile.

A sociopathic man that was one of the leading figures of noble descent from the destroyed land of Sky. A medical genius that excelled particularly in techniques that simulated the body’s regeneration traits. The last Kabuto heard, the man had been delving into the relationship between this field and more esoteric variants of chakra and how they affected one another.

Clearly there had been a breakthrough.

A major one at that if the man was making a move now of all times.

... He wouldn’t lie. He was curious. For several reasons.

“Haha. Well when every major shinobi village’s gone and locked up after what supposedly happened in Iwa, pretty much everyone’s stepping on glass right now. It doesn’t hurt to take a few extra steps to protect yourself, you know?” Shinno shrugged, but it did nothing to hide the obvious message in his eyes.

“Haaah. I can somewhat relate, being an introvert, I’m naturally inclined to take such steps when events are normal. Not sure I like being on the other end of things to be honest.”

“You must have it pretty bad if you want to be stuck in a place like this.” Amaru pouted, not liking how Kabuto was playing games with her master. The poor child.

“Amaru, be nice. It’s called negotiating for a reason.” Her master chided with a grandfatherly tone.

“No no. She’s right. I was actually just about to go out on a journey to get some fresh air and expand my horizons a bit. You caught me at just the right time.”

“You don’t say? You had something in mind? I didn’t want to interrupt anything important.” Shinno faked concern.

“Think nothing of it. It was to be an... open ended journey, if anything. To try something new, only I don’t know where exactly to start.” The smile on Kabuto’s face was a rare one. It wasn’t completely genuine, but it wasn’t fake either. “If anything, meeting you was a boon. I wouldn’t mind starting off with some company, if you’ll have me.”

“Huh. That’s certainly unexpected.” The eldest one there donned a thoughtful expression before turning to his apprentice, “Amaru, do you mind getting some drinks and waiting for us for a moment? Your seniors need to talk about some private matters for a bit.”

The girl puffed out her cheeks in annoyance, clearly not wanting to be left out of the conversation, but not wanting to disappoint her teacher either. “... Fine.”

Kabuto chuckled as she walked away from the table and subtly made a few seals to make their conversation private. “I’m surprised. How did you manage to find an Uzumaki? Let alone make her your apprentice.”

“Luck, not that I’m complaining. She was an orphan living in a village near some ruins I was investigating.” As if a switch had been flicked, Shinno’s smile turned predatory. “Poor thing practically lives on my approval. It’d be adorable if it wasn’t so pathetic. But she has her uses.”

“No doubt.” Kabuto had a few ideas what those uses could be but held his tongue. One didn’t survive with Orochimaru for long without knowing when to keep quiet. “So why do you need another medical expert after all this time? You still have your army, no?”

“And then some, but there aren’t many that are as talented as you, Kabuto Yakushi. ROOT. Orochimaru. Akatsuki, if the rumors are right. There aren’t many with a resume like yours still on the market. Alive at least.”

“Information then.” He held back a sigh. He personally didn’t like playing the spy game anymore. Too hands on for his liking. He much preferred research these days. “A fair

warning, I'm a bit of a person of interest at the moment. If you want me for those services in particular, I'm afraid I'll have to charge quite a bit up front. To convince me that your project is worth the risk, and to maintain my interest."

"Humph. I see that Orochimaru taught you how to negotiate on top of his jutsu." Shinno didn't like being squeezed, but wasn't particularly surprised either.

"I'm a man that likes to keep track of the market." Kabuto smiled genuinely that neither bought for a second. "And in uncertain times like these, information and certainty are a commodity worth investing in."

"Fine... like I said, I'm planning on moving soon on Konoha, and I wanted some insurance with all these rumors going around."

"Ho?" Kabuto already saw where this was going to go and decided to make plans. "I have some talents and resources, but I'm afraid I'm not enough to turn a war. You must have something truly convincing on hand."

"Something like that." Shinno smirked before leaning forward. "I hear you have some familiarity with the Biju."

"A few run-ins and experiences. Of my own and with Orochimaru-sama. I'm hardly the first. Especially as of late." Kabuto played coy.

"Ah, but tell me, what do you know of the Zero-Tailed beast?"

He stood corrected. This endeavor may be more interesting and profitable than he first thought.

"... I'll tell you what. To christen our lovely arrangement, you tell me about this hypothetical monster, and I'll give you some interesting rumors I've picked up about the equally hypothetical Ten-Tailed beast."

For the briefest of moments, Shinno showed genuine emotion on his face. Open surprise, hunger, and even the slightest bit of hypothetical fear.

And then it was gone, replaced only by greed covered with a thinly veiled mask of confidence. "It seems I was more right than I thought to go the extra mile for you after all Kabuto. It almost feels like I'm dealing with the Snake himself."

The two smiled, not at all bothering to hide their malicious intent for one another.

“To progress.” Kabuto held up his glass, his eyes hidden behind the light reflected off of his glasses.

“To progress.” The other party’s glass clinked in turn.

Shinno should have invested in glasses of his own. Not even Amaru would be able to write off the evil look in his gaze.

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“Hopefully we can be productive with all of us in the room for once.” Onoki grunted, glaring at the other Kage in the room.

“You’re the one that’s holding everyone back with those damn demands of yours, Tsuchikage.” Ai huffed.

“As if you are any better, Raikage.” Mei inspected her nails whimsically.

“Delegates, please.” Fortunately, the impassive Mifune was there to play the middleman. “Before the main topic of today’s meeting is addressed, are there any developments or inquiries that need to be made?”

“How’s Naruto?” Gaara bluntly asked Tsunade.

“Unconscious, again. For better or for worse.” The Hokage shook her head. “Fixing Sasuke Uchiha took up what little stamina he had managed to accumulate these past few days. It’s likely for the best. The longer he’s out of it, the longer he’ll actually stay still.”

“The child does not hesitate. I will give him that much.” Mei shook head, “At the very least we will not have to delay anymore.”

“Speak for yourself. The more I hear about this supposed failed past of ours, the more I want to dismiss it in its entirety.” The Raikage grimaced before turning to the focus of today’s meeting.

Sasuke Uchiha pretended not to notice the indirect jab, leaning against the wall with an almost cocky body language that he didn’t have before, situated between Kakashi and Itachi for obvious reasons.

“Does anyone else have any concerns or developments to share?” Mifune asked the occupants of the room, only to receive silence as an answer. “Very well then. Sasuke Uchiha, if you don’t mind to step forward.”

The room was eerily quiet as the man took his position, ignoring the looks he was receiving from the occupants.

“For the record, I will review what took place three days ago. Shortly after Naruto Uzumaki’s display of the current situation, outside worlds, and the means to recall a supposed previous timeline, the Raikage proposed the use of the remaining chain link to prove their validity. When it was noted that Sasuke Uchiha would provide the most useful detail on our current foe, a heated debate took place that only resolved when you in question agreed to use the link, albeit under notable supervision.”

That was one way of putting it, considering that Tsunade, Sakura, and Gaara were vehemently against the idea to the point of tearing up the place before even the Raikage before Sasuke made the decision for everyone.

“After intaking the chain link, even with measures in place, you went on a rampage that took out a portion of the castle defenses and severely injured over a dozen samurai and several of the shinobi here. Had it not been for the Hokage’s skills and Itachi Uchiha counteracting your techniques and mitigating the damages, there is little doubt that you would not be having this conversation with so little restraints so soon.”

“Humph.” Even with his mask on, Sasuke visibly smirked slightly, as if looking down on the samurai, who to his credit didn’t even twitch at the sign of disrespect.

Tsunade though wasn’t as patient. “Who are we talking to? My ANBU? Or the traitor?”

The Uchiha looked at her with some mild apathy. “I’m still under your payroll, Hokage. But I do have bits and pieces of the other guy running around here. For now. He’s stubborn, if nothing else. It’s a rather annoying experience. Both in itself, and because he’s the sort that’s angry at everyone all the time.”

“What about his memories? Information about this mad Uchiha running about. The very reason we took such a risk in the first place.” The Raikage mercilessly cut him off.

“You mean *I* took a risk, Raikage. *You* just stood back and watched doing nothing like the usual incompetent politician.” Sasuke met the leader of Kumo’s eyes with a disinterested glare, completely unafraid of the larger short tempered man, before scoffing and shook his head. “Straight to the point? Fine.”

His hand flickered.

All the guards in the room immediately jumped forward ready to fight. They had seen what he could do three days ago and would not hesitate again.

The sound of a weathered hand catching something met everyone's ears.

All eyes turned to Onoki, who looked at a chain link in his bare hand.

“You were killed by the guy claiming to be Madara quickly while everyone was trying to figure out what was going on. He saw the destructive potential of Dust Release as a threat. He kept the Raikage alive as a prisoner, as my personal training dummy and test partner to refine my lightning jutsu. After I had reached a satisfactory level and could pierce his lightning armor with little trouble, he was locked away with his arms and legs cut off as a pointless torture. As for the Mizukage, he kept her as a trophy toy with his Sharingan. Saw it fitting seeing as he had done something similar with the previous Mizukage. I don't know what happened to her other than that, but she was alive at least up to the final battle with Konoha judging from Madara's obnoxious boasting.”

As expected, the Mizu, Tsuhi, and Raikage were not too thrilled by the revelation.

Sasuke looked around with zero emotion and looked at all the guards before pointing at Cee, Darui, Ao, and Chojuro. “I remember killing you four off when we took over the villages. None of you expected the Zetsu sleepers we had in your ranks. It made infiltrating to take out all your critical infrastructure and personnel child's play.”

“Why didn't you do the same with Suna and Konoha?” Gaara asked with an impassive mask.

“Overconfidence, mostly. And the fake Madara had something else planned that seemed to amuse him whenever I asked. He never told me.”

“Danzo.” Tsunade grit her teeth in cool malice. “And you? The last anyone here saw of you was when you were fighting Gaara and got washed away by Kisame's technique.”

Sasuke's eyes narrowed in thinly veiled anger, “I survived, but was battered a bit from being caught unawares. I would have joined in again had the masked bastard not found me and literally stabbed me in the front with a smile, saying I wasn't needed and keeping me around any more would just cause problems. He ripped out my eyes before I had even lost consciousness.”

“Pity.” Onoki muttered with very little interest, more focused on the link in his hand.

“What of our villages?” Mei asked, keeping her temper in check.

For once, Sasuke showed a hint of regret. “We put the main council under genjutsu to keep everyone in line. The Kage were beaten out of the public eye, so most weren't suspicious at first. The populace were used as... material to make more Zetsu. People

would vanish quietly or be replaced for the first few weeks, just long enough to wipe out the rest in a single go after nearly a month with overwhelming numbers everywhere within the village defenses.”

The room became deathly quiet.

“You are insinuating...” Mifune started slowly.

“The white Zetsu clones are made from the husks of humans drained of their chakra by the world tree, or Gedo Statue, or whatever you want to call it.” Sasuke nodded with a grim look. “Madara had a large number already set up but was planning on making an army of a hundred thousand originally. He decided to rush things with me when Konan managed to escape to Konoha, and, I suspect in hindsight, when Danzo reached out to him shortly afterwards for “negotiations”.”

“Ugh. It really was a mistake to keep that bastard alive.” Tsunade rubbed her temple in frustration.

“My people were used as fertilizer for those... *things*?” Mei looked absolutely revolted and enraged.

“From what I understood, he had been at it for years. It wasn’t just the people from Kiri either. Kabuto, when he showed up, once joked he thought the monster was trying to one up Orochimaru when it came to abducting others.” Sasuke shrugged with little pity. “Fortunately, with the dead last’s latest stunt and pure dumb luck, the tree and the Zetsu shouldn’t be a problem anymore.”

Nobody laughed.

Those that knew Sasuke from the previous timeline didn’t miss the “dead last” bit either.

“... And what of yourself?” Mifune slowly asked, his mask of indifference finally starting to crack. “Your memories were not returned merely to grant everyone such morbid stories.”

Sasuke nodded. “Hn. I was made to memorize over a hundred bases and drop points of Orochimaru’s when I was with him all over the elemental nations. Some even outside our borders. Most of them have already been hit and wiped out in this timeline. Madara had roughly a dozen and a half hideouts when I was with him, though things may have changed this time. Many of them were heavily trapped or sealed away with special means, some Uchiha exclusive. Like it or not, bringing me is mandatory if you want to get inside most of them reliably. I’ve already marked them on a map and made copies for everyone.”

That at least relieved some of the tension in the room.

“That said, I don’t think it would be the best if I stepped in Konoha for the time being either.”

That caught everyone off guard.

“Excuse me?” Tsunade frowned.

Sasuke looked at his boss and pointed at his head. “Memories weren’t the only thing that were transferred, Hokage. I’m me, but *him* as well to an extent. I’m compromised and unsuited for conventional duty. I’m all for hunting down the masked bastard, Danzo even more, but coming back to Konoha proper... or any of the Hidden Villages for that matter in the immediate future will cause nothing but problems.”

“You’re one of my best operators, Sasuke. But you’re not cut out for long term espionage missions.” The Hokage’s tone was firm. “I hope you have something in mind to convince me that you aren’t liable to become a missing-nin again. I doubt any of us would take too kindly to that. Especially Naruto.”

“Hah. He probably would finally give up trying and finally kill me without hesitating if I was dumb enough to do that.” Sasuke chuckled and shook his head. “No. I have a better idea.”

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Meanwhile, at the center of most of the madness in this universe:

Ghost and Shadow were dancing and singing around the titanic bonfire that was once their house, with Waltz staring at them unimpressed a few feet behind them.

“We didn’t start the fire~”

“Yes you did.”

“It was always burnin’~ since the world was turnin’~”

“You set it up ten minutes ago.”

“We didn’t start the fire~”

“You two were literally shouting that you were starting a fire when you set it off.”

“No we didn’t light it~ but we’re trying to fight it~”

“You threw Crypt in the damn thing as an accelerant.”

Part of the fire exploded violently.

“Woooo! I’m a fireman! And an efficient bug repellent!! Where’s my pension! I must automate the roasted potatoes before the promised time! Wait! What do you mean the promised time was seven years ago?! Oh no the redemption is starting! Field the overpriced middle school cell phone keychains! They’re our only hope!!”

Hana and Anko were standing next to Sylvia and Dima on the side of the inferno, the latter two putting marshmallows on sticks and ready to cook themselves a snack.

“Sooo…” Hana started off slowly.

“This usually happens whenever Ghost and Shadow get forced to do loads of paperwork by Scab.” Dima didn’t skip a beat while setting himself up.

“Speaking of which…” Anko skeptically began to ask, only to spot a flare of green and an errant bolt of lightning shoot out from the bonfire. “Also in the fire. Good to know.”

“I think they nailed his wheelchair to the floor before spreading the woodchips and flammables.” Sylvia absently noted not at all worried. Presence aside, the Oogakari in general had absurdly high natural fire resistance.

“They told us we’d have a cook off with it, so fortunately didn’t use gas this time and ruin everything with chemicals.” Dima held up his elongated toasting stick and nodded in satisfaction at the six white confectionaries on it before holding it over the flame.

“They really hate paperwork, don’t they?” Hana stared at the inferno curiously. Everyone knew that Hiruzen Sarutobi frequently let it slip that he dreamed of setting the Hokage Tower ablaze to get away from litigation, but the Oogakari, as if taking it as a personal challenge, one upped him by setting their own home off.

“They take their jobs seriously. And they seriously hate their jobs. It’s a vicious circle.” Sylvia shrugged, as if that was enough to explain pretty much everything.

“We start-ed the fire~”

“Make up your minds already!!!”

“We planned the whole thing, a spontaneous fling~”

“This is why nobody trusts us for shit these days!!”

“Waltz start-ed the fire~”

“That’s it. The threshold has been met.”

“He’s gon-na kill us, our silence a plus~”

WHAM!!!

Waltz stood where Ghost and Shadow had just instants before been dancing, his body frozen in time like a picture in a trademark serious uppercut pose with the light and shadows highlighting every dead serious contour of his face and body, the sky and the clouds above him rippled like a hole had just been made in the heavens itself, evidence of the dozens of times the sound barrier was utterly mutilated in the process, with two shining stars in the center.

“K.O.!!” Dima and Sylvia shouted simultaneously as though they were referees.

“They’re not even trying to hide their bullshit strength anymore.” Hana couldn’t muster up the motivation to play along.

“Nope.” Anko was in full agreement, pretending to ignore the ANBU hiding in the forests nearby whose eyes were bugging out their masks in disbelief.

“You two shut up and hand me one of those damn skewers already.” Nobody batted an eyelash as the irritated old man stomped over to them and snatched the stick with five marshmallows on them from Dima’s hand and started holding it over the fire with a glum look. “... It’s going to be a right pain in the ass cleaning this damn thing up.”

“Might take a while before you can get started.” Hana observed the inferno with a curious gaze.

“Depends how long Crypt and Scab stay in it.” Dima shrugged. Clearly this isn’t the first time something like this had happened.

“Speaking of which. First cosmic accident of the day everyone” Sylvia pulled back her skewer to see that one of her burning marshmallows now had a face and was now laughing maniacally while eating the top of the one below it.

It was adorable.

“Ugh. That’s what we get for cooking anything using Crypt as fuel.” Waltz grunted but did absolutely nothing about it.

“The secret is extra balsamic vinegar!” Crypt cheerfully added from somewhere in the burning wreckage. “And Love! It makes everything extra crunchy! Also great for the intestines. It’s super easy to digest.”

“Still better than having Scab mess with it.” Dima noted.

“He’s on the other side of the-” Waltz paused as part of the building collapsed right in front of them. “The bottom of the fire.” He corrected himself.

“You sure he’s not going to charge you for this?” Anko asked with a cringe.

“He can’t. Scab’s banned from directly getting involved in the food market.” Sylvia explained. “Best he can do is own facilities that happen to also provide food as a support business. Like how strip joints often have their own restaurant in them to cater to customers so they’d stay longer.”

“Guessing there’s a story there.” Hana surmised.

““You have no idea.”” Waltz, Sylvia, Dima, and even Crypt replied as one with zero inclination of going any further.

It was a rather peaceful afternoon all things considered. Snacks. Conversation. Ghost and Shadow flailing about wildly in upper orbit for three hours before crashing back directly onto the property on their thick skulls at terminal velocity. One of the marshmallows turned into something called “Mr. Frundles” for all of three seconds before Waltz killed it with a hint of panic and hurry, pointedly pretending that it had never existed when asked about it afterwards.

All in all it was pretty normal.

So nobody was particularly surprised when everything started going to shit again a few weeks later.

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