

Naruto: Okuden Chronicles

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An alternate reality of Naruto. Uses some OC's.

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1 - The Hidden Atrocity

PRESENT DAY

((Character credits:

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It was no good, Sakura knew. Itachi had her cornered. Around her, Sai and Yamato were fighting together, while Kakashi and Naruto had taken another enemy. Itachi had managed to break through their lines and surprise her. Even with her natural affinity for genjutsu, she knew she was in for an impossible battle.

Itachi's eyes bored into hers, and she felt her body begin to shift. She was helpless to fight the sensation as it happened, knowing that what lay at the end of the road she was being forced to traverse was insanity- if that.

I've got to fight! Focus my chakra and- wait? What is this feeling? It's another chakra. A third, breaking the genjutsu!

Itachi reeled backward, a hand over one eye. Blood was running through his fingers. Sakura didn't question it further; she took advantage. She threw kunai at him and ran behind them, her fist cocked for a knockout punch.

Itachi caught the first of the kunai and used it to deflect the rest of the blades. He kept one hand over his eye, but it was now focused into a handsign. It was as if he was battling someone else while he fought.

Sakura punched hard, but caught only Itachi's cloak. Or rather, she *managed* to catch Itachi's cloak. That as the closest she'd ever seen anyone come to hitting him with taijutsu, or anything else for that matter. Itachi had leapt out of the way, throwing a fire jutsu almost absently at her. Sakura rolled out of the way, more kunai leaving her hands.

"We're pulling back!" Itachi called to his teammates suddenly. Kisame and Tobi looked up, surprised at the order to retreat. They'd been doing quite well in their battles.

"Hey, what gives, Itachi?" Kisame demanded.

"Yeah, Senpai! What gives?!" echoed Tobi.

Itachi's eye had finally stopped bleeding. "Someone in Konoha has intercepted our plans by reflecting my genjutsu at me and using the loss of my control to scan my mind. This battle has no more point."

The Akatsuki members obediently drew back, leaping to Itachi's side. As one they disappeared, leaving only puffs of smoke in their wake.

Sakura was puzzled, but soon realized she wasn't the only one. All the others were looking at her, curious as to what happened.

"Sakura..." Naruto said, his voice trailing off in wonder. How had she managed to drive Itachi off like that?

Kakashi put an arm around Sakura's shoulder, steering her away from the group. He called instructions to Yamato over his shoulder, but kept Sakura moving. They were a good distance away before Kakashi spoke to her about what happened.

"Tell me all you can, Sakura. Every detail. What did you feel? Was it familiar?"

Sakura shook her head, but she nodded. "It was...familiar, I guess. Foreign, but not completely odd. If anything, it felt natural. It was another chakra. If I had to put a color to it...it was both black and white, with a red center...I don't know how I know that, though..."

Kakashi listened mildly, taking mental notes.

This might be an answer to the mystery I've been thinking about for the past two years. My memory is good, but there's a window of time missing...

"...and then, Itachi was driven off. But before he released the genjutsu, I felt like...I learned something. Then it was gone, along with that chakra. Like the two were related somehow...For all the sense that makes."

--

As she slept that night, Sakura had a dream. It was vague, and when she woke up she had forgotten she had dreamed almost completely. But a nagging feeling stuck with her the rest of that day, and it had nothing to do with that brush with death earlier.

She saw a man in the village later that day. She knew him vaguely and nodded 'hello'. He was in and out of Lady Tsunade's office fairly regularly.

He returned the nod with a smile and a small bow, but was apparently in a hurry as he kept moving.

Sakura suddenly felt an urge to take one more look at the man. Her eyes caught his thick brown hair and a small leaf crest on the collar of an odd black cloak, a style which she had never seen before.

I know him! But how? He's so...familiar. But I've hardly spoken to him! And yet...I feel something...

--

TWO YEARS AGO:

The three genin lay unconscious. Kakashi was wounded and barely holding his own. The rain beat down, drumming heavily down on all of them. There was no omen for victory here. Until a trio arrived, attired in black cloaks that bore a single mark on the back collar. Leaf Village, thank God.

The three that had arrived looked at the scene with disgust.

The oldest of the three, age seventeen, shook his head. The enemies were coming. With little effort, he erected a barrier. The enemies bounced off. Even the Akatsuki were stymied by this barrier.

"We were caught completely off-guard," Kakashi told the newly arrived trio. "Naruto will be fine, but Sasuke is going to die. Sakura...I don't know what that guy did to her, but she hasn't woken up. I could only hear her scream and..."

"Ryofu, can your water jutsu do anything to accelerate the healing process? At least clot their blood? Hisako, can you buy us some time with a Water Wall jutsu?"

Ryofu and Yuji got along as well as oil and water, but in this case he deferred to the de facto team leader. He had no desire to see these kids hurt. Hisako was feisty, but she too accepted Yuji's decision silently. He watched as his teammate threw his cloak over Sakura, leaving only her head uncovered. He removed his vest as well and placed that over Naruto. It wasn't much, but it would have to do.

"This isn't made for healing, you know..." Ryofu said sourly, working on the young Uchiha boy.

Yuji nodded. "I know." He'd seen what controlling the water content of a person's blood could do. For once, he was thankful he and Ryofu were on the same side, fighting under the same banner.

Hisako didn't make any of her usual remarks- not even as Yuji went over to Sakura and knelt down. He paused for a minute, and in that time Hisako saw several feelings cycle through his face. First longing, then fury, then nothing at all.

He'll do his job. Doing mine is all I have to worry about.

Yuji made marks all around Sakura, scratching them into the ground with a kunai. Soon the young kunoichi lay in the middle of an intricate web.

Yuji gently held Sakura's head, touching her temples. He pressed his forehead to hers and shifted his hands into handsigns as lightly as possible. It allowed him to see what Sakura had just seen.

He pulled back in horror after only a couple seconds. He moved away quickly and was violently sick to his stomach.

How could that bastard do that to this girl?! I have never seen such a disgusting image! I cannot allow her to remember this!

Yuji wiped off his mouth, spat one more time then went over to the unconscious girl. He took up his position again, then paused.

"Kakashi-sensei, you did not see this happen. It's best if you turn away. This jutsu is forbidden. If you are asked about this, please turn me in and do not take any of the blame. Say I altered your mind with

my genjutsu.”

Kakashi shook his head. “No, I won’t-”

But that was all he said. Ryofu was standing behind him, one arm held up. He had struck Kakashi between the shoulder blades, knocking him unconscious. He looked down at Yuji and was about to admonish him for being soft, but then he saw the tear stains on both Sakura and Yuji’s face.

“...Hurry up and finish.”

“ ... ”

Ryofu turned away. “Hisako, let the water down once Yuji is done. If you can’t hold it, let it go sooner. I’ll fight them.”

Hisako nodded, focusing hard to control the water wall. “Got it! Hurry up if you can!”

Ryofu turned away, preparing his sword for battle. The site of the cursed blade made Yuji’s skin crawl. Ryofu could tell. Quietly, he said to Yuji, “It must be a dog, having to sense her emotions to do this.”

Yuji nodded, moving around Sakura again, kneeling at her side. “Being empathetic is bad enough. Being an empath when you use genjutsu is even worse.”

Yuji stroked a kunai across his left palm, wincing only a bit. His hand was thick with scar tissue. He’d had to do this too many times.

“I suppose I can’t complain. The more I feel, the more I can tune into someone’s chakra. I’m that much more effective.”

Yuji made the final handsign, then bowed to Sakura.

“Forgive me for invading your mind, Sakura-chan. But there’s no choice if I’m to spare you from remembering this atrocity.”

With that, Yuji used his Jutsu.

“Forbidden Genjutsu: Seal of Eternity!”

Yuji’s chakra flowed into Sakura’s mind, searching out the remnants of the genjutsu attack. He found it after a moment and began his jutsu. A wall of his chakra sprang up in Sakura’s mind and began to work at erasing the memory. Or rather, covering it up. No memory could be completely erased. But Yuji added the strongest defense he could. Plus one more...

I hope it will offer you some comfort, Sakura-chan, that I’ve seen the strength you can have. I hope that I can influence that strength someday. But for now, rest your mind and body. You fought well.

Yuji stood up, preparing himself to fight.

“It’s done. Let’s drive them off. I’ve used a sleeping genjutsu on the others and erected a barrier to protect them.”

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PRESENT DAY:

Yuji felt the scroll he kept in the makimono pouch closest to his heart vibrate. He quickly pulled it out and silently left a small meeting. He sent a small message via genjutsu to his teammates, as well as Lady Tsunade. The message was simple: It only gave a set of coordinates.

Yuji opened his cloak and threw it in front of him. He stepped under it as it fell to envelope him. He disappeared-

==

-and reappeared at a small meeting place with no doors inside of the Third Hokage's head on the Hokage Faces. Granted, those were just coordinates- they were not 'truly' inside the Third's head. Rather, they were in a genjutsu world whose location changed each time.

Yuji settled down into a sitting position, the scroll in his mouth. He cut one thumb open and made small marks all over his face and neck. He connected them all with a thin line of blood. The line traced his chakra network.

One by one, they all appeared. Ryofu was first, followed by Hisako. Last was Lady Tsunade.

Yuji opened his eyes, but you could only see the whites of them. When he spoke, his voice wasn't his own. Rather, it was Itachi Uchiha's. And it told the whole story of what REALLY happened during the Uchiha Clan Massacre.

"...And so, I let my little brother live, in hopes that he would surpass me. He was more precious to me than the village which I sacrificed everything for. This life with the Akatsuki is-"

At the end of that, Yuji returned to himself. He looked up, bowing to Tsunade before continuing.

"You all heard?"

The nodded in silence.

"Good. I also received a vague impression of an Akatsuki plan. I don't know what it was, but I know that they're moving fast to collect the Jinchuriki. My Lady, it is my opinion that we can no longer wait to confront the Akatsuki. We have to strike hard and fast."

--

NEXT TIME:

More of the historical battle that was suppressed in the minds of Team Seven comes to light. Who exactly are Ryofu, Hisako, and Yuji?

This and more will be answered next time in Chapter Two of Naruto: Okuden Chronicles.

2 - The Unexpected Assault

Yuji sat in the back corner of a quiet tea house, turning over what had happened in his mind. He sipped the tea, nodding politely to the sweet little waitress who had taken care of him for the past hour. He would tip her well, as he always did. This problem, though...

Two others sat down with Yuji. He looked up sharply, not happy his thoughts were interrupted. He was less than thrilled to see who had interrupted him. Strange that his reaction to his own team was hostility.

Ryofu and Yuji had been at each others throats for years. Since Ryofu came, he'd been a natural at everything Yuji had to work hard at. They were both from outside the village originally, but Ryofu's incredible abilities got him promoted quickly.

Hisako, on the other hand, was naturally talented as well but not so eager to climb up in rank. She was a good friend of Sakura's and had no desire to rush past her friend in rank. Her promotion to chunin had come at the same test as Sakura's. The two kunoichi had even faced off in a sparring match.

"I'll have tea and dumplings set, please!" Hisako called cheerfully to the waitress.

"Right away!" the girl called back. As she turned to leave, Hisako reached across the table and smacked Yuji on the head.

"Idiot! That girl likes you!"

"The hell?! Where do you get off hitting me?" Yuji demanded, trying to keep his voice down. He murmured under his breath "You probably *do* get off on hitting me, you sadistic- OUCH!"

"Then don't say stupid things if you don't want to get hit!" Hisako shot back. The waitress placed her order on the table, though she tried to stay away from Hisako as much as possible, pushing the dish and saucer in with her fingertips.

"Thanks!" Hisako called out, happily biting in to a dango.

"You psycho! You just turn on the charm around the others, don't you?!"

Ryofu had silently observed all this, taking it as a lesson in human nature. He reached across the table and took one of Hisako's dumplings. That got her off Yuji's case and onto Ryofu's.

"Hey, HEY! Who said you could have one?!"

Ryofu shrugged. "You have so much energy anyway it doesn't seem like you need the sugar."

"Why, you-!"

"Both of you, shut the hell up!" Yuji demanded suddenly, his fist thumping on the table causing the

plates and cups to clatter. The poor little waitress scurried back into the kitchen, her eyes wide.

Huh. She IS cute. Damn Hisako, always wanting to pair me up!

"Listen, we have a problem. I didn't tell you about it because I needed to figure something out. Do you remember our fight two years ago? Against the Akatsuki?"

Ryofu and Hisako immediately snapped to attention. This mission had been blacked out on their records. It was the first time ROOT and ANBU had clashed. The Akatsuki inserted themselves, and Team Seven had been caught in the middle.

Only Yuji knew it went deeper than that. He couldn't tell his teammates. Even though the Third Hokage had died Yuji took his promise to keep the true nature of the mission quiet.

"What about the fight? It's all taken care of, isn't it?" Hisako asked, a little nervous. That was one fight no one wanted to remember. Her hand drifted to her left breast, to a small mark that didn't quite completely fade. That had been her closest brush with death.

Yuji shook his head. "No. The Akatsuki are mobilizing for battle, and it's worse than I feared. Even than I dared tell Lady Tsunade. This is something that relates to that incident two years ago...something Lord Third made me swear never to reveal to the next Hokage, or anyone who might be influenced. I can only reveal some things to you. And-!"

Yuji suddenly leapt with a snarl, vaulting past the poor scared waitress. The girl's eyes were wide as dinner plates.

"Your genjutsu is too clumsy."

The girl jumped a foot- or would have, had Yuji not been holding her in a headlock, with a kunai at her neck.

"You aren't Hitomi-chan. But she was here until just now..."

A smirk so incredibly nasty that it was out of place on the girl's face made Yuji's stomach turn.

"You know, your friends ate my tea and dumplings. You were too busy fighting to take a bite. Too bad. But then again, if I remove at least two of the future leg-"

"If you finish that sentence, you're going to die," Yuji interrupted. "I'll mourn Hitomi-chan, but I WILL kill you. You know my record if you took this mission. Tell me where Hitomi-chan is- NOW!" Yuji snarled, letting the kunai tap against the girl's neck.

The girl was still smiling. "She's tied up in the kitchen. Poor stupid thing dropped her guard."

Yuji nodded to Hisako to check. He waited a moment, and saw Hisako's nod of confirmation.

Then he saw her and Ryofu drop to the ground.

"The antidote! Now!"

The girl just smirked. Yuji felt her move suddenly, and he slit her throat, letting her drop to the ground. He found a hypodermic needle laying at his feet. A quarter of an inch and it would have been in his leg. Injected poison worked faster than ingested poison- he would have been dead instantly.

Yuji bit his thumb and made a move to flick the blood. The blood landed on Ryofu and Hisako. Yuji slapped his palm to the ground an instant later, transporting them all to the hospital.

Once he got there, he passed out as well.

Damn...clever dog managed to poison me after all. Didn't notice around my agitated chakra Must have replaced Hitomi-chan earlier than I thought...

--

Yuji, Hisako, and Ryofu all awoke in the same room. Someone had draped a hospital gown over Hisako's chest while the two boys were shirtless.

Sakura was standing at the other end of the room, making notes on a chart. She smiled brightly upon seeing her patients awake.

"You guys gave me quite a scare! But you'll all be fine. You're lucky you didn't breath in any more of that toxin!"

Ryofu beat everyone else to the punch. "Breathed in? Not ingested?"

Sakura shook her head. "No, you were all clear for anything ingested. You would have thrown up by now, anyway. This poison wasn't designed to kill, so your body would have just rejected it...hey!"

Yuji had gotten out of bed and was striding purposefully toward the door.

"Thank you for the treatment. I owe you my life."

Sakura stepped in front of the door, blocking Yuji's exit. "Oh no you don't! You aren't running off! Lady Tsunade gave me specific instructions not to let you go anywhere without an escort!"

Yuji couldn't bring himself to yell at Sakura. He tried to just stare at her but soon realized he couldn't win that battle. Sakura dealt with stubborn patients all the time. Besides, girls were Yuji's weakness.

If I hadn't been so concerned about Hitomi-chan liking me...Damn it! Shinobi Prohibitions! Did I learn nothing from Lord Third?! I have to put a stop to this, now!

Yuji felt a light tug on his arm. Hisako was pulling him back.

"Don't, Yuji. You know Sakura's the expert here. Not you."

Hisako knew she hit a nerve. She had aimed for it, if she was honest. Yuji needed to settle down...

Yuji bit off a nasty reply. "I'm well aware of that. I am also team leader, and I have a report to make."

Hisako drew herself up to her full height and raised her voice just enough to be sure that her voice would echo.

"You need to lose this over-developed sense of duty to a man who died three years ago! Damn it, grow up and be your own man!"

Yuji whirled to face her, aggression set in his face. Before he could get a word out, Ryofu had shoved him back into the wall.

"You don't hit girls, remember?"

Yuji was fuming. Beyond fuming. Didn't they understand? No, of course not. He wasn't allowed to tell them what was so urgent, so how could they understand? He had to not lose his temper. He had to try really hard.

A light fabric covering was draped over Yuji's shoulders. He turned to see who had placed it, and found himself facing Sakura. She smiled at him as though indulging him.

"Much as I enjoy seeing a cute guy like you half-naked, if you're going to speak to the Hokage you should cover up. Well, really, you should rest," Sakura amended, wagging her finger admonishingly. "But we can make an exception. I can tell how important this is to you..."

Yuji was taken aback by the about-face. "Thank y-"

"I'll escort you myself. Hisako, I can count on you to keep this guy," -she jerked her thumb at Ryofu jokingly- "in line, right?"

Hisako grinned and offered a salute. "You know it! Baby sitting these guys is all I'm good for, I swear..."

Sakura smiled and took Yuji's arm. "Come on, then. To Lady Tsunade. Might be hard to explain why her chief nurse is escorting a half-naked man in a doctor's coat, though. She might get the wrong impression..."

The last thing Hisako and Ryofu saw was Yuji blushing at the idea. The door closed, and the two of them were alone.

Hisako sat down on the edge of her bed, feeling the uncomfortable crinkle of hospital sheets beneath her knees. She looked at Ryofu, who was busy staring at the wall.

"I guess we won't ever get it out of him, huh?" intoned Hisako. "He knows more than he'll let on. Still serving the ghost of old man Third. Huh! Loyal to a fault!" she added, moving her bangs out of her eyes, a thoughtful expression on her face.

Ryofu rolled his eyes. **She's hot for him, at least a little. She rags on him a lot...me, too, for that matter. Wonder what she's thinking?**

"Yeah," he said aloud, standing up to stretch a little. "He slit that girl's throat earlier. I've never seen him get that vicious before. He doesn't kill people without a really good reason. Part of his weakness."

"...Sometimes, yeah. For all his bluster, he's kind-hearted. This secret must be a good one. But back to

the girl...did you notice?"

Hisako's eyes shifted toward Ryofu. She wasn't going to say anymore if he didn't notice the big clue himself.

Ryofu looked at Hisako, his eyes grim. "...yeah. The tattoo on the tongue. Never seen that mark before. Not like that. But it looked like..."

"...A curse mark," Hisako finished. "Meaning that she might have been acting under someone else's orders."

"The Hokage must know if she insisted he be kept under guard," added Ryofu thoughtfully. "But who has the grudge against Yuji? We've been on his team since I came to the village, right? Four years ago..."

Hisako nodded, getting up off the bed and looking to see where her top had gone. Damned hospital gown was uncomfortable.

"Yes, four years. We know that since he was twelve he trained with the Third Hokage. But we don't know what that training entailed..."

Ryofu shrugged. "I think I have an idea. You ever seen him look at Naruto? You know, the orange kid on Sakura's team?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I've only ever heard that kid talk about one thing beside ramen. And that's being Hokage."

--

--

As she escorted him to Lady Tsunade, Sakura had to stop for a minute. Yuji looked over at her, concerned, but Sakura just smiled and waved her hand in front of her face negatively.

"It's nothing, it's nothing. Just used a lot of chakra getting all that poison out of you three. Mind if I rest for a minute?"

Yuji shook his head, leading her by the arm to a bench nearby. Sakura sat down gratefully. Yuji sat down next to her. It made Sakura smile a bit.

"Hey...you used to sit on the other side of the bench, as far away from me as possible. You finally over your fear of me?"

Yuji blushed, looking at the floor. "Well, a little. Hard to be afraid of someone who saved your life. Haha. But point well taken."

Sakura smiled again. There it was again- the old, familiar feeling she got around Yuji. In fact, she was pretty sure she'd seen him like this before. With a concerned look on his face. Concerned, but determined.

-

TWO YEARS AGO

Yuji stood up, preparing himself to fight.

"It's done. Let's drive them off. I've used a sleeping genjutsu on the others and erected a barrier to protect them."

Yuji stepped away from Sakura. Her eyes were open but she couldn't move. She felt the effects of a barrier around her. She was too weak to do anything but watch.

But why...can't remember what just happened...and who are these three? Got to warn them...they're fighting...really bad...

But Sakura could only watch.

The silver-haired boy who had helped her- or harmed her, depending on who you asked- all those years ago drew a sword that was at least as tall as he was. He wielded it one-handed, his other hand held in a handsign in front of him. His sword was more of an accessory at this point, as he simply raised his free hand and five of the enemies charging him began to scream in agony before they simply exploded, raining blood all over, including on Ryofu, who seemed to expect this and used his sword to wield off the worst of it. A fleck landed on his cheek and ran a little bit. In Sakura's mind, his cold eyes and the blood on his cheek formed a snapshot in her mind.

Hisako was a more elegant fighter, Sakura decided in her numbed state. The way the girl manipulated water into a vortex and scooped up the enemies suited her. She had known Hisako for years, of course. Still, she didn't get to see her good friend at full power very often, so it was kind of cool. When the vortex sent enemies flying away from the Leaf group, Sakura cheered inside. She would have hugged Hisako, but damn it something felt weird.

Yuji was just out of Sakura's sight until he was battled back, fighting the Akatsuki guy that had given Kakashi all kinds of trouble. The way the man fought was so damning to every technique Sakura knew!

Go, Yuji!

--

PRESENT DAY

Sakura sat up with a gasp, suddenly unsure of where she was. It took her a moment to realize she had just fallen asleep for a minute. Yuji hadn't moved much, so it couldn't have been long. Then again, shinobi didn't tend to be real fidgety, save for Naruto.

As she looked up at Yuji, Sakura felt a sudden surge of protection. Before she could stop herself, she had leaned over into Yuji's lap, forcing their eyes to meet. She was trying to recapture that feeling from before. The warmth and safety she felt both mentally and physically.

I never felt that for Sasuke. Is it...love? I can't tell. But it felt...good. But still so strange. Why does

it feel like Yuji knows me so well?

3 - Mirror to the Past (Part 1)

Yuji noticed Sakura's preoccupied silence and began to worry. Sakura was a smart girl to begin with, and her proficiency with genjutsu made this whole situation all the more dangerous. Yuji wasn't sure what to do about it. At Sakura's level of skill he'd never be able to hit her with a genjutsu to reseal the memory that was coming back to her. She was focusing on it so much that Yuji was worried she might actually figure it out.

"Sakura, do you mind if I confide in you?" Yuji asked suddenly, surprising himself. He was such a private person that he was worried that his hastily hatched scheme wouldn't work. He hadn't confided in anyone in a long time, let alone someone who might actually know him somewhat well. He reminded himself that this was for Sakura's sake. At her distracted nod, he threw another lure to get her attention. "I haven't told this story to anyone before..."

Sakura perked up, and Yuji knew he had her. The downside was he had to actually tell the story now.

--

SIX YEARS AGO

Yuji, age thirteen, waited patiently for his turn. Harada-sensei was announcing the new genin squads today. It was a hot summer day and the heat was making people impatient. Everyone was sitting near their friends, hoping to be paired with a friend, or at least someone who wasn't totally obnoxious.

Anyone but that girl Yuji thought desperately, chancing a glance at the girl in question. Reddish-brown hair pulled into a braid; an out-of-place smile (at least, to Yuji); a scary, almost bossy demeanor. Then again, at thirteen, Yuji thought girls in general were bossy. It didn't help that the kunoichi in training bullied him more than the other boys did. Just because he didn't yet care about girls was no reason to bully him, he decided.

Harada's voice rang throughout the classroom, calling Yuji's attention back to him.

"Squad Four, under Hayate Gekkou: Tanaka, Chiyoko; Mutakami, Hisako; Tadayoshi, Yuji."

Yuji closed his eyes, exhaling deeply. That was bad news. Chiyoko wasn't so bad; actually kind of cute and very talented. But Hisako? That nightmare? On the upside, Yuji's new sensei, Hayate, was someone Yuji admired.

Seventeen year old Hayate stood near the door, the bags under his eyes already far too dark for someone so young. He had a slight cough, as always, but you couldn't let his apparent poor health fool you- he was a talented young chunin well on his way to jonin.

Chiyoko had jet-black hair, pulled back into a ponytail. She typically wore a long sleeve red jacket over a white t-shirt. The thing that got the most attention was her incredibly short red shorts with two little red lines on each hip. The girls had sneered at her at first but the girl was impossible to dislike. The boys had noticed too, of course, but they had no reason to sneer at her for any reason.

Hisako didn't look thrilled with her new team, but she said nothing about it. Yuji knew her well enough to know she would do her job, no matter what. He admired that much about her. She was pretty, Yuji supposed, but he just hadn't gotten along with her since they had competed in shuriken practice, where she had bested him by an inch and had never let him forget it. To her credit, she had approached Yuji afterward in friendship, but Yuji had been too absorbed in practice to really take the time to talk to her. He had to make up for that inch...

Yuji himself was a bit standoff-ish for his age. If anything, he could disappear if he chose to. He chose to wear a black short-sleeve vest with the standard-issue chain mail under it, tucked neatly into long black pants. Other than his headband he wore no accessories.

"(Cough) Okay Squad Four, let's go to the training field."

Hayate's order was met with enthusiasm by his new team. They left together, chatting amiably.

--

Once at the training field, Hayate asked everyone to talk a bit about themselves. Yuji and Hisako were quiet in class so Chiyoko took the initiative. She was enthusiastic, as always, as she introduced herself.

"Okay, I'm Chiyoko! You can call me 'Chi', is ya want! So, lessee...I like to live every day with a ton of energy! Umm, I don't dislike anything, really. Except for maybe people who don't wash their hands after using the toilet..."

*Yuji nodded his head sagely. **I totally get this girl!***

Hisako volunteered to go next. She answered crisply and without the flourish that Chiyoko had.

"I'm Hisako. Call me 'Hisako', please. I enjoy camping outside on mild nights. I dislike people who lie constantly. Most of all, I dislike people who misuse their power and abandon their friends.

Just from her words...She's powerful, Yuji realized. Very powerful. Or she will be. Maybe I need to lay off on her a bit...

"Top THAT, Yu-chan!" Hisako declared, clapping Yuji hard on the back (and earning herself a glare).

Or not.

"My name is Yuji. I'm happy being called 'Yuji'. I like to learn new techniques, or learn ways to perfect the techniques I already know. So I guess I like studying, too. I dislike people who are arrogant, or people who kill for no reason. Um...I hope to one become strong enough to train with the Hokage."

Before they could continue there came an interruption in the form of an ANBU agent. Her mask was off and she was speaking to Hayate. She looked to be about sixteen. With long purple hair and tasteful make-up, she was very pretty. The way she talked with Hayate seemed to show an intimacy between them.

Smack!

Hisako removed her hand as Yuji nearly caught her wrist.

"What the hell are you hitting me for?!" he demanded in an angry whisper.

Hisako rolled her eyes in exasperation. She certainly seemed to be exasperated a lot.

"Put your eyes back in your head! Stupid boy!"

"What the hell do you mean by that?!"

Chiyoko giggled, putting an arm around each of the warring team mates.

"Yuji, I think she's trying to say that you're fond of our visitor."

Finally getting it, Yuji blushed and quickly looked away. "Hm! Not that it's any of her business, but I've never seen an ANBU agent before! Especially without a mask."

Chiyoko settled back, agreeing with Yuji. But Hisako couldn't resist stirring up the hornet's nest.

"Not one with such a pretty face to match a perfect butt, huh?"

"IF you were a boy, I would-"

"Don't let that stop you!" Hisako shot back. Both of them got to their feet.

Hayate was in between them before they could move any further. He put a hand on Hisako's shoulder, gently pushing her back.

Fast! I never saw him move! *Hisako thought, stunned at suddenly having someone between her and Yuji.*

Yuji was being held in a loose headlock by the new ANBU agent. She was standing behind him, trapping one arm behind his back while reaching around his neck with her free arm. Yuji knew enough not to struggle; ANBU agents didn't play around- she might snap his neck entirely on impulse. Beyond that, he was certainly content, stirring up feeling for one of the first times in his thirteen year old body.

"Hey, hey, you play nice with those girls," said the unnamed agent. "They only pick on you if they like you, remember!"

Hisako couldn't resist getting in another shot. "Wow, look at how red he's turning! But it doesn't seem like the headlock is THAT tight. Why are you blushing, Yuji?"

Yuji was glaring at Hisako, swearing in his mind that he would get her for this. Before he could, he felt the headlock release, replaced by a friendly hand on his shoulder.

"I see you're with Hayate. You must be Yuji."

Yuji bowed in response, confirming his name. The girl waved the politeness aside.

"No, no, not necessary! Don't stand on ceremony. I was just saying hello to Hayate. But I'll tell you what- that girl keeps picking on you, you just let me know. Her and I will have a little woman to woman

talk. Unless that's your girlfriend."

"No way in hell. I'm single, not desperate."

"WHAT DID YOU SAY?!"

Hayate stood back, smirking to himself as he watched the little fight. His new girlfriend was a real catch, and it seemed like his new student had taken notice. He had no questions about Yuugao's loyalty to him or anything- he knew how healthy it was to have a first crush. It broke the ice to the first relationship. And Yuji had two good looking girls to choose from.

Of course, Hisako and Yuji were still shouting at each other.

Yeah...Chiyoko has the inside track there, I think.

--

--

Hisako had bested Yuji again; this time in a race to the top of a tree using chakra control to run up it. Yuji had been only a half-second behind her, but that didn't stop him from staring at the tree long and hard, then running up it again and again.

Later that night, Hayate returned to the same spot to plan the next days training session. To his surprise, he found Yuji still at, even in the moonlight. He was out of breath and beyond sweaty and grimy from running and occasionally falling down.

Hayate wondered what kind of single-mindedness that took to keep running yourself like that until you were exhausted. He had known Yuji wasn't a natural- he'd know that while proctoring one of Yuji's tests. But there was also the reason Hayate wanted the boy on his team.

He'd withdraw, and maybe even sulk a bit, but he'd sure enough be working harder to improve himself.

"Sensei? What's going on?"

Hisako had wandered over. In the distance, Hayate could just spot a tent. Then he remembered Hisako's love for sleeping out under the stars.

"(Cough) Just...looking at the moon."

Hisako looked up, seeing the crescent moon above. "It's so pretty, isn't it, Sensei? That's one reason I like being out here so much. And it's quiet, too."

"OH DAMN!"

THUD!!!

Yuji had finally lost control of his chakra due to fatigue and had plummeted to the ground from ten feet

up. He managed to cushion his landing but he still had the wind knocked out of him.

"Ahh...went too far...but I've gotta do better! --!"

Hayate and Hisako had rushed over, making sure Yuji was okay. He was sitting on the ground, now more embarrassed than in pain.

Hisako rolled her eyes. "Honestly! You couldn't get over the fact that I just barely beat you in a race?! What kind of child are you anyway?!"

Yuji wiped a smudge of dirt off his face as he answered.

"The kind who doesn't tolerate failure for himself. The kind who will do anything to purge the slightest bit of weakness."

Hisako looked taken aback, but Hayate had to hide a smile behind a fake cough.

He's like I thought. Her, too, for that matter. An interesting group with great futures, no doubt. Chiyoko is tops now, but she'll have a run for her money in the near future.

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Sakura had to laugh. She didn't know much about Yuji, but that seemed so typical of him!

"(Giggle) You were always that way, huh?"

Yuji blushed, looking down a little, as if floor had suddenly become fascinating.

"Yeah...I guess so."

Out of the corner of his eye, Yuji was watching Sakura. He breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing that it looked like she'd forgotten what she had been so close to remembering.

Too close. I need to redo my genjutsu seal. For the sake of gathering information, however, I should go to Naruto...

Sakura noticed the sad look on Yuji's face. She could never read him as well as she could other people. Even unconscious, his expression betrayed nothing. But the sad look seemed to be his default. She had noticed the look lighten when he told his story, though. It was in Sakura's very nature to help people.

"Hey...Yuji?"

"Yes?"

"If...if you're comfortable with the idea, maybe you could tell me more about your past? It seemed like, for a minute there, you were...I don't know...comfortable, maybe? Like the past is..."

Yuji interrupted then, saying "Comfortable is the word. In the past, my friends and mentors are still alive. I was so innocent...Though I'm thankful to be alive, sometimes I wish I could take back what I've seen and done."

Sakura didn't know what to say, so she didn't say anything. She just let Yuji continue. She heard his voice betray the slightest bit of emotion as he continued.

"...the girl from earlier. I don't know what her name was. But I killed her to protect my own life. It seems selfish..."

Sakura grabbed Yuji's arm, her voice now strong with emotion.

"No! You can't go thinking that way! You have as much right to live as anyone else! That girl took her chances trying to kill you, and she suffered the consequences! What you did, anyone of us would have done! Protecting yourself is not a sin!"

Yuji could only smile a bit, conceding her point. From the outside looking in, he supposed to it looked that way.

She's so powerful, yet so innocent. Amazing to think the world could work that way. I know how fragile that innocence is. Sakura, you don't know what knowledge I've been burdened with! Even if I had friends to share the knowledge with, I am forbidden to do so by a promise.

--

Once Sakura bowed out of the room, leaving Yuji with Tsunade and Shizune, Yuji made his real request of her.

"My Lady, please summon Master Jiraiya. It is partially regarding the Akatsuki, and partially regarding Naruto."

Tsunade didn't argue with Yuji. She trusted him implicitly. He was on the war council, and had since moved several seats closer to her, indicating his advanced rank. His team was responsible for halting many Akatsuki schemes. So Shizune went off after Jiraiya, contacting him in a method that she had worked out with him the last time he'd come back to the village.

"You have done excellent work, Yuji. Your team has earned the respect of all of us for your speed and efficiency. Your last mission alone cost the Akatsuki a fair amount of money and manpower. I admit, I was skeptical of your plan, but it has worked wonders..."

At that moment, Jiraiya returned, his face grim. Yuji bowed to him, then began to tell everyone about his latest plan.

NEXT TIME: RYOFU'S INTRODUCTION TO TEAM HAYATE!

4 - Mirror to the Past- Part 2

"I think I can do it," said Yuji solemnly. He had put a lot of thought into this plan. It could work if he was just given the time...

Jiraiya stroked his chin thoughtfully, brow knitted. It was such a distasteful thing...and yet, Yuji was right. It would get them valuable information, and even decrease the number of enemies by at least one.

"Since you're called me here, you must want to do this to Naruto..."

Yuji bowed again, this time in agreement. "Yes. Naruto will be targeted by the Akatsuki. This plan could also be seen as a failsafe if he were captured. It would give him a chance to escape. But..."

Tsunade nodded, encouraging Yuji forward. He inhaled deeply, then continued.

"But Naruto has to be unaware of the trap. If he is aware, then anyone who can read minds, or even a particularly sharp sensory type will be able to sense the trap. This means I need to either catch him unaware, or he needs to be unconscious...This means I need to ask you, Master Jiraiya- is there any danger to Naruto or myself while he is unconscious? With Nine Tails inside him..."

Tsunade frowned. "It means having one more person in the loop, but perhaps Yamato would be a good safeguard," she said, referring to the newest addition to Team Kakashi. Yamato had the ability to tame the Nine Tails chakra, should it get out of hand."

Yuji looked to Jiraiya, trusting him to make the call. He knew Naruto better than anyone at this point. He gave a small nod, approving of the idea.

"I'll give my consent, and render any aid I can. But only if there is a medical shinobi present. If something happens with you or Naruto I won't be much good."

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"This is great, Pervy Sage! You never treat me to ramen! Itadakimasu!"

Naruto dug into his ramen with gusto, ignoring Jiraiya's terse reminder not to call him 'Pervy Sage' in front of others. Especially not Ayame, Teuchi the ramen maker's very pretty daughter. To Jiraiya's relief, the girl just giggled and smiled, ignoring Naruto's comment.

Then, suddenly, Naruto began to waver, then he fell off his stool and to the ground. Jiraiya scooped him up, telling Teuchi that he would get Naruto to the hospital.

Tsunde's poison works as well as ever.

--

Yamato was sitting down, surrounded by wooden pillars with lion heads on them. He extended one hand whose palm was marked with the kanji for 'stabilize'. He braced his outstretched arm with his other hand. His face was contorted into a look of concentration.

Jiraiya and Sakura stood back, watching this ritual unfold. It scared Sakura, she had to admit. She watched Yuji make marks on the floor first and then on Naruto. Her hand unconscious touched her own back. This looked so familiar, and yet she couldn't place it.

-

TWO YEARS AGO

Sakura felt a presence by her. It was Hisako, putting a comforting hand on the Sakura's shoulder. Sakura realized that Hisako didn't know she was conscious. Something told her to keep quiet and watch, so she did.

The man that had scared her before, Ryofu, watched from a little bit ahead, keeping an eye on Yuji's fight.

Yuji was fighting one enemy- everyone else had backed away. The small fry stood no chance against him or their boss.

The battle went on and on. Yuji pressed forward, driving the other shinobi backward. But he'd lose ground as quickly as he gained it. The opponent was using some strange attack, shooting strings out of his arms. He seemed to be trying to gain distance, but Yuji kept pressing forward, dodging the strings.

Yuji threw a scroll in the air, biting his thumb to pay a summoning tribute. The opponent attacked, seeing this as an opportune moment. At that moment, however, a weapon fell from the scroll. Yuji caught the weapon and swung in one motion. He had produced an Eku (a boat oar) and had smacked his opponent with it. Yuji held it at his opponent's neck, showing he'd clearly beaten him.

"Fine, I surrender," said the opponent, raising his hand in surrender. Hand?

Yuji leapt aside just in time as a huge purple hand came out of the ground behind him and tried to grab him. The hand shot into the ground. Yuji retaliated with a fire ninjutsu that shot one, explosive burst. It caught the enemy full in the face.

Sakura could see what the enemy couldn't: Yuji ran in right behind his attack. She also saw the purple skin on the enemy's face receding. He had blocked the fire attack. But removing his armor was a mistake. Yuji's hand grabbed his throat at a full run and slammed him into the ground, rocking the earth with a tremor. In the same motion, Yuji drew a short sword from his belt and stabbed the opponent in the chest.

"If Kakashi-sensei hadn't battled you first I would have had no chance. You're the toughest I've faced so far. But this is the end of you."

Out of nowhere, the purple hand smacked Yuji, sending him tumbling end over end. The Akatsuki member stood up, oblivious to the hole in his chest and the pain it must have caused.

"First that silver-haired Hatake manages to get one heart. Now this brat gets another one? What a pain. My chakra is too low to do much else but replace them."

A string shot out and struck an Akatsuki grunt in the chest. In a gruesome display, his heart came out of his chest. He dropped dead on the spot while the man who took his heart simply stuffed it into the hole in his chest. Thin black strings seemed to perform surgery, tying it into place. It was gruesome, seeing a heart beating openly like that.

Another string shot out, but was thwarted by a water wall.

"Oh no you don't!"

Hisako had summoned the water wall. The Akatsuki member looked up just in time. He leapt back, withdrawing his strings, as a sword buried itself into the ground where he had been. Ryofu pulled the sword out of the ground, glaring at the enemy he had just narrowly missed cutting in two.

"You're lucky I had to use my Blood Manipulation Jutsu on all those weaklings. I would love nothing more than to rip you apart from the inside. Make your hearts explode one by one..."

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Sakura gasped, suddenly aware that she had been day dreaming.

I'm sure I didn't know Yuji very well two years ago. I only knew Hisako, and then Ryofu because of that other incident that came after this. So why do I know their names in this daydream? And why do I suddenly know that this was two years ago? It was just a daydream...wasn't it?

In the meantime, Yuji had finished his preparations. He made his handsigns- it was a long set, but he did them with a practiced ease. Gently, he touched Naruto's temples with his fingers.

"Forbidden Genjutsu: Seal of Eternity."

Yuji looked around the room, exhaling in a measured, practiced way. Then he started to concentrate intently. His chakra began to concentrate in his fingers, looking almost as if he was performing a chakra scalpel medical ninjutsu.

Forbidden Genjutsu: In Yo Chu Benso (English: Yin Yang Central Defense)

Yuji tried to put on the genjutsu. He felt Naruto's chakra welling up. He frowned, concentrating harder.

No...this isn't Naruto's. This is-! No, I've got to pull ba-

-

Yuji found himself in a dark corridor. His feet carried him automatically toward a dark, forbidden-feeling corridor. He tried to stop, but he couldn't. He fought using all his mental strength, but it was to no avail.

At the end of the corridor was a cage. Yuji felt the most forbidden, chilling, malicious chakra he'd ever sensed. It repelled him but at the same time drew him in.

Well, a human who is tampering with my container! said a deep, forbidding voice.

All at once, Yuji knew. The demon fox!

A single tail whipped out of the cage, through the bars. It struck Yuji on his right side.

--

Yuji was suddenly flung away from Naruto. He was rocketed across the room into the far wall, where he struck the wall with enough force to crack it. He groaned as he hit the wall and stuck. Then he fell to the floor and landed face-down.

Sakura ran over, rolling him onto his back. She gasped in shock, seeing such damage! Yuji's whole right side was burned. And it was familiar, no doubt about it!

These are the burns Naruto had all over his body when four tails of the demon fox came out that time against Orochimaru! The damage is-

She began to heal him as fast as she could. Unfortunately for Yuji, he was still conscious and very, very focused on the pain.

"I thought this might happen!" Jiraiya exclaimed, looking guilty. He felt guilty, honestly, for the question he had to ask Yuji.

"Did the jutsu take?"

Yuji opened his mouth, but only gasped with pain. He finally nodded, gasping out a 'yes!'

Sakura redoubled her efforts on Yuji, working frantically. She was still grappling with her feelings. Those feelings of familiarity; warmth; comfort- all for this man who she knew little better than peripherally. It's not that she found him unattractive before. A bit grim, maybe, but she had a thing for boys with dark natures.

He's not going to die...he's not going to die...he's not going to die...damn it, where is the source? Burns from that demon fox are like poison. If I can heal the central wounds and infuse him with healing chakra...

"Master Jiraiya! I know medical jutsus aren't your thing, but can you mix herbs if I tell you what to make?" Sakura called, not taking her eyes off Yuji.

Jiraiya responded affirmatively. He could do that much. He listened carefully as Sakura gave him instructions. When he was done crushing, mixing, and then cooking with toad oil, he had a green paste at the bottom of a bowl. Sakura took it, thanking Jiraiya, and spread it gently over Yuji's wounds. Then, her chakra at her fingertips, she pushed the paste in deeper, rubbing it deep into the affected tissue.

All at once, Yuji's pain seemed to recede. That mixture had been a strong painkiller. He would need it, as Sakura was going to have to cut him open a bit without the benefic of anesthesia.

"Yuji, talk to me," Sakura asked "Tell me about your team when you were my age. You told me about Hisako and Chiyoko. But where does Ryofu fit in?"

Yuji found that he could talk, and in fact that talking would be helpful. So he picked up his story...

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FIVE AND A HALF YEARS AGO

Yuji led them through the Forest of Death at a run. Yuji cast a quick genjutsu on the enemies ahead as soon as they noticed him. Before they could break the genjutsu, a massive blast of water had knocked them away. That had been Hisako's doing. They made a very potent one-two punch between Yuji's genjutsu and Hisako's devastating use of water. The one-two-three came when some enemies tried to circle to the rear.

"Wind Style: Gale Torrent!" announced Chiyoko, not missing a beat. All at once, a massive pocket of air descended on the enemies, pinning them to the ground first, then pushing them even further into the ground, past the grassy shell and into the harder bedrock.

"Nice, Chi!" Hisako called, smiling at her friend. The two girls had bonded over the past six months. It was just impossible not to like Chiyoko.

Yuji stopped suddenly. There was a single enemy ahead, and the bloodlust he could sense was incredible. Call it a sixth sense, but Yuji suddenly realized the horrible danger ahead. So close to the tower, too!

The chunin exams had been a breeze so far. Chiyoko had scored one hundred on the written exam. Yuji and Hisako had scored below her, but well enough to feel proud. That led them straight to this test. They had gotten the Heaven scroll they needed to compliment their Earth scroll within five hours. They had hit plenty of obstacles, but they all complimented each other so well that there was really nothing that had stopped them cold.

But now, so close to the exit...

"Yuji-kun, why are we stopping? With one enemy..." Chiyoko told him, keeping her voice calm.

"That's no ordinary enemy," Yuji said flatly, refusing to move. "That guy isn't normal. Look at his feet."

His feet weren't so much the issue; it was more the pile of corpses at his feet that bothered Yuji. Teams- entire teams of three from the Grass, Rain, and even the Leaf were stacked at this opponent's feet.

"We should stay away from him," Hisako offered. "Fight from a distance. Our combo should do it..."

Yuji agreed at first, but then shook his head. "No. He's just seen us perform it. And judging from those bodies, he's used to tackling three people at once. Let me try my genjutsu. Once I have him in it, you two go into the tower."

Yuji created a Shadow Clone. He could only manage one at a time at his current level, and he had to be careful with his chakra. Now that they were at the end of the exam he could be a little less careful, but he wanted to keep something in reserve in case this didn't work.

The clone raced in toward the opponent, wielding an eku (oar). He dueled briefly with the enemy, but was cut in two by a sword strike. However, that had given Yuji time to cast his Genjutsu. It was simple False Surroundings Genjutsu. In it, Yuji simply 'moved' the door to the tower five feet to the right of where it really was.

Come on, come on. Take the bait... Yes!

Yuji saw the enemy move to guard the 'door', leaving the real door clear. As quickly and quietly as they could, Yuji and his team snuck by, shutting and locking the door.

They exhaled as one. They quietly celebrated, culminating with Chiyoko kissing both her teammates on the cheek, giggling at their red faces. Girls didn't kiss other girls, thought Hisako, while Yuji was flushing with pleasure and dying to return the favor.

Then they noticed there were no other doors in this little room. Just a wall scroll with some words missing.

Chiyoko was quickest to understand that they would need to open their scrolls and then fill in the blanks on the scroll. They began their work. Then Yuji twitched first, followed by the others. The genjutsu had worn off and their attacker was back. Just outside the door.

The three stood together, weapons out, ready to defend themselves. Yuji's chakras was lowest after maintaining that genjutsu, so he armed himself with an eku, trying to forget how useless it had been to his clone. Hisako used a defensive jutsu that clothed her in water molded to her body. It was dense as steel and would stop almost any attack. Chiyoko readied her wind style, also holding a kunai.

The door burst open. Yuji attacked first, his oar clashing with the stranger's sword. He swung for the head and missed, then dropped to his knees to dodge a sword slash. He swung toward the attacker's knee, but found his strike blocked by the sword. No, not just blocked- the attacker had stabbed through his oar.

While in motion? That's hardly possi-

Yuji was kicked hard in the face, rocketing him backward into the wall. Hisako took his place on the attack, simply barreling into the attacker. He was knocked backward, but regained his footing and picked Hisako up and threw her into the wall next to Yuji.

Chiyoko threw her kunai, managing to hit the enemy in the shoulder. The enemy grunted in pain, but that was it.

"Wind Style," Chiyoko yelled, making handsigns. But that was all she could manage before the sword came toward her.

"No!" Yuji shouted, throwing kunai and shuriken. They struck the opponent, but he had gotten Chiyoko. He had stabbed her straight through the chest, pinning her to the wall.

"Bastard! Hisako, use your water to slow the bleeding! I'll hold him off!"

Yuji had one last trick. It would hurt, this late in the game with so little chakra. But right now, his opponent was off-balance; he would never get a better chance.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!" A clone appeared, ready for action. "Now, Dance of the Sickle Moon!"

An homage to Hayate-Sensei's "Dance of the Crescent Moon", Yuji's jutsu lacked the speed and precision that Hayate's did, so he used a Shadow Clone to make up the difference. Clone and original moved at a high speed in an intricate pattern. They were each armed with two kunai, dancing in and out of range, stabbing and slashing when they could.

The stranger took hits, but none vital. This worried Yuji- for the first time, he was trying to kill. This monster couldn't be stopped. He had to finish him. But the hits were nothing even close to kill shots. And worse yet, he was slowing down from fatigue. On instinct, he threw his hands in front of his neck in a block. The enemy's foot struck him in the arms. A split second earlier and Yuji's throat would have been crushed. As it was, he was sent flying back into the forest, hitting a tree with tremendous force. It splintered when he hit, and he was worried his back had splintered, too.

Got to- ah! I can't use genjutsu! I don't have enough chakra. But I have to try-

Hisako had hit the enemy again, but there was no damage. Her chakra was too focused on keeping Chiyoko alive to focus totally on combat. Yuji was trying and failing to cast a strong genjutsu. It was hopeless.

Then Yuji heard Chiyoko's voice. It was strained, but clear enough to be heard:

"To shinobi, life is the same as death. To die for your comrades is the greatest of honors."

It was the saying on the scroll! She had deciphered it! The Heaven and Earth scrolls were open on the ground, and even with a sword in her she had managed to figure out the clues!

With a poof, Hayate-sensei appeared. In another blink of an eye, he had his sword at the enemy's neck.

"(koff) They have passed the exam. There is no further reason to attack them."

--

It was a blur after that. The next few days went by in a haze for Team Hayate. Yuji himself was inconsolable. He'd failed to protect his teammate. Why he felt so personally responsible he wasn't sure. He'd done all he could, and he knew that. There was not a thing he could have done different. This was part of the exams.

And yet...

Even as he stood in front of her casket at the funeral, Yuji couldn't understand what was so wrong. Death was terrible, yes, but this personal guilt. This feeling that it should have been him lying there in the casket instead...it was so strong.

Yuji knew he was standing at the casket for far too long, but he didn't care. His fingers wouldn't release the white rose he was supposed to place on the casket. He felt the tears start to fall; his stoic mask melt away. He put the rose down in a hurry and walked away, head down. He kept walking, past the crows and off of the rooftop where they had gathered. He didn't know where he was going, but he let his legs carry him wherever they wanted.

Eventually, he stopped at a tall black obelisk. He knew it was memorial to fallen shinobi. It was here his legs finally gave out and he collapsed to his knees.

Why? Whywhywhy?! How could that monster do that to her?! Why? What was the point? It was so senseless!

Yuji saw her again, pinned to the wall, blood running down her chest; out of her mouth. Blood was everywhere. And yet the last thing she did was for her teammates. She saved them.

She saved me...I have to do something! I have to...to kill. To kill him! That murdering-

Yuji was jolted as he felt a hand on his shoulder. It belonged to the Third Hokage. The old man didn't say a word as he slowly sat down next to Yuji. He stared at the obelisk, too. Yuji didn't know what to say or do.

"It's always a tragedy, isn't it? To lose someone. Close to you or not, when someone dies, you feel it. The grief, the horror...the guilt..."

Yuji turned to face Lord Hokage, surprised to hear 'guilt' in his list of emotions. So it wasn't just Yuji?

"There is no way to prepare for the death of another. All you can do is give yourself the right to live. Do you feel you have that right, Yuji? Do you count yourself among those your bravery could save?"

"..." Yuji closed his eyes, willing the tears to stop. No matter how hard he closed his eyes they continued to flow. "No! It should have been me! Chiyoko was the best of us, Lord Hokage! The best! She had so much to offer...and I...I think I was in love with her! If I had just said so! If I had just-"

"Would your words have shielded her, Yuji?" the Third Hokage asked. The tone in his voice was one of patience honed over a lifetime; of understanding cultivated through both tragedy and happiness. "I think you know the answer. Love is powerful. So powerful that it sometimes reaches the hearts of the ones you love without you ever speaking your feelings. I think Chiyoko knew what you felt. And I think that her love is what has allowed you to be here now. She stayed alive long enough to defend you and your teammate. That goes above duty, or even loyalty. That was an act of love, and it's power protected you."

Yuji was now sobbing, unable to stop. The Third Hokage held him in a gentle hug, giving the boy a shoulder to cry on. It was a shoulder of understanding that perhaps no one else could offer.

"Yuji...Don't let hate dominate you. Revenge was not in Chiyoko's heart; it should not be in yours. Instead, live. Live so that she may rest in peace. But also live for yourself and those among the living you care about."

Yuji sniffled, but nodded. "I'll become stronger. I won't allow that to ever happen in front of me again! To anyone, even people I don't know!"

Lord Hokage smiled, patting the boy's shoulder once more.

I believe him. He will be exactly like that. A straight arrow, doing whatever is necessary to defend anyone who is in danger. I'll have to keep my eye on Yuji.

5 - Mirror to the Past- Part 3

There was a month between the Forest of Death and the next round of the chunin exams. It would be individual combat. Teammates could wind up fighting each other; conversely, enemies could wind up fighting each other...

Yuji looked down the line of genin- not many left. There was himself and Hisako; a team of older Grass genin, then there was one Mist shinobi. Yuji had since learned his name.

Ryofu Housen. He's the one that killed Chiyoko. Even though it was part of the exam, I can't just forgive him! Lord Hokage told me not to consider revenge...

But when Yuji looked at Ryofu, he saw nothing but the corpses piled at his feet. Wouldn't the world be better off if Ryofu was killed? This threat didn't need to continue existing.

After an extra month of rest and training, Yuji knew he could do it. If he could just get in the ring with that monster he could defeat him. Kill him, if it came to that. Part of him wanted to. Part of him remembered the devastating hole in his heart that Chiyoko's death had left; how sad her parents had been, swearing up and down that Yuji was not to blame, though their eyes asked him why he was alive and not their daughter.

But each time he thought of that, he also thought of Lord Hokage. His words had resonated with Yuji in a way that went beyond the conscious mind. Yuji felt instinctively that Lord Hokage was right. If he couldn't trust his hero, who could he trust?

Hayate had trained with Yuji night and day to make sure he was ready. Hisako had sought out another water user for tips, since neither Hayate nor Yuji was proficient with water. They had made the most of their time.

"There are two of us. Two chances to take down that murderer," Yuji heard Hisako mutter, not for the first time. It had been sort of her mantra. She had been just as close to Chiyoko as Yuji, if not closer. Besides the younger Haruno girl, Chiyoko had been Hisako's closest friend.

The matches were due to be announced. Yuji didn't even notice anyone else's name. Ryofu was paired up against one Grass shinobi; Yuji against another one. That left Hisako against the remaining Grass shinobi.

The battles seemed to be over in an instant. Hisako fared well against her opponent, winning in five minutes. Five minutes was a good battle time. It gave you a good amount of time to show your best stuff while at the same time not being so long that you would have nothing in reserve at the end. Hisako took full advantage of that, even taking the time to show both her offensive and defensive capabilities. The end came when the opponent grew frustrated at her water defense and rushed in to punch. Hisako manipulated the water to catch the wrist of her opponent, while another water-coated hand clocked him in the side of the head for a nice, clean knock-out.

Yuji congratulated her, telling her how impressed the judges seemed. She simply nodded, too grim to banter. She wished Yuji luck in his match. He was on next.

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Yuji's match was a short one. The Grass ninja was also a genjutsu user, meaning that much of their battle took place mentally. They actually got along well for opponents, even mutually agreeing to call a halt to their long genjutsu battle so that they could display other skills for the judges. After that they both used an impressive array of taijutsu and ninjutsu. The end came after about seven minutes when Yuji parried a strike with one hand and returned the favor with his other hand, hitting his opponent square in the jaw. That was the end of the match.

As he returned to the observation catwalk than ran around the arena, Yuji walked past Ryofu. He sensed no hostility from the other boy. Just a scary intensity and the now-familiar but still jarring bloodlust.

Let's see what you can teach me, Ryofu...!

Ryofu's match lasted three seconds. He extended one hand forward, then pulled it in toward himself. His opponent, who had been wielding a pair of kama, simply exploded.

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The next matches were announced, and they would begin immediately due to the scarce number of competitors. Up first: Yuji and Ryofu. That meant Hisako would fight the winner by process of elimination.

As Yuji stood in line he noticed something peculiar.

The explosion came from within the person. Ryofu didn't touch him and he used no tools. The blood on the floor is in streaks, rather than clumped. As if it was pulled or directed...directed toward Ryofu...directed BY Ryofu...

When the two boys lined up across from each other, Ryofu spoke for the first time Yuji could recall.

"You figured it out, did you? The blood, the explosion. Not to mention my home village is a clue by itself, thinking of it a certain way."

Yuji didn't respond, not wanting to admit that he hadn't really figured out all that much. Ryofu kept talking, so Yuji was going to let him. That much more time for Ryofu to slip up and/or for Yuji to think up a plan.

"Mist habitually use water. Water is in blood. And as it habits, I control water, which means I control blood. Putting it together now?"

Yuji did, and he cursed. This demonic ninjutsu had no counter he could think of. How did one protect one's blood? Especially when one used fire ninjutsu?

I should surrender. But if I do, Hisako is next in line. She won't surrender. She'll die first. I value my life, but not enough to let yet another comrade take the hit for me. If I die, I die, but I'll take a

chunk of him with me!

Yuji had carried his eku with him to the arena, holding it at his side. At the 'Begin' signal, he immediately backpedaled, using a burst of fire to allow him time to back up. As he did, he threw an exploding tag which caught the embers in the air from his fire jutsu and exploded with a heavy cloud of smoke.

False Surroundings Genjutsu! Shadow Clone Jutsu!

Yuji cast his genjutsu, and the second he felt it hit, he used his clone. He hated to use the same combination against Ryofu as he had when they had met in the Forest of Death, but it couldn't be helped. This was the best way to gather information. There was a twist to the trick this time, though- an intricate trick he'd worked on with Hayate-sensei.

Ryofu was going to focus on the clone after he broke the genjutsu- check. Ryofu swatted at the clone with a large sword but the clone dodged.

Now!

The clone used a Replacement Jutsu. A log took his place. The clone re-appeared right behind the log and kicked it at Ryofu, who sliced it in half. The log blew up, having had an explosive tag attached to it. The clone threw down some smoke bombs and disappeared inside the purple smoke.

All at once, Yuji charged across the room at top speed. Ryofu had his back to him; now was his chance!

Ryofu raised his hand and Yuji was stopped in his tracks. Ryofu pulled his hand toward him and- poof!

"A clone!" Ryofu was caught by surprise. Yuji's eku came out of the smoke and smacked Ryofu's hand, causing his sword to go clattering away. Yuji emerged from the smoke, the oar in his left hand. His right hand closed around Ryofu's throat. Charging forward, Yuji smashed Ryofu into the floor, causing the thick tile to crack.

He held his oar at Ryofu's throat, showing dominance. The proctor began to raise his hand to signal the end of the match, but Ryofu's foot hooked around the oar. When he rolled onto his stomach the oar was wrenched from Yuji's hands. A bloodied but not beaten Ryofu sat up.

"Good move. But you should have killed me when you had the chance!"

Yuji closed the distance on Ryofu suddenly, aiming a kick at his head. Ryofu dodged away, but Yuji pursued, throwing precision punches, each one aimed carefully to make Ryofu work to block them. Yuji's feet began to annoyingly tangle up with Ryofu's trapping it to the ground and ruining his footwork.

"I think I've found your weakness, too. You don't need good taijutsu if your opponent never gets inside your striking range, right? But here I am!"

It was true- Yuji was more skilled in taijutsu. Ryofu was faster overall, but his technique wasn't as solid. Ryofu also held the edge in power. But Yuji's techniques were different than what Ryofu was used to.

Genjutsu: Demonic Illusion!

Yuji threw a genjutsu in the middle of their taijutsu battle. It threw Ryofu off just enough for Yuji to close the distance and land a punch. Ryofu broke the genjutsu and threw a kick. Each boy was knocked backward. Ryofu immediately tried his Blood Manipulation Jutsu again, but he forced to roll away as a fire blast from Yuji came dangerously close to his head. In a stroke of fortune for him, Ryofu rolled right to the place where his sword had landed.

Yuji by now had retrieved his oar and hurried to close the distance again. His oar had the longer reach, but Ryofu's sword could break it with one swing. Yuji's only hope was to disarm Ryofu again, and this time not hesitate to deliver a kill strike.

Ryofu's sword swings backed Yuji up, and for the first time he began to worry. His mind was all over the place. All he could think of was that he had done so well only to fail.

"Water Style: Water Dragon Jutsu!"

Yuji was caught completely off guard by the ninjutsu. A torrent of water, shaped like an enormous dragon, smacked him hard and sent him flying across the room. He bounced and rolled painfully across the room, landing face-up. Before he could move the dragon slammed into him from above, pinning him to the ground.

I'll drown! I've got to get away! But how?!

After rolling around and trying to get to his feet, Yuji eventually did the only thing he could: he stopped moving. He let the water wash over him.

There was silence from the audience. They were sure they had just seen another fatality. Many people took a step backward, fearing for their lives. They began to murmur, some in fear and other in anger. Hayate and Hisako stood their ground, ready to jump in if necessary. The Water Dragon Jutsu died down eventually, leaving Yuji- or what was left of him, anyway- a soaked mess.

The exam proctor moved toward Yuji to check on him. Once more, he raised his arm to signal victory, this time for Ryofu.

Then Yuji got up. He was sopping wet and looked like hell, but he still held his oar and was ready to fight.

Ryofu glowered at Yuji, not angry but very curious as to how the boy had weathered his attack. "That level of water pressure should have killed you. How did you survive?" Ryofu asked in a manner akin to discussing the weather.

Yuji was catching his breath, but managed to answer. "I had never done that before. I knew it was possible to channel chakra into an object but I never thought about why I would do that. Now I'm glad I did. Using my oar and my chakra, I was able to just divert your water's power enough to avoid being crushed. Now then," Yuji said, making handsigns, "Let's finish our fight!"

Yuji and Ryofu ran together, their weapons clashing. They kept nearly missing each other or scoring non-vital hits. It was a close fight, each one giving and taking a beating. Their weapons stayed evenly matched until both had the same idea and tried to strip the weapon away from the other. Yuji circled his eku in, catching Ryofu's wrists. Ryofu was out of range of Yuji's hands but could hook his eku with his sword and did. Both weapons went spinning away. Yuji wasted no time and closed the distance with punch. Ryofu dodged the punch but didn't manage to get away from the elbow that Yuji threw hard into his jaw.

Now!

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In the stands, Hayate and Hisako watched with unblinking concentration at the exchange of blows. After a minute or so of this, Hayate smiled slightly. He had worked on a move with Yuji that just might pull this match out.

"(Cough) Hisako, did you notice Yuji's handsigns earlier?"

Hisako answered "Yes" in a distracted tone. "Why?"

"Because he hasn't used a jutsu yet. This is something we worked on. You can store chakra in the same manner as cocking your first back to punch. (koff) So right now, Yuji has a 'hidden fist' so to speak."

"If he gets a chance to use it," Hisako added, worried despite Yuji's well-fought match. "He's done what he promised, and taken a good chunk out of Ryofu. If he'd just surrender now, before he gets killed, I could finish the job..."

Hayate returned his focus to the match.

Yuji won't let it go that far. He's a team player, but he also knows when to keep a teammate out of the action.

--

Yuji prepared to release his 'cocked' ninjutsu. But before he could, he saw Ryofu's arm raising up. He felt a peculiar pull in his body.

"Got you!" Ryofu said triumphantly. "It's a pity it took so long for me to 'recharge', but now that I have you in this jutsu you're as good as dead."

Yuji felt the clutch of Ryofu's chakra, to be sure. But it was weaker than he had imagined. He must have used a lot of chakra to just battle me up to this point. If I fight him I think I can strain him even farther. Even if I fall, Hisako will have him dead to rights.

Yuji bowed his head, summoning up all the chakra he could to defend his body. Chakra could counter chakra; it wasn't that different from breaking a genjutsu. So he began to battle back as much as he could, fighting for just enough control...

Now!

"Fire Style: Dragon's Wrath Jutsu!"

Yuji exhaled three balls of fire that sped toward Ryofu.

-

"Yes! He got it off! Sensei, what is that jutsu?!" asked Hisako.

Hayate watched intently as the fire streaked toward Ryofu. "Yuji held his chakra in reserve long enough to create three blasts of his normal fire jutsu. Normally, he exhales one ball. But when he 'cocks' the jutsu, the longer he holds it the more power he can emit. His limit was three balls in practice. The only downside is, with his chakra so low, this is the end of the match for him no matter what."

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Ryofu couldn't dodge. He didn't have enough chakra for that. Instead he decided to counter. Water should beat fire, no problem.

"Water Style: Water Dragon Jutsu!"

The water hit Yuji's fire head-on. But to Ryofu's surprise, Yuji made one last move. He threw ten kunai, laced with explosive tags, right into the middle of his fire jutsu. Then he scrambled for cover. Ryofu realized too late that Yuji was going to make an explosion that was going to trump even Ryofu's Water Dragon Jutsu.

The exam proctor leapt up to the catwalk, hanging by his legs. He quickly weaved handsigns. A few other chunin or jonin had the same idea to protect the spectators.

"Golden Barrier Jutsu!"

The catwalk was now protected by a force field, and a good thing, too. The resulting explosion below sent pieces of the enormous tile from the floor below rocketing upward. The pieces bounced harmlessly off the barrier, protecting the spectators.

When the dust cleared, both boys were at opposite ends of the stadium. They were both conscious, but clearly hurt. Yuji's back had taken the brunt of the explosion, burning him pretty badly. Ryofu had been facing the explosion, but his dragon had taken some of the edge off, leaving him with mostly cuts from the stone tile below. One sharp bit had pierced his left shoulder.

The two boys looked at each other, staring each other down. The proctor had begun a count. The first boy to his feet would win.

Yuji pushed away from the wall.

Ryofu got to one knee.

Yuji was crouching, still rising around the pain. He was sweating with the effort of just standing.

Ryofu was rising, ignoring his bleeding wounds.

At the same time, they stood up. They stared at each other. The audience held their breath, disbelieving at what they were seeing. The judging panel was sitting in mute silence, their brushes long stopped from

their task of taking notes.

The two boys began to move. They walked at first, each step a painful journey. But as they got closer they shed the pain of their wounds and ran.

This has got to be it, thought the exam proctor. This is enough. They're both dead if they don't stop!

The two boys collided in what would finally be the last move of a match that had lasted fifteen minutes- a lifetime in the world of combat.

Yuji punched. Ryofu kicked. Yuji's punch struck Ryofu's face; Ryofu's kick hit Yuji in the sternum.

They both stood for a minute, as though unaffected. Then, slowly, each boy toppled to their right.

The proctor didn't hesitate this time. He raised both hands and crossed them in front of his chest. "I declare this match a draw! The fifteen minute time limit has expired; there will be no overtime in deference to the nature of their wounds.

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By the time Yuji had finished telling the story Sakura was done with his wounds. Yuji would ache a bit, but that was all. But if she hadn't been here it would have been a disaster.

"So, wait, that guy was Ryofu, right? The same Ryofu that's on your team now?" Sakura asked. She wiped her hands on a spare cloth she kept in her medical pouch, looking down at Yuji. "So how did you ever forgive him for killing Chiyoko?"

Yuji looked back up at her. "I didn't," he said sadly. "But duty continues with or without my forgiveness. He is a strong shinobi and has done good work for the Leaf. My personal feelings leave when I tie my hitae-ate on." Then Yuji smiled. "Well, at least I try. Really, though, I'm still angry. I can't bring myself to blame him. Death is part of the chunin exams. We all know that going in."

Yuji got to his feet, unsteady for only a second. He thanked Sakura and Jiraiya again, giving them both some last minute instructions for Naruto. He thanked Yamato as well, though Yamato was upset that he hadn't been able to control the Kyubi chakra well enough to avoid this near-tragedy.

Yuji waved off his apology, thanking him again because, in all likelihood, things would have been much worse if Yamato hadn't been there. Whatever control he did have kept Yuji alive and kept Nintails from rampaging.

Naruto suddenly leapt to his feet. A strong orange chakra surrounded him. His movements weren't his own...

"Oh no! He's up to three tails!" Sakura yelled. She moved back to Yuji's side, as he was the only one she could help right now. She stood ready to defend him, sensing his fatigue and low chakra level.

“Yamato!” Jiraiya called out, making handsigns. Naruto was beginning to sprout a fourth tail. He opened his mouth and a dense ball of solid black chakra began to form.

Naruto was unconscious, so when the Kyubi chakra was agitated, it was allowed to take over! We’ve got to stop this before it gets worse!

Yamato was already using his Wood Style Jutsu to restrain Naruto. Pillars of wood shot out and wrapped around Naruto’s arms, legs, neck, and the three visible tails.

Jiraiya moved forward with incredible speed and jammed his hand onto Naruto’s stomach. He tightened the seal that the Fourth Hokage had made sixteen years earlier. The tails, to everyone’s relief, receded, and Naruto collapsed back down, unconscious once more.

“Phew! Close one!” commented Jiraiya. “I’ll take him from here, Yuji.”

Yuji bowed. “Yes. Thank you, Master Jiraiya. You as well, Sakura; Yamato. I owe all of you my life.”

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Yuji paid a visit to the memorial obelisk. It wasn’t that he usually didn’t come here; he was a frequent visitor. But today was different. Memories had surfaced that he hadn’t given thought to in quite a while. The Third Hokage, Hayate, Chiyoko...there were so many others Yuji didn’t know. That awful battle against the Sand and Orochimaru took far too many lives on both sides.

If the Third had just allowed me to fight with him...if I had been out on patrol with Hayate that night...if I had been stronger back then- strong enough to protect Chiyoko. If I’d just been able to start training with the Third Hokage sooner. All of those deaths may have been averted. But at least I learned to protect those who are left with a Will of Fire big enough to honor all those who died. That was a worthwhile lesson.

Yuji was soon joined by Yuugao. They bowed quietly to each other, then stood a while longer. Then they left at the same time, walking the same direction.

“I was thinking about Hayate-sensei today,” Yuji said quietly by way of conversation. “I have quite a few memories that came to mind today.”

“Oh? Like what?” asked Yuugao. She had removed her mask, showing how much she trusted Yuji. They had fought together before.

“Well, one was the fact that I had a crush on you when you came to talk to Hayate-sensei during my team’s first training session.”

Yuugao laughed; she did remember. “Oh yes, that girl...Hisako, that’s it! Hisako pointed out your feelings. Hayate and I had a good laugh over that.”

Yuji chuckled a little, smiling at the memory. “I was so mad at her. That’s probably why I have such a hard time talking to girls.”

They both laughed at that. Then Yuji did something out of character for him:

“You know, that crush never completely went away. Maybe we could get dinner sometime; talk a little more...”

Yuugao was stunned by that sudden proposition. But what the heck? She liked Yuji well enough, and she hadn't seen anyone seriously since Hayate died. Maybe it was time to move on?

Hayate, are you playing matchmaker? Bringing both of us here , at the same time? If I could just get one more sign...

“(Koff) Sorry. Sudden tickle in my throat,” Yuji said, covering his mouth as he coughed a couple more times.

Yuugao smiled. “Yes, I think that would be nice, Yuji. Does Friday work for you? I'm off duty that night.”

“That's perfect for me, too. Is seven too late?”

They finalized their dinner plans, then went their separate ways for the time being. Yuji's smile was a mile wide- he hadn't ever really bothered with dating. The only other girl he'd met that he liked was too young for him.

He had walked for a bit when he saw someone else he knew up ahead. It was Kakashi, reading one of his books. Yuji stopped and bowed to Kakashi. Before he could resume his walk, Kakashi closed his book and gave Yuji a hard look.

“We need to have a talk, Yuji. Sakura told me about a dream she'd been having, about you fighting the Akatsuki. To my surprise, it sounded familiar. As if it was a memory that I had shared with her.”

Yuji was unable to keep his face stoic now. He bowed slightly, then requested that Kakashi follow him. It was time to tell the memory in it's entirety, and then let Kakashi decide what happened next.

6 - Lost Meeting

Yuji and Kakashi wound up deep in the Forest of Death to talk. Yuji tried not to feel like a child caught with his hand in the proverbial cookie jar. What he had done, he had done legitimately and for good reason. He had to stop bowing so easily to people he cared for.

“Sensei, I will tell you everything, but I ask that you please- *please*- not tell Sakura what I saw. More importantly, I’m going to tell you the secret mission my team and I have been assigned. Understand that there is more to this story than I can tell you. More than I am *allowed* to tell you. So please accept this is as the only true explanation.”

Kakashi nodded his head, leaning against a tree to listen. Yuji told him about the fight, and about how he had managed to protect Sakura’s mind while setting a trap for the Akatsuki within it. That was the easy part. Now came the harder part:

“I have told no one this, sensei. This mission has been ongoing since my training with the Third Hokage ended. Was ended, I should say.”

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After the Third Hokage’s death, Yuji brooded. Had he just been allowed to fight with the Third Hokage things would have been different! Damn Orochimaru!

It was uncomfortable, Yuji decided. Sitting behind the Hokage’s desk. It was uncomfortable circumstances that led him here. It was uncomfortable due to his age, experience (or lack thereof), and because he wanted to be out doing something. Something to help!

Assigning missions and organizing shinobi was important, he knew. And until the next Hokage could be found, he was the best bet. Having trained with the Third Hokage for two full years, from ages thirteen to fifteen, made him the best person to run the village. He had help from the council, but it was important to have one person at the top of the pyramid. Decisions by council take time and discussion; the Leaf had no such time. So they had to rely on what wisdom the Third Hokage had passed on to his final pupil.

To be fair, Yuji knew he had quite a bit of knowledge. He’d managed to keep everything running, though just barely. There just weren’t enough shinobi to go around. Genin were seeing multiple D-ranked missions a day, and even some C-ranked missions. ANBU agents had also stepped into missions that were usually below their expertise. Everyone was pitching in and doing what they could.

When I see that, I understand why I love this place so much. I understand what Lord Hokage tried to tell me about the ‘Will of Fire’. I can do this. I love this place. I’m working one hundred hours a week...I’ll have to do one hundred twenty, but maybe then...

At that moment there was a puff of smoke. A jonin was kneeling in front of Yuji’s desk, waiting for acknowledgement.

"Yes, Tamamura?" Yuji said calmly, trying to speak in the same manner as the Third Hokage.

"Lord Ho-...I mean, Shidousha! A number of missions have just been cancelled! Sir, someone is taking missions for so little money we cannot compete! We're losing funding!"

Yuji frowned, looking over the documents Tamamura had brought. He spread them out on the table, clearing missions scrolls to the floor. He studied for only a moment, seeing a pattern that gave him some hope.

"We need to squash this quickly. Right now, only one village is using this new...'mercenary group'. Iwagakure...If we squash them quickly we can nip this in the bud and keep these mercenaries from gaining any ground..."

Yuji sat back for a moment, mentally checking off who he had left to use. He decided to use some of those who had guarded the Third Hokage. Using small birds meant for in-village memos, Yuji summoned them.

And two others...

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Within twenty minutes, all of Yuji's crack team of elite shinobi had assembled. Aoba Yamashoota, Raido Namiashi, and Genma Shiranui were all of Tokubetsu jonin level. Raido and Genma had been bodyguards to the Third Hokage, and Aoba was an intelligence operative who impressed Yuji the few times he'd seen him in action. Intelligence would be important from here on out.

"I've asked you here to take part in a mission. The village faces a grave threat. Our missions are being undercut by a mercenary organization working for almost no money. We cannot respond to this by lowering our prices or by taking on more missions. What we can do, however, is strike at this organization. I would ask all of you to become a new branch of special forces, put together to combat the economic threat this poses not just to our village, but to all villages."

There were no objections, so Yuji continued.

"This means not only potential combat, but an 'official' loss of money due to you for what is at least an A-rank mission."

That, unsurprisingly, did not go over well. No one protested vocally, but Yuji could see the objection clear as though they'd shouted it.

*"That is only 'officially'. Instead, you will be paid for an S-rank mission from a private fund I have started with approval from our Daimyo. You are part of the "KEKOBEE-- **Keizaishakai koushu Bengodan** (Economic System Offense/Defense Defense Council)- should you choose to take this mission."*

"I'm in," Raido said, surprising himself. Then he laughed a bit, amazed that he'd just committed to something like that without much thought.

The way he speaks...it's familiar. Comforting. Like the Third Hokage. Without the experience, but confident all the same.

"Me, too," Genma added, smirking at Yuji. They'd been buddies before Hayate was killed. "Good

idea.”

“Me as well,” Aoba chimed in.

Yuji gave them all a smile and bow of appreciation. “Thank you all. I will also ask you to take on two additional members. They’re chunin level now, but more than formidable. I’ve asked them to join us. They’re just outside, waiting for my signal. Enter, please!”

Hisako came in first, followed by Ryofu. Both of them were wearing their chunin vests and standard issue sandals, though Ryofu had opted for long pants while Hisako was wearing pants that fell to just below her knees.

“Shidousha,” Ryofu said by way of greeting, giving a slight nod of his head. Hisako bowed and waited for Yuji to continue, not trusting herself to say his title, afraid that ‘baka’ might slip out instead. It was hard to think that her teammate was now in such a position. She was proud, in a way, though she wasn’t sure why.

“Excellent. Ryofu, Hisako, these are your teammates for a mission I will ask you to take.” Introductions were made and the mission was explained as quickly as possible. There were no questions at the moment, so Yuji wrapped up the meeting.

“Then, to the final articles of business. First, you must never mention the KEKOBÉ to anyone. This new threat is still in it’s infancy; calling attention to it will make it grow faster. If anyone questions you more thoroughly than your personal standards allow, refer them to me. Do not answer their questions truthfully. This includes our council. This is a deal between the Fire Daimyo and myself with the condition that it be kept secret. Here,” Yuji said, laying out black cloaks decorated only with a small Leaf symbol on the back of the collar, “are your uniforms. Wear them on your missions at all times. An intelligence operative stationed within the Leaf has placed a special jutsu on them to allow them to be monitored. If you are captured, this will allow for a rescue attempt, as well as tracking to the enemy base. Any questions?”

None. So Yuji continued, trying to make sure he didn’t allow any of the questions he had into his voice.

“Very well. Raido, I will trust you to lead this mission. Aoba’s survival is key once he obtains intelligence.”

“I understand,” Raido responded, yet again in wonder at Yuji.

Yuji allowed his expression to soften. “I am asking a lot of all of you. Your trust, your secrecy, and indeed your safety. I want to see all of you alive again. By that time, I may no longer be in charge of the village. In that case, please report to me first before speaking to the new Hokage. Until I have briefed him or her, assume they know nothing.”

There was another call of agreement from Raido. With that, Yuji dismissed them, giving Raido a scroll of all the information Yuji had collected so far. Then the group was gone.

Yuji sat back in his chair, exhausted mentally. His bodyguards, Tonbo Tobitake and Iwashii Tatami

flanked him, guards up.

"Thank you both for keeping an eye on me. It must seem troublesome to watch after a child," Yuji commented, feeling his eyes closing despite his mental insistence they stay open.

"It's not troublesome. We've seen firsthand how hard you're working," said Iwashii. "None of us could have done the job you're doing, never mind as well."

Tonbo was smoking a cigarette, but he was vigilante- at least, Yuji thought so. Given that the guy had bandages over his upper face, plus his hitai-ate over his eyes, the best Yuji could do was guess at the man's emotions until he spoke.

"I don't envy you your job, Shidousha."

All three sensed it at once. Yuji rolled forward while Iwashii and Tonbo took up kunai.

A green vapor appeared in the center of the room. Yuji covered his mouth and nose with his arm, thinking it to be poison. But then the vapor began to take form. It began with a pair of feet and legs, grew to a trim waste and shapely, fair-sized bosom, and was topped with a head which was full of green hair.

"Who are you?!" Tonbo demanded.

"Midori," the girl replied airily, as though that was all the introduction necessary. A black cloak with red clouds adorned her shoulders, tied around the neck like a cape. Beneath that she wore tight black jumpsuit.

She looked from person to person, smiling in an air headed way.

"Let me see...they said he would be young...I can't tell with bandage-face, but if you're that ugly you probably aren't young. Let me see...beard man is pretty cute. But the little boy must be in charge!"

Yuji glared at the intruder, keeping the rest of his expression mild.

"You are 'Midori'. What is your association, Midori?"

"Associ-what?"

Yuji spoke slowly and kindly. "What village are you from?"

"Oh!" the girl answered brightly. "I was from Iwagakure, but that was, like, a year ago! Now I'm with another group! But I'm not supposta tell you the name. It's a secret!"

"Enough of this!" Tonbo shouted.

"Tonbo, do not attack!" Yuji countered, holding up his hand, stopping Tonbo in his tracks. "Besides, the girl won't be alone. Am I correct in saying that your organization operates in two-man cells?"

Midori nodded enthusiastically. "Yep yep- hey, wait! How did you know?!"

"I guessed. You confirmed it."

“Aw! But if you do that, I gotta kill you!”

At this, Tonbo and Iwashii attacked, stabbing with their kunai. Their attacks were targeted perfectly, but Midori was unaffected. She had simply turned parts of her body back to the green vapor.

“Sorry boys, but I can’t let you do that! I gotta kill the cute little boy over there.”

Yuji was already moving, creating two Shadow Clones who began to move around the room at high speed. Yuji joined their pattern suddenly, throwing Midori off. Until suddenly, Midori couldn’t see anything.

“Genjutsu: Bringer of Darkness Jutsu!”

That was the First Hokage’s genjutsu! Yuji can perform it?! Tonbo was shocked to learn about the depth of Yuji’s abilities. He knew that the boy had passed a strict test to be allowed to be something of an ‘Acting Hokage’, but this!

“Withdraw your kunai, quick!” Yuji ordered, moving in toward Midori. His clones did the same. All of them were primed with the same jutsu. As one, they called it’s name:

“Sealing Jutsu: Five Elements Eternity Seal!”

Midori swung out with one arm. The arm was insubstantial vapor between shoulder and hand, but still connected and solid at the hand end, allowing her to smack a Yuji hard in the face. She hit a clone which disappeared. The real Yuji plus his other clone reached Midori and jammed their hands against her back and stomach.

A gold flame encased the tip of Yuji’s thumb, representing heaven. His index finger’s tip was covered in an orange flame- fire; his middle finger, blue- water; his ring finger, green- earth, and finally his pinky, black- void.

The clone pulled back, leaving only Yuji to finish the seal. Midori’s body began to become solid again. She shrieked in surprise and tried to attack but found that her range was limited to how far her arms could extend.

Yuji released the genjutsu so his comrades could see again. “Now!” Yuji declared, leaping away. Right on cue a Yuji clone, Tanbo and Iwashii buried their kunai into Midori. She couldn’t turn to vapor, and as a result she was dead as Tanbo bisected her kidney while Iwashii stabbed her heart. Yuji’s clone had stabbed her in the neck.

That was the first time Yuji had ever killed someone. Even though he doubted his clone’s strike could be called the only lethal one he still felt a pang of guilt. He also felt a sense of duty to take that guilt on. There was no choice. This ‘Midori’ had gotten through village security undetected and had tried to stab at the heart of the Leaf. Not only was it self defense, but it was defense of the village. Someone that dangerous could not be allowed to live!

“There will be another one,” Yuji said aloud, forcing himself not to think of what had just happened. “We

can't drop our guards. Iwashii, you summon a sensory type from ANBU. Tanbo, you and I are going up to the roof."

"That won't be necessary, Substitute Lord Hokage."

Two kunai were thrown from opposite ends of the room. One each hit Iwashii and Tanbo, knocking them toward Yuji's away from Yuji. Yuji drew one of his own kunai, holding it in his right hand. Two more kunai came toward Tanbo and Iwashii, but Yuji's threw shuriken to counter them, sending them spinning off-course.

"Tanbo, Iwashii- take cover under my desk! Create a barrier if you can!"

Yuji was already making handsigns, his kunai spinning up in the air where he had thrown it to free up his hands.

"Fire Style: Dragon's Breath Jutsu!"

Yuji exhaled a powerful burst of fire, filling the room with flames. Out of the flames came one figure, aiming for Yuji.

Iwashii was ashamed of himself, hiding under the Shidousha's desk. He leapt out and threw kunai at the head of the oncoming target. Tanbo was apparently in agreement because he moved in tandem and threw kunai into the legs of the target.

When the attacker stumbled under the assault of kunai, Yuji made his move. He caught his kunai as it fell, dashed forward with the knife in his left hand and made a sweeping cut at the arms covering the attacker's face. The sudden strike caused the attacker to swing at Yuji, but Yuji moved outside the strike, parrying it with the edge of his kunai, while his right hand struck for the throat, catching the intruder around the neck. With all the force he could muster, Yuji slammed the intruder to the ground.

He used that move at the chunin exam finals! Iwashii remembered, seeing in his mind Ryofu being dropped by the attack. He's really improved since then! Or he never meant to kill Ryofu to begin with. Either way, Yuji is no joke!

The force of the slam brought Yuji and the intruder crashing down to the ground floor of the Hokage mansion. Screams came from bystanders, and all the shinobi in the area came running, worried about their leader.

The dust cleared. Yuji's target was no longer moving, save for breathing.

Yuji withdrew his hand from the man's neck, seeing the damage he'd done. He wanted to panic but he couldn't- not now, with all the shinobi under his command here.

"I need a medic and four ANBU agents immediately! This man is to be taken into custody, his wounds treated. Iwashii, Tanbo, see to your own wounds. Have someone send Ibiki Morino to me as soon as he's available."

With that, Yuji swept inside the mansion, all the way to his personal room at the top floor. He walked

straight past his bed and into the bathroom. There he got violently ill, sickened as he was by taking a life.

I see why you despised killing, Lord Hokage. It seems I am unsuited. But I also see the necessity. To protect the village I must be willing to stain my own soul. But in the end, I'll be forgiven if I accomplish the good I set out to do.

Yuji got up, wiping himself up. He would finish assigning missions for the day (he suddenly realized it was before noon), albeit in another location. Construction was to begin on the Hokage mansion only after the rest of the village was stable.

The missions...I'll assign them at the chunin exam arena. There is no demand on that room at the moment. Not for another few months.

Yuji's mind kept wandering toward his team. He had faith in them, but couldn't help but worry. Raido, Aoba, and Genma were jonin level and would be fine; Yuji was more concerned for his former teammates. They were strong as jonin but with none of the experience.

Their strength will be enough. I envy them; they're out doing something. I'm protecting my own tail. He knew the thought was unfair but he couldn't help it. Yuji knew who the real heroes were.

7 - The Forgotten Battle- Part 1

Yuji stood in interrogation with their new prisoner. The man was disturbing, now that Yuji had a chance to analyze him. He was eight feet tall easy, with a ton of muscle mass. That had been his only weakness- that much muscle didn't allow for a ton of speed. But Yuji had to concede that, had he gotten a clear look at his enemy instead of simply attacking he might have been distracted enough to get hit. The man wore a black executioners hood that was apparently designed to never come off. There were large bolts that had been drilled right into the man's upper back and chest, keeping the hood over his face. Only two menacing, red-glowing eyes shown through two small holes in the mask.

Ibiki Morino stood with Yuji, along with Inoichi Yamanaka. The two of them were going to probe the prisoner's mind to see what secrets it held. There was one problem:

"Shidousha...if we do this, it is an act of war. We risk war with his organization, as well as his original home village," Inoichi cautioned, wondering if Yuji was capable of making this decision.

Yuji clasped his gloved hands behind his back, eyeing the prisoner.

"Yamanaka-sensei, they have infiltrated our village, attempted to kill me, and wounded my guards. And they speak as part of an organization. If these were isolated incidents I wouldn't risk war. But this is part of a larger problem. One we need to solve, now, while the potential crisis is contained."

Inoichi couldn't argue with that logic, but he had one more argument to make.

"You're right. But they talk about an organization, but have no proof, aside from these 'uniforms'. They could be just two people with a grudge, not representing an organization. It could be a nation just creating an excuse to go to war while we're weakened..." Inoichi shook his head. "We'd never survive a war. Not right now."

Yuji raised an eyebrow. "I don't agree with you there- the Leaf retains more strength than our neighbors. And with our new alliance with the Sand we can certainly defend ourselves. But regardless, the task at hand is vital, and I must depend upon your skills. There is further evidence that this is not an isolated couple of radicals but a large military organization at work. We cannot allow them to gain the strength to attack us outright. And to defend ourselves, we need information..."

Inoichi simply nodded. He was in agreement with Yuji but certain arguments had to be made just to be certain all angles were covered.

"I'll leave him to you, then. I would recommend doubling the guards, however- based on his abilities from before, he can reach through solid objects to attack."

Ibiki Morino smiled at Yuji, proud to have passed such a fine young man in the chunin exam a few years ago. His smile turned nasty as he faced the prisoner. He already had picked out with route to take in dissecting the captured man's mind.

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NEAR IWAGAKURE'S BORDER...

Raido led the way through the dense underbrush, clearing it away as quietly as he could. Right behind him was Hisako, who was guarding Aoba. Though Aoba was strong in his own right he needed to be free to gather intelligence without being attacked, hence his guard, Hisako. Genma and Ryofu brought up the rear, walking side by side. Genma seemed relaxed, a senbon tucked between his teeth. Ryofu was the contrast to that, a sword four feet long slung across his back. He kept one hand on the hilt, ready to use it at the first time of trouble.

Raido checked his map the next time they took a break. They had traveled for three days straight, stopping only for meals and two hours rest each night. Now they were close to their first target. He wanted his team well rested and ready to go.

Our first target is an abandoned Shinto temple, about three thousand meters to the west. If there's no luck there, we'll check one more spot, then head back to the Land of Fire outpost town, Tanzaku, to re-supply.

Genma and Aoba set up the tent; Hisako gathered firewood; Ryofu went fishing (his water jutsu made that easy. Hisako could do it, too, but it felt a bit like cheating to her. Ryofu was 'more interested in survival than ethics', as he had so succinctly put it). That left Raido with the task of setting up some campground defenses. He spent the better part of a half hour lacing the area with razor wire in intricate forms, dotted with exploding tags as proximity alarms. Then he and Hisako used their combined talents to put up a barrier ninjutsu. Finally, Aoba added an advanced version of the 'Demonic Illusion: False Surroundings Jutsu' around their campsite. Anyone who looked would see a very dense, dark section of forest, dotted with the glowing eyes of very large and hungry creatures.

At last they all sat down to eat. Ryofu had caught plenty of fish, and after traveling 'plenty' met 'just enough'. Their bellies satisfied, they all laid down to rest, with Raido taking the first guard shift.

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Yuji was sitting in the Chunin exam hall, doling out missions with Iruka. They had sorted through most of the D's and half of the C's, as Iruka was familiar with the genin and their abilities. The A pile was vanishing quickly thanks to ANBU. But the B pile was problematic; chunin were distinctly lacking in numbers.

Yuji considered the pile, thinking quietly. He looked to Iruka who was also lost in thought.

"Iruka-sensei, among our squads who took the chunin exam the previous two times, were many very close to making it but failed?"

Iruka was surprised by the question, but he had an answer ready after a moment's thought. "Yes, sir, there were at least six chunin hopefuls who didn't make it. In fact, two have done fine in both individual combat and test scores. Some failed only because of their squad mates. Either they opened the scrolls in the Forest of Death or they were caught cheating during the written exam."

Yuji carefully turned Iruka's reply over in his head. He didn't like what he was thinking, but he saw little choice but to suggest it.

"Iruka-sensei, I suggest a supplementary chunin exam for these individuals. I'd like to re-exam them for promotion. I'm proposing we hold an abbreviated, in-village testing session. A written test followed immediately by singles combat. I'm not concerned about teams at this point; we can form new ones among those who pass and those who fail."

Iruka immediately saw the logic in that. "That's a great idea! We can do the same thing with some of my students! The next genin test isn't for a two months, but I have a few ready now!"

Yuji nodded in agreement. "Good plan. Can I leave the arrangements to you? I'll finish up here."

Iruka nodded happily and got up. Yuji called him back before he could disappear to see to these new orders.

"Iruka-sensei, I would like to proctor the exams with you."

"Sir?"

Yuji waved his hand aside, and with it Iruka's questioning tone. "I know it's unorthodox. But I won't be in charge for much longer, and I need to have a career to fall back on. Proctoring exams might just suit me (That, and we're horrendously understaffed)."

Iruka agreed to make the arrangements and left. The second he did, Inoichi Yamanaka came to Yuji and asked him to speak with him privately. They left for a room in the basement of the testing complex. Once there, Inoichi told Yuji what was going on.

"They're part of a growing group. They call themselves the 'Akatsuki'. They've been taking missions for little money to stifle the Five Great Nations economically."

Yuji frowned, and tried not to show more emotion than that. He already had a feeling that the group he had KEKOBÉ hunting was connected to the group that was attacking here.

"This is a problem. A big problem..." Yuji murmured, saying things like that to get time to organize his thoughts.

"It gets worse," said Inoichi, his eyes and voice both projecting the intensity of the situation. "All of them are S-ranked criminals from different villages."

"S-Ranked?! You're sure?"

Inoichi nodded gravely. "Yes, sir."

Yuji thanked Inoichi and abruptly headed out, heading for the residential district of the Leaf Village.

I sent them against a band of S-ranked criminals?! They're all great shinobi, but they'll need back-up. I won't be enough good by myself. I can think of only one person who I can really trust to do this. Thankfully she's off-duty today.

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Yuugao was sprawled on her bed, looking at pictures of her and Hayate. She was finding it difficult not to dwell on the past. The past, in the form of an Orochimaru-duped Sand Village, had taken away her lover. Moving on was difficult.

Knock knock

The knock at the door brought her back to reality. She rose off her bed with grace and answered the door, finding a grave looking Yuji on the other side.

“Yuugao, I need your help. We don’t have a moment to lose. Please come with me; I’ll explain on the way.”

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The temple was abandoned according to their sources. From the outside it certainly looked that way. The red paint on the torii had begun to peel long ago; the wood had rotted in some places. The stone steps were chipped and full of dirt, and the grass and trees were overgrown and unkempt.

But that’s exactly the way a criminal would leave it. No one would bother going in if it was abandoned.

Raido and the others took a closer formation. Aoba was in the center, protected in front by Raido and the back by Genma. The sides were covered by Ryofu and Hisako who, at the first sign of trouble, would put a water wall up around Aoba.

“Let’s move in,” said Raido, tightening the grip on his kunai. The group moved slowly and stealthily, staying together in a seamless pattern of teamwork.

The inside of the temple was dark. It was deceptively large inside, given the small view you got from the outside.

“Aoba...” said Raido. Aoba nodded in response, making handsigns.

All at once, the temple turned deadly! Kunai flew from every direction, all aimed at the small group of Leaf shinobi.

“Water Style: Water Wall!” said Hisako and Ryofu in unison, throwing up their defensive techniques in a cocoon around the group. The bombardment continued nonstop. Far longer than should be possible.

Hisako put her hand to the water wall. Then she shook her head.

“There’s no impact. It’s genjutsu.”

“Wha?! But I just broke a genjutsu!” Aoba protested even as he was closing his eyes to focus. “You’re right. A genjutsu within a genjutsu! This is advanced stuff!”

Ryofu drew his sword and, very calmly, cut his left palm with it. His face didn’t even flinch in pain, but

apparently he must have felt something because all of a sudden he swung at a mysterious enemy.
“This one is real!”

Hisako broke the genjutsu with the Release technique and had to immediately raise her kunai in a block. She struck at another attacker, but her kunai just slid through him with no damage.

“Everyone outside!” Raido ordered, realizing there was too much chance of getting caught in a genjutsu in here. The others followed his lead. Thankfully there was no genjutsu obstructing the exit; they must have tripped that one when they came in.

“Hold on!” Hisako called. She raised two fingers above her head and called out a jutsu. “Penetrating Mist Jutsu!”

A thin mist floated in front of the door. Inches from Raido’s face there were dozens of lines of razor wire. If not for Hisako’s quick action he would have been shredded.

Ryofu cut the strings with his sword, leading the way outside- and into an attack. The kunai was so close there was no way he could raise his sword in time. But if he dodged, Raido would get hit. There was no time for a warning.

Pfft. Genma spit out the senbon he carried between his teeth, using it to knock the kunai away.

In front of the Leaf team was six people, all wearing the same thing: a black cloak adorned with red clouds.

The one in charge of the six was a tall man of average build. He carried a pair of kama. Subtle things in his grips and posture told the Leaf group that he knew how to use them effectively. The man’s voice fit him perfectly; it was a deep, rich voice that commanded attention.
“What are you doing here?”

8 - The Forgotten Battle- Part 2

Raido stepped forward as the spokesman for the Leaf group.

"What are we doing in a temple? I didn't realize that access was restricted. We're simply looking for a place to spend the night."

"He's-"

"-Lying."

The chorus of two identical blonde twins toward the back of the unnamed group surprised the Leaf squadron.

Mind readers, huh? Two can play that game! *Thought Aoba, using his chakra to suit action to thoughts. Without touching someone in the other group, it would take time to read one of their minds. Thankfully, he'd briefed Raido on his abilities before this confrontation took place.*

Raido didn't waver or back down. "You're reading minds? That's hardly a friendly act, given that this is neutral territory."

Hisako kept her eye on the twins. She signaled to Ryofu by doing so that she would handle them if worse came to worse. Ryofu noticed and responded by staring fixedly at a swordsman at the back with a straw hat pulled down over his face. That took care of three of them. Four, if you count that Raido seemed intent on squaring off against the 'leader'. That left Genma to protect Aoba, along with Aoba protecting himself against the remaining members who were all varying shapes and sizes. It was just a slight disadvantage in numbers; nothing to worry about.

Until Aoba finishing reading their minds.

"They're all S-ranked criminals! And they call themselves...Akatsuki."

At that, the fight began.

Hisako broke toward the twins, water forming from vapor in the air to armor her. The twins attacked from opposite sides using identical taijutsu kicks. Hisako's water armor allowed her to weather the attacks with no problem. The twins, however, were incredibly quick and Hisako had a hard time hitting them, even with her water extending her reach. A plan formed in her mind, and she drove the twins together, lining them up until they were just right...

Now!

She blasted at them with water. They moved to leap but found their upward progress stymied by a low-hanging tree branch. Hisako adjusted her aim slightly and hit the twins center-mass.

"Got you! What the-!"

The twins were weathering the water. One got behind the other, who was using some sort of shield ninjutsu, and pushed. Hisako focused more energy on her attack. The twins gained a bit of ground. Just as they did, the back twin leapt away, letting her shield-using sister take the brunt of the attack. She leapt off the branch above her and rocketed toward Hisako's right side.

Oh no! I moved water to attack, so my defense is weak there! But if I withdraw the attack-

The twin smacked into Hisako's vulnerable side with a powerful kick, sending her spinning across the battlefield.

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Ryofu looked toward Hisako, ready to jump in, but he was forced to draw his sword in self-defense. That was no problem, though. He only needed one hand to wield his sword, however massive it might be. He let go with his left hand to perform handsigns-

The opponent simply began to push harder, his blade moving toward Ryofu's neck. Ryofu used his left hand to brace the back of his blade, pushing back. If this were the old Ryofu, he would have kept pushing until he won. But the Leaf had taught him something about strategy. He pulled back his blade quickly while moving to the side. His opponent countered even quicker with a side slash that caught Ryofu in the side. POOF! Replacement jutsu.

Ryofu was standing behind the sword user, his blade arcing toward the neck of his opponent with one hand; the other hand covered the medium sized gash on his right side where the sword had just managed to hit him before he had replaced himself with an unfortunate piece of lumber.

His opponent simply turned and caught the sword, bare-handed.

That's imposs-!

Ryofu had time to think that much before his opponent closed the distance between them and kicked Ryofu in the chest, launching him down the stone steps that led to the temple.

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Raido was being frustrated by his opponent. The man moved just a little faster than he did, though Raido had better technique. As a result, it was just about an even match. Their kunai clashed first, then their free hands would cross in punch and grappling attempts. Raido knew he couldn't disengage; if he did, his opponent was faster and would be moving forward while he, Raido, would be moving backward. No one was faster going backward versus forward.

Aoba and Genma were being circled by two enemies. They were back to back, in a stalemate with tall bald man and his shorter, stockier friend who was sporting a beard. They were moving in tandem, more or less. To a trained set of eyes like Aoba, that screamed 'teamwork'.

They seem to have paired off. The twins against Hisako; these two against Genma and I; the swordsman and the leader separated out of necessity. Maybe that's the key...

"Genma! When you get the signal, move toward the temple!" Aoba called. Raido heard him and looked

out of the corner of his eye. He didn't know what Aoba was planning, but he was thinking that he could take advantage of it.

"Scattering Thousand Crows Jutsu!" yelled Aoba. A thousand crows appeared. At Aoba's direction, they all flocked towards Raido's opponent.

That spectacle in progress, Aoba used another technique.
"Secret Technique: Stone Needles!"

The needles he threw at his own opponent- or so it seemed. At the last second, Aoba moved his hand and pitched them instead at Genma's opponent, who had his back to the temple. One caught the opponent, and he fell to the ground.

What made Aoba's needles so nasty is that when they hit you, the nearly invisible strings attached to them ran his chakra right into your body. Apparently, the strings weren't invisible enough, as the bald man covered his bearded partner and cut the strings. He reached down to pull the needle out, but stopped partway through that motion as Raido had flung a kunai at him. He stopped moving and the kunai stuck into the wall of the temple behind him.

Suddenly, Raido's enemy had no opponent. Raido was gone!

And then he was back, appearing at the spot where his kunai had sunk into the stone! In one motion, an odd black sword ("Kokuto"- translates to 'Black Sword' or 'Black Blade')) was in Raido's hand, and it in turn was thrust through the bald Akatsuki member's chest.

*The leader's eyes widened. **That was 'Yellow Flash of Konoha's' technique! I'd recognize it anywhere after the last Shinobi war! It's odd that seeing it would make me feel pride for Iwagakure after that defeat is what led me to the Akatsuki to begin with.***

The bald man turned and, with his bare hand, ripped the blade out of his own chest, shoving the pommel backward into Raido's throat. Raido leaned back just enough to avoid a critical strike, but he still was hit hard enough to lose his ability to talk temporarily, as well as being able to breathe comfortably. Genma took advantage of the situation by throwing twenty senbon into the bald man's back and neck, finally putting him down for the count.

The bearded Akatsuki member rolled forward, grabbed Genma by his outstretched arm and, planting his foot into Genma's stomach to act as a lever, threw Genma into the temple wall head-first. Genma hit hard and lay still, face-down.

Aoba and Raido moved back to back immediately, now contending with the Akatsuki 'leader' and the bearded henchman.

-

Hisako and Ryofu had landed near each other after being knocked down the temple stairs. They got up, both shaking their heads.

"Man, that smarts!" Hisako moaned, massaging her side.

"We need to get back to the fight," said Ryofu dryly. His sword was up with the opponent. That meant it was time to shift to ninjutsu.

"When did I suggest otherwise?" Hisako answered, a grin across her face. "I've got those twins figured out."

Ryofu nodded. "My opponent has a weakness, too. I would suggest we end them all at once. Yuji isn't here, but I think part of our team's combo will work."

Hisako agreed. Yuji's genjutsu would have come in handy but it wasn't a deal breaker without him against these enemies.

"One 'usual combo', coming up!" Hisako declared, running up the steps. Ryofu was right behind her, which was good, because their enemies were right in front of them. The twins attacked from either side, peppering Hisako with shuriken. She shrugged the blows off, letting her water stay on her for defensive use. She flung kunai at the twins instead, missing them both as they moved spectacularly through the air. Hisako kept moving, aiming for Ryofu's opponent at the top of the steps.

"Penetrating Mist Jutsu!" she yelled, filling the areas to all sides of her with mist. It extended up to the twins range of vision. They swatted at the mist, dispersing it a little. Suddenly, in front of them was Ryofu, swinging a sword of water at them!

One twin used her shield ninjutsu again, blocking the sword. The other twin was behind her, ready to throw more shuriken. That was as far as she got, as Ryofu was holding her arm behind her!

***A clone!** the shield-user realized. Her sister was in trouble, she had to-!*

Schunk. Ryofu stabbed the other twin in the neck, killing her. Then he disappeared with a 'splash' of water, heavy enough to fall through the mist.

"I'm the real one," said the Ryofu with the water sword. "And you're dead. Good thing that clone new to kill itself. I needed more chakra to do this: Blood Manipulation Jutsu!"

Ryofu raised his arm, hand open. He slammed his palm to the 'ground' (which was really Hisako's mist- he manipulated it to make it thick enough for him to walk on), and the twin exploded outward.

As he stood back up, in one economical motion, Ryofu threw the water sword, sending it spinning toward the sword user he had fought before.

The sword man ducked under the sword, then leapt high, scoring a second kick on Ryofu. Or so he thought. Ryofu had caught his kick!

"This is why it's called 'Penetrating Mist Jutsu!'" Hisako shouted, manipulating the water upward. Tendrils of solid water shot through the mist, piercing the opponent in the throat, heart, lungs, spine, liver, subclavian artery, kidney, and jugular. The eight assassination points as taught to Mist shinobi.

That was four down, two to go. The last two Akatsuki members were the bearded man and the leader.

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The Akatsuki group leader looked left and right. They'd only managed to incapacitate two of the five Leaf shinobi. The two they'd taken out could recover at any time. The man with the annoying habit of spitting senbon was already stirring back to consciousness. The other one was awake and aware but unable to move. This was not good. They'd underestimated the Leaf badly.

Aoba was the ranking person left conscious, and he was alone for the moment. The leader had noticed him at the back of the battle, just watching until engaged.

Information collector...can't let him live. I'll have to make Waju use his hidden jutsu.

He needed only think it. The bearded man leapt at Aoba, wrapping himself around Aoba, dislocating his joints so he could hold on. Even as he moved, he was begging. Some kind of mind control?

"No! Please, Shudo! Not th-"

KABOOM!

Waju had exploded, right in Aoba's face! Aoba fell backward, his chest a mass of blood. He hit the ground hard, still breathing but clearly near death.

Ryofu took charge of the situation. "Hisako, heal him as best you can! I'll deal with this 'Shudo' creep!"

Ryofu said that, but his chakra was low after using his Blood Manipulation so recently, combined with the Water Clone and Water Sword. As he ran he retrieved his real sword. He and Hisako ran side by side, splitting off as they reached Shudo. Hisako leapt over him. Ryofu swung just below her to preclude Shudo's attempt to grab her. Hisako safely got to Aoba and pulled him and Genma around the side of the temple. Raido made his way over, a kunai in hand. As team leader he was ready to die for his soldiers. He had to cover Hisako while she healed Aoba. He was the mission priority. He hated to throw Ryofu out there like that. The leader hadn't fought yet, so he was unhurt and full of chakra. Ryofu was clearly a bit fatigued. Just a little, but that could be the deciding factor.

Shudo ran toward Ryofu, an attack ready.

"Boulder Rain Jutsu!"

Ryofu watched in amazement and horror as all the loose rocks on the ground, and a few of the temples' stone steps came loose and hurtled toward him. He rolled aside, dodging the first few. One stone hit him in the side of the head, causing him to lose focus for a split second. He dodged the next wave, but another rock smacked him in foot, causing him to lose his balance.

"Ryofu, duck!" Hisako called, knocking her sandal heel on the ground, dislodging a hidden blade. She twirled in an amazing handstand, sending the blade flying from her heel and toward Shudo's neck. He dodged it and, in the same motion, smacked Ryofu with another rock, this time striking his hand and causing him to lose his weapon.

Shudo then flung a boulder at Hisako and her group. She bent over them protectively, her chakra already spent healing Aoba and Genma. She hadn't gotten to Raido yet; she would need a Food Pill for that. Didn't look like that would be an issue if that boulder hit.

"Water Style: Water Wall!" Ryofu shouted, throwing the last of his chakra into a defensive maneuver that saved his teammates.

Shudo smirked nastily, hitting Ryofu with a small rock, bloodying his lip.

"Well, that's it. You did well to eliminate five of us. But now I'm going to kill you all, making this little campaign of yours pointless!"

Ryofu shook his head. "No. Not pointless. There's five less scumbags in the world thanks to us."

At that, Raido's kunai flew at Shudo. Shudo batted it away the back of his hand. Raido appeared next to the kunai, his Kokuto moving toward Shudo. Instead, Shudo's hand lashed out and caught Raido by the neck, holding him up for a moment before throwing him into Ryofu.

"Now then-You die!"

POOF!

A puff of smoke, a flurry of leaves.

Ryofu sighed heavily, though he was visibly relieved. "Showoff."

Hisako, too exhaled, but she was clearly thrilled. "As always. What do you expect from our Shidousha?"

Yuji was standing in front of Ryofu, his eku in his hand. He rubbed the back of his head, apologizing.

"Sorry, sorry. I was so bogged down with paperwork it took forever to get away and save your butts."

Ignoring the howls of protest from his team, Yuji kept his focus on Shudo.

"Now then, you were going to kill my shinobi. Can't have that. So you're going to have to either surrender or die. Choose quickly."

9 - The Forgotten Battle- Part 3

Shudo laughed, pointing at Yuji's weapon. "Or what? You'll spank me with that ridiculous excuse for a weapon?! No, this is what's going to happen: I'll kill you now!"

Shudo may have said that, but the blood coming from his mouth said otherwise.

"Wha-" he managed, turning to look. He saw a purple-haired kunoichi in ANBU armor crouching behind him, her sword thrust through back.

"You will kill no one else! Now die with dignity!" Yuugao stated, twisting the sword in his wound.

The rocks were still floating as Shudo screamed "Never!" He directed all the rocks toward Hisako's group. "I'll take them all to hell with me!"

Yuugao withdrew her sword, causing enough pain for Shudo to falter just long enough. Yuji was already moving forward, his eku smacking Shudo's hand down. He struck at Shudo's neck with his right hand, driving the enemy backward onto the caltrops Yuugao had scattered as she yanked her sword out. If the sword through the spine wasn't fatal, then the combo of caltrops entering the wound Yuugao had created and Yuji's neck strike were.

The rocks fell harmlessly to the ground as the chakra powering their motion was gone. Yuji stood up, removing his hand from Shudo's neck. He looked at the corpse for a moment, then he bowed. With his free hand, he closed Shudo's eyes.

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Kakashi was skeptical at the end of the story, and Yuji couldn't blame him. He hadn't explained much of anything. But that was the most he could say right now. Only Lady Tsunade knew a slightly longer version of what happened.

"In the end, we were attacked on the way home by Itachi Uchiha and Kisame Hoshigaki. I held them off while the injured and the intelligence were rushed back home. For whatever reason, Itachi chose not to kill me. Something about 'not causing senseless bloodshed to rile Konoha'. Kisame wasn't happy about it, but Itachi was in charge and that was that. The point of the story: I was among the first to know about the Akatsuki, and among the first to realize how deadly they were. So I had the secret team KEKOBÉ formed to deal with them. That's why I came to help your team. Or rather, that's one reason." Yuji grinned a bit, purposely lightening the tone of this meeting. "I'm also very fond of your team, truth be told. I had a crush on Sakura when I was younger."

"And the reason you had to knock me out?" Kakashi asked, more mildly than before.

Yuji allowed himself to be completely serious again. "Because KEKOBÉ couldn't be revealed. Not even to you. I'm trusting you with a lot now. KEKOBÉ is still a secret from the elders, and even from Lady

Tsunade. They still answer to me.”

Kakashi narrowed his eyes, still not happy with the answers he’d gotten so far.
“And why tell me?”

Yuji looked at Kakashi seriously. “Because if anything happens to me, I’ve set it so that you automatically take control of the group. We must operate separate from both ANBU and the Hokage to keep our mission secret. Too many people would object to us attacking the Akatsuki and risking war just to defend our economic structure. After being in charge for a month or so I realize just how damning finances can be. We have to protect our finances. And if we take out the Akatsuki totally along the way...”

Kakashi conceded the point quietly. There was one more point of concern for him, now that all was forgiven between him and Yuji.
“And Sakura? What forced you to alter her memory.”

Yuji paled, shaking his head. “It was disgusting. The most foul...absolutely disgusting images. If I didn’t block out her memory, it would have seemed to her that these things actually happened to her. Mutilation, degradation...enough to nearly induce suicide even in myself, though my sense of her emotions was diluted.”

Yuji stared Kakashi in the eyes, unblinking. It was a cultural taboo, and by breaking it Yuji was conveying just how important his next words were.

“She must not be allowed to remember, Kakashi-sensei. She cannot be allowed to live through that ‘memory’. No matter what.”

They left the grim discussion at that. They made small talk for a few minutes before parting ways on good terms. Yuji brightened immediately after that horrid conversation- he had a date!

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Yuji got ready for his date with Yuugao, feeling pretty positive about it. He was sure they’d at least walk away better friends. That was the worst case scenario, and he could totally live with that. The best case would be that she would agree to date him again, this time as more than old friends catching up.

As he was getting ready, finishing by polishing his hitae-ate, he found himself thinking of that meeting with Itachi. He couldn’t help reliving it, as it had caused him to ask some very deep questions that even the elders who trusted him implicitly skirted around neatly.

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The group walked/was carried back home. Aoba was being carried between Raido and Ryofu; Hisako kept her eye on Genma, who had escaped with only a small concussion. Yuji was in front; Yuugao in the back.

Yuji’s sudden stop and Yuugao’s sudden jump to the front stunned the others. Then they saw what was blocking the path. Or rather, who.

“ANBU agent, get these people out of here. I will deal with this...roadblock.”

Yuji strode bravely forward, drawn up to his full height. Which, at age fifteen, wasn't all that impressive. Especially given that he came up the belly button of one adversary.

Yuugao hesitated for only a moment. Yes, this was a good friend of Hayate's; yes, he was the last living link to Hayate Yuugao had. But duty was ingrained into her. She herded the other away, cutting a wide path around the roadblock.

The second he was sure that everyone was out of earshot, Yuji spoke quickly.
"I can understand you coming, but why is he here?"

Glowing red eyes bent down to Yuji's level in the darkness.
"Because this isn't about Konoha. This is about you knowing things you shouldn't."

Something in the voice smacked of danger. Yuji leapt backward, bumping into the other half of the roadblock.

"Shidousha, huh? At your age? Must be doing well for yourself. I'm impressed."

Yuji gulped- what else could he do? When you were cornered by Itachi Uchiha and Kisame Hoshigaki, and you were the only one around, you did what you had to. And that 'had to' was get the new intel on the previously unnamed group back to Konoha. The information that Aoba had no doubt stolen from the minds of the Akatsuki operatives would prove invaluable.

But a cryptic message that the Third Hokage had given Yuji stuck in his head.

Yuji, someday I will be gone and you will be Hokage. If you have problems, take council with my son, Asuma. and Itachi of the Uchiha clan, he said. Then, three months later, Itachi slaughters his entire clan. There was a message in what the Third Hokage said; I just don't know what it is! Fat lot of good that does me now! Unless I can trick him...

Yuji stepped backward carefully, narrating his movements. He had to buy time for his group to reach Konoha anyway. With the wounded and chakra-drained compliment supplemented by only one able body it would be slow going.

"The Third Hokage mentioned you by name, Uchiha-san. It was regrettable he never got to finish telling stories to me. It might have made things more clear."

Kisame held Yuji by the shoulder, just hard enough to keep him in place. Itachi moved closer and grabbed Yuji's face. Yuji closed his eyes reflexively, having learned more than just the history of the Uchiha clan from the Third Hokage. But his plan to keep his eyes closed was foiled when Itachi kned Yuji in the stomach three times, causing him to cough up blood and his eyes to open.

Itachi's eyes bored into Yuji's. He was paralyzed by Itachi's unblinking gaze. The pain in his shoulder from Kisame's massive hand dulled. The background began to fade to black, until all that was left was Yuji and Itachi. They were alone in what Yuji could tell was a genjutsu.

Itachi didn't attack. He simply pulled Yuji up to his feet, at least in the genjutsu.

"Did the Third pass on the truth to you?" Itachi asked evenly, without a threat in his voice.

Yuji shook his head. "Only parts. Such as indicating you had a very good reason for doing what you did. He told me to seek council with you if I was ever in dire straights."

Itachi didn't question Yuji's statement, though it could easily have been a bluff on Yuji's part. Itachi could probably sense the truth of the statement. He and Yuji had gotten along well in their limited interaction before the Uchiha Clan Massacre. Yuji even owed Itachi his life when a C-ranked mission- Yuji's first time in command of a team- when horribly wrong.

"...Then you won't hear the truth now. It isn't necessary for your survival."

*Yuji had to focus hard on that. Wasn't it irrelevant if he knew or not?
"You're going to kill me, aren't you?"*

For the first time, Itachi smiled a bit. He looked younger instantly.

"No. But I am going to hurt you a little. It's necessary to buy time for your team to return home. Keep your eyes closed and act convincingly...Shidousha."

--

Yuji had been rescued not long after that by Yuugao. She had led the team home and Aoba had reported to ANBU's intelligence division. The mission had been a success. The interrogated Akatsuki prisoner had given more information before biting off his tongue and drowning in his own blood to escape more mind probing.

Shortly thereafter, Lady Tsundae had taken over control of the village. Yuji had stepped aside as a Hokage candidate, bowing to Tsunade's superior experience in the field. He had hoped to be named as an advisor but everyone seemed to think that he wanted to get away from the strain of leadership. They couldn't have been more wrong- it was all Yuji wanted.

Instead, his team had been reformed. Hisako, Ryofu, and Yuji were back together. They were put under the tutelage of various instructors over the course of the next year. Each instructor subsequently found little he or she could do to improve teamwork within in his team, or eve their skills.

The only instructor to really spend any time with them was Shikaku Nara, Shikamaru's father. He saw a couple interesting things during his few months with Team Hayate. In a meeting with the Fifth Hokage he outlined what he saw:

-Superb teamwork.

-Flawless switch from offense to defense, and back

-Yuji was a born leader. Any of them could have been, but Yuji's tenure as Shidousha had honed very good instincts into him

At that, Tsunade had smiled, saying that she had considered Yuji a potential successor, but ultimately would pass the village over to someone else when he came of age.

That led Shikaku to his point.

He'd never met a team that was so hostile to each other.

It was rare to find a team that didn't bond at least a little bit over the years. This group was the exception rather than the rule. Yuji made no bones about hating Ryofu; Hisako tolerated Ryofu and Yuji but wouldn't hesitate to light into them verbally or physically; Ryofu didn't particularly care about what either one thought.

But to watch them fight, you would be surprised. They had each other's backs no matter what. If Yuji was down, Ryofu's Water Wall protected him while Hisako attacked. If Ryofu was cornered Hisako didn't hesitate to ignore her own fight to bail her teammate out. And Yuji didn't make any decisions without considering his teammates' feelings, never mind coming to their defense. The patchwork of scars on his body were ninety percent from training; ten percent from defending someone else.

But after missions they didn't celebrate together. Hisako was the only one who would go out and be social. Yuji might go to a teahouse or occasionally drink at the base of the Hokage Faces. Ryofu would drink in a bar but speak with almost no one.

It spoke volumes about what type of shinobi Team Hayate was. They could despise each other, but at the same time respect each other. And when the chips were down, no one was left alone.

It was the damndest team dynamic Shikaku had ever seen. All of Team Hayate had warmed up to Shikaku just fine. No one resented him being in charge suddenly. Even Yuji, who clearly wanted to be a leader of some kind deferred to Shikaku without question.

Among the group, Shikaku noticed, Hisako was the most innately talented. Her amazing chakra control helped, but at the same time she picked up whatever jutsu she set her mind to learn. Soon she had mastered every water jutsu in the village. Her taijutsu was solid as well, and she had learned to use it in tandem with her water style. She could also release genjutsu with proficiency, though she could only perform basic genjutsu.

Ryofu was in the best physical shape of all of them. He was quick but didn't have the best taijutsu technique. He could wield his enormous sword with ease. He tended to use his water jutsu offensively, which was in contrast to Hisako, who used it primarily for defense. As far as ninjutsu went, Ryofu was the most devastatingly powerful member of the group.

Yuji was proficient with genjutsu. His taijutsu was fairly strong as well. Lord Hokage had taught Yuji fighting styles rather than jutsus, so as a result Yuji had his own kinds of fire and earth style jutsu. He strived to learn to use water, lightning, and wind style as well, though so far he could only use water a little bit. He was fine with or without a weapon. His best attribute was that he was always willing to put his life on the line. It didn't matter if it was a D-ranked mission or a B-ranked mission.

The three together made a strong team, Shikaku had concluded. They got along fine and worked well together; they just weren't friends. That was good enough to be a solid team.

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Yuji and Yuugao met up at the time they agreed on. Both had dressed for the occasion, with Yuji donning some western clothing (all black, as per usual for him) and Yuugao slipping into a pretty skirt and blouse combo.

“Hey, you look really great! No shock there,” Yuji said after bidding Yuugao good evening.

“You clean up well yourself,” Yuugao replied, meaning it totally.

They proceeded to a tea house and, for the next hour, lingered over dumplings and green tea. They laughed, sharing stories about Hayate and other mutual friends. Yuji had told Yuugao about how he had fought incessantly with his teammates. It was funny now, he decided.

“Oh yeah, they used to team up when they got tired of me being so by the book. Hisako would start out neutral as Ryofu and I went back and forth. It always bugged me how he could keep his cool and still wind up winning the argument. Usually by then Hisako was rolling her eyes at both of us.”

Their conversation continued like that. Before they knew it, an hour had passed. The only trouble was that Yuji was realizing they were behaving like friends; not like a couple on a date.

I knew it, he said, laughing at something Yuugao had said. **I’m still too close to Hayate for her. I’ll always be the ‘little brother’. But all things considered, that’s not so bad.**

Yuji settled in and let the date take its course- as friends.

10 - The Rescue- Part 1

Hisako was sleeping in her favorite spot that night. It was on a hill near the training fields. The stars were so bright and clear out here. It was peaceful. Unlike home...

For some reason, thinking of her home life made Hisako think of a couple of handsome men. Iruka from the academy was one. She could imagine him being a tender lover, shy to even kiss. She also thought of an ANBU agent whose name she learned only after he became part of Team Kakashi.

"Yamato...(sigh). Could use some of that right now."

She rolled over, trying to get comfortable. She couldn't understand why she was so fidgety tonight. She felt some weight pressing down on her. Some burden she couldn't quite figure out.

She sensed rather than heard someone approaching. She got up and rolled out of the tent in one smooth motion. She recognized the chakra. It belonged to Ryofu.

Sure enough, there he was standing outside the tent, huge sword shouldered. By way of greeting, he said "Come on. Yuji's got a mission."

"KEKOBÉ?" she asked, then noted Ryofu was wearing the black cloak with the small orange leaf symbol near the collar. KEKOBÉ it was, then.

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The group met in the Forest of Death tower. Since the group had been formed largely from Hokage bodyguards back when there was no Hokage, they needed new members to keep going. Right now, Yuugao Uzuki from ANBU was a member, as was Anko Mitarashi. Aoba Yamashiro had stayed as part of the group, but he was the only original member (besides the founders) to stay. He had many connections within the Intelligence Corps that came in handy. This meeting spot was provided by Anko.

Yuji had been the first to arrive, having contacted the others by means of his small red scroll. They had all gathered quickly, none of them having been on regular missions. Yuji and Yuugao weren't dressed for combat, though no one commented on Yuugao's skirt or Yuji's western clothing.

"We've gotten some intelligence. One of the Akatsuki's "Big Nine" and his partner are moving to attack. This one- codenamed 'Red' by our informant- controls a good deal of Akatsuki pawns. We can strike a big blow by eliminating these two and their minions."

Everyone nodded- no questions so far.

Yuji continued after a moment. "Since there are so few of us, we can stay together and remain stealthy enough. But if we do split up we need to do so in an intelligent way. Hisako, you'll go with one group; Ryofu the other. We're headed to the desert, and that means a lot of sand and wind. Water is the enemy of the desert so we need to stay balanced. Anko-sensei, I would like you to stay with

Aoba-sensei.”

Nods of understanding again. Yuji returned their nod.

“Good. Let’s move, then.”

Everyone took off, except for Yuji and Yuugao. Yuji was holding her arm gently.

“I’m sorry about this. I WILL make this up to you,” Yuji told her, looking embarrassed. “My work comes before everything...but I mean to make you the exception to that rule, as a friend or otherwise.”

Yuji blushed awkwardly, and Yuugao was reminded of the Yuji from nearly seven years ago. The one who had blushed upon seeing her, back when Hayate was alive. He was still so similar to that boy. But that boy had become a man, and possibly that manhood had come too soon. His face still seemed to young and innocent for these missions. Maybe it was that that made Yuji seem so amazing for doing this job. No gratitude, no acknowledgement except from those who knew what he was really doing; what he had really done for those few weeks as the Leaf’s leader.

Yuugao had taken her mask off- she wasn’t acting in an ANBU capacity and couldn’t allow herself to be recognized as such- and kissed Yuji’s cheek before embracing him. He returned the embrace.

After that, they were gone, off at the speed of light.

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ONE MONTH IN THE FUTURE

Konan walked to the prisoner’s cell carrying a tray of food. She fashioned a key out of paper- the only way to open the cell- and walked inside. She had a slip of paper hidden somewhere in her body that allowed her to keep her chakra while walking into the cell, which was plastered with chakra suppression tags. This prisoner was too dangerous to leave simply tied up.

The pitiful figure within barely stirred. He was sitting in the shadows, half of his body covered with dirty bandages. One eye had a piece of gauze taped over it. The bandage was dirty and neglected

The boy was too badly injured to do anything but stare with his remaining eye. The threat was long gone from his face; the fire gone from his eyes. Instead he lay defeated and silent, looking up at Konan, already wincing.

Konan knelt down, placing a tray holding hardtack and water at the boy’s side. She stayed kneeling, regarding him for a moment before speaking.

“You should eat, or you will die.”

Yuji didn’t answer right away. It seemed to take all his energy to move his eye to look at Konan.

“...What...do you care? I won’t tell you...anything.”

Konan put a hand on the boy’s chin. His hands came out feebly, but he was in position to do anything.

He let his hands fall back to the floor. Konan sliced off a sheet of paper from her sleeve and wetted it with some water from the tray. She began to gently clean his wounds.

"Neither I nor Lord Pain wishes you to die for the time being."

Yuji coughed, though it sounded like a laugh, which was apparently his intent. "Too quick? You want me in pieces first?"

Konan ignored him and kept cleaning his wounds, cutting open his shirt to get at his chest. Finally, she turned her attention to his eye. She said nothing, but she ripped a piece of Yuji's shirt off and made a makeshift bandage out of it using a fresh piece of gauze. Once she was done she got up and walked away.

"...Thank you..." Yuji choked out. He managed to bow his head as well.

Konan looked back but didn't say anything else.

He is contrary to Lord Pain's mission. This suffering is outside of that. Lord Pain would be merciful and kill him, were he to understand that this interrogation is yielding no results.

"Please, tell me one thing," Yuji requested politely. *"I'm not making a demand or anything. I just want to know how long I've been here..."*

After a moment's hesitation Konan decided to answer.

"A month. So far."

Then she left.

Yuji sat back, his strength gone. A month? And no one had saved him yet. Then again, they must have given up on him by now.

No. They know I'm alive, and they should be able to track me. My cloak wasn't destroyed. It should still be feeding my whereabouts to them. Unless they think the poison killed me?

Yuji tried again to bite his tongue off. No luck, as the curse mark on it prevented him from doing that. He couldn't hold his breath until death came either. There was no escape.

No escape; no death. Rescue is my only hope.

He used a measure of strength to stand up and move to the bars of the cell. He could reach outside the bars and for a moment his chakra would be allowed to circulate more freely.

He withdrew his hand quickly as he heard footsteps. By now he could recognize his tormentors by their sounds, smells, and touch. Today he heard the worst sound yet.

Not him again. Not again. I've got to get out of here!

Yuji sunk into a sitting position, conserving his strength until the last possible second. He drank some of the water that Konan had given him, knowing that he would die of thirst if he didn't die from any poison they put in the water. He needed as much strength as he could muster.

Yuji's tormentor opened the cell. Konan opened the door, but didn't look happy about it. She seemed to have gotten attached to Yuji. It was nothing he'd done intentionally. He hadn't tried assumed she'd be kind just because she was female. He'd simply been polite to her because she'd been polite. Once she became his primary care giver he made sure to be kind simply because it was the right thing to do.

But if I have to, I'll go through her to get out of here.

A hand closed around Yuji's neck, lifting him up and slamming him against the wall. He tucked his chin to protect his head and neck, but the rest of his body took a pounding. He had to endure this for just a little longer. Having spent a month like this, he'd had time to do nothing but exercise his body and think. If he couldn't rely on using chakra normally...

As usual, the session began with Yuji being cut, this time across his right arm. His whole body was a mass of scars caused by this ritual.

Hidan, as Yuji knew him thanks to Konan's warning to 'beware him', lifted the sharpened rod that did the cutting to his mouth.

At that moment, Yuji snapped his elbows down across Hidan's arm. His right arm shot out and caught Hidan around the neck as Yuji's feet hit the ground. He smashed Hidan's head down as hard as he could. He snapped his foot down across Hidan's arm, succeeding in taking the rod he used to stab Yuji.

Konan was too startled to react at first as Yuji ran by her. She tensed as Yuji ran by, but he didn't attack her. He blazed down the corridor at top speed, the rod still in his hand.

He ran right into another nightmare of an attacker.

"Not you again!" Yuji snarled, wasting no time in attacking. He stabbed with the rod, hitting only an enlarged purple hand.

Kakuzu struck back with his strings. They tried to wrap around Yuji, but Yuji managed to foil them by blasting Kakuzu point-blank with a fire jutsu. He ran by him, casting a genjutsu over his shoulder. He felt it released almost immediately, but it had bought him precious seconds-

"Got you!"

Hidan was in front of Yuji, having taken a different route to get here. The exit was behind him.

"Move or I go through you!" Yuji threatened, holding the rod in front of him like a sword. He had since wiped his blood off on his sleeve.

Hidan shouldered his scythe, a maniacal grin on his face. "I'd like nothing better!"

Yuji, having been confided so long, wasn't as fast as he would have been normally. He sprang toward Kakuzu, negating the length advantage of the scythe. Yuji stabbed, slashed, and struck, but Hidan was fairly apt at blocking with that ridiculous weapon and it's cord.

Yuji finally parried and had Hidan dead to rights with the rod when suddenly dove aside. A string shot down the corridor and narrowly missed Yuji. Yuji rolled to the side and threw the rod, calling out 'Shadow Clones' as he did.

The rods multiplied and rained down onto Kakuzu. Unfortunately, that left him without a weapon to block Hidan's scythe.

"Got you!"

The scythe swung toward Yuji. He didn't have time to dodge. He could only avoid a fatal blow by throwing an arm up and bracing it with the other arm. All the same his side was pierced by the very tip. Hidan began to retract the scythe, opening his mouth.

"Oh no you don't! Aggh!"

From behind, Yuji was pierced by one of Kakuzu's strings. In horror, he watched the string shoot right into Hidan's mouth! It stopped shy of a killing blow, and instead Hidan lapped Yuji's blood off it.

Being restrained by the string, Yuji could only watch as Hidan leisurely set up his circle. Pointedly, he raised his scythe to his arm.

"Shall we see if this still works on you?" Hidan asked, stabbing his own arm.

Yuji didn't want to yell, but the pain ripped through him unmercifully, and eventually he did scream. The scythe rose and fell on each of Hidan's arms and legs, then into his feet. Yuji felt it all and was powerless to stop it.

"Since you won't talk, I won't waste time asking questions," said Kakuzu from behind, drawing Yuji back to him with the string that had caught Yuji through the torso. "We'll just make this a punishment day. But don't worry- Konan will see to it that you won't die."

Yuji couldn't hide the horror in his eyes. He had been so close to ending the torment! Freedom had been within his reach. To have it yanked away so cruelly, so painfully...

Yuji had to fight to keep his mind together. He would never talk; even if he considered it it would do no good. The torture would never end.

Yuji saw the maniacal look on Hidan's face as he raised his scythe up again. This time, he closed his eyes as it plunged down.

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PRESENT DAY

Yuugao, Ryofu, Hisako, Anko, and Kakashi had met up, all clothed in the same black cloaks that KEKOBÉ had been wearing since it had been formed. They had met secretly in the Forest of Death, and were ready to go.

“This will be our last attempt to find and rescue Yuji,” Kakashi announced. “It isn’t likely that he is still alive, and if he is, he may not be in any good state of mind or body. But he must have collected intel if he’s been captured all this time. Everyone clear on their roles?”

There was a resounding agreement. With no further preamble, the group took off, heading for the Iwagakure border- the last know position of Yuji before his capture.

How could this have gone so wrong? Yuugao wondered as they ran. **That doesn’t matter, I guess. What matters is getting him back. I’ve got to think. The battle; our escape; Yuji’s capture. It was too well coordinated to be an accident on the Akatsuki’s end...They must at least suspect KEKOBE’s hidden purpose.**

Before long, the group was joined by one more figure. Kakashi looked over and said in a too-obvious voice:

“Sakura? What are you doing here?”

“You are *such* a lousy liar! Hisako exclaimed, shaking her head. “Didn’t Yuji tell you this whole deal was a secret?!”

Kakashi turned to look at Hisako, keeping his gaze mild with effort. “Yuji put me in charge of this group in the event of his death or disappearance. This qualifies. As a result, I am in charge and I have decided to have a medic accompany us. On a rescue mission, I might add.”

As soon as he said it, Kakashi realized that his mild annoyance had been misplaced. Hisako was upset at Sakura’s inclusion because it was such a dangerous mission; not because it was a secret. Hisako didn’t want to see her friend harmed.

But she isn’t as delicate as you may think, Hisako. Especially when you’re watching her back. Besides all that, Yuji will need medical help. If he’s still alive.

11 - The Rescue- Part 2

What was left of Yuji lay in his cell, unmoving except for the rise and fall of his chest. Even breathing hurt. Yuji was pretty sure one lung had been damaged fairly heavily.

Konan looked down at him, making sure to keep him alive, though just on the brink of death.

If I treat the child too well, the others will certainly compensate with further abuse thought Konan, once again seeing to Yuji's wounds. *But he's strong. He lasted that long against Hidan and Kakuzu, in his weakened condition. Were he to ever be freed and allowed to share intelligence he's gained from being our prisoner...our attacks...those fools used their best attacks on him for torture...He must not be allowed to live.*

Konan noticed something odd about Yuji, though, as she leaned forward to pick a spot to stab. His eyes were unfocused, but he wasn't reacting to any pain. As a test, she pricked his arm with a paper cone she fashioned from her sleeve. No reaction.

He is in a genjutsu-like trance...but that isn't possible...

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THE BATTLE

Yuji, Ryofu, Hisako, and a new recruit, Masahiro, aimed for the stronghold marked on the map by...well, whoever it was that supplied Yuji with intelligence. Yuji, of course, did not reveal his sources. Yuugao, Aoba, and Anko stayed back to provide cover from the rear. This place was right in the middle of Akatsuki activity, so it would be no surprise if they got jumped because they'd left the rear unguarded. Masahiro had been a last-minute addition. Yuji hadn't planned on bringing him into the fold just yet, but Masahiro had enough potential to be granted a little leeway.

There were forty or so Akatsuki members in here. But these weren't the S-ranked criminals. These were their grunts. Scum-ridden sympathizers that chose to support the Akatsuki. Usually, in a group like this there was maybe one potential recruit for the Akatsuki 'top ten'.

The plan for the KEKOBÉ group was simple- go in and kill the greatest threats; scatter the rest to the hills. These wanna-be recruits would not go running back to their village- most of them had been defected to the Akatsuki long enough to have been missed, and therefore had no home.

"Hisako, give them the test," Yuji said quietly after they had watched for a half hour. He wiped the sweat off his forehead. This close to Sunagakure it got really hot. He was ready to finish this and move on.

Hisako's 'test' would have felt good, come to think. The test was simply a voluminous water jutsu. If they could protect themselves from the water, then they were enough to be a threat. The rest would be left alive- if they were smart enough not to interfere.

This sort of wanton slaughter made Yuji a little sick every time he helped carry it out. But he knew their mission was worthwhile: the Akatsuki's top ten ranks hadn't been able to expand, and several of their key missions had been blocked. They couldn't pull off their mercenary missions without their underlings, for one thing.

Right after this, Yuji and the others had picked up a mission for two hundred Ryo- it was a B-ranked mission that would have ordinarily cost a village more than 100,000 Ryo. The Akatsuki had accepted the same mission for five hundred Ryo. Yuji's group undercut the Akatsuki in price, and then proved their worth by eliminating the competition. It was a two-pronged approach to keeping the Akatsuki organization small.

Hisako had made her way to the best distance for her jutsu. She took in angles, distances, size of the target, and shook her head. Too big, she was saying. Yuji nodded to Ryofu, who got up to join her.

"Water Style: Immense Water Saturation!" they said in tandem. Their jutsu caused a tidal wave fifty feet high to come crashing down on the building that was hiding their opponents.

As Yuji expected, the ranks thinned immediately. Out of the forty that had been there in the beginning, there were now only ten or so left. And of those ten, only three had the good sense (or ability) to use barrier ninjutsu to repel the water.

Yuji gave the word, and the group sprang forward. Ryofu and Masahiro led the pack, as they were the most physically powerful. Their taijutsu thinned most of the ranks in a few seconds.

Hisako came after them, covering their flanks with water jutsu. She had the largest chakra of the group, and she used it most effectively. This led to speculation that females had better chakra control than their male counterparts; given Lady Tsunade, Sakura, and Hisako, you couldn't discount the possibility.

As they had all suspected, the remaining few tried to surround the three KEKOBÉ agents. The idea was that, in Aoba's absence, Yuji would be the observer. He collected data as long as he could, transmitting it with a unique ninjutsu in code to a small collection node in his apartment.

Then he stepped in, picking out the strongest target, and beginning a fight. A distraction was all that was necessary for his group to break free and finish the remaining opponents.

Thirty had fled; seven had been killed; three captured alive. At first. Two managed to commit suicide by biting off their own tongues. The third tried that, but Ryofu stopped him by punching him hard in the mouth, knocking out teeth while shoving a rag in, keeping the man's teeth from clenching around the tongue.

"Nicely done," commented Yuji as the group flicked blood off their weapons, sword or otherwise. "Anyone hurt?"

Masahiro raised a timid hand. He was hunched over, holding his stomach. Yuji could see blood welling out from between Masahiro's fingers. He judged the wound to be deep and painful, but non-fatal. Hisako could handle that easily.

Not for the first time, Yuji warred with himself over asking a medic-nin to join the group. He would have loved to have Sakura in. Hisako vetoed that; no way was Yuji going to put her best friend in any ridiculous danger. Shizune was too tight with Lady Tsunade; most of the medics were, in fact. And since Lady Tsunade couldn't know about this group, that left Yuji at an impasse.

The energy in the air shifted suddenly. Yuji felt it like a wave, crashing down hard on him. He looked around; the other had felt it, too.

"I'll cover your escape with a barrier ninjutsu; get Masahiro out of here," Yuji ordered quickly. "Go to our next mission, and complete it without me if necessary. I'll catch up as soon as I-"

Yuji threw up a barrier just in time, as three small, white birds bounced off his barrier. They exploded, shaking the landscape violently.

"Go!" Yuji yelled again, bracing himself to fight. He threw up another barrier ninjutsu, again just in time. He saw Hisako looking back, worried, but Ryofu caught Yuji's eye and hustled her and Masahiro away.

Good, Yuji decided. Now he could focus on the battle. He started by casting a light blanket genjutsu, using it to detect his enemies. He caught one, straight ahead, closing slowly.

Even as he did that, Yuji saw another white bird coming toward him. With a curse, he rolled away. He rode the tail end of the explosion, smacking hard against a tree.

There are two! I can only find one, though! Where is the other. He'd have to be underground, or abo-

Yuji leapt for it again, this time dodging the blast entirely. As he rolled, he reaching into his waist pouch and extracted a handful of kunai. He threw them in the direction the explosions had come from.

He saw a silhouette move, and that was his cue. He made a single handsign, and his kunai split apart from the group, each moving in a different direction. A thin net of razor wire extended between them.

"Aggh!"

Yuji's net had caught something- or somebody, he hoped. Putting an end to these damned explosive birds wouldn't be so terrible. Yuji just had to see what he had caught in his net, and deal with it- kill it- quickly.

As Yuji moved to check his net, he heard the sound of more of those birds coming. He ran for it quickly, leaping aside just in time as three more birds detonated. The resulting explosion blew him into soft, white ground.

White?

Yuji leapt, but too slow this time. What looked like a half-dozen little white spiders exploded. Heat scorched Yuji's back as deadly bits of rock and pebble from the ground suddenly became shrapnel. He managed to stay on his feet and draw a weapon.

His movements had been slowed sufficiently, however, to allow a group of forty or so senbon hurled at him from somewhere to become effective. He managed to block most of them, dodged the majority of the rest, and caught only one in his left shoulder. Nowhere vital.

Then, suddenly, Yuji found himself unable to manipulate chakra. This wasn't good. He could feel his movements slowing down even more.

If I run, I'm done for. But maybe I can do some damage, at least. Best thing to do for poison is to sit still anyway; stop it from spreading quickly.

Yuji let his knees buckle under him, and he collapsed in a heap. He kept his eyes open, though, hoping to see an opening. He didn't have to wait long- the man who had been provided the explosives soon came into site, flying on an enormous white bird. The bird landed about twelve feet away, and it's rider got off. The rider was of average height, with long, blond hair that obscured his or her features. S/he walked toward Yuji, apparently assuming that Yuji was unconscious or dead.

"Got him, Sasori? HmMMM?"

In one motion, Yuji rolled forward, pulled the senbon out of his shoulder, and hurled it at his opponent. His surprised opponent dodged the senbon, but Yuji summoned his last reserves of strength and dove at his attacker, his right hand moving for the throat.

Then his strength left entirely, and he collapsed, his fingertips just brushing his attacker's neck.

"D-damn...it..."

Yuji could just sense on the periphery of his consciousness that another attacker had come from behind. The one who had thrown the senbon. He spoke just as Yuji faded:

"Close call for you, Deidara. I don't have the antidote for that poison on hand. Would have been a shame for you to get caught in our little ambush."

"Leaf pests, hmmm? Calling themselves 'Kekobe', and ruining my art."

"Fool. Your art is the least of anyone's worries, including your own if you don't get our prisoner back to the base quickly! I need to administer the antidote in time to keep him alive. A dead prisoner tells no tales. And he has plenty to tell us..."

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Kakashi and his summon, Pakkun, took the lead. Sakura and Hisako followed behind him, with Ryofu on one side and Anko on the other. Yuugao took up the rear. They were moving fast, nearly desperately fast. Each hour that ticked by lessened Yuji's chances of survival.

They had their target area picked out based on recent Akatsuki intelligence. Since the top nine of

operated in cells of two (as far as they knew, anyway), seeing flurries of Akatsuki activity was rare. If more than two people were mobilized, it either meant that the top members of the Akatsuki were meeting; that the swarm consisted of 'grunts' and dupes; or that the top members of the Akatsuki were heading out on a mission together. Either way, if they hadn't killed Yuji, then he would be at the center of this activity.

Surviving Itachi Uchiha put him on the map. To the Akatsuki, he is an enormous threat. But he is also an opportunity. I'm not concerned about Yuji talking...

Kakashi glanced at Sakura as he thought this. He gave her a reassuring smile. That seemed to buoy the young kunoichi, and the worry on her face melted, then solidified into a strong resolve.

I'm worried about what they'll do to him when he doesn't talk. He survived Itachi, yes, but with help. If Itachi got him alone, with no allies, there's no telling what state his mind will be in; never mind his physical well-being.

Up ahead, there were several waves of grunts on guard duty. The Leaf shinobi were on a sheer ledge, maybe six meters above their targets. Easy pickings.

Except if we announce ourselves, they can just use Yuji as a hostage. Or even just kill him. No, we need stealth...

"Yuugao, you're with me. Anko, you're in charge of this group until we get back. Yuugao and I are going to infiltrate the Akatsuki headquarters to do some reconnaissance. When you see the purple smoke bombs go off at the entrance, make your move and clear a path."

12 - The Rescue- Part 3

Yuugao and Kakashi dodged around the Akatsuki sentries to the best of their abilities. A couple times, assassination was necessary to conceal their presence. Neither one felt horribly bad about it, if they were honest with themselves. Yuugao was fond of Yuji as though he were a little brother; Kakashi had tangled with the Akatsuki too many times to feel sympathy if their numbers lessened.

They moved quickly through different points of cover, dodging behind trees or casting genjutsu until they found a set of stone steps leading down into a dark sort of cavern.

They moved in quickly, weapons out, but met no opposition.

"It looks like the only purpose of this base was holding prisoners..." Yuugao said. She realized that she was wrong when they passed a room that held a number of torture devices. Chains for restraining prisoners, chakra seals, spikes- all stained with blood. Yuugao found herself staring, imagining Yuji being chained up and tortured, his young body marred while his eyes stayed defiant- at least until he cracked psychologically, and-

Kakashi clapped Yuugao on the shoulder with his hand. His headband was raised, and his expression was grim.

"Keep moving. Don't imagine the worst. Yuji may be here, and may be alive. If anyone survived down here with his mind in tact, he did."

Yuugao nodded, muttering 'right' and decided Kakashi was correct.

That was vindicated after only a short run. There was only one cell occupied at the moment in this base. Laying in the darkest corner was Yuji- or what was left of him. He seemed to stir a bit when the little bit of light that trickled into the cell was eclipsed by Kakashi and Yuugao, but he made no move other than that.

"Cover me. I'm going to open the cell," Kakashi said, cutting the chakra wards with a kunai while readying a low-level Raikiri. He swiped at the bars of the cell. They fell to the floor surprisingly quietly. There was a buildup of dirt on the floor that cushioned the impact.

"Kakashi! Someone's coming!" Yuugao warned, her sword drawn and ready.

Kakashi gave Yuji a quick check-over. Some broken bones, heavy blood loss, a ton of scrapes, contusions, and bruises. But the worst was his eye. Kakashi honestly could not tell if there was still an eye beneath the bandages.

Bandages? That means someone has been taking care of him, at least enough to keep him alive. I'm not sure that was a kindness...

Kakashi hefted Yuji to his feet, but felt the boy go deadweight.

Yuugao is faster than I am. I'm more suited for combat, so...

Kakashi passed Yuji over to Yuugao, telling her to 'take him and get to the checkpoint! I'll deal with whoever is coming!'

Yuugao didn't need to be told twice. She hefted Yuji onto one shoulder, made a single handsign and disappeared into a swirl of leaves.

Kakashi turned to face his opposition. To his surprise, he was faced with a woman, unarmed.

"Who are you?" Kakashi demanded, crouching into a battle posture.

"..." The woman didn't reply right away. In fact, she turned and walked away. "I have duties elsewhere to perform. If the prisoner escaped...that is none of my business."

Kakashi didn't relax; instead, he spun around and struck with a Raikiri, gutting the luckless Akatsuki grunt who had tried to get the drop on him.

Damn, she got away. I could track her...No. They might need my help in getting Yuji out. He'll have intelligence- more than I could gather by chasing down that woman.

--

Yuugao laid Yuji in a dark corner near the exit of the tunnel, shielding him with her body as much as she could. One hand snapped into her waist pouch, producing the smoke bombs that would spell the end of this Akatsuki hideout.

She threw the smoke bombs to the ground. Puffs of purple smoke momentarily brought every Akatsuki member around on her location. She used a Paralysis Jutsu unique to ANBU on the first wave. By the time the second wave of black cloaks came, huge torrents of water rained down on them. The water pressure alone was enough to deal major damage.

Following in the wake of that water was Sakura, guarded by Anko and Hisako. Ryofu was fighting solo battles, keeping their backs free of enemies. Yuugao and Hisako took up defensive positions on either side of Yuji.

"Sakura! Please tend to Yuji's wounds as much as you can. He's stable, but not by much!" Yuugao informed her, deflected a wild shuriken attack.

"Sorry! One got through. Won't happen again," Ryofu called from ahead, slashing the offender in two.

Sakura got to work immediately, cutting off what was left of Yuji's shirt. She worked fast but not frantically. Yuji wasn't in danger of dying at the moment, but he would need serious medical care. For that, he needed to get off the field quickly. He was strong and young physically, so he would probably survive.

It was his mind Sakura was more worried about.

The brain isn't designed to process this much at once. Painful stimuli can overload the brain, which is the body's defense mechanism. But it can only do that so many times and remain intact. Shutting down the body completely to heal works, but it can't be done that often.

Sakura moved to touch Yuji again, but he didn't move. She panicked for a second, but noticed quickly that his vitals were stable. So why was he-! With a gasp, Sakura realized what had happened. Somehow, Yuji had used genjutsu to stay sane.

Chakra tags prevent chakra from flowing outside the body. Chakra has to keep circulating inside the body to keep the body alive. So it would follow that you could use genjutsu on yourself like this...at enormous risk.

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Ryofu met no one that was his equal. He was partially disappointed by that, but decided that he would have other chances for better combat. Right now, he didn't want Yuji to die. He wasn't Yuji's biggest fan, but he didn't have the intense dislike for Yuji that Yuji seemed to have for him. They had one philosophy in common that bound them when it came to teamwork: The mission came first. If the mission was a rescue mission, then the person being rescued would make it out alive, and that was that. In this case, that was Yuji, so Ryofu had the mindset that Yuji would live, no matter what.

He has every right to hate me, I suppose. I *did* kill someone close to him. But I don't regret it now anymore than I did then. The chunin exams are just business; there was nothing personal in what I did. Yuji knows that.

Ryofu sheathed his sword and began to practice his taijutsu. It was his weakest point, but against enemies like these it was more than enough. It was good practice...until the numbers began to grow ridiculous. Soon, it was a hundred on one. Simple if Ryofu drew his sword, but that would mean admitting his taijutsu wasn't good enough.

There's a medic here to heal me, if it comes to that.

Ryofu shrugged and kept battling empty-handed.

-

Anko soon joined Hisako and Yuugao in checking on Yuji. They had to get out of here, and fast. It looked like this was a trap for the Leaf shinobi. This many enemies at such a small base.

We planned for the eventuality that this was a trap. Why else would they keep Yuji alive for so long? But they have to know these foot soldiers won't do the job. There are more talented people coming. We can't fight while protecting Yuji from someone of Kisame or Itachi's level.

So Anko acted fast. "Sakura, Yuugao, Hisako- take Yuji and get out of here! Ryofu, you and me are going to buddy up until Kakashi catches up!"

"Already here," Kakashi said grimly. His headband was raised, revealing his Sharingan. "And agreed, Anko. Get Yuji to safety."

Yuugao took charge and the three kunoichi took off, Yuji suspended on a bed of water by Hisako's abilities. As they ran, Hisako formed a second platform of water so Sakura could float next to Yuji and heal him.

"How the hell did he survive?" Hisako murmured, half to herself. And yet, it didn't surprise her. Yuji, annoying creature though he was, was a stable part of Hisako's life. It shook her more than she cared to admit that him being captured and presumed dead bothered her. Not because Yuji was Yuji; but because he was simply someone she could count on.

I guess he can be endearing in his own way.

Sakura answered on reflex as she worked. "Genjutsu. He put himself in a trance while they tortured him, I'm guessing."

Yuugao looked back sharply. "How could he do that? Pain breaks genjutsu..."

"Ordinarily, yes. But he has somehow engineered this genjutsu to ignore pain and outer chakra stimuli, making it impossible to break from outside."

As she said this, Sakura was leaning close to Yuji to heal a wound on his neck. She noticed a peculiar mark on his tongue as she did. Gently, she opened her mouth and examined the mark and the surrounding area closer.

"It looks like he was prevented from committing suicide, too," Sakura noted, trying to keep her voice cool and professional. Inside, she was disturbed by this.

To have no way out of such awful capture and torture...it would be maddening. No exit; no way to end the suffering...

Unless you stuck yourself in an endless genjutsu.

"Bite marks on his tongue, but not deep enough to bite it off. He clearly tried, though," Sakura added, noting the marks on his tongue. "That must be the reason behind inventing this genjutsu."

Yuugao kept her eyes on the path ahead, but called back: "Then how do we wake him up?"

Sakura shook her head, her bangs heavy with sweat and sticking to her face. "We don't. For all intents and purposes, Yuji is in a coma. And only he can decide when he'll come out of it."

Yuugao was about to reply, but held up her hand mid-sentence, indicating that the group needed to stop. Her raised hand went to the sword on her back, drawing it smoothly and holding it in a guard.

"We aren't alone."

13 - The Rescue- Part 4

Yuugao drew her sword while Hisako made a protective water shell around Sakura and Yuji. She had developed her skills such that she didn't need to maintain contact, and she could even create small, porous openings to allow air in without compromising the integrity of the water shell.

Hisako glanced at Yuji out of the corner of her eye. To her admittedly worried eyes, the boy seemed near death. She bit her lip, wondering if she dared to entrust the one duty she'd always sworn to perform to another.

Sakura is so focused on healing Yuji she might not even see an attack coming...But if we don't get moving, Yuji will be...

Hisako felt a hand on her shoulder. It was Yuugao, and she was gently pushing Hisako back toward Yuji and Sakura.

"Keep them moving, okay? I'll hold this one off."

Yuugao's offer was what Hisako had hesitated on. Sakura's life, not to mention the life of her teammate, was her responsibility in her mind.

"I know you're worried for her, so stay with her," Yuugao told Hisako, as if reading her mind.

"But you're just as worried for Yuji!" protested Hisako. "Why should I-"

Yuugao turned her head and smiled. "Because I've already lost someone to shinobi battles. I don't want to lose anyone else, and if I can spare anyone else my pain, I will."

Hisako thought that over in a split-second. Made sense, she decided. It was time to go- now.

"Sakura, what's the nearest Leaf-friendly outpost town?" Hisako called to her friend. The pink-haired kunoichi responded absently, still stabilizing Yuji.

"Shinzawa town. Two miles east."

Hisako leapt over to her friend, casting a body-flicker jutsu as she reached them. Her chakra control was such that she could 'flicker' them over a mile at a time. It would save a lot of time this way, but it would also exhaust her chakra.

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Yuugao handily defeated her pursuer. It was some grunt-level threats, around ten of them. She dispatched them- unkindly, seeing what had been done to Yuji- and moved on, heading to Shinzawa town. She would only be about ten minutes behind the others, at most. Kakashi had radioed, saying that he and the rest would be following shortly, and to proceed to the outpost town.

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Yuugao reached town quickly enough. As she did, she heard a blood-curdling scream. Every bit of her being was shaken by the sound. She'd heard the sounds of torture before, and that was what was happening. Worse yet, she recognized the voice.

It was that kunoichi of Kakashi's. Sakura! Oh no!

Yuugao followed Sakura's chakra (and scream) to a small hotel room that had been stocked with medical supplies. The site that greeted Yuugao was beyond horrifying, however.

The walls were covered with blood, floor to ceiling. Splatters that could have only been caused by a violent, tearing wound had left splotches, then dripped down in a spider web pattern. The medical supplies were covered in blood and knocked over, bandages littering the floor.

Hisako lay against one wall, unconscious and with blood dripping from her mouth. Her clothes had been torn in the torso area. It looked like a powerful fist had slammed her in the stomach mercilessly at least five times. Her arms were suspended over her head by a kunai thrust through her hands.

I wasn't ten minutes behind them! And this...

Sakura was sobbing in the center of the room. Deep, wrenching, guttural cries that came from her soul emitted from her as she rocked in the fetal position. She didn't have a scratch on her, though she was covered in blood.

At the center of all this lay Yuji, still unconscious.

Yuugao immediately radioed Kakashi, alerting him to the attack and telling him to bring medics from the outpost town's hospital. Yuugao didn't dare leave the others alone. Whoever did this might come to finish them off.

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Kakashi and Yuugao watched the three shinobi being carted away, unconscious. Sakura had been sedated, as her words had been too hysterical to make any sense of. Whatever had happened had happened in her head. It would take the Leaf's best to get in around Yuji's seal to see what had happened.

Without speaking, the two jonin began their survey of the room. Any clue, anything lead- anything!

"A professional assassin? No...not assassin. He was efficient, but not a murder..." Kakashi murmured after they had been all over the small room.

"Terrorist, then?" Yuugao offered. "He seemed to just want to cause pain and fear, rather than casualties."

Kakashi grimly looked at where Sakura had been found, screaming her throat raw. "...We can't discount it. But I feel like there was a message in all this. A pattern...I just can't tell what..."

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Another month passed before anything significant happened.
Yuji was awake.

He resumed his duties without fanfare. Kekobe continued to function secretly, with Yuji back in charge. It seemed as though this incident had slowed him down. His eye was still healing, so he was only half as effective as usual. Still, he did a lot. But no matter what, without fail, each night he was at Sakura and Hisako's bedsides.

"It's my fault. If I hadn't been in that genjutsu..." he said, again and again, lamenting his inability to protect his friends. Each time he said this, the attending nurse would always reassure Yuji that he wasn't at fault. He would nod and then leave.

Sakura was still being kept unconscious by drugs and ninjutsu. Each time they had woken her up, she had simply resumed screaming and begging some invisible person for mercy.

Hisako was also still unconscious. Her body was mending. Whatever had hit her had been blunt, fist-shaped, and meant to cause internal damage- at least at first. That same fist had been using 'cutting' punches- punches in which the knuckles were snapped downward at the point of impact, with intent to cause bleeding.

Ryofu was the other major visitor these two had. And something about this scene bothered him. Kakashi and Yuugao had shared their findings with him, and he also felt there was a clue in the way this was done.

Damn, it's right there. I just need one more clue. Then the bastard that did this is dead.

--

Hisako was just waking up when Ryofu was standing over her. She tried to speak, but only made a gurgling sound. A tube had been shoved down her throat to help her lungs remember how to expand properly. Her sputtering, however, garnered Ryofu's attention.

Damn it, I'm going to pass out again! I need to...!

"Ch...chu..." she said, looking at Ryofu, willing him to understand. Ryofu, for his part, looked at her patiently.

"Chu...ni...n. Chuni..."

Hisako got out that much before she fell unconscious again. But that had been enough. Ryofu had another clue now.

She said 'chunin'. She has to mean the exams we took together. No chunin could do this to her. And no chunin could break Yuji's seal on Sakura. This has to mean our exam. But who could have done this that was involved in our exam? It was so small, and I pretty much killed

everyone...

Ryofu would continue to tackle this problem for a long while. Over the next month, he spoke to all the students that had survived the exams with them, four years ago, as well as all the Leaf proctors.

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Yuji and the others burst through the gates to the Hidden Leaf Village. They were all blood-soaked and injured.

"How...the hell...did they know...about our attack?!" Ryofu snarled, hands on his knees as he alternated between sucking wind and spitting up blood. "That's...the third...time!"

Even as he said this, Ryofu surveyed Yuji. Since his capture, Yuji had been uncharacteristically careful. It used to be that Yuji took all the hits. But lately, he'd been at the rear of their attack postures, mostly defending himself. Ryofu chalked that up to the effect that torture would have on a man. But now, two months later, Yuji hadn't recovered.

It must take time...but this doesn't seem right for Yuji.

"Yuugao! I can't believe they captured her!" Masahiro howled, slamming his weapons to the ground in frustration! "Damn it! If they hadn't swarmed us..."

Yuji looked at the Hokage Mansion, as if thinking about something deep.

No. Pretending to think about something deep. I don't know why, but I suddenly don't think Yuji is in his right mind. Maybe he needs to be back in the hospital, at least for a little while.

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Ryofu was drinking later that night, thinking again about what 'chunin' could mean. He thought about his own chunin exams again. The fight that he and Yuji had; a fight that was still talked about to this day. Two boys of their age going all-out. The fight ending with a simultaneous kick and punch.

Punch.

Ryofu stood up immediately, his glass hitting the ground as he ran for it. Suddenly, it all made sense.

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PRESENT DAY; AKATSUKI HEADQUARTERS IN AMEGAKURE

Konan stood over her prisoner, staring down at him. There was no expression on her face to speak of. She just seemed to be patiently waiting for him to wake up.

It had been a bad few months for the boy, having his body destroyed, healed, then destroyed again. And worse, having his 'Infinite Genjutsu' protection countered by Itachi Uchiha left him helpless to defend himself.

Yuji was laying in a bed now, resting.

Konan smoothed the boy's hair, finding it matted with sweat. It seemed that even when his body slept peacefully, his mind was tortured. The gauze patch over his left eye was fresh, however, and Yuji was no longer suffering from hunger or thirst. He had regained his strength under Konan's care.

Konan lifted the blanket over Yuji, noting that the boy's chest wounds had healed, albeit with scars. The chest had taken the longest to heal of all his wounds. Konan had looked his body over as she stripped and washed him while he was unconscious, clothing him in a pair of black pants, not offering a shirt or shoes.

Yuji finally woke up. He sat up slowly, looking straight ahead. As usual, he thanked Konan for her care, politely bowing to her.

Konan regarded him with silence and a stony stare.

"You've taken good care of me. But I can't understand why..." Yuji said yet again, hoping to get some of the elusive answers he craved. He did not actually expect answers from Konan, but she was his most likely lead.

At that moment, however, Konan opened the door, nodding to someone Yuji couldn't see. Yuji braced himself, preparing to be tortured again. It wouldn't be unlike the Akatsuki to give him a brief respite and allow him to heal, then cruelly take all that away and torture him again.

Instead, a battered Yuugao was shoved into the room, thrown to Yuji's feet. Yuji dove down to catch her, just stopping her head from hitting the floor. She appeared to be unconscious, but with no further harm.

Konan offered no explanation of how Yuugao had been captured; just this:

"The girl's body is unmarred. If you wish it to stay that way, you will cooperate. She will not be shown the mercy we have shown you."

With that, Konan swept out of the room.

14 - Deeper Truth- Part 1

Yuugao woke up, immediately clapping her hand to her head in pain. A groan escaped her lips before her consciousness could kick in completely. She immediately suppressed the moan and took in her surroundings. She didn't get far before seeing a familiar face.

"Yuugao! Thank God!"

Yuji was kneeling next to her, a washcloth in his hand. Yuugao felt a cool wetness on her forehead. Her befuddled brain put two and two together. But this gave rise to a more dire question:

"Yuji?! If you're here..."

Yuji's face fell. " 'If I'm here'? Yuugao, do you feel alright? I was taken prisoner five months ago!"

At this Yuugao sat up the rest of the way, ignoring the pain in her head. "What?! No! Then...then who's the..."

Yuugao grabbed Yuji's shoulders, holding him still and herself upright.

"Yuji, we rescued you! Two months ago! We've been on missions together since!"

Yuji's eyes widened as he realized the implications of what Yuugao was telling him.

"Yuugao, how did I behave? Was I myself? Did I do anything out of the ordinary?!"

Yuugao forced herself to her feet. Yuji got up with her, keeping a bracing arm across her shoulders. She took a few breaths before answering.

"I didn't notice anything right away. But Ryofu mentioned you were acting weird. We...you know... we started failing missions. Not all the time, but just often enough. Hisako and Sakura were attacked while they carried you...that is, 'you', back to the village, and- Wait!"

Yuugao leapt back, arms up in a guard. "Prove to me you're Yuji!"

Yuji thought hard, but came up with nothing. "If this guy has all my memories and all my mannerisms as I suspect he does, then there's nothing I can say that can convince you."

"No...but actions speak louder than words. Let me think..."

Yuji waited patiently for Yuugao to continue. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to look at Yuji's tattered body. Scars that ran the length of his torso decorated his one-smooth skin; six months of poor nutrition caused him to lose weight, making him look gaunt and unhealthy. It was obvious that he'd tried to keep in shape, as his musculature was about the same.

The other Yuji...think! What made him different? He gave up on missions...didn't fight as fiercely due to his injuries...damn! If we could just use our chakra somehow. All the ANBU techniques in the world won't counter chakra wards empty-handed. Even then, there's no way to tell which

one is real.

“Yuugao...When you were captured...how did ‘I’ react?”

Yuugao’s answer was sharp and short. “I was unconscious! How do I know what you did?!”

Yuji nodded, again deep in thought. “How, indeed. You should know, and there’s a very simple reason you should know: In all the battles we’ve fought, have I EVER, under any circumstances, let one of you get captured? Or, think of this: When I got captured, I sent everyone else away so I would be the only one at risk. This...imposter, for want of a better word- did not do that. If my injuries were too severe, I would have stayed off the battle field. I would NOT have put all of you at risk by being a liability myself. Especially not you. ...”

Yuji blushed, and that was it. Yuugao was convinced. The other Yuji had let people get hurt on his watch. Missions had been failed, and failed in a dangerous way. Lives had been at risk- nearly lost- each time. Yuji’s whole strategy had changed. Now that she had talked to him about it, it made sense.

“We need to escape once you’re well,” Yuji said, guiding Yuugao toward the bed. “Your injuries aren’t severe so far as I can tell, but I can tell you aren’t as well as you’re trying to convince me.”

“How can you tell that?”

Yuji replied with an offhand “Remember? I’m empathic to a small degree. I don’t need to be able to project chakra to read emotions. What a useless ability to have. I can’t even read a person unless I know them well, or I’ve put them in a genjutsu. Now, you should rest...”

Yuugao laid down in the room’s only bed, and Yuji tucked her in, replacing the cool washcloth.

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Yuji been planning an escape for the past couple months. He explained to Yuugao his plan, what he knew about Akatsuki defenses, and which way they should head. After only three days, Yuugao was good to get moving. Her injuries had been minor, as her capture had come by simply being hit by a wave of goons, and one got lucky enough to hit her square between the shoulder blades, dropping her.

“I couldn’t make a move any sooner because of my injuries. As it is, I’m not even close to completely healed...”

Yuugao noticed Yuji run a hand over his injured eye as he said this. That was another thing about ‘this’ Yuji- he made no mention of his injuries, but subtly he would check to make sure he was alright and healing. That was definitely a genuine ‘Yuji’ trait. Under no circumstances would he let someone else worry for him. Not intentionally, anyway.

“Anyway, if you’re ready, today is our best bet. If Konan keeps to her schedule, she’ll be with this ‘leader’ of hers, and a grunt will be coming to give us nourishment (or what they call ‘nourishment’, anyway).”

Yuugao checked her sandal heel again, knowing that the hidden razor blade was missing. The Akatsuki weren't stupid. KEKOBÉ had seen early success because the Akatsuki wasn't prepared for their assaults. From now on, they wouldn't drop their guard anymore. And worse yet, who knew what intelligence the 'fake Yuji' would give them? Gritting her teeth, Yuugao tightened her sandal straps and stood up.

Yuji, meanwhile, opened his mouth and tapped precisely on two back teeth. The caps flipped off his hollowed-out teeth, and he produced a small smoke pellet and a short, thin coil of razor wire.

Yuji looked at Yuugao and smirked. "Heh. Well, we've faced worse odds at some point, right?"

Yuugao appreciated the levity. Looking at Yuji, she could feel that he was as worried as she was, but his duties as the Third Hokage's student and the leader of KEKOBÉ demanded that he stay 'in charge'. It made Yuugao chuckle, and not for the first time she wondered what Hayate would say. Surprising herself, Yuugao held Yuji's chin and kissed him firmly on the lips.

"For luck, Yuji. We'll need it to make this work."

The reddening leader of KEKOBÉ managed to nod, but he couldn't hide the smile from his face.

Even if it was only for a week, studying with Master Jiraiya had it's side-effects. I was half-hoping for the 'hero's kiss', as he called it.

Then, there was no more time for banter. The lock on the other side of the door was being moved...

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THE LEAF: PRESENT DAY

Yuji stood in the darkened hospital room, standing over Hisako and Sakura's beds. The two girls had been put together at Hisako's insistence. An IV kept Sakura alive, while Hisako was at the end of her breathing treatments, and her lungs were just about ready to work normally again. But at night, the pain still kept Hisako awake, and so she was sedated with an IV drip.

Yuji finished contemplating the two girls and reached into the pocket of his long, black coat. He fished out a syringe filled with a clear liquid. Reaching out for the Sakura's IV first, he held it steady with his left hand, while with his right the syringe moved to penetrate the IV bag...

Suddenly, light flooded the room from a door thrown open. Yuji appeared to be bathed in half-light, half-shadow. But no matter what the lighting was, Yuji had been caught in the act.

Ryofu, Tsunade, and four ANBU black ops agents entered the room, surrounding Yuji.

"You want to tell me what you're doing with that?" growled Tsunade. **To think, if I'd been one second later! I always knew Ryofu had it in him to be a Leaf shinobi of the highest degree. Good thing he noticed Yuji acting strange and tipped me off.**

A shuriken shot across the room and destroyed the syringe in Yuji's hand. He didn't seem fazed in the least. In fact, he smiled.

“Oh dear. Seems I’ve been caught.”

The ANBU agents moved in, weapons at the ready.

“Hands behind your head. Any false moves and we kill you, traitor!”

Yuji ignored them and kept moving- toward Tsunade.

“It seems by being caught I’ve gotten a much more valuable target for the Akatsuki. The ‘Legendary Loser’ herself-”

Yuji lunged, but found his path blocked by Ryofu’s enormous sword. It slammed down just in front of Tsunade, forcing Yuji to back up. The ANBU agents took that opportunity to move in. All four moved as one, aiming to grab Yuji. At nearly the same instant, all four hit the floor, unconscious.

Yuji spoke again, his hand on Ryofu’s sword. “Goodness, that was dangerous. If you aren’t careful with a sword this big, people will get hurt.”

Yuji as holding the back section of the sword. He flexed his wrist, and Ryofu felt the sword ripped from his grasp.

No...not ‘ripped’- destroyed!

It was true- Yuji had simply snapped his hand closed tightly and the sword shattered.

“Use your eyes, demon,” Yuji whispered to Ryofu. “Or your loved ones might get hurt.”

With a start, Ryofu shot a glance toward the girls. Another Yuji was standing over them, two empty syringes in his hand. Sakura and Hisako both started to breathe deeply, fighting some obstruction in their airway. Sakura was awake and trying to scream, whooping gasps coming from her very soul.

“Bastard!” Ryofu shouted, swiping at Yuji, but hitting only air. Yuji had leapt backward onto the windowsill, standing in front of the moonlight.

“I have no doubt the ‘Slug Princess’ could save them...but then you’ll fight alone and with no weapon, Ryofu. Are you willing to lay your life down for this village...outsider?”

Ryofu’s answer came in the form of a tackle. He didn’t know where the power came from, but he caught Yuji around the waist and threw them both down five stories to the street below. Ryofu got up first, some battle instinct kicking in. He leapt back, just avoiding spikes of fire shooting up from the ground. He raised a hand, and his sword’s hilt came flying to him from the hospital room. Water began to form a blade-

But Yuji came flying in, closing the distance between them. Ryofu threw his sword at Yuji. Yuji dodged it and caught Ryofu with a hard punch. The spikes of fire from before were still burning. Yuji reached over and grabbed one, holding it like a sword. He stabbed down at Ryofu, who rolled aside, catching only the tip of the blade in the shoulder.

Yuji was already behind him, slashing Ryofu in the back. A Water Wall sprung up, extinguishing the sword.

"You've lasted a long while, Ryofu. Longer than I thought," Yuji commented, his backhanded compliment making Ryofu even more angry. "I didn't think you had it in you to face me. But I suppose it's also foolish of me to think that I could beat you after holding my real power in check for so long; masquerading as one of you fools."

The water wall died, and Ryofu again got distance between them.

"Why did you betray the Leaf?!" Ryofu demanded to buy time.

Yuji stood still, choosing his words carefully. "Well, if I had to pick why, I guess...being passed over as a Hokage candidate after the current one dies. Or maybe it was seeing my first love killed by someone who I've been forced to team with for the past few years. Or maybe it was just all the weakness around me. Anyone with strength has left this place- why shouldn't I? Superior shinobi like Orochimaru and Itachi Uchiha left this place as soon as they could."

"Superior?! The one who killed your master is 'superior'?" Ryofu sputtered in disbelief. "The Third Hokage was-"

"Weak," interrupted Yuji. "If someone falls in combat, then that's all they were worth to begin with. Orochimaru was the better man. Retaining feelings for the old fool...that's what will get you killed."

Ryofu threw his hand in the air, his Blood Manipulation Jutsu charged and ready to go. But Yuji didn't explode. He didn't move, or even seem panicked. Ryofu was shaking with the effort, expending chakra at a high rate.

"You won't beat me like that. This is why I keep saying you're all wea-"

Ryofu's sword shot through Yuji's back, guided by a single hand movement of Ryofu's.

"What will get you killed," Ryofu told Yuji calmly as his sword passed clear through Yuji. Ryofu held his sword above his head. The pieces that Yuji had broken came flying back to the sword as it rebuilt itself. "Is being an idiot. You weren't an idiot before, whatever else you were."

Blood ran down Yuji's chin from his mouth as he stood, apparently in shock from the sword that had just shot through vital organs. He coughed, and blood splattered to the ground. But his throat was clear enough to talk:

"Then...what was I, Ryofu? How did you see me?"

"Annoying. Strong. A capable leader. A dependable teammate. And a jerk. Not necessarily in that order."

His sword had finished reforming, and Ryofu was poised to deliver a finishing strike. Yuji fell to his knees, doubled over in pain.

“You forgot one, Ryofu,” he choked out, blood now cascading from his mouth. Ryofu rushed in, his sword at the ready.

“What’s that?!”

The Yuji in front of Ryofu disappeared. Over Ryofu’s shoulder, Yuji’s face appeared as he had taken Ryofu’s back again.

Yuji’s hand sliced across Ryofu’s back with the effect of a sword. Blood spurted out as Ryofu crashed and burned, lying face-down.

“You forgot to mention that I’m also adept at Genjutsu.”

Yuji’s hand plunged down, but he found it blocked by another hand. He spun and struck, but his attacker leapt backward, Ryofu in her arms. Facing his attacker, Yuji smiled and wagged his finger.

“Tut tut, Princess. That temper of yours will get you killed.”

Tsunade glared back, but she couldn’t think of a retort. He might have a point, she conceded.

I can’t believe this is Yuji! He’s a lot of things, but not a traitor! He didn’t have this level of strength. Yuji would never pretend to be weak. Something isn’t right.

Tsunade kept her eyes on Yuji. He waited, apparently for her to make a move, unconcerned about her having called for back-up.

No. This can’t be Yuji. I hope my back-up arrives shortly. I need to heal Ryofu.

15 - Deeper Truth- Part 2

AMEGAKURE: PRESENT DAY

The guard who came in to feed Yuji and Yuugao opened the door carelessly, not concerned about two chakra-less shinobi. Balancing a tray of food, he swung inside.

"Hey! Time to eat- oh!"

Yuugao was lying on the bed, her lower half covered by the bed covers; her upper half exposed- and bare! Her purple hair was fanned down over one shoulder, leaving her other shoulder and most of her back exposed. Even that little bit of exposed skin was enough to distract the guard.

Yuji shut the door silently, creeping up from behind his target. The small 'click' the door made caused the target to turn. He saw Yuji and immediately made a move to call for back-up. Yuugao rolled over and threw the razor wire Yuji had concealed around the man's neck, intending just to choke out their enemy, but instead cutting his head clean off.

Standing up, Yuugao faced away from Yuji and put her top back on. The tank top she wore under her (confiscated) ANBU armor fit snugly, but at least she was covered up again.

"You were right," Yuji told her, looking at the guard they had just killed. "We did need that...what did you call it? Kunoichi distraction technique number twelve?"

Yuugao nodded absently. "Yeah, I thought he might be a bit much to handle for a straight-up ambush. For the record, I think you're nuts, carrying something this sharp and dangerous in your mouth all the time."

Yuji shrugged, dragging the body onto the bed and throwing the covers over it. He took a moment to bow and pray before answering.

"It helped, right? But this'll help more. Here."

Yuji tossed Yuugao a kunai holster after removing one for himself. While Yuugao fastened that to her leg, Yuji dug through the dead man's pouches. He found scrolls, some money, and thankfully a spare cloak with a hood. This he gave to Yuugao, then bowed again to the dead man before removing the cloak the man was wearing. They suited up in silence, quickly and efficiently. At the end, if they kept their heads down and weapons concealed, they could move around freely.

"Having our chakra suppressed might help us," Yuugao said thoughtfully. "Then they can't track us by our chakra."

Yuji managed a grim smile. "Yeah. Good thing both ANBU and KEKOBÉ agents are trained in espionage. Not to mention KEKOBÉ's training without using chakra."

Yuugao had thought that was a pain at first, until Yuji explained the application. He'd created a new combat art based on old forms of martial arts, none of which used chakra offensively or defensively; rather, it was just a life force. You could tell who took this training seriously- the girls were toned and the guys were muscular. Now that old-fashioned training might be their salvation, Yuugao thought/hoped.

Yuugao was in better shape than Yuji was, so she took the lead, making sure to keep her head bowed. Yuji followed suit, his head tilted to one side to hide his covered eye. They moved as quickly as they dared, meeting no resistance. They had been seven stories up, which would have been a one-second ordeal with chakra. Without it, they had to descend staircase after staircase. Yuji, for all his training, was still saddled with injuries that forced him to rest every few flights. At one of these rests, he turned to Yuugao and gave her instructions.

"If things go wrong, you've got to get out of here. One of us has to make it back with the intelligence I've collected. You've got the better chance. So if you get the opportunity, take it. I'm not much good to you like this..."

Yuugao found herself furious with Yuji. "Damn you men! Always trying to be the hero! If you didn't, Hayate would still be here!"

Yuji said nothing more, knowing that Yuugao was just frustrated. Besides, girls were heroes, too. He need only think of Chiyoko to know that.

I've lost somebody, too, Yuugao. It's only for everyone's safety that I would even think of putting you through that. And if I do, I'll escort myself to hell for betraying your trust.

Yuugao looked around the corner. The coast was clear. Time for the last sprint down the stairs. "Let's go."

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PRESENT DAY: HIDDEN LEAF

Yuji was surrounded yet again. The injured and dying lay all around him. Tsunade was across the battlefield from him, crouching over Ryofu. Tsunade was panting heavily, having been pushed hard by Yuji. Shizune was just out of Tsunade's reach, and she was near death.

He doesn't fight like Yuji does. Too aggressive...and far too calculating. Yuji is good, but he never lays traps this elaborate. The more elaborate the trap, the bigger the risk that you, the caster, will get caught in it. Yuji is taking massive risks.

Tsunade had to admit they were paying off. She was tiring, and there seemed to be no end in site to Yuji's chakra. That by itself bothered Tsunade. That wasn't normal for Yuji. He had a good amount of chakra, but he had already exceeded his normal limit several times over.

Yuji's movement had changed. This Yuji seemed to just 'appear' in front of you. Yuji was fast and accurate, but not like that.

As if that had made him move, Yuji suddenly appeared in front of Tsunade, his hand slashing through the air, glowing with blue chakra. Tsunade leapt backwards, Ryofu still in her arms. A cut appeared on her forehead.

Chakra Scalpel? Damn it, he's really pushing me! But I've seen him do this before; just not with this much skill. What is going on?

Four more ANBU agents made their move, with three of them running forward, swords drawn, while a fourth tried to cast a Paralysis Jutsu. Tsunade watched, cursing herself for not stepping in, but looking for an opening in Yuji's fighting style. Anything to stop him.

Yuji ignored the swords and leapt straight for the Jutsu caster, eliminating him by breaking his neck. He then threw the body into the path of the others, drawing the sword off the dead man's back and plunging it into the agents in rapid-fire succession.

Tsunade shook her head in frustration, not seeing an opening of any kind. She needed powerful back-up, and fast.

"HEYYYYYYY! GRANNYYYYYYY!"

Naruto was running up, waving and shouting at the top of his voice. Tsunade felt relief first, then exasperation.

"You idiot! Sneak up and attack! Don't scream!"

Naruto stopped running, his hand falling to his side. "Huh? Why would I attack, Grandma Tsunade?"

Yuji walked toward Naruto, his arms spread wide. "Why, indeed? Because, Naruto, the Princess has decided that I'm evil. And evil has to be destroyed, right?"

Naruto backed up, his hand reaching for a kunai. Yuji continued to advance, not in any particular hurry. Two ANBU agents leapt from either side. Yuji stepped back, avoiding the swords, disarmed the two agents, and threw them to opposite sides of the street.

Naruto watched in horror as Yuji continued to advance, completely unscathed. Only now did he notice the heap of bodies around Yuji, not to mention Tsunade and Ryofu's battered states. Naruto's eyes felt betrayed by the scene.

No way...Old Man Third's student...how did this happen? If Grandma was powerless...what can I do?

A small voice shouting loud echoed throughout the silent streets!

"That's enough! You've done enough damage! Take this!"

Konohamaru was running toward Yuji, a clone matching pace with him. Yuji turned slightly, just enough to watch him coming.

“RASENGAN!”

Konohamaru threw his most powerful attack at Yuji. Naruto shielded his eyes and face while watching as best he could.

Yuji was holding Konohamaru up his wrist, the Rasengan spinning harmlessly in the air. It finally died out as Konohamaru struggled to strike Yuji.

“I’ll never let you hurt the Leaf! You traitor! I’ll die first!”

Yuji stared at the struggling boy, contemplating him.

“You’re right. You will die first.”

Yuji’s right hand aimed for Konohamaru’s throat. Tsunade tried to move, knowing she’d never make it in time.

CLANG!

Naruto had dove in the way, just in time! His headband was knocked off as he ducked Yuji’s strike, Konohamaru safe in Shadow Clone’s arms.

Yuji held his pose, looking at where Konohamaru had been. Slowly, he turned to look at Naruto.

“So, you must be deluded. Thinking you can protect everyone.”

“I WILL protect everyone! That’s my Ninja Way!” Shouted Naruto. “I don’t know what’s happened to you, but-”

Yuji threw kunai and shuriken at Tsunade. Naruto leapt in the way, knocking all the projectiles down with his own kunai.

Yuji cocked his head. “You mean what you say, don’t you. ‘I’ll protect everyone’. Did you know that you can put your whole heart into something, but you can still fail? I’ll bet that’s never occurred to you.”

Naruto stood his ground, refusing to respond. Yuji continued, picking up the dead body of an ANBU agent.

“It works like this, you see. You take someone like me, who gave everything in his efforts to help this village. And then, do you know what happens to me?”

Yuji threw the ANBU agent aside. A Naruto Shadow Clone ran to catch the body.

“You get discarded. Removed from consideration as Hokage, twice. One time as the Fifth; another to be considered as the Sixth. And for who? A child who has decided to make the world bend to his whims?”

Yuji continued his monologue, though he stopped moving. He seemed to be content with telling his story. Tsunade perked up; there was a clue here. She couldn’t quite grasp it yet. If he would just keep talking.

“And then there is my team. The girl I loved was killed before my eyes, and I couldn’t protect her. My heart wasn’t enough. And then, I’m teamed with the heartless monster who killed her to begin with.”

Yuji’s voice turned even nastier now. His words were coated in venom, even as he spoke calmly. “My little ‘secret’ organization has been a failure, despite my efforts. Though maybe that’s unfair- I wouldn’t have gained this power had I not been constantly fighting the Akatsuki. They are the future, Naruto. I’ve chosen to be part of the future. You should, too. Your sacrifice would save so many. Just think- you would even be saving me. All my mistakes...KEKOBÉ, Chiyoko, and even that foolish old man, the Third Hokage. All this time I’ve wasted, serving a ‘greater good’- Konoha. But really, there’s no point in saving a piddling little village. Not when the whole world could be saved! You could-”

Naruto’s fist hit Yuji’s cheek before Yuji could move. The force of the blow sent Yuji tumbling end over end, for almost one hundred yards.

When he managed to raise his head, he saw something barely human charging at him. It was Naruto basically, but the demon fox had started to take over. Two tails had sprouted fully, and a third was already half-grown.

Yuji still didn’t seem worried. He rolled to his feet, moving his neck in a small circle as if he had only slept on it wrong, not been smashed in the face with the force of three kages worth of chakra.

“I wondered if you’d show up,” Yuji said, flexing his right hand now. “Three tails? You should have brought out more.”

A high-speed battle began. The others could barely follow it. Yuji would hit Naruto, then just barely dodge away. Naruto would punch first; Yuji would lean back. Naruto would kick; Yuji would move to the side. Naruto spun and struck with his tails; Yuji jumped over them and smashed his foot down onto Naruto’s head. As soon as Naruto was down, Yuji was on him, stomping him and kicking him. He cocked his fist back to throw a shot into Naruto’s face, but a tail caught his punch, and Naruto threw Yuji hard into an adjacent building.

Amazing! He has so much control at three tails! Jiraiya’s training must have paid off! Tsunade thought in astonishment. But Yuji shouldn’t be able to keep up; no one short of Orochimaru should be able to. But he’s not only keeping up- he’s winning!

That assessment proved to be true. Naruto was landing hits, but Yuji was giving more than he was getting. His speed and strength had been more than tripled, and apparently something had been done to him to allow him to counter the toxic effect of the demon fox’s chakra. He had grabbed and hit Naruto several times, striking him right through the chakra veil covering him, apparently suffering no ill effects when he did.

Even in his demon fox state, Naruto seemed to realize what was happening. He whipped his tails at Yuji to drive him back, then leapt up to the top of a building to think. He sat on his haunches, staring down at Yuji. Yuji stared back up at him. An ANBU agent darted in, trying to put a sword through Yuji. Yuji spun across the man, until they were back to back. Yuji’s elbow struck the agent in the back. Then all the holes appeared- Yuji had stabbed the agent three times while spinning off him.

Naruto just managed to roll aside as Yuji flung the kunai at him. It grazed Naruto's cheek, leaving a small gash dribbling blood on the side of his face.

More...power. More...more...power!

Naruto found himself face to face with the demon fox. This time, there was no hesitation on his part as he pulled the seal off the fox's cage-

Naruto fell forward, held up by a strong arm.

"Four tails? Not yet, Naruto. For now, Yuji will have to make do with me!"

Jiraiya glared down at Yuji, skipping his usual jovial introduction. Yuji rolled his neck in response- then took off straight toward Jiraiya!

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AMEGAKURE: PRESENT DAY

There were no more enemies on the stairs. Yuji and Yuugao made it to the bottom with a minimum of effort. Yuji's body seemed to be learning how to move freely again, even around his injuries. Yuugao was careful to stay on his left side. She had to be careful not to look at the gauze patch over his left eye. It made her too angry.

They'll pay. People like this took Hayate from me. They aren't getting Yuji, too!

An elongated shadow in the dim light of early morning caught Yuji's eye. At this point, there were no innocent people in this village, so Yuji didn't hesitate to grab the man into the dark corner and bounce his head off the wall.

"Listen, you- you're going to help this young lady and I leave this miserable place. Open your mouth to scream and I'll kill you. Do you understand?"

The man nodded vigorously. Carefully, Yuji removed his hand. The man didn't move. He was a shinobi, but not a very good one, apparently.

"Good. Now, listen- There are chakra tags implanted on our bodies, and we can't remove them. Can you? Or do you know someone who can?"

The man began to shake his head back and forth, begging. "No, no, no- please, no! Lord Pain will kill me!"

Yuji's hand snapped around the man's throat, tightening gradually. Being a scarred mess with one eye worked in Yuji's favor. He looked incredibly menacing as he snarled: "*I'll* kill you if you *don't* help us. There's a chance that 'Lord Pain' won't find out you helped me, and you won't be killed. But if you tell me anything but what I want to know this time, you have no chance. Understand?"

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There was no other way, the man had said. Yuji kept him tied up and nearby so he couldn't run away. But his answer hadn't made Yuji happy. Removing the tags might just be as fatal as being captured again.

But there was a chance. They had made it all the way to the village outskirts. There were too many guards around the perimeter to try to just bluff their way out with no passable cover story.

Yuji had braced himself against a wall, his cloak removed and laid on the ground. His back was exposed, and if you looked in the right place, you could just see where the tag was buried below the epidermal layer of skin.

Yuugao held the kunai in shaking hands, trying to aim it properly. She had to cut the tag off Yuji- there was no other way unless one of them had chakra.

"One more scar isn't going to kill me, Yuugao. Please; we have no choice."

Yuugao was still hesitant, so Yuji turned around. He pulled her into a tight hug.

"You have to," he whispered. "It's the only way. Then I can remove your tag, and we can get out of here. You can heal me. Besides," he quipped lightly, kissing her cheek. "I won't hold it against you, you know? It's kinda...hot."

Yuugao smirked, shaking her head lightly. So typical of Yuji. "Submissive as ever to girls, huh? That gentlemanly streak of yours is gonna get you killed. If you're sure about this, though...please forgive me!"

She cut as quickly and lightly as she could. Eventually, the tag was exposed. Yuugao reached in and took it, tearing it to shreds with the kunai.

It took Yuji only a split-second to activate a Chakra Palm Jutsu and painlessly remove her tag.

The sudden appearance of two chakras startled the guards, and they tried to find where it came from.

Yuji healed himself quickly, only covering the latest wound. He weaved handsigns quickly, then grabbed the man who had helped them with one hand and Yuugao with the other.

"Yuugao, I would appreciate it if you would forget I just did this. If there's something beyond 'illegal', this is it. Hold on! Shadow Gateway Jutsu!"

Guess I'll have to thank her for this one, if I ever see her again. Now we're even, Azami.

The three of them were swallowed up by their own shadows. They dropped straight into the ground, disappearing completely.

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HIDDEN LEAF: PRESENT DAY

Jiraiya and Yuji had battled for the better part of ten minutes. Neither one had gained the advantage so far. But Yuji couldn't be as cocky and distracted as he had been with Naruto. This gave Tsunade time to heal Ryofu and craft a plan.

That plan, as it turned out, was scrapped by the arrival of three guests.
One of them was Yuji!

'Yuji' stopped battling Jiraiya, surprised to see his twin. Original? Clone? He leapt down to face Yuji.

"You're looking a bit ragged, 'brother'. Maybe you should lie down..."

Yuji had no strength left after that Kinjutsu he had performed, and at any rate he hadn't expected to be attacked first thing when he returned to Konoha. The open-handed blow struck Yuji right on the heart muscle. A look of shock managed to pass across his face before he fell to the ground.

He was not breathing.

17 - Growing Conspiracy

A cry of rage echoed around the village. Yuugao charged, swinging furiously at 'Yuji'. 'Yuji' swung at her head, only to find that she had pulled back out of his striking range.

Tsunade was holding both Ryofu and Yuji now. She was working feverishly to revive Yuji.

"Naughty princess! Death is not to be trampled on! Take th-"

A bushel of white hair caught Yuji as he began to move.

"Raging Lion's Mane Jutsu! And now- Needle Jizo Jutsu!"

Jiraiya had caught Yuji with his hair, halting him, then skewered him with needles from all directions. It was the first critical hit that the fake Yuji had sustained.

Yuji began to cough. He sat up carefully, his body weak but his eyes alert. He watched his counterpart struggle against the hair trapping him in place. It seemed to take a minute for his mind to get working, and then more time again to get his body to work. He got up shakily, glaring silently at his counterpart. Finally, he seemed to be more or less fully aware.

"...It must be a clone. They took...all kinds of samples...including..."

Yuji's outstretched hand pointed to his counterpart's left eye.

"...This is all my fault. I should never have allowed myself to get captured. I hope Lord Hokage won't be too mad at me when I join him someday..."

Damn! He's delirious! Tsunade realized, biting her lip. This wasn't good. Some part of her had been counting on Yuji to come through like he always did.

"...Wasn't suppos'd to use this yet...but if I don' I'll just die again."

Yuji let his arm drop to his side. Then he tensed every muscle in his body as he shouted: "Fuzetsu: Kai!" (Seal: Release!)

Yuji's body seemed to suddenly be in working order again. He rolled his neck experimentally, hearing a small 'crick' but nothing else. Satisfied he moved back toward his clone.

"Master Jiraiya, forgive me, but I have to end this fight now."

Jiraiya's hair withdrew, freeing the 'bad' Yuji.

"If you know I'm a clone, you must know that I have all your knowledge," said the clone, rolling his neck

the same way Yuji did. "But I'm free of your 'moral restraints'."

Yuji began to circle his clone, his hands raised in a guard. "You're the old me. You learn a few things in captivity. Things that allowed me to survive being tortured nearly to insanity."

The two Yuji's rushed each other. It was hard to tell who was who. They countered each other perfectly with the same moves. The real Yuji would kick, only to have to pull back to avoid an elbow being dropped into his foot. The bad Yuji would counter-attack with a punch, which would be blocked, and an elbow would be coming in to drive him back.

Yuji finally backed up, making handsigns. His clone did the same upon seeing what Jutsu it was Yuji was using.

"Shadow Gateway Jutsu!" they both shouted. They both began to be swallowed up by shadows. The good Yuji was trying to sink the bad Yuji in a shadow, while the bad Yuji tried the same tactic.

"Good move! I thought you'd try to escape with this Jutsu until I really thought about it. You don't run-even when it would be smart! You loyal fool!" taunted the bad Yuji.

SCHUNK!

Ryofu, lying on his stomach, managed to extend a sword made of water through the bad Yuji's back. He knew for sure he got the bastard this time!

Yuji was panting with exhaustion, his chakra nearly gone and his body far from healed. "You're too much like me. You know how I think, bastard. But you also know what I dislike more than anything. It never occurred to you that I might enlist his help, did you?"

Yuji began to sink into his shadow more. He clasped his hands together, trying to hold himself up just a little longer. As he did, a shuriken made of the most dense water he had ever seen whizzed by his head, hitting his other self in the neck.

Hisako was leaning out of the hospital room window. All of her chakra had been put into that attack. She wavered, then fell.

Yuji took off, freed of the shadow since his 'evil twin' had been killed. He made a diving catch, grabbing Hisako just before she hit the ground.

Holding the injured girl, Yuji realized there was one more thing he had to do. He could hear Sakura's gasping yelps now.

I can't allow this! Even if it takes all my chakra, I will protect that girl from what I saw!

Yuji leapt up into the window, laying Hisako back in her bed. He covered her up, taking a split-second to bow in gratitude to her before he spun to Sakura.

He put his hand on her forehead-

He felt a scream rip from his lips. He fell to his knees and vomited, but he did not let go of her forehead.

It's worse! She's close to insanity! I have to close this memory off! But to do it this time...it's going to hurt.

Yuji already knew what to do. He saw Tsunade running toward him, trying to stop him. She must have known what he was going to do, and what it was going to cost him. Only she knew the extent of his genjutsu ability when it came to defensive genjutsu. She had come to him once or twice when she desperately needed Dan and Nowaki to stop haunting her dreams. His compassion as a normal human was touching- his empathy as a shinobi was deadly to him.

Final Genjutsu Seal: Emotional Connection Barrier!

Immediately, Sakura's gasping moans ceased, and she began to simply breathe heavily. Yuji, however, let loose with one final scream that tore at everyone else. Then he fell, his hand removed from Sakura's forehead.

Yuugao caught Yuji, holding his battered body in her arms. Tears stained his cheeks, raining down through closed eyelids. She knew that he would share with no one what he had just seen in Sakura's mind. Whatever it was, however, had brought her tough-as-nails friend to his knees.

Ryofu and Hisako were both awake and moving. Staring at Yuji, Ryofu said the words on everyone's mind:

"He going to make it?"

Tsunade was without an answer. Yuji had just done a number on himself. A forbidden jutsu that ate up a ton of chakra, performed twice within minutes of each other; an unknown 'seal release' jutsu that appeared to have healed Yuji with no drawbacks (A sure sign that the drawback would be a doozy); then a forbidden genjutsu defense that seemed to have hurt him worse than anything else.

Sakura stirred in her bed, then opened her eyes. She blinked them, clearing tears away.

"I remember this time. He was in my mind, and he took it...a memory. I can only remember some of it. I just know...that it was awful. Something so bad...so evil...I can't even..."

Yuugao picked Yuji up in a fireman's carry and deposited him on the nearest available bed. Tsunade ushered everyone healthy out of the room, giving Yuugao instructions to 'dismantle the body (of the clone), but retrieve the left eye'. She said this over her shoulder as she began to examine Yuji.

Hisako and Ryofu looked at Yuji, by silent agreement not saying anything. Not here. There was plenty to be discussed in private. Even more so when Yuji woke up. Quietly, they slipped out of the room, moving to an empty room down the hall.

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"He's going to go after them right away," Hisako said, holding her side. She had folded herself awkwardly against the window sill during her fall and bruised a rib.

"No doubt. We need to plan our strike force now. The less he does, the better," Ryofu commented,

arms crossed as he leaned against the wall. "That damn seal he released...any idea what that was?"

Hisako shook her head. "He never mentioned anything like it. But he's so damn secretive anyway..."

"When he did...whatever to Sakura...that ate him up emotionally. Those empathic abilities of him are such a pain."

Around a smile, Hisako reminded Ryofu of something that had happened. "When my mom was pulling her crap...you know, the usual stuff...I was a total wreck one day. Yuji actually managed to help me out. I think that maybe he's a better guy than we give him credit for. That maybe...he's a loner because he has to be, rather than any outright dislike for us."

Hisako looked at Ryofu, shaking her head. "Because when he did whatever genjutsu trick it was on me, I felt better. But he looked like hell. He swallowed it all and walked away, but I could see my emotions on his face for a brief moment. The emotion was drawn to him like a magnet. Maybe, between my stress and your...well, angst...that's why he doesn't act like he belongs with us."

"That might be true for you. He doesn't like me. I don't blame him one bit, and I care even less. But I wonder why you could forgive what I did to that girl, but he can't..."

Hisako shrugged, stretching her body carefully so as not to aggravate her injuries.

"I think it was maybe because Chiyoko was the only one who could understand him. She thought his empathy made him unique, and rather than give him a hard time, she went out of her way to talk to him. Before Chiyoko, Yuji didn't talk to anyone. I think maybe that's why he fell in love with her. And that's why he can't bring himself to forgive you. What you did to Chiyoko he took personally, no matter what he says. I doubt he meant to take it personally, but if you kill someone's first love...they remember."

Ryofu had figured as much. As long as Yuji could function, he didn't care what went through Yuji's head. It wasn't his business. He would be ready to work with Yuji, or even be friends with Yuji- but it would be on Yuji's terms. The ball was in his court.

"So, we should include Yuugao, you think?" Ryofu asked, referring to the strike team he knew Yuji was going to assemble. KEKOBÉ was going to take out the Akatsuki method of making those clones.

"Hold it right there. Don't move. You're all under arrest."

Four ANBU agents had their swords drawn, surrounding Ryofu and Hisako.

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Yuji found himself shaken awake, and instantly surrounded by four ANBU agents.

"Yuji Itou, you're under arrest for criminal conspiracy. Your organization has been disbanded and declared illegal."

Yuji didn't move, doing his best to hide his surprise.

That damn clone revealed KEKOBÉ?! This is bad...I've got to make a move now, or we're all

done for!

18 - 'Darkest Hour'- The Desperate Plan!

“What ‘organization’? I’ll admit to the criminal acts, but I had no accomplices.”

That was the best Yuji could do for now. He had to limit the damage to himself. He was guilty, and his clone had proved it. There was a chance that, even if they discovered the other members, if Yuji, the leader, capitulated, the others would be spared.

The memory he had taken from Sakura welled up suddenly. Not expecting that, Yuji yelled out in pain that he had never felt. The ANBU agents jumped, and one of them stabbed at Yuji by reflex. Yuji reacted reflexively and batted the sword away with the back of his hand, causing three other swords to be thrust at him.

The memory hit Yuji’s consciousness again, and he suddenly had to escape. Even if it meant going through the agents.

Yuji’s palm shot out and hit one agent in the stomach. He pushed past that agent and ran, in a genuine panic he could not understand. All he could do was feel a scream that rattled his bones. He yelled in turn, trying to keep his wits about him long enough to escape. He needed to be sedated, at least! This was maddening.

You took this from Sakura, remember. So this is a diluted version of the memory. What she went through was worse. Much worse.

That thought sobered Yuji a bit. He stopped running, raising his hands in surrender.

“I just need to be sedated, then I can answer all your questions. The memory I just absorbed is affecting me.”

Immediately, Yuji noted that there were not the kind of ANBU agents that normally would be sent. Those agents would have announced his arrest with regret, asked him to confess or defend himself, and would only resort to force if absolutely necessary.

“The Foundation, isn’t it? I think I’d like to see the warrant for my arrest before I cooperate...”

As he said that, Yuji leapt forward, his right hand arcing toward the throat of the nearest agent. The agent moved to block his throat, and Yuji dodged past him out the door.

“Good thing they’d been briefed on me, or that feint wouldn’t have worked.”

Then the worst possible thing happened.

Hisako and Ryofu broke out of the room down the hall. Yuji reacted on a level he didn’t think he would ever have to. He gave Ryofu and Hisako a genjutsu signal to execute KEKOBÉ’s final plan, the ‘Darkest Hour’.

Immediately, Ryofu and Hisako stopped fighting the Foundation agents they had been brawling with. Instead, they both ran toward Yuji.

“Water Style: Water Containment Jutsu!” shouted Hisako. Water flowed toward Yuji, covering all but his neck and head in a dense water prison.

Ryofu said nothing, but merely appeared in a flash at Yuji’s side, his sword held at Yuji’s neck.

“Traitor! I knew you couldn’t be trusted!” Hisako declared. In her mind, however, she was cursing Yuji. **Damn him! He knew we would never sell him out, so he put this plan on us! I hate this!**

Ryofu was fighting the same disgust with this plan, but he also accepted it as necessary. **This way, since KEKOBÉ is exposed, he plans to take all the blame. I’ll give him this, he lives up to his stupid promises.**

Ryofu’s sword swung toward the Foundation agents, just enough to back them up.

“We’ll only turn this traitor over to the real ANBU, not you shady cretins. Go back to your holes.”

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The ANBU that answered to Lady Tsunade soon showed up. As expected, they first persuaded Yuji to come peacefully. He offered no struggle, allowing them to lead him to Tsunade herself. She had been briefed on Yuji’s ‘Darkest Hour’ plan for KEKOBÉ, but knew only her role; not the roles of everyone else. That is, except for Yuji’s role.

In a court held with only the highest village elders and officials, Yuji knelt before them, the accused and condemned. The room was deep underground, lit only by candles that flickered and gave minimal light.

Yuji found himself more nervous than he thought. He knew the outcome of the trial, and he knew the sentence. He even knew what was going to happen afterward to some degree. But that knowledge held little solace for him.

“Yuji Itou, you have been proven guilty of creating an unauthorized Black Operations group within the village, outside of the jurisdiction of the Hokage. This is a capital offense, usually warranting death or life imprisonment,” said Tsunade, her hands folded solemnly in front of her. “However, in recognition to past services to the village, we will commute that sentence. Your actions were dangerous and foolhardy, but they did aid our village during a difficult time. I will give you one last chance to tell me who aided you. Your sentence will not be overturned, but your honor will be restored.”

Yuji looked ahead defiantly. “I had no accomplices, my Lady. What I do have, if you might indulge me, is one last set of words for you and the council...”

At Tsunade’s nod, Yuji continued:

“I acted in the interests of the village. I acted alone and in secret. The village would not have survived had I not acted. The financial turmoil I averted by undercutting the Akatsuki allowed us time to rebuild, and in addition removed several key Akatsuki members. I risked war with the Akatsuki, yes, but that is a

war that is coming regardless. I chose to be proactive; to limit our enemy's strength. I will readily accept any punishment that may warrant. I lay myself prostrate before you and acknowledge my crimes, but I do not repent. I cannot. I acted in a way that our village could not to protect the village."

Tsunade allowed Yuji to finish, biting back tears and bile as she did. This was so painful for him, she could tell. And for her, too. Yuji had just told what was mostly the truth. Based on what she had seen through his eyes during genjutsu debriefings, it was clear that what he had done was necessary. But then, this was now necessary for her to ensure he could continue to work this way.

"Then, Yuji, your sentence: You will leave the village in twelve hours. You will be exiled in a place of your choosing with the Land of Fire. There, you will live until such a time that your sentence maybe overturned or your crimes forgiven. You may contact members of the village through letters, and you may have supervised visits with them. Any secret meetings will cause both you and the other party to be punished."

Yuji bowed low until Tsunade finished speaking. He stood up, walked backward to the door, and bowed again.

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Outside the door, Yuugao, Ryofu, and Hisako waited. They couldn't hear what was going on, but they didn't really need to. The elders didn't know it, but this whole thing had been scripted. At least, they hoped. The elders and Tsunade clashed too often for them to be sure their script would stick.

The door opened, and Yuji exited. He was ashen-faced and clearly near tears. He was also clearly not going to shed a single one of them in mixed company.

Hisako, as gently as she could, asked Yuji about the verdict. "Well? How did it go?"

Yuji spoke quietly, solemnly. "In twelve hours, I will be escorted out of the Leaf Village. I will then be exiled for an undetermined amount of time in any place I choose in the Land of Fire. I can stay in touch by letter, but I may not meet anyone from the village without supervision."

That was worse than they had hoped, but better than they'd dare expect.

"If they'd tossed you in jail, you'd be really screwed. Worse if they decided to execute you. I don't really want to kill anymore Leaf shinobi..." murmured Ryofu. "At least not amongst you decent people. The Foundation, though..."

Yuji looked up sharply at that. "The Foundation is going to be a problem from now on. It's a shame our team is disbanded, but you should keep an eye on them."

The doors to the room Yuji had just exited opened again, and a single elder exited. It was Danzou. He stopped outside the door and favored Yuji with an unreadable look.

"..."

Yuji stood, his muscles tensed as Danzou surveyed him in silence.

“...What ‘team’ has been disbanded, Yuji Itou?” Danzou finally asked, looking over the four of them.

Yuji’s voice was laced with venom as he answered. “My team consisted of myself, Hisako, and Ryofu, Elder. *As you well know.* Your insistence on investigating this mythical ‘group’ you think I’ve created is baffling to me.”

The other three drew in their breath. To speak that way to an elder! And moreover, it was *Yuji* saying it! The tone in his voice put them on edge. That may have saved their lives.

Why did I never notice how evil this man is? Or how strong his chakra is? I don’t think any of us are a match for him! Yuugao thought, a slight tremble in her body. She glanced at the others. Hisako was unimpressed, and Ryofu looked ready to kill Danzou.

Yuji and Danzou stood face to face, neither one even blinking. Danzou continued:

“You may fool the others, but I know otherwise. You and I seem to be cut from the same cloth. We will both do whatever is necessary to protect our village- even plunge it into war.”

“Don’t insult me, Elder. I will do what I need to protect this village, short of plunging it into war. If I need to, I will destroy every criminal, villain, and Orochimaru experiment out there. But this village will stay a safe haven for decent people. And for you, too- until and unless you become a threat to that safety...”

Danzou didn’t seem to register the threat in Yuji’s voice. Instead, he turned his back and walked away, saying one thing over his shoulder:

“Hmm. You do have a backbone, I see. Sarutobi did choose well. Pity you weren’t more clever.”

Yuji’s fists tensed. Before he could move, his three teammates had restrained him.

“I want to kill the bastard, too. But if you do that now, we’re all screwed. Let it go.”

Hisako’s words made sense. Yuji let himself calm down, reflecting on why he had done all this to begin with. The Leaf Village had to be protected.

Gulping back emotion, Yuji nodded grimly, forcing himself to turn away from Danzou.

The man who caused all this...if I killed him, we would all be better off. Damn my conscience...

19 - The 11th Hour

The last few hours in the Leaf Village for Yuji were largely uneventful. Supporters he had quietly gathered over the years wished him well, some even giving him gifts for his journey. It touched Yuji, and he promised he would protect these people.

He had said his goodbyes to everyone. He and Yuugao had spent the night together. He had tried to warn her off, saying it wasn't good for her to be seen with him, but she wouldn't hear it. So they'd talked until the wee hours of the morning. At the end, she kissed him lightly on the lips, wishing him luck and promising to keep things together.

Ryofu and Hisako blatantly walked Yuji to the gate, where ANBU flanked the Hokage and the elders. They stood with him as he marched straight past the people he had given so much to protect.

Their fight would be just as difficult as his. Yuji was now free to deal with the Akatsuki. Protecting the Leaf Village from the attack Yuji had warned them about would be the hard part.

Ryofu thought back to fighting the Yuji clone. He shook his head, realizing that if they cloned someone even more dangerous, there would be no stopping the Akatsuki. He had to get stronger, in case Yuji failed.

Given the way he nearly passed out earlier from that memory...He can't be that strong right now. There's a strong possibility that if he's by himself an assassin will finish him off. We need to prepare for that eventuality.

Hisako had a different job. She would fight by Ryofu's side when the time came, but in the mean time, there was Sakura to deal with. She'd been affected by Yuji's interlude into her mind. Sakura had felt Yuji's empathy even while unconscious, and now she'd fallen for him. The vague trace of the memory he had taken from her still haunted her, and her emotions were out of control sometimes. Yuji had warned Hisako about that possibility, and the fact that her being in love with him might be the worst thing for her. Hisako remembered his sad smile as he told her 'Heh, figures the girl I had hoped for would only love me when it was bad for her. By the time I'm a good guy again, she'll be over me.'

Hisako and Ryofu nodded to each other, ready to leave by tacit agreement. This was too unfair to watch for long. As soon as Yuji cleared the gate, they turned and left as one.

"Did what Yuji said last night bother you?" Hisako wanted to know, not quite looking at Ryofu as she asked. "I mean, I never knew that about him..."

Ryofu admitted he hadn't either. It was a surprise to both of them to learn just how ambitious Yuji was. He wouldn't talk about the mysterious seal he had released, but he told them why he had been given the seal.

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THE PREVIOUS NIGHT!

“Hahh! Good stuff!”

Hisako and Ryofu watched, a little dismayed, as Yuji downed alcohol with astonishing quickness.

“Leaf sake tastes best, doesn’t it?! Man, I’m gonna miss this!”

Ryofu glowered at Yuji, clearly about to say something when Yuji reached over and pinched his cheek.

“Hey, hey, Ryo-chan, what’re you all worked up for, huh? We have to put on the right show if we want to talk, don’t we?”

Ryofu mentally made a note to punch Yuji at least one more time, but for the moment deferred to the situation. It was true that partying would be the normal way to spend one’s last hours at home, he supposed. Besides, Yuji promised to tell them something worthwhile, so it was worth putting up with the (fake) drunk’s antics.

After a few more minutes, a red-faced Yuji set down his cup and turned serious.

“I...owe the two of you a great deal. And all these years, I’ve been pretty secretive. So, before I go, I wanted to tell you two something about me. Something almost no one knows.”

Hisako adjusted in her seat, making herself more comfortable. Yuji probably wouldn’t drag this out much longer. He was already uncomfortable in the Leaf, and planned to leave as soon as he could.

“It’s...like this. The seal I released earlier was something the Third Hokage gave me. It was to give me a chance to be named Hokage when the time came.”

Hisako raised an eyebrow. “You? Hokage? This is a surprise...”

Yuji half-shrugged as he replied. “Not so much, actually. I’ve never said anything because I was so young when the last chance came. And the next chance I probably won’t win, either. Naruto is becoming popular, and there’s Kakashi to contend with, and even Konohamaru, who has direct lineage to the Third Hokage.”

“Is that why you didn’t fight the elders on your punishment?” asked Ryofu. “Masochist.”

Yuji chuckled. “Well, that too. But my loyalty is to Sarutobi-sensei over the Leaf. He asked me to make sure that I became a pillar of this village. I’m supposed to support the village through it’s darkest hours, even if it’s behind the scenes. This way, I can move more freely. No restrictions, no worrying about my actions causing a war.”

“No one to back you up if you get in trouble, either,” Hisako added, unable to keep the worry out of her voice.

Yuji looked down into his drink. “Yeah...I think that maybe, after all my complaining, I wound up being fond of the two of you. Thanks for all you did for me. I really mean it. Thanks.”

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PRESENT DAY: THE LAND OF FIRE

Yuji's new home was to be near the outpost town of Kanzo. Yuji was thankful to have been allowed to pick the place. He could have chosen somewhere closer, or more well fortified, but Kanzo had a special place in Yuji's heart. Rather, someone he had met here had a special place in his heart.

Shaking his head, Yuji chose not to think about it. Right now, he needed to get settled. There was a lot to do before he could really call the place 'home'.

His house was an old farmhouse with two stories. It was relatively large by most standards, but average sized for the surrounding houses. Yuji required little in the way of furniture, since he was a bachelor. He bought two futons, two blankets, two pillows, a table, a tea kettle, and groceries. He had the rest of his stuff in one of the two packs across his shoulder. Once he got his table set up, he unpacked his two bags, removing mostly books and scrolls. His other bag contained a few keepsakes that he always kept with him.

Okay. Now to explore the town.

As he did, Yuji thought about the hardest part of leaving. His parents understood, and he would miss them deeply. But something else had happened before he left, and now he felt as if in leaving he had done her a disservice.

Sakura... I should be there for her. Even if I can't have her as a lover, I've already protected her. She means something to me, and to my friends. She's a strong young woman already... So why am I so worried?

Yuji didn't make a habit of lying to himself, but he made an exception this time. He knew full well why he was so worried, or at least why he was so upset.

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LEAF VILLAGE: PREVIOUS NIGHT

Sakura was allowed out of her hospital room after a thorough examination. Ino had come by, as had Lee, and a few others. She talked amiably with them, feeling odd as she did. She felt oddly...empty. It was a strangely good feeling, as though a burden had been lifted from her shoulders. A burden she had been aware of but unable to pinpoint. Now that it was gone, she was vaguely disturbed.

Was an accomplishment still an accomplishment if you did nothing to earn it?

As she walked, she thought about that. This 'light' feeling was akin to finishing a unpleasant chore, knowing it was over and done with. But she hadn't done anything, and that in turn disturbed her.

When she crossed the long wooden bridge than cut through the center of Konoha, she noticed Yuji standing by himself, staring out over the water. Her heart fluttered and sweat formed on her brow.

Oh my God. I still don't know what to think about him! I know what he did for me, but I can't call my feelings simple gratitude...

Yuji felt her presence and looked over. All at once, his dark mood seemed to disappear and he jogged over to her.

"Are you feeling alright? I apologize for the reaction my jutsu caused..." he said, bowing even as he walked over.

Sakura waved the apology aside. "No, no, you saved my life. I wish I knew what it was you saved me from, but..."

Yuji shook his head. "No. It's better you don't know. Trust me." The dark tone in his voice left no room for argument.

Sakura smiled, and suddenly felt a stab of bravery. "Tell me sometime. Over tea, okay?"

Yuji was surprised at that, and it showed on his face as he blushed lightly. He couldn't hide his smile at first, but quickly it faded.

"Sakura...I have to tell you something. I wish I could tell you everything, but that would make things more...complicated for you. I don't want that. But you have a right to know, at least, that I have to leave the village. I committed a crime, and to pay I have to leave. At least for a while."

Sakura clapped a hand to her mouth as tears fell from her eyes, unchecked. She hadn't realized until this moment just how much she cared for him. Her feeling suddenly sorted themselves out.

It was love.

Yuji saw her words coming, and moved to halt her. If he heard those words, he could never leave. He had to leave! There was more than himself to consider here. This was for the survival of a nation. Sakura would find someone; someone better. It was like a knife twisting in his heart, but he made his move quickly.

He embraced her tentatively, holding her arms lightly. He looked at her, hesitant, but then he leaned forward and kissed her lightly on the lips, surprising the pink-haired female.

"I don't know if that was the right thing to do or not. But it's not fair for me to just leave without letting you know that I do care. I don't want to abandon you, not now. And not just because I'm...so fond of you. You might still have a backlash from my memory removal kinjutsu. Hisako will take care of you, but..."

Yuji looked up toward the sun. He released Sakura, though his hands lingered on her as long as he could allow.

“It’s time for me to go. I’m to be escorted out of the village in five minutes. Please take care of yourself.”

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20 - An Ending and a Beginning

PRESENT DAY: LAND OF FIRE

Yuji still wasn't sure he had made a good decision. He had hoped to not 'just leave', like Sasuke had. Sakura didn't deserve that. But maybe he had done too much, and therefore created a bond that would hurt Sakura more than help?

It was hurting him plenty.

This would have been so much easier if he'd had a girlfriend. Yuugao had remained uninterested in anything but a solid friendship; Hisako had her eyes elsewhere, and the two of them fought like cats and dogs anyway; Chiyoko was dead; Tenten and Ino were both semi-involved with other people. Yuji just didn't know where to go.

There was one girl who he had thought about as maybe being 'the one'. It hadn't worked out, but it hadn't ended badly, either. In fact, the jutsu she had taught Yuji had allowed him to escape the Akatsuki's clutches with Yuugao.

I should look her up. Maybe recruit her. Now that I'm a criminal, too, it should be okay...

Yuji absently bit his thumb, then made a handsign on the ground. A small bird appeared near his hand. It was a brown raven. One shiny eye looked up at it's summoner before flying happily up to his shoulder. It sat pleasantly while Yuji composed a brief note, then obediently extended it's leg so he could attach the note.

Yuji held the bird for a moment, almost wanting to keep it with him for company. Eventually, he decided the bird would enjoy flying more, and he might enjoy the company of his female friend more. She had lived the life that was being forced upon him for a long time; maybe she knew how to make it bearable.

Giving the bird a toss, Yuji watched it take flight. It would take the bird a while to find her. In the mean time, Yuji finished up his exploration of the town and returned home. He peeled off his shirt and began to exercise, not knowing what else to do with himself.

That evening, he picked up a brush and paper and began to write. He blushed as he did, because his words were worthy of Master Jiraiya.

This is what comes of being lonely...not to mention single. At my age... Yuji sighed, turned off the light he had been working by, and went to bed.

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THE LEAF VILLAGE: PRESENT DAY

Sakura sought out Ryofu and Hisako immediately after Yuji left. She knew the two of them better than she knew Yuji, ironically enough. Hisako had been a close friend since they had been at the academy together, and she and Ryofu had some dealing a few years back, when Ryofu was new to the Leaf.

The three put their heads together in the dark teahouse Yuji selected as their meeting point. They spoke in whispers, letting their tea grow cold as they spoke. Eventually, they were joined by Yuugao as well.

The conversation stayed serious. With KEKOBÉ's existence revealed, they had to change their plans. Yuji had taken the hit for them, which would satisfy everyone but Danzo and his Foundation agents. They would be watching Yuji now, and probably Hisako and Ryofu and Yuugao. Sakura was the only one of the group who could move freely at this point.

Yuji had figured all this into a plan, granted, but it was still disconcerting. It left a lot to chance: Yuji had to play a certain role, and play it well. This role was contrary to his personality and even his morals; but he would still do it, they knew. While he did that, they had to continue KEKOBÉ's normal work, albeit much less often. They would have to rely on Yuji to continue to plague the Akatsuki as much as possible. If they had to fight a war on two fronts, so would the Akatsuki.

Hisako filled Sakura in on Yuji's role in all this. When she noticed the light pink hues on the girl's pretty face, she immediately knew that Yuji must have screwed up when he said goodbye. Cursing him inwardly, she resolved to talk with Sakura later. One wrong emotion could ruin everything.

"So Yuji is going to take on jobs on his own for less than the Akatsuki?" Sakura asked, probably hoping to get attention off of her reddening face.

Yuugao was the one to answer. "Yes. And also, he will be raising capital in other ways."

"Our job," Ryofu filled in, "Is to keep KEKOBÉ going here, just like before. But more secretly. This meeting will be our last as a group for a while. At least, about this. I think it best if we keep getting together once in a while as...friends."

The big surprise had been Ryofu. He had stepped up into a leadership role. Hisako was sure Yuji would rather swallow his tongue than have that happen, but Ryofu was a good choice to lead. He would never say more than was necessary, and when secrecy counted, that was an incredibly good quality in a leader.

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Yuji sat in the upstairs bedroom of the farmhouse, all the lights but a single candle extinguished. The darkness made him feel invisible, and that was certainly okay with him. He wanted nothing more than to be at home, in the Leaf, planning a way to be Hokage someday, and maybe even have Sakura with him.

That was impossible, now.

The only reason he had the single candle lit was so that the one he had summoned could appear, if she chose. The candle cast just enough of a flickering shadow to allow her to come in that way, using the

jutsu she had taught Yuji. He didn't expect her for another couple days, at least, but her unpredictability was a charming quality to Yuji.

Sitting in the dark, he reflected upon the first time they had met.

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TWO YEARS AGO

Yuji, age seventeen, stood proudly near the ANBU team he had been attached to for training. They had been walking on eggshells around him, all while treating him fairly badly. It was odd. They were careful to raz him only a little because he was the 'Hokage's Pet', as he had heard more than once. But they DID raz him, because he was new. Eventually, in a shorter time than he had anticipated, he had become one of them. They trusted him, and only teased in a good-natured way. Mostly, they treated him with respect.

Yuugao was sitting by herself, with no idea that in a couple years Yuji would be asking her out. Right now, he was just a reminder of Hayate.

Neither one knew how to behave with the other. They had only ever interacted while Hayate was there. Now it was awkward. Yuji had gotten to be a lot like Hayate, Yuugao thought. He was reliable, strong, and didn't mind doing the unglamorous work. To Yuji, Yuugao was his first crush- an unattainable crush, sure, but still a crush- and now she had lost the only reason Yuji had never pursued her. She was with Hayate, and there was no way Yuji would have ever betrayed either one that way. But that didn't mean an attraction wasn't still there.

Finally, Yuji got up and moved to sit next to her. Without preamble, he told her a story.

"The guy on my team; he's a real @\$\$\$. Before him, you remember the girl, Chiyoko? Well, to be honest, I kind of had a thing for her. Then this guy comes along and kills her. As if that isn't bad enough, I have to be on the same team as him. Even though what he did wasn't personal, I still haven't been able to forgive him. Am I a bad person?"

Yuugao looked at Yuji in surprise. Where had this come from? Was Yuji drunk or something?

Yuji looked down, blushing. "I'm a bit...of a sensory type. It makes things awkward sometimes. I wish I could turn it off. I could tell...that the girl liked me, too. It seems like cheating. There's no risk of asking someone out if you know they like you, too. It seems like that risk is part of the game."

Yuugao continued to stare at Yuji, a bit off put by his talk. He seemed to be a little uncomfortable, too.

"It's kind of like cheating. I don't like it very much. It isn't a very useful ability. It's annoying in combat. I can tell when someone truly means to kill, or really hates me. But I can also tell when they're following orders. But no matter what, my response has to be the same. I can't act on the knowledge I have in either case. Not morally in the case of love, or safely in the case of combat."

"...Why did you tell me that? After losing Hayate-" Yuugao began. Yuji put a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Because you lost Hayate. That's why. I lost him, too. I would never compare my loss to yours- yours is far greater. But...well, I guess, I needed to bare my soul, or something like that. It's a weird thing to say. But for some reason, I felt compelled to tell you what I did. I don't know if it will help you, and if it doesn't I apologize for my selfishness. But you looked like you needed a friend who could understand, And, well, maybe I can. I wasn't close with Chiyoko; not like you were with Hayate. But I did have feelings for her, and when she died there was no one to talk to. Being in a time of peace and all, no kids my age had lost a lover. Most didn't have lovers, granted, but childhood is lonely anyway."

Yuji sat a moment longer, then got up and walked back toward the main group. They were huddled around a campfire, and it's warmth was pleasant; as was the company. A fair mix of the strongest men and women in the Leaf, they discussed tactics, and they also discussed things of no consequence. It was nice to be part of a group, Yuji thought.

Shortly after, Yuugao got up and joined them, sitting next to Yuji. She would seek him out more often, she decided. Maybe he did understand, and in his own way had decided to be there for her if she wanted. It was up to her to decide.

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The mission was pretty simple, and the Leaf crew had accomplished it within two days. They had been allotted a week, so they took their time returning. Yuji was the only one of the group who was unmasked and not in an ANBU uniform. He was here as the Hokage's trainee; not an ANBU agent. They would have taken him in a heartbeat; indeed the group had already asked. But Yuji couldn't accept, and the group knew and understood why. But their offer had meant a lot to Yuji- something else they knew.

Up ahead, the advance scout shouted for help. He called for a medic. Yuji accompanied the medic, wanting to see for himself what had caused the alarm.

It was a girl. Yuji felt himself blushing. She was beautiful! Her hair was long and jet-black. She was wearing a long-sleeved black top that covered her breasts but left her navel exposed. It was covered with thin chain mail that reached to her pants, which were long and had slits on the sides, also covered with chain mail. She was leaning up against a tree, apparently dazed.

The ANBU agent stepped back when Yuji and the medic arrived. Yuji immediately shrugged off his long coat and wadded it up to make a pillow behind the girl's head. He placed it gently behind her head, and she nodded her thanks.

Something flashed in Yuji's eyes. "You go on ahead. I'll take the rear and bring her with me when she can move."

"Yes, Shidousha!"

Yuji smirked. The man he only knew as Kuromaru called him by his old title purposely. Kuromaru had said boastfully that Yuji would be Hokage one day, and that he would be the chief advisor. It was Kuromaru that had been the first to welcome Yuji, outside of Yuugao.

The agents moved on ahead, now more on their guard, having found an unconscious woman on the

path.

Once the agents were gone, Yuji moved back and allowed the girl to move.

She looked up at him, smiling in a way that was both alluring and arrogant. "You knew?"

Yuji looked down at her, his guard clearly up. "Yes. It was your bad luck to run into an empath. It's rare, I'm told, to be cursed like this. But it comes in handy to curtail ambushes..."

The girl stood up with a grace that Yuji found himself admiring. He was instantly drawn to this woman. He had to fight his emotions here.

"I feel like I know you from somewhere..." Yuji muttered, his head cocked as he tried to remember.

The woman smiled charmingly. "I'm afraid you're guilty of misreading twice, mister empath. That was no ambush attempt, and we've never met."

"Call me Yuji, please. It's easier to speak to each other using names, right?"

"Fair enough. I'm Azami."

The name clicked, and at the same time so did a hidden kunai holster on the girl. Yuji drew his own and blocked her strike.

"Now I remember! I saw you in our BINGO book! I used to wonder who you were. Besides 'Azami Hayashi' and a bounty hunter."

Azami smiled, withdrawing her kunai so suddenly and smoothly that Yuji fell forward. He threw his kunai forward in a block, his weight still moving forward. The girl had ghosted to the side of him and threw a kick at his ribs once her kunai was deflected. Yuji dropped his elbow down to block her kick while allowing his momentum to carry him into a combat roll. He rolled over his head and to his feet, dodging a sweeping kick with a little leap, then catching a backhand stab with his free hand. He swiped at her face, and Azami bent backwards to dodge it, her foot snapping up toward his groin. He shifted his shin in to deflect her kick while his left hand ripped the kunai away from her. Before he could counter he had to dodge a senbon that the girl had hidden on her. He threw the kunai to deflect the second senbon, rushing in behind his knife. Azami dropped to one knee and elbowed him hard in the stomach. That saved her life, as his elbow dropped to the top of her head. She kicked his leg out from her kneeling position and dove on top of him, her knee pinning his kunai-wielding hand down.

"It's nothing personal. It's just orders," she said briskly, pulling a kunai from Yuji's leg holster and holding it at his neck. "I was supposed to kill you, but you're worth more alive. You seem like a good guy, so if you don't resist I won't hurt you."

Yuji nodded slowly, not exactly thrilled that this girl had handled him so easily. He didn't like to think his training had faults. But it was apparent that it did, and he would have to work harder once this was over.

Provided I'm alive, he reminded himself. He turned his thoughts, with effort, away from that and back

onto the here and now. How to escape...or rather, should he? **If I go with her, she's going to lead me to a crime syndicate. I can track them down this way. People will be looking for me anyway; least of all the ANBU squad I was with. Best to play along for now...**

"Okay. I'll come with you. Let me up, and I won't resist."

Azami nodded, smiling a bit distractedly. She made a few handsigns, then tapped Yuji's chest. He immediately felt the tell-tale weight of a chakra inhibiting jutsu. That made his plans a little more difficult to carry out, now that his team couldn't track him by his chakra signature.

Yuji stood up, and Azami tied his wrists in front of him, leaving a length that she could hold and drag him, like a leash.

"You're an empath, you said?" Azami asked.

"Somewhat, yes."

"Does your chakra enable you to do that, or is that a separate ability?"

Yuji answered honestly. "My chakra boosts my ability to recognize the emotions I sense. For example, with my chakra restrained, I can only vaguely tell that you're covering your emotions and be strictly business about this. If I could use my chakra, I could probably tell you what emotion you're covering up."

Azami smiled, though a pink hue touched her cheeks. "Honesty, huh? I guess you deserve an honest response. I'm hiding the fact that I'm attracted to you. You're quite a catch, and I don't just mean for the sizeable bounty on your head."

Yuji blushed heavily, and bow clumsily. The bow was part truthful thanks, part movement to hide what had suddenly occurred to him.

No one but the squad I was with knew I would be attached to ANBU. This mission was top secret, and we report directly to Lord Third. So someone in the group sold us out...

21 - A Deep Understanding

It was nearly unfathomable to Yuji that someone of the Leaf could be such a villain. The Third Hokage had hinted that things were not what they seemed with the Uchiha clan, but refused to tell Yuji more. He probably would have if Yuji asked, but Yuji trusted the Third's wisdom to tell him what he needed to know when he needed to know it.

Yuji looked up at his captor, thinking her fairly arrogant to turn her back to him and lead him on with just a rope separating them. She had taken his weapons- the ones she could find anyway. She didn't look very hard.

She's underestimating me. Purposely, maybe? She's a combat veteran; that much I could tell from our fight. She's expecting something out of me. If I could just touch her, I might be able to get some kind of impression...

Yuji looked up ahead. "Pardon me. I don't mean to complain, but I'm getting thirsty back here. Any chance I can get a drink?"

Azami stopped, her eyes questioning him. "What kind of shinobi gets thirsty an hour into the journey?" She answered herself instantly: "One with a plan. Escape, maybe? I'd rather you didn't do that."

Azami put a hand on Yuji's cheek. "I really don't want to hurt you. I will, because I do what I have to. But hurting someone like you would really bother me."

Yuji felt her emotion. What she had just said was true, but there was more to it. She was scared. Her emotions struck Yuji like a cry for help. He exhaled at the sudden power of the emotion, pulling back as the emotion throbbed. He fell onto his back, then rolled over onto his knees and coughed violently. Azami quickly gave him a drink of water, genuine worry in her eyes.

As Yuji coughed, Azami stepped back and looked through the things she had taken from Yuji. One of them was his BINGO book. She had found the page with her face on it creased, as though it had been marked and read often.

"I want to show you something," Azami said to Yuji, kneeling next to him once he'd recovered. She placed a leather-bound book in front of him, allowing him to hold it. "It's on page twenty-three."

When Yuji opened to that page (with some difficulty, as his wrists here bound), he saw his own face staring back at him. It listed him as a grade-B threat, with a bounty of 190,000 ryo for live capture, with the intent to ransom back to the Leaf Village at a high cost.

"I always wondered about the young man on this page. Someone so young studying under the Third Hokage. Eyes so clear and focused, the word 'justice' practically tattooed on his forehead. I wondered what kind of boy he was. And how he could have grown to be so opposite to me."

Yuji was surprised by this sudden outpouring of emotion. Part of him listened intently, but part of him held back, wondering if this was just the kunoichi in her playing with him. God knew they loved to do that.

"I wondered if I could meet you someday. And if I did, would we be friend? Or enemies? If we fought, who would win? All kinds of things. Maybe it was because we were so close in age that I wondered all this about you. So of course I jumped at the chance to be the one to hunt you."

Yuji gave a single, forlorn chuckle. "Pretty disappointing in person, huh?"

Azami knelt down near his face. "No. You could have killed me, but you chose to talk to me instead. You sent your squad away and faced me alone. You acted just like I expected. Had our fight gone on longer, I doubt I would have been the victor."

Yuji decided to take a risk here. Mentally rolling the dice, he threw what he hoped was a curveball: "What are you so afraid of?"

"You felt that? That's impressive. Not even I feel that fear very often anymore."

"I think you wanted me to feel something. There's no other reason that you would take the risk of touching me, knowing that I can sense emotions. You're a lot of things- most good, from what I can tell- but 'careless' isn't one of them. Did you think I wouldn't help you? Or that your problem is too small for me to care about?"

Azami blushed yet again, furious with herself for allowing this boy to play this game with her. Even if he was being completely earnest, as she suspected he was, this was too much. But he pressed on:

"I didn't train with the Third Hokage just to learn physical skills. I've had to learn to be a diplomat, a master of ceremony, and a warrior. In fact, I think he even taught me my empathic abilities by proxy. I can't divine like he does with his crystal ball, but I would be surprised if he didn't have something to do with me getting this ability. Now that I've glimpsed your fear, I won't leave you alone, no matter what. Not until this problem is solved and your fear is gone."

Azami couldn't help herself- she burst out laughing.

"Oh my God, that was so corny! And you're dead serious, too! Clearly the Third Lord didn't explain the ways of the world to you. There are good shinobi, and bad shinobi. And I'm bad!"

Yuji shook his head. "No. You're not. Whatever you've done, I get the feeling you haven't taken the joy in it you're pretending to. You throw yourself into your work, just like I do. I kill sometimes, but that doesn't mean I enjoy it. I don't think you enjoy it, either. Proving your strength is one thing; but wanton killing isn't something you could ever take pleasure in."

Azami had long stopped laughing. Her face darkened "Damn you. I hadn't thought about things like that in a long time. It was easier not to. Your damn justice always makes me question myself! Why can't I just do what I'm good at?! Huh? You well-meaning bastards with your laws that only serve the good! I'm wicked compared to you! How can you treat me so well?!"

“ ...

Well, I like you. I mean, from your picture. (it's only natural, I guess...)”

Azami's hand snapped around Yuji's neck. It took all his restraint to stop himself from resisting her. He had told her some harsh things. But if he was right, it might just save his life- and hers.

“I like you, too, damn it! But there's nothing we can do about it! I have to turn you over to these people! They're stronger than I am.”

Yuji raised his chin a little so he could speak: “What about both of us? Are they stronger than both of us combined?”

Azami's grip loosened. “You'd fight these men? You don't know them! You don't know *me*! Why would you do this?”

“Like you said, I believe in justice. Anyone pulling your strings...making you do things you don't want. That's injustice. Like it or not, you've involved me. Now, you can turn me over to these guys and live another day, or you can let me help you and be free of them forever.”

Azami couldn't meet Yuji's eyes. She stepped close to him, her head facing down toward his chest. “...Can you kill them? Do you, someone so good, have that ability?”

“...If they deserve it. Whether I kill or not, you'll be free of them.”

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LAND OF FIRE; PRESENT DAY

Yuji opened his eyes, forcing himself out of the past. In the end, he had been forced to kill the leaders of that group. If he hadn't, Azami would have been dead. He was convinced she was actually a good person. Or at the very least, he had been attracted to her. Still was, if he was honest with himself.

These next few...months? Years? Who knows? I can't go home tomorrow. And I don't want to be alone anymore. I've had no one since Chiyoko. It's been too long. I keep grieving, but if I know her, Chiyoko would tell me to move on, smiling cheerfully and giving me a thumbs-up. God, do I miss her! But I'm fortunate; I have other people in my life. And Azami is one of them.

At that thought, the shadows in the room rippled. Yuji looked at the base of the candle, where the shadows were collecting. As he watched, a female appeared through the shadow, appearing as though 'falling forward', as if he was watching a rewinding video image. She landed on her feet gracefully.

Yuji took her image in as she landed before him. She wore a black dress with thin straps at the shoulders. The hem of the dress fell to her ankle. Just visible as her dress fluttered a bit was a black garter on her right upper leg. She wore western high heeled shoes with thin straps that wrapped around her ankle.

Her face was as gorgeous as he remembered. Framed by long, jet-black hair, Azami's face was perfectly shaped, her beautiful dark eyes lightly decorated with expertly applied make-up. Her lips were just the right shape and size, with just the right shade of lip gloss.

She finished her landing, standing up perfectly straight. She turned to Yuji, her smile wide.

"It's been so long. I've missed you."

Yuji stepped toward her tentatively, arms open for a hug. "I've missed you, too."

Azami stepped into his embrace, surprising him with a kiss. He had forgotten how forward she could be. He was wondering if it was maybe more healthy to be like that.

"I've missed that, too," he commented, knowing her kiss was just a friendly one.

"The last one I gave you was a little more serious than that."

Yuji nodded mildly. "Yes, but at that point, who knew we'd ever see each other again?"

Azami agreed with a nod and a smile. She looked around the room, noting the single lit candle. "Setting the mood, are we?"

Yuji shook his head. "No. I wish, but no. I know better than to assume that's where this meeting would head."

"I'm a classy girl; you've got to at least buy me dinner first."

Yuji and Azami both laughed at that. Their relationship, however short, was full of innuendoes and good-natured ribbing. To Yuji, Azami was an ideal girl. Practical, strong, smart, and gorgeous. Just the right amount of feminine, too. Yuji couldn't stand the clingy type; girls who pretended to be 'oh so helpless'. Not when he had seen how strong kunoichi could be, and how cunning they were.

"I summoned you for a mix of business and pleasure," Yuji said, getting right down to it. "You've probably heard that I've been exiled..."

At Azami's nod, he continued.

"I've found a dangerous section of Akatsuki research. I was tortured for months by them, while a clone took my spot. The clone was perfect, until I showed up and blew it's cover. The clone, in turn, told everyone about my organization, KEKOBÉ. Granted, it was just me who took the fall, so no real harm was done. But now I'm in the position to continue my work, undermining the Akatsuki. And...well, now that I've gone bad, I thought we could see each other again. You know. Without ANBU breathing down your neck."

Azami smiled to herself; Yuji couldn't keep his eyes off her. She was admiring her respectfully. She didn't get all done up like this for just anyone. The chance to work with Yuji again was a good excuse.

To Azami, Yuji was a guy she thought she'd never meet. He was honest, hard-working, and would put

his life on the line for any innocent person. He took no pleasure in killing, but he understood when it needed to be done, and he made no excuses for what he had done. He was handsome in a sweet yet rugged way; boyish enough to be cute, yet with enough edge to be formidable.

Yuji offered Azami a set. She took it, patting the seat next to her so he would get the hint to join her. He did without hesitation. Azami spoke even as she considered him.

“So, that’s ‘business’. What about ‘pleasure’?” she asked, a little purr in her voice.

He’s been beaten up. His eye has been damaged, and I can see the restraint marks on his wrists from the torture. He had bags under his eyes, too. He’s being pushed to the limit psychologically so soon after being pushed to the limit physically...

Yuji answered her question as she thought about his ruffled state.

“The ‘pleasure’...I was hoping to spend time with you. I mean, *really* spend time with you this time. We didn’t leave things the way I would have liked. I didn’t want to really leave things at all...”

Azami didn’t make him finish that thought. The goodbye they had shared had been painful. No point in dwelling on it. Not when they had time to make up for all they had lost in the name of duty last time.

Azami cuddled up to Yuji, holding him close.

“I’m all dressed up; how about we go grab a bite and then talk business?”

Yuji agreed, moving to go get dressed.

“Or we can talk pleasure, if you want. After not seeing you for so long...”

Azami smiled at his attempt at innuendo. He was improving at that kind of banter.

“One doesn’t ‘talk’ pleasure, sweetie. That takes physical effort...”

Yuji blushed.

Another point for me, thought Azami. This time, Yuji, we won’t have to say goodbye. Not like last time.

22 - Circumstances of Developing Feelings

FOUR YEARS AGO;

Azami led Yuji into the building that housed her bosses. The Thirteen, as they were called, called the shots with the local crime organizations, and their influence was growing, thanks in no small part to Azami.

I killed the worst criminals from the other organization, allowing The Thirteen to grow in power. I've done nothing but kill scum. Yuji was the first 'good' guy I've hunted. I'd like to think that he can take these men down...

Azami slid a sideways glance at the boy next to her. His slender frame, his young features, his apparent lack of chakra leaking out from around her purposely flawed seal...

But if he can't, then I'll sit back and let him do what damage he can. Then I'll step in and finish him, collect the bounty, and then kill the rest of them. I would owe him that much...

*Yuji looked over at Azami. In a voice that seemed genuinely hurt, he asked her:
"You don't think I can do it...right? I don't need to be an empath to figure that out..."*

Before Azami could cover up with a response, Yuji looked forward again, his face nothing but determined.

"If I don't kill them, then I'll hurt them enough so that you can escape their clutches."

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As soon as Azami brought Yuji into the room, she released her seal on his chakra. With chakra, breaking the ropes holding him would be no problem. The Thirteen sat behind thin curtains made of tatami, hiding their faces from everyone, including each other.

Paranoid bastards...

Yuji looked from one to the other. Azami guessed he was trying to pick out who the leader was. He would be looking for a long time if that was the case- there was no 'leader' per say among The Thirteen. They were all equal in their shares of power and money. All equally guilty, for that matter. Then what would matter most was who had abused Azami the most.

Yuji used chakra to cut his ropes. He shook his head.

"They played you, Azami. These must be stand-ins. There's no real ability here. You caught me for nothing."

As one, eleven on the seven rushed Yuji, their various weapons drawn. In an instant, they were all cut

up and lying on the floor. Yuji's hand glowed blue with a Chakra Scalpel.

"Stupid enough to fall for insults, too."

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Present Day; Land of Fire

Yuji took a few minutes to get dressed, wearing western attire to match Azami. A pair of black pants, a crisp white shirt, and a black and red striped tie. The two of them turned heads as they walked. Azami was incredibly gorgeous; Yuji was on her arm. Azami was the main event, though Yuji could easily be called attractive in a dark sort of way.

They sat down at an upscale restaurant, talking amiably about their single shared adventure. The restaurant was dark, lit by recessed lights, making for an intimate atmosphere. The food was good, but the couples that came barely noticed. That included Yuji and Azami. By the end of the meal, they were sitting much closer together, talking more intimately. Eventually, their drinks lay forgotten as they talked, their hands constantly touching each other's arms or shoulders.

There had always been an attraction, Azami thought. Their respective paths had stopped anything from forming from that attraction, but now that Yuji was operating outside of his village.

Not caring who was watching at this point, Azami leaned in and kissed him. He put his arm around her and leaned closer. She broke the kiss and put a hand on his chest, inside his shirt, leaning her head into his ear, giving it a small nibble.

"You know, this damn mission of yours is crazy. But what the hell; I'm in. You've earned my...trust."

Yuji nuzzled her with his cheek, planting a kiss on her neck. She leaned away and took his hand, a light hue of red on her cheeks.

"Come with me," she asked/demanded/begged. There was desperation in her voice, and she was NEVER desperate. Yuji let her lead him away, his heart fluttering. He'd really missed her. The way things ended before left a bad taste in his mouth. This was a chance to make things right.

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Four Years Ago

The last two of The Thirteen were at least smart enough to be cautious. Their comrades lay in varying states of injury all over the floor. Some had been separated from their limbs, and only the precise cuts Yuji had made allowed them to stay alive around the shock.

The last two were the most skilled and smartest. One of them spoke to Yuji, who turned in his direction instinctively.

“This is a boon for us. The weakness in our group has been eliminated. Thank you, Yuji Itou.”

Yuji didn't rise to the bait. His eyes shifted, waiting for the next attack. Where would it come from? Left? Right? Behind?

Above!

Yuji rolled forward just in time to dodge an axe. He flung a chakra-laced palm midway through his roll. The axe buried itself in the floor where he'd been just a moment ago. The arm wielding the axe hung limply at the side of its owner. Yet for that damaging blow, the owner of the arm didn't seem all that disturbed.

“A well-timed counter. Most wouldn't have attempted that counter. They would have simply dodged.”

The man who owned the axe, Yuji saw, was older, maybe in his early sixties. He was bald on top, but had hair on the back and sides of his head, all of it gray. He carried himself like an aristocrat, and dressed the part, too. The haori he wore was expensive; the maker famous. The hakama fit so well it had to be custom made.

“If I dodged, you would have hit me with the side to side slash you were about to use before I cut the tendons in your arm.”

A sudden gurgling sound from Azami made Yuji turn toward her. A mistake, as the old man stabbed forward. Yuji snapped his arm down, but the knife was lodged in his forearm, sticking straight out the other end. It hurt, but he'd been stabbed so many times by now it scarcely mattered. If it didn't kill him and he wouldn't bleed out from it, then he was fine. The old man just dodged Yuji's side kick- a kick Yuji had thrown with murder behind it.

Azami was being held in a chokehold by the other member of The Thirteen. This one was a woman, and a very elegant one. She dressed well, wearing a Chinese dress that showed off her shapely legs and ample breasts. She could have been Azami's...

...

Mother.

Azami herself looked betrayed. Her eyes moved to Yuji, no comprehension in them. So this wasn't part of some elaborate plan on her part. He could feel her apprehension...her betrayal. It made him sick. He felt bile rising, but he swallowed it down.

“You fight very well,” came the compliment from Azami's mother. “But I was concerned that my daughter, who never took interest in her work, would insist on finding you. The bounty on you is large enough, but there were better targets. To think she would be infatuated with the bastard protégé of the Hokage of the Leaf Village!”

The woman began to speak directly to Azami now, ignoring Yuji.

“You stupid girl! I warned you that romance would be your downfall! If you did anything with this target, it should have been seduction! Marrying him would have assured you power! And with power, comes wealth! How do you think your father and I met?! A marriage of love is weak! Nothing good is born from

emotion! When will you learn?!"

Azami's mother threw her to the ground and put a foot on her neck. Azami's hands pushed against the foot at first, but then simply dropped to her sides.

"Good. You were smart enough not to resist this time. Still, I must kill you for this failure."

Yuji audibly sank to his knees. The sound attracted attention, as he'd meant it to. Azami's mother and father looked at him.

"Please," he begged, bowing low. He had never humbled himself in such a way before, and his cheeks burned with shame. "Don't hurt her. If you need to kill someone, then make it me. Let her go- disown her, so any disgrace won't be connected to you. But please...don't hurt her anymore!"

Azami's mother responded by stepping down harder on Azami's neck.

"You are as big a fool as she is! Your life is not equal to hers! This girl that I gave birth to is worthless! You, who have done nothing to dishonor me, would trade your life, thinking it equal to hers? You'll die, but only after you watch her die."

Yuji looked up from his bow. His face was expressionless. Lord Hokage had seen this face before, and at that time always knew that Yuji's temper was at it's worst. These people did not have the benefit of that knowledge.

"You know, I thought I'd give you a chance," he said, standing up slowly. "I don't enjoy killing, you know. It's part of my job, and I may even do it well, but I do not gain any sick satisfaction from it. Life is sacred, and once taken away may not be given back. I will ask you once more: Let her go, and take my life instead."

Yuji shot a glance at Azami. It was now or never.

The kunai in his forearm came out easily. Azami pushed her mother's foot up as hard as she could, rolling to the side as soon as her neck cleared her mother's foot. Yuji's kunai went flying, halting the older woman before she could reach Azami, who was still sputtering on the ground. That bought him time to get in between the two females. Yuji's right hand shot out like an arrow and snatched Azami's mother's neck, lifting her off her feet and dropping her onto the ground.

Yuji held the woman in place, glaring down with cold intensity. "Stay down. Get up again and I kill you."

Azami, still breathless, tried to warn Yuji to move. Her father and his axe were coming. There was no time to do anything else. Azami rolled forward, her hand snatching a senbon from a garter her mother wore high up on her leg. She threw it with all she had, then grabbed Yuji around the waist and sent both of them tumbling away.

Unable to stop, Azami's father buried the axe into his wife. The senbon Azami had thrown lodged in his throat, killing him just as he hit his wife with the axe.

23 - The First

LAND OF FIRE: PRESENT DAY

Yuji had set up a room for Azami. After the previous night, they agreed that her staying here would be best. As it turned out, Azami had been thinking back to when she had met Yuji. Not much had changed when it came to his looks, but she noticed that he was much more...well, maybe it was less naïve. It pained her a bit to see that he had lost that shine of justice in his eyes. She knew he would.

The life he chose...he would become tainted eventually. Just like me- it just took him longer. He's still so sweet and innocent, and he still fights for justice. But he won't ever trust people the same way again.

For his part, Yuji was not surprised to find Azami to be a very beautiful, and quite honestly sexy twenty year old. She practically sparkled without even trying. She just had natural beauty. He also knew to treat her like a knife without a sheath. The years hadn't lessened how dangerous she was. But somehow it didn't matter.

Since we met, I've felt an affinity toward her. Not just her beauty. On some deep level; a level I'm not entirely conscious of. I can still read her better than anyone...well, except Sakura, and except Chiyoko...

That set Yuji thinking about Chiyoko, just for a moment.

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THE LEAF VILLAGE- EIGHT YEARS AGO

*Thirteen year old Yuji watched thirteen year old Chiyoko wash her face after training practice. Even glistening with sweat, she was somehow so...
So...*

So what? Hell if he knew. At thirteen, he knew he liked Chiyoko. He wasn't sure why, or what to do with those feelings. Boys liked girls- he got that much. The 'why' just didn't follow yet. He didn't like every girl he met. Some were petty, whiny, selfish. Just like guys, he supposed, but it seemed more obvious when it came to girls for some reason. Maybe he put them under a microscope because he didn't understand them?

It made his teeth itch, trying to unwrap that paradox. All he knew was he had to say something to her. It felt like the right thing to do. He certainly couldn't keep stalking her.

Gritting his teeth, he walked over to her and stood next to her, at the next sink. They were outside, in an area for the academy students to just relax between classes. The boys and girls had been separated for training today. Perhaps an opportunity for conversation?

Before Yuji could talk, Chiyoko did.

"Hiya, Yu! What's up?"

Well, that was the question, wasn't it? Yuji answered as casually as he could, picturing Hisako snickering. That actually strengthened his resolve to be casual. He would have to thank her, though she'd have no clue why. That actually made him smile. Driving her nuts like that was one good reason to get up in the morning.

"I was curious about what the girls did in class today. Seems like they gave you a good workout."

Chiyoko giggled. It was such a pleasant sound. She was always doing that, luckily. Yuji wondered if he amused her; then he wondered if it was a good thing that he amused her.

"We had physical testing today. Jumping, running, lifting weights- all without using our chakra outside our body! Climbing that tree was soooooooo tiring!"

God, but she was cute! As she said that, she gave a cute little stretch, her hands clasped as she stretched her arms over her head. That made Yuji notice something different about her. But what- ah. No track jacket today. Just a white t-shirt and her red shorts with the white stripes on them that were mesmerizing when she moved.

"What did the boys do?" she asked, leaning on the sink as she looked at Yuji. Her brown hair was pulled up into a ponytail. Yuji decided he liked ponytails soon after meeting her, as her hair was habitually tied as such, but today's ponytail somehow seemed the best.

"We sparred without chakra," he answered. "It was...fun. Kinda painful, though. I bet I'm one giant bruise."

Chiyoko playfully lifted up his shirt, inspecting his side.

"Hmm. Yeah, kinda. I'd kiss it better, but I'm not sure Hisako would like that..."

Yuji found himself blushing, not entirely sure why.

"Hisako? Why is that?"

Chiyoko smiled knowingly, and it sure seemed like she knew what she was talking about.

"Oh, nothing much. But I think she would probably say something about you and I getting all friendly without being fully clothed. Though I am curious about what you look like without a shirt."

Likewise, Yuji thought, blushing even as he thought it. What the hell was wrong with him?

"Likewise I bet," Chiyoko added, shrugging. "Nature of the beast, I guess. Well, if ya really wanna see..."

Yuji didn't quite know how to answer that. Well, duh, he did, but somehow 'hell yes' didn't seem like a good answer. But 'no, thanks' wasn't right either. Damn the female paradox.

Chiyoko was already giggling as she watched Yuji work that one out. She spared him having to answer,

apparently deciding she'd teased him enough.

"Um, you know, that wasn't a fair question for me to ask. But, um, if you take your shirt off, I can heal you. I mean, I learned a healing jutsu, and I'd like to try it...if that's okay..."

Something about Chiyoko's sudden loss of confidence made Yuji's take notice. She seemed so...serious. As he thought it, he found himself taking off his shirt. That was odd for him- he wasn't one to take his shirt off in front of others. Stranger still, Chiyoko seemed particularly interested. Guys in the village took their shirts off all the time, so she had to have seen a guy's chest before. Unless it was his chest, specifically, that had her interest?

She doesn't offer to heal everyone. She could just as easily have tried this out on some girl in the locker room. And she didn't giggle, or even talk like her normal self.

The feeling of a hand- and chakra- on his bare flesh made him return to what was happening in the present. Chiyoko was kneeling down, holding a hand to his side, focusing as she used her chakra to heal his bruise. He felt the pain lessen. His mouth had dropped open in surprise. This felt so...something. It was a word he couldn't place. But seeing this girl work so hard to heal him... He wanted to protect her. That was his first thought. The first thought he understood, anyway. He had plenty of others he would need to sort out later.

"I...wish I could do the same for you," Yuji managed to say to her. "I'm not so good with healing jutsus, but if you're okay with it, I could use the practice..."

Chiyoko looked up, blushing heavily. She stood up awkwardly, and indicated her ankle. "I...twisted my ankle a little bit. Anko-sensei doesn't really believe in healing her students, I guess. If you don't mind..."

Yuji activated the jutsu, and he did his best to heal her. He found that if he concentrated hard on her injury, the jutsu worked. Seeing any injury on her seemed to hurt him. In a strange way, that made him understand what was going on. Why he was acting this way. Why he felt what he did.

He was, for the first time in his young life, in love.

He finished healing Chiyoko, taking longer than he needed to because he needed to think. How did one admit to these feelings? By the time he stood up, he wasn't sure, but he was going to go with 'pure honesty'.

"Chiyoko...I really...I really like you."

Chiyoko smiled at him sweetly. "I like you, too. And Hisako, too, ya know?"

Yuji shook his head. "No. I mean, I love you."

Chiyoko lowered her head, unable to look at him. Panic time.

"I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable! I just...damn, I...really messed things up."

Yuji forced himself to calm down. This was already hard for Chiyoko. He couldn't make it worse with his own selfish feelings that he had just thoughtlessly forced on her.

But then, Chiyoko stepped into Yuji and put her arms around him, with her head in his chest. "I love you, too."

Yuji felt himself returning the hug, entirely unsure of what to do now. Ask her out? Hell, marry her? What did people in love do?

Chiyoko answered that question for him. She was looking up at him, clearly expecting something. Her lips were parted, as though she was about to speak. Her eyes were closed, and she had closed the distance between their faces to half of what it had been before.

Yuji leaned forward, parted his lips, and managed to meet hers. He closed his eyes, too, because that seemed like the right thing to do.

A second, maybe two later Chiyoko moved back, though she kept her hands around Yuji's waist, and she gently touched her forehead to his.

"I was so nervous, wondering how to tell you," she told him, nuzzling him with her forehead. Her bangs rested against his, her lips just out of reach.

This kissing thing was something Yuji planned to do more often. He had felt pure energy when their lips met. Bring on the Legendary Sannin- he'd take 'em all on right now, and win, too.

"I didn't know what I was feeling. I've never been in love before," Yuji admitted.

"Me, neither. Heh, Hisako's gonna be mad, though. I think she likes you, ya know?"

Yuji shrugged. "I...tolerate her, too."

"Yuji..." she said, her voice lined with mock exasperation. She was always insisting the other two get along better.

"Okay, okay, she's a friend. But I think she'll be happy for...well, for you, anyway. Not sure 'happiness' is what she wishes me. An ulcer, maybe..."

Chiyoko playfully rapped her fist on Yuji's head, giggling as she did.

A whistle in the distance summoned Chiyoko back to practice. The others girls ran by, streaming around Yuji and Chiyoko like salmon upstream. Seemed to be a calculated effort on their part to give the new couple privacy. Yuji was thankful for that.

Chiyoko lingered, though she wasn't holding on to Yuji anymore. She was a short distance away, but she had her big, sunny smile on again.

"I'm glad ya started this! I don't think I would have been so brave. To just say what I felt honestly.

Good thing yer not shy!"

Yuji snorted in response. Chiyoko knew what he meant by that, and laughed again.

"Ahhh! Well, either way, I've gotta get back to practice! But how 'bout meeting up outside the academy after?"

Yuji's tongue had seemed to swell to ten times it's normal size. He managed a 'That'd be great', and a little nod. Chiyoko seemed to understand what that meant. She turned to trot away, but looked over her shoulder one more time as she did.

"I'm glad you were brave. We could all die tomorrow, ya know? Best to have some great memories, right?"

Yuji didn't think much of what she said at the time. Right now, he was in love and death could get lost. Who had time to die? He had to decide what the hell people did on dates! Maybe Hayate-sensei could help him. He was going out with Yuugao, after all.

The chunin exams were in a month. He had to train hard to protect Chiyoko.

And Hisako, too. Chiyoko's right. She's gonna be pissed!

A big grin on his face, Yuji went back to the boy's training area. He realized that he had just kissed his crush with his shirt off. Suddenly, who cared about being shy? He kept his shirt off as many of the other boys did while sparring, and matched up against his next opponent.

24 - The Peak; The Valley; The Plain

THE LAND OF FIRE; PRESENT DAY

How messed up was it to think of your first crush after just having spent the night with someone else?

As he thought that, Yuji suddenly knew why his abilities had become so strong when it came to Azami. It was strong personal feelings- a desire to protect, specifically- that awakened his empathic abilities to the point where those he trusted could read him as well as he could read them.

He hadn't developed the empathic abilities to the current extent he had them now until after Chiyoko had died. He had always been sympathetic to someone in need, and maybe able to sense basic emotions, but true empathy was different. Chiyoko's death had taught him that, in more ways than one. It had someone allowed his abilities to evolve out of some necessity. That necessity, Yuji reasoned, was a strong desire to never let another loved one be murdered. Sakura had been close to an insanity that would have been worse than death; before that it had been Azami who had nearly been killed. And in between had been Yuugao losing Hayate. Each time, Yuji's ability to feel- and more importantly, the ability to react to that feeling with an appropriate jutsu- developed further.

No more thinking about that, though. The pieces were coming together naturally. Right now, he had a woman he was very fond of in the next room. He had left her side only because he needed to write some things down and didn't want to disturb her.

They had picked up where they had left off, as if they hadn't been apart. It was like they had known each other forever. It felt completely natural, being with Azami. And it wasn't any less passionate for being natural.

If only he could go home and take her with him life would be perfect.

Instead, reality dictated that he undercut the Akatsuki in terms of price and effectiveness wherever possible. What had occurred to Yuji last night was that he could really make money off this, and he could do it legitimately. Raising capital would be a big help, of that he was sure. Why, he didn't know, but it felt correct. Giving that his feelings had just reunited him with Azami, he decided to let them play out.

He had ideas, but he kept thinking about Azami more than work. Last night she had been dressed so elegantly. She was a pure energy; a passionate energy. And that passion had been all for Yuji. As they had laid together last night, she admitted to him that she had never trusted anyone else like him since. She had been living alone, working jobs that were still cringe-worthy, yet not blatantly illegal like before. The Sand Village had already taken her out of their BINGO book, as she had performed some services to them that had aided them while their Kazekage recovered from his death and subsequent return to life. She had given them copies of the reports Yuji had made to the Third Hokage; reports that proved her innocence and the mitigating circumstances around her crimes. The Leaf Village had already cleared her, again thanks to Yuji's testimony.

Yuji again pictured her from last night. Her makeup was tasteful; her clothes elegant yet sexy; her mind and body all for him. And his for her. She had seen the wounds all over his body; he had seen the wounds on hers. They spoke a silent language to each other that they each understood perfectly. Yuji could remember her beautiful, dark eyes speaking volumes to him; his hazel eyes returning those thoughts.

The best part of the night had been holding on to each other, their emotions buzzing so thickly that each could tell what the other felt. Above all else, even carnal desire, was safety. Trust. Their trust in each other was as close to absolute as they had ever felt.

Azami woke up soon and joined Yuji in the next room. She gave him a nice kiss, her hands lingering on his shoulders as she stood behind him.

“At work already, handsome?”

Yuji smiled, putting his brush down. “After last night, I felt like I could do anything. So, I thought I should write some of the stuff down, before I decided it was impossible.”

Azami took the paper off his desk, frowning as she read it.

“That’s a big undertaking. Undercutting the Akatsuki; building a business as a front...huh. A nightclub is what you want to do with that money?”

Yuji nodded. “And a teahouse. Seems like some money could be made there, too.”

“You’d make more money with a strip club or casino,” she pointed out, absolutely serious. And in places like that, you can gather information more easily than at a place like a tea house or an izakaya.”

Yuji had thought about that. If he were only thinking of money, that would make sense. But he also knew such places carried a disreputable connotation, and he wanted to keep his name available for Hokage someday. He would have to clear his current record up, but that was already being arranged.

Azami sat down next to him, leaning her head on his shoulder, nuzzling him as he sat there.

“Distracting you a bit, am I?” she asked, hoping her newly broken in lover would get the hint in her voice.

Probably not. He’s so dense when it comes to girls!

Yuji rolled his eyes. “Just a little. You’re hard to ignore...”

Azami gave a sigh. “You have so much to learn about women. If I’m bothering you like this, then I WANT you to be bothered. You know. *Bothered*.”

Yuji sat up a bit straighter, chuckling at his own stupidity. “Times like these I wish I had read Master Jiraiya’s work. Then maybe I would better understand the female mind.”

Azami pushed Yuji down onto his back, curling herself up next to him so her head was on his chest.

"No man can understand the female mind. Years alone have proven that. But what fun would there be if we made ourselves clear?" asked Azami, seemingly more content now. She liked listening to Yuji's heartbeat. She remembered feeling it through his embrace the night they two had killed her parents and their eleven partners. It was a sound and feeling she associated with comfort.

With love.

With that thought, she rolled over and kissed him gently. Last night was plenty passionate; the unrestrained romance of a young couple. She wanted to show him that there was more to her interest in him. There was a depth to it as well; beyond skin deep. This was very much an affair of the heart for Azami, even though she was cast through body and skill as the seductress.

Her jet black hair fell over his face, and he reached up to brush it to one side, his eyes lovingly searching hers. He moved to kiss her, though he was more than content with her being the aggressor. It was acting on instinct.

Then the memory hit him again.

Azami hadn't seen Yuji like this yet. Panic filled his features as a specter inside his mind chased him, leaving him no safe haven. She'd been able to see that he was beaten up psychologically, but this!

She held him, physically forcing him to her, making him feel her warmth. It was real; the hell inside his mind was not.

His breath came in gasps, though she could see him fighting to retain control. His eyes teared up, and he suddenly was heavier in her arms.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "Sorry. God, I'm so sorry. This isn't fair to you! Hell, it isn't fair to *me*!"

Yuji sat up his eyes now watering. He crawled to the window and put his head out, trying to get some fresh air into his lungs. He kept talking to Azami.

"You don't deserve this. After last night...you mean so much to me! But I can't ask you to share this! This...this private hell! I can't do that to you! I wish I could just die!"

At that, Azami held Yuji, bodily pulling him away from the window. She reached for a series of pressure points, starting at the bottom of his feet.

"Listen to me," she told him, firmly, tapping the first pressure points. "I don't understand yet, but I will! And even if I never do, it doesn't matter!"

The next set of points, and the set after that. She'd worked her way up his legs, and she could feel the tension drain out of him, little by little. She struck him lightly at his ki point, three inches below his navel. He gave a little gasp, and the memory faded. His pain faded.

The illness...yes, it too. He could deny it no longer. The memory...the obsession made him ill.

But Azami wasn't gone. He fought with his mind, forcing it to clear; to keep her separate from his fears.

She was not to be feared. She was to be loved.

She had not run from this. His personal fear, which he himself tried to run from. She reigned it in and stared it down, looking through it to see him. She wanted him to feel no more suffering at the hands of this fear. She wanted him to feel nothing but the peace and contentment she felt with him. He could feel all this from her.

“This fear of yours...this anxiety...this obsession...whatever it is. Together we’ll kill it! And if we can’t kill it, then I’ll share your suffering! You took my pain; let me help you with yours. In any way I can...” she pleaded, her eyes watering though she was strong. “Let me help.”

Yuji let himself fall forward into her embrace, sobs wracking his body.

“I never wanted you to see this. I thought I could handle it alone. I thought I could hide it. But I can’t. I’m pathetic. Please...you don’t have to suffer with me. I love you too much to ask that.”

Azami held him tighter. “Unless I’m dead, I won’t leave you. Even if you order me away. Even if you threaten me. Even if you run. I will not leave you. If your strength runs dry, then I will be your strength!”

They sat in silence for a while, the battered warrior and the beautiful bounty-hunter kunoichi who was now his caretaker. Slowly, Yuji’s strength returned, and he got to his knees. Then to his feet. Azami followed him, keeping her hands on him. He needed the warmth of human contact. He needed *her*.

This ‘need’ another human had for her was new to Azami. She had always been one to fly solo, doing work that was just the good side of the law, killing the worst scum she could for profit. To have someone depend on her...she always thought she would dismiss it as a weakness, and the person depending as weak, but that wasn’t true. Not now. Not with this person.

Azami found she needed to feel Yuji as much as he needed to feel her. A pair of outcasts had found each other. Yuji couldn’t go home; Azami didn’t have a home to go to. It made perfect sense that they would meet.

“I...I found my father. My REAL father,” Azami told Yuji, to get his mind on something else. “He had been looking for me for years. He’s been living as a sword maker in the Land of Iron. He’s good. Really good. And he’s young, too. That old guy...from before...my mother slept with him for his wealth. She had married my real father before he gained any fame as a weapons artisan. I’d...love for you to meet him.”

Yuji was a little surprised, but he hid it as well as he could. He would not drive yet one more person out of his life. He had alienated all but a handful of allies and family; he needed everyone left in his life. Azami especially.

“I’d like that.”

25 - A New Life

SIX MONTHS PASS

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SOUND VILLAGE: PRESENT DAY

Hisako and Ryofu dove into the bushes, dodging the sentries. It had been their seventh close call this hour. Too many to be a coincidence.

"They must have a sensory type that is following us," murmured Ryofu, his hand twitching on his sword's handle. "Bastard."

"Could be 'dog', remember," Hisako said cheerfully. "Either way, it doesn't matter. This is a freak's nest now, since Orochimaru abandoned it."

"Or was killed," Ryofu added hopefully. "Bastard."

No argument there.

"We aren't going to do any good here. We should get back. This sensory type is annoying, but not all that good if he or she can't pinpoint us."

The two backed up slowly, then used a Body Flicker Jutsu to land at the meeting spot.

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It had been three months since Yuji had been exiled. KEKOBÉ had continued to function, led by Ryofu. Hisako, Yuugao, Sakura, and Ryofu were the four main agents. Kakashi helped out occasionally, but with so many S-ranked missions out there he wasn't often available.

They had done good work. The Akatsuki had been unable to grow effectively. Their recruits had all but disappeared, either defecting or being killed by KEKOBÉ. Their sources of income had been limited- or so captured soldiers had told them. It seemed a pair of shinobi, one male and one female, had been undercutting the Akatsuki by a good portion, even working for only 100 ryo. The mystery pair also turned away missions that would be given to the villages, so no one suffered but the Akatsuki.

"Wonder who the female is," Hisako muttered for the hundredth time. "I mean, it is TOTALLY unbelievable Yuji would take on a partner, let alone a female! He'd never put her in that kind of danger!"

Ryofu agreed privately, but always made sure to object to annoy Hisako. "Maybe he found a 'bad' girl. That's what a stuffed-shirt like him needs anyway."

"Does that really sound like Yuji? I mean, shacking up with some huge breasted, I don't know, bounty-hunter chick?"

Ryofu had to agree that it didn't sound like Yuji. It was laughable, in fact. But it didn't answer the question of 'who was it'? Wracking his brain, Ryofu could not think of a single possibility. Yuji never mentioned any girls from his past, except for that Chiyoko girl. And it sure couldn't be her.

At that moment, Sakura and Yuugao joined them. They, too, were empty-handed, save for a small black scroll.

"Thought this was interesting," Yuugao said, opening the scroll. "Sakura picked it out. Don't ask me how, but it's from Yuji."

"The base was crawling with Orochimaru's usual freak-show," Sakura reported. "No Akatsuki." **Or Sasuke**

The scroll was unraveled now. It was Yuji's untidy scrawl, but it was written in English. Of them, only Yuugao could read it.

" 'I've arranged for you to have a mission a few miles north of the town of Kanzo. We will meet you there. Burn this upon reading.' "

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True to his word, Yuji's KEKOBÉ group had a mission five miles north of town of Kanzo. Team Kakashi was dispatched, with Naruto 'under ANBU guard'- Yuugao, in this case- to keep him protected from the Akatsuki threat.

The specifics of their missions were to be determined by their client, a restaurant/bar owner by the name of Masato Oshima, who had been plagued by what he described as 'demons. Absolute demons. B-ranked mission level!'

The bar was a long room, with tables that had candles on them and a bar built into a corner, making an L shape. It was all made of dark wood, with dim and intimate lighting. The patrons all seemed to be happy, regular people. The bartender, however, stood out.

Even Ryofu blushed a little at the sight of her. A tall woman with large breasts, a toned stomach, and shapely legs shown off by her cocktail dress stood behind the bar, handily mixing drinks, flinging bottles around in the air. She saw the group, smiled and waved them over, then caught a bottle behind her back, pouring it into a glass.

"Noto-chan, table twelve!" she called, sliding the drink down a bar to a young man who was built like a brick house. Muscles bulged under his uniform, but he had an easy look about him, rather than the intimidating bouncer type.

Not missing a beat, the woman turned back to Team Kakashi.

"Here to see Oshima-san? He said some friends were coming. He didn't mention all of them were so handsome..." she said, eyes lingering on Ryofu. "Or so sexy!" she continued, giving an eye to Yuugao and Sakura. She giggled at the looks on all their faces. Whatever they had been expecting, this wasn't it.

Just as ‘Oshima-san’ wanted. He told me to keep them off-guard.

“Come on to the next room. Oshima-san is waiting.”

Without waiting for a response, Azami turned around and walked through a set of western-style doors in the back.

KEKOBÉ followed her in silence, having agreed not to say anything until necessary.

After the western-style doors, they passed a small room on the right that was as traditionally Japanese as they could have wanted. A shoji-style door, currently open, separated it from the rest of the bar/restaurant. It was currently unoccupied.

“Oshima-san will probably treat you to that. He’s become quite good at the tea ceremony. Also, Battoujutsu. He teaches classes in both. Calligraphy is a hobby. He inked all you see on the walls.”

Before they could really look at the various wall scrolls, they arrived at another western-style door. At this one, their hostess stopped and knocked. They heard an unfamiliar voice call ‘come in’ on the other side.

Azami smiled back at the group. “It will all be clear soon. Sorry for embarrassing you back there,” she told them, stepping aside to let them into the office. She didn’t *sound* sorry, so the KEKOBÉ group took her at her word.

On the other side of a thick desk was a man with short black hair, cut in such a way that it seemed slicked back. He wore tinted glass that hid his eyes, and a black suit with a white shirt. He looked up from a stack of papers. He nodded once to Azami, who closed the door and began to weave hand signs.

“Art of the Barrier of Silence!”

The man joined her, murmuring an apology for the secrecy. “Art of the Barrier of Blindness!”

The Leaf team felt the sensation of two chakras gliding across the room with practiced ease. Nothing changed, but they could feel the chakra creating a genjutsu. It was like standing with one foot inside a genjutsu world, the other foot in the normal world.

“You get used to it,” said the man presumed to be Oshima-san. He bowed to them deeply. “Forgive me for being so secretive...especially to colleagues.”

Just like that, Oshima-san became Yuji. Nothing changed in appearance, or even voice, but it felt like Yuji. At least, mostly.

Yuji carried himself differently. Like a man who no longer carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. Like someone who had decided to act, rather than observe.

Like someone who’s been sharing a bed with an exotic beauty... Hisako’s mind supplied, giving

Azami another look. **She's obviously interested in him, and less obviously not just as a sex object. There are feelings here. If I'd known that, I wouldn't have had Sakura come...**

Yuji smiled widely, and continued. "The Akatsuki has been hurting lately, so far as the information I can get tells me. I'm hoping you can tell me more about what's going on..."

Ryofu spoke first. He listed all the damage done to the Akatsuki. Their limited numbers, their funding hurt, their recruits scared away or killed.

"But for all that, they aren't overly concerned. The remaining Akatsuki- their leader, the man who looks like a plant, the goofy one with the mask, the female- they're all going about business as usual."

Sakura chimed in. "But it isn't all good news, Yuji. We've lost a few on our side...including Asuma-sensei and Master Jiraiya."

Yuji's hand hit the desk hard enough to split it in two.
"No...that can't be..."

His demeanor changed. The businessman 'Oshima-san' seemed to have never existed. Yuji- the old Yuji- was now front and center.

"Tell me that Asuma-sensei took his killer with him. I know a man like him wouldn't just be killed..."

Omitting a lot of the detail, Yuugao nodded. "It's as you say. Both his killers have been killed. Master Jiraiya's killers...all six of them, from what our intelligence gathers...were seemingly unscathed, despite all the power Master Jiraiya possessed. He passed crucial intelligence on to us, which Naruto deciphered."

" 'The real one is not among them,' " Naruto recited. How could he ever forget his Master's final message.

"Where did he die?" Yuji asked. "Has anyone gone for the body?"

The silence that greeted his question gave Yuji all the answers he needed. He turned to Azami: "I'm going back to the Leaf, and I want you to come with me. Noto and Takeshi can run the bar and dojo. It's time to clear our names and lend our strength to this fight."

"I'll tell them," Azami said, exiting the room immediately. Yuugao and Team Kakashi followed her. That left Ryofu and Hisako alone with Yuji.

"...Has Sakura been okay?" Yuji asked quietly. Guiltily.

SMACK!

As he expected, Hisako slapped him across the face.

"How the *hell* could you say what you did to her as you left? And then have that...that *slut* on your arm when you see her again after all this time?!"

Yuji spoke quietly. "Because I never intended to return to the village. I wanted to give her closure. I said too much, and I regret it."

Then his voice turned nasty: "But if you *ever* call Azami a slut again, I will make damn sure you pay for it."

Ryofu thought about stepping in, but ultimately chose not to. Yuji and Hisako had both crossed lines. Tit for tat, he figured. No point in stepping in. They wouldn't take it any farther.

"As I'm no longer part of KEKOBÉ, I can't reveal anything. But I think I can clear my name in a different way..." Yuji muttered mysteriously. He put his tinted glasses back on, leaving his suit in place. "I'm going to make them pay attention to me when we get back."

It was then that Ryofu noticed Yuji's slight limp. It was about the same time that Hisako noticed a scar on the back of his neck.

"What did you do?" Hisako asked quietly. "You're injured. Knowing you as well as I do, I can sense it- your chakra isn't even flowing properly. That means you had some catastrophic injury. Probably internal injuries..."

Yuji stopped walking. "The Akatsuki movement was halted. That's all that's important. I managed to stay alive only thanks to Azami. I did major damage- damage we could *never* have done if we played by the rules. I took a mission nearly four months ago with no intention of coming back, if that's what it took."

26 - The Lost Mission- Part 1

FOUR MONTHS AGO: AKATSUKI MAIN HIDEOUT

Yuji ran as fast as he could. His hands were a blur the entire time, throwing shuriken and kunai because they were quiet, and stealth was a necessity. That was why each shot had been to an enemy throat. Yuji didn't like to kill so indiscriminately, but this WAS the Akatsuki. There was no saving those people. Not this late in the game.

Nearly twenty sentries later, Yuji was crouching near the entrance of the Akatsuki base he was going to ruin. This one seemed to be special to them. He didn't know why, but he'd figure it out and destroy whatever it was. If it was just a meeting room, then he'd blow it up. But he hoped to find something better. Something really worth all this risk.

Yuji had been inactive two months. He spent that time with Azami and didn't regret it one bit. She hadn't managed to cure him of his illness, but she made him work harder to get over it. He had someone in his life who needed him, and he couldn't be bogged down with selfish concerns.

Shaking his head to bring him back to reality, he reached into the tools pouch he'd attached to his leg. He had three kunai with tags hanging off them. These were seal-disrupting tags. Seeing a big, open entrance like this made Yuji feel sure there was a seal of some kind over or on the side of the door.

To test his theory, he tossed a kunai at the opening. The kunai passed through, but there was a buzz and a crackle as it did, coupled with a flash of light.

Probably monitors until someone living person who doesn't know the code passes through. I don't know their code, but my own code works just fine.

He threw the kunai. They all hit their marks and sunk into the massive red torii gate. Sure enough, three seal tags fell off of it and fluttered to the ground, their seal overwritten with his own.

Yuji threw one more kunai at the door. It passed through with no problem. But just to be sure...

"Mud Clone Jutsu!"

A clone formed out of the nearby mud. It nodded at Yuji and walked through the door. Almost immediately, the clone fell, his hands over his head. Even from here, Yuji could feel a trace of a potent genjutsu trap. But this sort of genjutsu could only be sprung once, unless fed with a continuous supply of chakra.

Yuji formed four more clones. They all took up a defensive posture around him, circling continuously. Satisfied, Yuji walked through the door.

It felt bizarre, walking around like this. Yuji hadn't wanted to ditch his disguise as 'Oshima-san', so he

was wearing his shirt, tie, dress pants, dress shoes, and suit jacket, along with his fake glasses. But he found himself walking more confidently now. Whether that was simply assuming a new identity or whether it was because he had Azami with him he wasn't sure, but he liked the feeling.

The feeling was the only thing that made this mission possible.

The old me wouldn't have the guts to do this. The new me has no problem rolling the dice.

Yuji stopped walking. Two of his clones had stopped moving a few steps back. They seemed to be frozen.

"Leave them. If you try to undo the clone jutsu, you'll feel what stopped them," advised a clone to Yuji's right.

Yuji nodded grimly, continuing to stride forward. He eventually made it to a large stone chamber. In the darkness, a distinctive smell hit him first.

Rotting corpse. No, corpses. Someone left bodies here. For quite a while, too.

Gulping back his revulsion at this knowledge, Yuji kept moving forward. He raised one hand in a handsign- the tiger. A flame appeared at the end of his two fingers, bright enough to illuminate the entire chamber.

In the flickering glow of the hand-held fire, Yuji looked around, and there he saw what he expected.

The statue the Akatsuki have been using. According to the people I interrogated before I left the Leaf, the most powerful Akatsuki members come here for the meetings, and they're sometimes here for days at a time. So this is their main base...then that statue must be the 'Gedo Statue'. The grunt I interrogated didn't know what it was or what it did- only that the main members always met in the same chamber as it.

"If it's important to them, I will destroy it," Yuji decided. "They cannot be allowed to have any leeway. Bow to the Akatsuki even a little, and this war will go very wrong. I don't know what this statue does, but-!"

Yuji saw the bodies for the first time. He knelt down near them to confirm what he thought he was seeing.

Two tails...Three Tails...Four Tails...all jinchuriki. Or rather, their bodies. And at the base of this statue. It can't be a coincidence.

Yuji walked over to the base of the statue and put a hand on it. He pulled back almost immediately. A raw energy the likes of which he'd never felt surged through his hand. It took all his strength to pull away. In the short instant he'd had his hand on the statue, he felt like he'd been hit with a jolt of electricity. He came away sweating. He was sitting on the ground, staring up at the statue, letting his breathing return to normal.

"This thing has to be destroyed!" Yuji murmured, his breathing slowing to normal. "Nothing good can come of this thing."

"But how to do it? Your Shoukyaku Jutsu won't be enough..." said a clone.

"The statue is protected by the energies it has harnessed through the jinchuuriki. As of now, only eight and nine tails remain free. That is power orders of magnitude beyond anything we've felt before," said the other remaining clone.

Yuji bit his lower lip, thinking hard. "Let's try a group Shoukyaku. If that fails, then we'll seal it away."

The three Yuji's lined up and, as one, fired their most powerful jutsu at the statue.

"SHOUKYAKU JUTSU!"

Three explosions centered at the statue's core yielded nothing- not even a scratch.

Yuji almost didn't catch the attack in time. He threw his hand behind his head at the last second, catching a black rod that was thrown at his neck with startling force just as the sharpened tip penetrated his skin. A single drop of blood rolled down Yuji's back. He threw the black rod into the ground, spinning to face the attackers.

"We have company," Yuji told the clones. "Please see to sealing this monstrosity. I'll buy you some time."

Yuji walked slowly toward the blackness from which the attack had come. He cast a silent genjutsu, feeling it hit somebody, though it was broken instantly. That was enough, though, as Yuji rushed his attacker, having found him by mentally marking the spot where the genjutsu had been dispelled.

A pair of purple eyes with rings greeted him. Yuji put on the breaks, standing his ground but not going any farther.

"Wow. Rinnegan, is it? I didn't think that was a real ability."

A voice that spoke without emotion greeted Yuji. "You'll perish here for your crimes, Yuji Itou."

Yuji did his best not to flinch. The voice held a ring of truth. Yuji had been threatened a lot over the years, but this was the first time he'd really, really been scared. A cold sweat came over him. He shook it off and kept standing in the way.

"I'm afraid Yuji Itou is dead. But perhaps I, Hideki Oshima, can be of service to you? Such as removing that gaudy statue so your creepy little cave is more spacious?"

"You boast."

Yuji managed to sense the attack just an instant before it would have hit him. A black rod shot at him at eye height. He hit the ground, shooting his best jutsu at his attacker even as he slid backwards.

"Shoukyaku Jutsu!"

The fire jutsu exploded right in the face of Yuji's attacker. Yuji rolled over and ran for it. He had seen the attack hit, but it had done no damage.

That jutsu was designed to destroy targets, leaving nothing larger than a bone fragment! And this guy shrugged it off like it was nothing!

Something buzzed Yuji from above, causing him to go tumbling to the base of the statue. His clones were nearly done-

Something stabbed Yuji through the shoulder. It lodged in the ground, pinning him face-down.

27 - The Lost Mission- Part 2

A female gently fluttered down near Yuji, wings extending from her body. The wings disappeared as she landed, folding into her body and disappearing. In one hand she held a a spear of some kind.

One of Yuji's clones got up from his kneeling position and attacked. He punched, his hand laced with a Chakra Scalpel. The strike landed, but it had no effect. Yuji saw her body simply part and allow the punch to pass through, then close up around his clone's arm. His clone tugged, but could not free himself.

"If you cannot defeat me, you will not defeat the Leader," the girl said tonelessly. She threw spear at Yuji. He scrambled around, pivoting around the spear through his back, and her attack hit his leg. He immediately pulled the spear out, hoping it wasn't poisoned.

Paper! Then the stupid spear through my back is also-

Yuji held the flame in his hand to the paper. It ignited, and he could get up.

Time to cut my losses and get out of here. I have to warn the others about-!

Yuji threw himself to the ground as another black rod flew through the air, narrowly missing him as he dodged. Another spear of paper glanced off his ribs, striking with the force of a rock. At least one rib broke cleanly in two, and that meant no more breathing comfortably.

They're not using killing techniques. They're going to capture me alive. Torture me...again. No. I can't relive that. I won't make it through this time! I have to escape with what information I have, and maybe blow this place up!

Yuji, inhibited by pain and injury, threw a fire jutsu upward at the paper lady. She dodged it, and his blast of fire hit the ceiling. Inwardly, Yuji cheered when the ceiling began to crack and buckle. A few small chunks of rock fell first, then larger chunks, until the whole ceiling was crumbling. Light flooded in from the life-saving skylight. And where there was light, there were shadows.

Immediately, one shadow wavered, and Azami flew up through it, landing on her feet.

"Yuji!" she shouted, breaking character and calling him by his real name. She dove for him, seizing him under the arms, and pulling him backward into the shadows. The last thing Yuji saw was his clone being beheaded by the man with the Rinnegan.

Orange hair...purple Rinnegan eyes, with pupils like ripples in a pond...and what looked like piercings on his face. And the girl. Made of paper, blueish hair, dark make-up...I don't know what those two were, but they won this round.

Even as he thought that, Azami dropped an explosive she and Yuji had made using their combined

expertise. She dropped it into the shadow even as she and Yuji 'fell up' on the other side of it.

There was an earth-rending blast, and the remainder of the Akatsuki hideout crumbled and fell. The ruins of the base were exposed now, and the immense damage they had caused was easily visible.

The Gedo Statue was unscathed.

Before Yuji and Azami could get anywhere, their two attackers landed directly in their path.

"Sorry, Azami. These guys might actually kill us," Yuji told her, holding a Healing Palm Jutsu to his broken ribs. He felt them mend, though they would be a little brittle for a while. "You should run for it."

Azami let Yuji stand on his power, giving him a swat on the butt, ignoring his plea for her to run. "They don't look human. Although you and I are barely human anymore ourselves."

"...True enough," Yuji said, half a smile on his face. "The best way for monsters to disappear is by being killed by other monsters."

They stood side by side, prepped for their last fight.

"Can you buy me a little time...for that jutsu?" Yuji asked Azami.

"You must really think we're going to die if you're going to bring that thing out. I'll buy you the time, though."

Azami, in one, smooth motion, put up a barrier jutsu. It sprung up just in front of the two enemies, burning away a layer of the paper girl. Besides taking a step back, the two enemies did not move.

Yuji knelt down, his right hand turning a fiery red. He gave a loud shout as he threw his hand into his chest. When he removed his hand, he held pure energy in it.

"Earth Style: Earthen Life Vessel!" he shouted to distract himself from the pain.

From the earth a clone began to form. The clone, however, stopped at about waist height. Another sprung up beside it, this one the same size but shaped like a female, about seven years of age. That one finished forming first, and when it was done, a little girl with black hair like Azami stood in a knee-length black dress and black stockings. There was a red bow in her hair.

The other lump of earth became a boy that looked a lot like Yuji at age seven. Shaggy brown hair, a slim build, but with a fierce determination on his face.

"To the Leaf! Tsunade herself!" Yuji said, his pain already gone. It hurt to physically remove chakra. Some even believed the procedure to be impossible. But energy could be controlled; manipulated- so why not held, and formed into different shapes?

The little girl nodded. "Got it! Come on! I can't protect you if you don't hurry up!"

The little boy followed suit. He took off running, his clothing finishing forming. He wore a black vest, a black t-shirt, and a pair of black shorts.

Yuji made sure they were gone before rejoining Azami.

“They grow up so fast.”

“You’re sick. Those were NOT children. They were a hellish use of your chakra!” Azami shot back. “If you want children, then we need to get busy once this is over!”

“Don’t mock my beautiful creations! Besides, those kids have a better range than a clone, and if they need help, someone will always help a child. And if not, well, that’s what the girl is for. The boy carries information; the girl protects him. It’s a genius information delivery system. As for ‘getting busy’, when have I ever objected?”

Azami let her barrier drop. “Creepy is what it is! But if those two work like you say they do, then I guess I won’t complain. But would it kill you to give ME that kind of attention?”

Yuji kissed her. “Sorry, sorry. I know they disturb you, but there was no choice. Now, let’s figure out how we can fight the real monsters across from us. HEY! YOU GUYS HAVE NAMES?!”

Azami slapped her forehead. “You’ve gotten so stupid since you became ‘Oshima-san’! You don’t just-”

“I am Pain.”

“...Konan...”

“Nice to meet you,” Yuji replied, giving a small bow. Azami slapped him in the head.

“Hey! Don’t bow to them! They’re trying to kill us!”

“That’s no reason for me to be impolite. At least, for Oshima to be impolite. Yuji probably would be a little angrier. But Oshima has you by his side, so how can he be angry?”

“And stop talking in that third person double-talk! Even if it does make sense to you, it’s too hard to follow!”

Yuji grinned. “I always knew someday I’d get you to lose your cool with me. But I think maybe I’d like to live to see it again. I don’t think this fight is winnable, do you?”

Azami sized up their opponents. “No. Not as we are now. And if you die, those two kids die too, right?”

Yuji nodded, his guard up. “Escape, then?”

“Yes, I think so.”

Yuji bowed to Konan and Pain. “Thank you for your time. I regret it’s time that we make our ex-!”

A black rod struck Yuji in the stomach. Before he could pull it out, he felt a foreign chakra invading his keirakukei. He slumped to his knees, blood coming out of his mouth.

"Now that you've seen one of my abilities, I cannot allow you to leave," said Pain. "That chakra will control your movements. You cannot use your chakra."

Yuji tried to stand up, only making it to one knee. He knew this injury was critical. Azami put her hand on his shoulder, stopping him from getting up further. Her foot shot down and destroyed the rod.

"You aren't the only one who knows how to pump chakra into somebody else," she told Pain, a challenge in her voice. "Consider yourself lucky that I'm not the monster I was. You and I wouldn't be having this conversation."

"...You are the girl from five years ago," said Pain flatly. "You were Akatsuki material then, and you are now. Join us. You need not waste your talents protecting that fool."

Azami smiled, bowing her head. "No. I do need to protect this fool. To me, he is family. The only family I've ever had. He means too much to too many people to die at your hands here and now."

Fwsshh!

Yuji was standing behind Konan, a kunai in his hand. He stabbed her neck, which she turned to paper at the last moment. With that, Yuji took off. Azami's shadow gateway was already waiting. He dove for her, tackling them both into the shadow. It sealed behind them.

BOOM!

The paper bomb he'd stuffed into Konan's neck exploded violently, sending bits of scorched paper all over the landscape. For a moment, the sky was darkened with the ash leftover from the attack.

Pain stared at the hole the two had escaped through as Konan reformed her body.

"He'll be worth eliminating early in our war," Pain noted calmly. "Even with a mortal wound, he was able to inflict this much damage."

"Will he die?" asked Konan, the last sheets of paper fluttering into place.

"...No. Azami won't allow that. Her talent does not lie in healing, but for that one...she will make do."

28 - The Donation

Seven year old Yuji followed seven year old Azami at a run through the Leaf village.

“Hurry up, you slowpoke!” called ‘Azami’, weaving her way through the crowd.

“I’m hurrying as fast as I can!” replied Yuji. “This information makes me slow...”

Azami stopped running, huffing a sigh. She bent over, holding her arms behind her back.

“Climb on. We’ll get there quicker this way.”

Obligingly, ‘Yuji’ climbed up on her piggy-back style. As soon as he was on, she took off at a run.

-

Raido was on duty as the Hokage office guard. He heard the sound of tiny footsteps running up the stairs. He opened his mouth to yell at the kids.

“Outta the way, loser!” said an unfamiliar little girl with black hair as she punched Raido in the groin.

The little boy following her bowed to Raido, but followed the little girl in to Tsunade’s office. Raido, doubled over, tried to follow them, but the little girl slammed the door in his face.

The little brats barged in on Lady Tsunade! Well, she doesn’t like kids, so they’ll get what they deserve.

Raido tried to retain some semblance of dignity as he straightened up as much as his pain would allow.

-

Tsunade was not amused at first. Her first thought was to kill Raido for letting these two little brats in here. But then she looked at the little boy.

“My God...Yuji?”

The little boy bowed. “In a manner of speaking. ‘Azami’ and I are...well, we are a measure of last resort by Yuji. We are vessels made of earth, designed to carry information while being autonomous and having the ability to defend ourselves.”

Azami jumped up on Tsunade’s desk to get her attention. She swung a finger toward Tsunade. “Listen, there’s no time for this! The real Yuji needs his chakra back! We have to deliver our message and then hurry up and disappear!”

Yuji climbed up on the desk. He opened his mouth and retrieved a scroll. It came out dry. He dropped it in front of Lady Tsunade. “This is what Yuji learned. It’s about the Akatsuki leader and his abilities. And also, his second in command and her abilities.”

Azami nodded, her energy gone. “Yeah...he nearly killed Yuji. If it weren't for my namesake, he'd be dead. This isn't an ordinary villain. But the scroll explains that.”

Azami took Yuji's hand. “Come on. It's time to go.”

“...I'm scared. It means we die.”

Azami shook her head. “But we'll be together. And besides, we won't die- we'll keep Yuji alive.”

Yuji shook his head. “No! I'm Yuji! I AM! I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want to di-”

Azami put a kunai in the back of Yuji's neck. Lady Tsunade was stunned and leapt up to help, but Azami stopped her.

“He was designed to release emotions. Yuji's empathic abilities might kill him, or at least drive him insane, if not for this release. My creation came about as a barrier. I'm the ‘conscience and protector’. Yuji is the ‘carrier of information and emotion’. We balance each other.”

Azami hefted the kunai, which looked ridiculously big in her child-sized hand. She stabbed herself in the neck, her expression never changing.

“Yuji gave me a message for you,” she said, melting into the ground. Tsunade hadn't noticed, but ‘Yuji’ had become a pile of mud on the floor. His face was still vaguely visible, emotion clearly visible on his distorted face. “The Akatsuki threat is no longer growing, but they are still more than we can handle. They have only a handful of senior members, and their recruitment has been halted.”

A thick wallet landed on Tsunade's desk.

“This is what Yuji has made so far- all by legal means. He makes an anonymous donation to the village coffers, with apologies for his crimes- which he alone committed. Do with it what you will.”

The girl finished melting into the floor after that. Tsunade saw her reach over and hold Yuji's hand as she did. It was such a sweet gesture that for a minute Tsunade forgot all about the message and the money.

She opened the wallet after saying a quick prayer for the two kids, knowing full well they were creations of chakra; not soul. For a time, they had been alive, and they deserved at least a prayer.

Then she opened the wallet, and her jaw dropped.

There's at least a billion ryo in here! My God! Yuji, you sweet kid!

Tsunade stood up and turned to look out the window. She would figure out a way to bring Yuji back. She had to.

I know I chose Naruto already, but Yuji would be a good choice succeed me. He has more practical experience than Naruto, and he can clearly manage money...What will be better for the

village?

The thought sobered Tsunade a little. She didn't like second guessing herself; especially about such an important topic. But while she was at it, who else would be a good choice?

Sakura, too. She's trained with both Shizune and I, and to be honest, she's a genius. So many in this generation worthy of the Hokage title!

That thought put a smile on Tsunade's face again. The goal of the current generation was to prepare the generation that would follow. If that's what her job was, then maybe she could consider herself a success.

These children have grown into sturdy adults. Given time, they'll reach potential that Jiraiya, Orochimaru and I could not even conceive.

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LAND OF FIRE; PRESENT DAY

Yuji finished his story, hands clasped behind his back.

"So, I decided to combat this 'Pain' person, and I was defeated soundly. Only Azami's jutsu saved me. I had no intention of returning to the Leaf. But now..." Yuji shook his head. "I can't let them face this danger without me. I intended to end it back then. Now, instead, as soon as I recovered, I began to train. And I think that maybe I might have a chance. But only if I can get in line quickly for the Hokage title."

Hisako paused, biting a nail. "So...you're going to turn your back on Naruto, too? Sakura wasn't enough?"

Yuji sighed and shook his head. "Damn it. I know. You think I don't understand what I'm saying? But the village needs what I've learned to survive. Naruto is strong, but he hasn't seen the worst the 'normal' world can offer yet. Yes, he's been shunned, but he's always had a home and even the support of the Hokage. I had lost both those things. On top of that, I just made a sizeable contribution to the Leaf. Apparently, I can at least make money. We need funds to bite the Akatsuki hard enough to win. We need to train- or buy- any able-bodied fighter to beat Pain. KEKOBÉ's mission is now more critical than ever."

Yuji slung a bag across his shoulder. Azami rejoined them, a bag across her shoulder as well. Yuji took the bag from her, insisting on carrying it.

Ryofu exchanged glances with Hisako. "You know...we can feel it. Your chakra."

Yuji raised an eyebrow. "I should hope so. You two know me better than almost everyone else."

"Don't beat around the bush, Ryofu," said Hisako. She knew Yuji would never answer their question unless it was asked directly. "You did something else, didn't you?"

Yuji shook his head. "Absolutely not. But my chakra level did increase- something that is supposed to be impossible. I think maybe my contact with the biju did it. I was hit with an enormous amount of power through my clones. They must have acted as a barrier and a conduit, funneling just enough power to me to help me grow, but not enough to kill me. It wasn't intentional, and I certainly don't recommend the method."

With that, Yuji stepped out the door, assuming his confident 'Oshima-san' stride. Azami held the other two back.

"What he didn't tell you was that his mental state deteriorated for a while. He couldn't be alone; he asked me to come, and I think that his mental fatigue was the reason. When you can feel the emotions of others to the degree he can- especially now, with his heightened chakra that he cannot yet control to it's fullest extent- your mind takes time to catch up. Couple that with all the trauma from being kicked out of his home, creating two businesses, running a dojo...he almost cracked."

"And what? You're the glue that held him together, so we should thank you or something? I still think you're a sl-" Hisako started. To her surprise, however, Ryofu bowed slightly.

"Thank you for taking care of Yu...Oshima. We'll need him."

Ryofu was sweating. Hisako was still angry and worried, so maybe she hadn't felt it, but Yuji's chakra wasn't just larger- it was horrifyingly sharpened. If Ryofu had to pick, Yuji's chakra had a mild redness to it before. The color now felt a blazing red- like fire itself. Ryofu's chakra was always blue and white- like a white-capped ocean. He could see waves in his chakra- the raw power of water. Hisako's was the same, but her chakra tended to be a darker blue- an angry sea during a storm. Ryofu supposed that was just a reflection of their personalities. He was ice; Hisako was active water; Yuji was fire.

That fire now seemed to be mountain size. Yuji was always a bonfire- a controlled fire, but powerful. This fire was much larger, but almost equally controlled.

"This just gets weirder and weirder," Hisako murmured. "I mean, what the hell? He's powerful, I get it. But this isn't normal, even for him!"

Whatever was or was not normal was irrelevant, Ryofu thought at first. But it still seemed Yuji was holding something back from them.

Without making a sound, Ryofu attacked Yuji from behind, swinging his sword full-power. His attack was repelled, and Ryofu finally understood.

"Bastard. Tell me when you have an ability like that," Ryofu said, sweating from the heat Yuji had generated by defending himself. He couldn't believe what he had just seen.

Yuji bowed his head. "I'm sorry. But you can't be tortured into telling something you don't know. I thought it best to keep this a secret."

Hisako stared at Yuji as his defense retracted.

"What are you, anyway?" she whispered, still stunned.

Yuji shrugged. “Well, maybe a monster? I’m not sure anymore. I just know I should have died and I didn’t. Through skill or luck, I survived and got a second chance.”

29 - Honesty and Sacrifice

VILLAGE HIDDEN IN THE LEAVES: PRESENT DAY

Yuji strode into the village, ignoring the sensory barrier ANBU placed around the village. He simply kept walking, and his group walked with him. They made no attempt to hide their allegiance- if anyone recognized Yuji, that is. The two at the gate didn't. They simply bowed and said 'welcome to the village'.

Yuji reached up with one hand to adjust his glasses; he'd never gotten used to the things. But they added to the right 'look' he was trying to portray, so he kept them. They also helped break up the shape of his face.

Yuji stopped, but didn't turn around. His teammates did, and they saw Kakashi and Gai, both in fighting postures.

"...I was wondering when you would notice me, sensei," Yuji/Oshima said. He turned and bowed, smiling. "It's good to see you."

Gai stepped up, guard at the ready. "I don't know who you are, but you're trespassing! State your business!"

"After all the times I sparred with your student, you don't remember me?"

Gai looked at Kakashi. "You know this guy?"

Kakashi rolled his visible eye. "Gai, you really need to pay attention more..."

"It'd help if you took those stupid glasses off..." Hisako muttered under her breath.

"...But Oshima has poor eyesight," Yuji answered. Azami giggled; this 'Oshima' thing was funny when it was happening to somebody else.

"He looks cute with glasses," Azami said, smirking at Hisako. She had heard that 'slut' comment earlier. Payback was a dog.

"You're just saying that to make me angry!"

"No. Actually, he's really cute with them on," Azami replied innocently. "Maybe you just like him too much to see that?"

Yuji paid no attention to this exchange; instead focusing on Gai and Kakashi. He had to be careful here; he could count on Kakashi as an ally, but one kick from Gai could end him. Yuji hoped to keep this 'Oshima' thing going on a little longer. It didn't matter who recognized him, so long as there were

enough powerful people willing to deny that Oshima and Yuji were the same person.

A genjutsu will cause enough reasonable doubt, though I hate to employ tactics on that on my comrades. Oh well, can't be helped.

Yuji didn't move, save for adjusting his glasses. Gai dropped his guard, and the tension of the situation was defused.

"Well Kakashi, if he's a friend of yours, then I won't harass him."

Kakashi's visible eye slid toward Yuji/Oshima. "...Yes, I think that's best, Gai. Whatever Oshima is doing here, it's nothing that will harm us."

Gai walked away; Yuji dropped his hand from his glasses. He exhaled, relaxing marginally.

"So, Oshima-san, then?"

Yuji smirked. "Please. We're old friends. Call me 'Hideki'."

Kakashi seemed to be smiling underneath his mask. "Interesting choice to jump right to genjutsu. That wouldn't work on everyone..."

"Because it was Gai-sensei, I thought maybe it would work," Yuji/Oshima replied. "Besides, his...vigor...is a bad match for me. Quieter power is more adaptable to my cause."

Kakashi didn't flinch at the expression. "And what is your 'cause'?"

"Perhaps we could talk in the Hokage's office?"

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Oshima/Yuji stood before the statue erected to remember the Third Hokage. He bowed to it, placing an offering of tobacco on it.

"I can't be the only one who visits here," Yuji said, lighting a cigarette. "But there seem to be fewer of us from your time to remember you. You're a legend these days- not someone that can be touched or spoken to. Not your style at all, Lord Third...Sarutobi-sensei."

Yuji exhaled the smoke, watching it curl upwards. "I never got the hang of smoking, but I still try, once a year. Today is the anniversary of my first day of training with you. I haven't really had a sensei sense then...it kind of makes me sad. I took over for you, but did that really have to be the way? You spoke of Orochimaru often to me...but always in a personal way. Not the way one talks about an enemy, or even a pupil. He was someone special to you, wasn't he? Is that why you had to battle him alone? I realize how young I was, but our powers combined could have ended that threat. Were you protecting me? Or was it the one vanity you chose to exercise?"

Yuji's held his cigarette away from his mouth for a moment. "Either way, it wasn't good timing. I think that if I had been there to fight at your side...even if I didn't make it...my chakra would have made all the difference. You chose to use that forbidden jutsu. I understand why- I even understood back then. What I don't understand is why I had to fight the pointless battle on the ground, while you died alone. With my chakra, you could have completed the jutsu and sealed Orochimaru, you, and I. A small price, Lord Third."

Yuji put his cigarette in his mouth, bowing and turning to walk away. "But I don't have your wisdom yet, and I suspect I never will. But maybe I'll have some other sort of wisdom, or some equalizer. Either way...I miss you, Sensei. I hope you and Asuma-sensei have had time to reconcile in Heaven. I don't know if you believed in such a concept, but having seen hell, surely the opposite must be true?"

Yuji finished the cigarette as he walked, dropping the butt into a garbage can. The Leaf was beautiful and clean for the time being. It was horrible to know that there was a war coming- a war that Yuji had to fight in, but he couldn't possibly live through.

No matter what confidence I may have as 'Oshima', I think that maybe I'm going to need to make some plans. Azami and I combined could take out quite a few enemies...but Pain is going to be a problem. With Naruto off training...

Talking to the Third Hokage, even though the conversations were one-sided, helped Yuji think. It made him think of the Third's advice to him.

Itachi Uchiha...I wonder what sort of advice he'd have for me? There's an easy way to find out, I guess. But it means 'Yuji' has to come out...

Sighing, Yuji/Oshima looked up to the sky. Things were getting complicated again, in a very bad way. Things like this never sat well with Yuji. Especially because it endangered more than himself. But there was no choice.

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Ryofu, Hisako, Yuji, and Raido walked slowly toward Mount Tenu. It was the highest point in the Land of Fire, but that wasn't what made it special. The Uchiha clan had long had a base dug into the side of the mountain. If there was a way to get the attention of one of the remaining Uchiha, this was the way to do it.

"Remember, keep one of my clones with you," Yuji told his three companions. "There's bound to be genjutsu traps mixed in with 'real' traps. You focus on the real traps; my clones will disable the genjutsu traps. This shouldn't take long."

Yuji, assuming his Oshima stride, walked in. He'd barely set one foot inside when a pair of glowing red eyes met his. In a split-second, a conversation was exchanged. Yuji raised one hand-

And his clones performed a barrier ninjutsu, coupled with a potent genjutsu. Yuji's comrades were trapped.

“A comfort genjutsu? Not usually the way to do that...” Itachi Uchiha murmured, sitting in a stone chair, a slight smirk on his usually impassive face.

Yuji kept his hands in his jacket pockets, staying in ‘Oshima’ mode. “Well, they are my comrades...”

Itachi got up from the chair, his eyes blinking just once to focus. “So why have you come? Did the Third Hokage’s words get to you?”

Yuji adjusted his glasses with one hand; it was a force of habit now. “I need the truth, Itachi. I plan to make a move for the Hokage title; at least until Naruto matures a bit more. To do that, I need to know the facts- both of what happened between you and your clan, and consequently the Third Hokage, and of the Akatsuki. I’m moving to protect Naruto and the Leaf Village.”

Another flash of red eyes. Maybe a second had passed in real life. But that one second conveyed all Yuji needed to know. He felt himself sweating. Even with no hostile intentions behind it, this famous genjutsu of Itachi Uchiha was something to experience. It made Yuji realize how his own power paled in comparison.

And how little I know! The truth behind the Uchiha massacre...almost as unbelievable as the lie fabricated to cover it. Maybe even more unbelievable.

“So, then, there’s a war coming, just as I thought,” Yuji murmured. “But my efforts to halt the Akatsuki...”

“Fell short,” Itachi finished. “You caused our senior members problems, and you ruined our ability to recruit, not to mention achieving your goal of halting our initial plans to gather funds by being mercenaries. Those are worthy accomplishments. But your overall goal- to kill the threat- was ineffective.”

“I suspected as much,” Yuji admitted, a little defeat in his voice, betraying his Oshima-san appearance. “But I had counted on doing more damage. And a preemptive strike won’t be of any use...Master Jiraiya was several times the shinobi I am. Even Naruto may fall short...”

Itachi closed his eyes. “Sacrifice is necessary for the shinobi lifestyle. You have the potential to deal a fair amount of damage- enough to make it possible for Naruto to win. But your chances for survival...”

“Are no worse than when the Akatsuki attack. The only difference,” Yuji said, removing his glasses, “is measured in how much difference I make.”

Yuji bowed low to Itachi. “Thank you. For your honesty, and for your sacrifices.”

30 - The Truth of War

LEAF VILLAGE: 1 MONTH LATER

All six paths of Pain had gathered together. The Leaf counter-attacks had been ineffective. The greatest sources of worry had been removed.

Except for two.

Yuji/Oshima was standing in front of pain, a nasty smile on his face. Next to him was Azami. Neither one was dressed like a shinobi. Yuji was wearing his suit, and Azami was wearing her black gown.

"I think this stops here," Yuji said plainly. The destruction in the background belied his confidence. He seemed oblivious to it- like this was just one more battle. "You know, I care a good deal for these people, even though I was exiled. They know that, too. It would have been easy for me to watch you destroy the village and tire yourself out, then simply kill you and help who was left. But I guess Yuji and Oshima have something in common- they both love this place and it's people too much to stand by and let you do as you please."

Tendo looked at Yuji, thinking back to their fight where the Gedo statue had been. Yuji had done damage, but that was only against him and Konan. With the other five paths of Pain here, there would hardly be a struggle.

But the way he speaks implies he knows more since last time. He could be dangerous. And Azami is even worse. She learned a good deal about the Akatsuki when we courted her to join us.

The fight lasted ten minutes. Yuji and Azami threw everything they had at all six Pains, creating an avenue for the injured to get to the hospital. But more than that, they were buying time.

Naruto will be here soon. Given what I know of Senjutsu, he'll be beyond formidable. This is all I can do right now. Hurry, Naruto!

A battle ensued. Once Yuji began to tire, Ryofu and Hisako supplemented his attacks with their own. Their teamwork had become well known throughout the great nations, and Azami's addition made them that much more devastating. They hit Pain with combo after combo. Yuji's genjutsu forced Pain to constantly be uncertain of what his eyes were showing him. They killed one Pain, then another, but were never allowed near the 'Reviver' Pain. Pain counter-attacked, wounding Ryofu in his right shoulder by using an Almighty Pull Jutsu and pulling him into a sharp corner of a ruined building. Experience allowed Ryofu to turn his waist and avoid a death strike, but the pain was considerable. Hisako had become distracted by Ryofu's injury, managing to half heal him before getting stab herself. Sheer rage allowed her to ignore the pain and break the offending Pain in half with a water-coated palm strike before collapsing.

In the end, however, it came down to this:

Yuji crawled over the wreckage, moving as fast as he could despite his injuries. Azami was lying on her side just a few feet away; he had to get there!

A looming figure halted his progress. It reached for Azami. Yuji took out a kunai and hacked at the man's leg. He might as well have sneezed for all the good it did.

Azami was lifted up by her neck. Yuji pulled on the monster's leg, desperate to help. He was bleeding from the mouth; his glasses were cracked; his left arm was broken. But he felt nothing of those injuries. He only saw Azami.

"Where is Naruto Uzumaki?" the monster asked.

Azami raised her hand weakly- then raised her middle finger. "Go to hell, asshole!"

Crack.

A simple sound, yet heard easily even amongst the ongoing screams of a lost battle. To Yuji, it was the only sound in the world. The sound was mixed with the image of seeing Azami's very soul sucked into a hellish beast that remained unseen until Yuji grabbed the Akatsuki member's leg.

Her neck was broken.
Her soul had been taken.

His body and mind snapped in tandem. He was on his feet before his body could protest. Blood flew from his mouth as he shouted in pure rage:

"SHOUKYAKU JUTSU! SHOUKYAKU JUTSU! SHOUKYAKU JUTSU!"

The three successive jutsu killed Pain. Yuji had killed one Pain or the other three times now. He never could get at the reincarnation one that kept healing them. Now it was too late.

There would be hell to pay.

Yuji got to his feet, his injured legs throbbing. He saw a hand reaching for him. A board with a nail sticking out of it made for a decent weapon. Yuji swung it with all his might. His clothes were in tatters, his glasses long since crunched; his hair out of place. But his desperation not to live or to protect- but to kill- had been awakened.

Rage swept him up. Chakra or no, they would die. They had taken the most precious thing he had to defend.

Yuji fought valiantly, his fighting become more and more ragged. He barely dodged lethal hits from the Pains. No one else dared approach. They took the chance to heal the wounded. Yuji bought them the time.

So many dead.
So many dying.

But adrenaline only carried Yuji so far. He finally slumped down after being stabbed through the abdomen. He turned enough to avoid a critical strike, but the gradual wounds and blood loss took their toll on him.

He looked to his right and behind, and there was Azami's body. It was still, and already impossibly cold. Yuji felt tears falling freely, despair replacing anger. He could have kept fighting if he had been alone. But the loss of the one person he'd let close to him during all those lonely years...

One of the Pains- Yuji wasn't sure which at this point- moved to strike, and Yuji found he could not fight. He crawled to Azami's side and took her in his arms, her slack body almost too heavy for him to bear. Blood had run out of her mouth and dried. A fresh drop appeared on her forehead as Yuji kissed her one last time. Her beautiful body was almost unmarred, save for the unnatural dent in her neck.

With a shaking hand, Yuji closed Azami's eyes. He braced himself to die, apologizing for not being able to do more.

BOOM!

Before the final blow could be delivered, Yuji was shielded by a familiar presence.

"Naruto?"

Naruto didn't look back. "Sorry, Yuji. Thank you for holding him off."

Yuji bowed his head, admitting to himself that Tsunade had chosen her heir correctly. He had been defeated by Pain. And worse, Pain had managed to hurt Azami. The one thing Yuji swore was going to be impossible- the one transgression he would not allow. And it had happened. Her body told the story.
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Ryofu had been dodging the Pain that seemed to be made of weapons. He kept breaking it's weapons with his sword, but the damn thing would just throw another weapon at him. Water didn't seem to bother it, unless it was the massive water dragon that he could only use twice in one battle. After Yuji's intel had been shared, he skipped trying his Blood Manipulation Jutsu on this thing. It was pointless to pull on a puppet's strings without knowing where the puppet was being controlled from. Unless there were tangible strings...

In the course of battle, Ryofu had found himself distracted. It was an uncomfortable feeling for him. He knew he had come to think of the Leaf as 'home', but had never strictly defined that term. Now he had people cheering him on, helping him, and being protected by him. Over the years, that had apparently become acceptable, and a definition of 'home'. Now 'home' was being destroyed, and Ryofu was getting tired of playing cat and mouse.

But what other options were there?

Suddenly, the Pain that had been doggedly attacking him disengaged and broke off toward a large summoned creature. A frog, Ryofu realized. Naruto had returned.

“Ryofu! Retreat! We need you!”

It was Hisako, freshly healed by one of the Katsuyus around the village. Ryofu saw his enemy was gone, and he heard the urgency in Hisako’s voice. He turned and ran toward the sound, preserving his remaining chakra for whatever task was necessary and suited toward him.

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The hospital scene was insane. Ryofu sheathed his sword and walked toward Hisako. She was using her water style to create casts, put pressure on wounds- anything to help.

“There are so many!” an overwhelmed Sakura said, wiping her brow with her sleeve before healing yet another injured party. “Ryofu, if you could use your Blood Manipulation Jutsu to induce clotting, it might really save some lives.”

“And your water style would help, too,” Hisako added. “I know it isn’t your thing, but battles like that are best left to monsters...”

Ryofu did as he was asked, but he turned to Hisako as he did. “...When did I stop being a monster?”

Hisako kept bandaging wounded, trying to think of the best answer possible. It finally came to her. “When you really accepted this place as home. It accepted you, but it took a while for *you* to accept [/it].”

The door to the infirmary burst open, and two stretchers were carried in. It was a badly marred young couple. At a glance, Sakura noted that the woman had died first- a broken neck, though her body had taken on an odd pallid quality that all the casualties with their souls removed had. The male was just recently dead, and his arms were still wrapped around the female, as if shielding her.

“No...” came the small voice of realization. Sakura moved over, her hands shaking. Someone had covered the faces of the deceased with a pair of torn chunin vests, but Sakura could tell who was underneath. She didn’t want to believe it.

Azami and Yuji had both fallen. The village had already been blown away by Pain’s jutsu when they had started fighting. Now they were dead. There was no one left.

The two young chunin who had carried in the deceased shook their heads. With them was a familiar ANBU agent. Yuugao. She removed her mask and shook her head.

“I know he was a friend of yours, Sakura. I’m sorry. But...because of that...their sacrifice...Pain’s advance was halted long enough for Naruto to return.”

31 - The Other

Naruto had returned and destroyed Pain.

Yuji stood atop the Hokage's mansion, considering this. He had been thanked for buying time, but was that satisfactory for him? For all the time and effort he had put in, to only be someone who could buy time...

Unacceptable.

He clenched his teeth so hard his gums bled. It began to drip to the ground, pooling grotesquely at his feet. Something inside Yuji's mind had snapped. He felt anger at himself, but little else. There was nowhere to direct the anger. He had been too weak- Naruto had been strong enough to save the village; Yuji had not. Sakura and Tsunade and Shizune had all been strong enough to save Azami; Yuji had not. There was no amount of anger that he could feel that would equal what he felt when her neck had been snapped.

And yet this was worse.

What do I do? Lord Third, what would you have me do? You died too soon. Now I'm alone. I have all the wisdom you gave me, but to what end? I can't help rebuild the village; I can't defend it in the first place! I have no right to teach others until I myself am strong enough. Maybe Kakashi died, too, but he wound up being okay with it. What's wrong with me? Why is it not okay with me? Lots of people died...

Furious, Yuji screamed inside his own head, his lip bleeding now. The pool of blood reflected him now. He saw it- his face. How could he seem so passive, yet be so angry? His face had forgotten how to show emotion.

"...So, now what? Do I live normally? I don't know anymore. Besides Azami, what is my...function? There's no enemy to face; there's no one to kill. And this place...is it still home?"

Yuji heard an answer. A young male, smiling affably, was standing opposite the roof from Yuji. "You're asking all the right questions. But you're asking the wrong person. If you knew the answers already, you wouldn't have to ask yourself, would you?"

The young man was dressed in a crisp white shirt and black dress pants, with western shoes shined. He had long blond hair, with bangs falling over one eye. He could have been female were it not for the light beard on his face.

"...Forgive me, but I don't think we've met..." Yuji said politely, on his guard. Something about this guy...

His instincts proved right. The young man moved across the roof in one step, a dagger aimed at Yuji's midsection. Yuji stopped the dagger and countered automatically, finding his throat punch blocked.

“Mm! Good! You know, they thought that maybe you’d gotten soft since you find a woman, but I guess not. I didn’t think you were the type of man to just fall apart because of a girl in your life. I guess they should listen to me (ha ha).”

“Yeah. Guess so. Now, who are you, again? And who is ‘they’?”

The man withdrew. “ ‘I’ am Shuhei Yamakawa. ‘They’ is the ‘Order of Fire’. And ‘you’,” said the man, now known to Yuji as Shuhei, “are of interest to us. How about having a chat with us?”

“I don’t think I like how you do business. I’d decline, but I think you have some reason I should talk to you that you aren’t telling me. How about you explain yourself.”

Another figure appeared on the roof. It was Azami, wearing her black gown. Her eyes were serious; her voice steady with just the slightest hint of anxiety. “I think, *Hideki*, that you should talk to them. Rather, I think that it is in your best interest to talk with them...”

Yuji managed to block out his surprise. “I see...And what about the others? Remember, I’m part of a ‘they’, too.”

Shuhei’s smile stayed in place. “That’s exactly why you should talk with us. We’ve already...met your group. They don’t seem to be very happy with us. We let that one-” he gestured toward Azami, “-leave so she could convince you to come.”

“...Well, that’s that, isn’t it. Lead the way, Yamakawa-san.”

“Please, please, so formal! My friends call me ‘Shuhei’. Or ‘Shu’, if you like.”

“...I think that Yamakawa-san fits for the time being. You’re welcome to call me whatever you prefer, since you seem to know something I don’t.”

“Mm...I think ‘Hideki’ suits you better. It means ‘excellent one’ in its native tongue, doesn’t it? I think that suits you. Clearly, we can all aspire to you. I even started dressing like you. Once I’m as strong as you, I’ll wear the jacket, too.”

With that, Shuhei began to walk. Azami followed him, and Yuji brought up the rear.

His blood had run cold, and a nervous sweat enveloped him.

Azami calling me ‘Hideki’ is a codeword for ‘trouble’. This guy...he’s strong. And he’s clearly been watching me. Azami seems shaken, and that’s saying something. If he has KEKOBÉ, then he’s taken three ANBU-level agents. Damn.

Then there’s the fact that I’m in the back. You don’t just let the person you’re escorting walk in the back. If I attacked now, I would kill him. There’s some reason, then. Some reason I shouldn’t attack. It might all be a psychological game, but I can’t risk that. Not with Azami and the others involved.

Check, you bastard. But not checkmate yet.

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“Hello! I’ve brought him! Hideki-san is here!”

Yuji/Hideki looked around, not seeing much. He was in a circular room that was left pitch-black, save for ten spots; one of those spots was the center of the room in which he stood. The other nine spots were along the outside of the room. One by one, Yuji heard the sound of sliding doors being opened.

“Thank you for coming, Hideki. Or do you prefer Yuji?” asked the first person, who revealed themselves to be a middle-aged man, tall and imposing in his own way, yet with a very pleasant, polite voice. He bowed. “Either way, I’m pleased to meet you.”

Next came two women from adjacent doors. They were twins, both with dark, chestnut-colored hair. They were both stunningly attractive. One was slightly more muscular than the other.

“Yuji,” said one.

“Hideki,” said the other.

They bowed. As one, they said: “Welcome.”

The five other doors opened, all revealing masked men and women who wore robes that were so large they swam on the wearer. The robes were black and tied with a thin gold sash.

The last door opened. Out of this one came Ryofu, Hisako, and Yuugao. Ryofu and Hisako stepped to one side of the door; Yuugao the other. The last person to exit struck Yuji hard.

She looks like...purity. Light. Warmth. I’ve never seen such...indescribable, transcendent beauty. Solemn, strong, fragile, with no emotion; with every emotion. I can’t even...

Yuji’s mouth had run dry. It seemed to be just as well to this last person, because she spoke. Her voice seemed to be made of light incarnate. She was comforting and disconcerting at the same time. She was blond, with hair flowing freely to her waist. She was dressed in the clothes of a Miko, a priestess, and carried a golden spear in one hand; in the other was a green, leafy plant.

“Hello, Yuji,” she said in greeting, smiling sadly at him. “Or do you prefer Hideki? Or perhaps your given name, instead of the aliases you’ve been using?”

Yuji found his voice. “I’ve found ‘Yuji’ to suit me just fine.”

I couldn’t say that more forcefully...like some pressure stopping me from speaking the way I want...

The woman smiled. “Well, I do know a great deal about you. It seems only right to tell you about me...”

Yuji interrupted her. “Not until you tell me why you kidnapped KEKOBÉ.”

"You're always so rude!" Hisako sneered from across the room. "Who said we'd been 'kidnapped'? That wench over there?" she indicated Azami.

"Stop it, Hisako. Don't provoke him, or he won't listen. You know how stubborn he can be," said Ryofu, his enormous sword shouldered for the moment. He looked at Yuji. "Listen to her. Do you really think that the three of us could be kidnapped?"

Yuji felt that cold sweat again. His brow was soaked, and he didn't honestly know why.

He just knew that he was more terrified than ever before.

"Yuji," said the priestess, "My name is Annako. I realize that your personal beliefs do not allow for reincarnation in the way I understand it, but please try to understand...The two artifacts I hold...do they seem familiar to you?"

Yuji frowned. Now that she mentioned it. But he couldn't help recoil even further, though the memories that surfaced were happy ones.

"...That sprig of a tree...from Asuna. And that weapon...the golden yari...from Miko. But they were...They're..."

"Dead?" Annako said, smiling her sad smile. "Please think: How old do you think I am? I realize that you never guess at a woman's age, but please ignore social protocol this one time."

"...twelve..." mumbled Yuji, something falling into place in his mind. "But that makes you..."

Annako smiled. "And yet, I was born...incorrectly. You are now twenty-five years old, correct?"

"..."

"Yes, that is correct. And that means it has been nearly thirteen years since you lost another precious someone..."

"...stop..." Yuji muttered. He was begging. He felt his knees wobble.

"Yes, she died, too. They all died. But you needn't feel sad for causing their deaths. Asuna and Miko live on in me. But her...Chiyoko...she was too stubborn. She wouldn't allow her soul to join ours..."

"...stop...God, stop. I'm begging you. Please...no more...not again..." Yuji's voice was weak. He fell to his knees, his hands balled into fists. Blood ran down his palms from his fingernails digging into them.

"My name should have been Senako*, but she resisted. So I'm only two-thirds as strong as I should be...but that's strong enough, isn't it?"

[Note: 'sen' is another reading for the kanji 'chi' in Chiyoko's name.]

Yuji let his head drop. Annako continued.

“Asuna...Miko...you were just a child. It wasn't your fault. But your guilt...it consumed you. Asuna died in the first attack- the attack meant for you. You dodged it on impulse...Her body was incinerated. You heard her scream, and you attacked for the first time with the intent to kill. But you were only eleven, and not yet trained.”

Yuji stopped moving, and just listened. He seemed to be powerless to do anything else.

“You were still wearing the crown she made you, weren't you? The crown of the green leaves that grew near the pond...She was only nine years old...”

Azami shifted uncomfortably, reading the mood in the room. It was necessary, maybe, to break Yuji like this. But it still hurt. It hurt everyone. But it had to be done.

“...and Miko. She died next. Her throat was crushed by your head. She tried to catch you before you hit that wall; to spare your life. And she did. But she died, too...She was only sixteen years old, and like a big sister to you. Her golden yari gave you that scar on your right shoulder when it fell from her hands....”

Annako stepped out of the doorway, walking silently across the room. She knelt in front of Yuji, her hands propping his chin up. His eyes were dead; his breathing was shallow.

“...I'm sorry to be so unkind, but we have one more person to visit, don't we? The other two died quickly, and you were so young. The man who attacked...you never found him. But that isn't the worst part, is it? No...you weren't in love with those girls. They were friends...maybe even family to you. They meant a lot, and that started you on this path. But the last girl...Chiyoko is truly responsible for you, isn't she?”

Annako knelt even closer, whispering, yet her voice seemed impossibly magnified.

“She died because you couldn't protect her. You weren't strong enough to block the attack; you weren't skilled enough in medical ninjutsu to heal her; you didn't possess summoning jutsu to bring help. She died because you were too inexperienced; too weak.”

Annako stood up. “I am the reincarnation of Asuna and Miko. That is why you see me this way. They were both priestesses. Both very powerful. And both dead well before their time. Hence the reason I exist.”

Yuji felt his strength return. He got to one knee, panting heavily now. He looked at Annako as she walked away.

“...you know, then. I can feel emotions. But you...you can...”

“Turn them off?” Annako said/asked. “No, but it means the same for you. Your abilities- that is, your empathic abilities- were awakened by your own unconscious mind as a coping mechanism for the death that has surrounded you. My...predecessors...were the reason your powers began to blossom. Chiyoko is the reason they bloomed. All three are the reason I exist...or maybe it's better to say that I NEED to exist because of them.”

Annako nodded to KEKOBÉ. As one, they moved to Yuji's side. He felt his weakness leave; as though

a shield had been held up to block the oppressive feeling.

Feeling...that was chakra I felt. Her chakra. No...THEIR chakra. Both of them. Asuna and Miko. But why didn't I remember until now?

"The Akatsuki tortured you," Annako informed him. "You hid away the most precious parts of yourself in a genjutsu that you were supposed to have awakened from when you were rescued. But this part of your mind did not recover...I will now heal it. It may hurt, but please bear with me...it is necessary."

Annako raised her hand before Yuji could stop her. Each member of KEKOBÉ restrained one of his limbs. Ryofu and Hisako each captured an arm. Yuugao forced Yuji to his knees, pinning his legs down by stepping on his ankles. Azami held his head. Annako approached, her palm outstretched.

"Genjutsu: Fuzetsu Sakai- Kai*!"

[Mental Arts: Seal of Existence- Release!]

It all came flooding back.

Asuna.

Miko.

The three henchmen of Orochimaru that Yuji had killed.

His vain attempts to resuscitate the Third Hokage by begging the shinigami to take his soul instead.

Special memories came gushing back to him. Memories that he had kept locked up inside to keep his mind intact all the time he was being tortured by the Akatsuki.

"It...hurts..." he gurgled, falling forward, supported only by his team.

"You must wonder why all this is necessary. Why I have assembled these warriors- why I've chosen you," Annako told him, her words both soothing and magnifying his pain. "It is because of your time with the Third Hokage. We believe in your strength to fight and lead. And we need you to do just that. KEKOBÉ was a start, but there are more enemies than just the Akatsuki. Worse enemies. Enemies with no agenda other than to simply kill. You have harnessed the powers of earth, fire, and genjutsu. Your partners use wind, water, and lightning. You all balance each other. And the rest of us- the ten of us- will aid you. Unless you've already died?"

Yuji was on the floor, unmoving. Annako sighed, a single tear falling from one eye. Her eyes were two different colors. One was jet black; the other brown- the color eyes of Miko and Asuna, respectively.

"He has died. The shock of his memories returning was too great. He must be revived. Azami, will you get the healer?"

Azami did something surprising- she knelt down and bowed- before disappearing into her shadow. Almost instantly, she returned with Sakura.

Sakura tugged on her gloves, already focused on Yuji. She closed her eyes, almost feeling his pain as he died. It was easy enough to revive him- this time, he'd died of something from within his body, rather

than any sort of external attack. It was a simple matter of infusing some of her chakra into his chakra network and letting it find his own dwindling chakra.

It would attach it self and 'suture' the chakra to it, dragging it back through his system, finally-

Yuji snapped up suddenly, his body wracked with pain. He was panting and even foaming at the mouth. His eyes bulged; his veins bloated and raised. Everyone but Annako moved away from Yuji as he shouted:

"You...You had no right! Those memories are mine only! I'll make you pay!"

Then he regained his composure. The pain receded. He began to breathe normally.

"I'm...sorry. I didn't mean any of that. I'm fine now. It just...hurt."

This girl...our souls touched. I felt Asuna, and I left Miko. But her...she herself is evil. She isn't purity- she is evil that is so black it's become white! But I can't let anyone else know that yet. I don't know what she's done to brainwash the others, but I'm far too vulnerable right now to make a move against her. If I did, it would mean killing everyone here- people that I care about.

She got me.

I can't fight her. She knows it. As long as she has one 'hostage', I'm at her beck and call. To make matters worse, she actually has some sort of power over my emotions. She can read them, the same as I can read others. Another empath...

32 - The Other Empath

Yuji felt his friends release him. The pain was completely gone, to his surprise. He had already sorted out his memories. He had already grieved for Asuna and Miko. He remembered grieving for them, which spared him new pain.

He stood up, looking around the room. Ten enemies, and most of his friends. Unless they were all brainwashed by this little girl? He needed help to beat her, no matter what. But who did he approach?

And he knew instantly who. It couldn't be Azami or Yuugao, and Sakura was in too influential a position. If she was brainwashed and he didn't play nice, her influence could majorly harm the village. No...for this, he needed to make the last choice he ever wanted to make.

"Ryofu...sorry to bring this up, but that money you owe me..."

--

Ryofu heard the phrase, but it's meaning didn't register right away. He knew it was important. He never borrowed any money from Yuji, and for Yuji to bring it up now was absurd.

Codeword. Code! He's using a duress phrase we came up with! Only he and I know it- we didn't even tell Hisako, just in case of genjutsu or impersonation. He's using it now...why? Isn't Annako solving the problem?

Wait, problem? Which problem? There is no problem. The village survived. In pieces, but everyone is alive. So who are we fighting?

"...Yeah. Sorry. How much was it?"

"...In private. We need to arm the group, or I wouldn't be calling in this loan..." Yuji answered. He looked at everyone. "The twins favor tonfa...maybe made of that ore that conducts chakra types...they're expensive, though...Yeah, we'll talk outside, Ryofu. It's a problematic amount, especially *with interest*..."

--

Once outside, Yuji and Ryofu spoke quietly. Ryofu knew an assessment when he saw one, and he answered all Yuji's questions. It was a line of questioning meant to prove identity.

For Yuji, he was doing his best to probe Ryofu with genjutsu while keeping him distracted. He could find no holes in whatever jutsu Annako had used on Ryofu. And the more he thought, the more reasonable Annako seemed. He had reacted to the pain of his memories returning, and maybe that had caused his instincts to trip?

No. Me, maybe. But the others? Azami bowing? Yuugao restraining me? No, no, this is wrong!

Ryofu took orders from that girl passively. But he also seems like the least likely ally for me of the group. I've got to do this carefully...

Desperate, Yuji began to look for physical differences. Marks a syringe might leave; anything.

Ryofu wasn't comfortable with that, an irritated 'What the hell do you think you're looking at?!' snapping Yuji away from him. Ryofu raised his hand, and his sleeve rode up a bit. Yuji frowned at that.

"You don't wear long sleeves...what brought that on?"

Ryofu looked surprised, as if just realizing he was wearing them. "Annako said...! That's gotta be it! This!"

Ryofu rolled up his sleeve. A tattoo of a dragon was on his left forearm. It was only a silhouette, but somehow it seemed to have depth to it. The color...

Is chakra based. I don't know who the artist is, but this thing is a problem...

"Hold still," Yuji said quietly, just as quietly activating a Sealing Jutsu. "Five Elements Seal..."

The second Yuji put his hand on the tattoo, a burning sensation shot up his arm. He pulled back, swearing at himself for making such a rookie mistake.

Of course there'd be a trap on it. A backlash to anyone who tries to remove the seal. I could've killed myself, or Ryofu...Damn it, that little dog is clever...

"Ryofu, can you sense anything? About that tattoo, I mean. Does it react with you? Your chakra, maybe? Can you cast a simple jutsu?"

Ryofu didn't argue. He rolled up his sleeve farther, and cast a water creating jutsu, forming a puddle on the ground. A red ring appeared around his tattoo.

"Ugh...I felt that. It's like it's...leeching off my chakra...It feels like it's eating the same amount I put out..."

Yuji nodded slowly. "Okay. We'll meet in the usual place we *settle our debts*, tomorrow at midnight. I don't want anyone to know the amount you borrowed. Come alone..."

Yuji and Ryofu walked back inside. Yuji's mind had begun to work.

A parasite-type jutsu? I've never heard of such a thing existing...I want to ask Lady Tsunade, but I might tip my hand. I don't know who has been compromised. If I do this, I need to do it alone, until I can be sure of my allies...

Yuji bowed politely to the group, who seemed to be frozen in time until he came back. "Sorry. Such a matter is best handled privately. Now then, these enemies...who are they?"

...You dog. You got me good. But I'll figure out what you're all about, one way or another...

"Wait, no, a more urgent question, if you don't mind..."

Annako smiled serenely. "Your emotions spiked just now...you were almost too cool before. Are you...lying to me?"

Yuji tried to force the bead of sweat that shot out of his temple back to where it belonged. "No, nothing like that. I've killed enough people to know that I'm not done killing yet. I feel nothing when it comes to ending a murder's life. Well, not *nothing*, but not so much. As for the spike in emotions...well, that's an easy one. I want to talk to her."

Annako raised an eyebrow, still smiling. "Who? There are lots of females here..."

"Yes," Yuji said, "But two in particular. You know so much about Asuna and Miko. I'd like to talk to Miko. Some unresolved issues there, as you might imagine. Seeing as how I wasn't able to save them. If you're both of them, can I talk to one of them?"

Annako's smile wavered only slightly. "I see...well, that is reasonable. I made a lot of claims to you. Naturally a man of your experience would prefer to have proof...very well. When the conditions are met, I can allow you to speak with them. But it requires something...uncomfortable..."

I got you, you little dog. I called your bluff. Now, show me how deeply you've been lying...

"I need a volunteer to house their spirits. A similar age and gender..."

Yuji's feelings of victory evaporated quickly. "You'd think I'll let you do that to one of my friends without knowing the effects? I'll tell you what: use those twins and bring Asuna and Miko back..."

"I cannot. As I said, they need to be close in age..."

"That's convenient," Yuji muttered. He lit a cigarette, trying to make himself look and feel imposing. "That seems like a convenient stipulation for someone who doesn't want to show her hand...Pardon my bluntness, but I'm still skeptical...why would need a similar age and gender for a soul? No resurrection jutsu I have ever seen requires that...Orochimaru's body transfer didn't...And you'll pardon me, but I'm actually well versed in the subject..."

Sakura stepped forward. "Yuji, let me be the one to test this. If worse comes to worst, then Lady Tsunade can probably help me."

Yuji felt the cigarette bobble in his mouth. "Absolutely not!"

Sakura turned to Annako. "Miko was sixteen, right? Perfect. I'm sixteen. Use me."

"Sakura, no! I-"

Sakura's head turned to Yuji, and his blood ran cold. Her eyes had changed! He'd never seen them so cold and black! They looked like heavy orbs, all shades of their pretty green gone, replaced by a dull black that gave off no sheen.

"It's my choice, Yuji. My choice," she said in an unfamiliar voice. "If you object, then someone will have

to hold you back. This is the only way to convince you that Annako is here with your best interests at heart.”

I can feel it! Her voice. It's like it's punching me in the chest! I'm...terrified. Every instinct I have is telling me to run! But I can't move! This feeling...I've never been so scared! Damn it!

Annako still smiled placidly. “You have nothing to fear from me, Yuji. But if this will set your mind at ease...”

She called my bluff! And if she can actually do this, then the group will trust her more! Am I wrong? Yuji began to wonder. **No. I'm not. She can fake everything else, but not my instincts. I felt her black little soul. I know how evil she is. I cannot let my self doubt that! If I do, it's all over!**

Risking Sakura...I hate this...But maybe I can test this...

“Has anyone seen you perform this jutsu?” Yuji asked, his voice level. “I mean, in person.”

“Of course,” Annako answered instantly. “In fact, your friends all needed similar convincing that I was who and what I said. I performed this jutsu for all of them, for some of their various loved ones.”

Yuji looked to Hisako. “Is that true?”

Hisako favored him with an exasperated glare. “Do you think I'd let Sakura risk herself?”

No. That's what I was counting on. If Hisako isn't objecting...

Yuji took the cigarette out of his mouth and assumed a kneeling posture, watching from a distance. “Very well. Go ahead. But if any harm comes to Sakura...I will kill anyone who tries to stop me from killing you.”

Annako didn't break her smile. “That's fine. I understand. Your feelings for her are still conflicted after all this time. I can hardly blame you. But you need not worry. As I said, I want you on my side. Rather, I want to be on YOUR side. So please, trust me enough to earn your confidence.”

Yuji had played every card he had to stop this, and had failed. Now all he could do was observe her.

I'm not beaten yet. You'll give something away. I already know something about your little tattoos...now show me how you cast jutsu.

Even as he thought such strong things, a part of Yuji wasn't sure he was right. But he couldn't be mistaken...could he?

-

The jutsu process was more involved than Yuji had ever seen short of Curse Sealing. Sakura lay on the floor, a red cloth beneath her. Annako knelt over her, her hands gently on the girl's throat first. For the process, Sakura had to take off her top, leaving her in only in the chain mail bra that kunoichi were recommended to wear. It made Yuji uncomfortable, given his history with Sakura a couple years ago,

when they were both just kids. In the shinobi world, you came of age at fifteen, but sixteen seemed to young to be sacrificed, or whatever the hell Annako was planning.

Annako carefully pushed up the left half of Sakura's bra. She felt for the heart, bit her thumb, and used the blood to make a small mark over it.

This isn't right. Every fiber of Yuji's being was opposed to this. **A twelve year old is about to sacrifice a sixteen year old. A girl I had feelings for. A girl I will always care for. I have to let this happen so that I can save everyone else...but if she dies here...**

And this! Sakura would never be okay with this! This exposed in front of mixed genders? The Sakura I knew would have punched out every male in the room first. And Hisako! She'd never let anyone do this to Sakura! Damn it!

"Yuji? Yuji! You're bleeding!" someone called. Yuji looked down, feeling the warm blood trailing from his palms. It was running out of his mouth, too. He'd been squeezing his fists and clenching his teeth so hard that he was bleeding.

"I'm fine," Yuji replied darkly, focusing his attention on Annako, making sure she felt the threat he had voiced early. If she did, she didn't show it outwardly. She just smiled slightly, concentrating on Sakura.

Then a flash of insight- or instinct, maybe- hit Yuji.

"Stop!" he shouted, leaping up. Other immediately leapt up to restrain him. He kept talking, even with his arms held behind his back. "Please...let's talk one on one. There is another way to make me believe you! If you do this now, I will NEVER trust you!"

It was only for a second, Yuji thought. In one second, I somehow knew...I felt that she meant to harm...someone. She can manipulate emotions, but that much concentration on her jutsu made her hold on my empathic abilities weaken. She means me no harm, but she is aiming higher...I'm a pawn. I'm a pawn in some game she's playing. I don't know how I know this, or why it came to me now...but I have to do something!

Annako frowned slightly- the first time Yuji had seen her waver. But quickly she recovered.

"I'm sorry, but will everyone please leave for a moment? If Yuji is ready to talk with me in earnest, then that is what we will do."

Everyone started to leave. Ryofu hesitated slightly, but left regardless. Only Azami didn't move.

Annako smiled. But this time, it was a sneer.

"So, you figured it out, huh?"

Yuji felt himself sweating. "No...not totally. Just on an instinctual level. I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't stopped you..."

Annako continued smirking. "Azami, please make me comfortable while I speak with Yuji."

Azami knelt behind Annako, massaging her shoulders. Yuji gritted his teeth.

“That’s for my benefit, isn’t it?” he snarled. “Don’t torture her. Do what you will with me, but leave her out of this.”

Annako reached up and caressed Azami’s chin. “So fragile. She is strong, beautiful, intelligent- but I promise one thing she wants, and her will becomes mine to command. She surrendered without a fight- as I’d hoped you would. You see, I do not wish to fight. My abilities are unique, and not once have I lied to you about my strength or skill. It’s a testament to your abilities that you could see through my acting. Most people don’t.”

Annako’s hand tightened around Azami’s neck.

“I could kill her so easily...Someone so full of regrets, like her, is easy to control. The people she’s killed...it weighs on her. Reliving the time she was nearly raped eats at her. I offered her relief from that, and the means to protect the one thing in the world she has left to love- you- and she crumbled.”

“I get it,” Yuji said. “You know full well that I regret not being able to save them. Those three girls, all dead because of me. And the countless others I’ve killed to protect what little peace of mind I’ve found.”

Annako nodded. “Yes. I really thought that you’d be easy. You’re also very strong. But your empathy tipped you off, and I hadn’t counted on that. By the time I suppressed it, it was too late. You’ve played your hand well, so far.”

“You’ve never killed anyone, have you?” Yuji asked, a cigarette in his mouth. “You’ve never actually taken a life, or you wouldn’t be playing games with the lives of others. Extortion is a crime by itself...extorting a life, as you do, is inhumane. You’re an evil little brat.”

Annako didn’t blink. “Shiroko! Please return.”

One of the two twins walked in. She bowed.

“Yes, my lady?”

Annako smiled pleasantly-

Then her fist shot into Shiroko’s throat.

Blood shot out of Shiroko’s mouth, and her eyes widened in a gasp as she realized she couldn’t breathe.

“Do you take me for a full, Yuji Itou?!” Annako shouted, shoving Azami away and stomping across the room to where Shiroko lay gasping. “Do you?! HA!!!”

She stomped down on Shiroko again and again. The girl’s head began to knock against the floor; her

lifeless body flopping like a rag doll.

Yuji was across the room in an instant. He had every intention of killing this evil little girl. His right hand arched toward her throat.

Then Azami was in the way. She stepped into him, the kunai in her hand plunging into his stomach. The next instant, Azami pulled the kunai out and kicked him to the floor. Annako came and stood over him.

“An injury like that won’t kill you. But it will make my point: Do not cross me. I have plans for you, and everyone else is expendable. Even your girlfriend. They’ll all turn against you. Do you understand what I’m saying to you? If you want to kill me, you’ll have to wade through your friends, and even your lover.”

Yuji could only hold his hurt stomach and stare up at Annako in fury. But eventually, he bowed his head.

She had him.

33 - The Explanation

Annako's plans were simple: Yuji was to become Hokage, by hook or by crook. Yuji forced himself to hollow out his emotions and do what he was told. Azami, Hisako, Sakura, Yuugao, and who knew how many others were all at risk if he didn't do what he was told.

Only Ryofu had been 'freed' as it were. He and Yuji met, and decided that Ryofu would be a double agent. But he had to be careful not to see any more of Annako's performances. He couldn't recall what Annako had showed him to make him believe in her enough to get a tattoo.

Yuji, meanwhile, contemplated becoming Hokage. It would mean betraying Naruto, Lady Tsunade, and even Sakura. But if he didn't make a serious attempt legitimately, people would die. Annako threatened to have Sakura kill Tsunade. Yuji didn't think that was possible, but Sakura would suffer whether the attempt succeeded or not.

It was in short order that the village became divided. Yuji announced his intent to become Hokage. Tsunade, rather than fight, ordered an election- the first ever in the Hidden Leaf. Naruto's name was immediately added to the fray, making for a three-way run.

Yuji hated this. He wanted to become Hokage, but not like this. Not by turning on everyone like this! He campaigned earnestly, however. He had no choice. Each time he spoke to the village, he could see Annako's group spread out in the crowd. Azami was always front and center, spinning a kunai, as if bored, her eyes dead.

So it went for a month. To Yuji's surprise, a lot of people seemed to support him. Tsunade and Naruto were village favorites, but then so was Yuji. The older people remembered how Yuji stepped in and took over the village in between the Third Hokage and Lady Tsunade. He had been a fine, upstanding leader, and had given the village a vast reservoir of funds in case of emergencies.

He had experience, proven results, and power to back both of those elements up.

Yuji was sitting by himself after one speech, drinking. He did that a lot more often these days. Never enough to get drunk; just enough to ease the constant pain he was in. A cigarette in the same hand as his sake cup eased his pain further; he was worried he was addicted. He was worried that he didn't care if he was addicted.

His tie loosened and jacked slung over the back of his chair, he was joined by Hisako. He spared her a weary glance, then looked down into his cup.

"Hey...Ryofu talked to me. He said..." she hesitated, but shored up her resolve, "He said Annako was a fake, and was using us to control you?"

Yuji's head snapped toward her. "That's it exactly. You know me, Hisako. Would I ever hurt everyone I care about like this? Challenging Tsunade's authority; hurting Naruto's feelings...I wouldn't do that

even to you and Ryofu.”

“Then what will you do?” she asked.

“What CAN I do? She’s got me, Hisako,” Yuji replied sullenly. “People will die if I don’t do what she said.”

“A handful of people,” Hisako answered. “A handful of us who you know would sacrifice themselves for the good of the village. So what are you doing? Make the move to sacrifice us! Save who you can! Or is this because of Azami?”

Yuji wondered about that. “I...don’t know. I would have done anything for Chiyoko, too, I guess. I don’t fall in love easily...and I have borne the guilt of Asuna and Miko’s deaths for all these years...Maybe you’re right. I need to make a move. I can’t let this play out the way it’s going.”

Hisako frowned. “That’s a shame. Annako is going to hear of your weak heart. Unless you kill me right now to stop me from telling her.”

Yuji gritted his teeth. He’d fallen for the trap. Hisako produced a syringe full of a clear liquid. She held it to her neck.

“I think it’s best if you tell Annako yourself. Maybe she’ll only kill a handful of us if you are honest...UGH!”

Hisako collapsed forward. Ryofu stood behind her, the pommel of his sword where her shoulder blades used to be.

“Yuji, if you’re going to stop this, you’d better move quickly. She’s going to know of Hisako’s incapacitation...”

Yuji stood up, using a medical ninjutsu to clear the alcohol from his system. In the same movement, he grabbed Ryofu’s arm.

“Barrier Ninjutsu: Awase Kagami (Opposing mirrors)!” he called quickly, slapping his hand over Ryofu’s tattoo. “Barrier Ninjutsu: Inoyshintai (Yin-yang central defense)!”

The twin jutsus were something Yuji had developed in private, just in case of such a thing. Since Kekobe, he’d been worried about mental takeovers. These arts, however, had been lost.

Until Annako gave him his memory back.

“Awase Kagami reflects opposing chakras, separating the chakra that belong to the body from the chakra that was forced into it.; Inyoshintai knocks opposing chakras out of the body using my chakra just like breaking a genjutsu.”

“How did you know?” Ryofu asked.

"My memories. Once I sorted through them, I remembered that Miko and Asuna were step-sisters. Miko was ready to inherit the title of 'Uzume'- the strongest priestess- from her mother. She used a rare Light-style Ninjutsu- a kekkei-genkai. Asuna used a rare Shadow-style Kekkei-Genkai. They had different fathers. Asuna, the younger one, had a half-sister from the Land of Iron that she never met in person. She only had a photo of her because 'she was a bad person'. I just remembered- that half-sister was Azami. And if there's anyone I know, it's Azami. Miko taught me the counter to her Light-style Ninjutsu- Awase-Kagami. I was to be her body guard, and maybe her husband someday. I was too young to get what that meant back then. Azami's 'Shadow Gateway' ninjutsu can be blocked by Inyoshintai, which means that her half-sister had at least some of the 'Shadow' ability. If Annako is a reincarnation of those two, then it stands to reason I can block her jutsu. It just took me a while to remember how."

"But she has to know that you can do that," Ryofu said in reply, his tattoo gone and his mind clear.

"Not necessarily. I thought about it a lot while I pretended to drink myself to death," Yuji murmured, making a long series of handsigns. "She looks more like Asuna, but speaks more like Miko. But only Uzume can use reincarnation jutsu in the manner Annako was about to."

"You knew her jutsu?"

"Yeah. The Third Uzume was disgraced when she killed fifty people in defense of the Land of Fire's temple. She used a forbidden Jutsu that even Orochimaru couldn't perform- the 'White Incarnation'. It's requirements are more stringent than Edotensei, but the souls are stronger. A soul is stronger than you might think- the fact is, if we could all die and come back with no damage to our bodies, we would be incredibly strong. To do that, you have to remove a soul cleanly, and it has to return willingly. Not even Pain could do that- ripping a soul out of the body leaves a 'scar' on the soul. This jutsu would allow for probably double or triple the chakra potency."

Yuji finished his handsigns. His shadow elongated. "Anyway, this Uzume used the jutsu- meant to keep leaders alive forever- and brought to life several strong warriors who had taken their own lives willingly just for this reason. They were centuries-old warriors- die-hard fanatics from the olden days- and each Uzume was subsequently taught their names so they could be brought back in times of war. The second Uzume made it taboo to do that. She declared that the dead had a sacred right to be at peace, and that unless, through clairvoyance, you could foresee their intent and will to return, you leave them dead. The Third Uzume saw no such thing. When the warriors killed everyone else and turned on her, she killed them with the 'Black Death'- a jutsu that causes a plague inside the bodies of those who have sinned. I don't know how the jutsu works, but it's dangerous as hell. That's what made me so afraid of Annako- she could perform the 'White Incarnation'..."

"...Which means she could perform the 'Black Death'," Ryofu finished, his face ashen.

"Yes. I'm going to have to move quickly, and kill Annako. I've been trying to figure out how to avoid doing that, but there's no option. She's too evil and too powerful to live. I have to throw my best jutsu at her, and hope it's enough."

Yuji let himself fall backward into the shadow. Ryofu didn't speak his thought.

What about the ‘Black Death’, Yuji? If she marks you as a ‘sinner’, then aren’t you as good as dead now?

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Tsunade and Naruto stood across from Yuji in the Hokage’s office. The election was only a few days off. Yuji had called them there to speak about the questions the proctor would ask them in the last interview before the count.

Yuji, however, wasn’t dressed in his suit. He was dressed in a black gi top and black gi pants- like he was attending a funeral.

“...I’ve thought a lot about this. I need you to believe me when I say this, and I need you to not question it. I will immediately forfeit the election for conduct unbecoming of a leader. But please- take this at face value and *help me*.”

Shizune walked in with Sakura. Yuji leapt across the room, using a Chakra Scalpel to combat the two women. He struck Shizune first when she tried to use her Poison Mist Jutsu. She fell to the ground. Sakura swung at Yuji’s neck, her own Chakra Scalpel activated. Yuji blocked it with his right hand, his left hand making handsigns. No jutsu activated, and Sakura tried to withdraw and slice at his stomach. Yuji used the Body Flicker Jutsu to appear behind her. He struck her between the shoulder blades, dropping her.

“Sealing Jutsu: Awase Kagami! Sealing Jutsu: Inyoshintai!” (‘Opposing Mirrors’ and ‘Yin-Yang Central Defense’, respectively) he called, touching one hand to both Sakura and Shizune.

He just finished the jutsu when Naruto barreled into him, holding him in an armbar with a kunai at his neck.

“Check Sakura’s left breast! You’ll see a tattoo that shouldn’t be there! You’ll feel a pure chakra coming from it! Please! Check! For God’s sake, check!”

Tsunade strode across the room, stomping hard on Yuji’s ribs. She unzipped Sakura’s vest. She broke into a sweat.

“That is the chakra of a priestess! But that jutsu...”

Tsunade nodded to Naruto, who let Yuji up. Yuji rolled up Shizune’s sleeves, spying a tattoo on her left forearm.

“This is why I started this ridiculous campaign. I’m being blackmailed. Everyone I care for is being held hostage by this evil little girl. She used the jutsu of two girls I knew- the one next in line to become Uzume, and her sister- and combined them to control everyone I care about. God,” he said, tears spilling from his eye. “She’s got Azami. She could have anyone else. And she’s evil. She tried to force me to take control of the village so I could be her puppet. I don’t know why she chose me, but-”

Tsunade interjected. “Naruto’s Kyuubi chakra would reject her influence. My Grandfather, the First

Hokage, could likely counter her justu with his Wood Style. Kakashi had the Sharingan, which could see the Jutsu and understand it's counter as it was being cast. That left you..."

Tsunade looked at her two fallen subordinates. "Are they free of her control? I don't know those jutsu you used..."

Yuji nodded. "Yes. They should be fine. Ryofu was also under her control, and these freed him. The problem is not knowing who she's gotten to..."

Naruto grinned widely. "Nah, Granny Tsunade just gave us the answer! She can't control me or Granny, or Kakashi-sensei. If you have us with you, we can kick her @\$#!"

"...I have to do it. You'll hesitate if you see her," Yuji said quietly. "She's twelve."

And I need to liberate the two souls she has inside her. I need...closure. Asuna and Miko were taken from me because I was too weak to protect them. I have to...save their souls. For my sake. And one other...

"...We can strike her and stop her. But we can't let anyone else know about this," said Yuji, looking to Tsunade. "And I'm sorry I didn't come to you sooner. I just...lost my nerve. She had her..."

"...Azami..." Tsunade said. Yuji nodded.

"You have nothing to apologize for. The knife was at your neck. Now we can move the knife away and get things back to normal," Tsunade said briskly.

"To that end, my Lady, I need a favor," Yuji said, his voice grim. "You can absolutely say no...it's highly unusual..."

"What do you need?"

"A dead body, and you to turn a blind eye while I perform some very distasteful kinjutsu."

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The dead body of a young woman lay before Yuji. He grimaced; she'd been too young. An ANBU agent killed while on duty. She asked for her body to be donated to help her village.

Yuji clasped his hands, making the final handsign.

"Art of Resurrection: Amashin" (Heaven Center)

The body immediately breathed life. It's appearance didn't change, but the mannerisms; the voice...

"Yu...ya brought me back?"

Yuji bowed his head. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Chiyoko. But I need your help."

Chiyoko leapt off the table. She wasn't smiling, and for a minute Yuji worried that she was angry with him. But then she spoke:

"Yu, I know what's happening. That evil little girl...She came for my soul, but I told her no."

"If this isn't good for you, I'll end the jutsu..." Yuji offered immediately.

"Are ya kidding?! Getting to fight by your side again, Yu! I wouldn't miss it!" she said, a new smile sparkling. Yuji could practically see the young girl. He felt young himself again. He hadn't yet lived twenty-six years, but he'd seen and done a lot. To see her again, though...

Chiyoko took Yuji's hand. "I'll handle your girl. You need her, Yu. You know that I can't stay..."

Yuji leaned his forehead to hers. "...I know. But there's always hope, I guess."

Chiyoko's smile turned sad. "Yeah...well, on the up side, you'll be seeing me again! Maybe I can't come to you, but you can come to me! But not for a long while, 'kay?"

Yuji didn't say anything. He took up a kunai with a red tag in it.

"...This will allow you keep your free will. Even if she tries to take your soul over by force, this will repel her attempt. It won't bind you to my will or anything..."

"...Because you know there's no need for that?" she said. It wasn't a question.

"...Yeah."

34 - Measure of a Man

Yuji strode through the village, his eyes straight ahead. Supporters called out to him; those who did not wish him to become Hokage politely nodded. Most could respect Yuji, even if they preferred another leader. A few shouted hateful things openly.

At the center of the village was Annako and Azami. Annako was dressed like a shrine maiden, no doubt to irritate Yuji- both Miko and Asuna had died in similar clothes. Azami wore her black gown.

Yuji stopped short of them. He used a Mud Wall Jutsu to create a platform which he then stood on.

"Excuse me, everyone!" he called out, his powerful voice stopping everyone within range. "I have an announcement to make. Please give me your attention for just a few moments."

Noise gradually stopped- someone like Yuji speaking was rare. And today, he was with both Naruto and Lady Tsunade. Genma, Raido, and a few other shinobi formed an impromptu protection detail, making a ring around the three Hokage candidates.

"I'm sorry to have wasted your time," Yuji began, humble as usual. "But I want to thank those of you who supported me. I am here to renounce my candidacy for Hokage, and if you'll listen for a short while, I will explain."

Murmurs rose through the crowd- the man who insisted on the election was withdrawing! This was major news.

"I would be honored to be your Hokage. I love this village with all my heart. As you know, I trained with the Third Hokage, and for a short time was the interim leader of the village. I would love nothing more than to take those duties on again. However..."

Yuji looked directly at Annako and Azami. He took off his jacket.

"However, not like this. Not like this!" he called, becoming more animated. He tore off his tie. "I have been coerced into running in this race! All for my own selfish reasons! The woman I love is being held hostage, and if I don't run for Hokage, she is dead. DEAD! But I can't do that. I know her- she wouldn't want to be used as a pawn like this!"

Yuji ripped off the rest of his outer clothes. Beneath he wore an all black suit, with metal gauntlets.

The Third Hokage's combat outfit, minus the character on the back. The character on Yuji's read 'Dragon Boy'.

In Yuji's hand was Sarutobi's helmet.

"When I tried this on for the first time, I was little more than a child. It didn't fit well. That was fine- I

wasn't ready to wear it," Yuji said quietly. "I wanted nothing more than to help Lord Third kill Orochimaru. With my chakra, he could have done it. He could have lived. Even if I had fallen, it would have been worth it!"

Yuji put the helmet on. It fit perfectly.

"...I lost my memories. I lost my shinobi way. But no more! I will not drag the village into this personal battle! I will fight to save it! That's why I'm here today! I'm asking for all of you to please stay safe, and to please allow me the vanity of dealing with a very dangerous enemy! Please, trust me this one last time!"

In a blur, Azami had leapt up on the platform, attempting to stab with a kunai. Yuji blocked her to a stalemate.

"In twenty-four hours, we will settle this, Annako! Bring whatever pawns you will! I will wade through a river of blood to end the threat you pose! In twenty-four hours time, you will meet your end!"

Annako's gaze stayed to the ground. Yuji could just see an evil little smile on her face.

"...So, you sacrifice even her, huh? Aren't you the consummate shinobi," she said. "Very well. But why tell me when we're alone?"

Yuji didn't smile. His old self would have. He undid the genjutsu he had placed on Annako.

"I guess I'll let you see, too. You admitted your crime to everyone in the village just now. I put a genjutsu on your sight, and also on your hearing. I think you probably just heard me defy you with some generic 'you won't get away with this?'"

Impossible! I never even sensed it! How did he do this?! This change...I don't feel his monstrous power like before. Instead, he has a quieter power...a power that is even more dangerous to me. A power I don't think I can control... Annako analyzed the situation in just those few thoughts. But it was true: There were no wings of fire ready to sprout from Yuji. For that, either his chakra had been sealed in a special way, or...

Or he remembered his old self. Did my meddling with his memories bring them all back? No! This is bad! I could only control him because of our empathic connection and his unsteady heart! Now, he has resolve! This is bad!

Yuji focused his chakra into his vocal chords:

"EVERYONE! YOUR LOVED ONES MAY BE BEING CONTROLLED! TRUST NO ONE! ISOLATE YOURSELVES!" Yuji shouted.

Yuji threw a punch at Azami. She ducked, but he pulled the arc of his hand and caught her cheek.

A trickle of blood rolled down her face.

"Te Ryu: Cutting Punch," Yuji said solemnly. "The gesture is more than symbolic. Gather your forces,

Annako. I and those who stand with me will meet you. But know this: I gave you twenty-four hours only to make your peace and pray. Enslave one more person, and I will kill you, here and now."

Yuji turned and walked away. The village stood in silence. The question lingered:

Would he really kill that little girl? Surely, there had to be a better way...

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Konohagakure
Yuji: Age 14

The Third Hokage watched his young apprentice work. And work. And work.

The boy was working as quietly as he could, trying not to disturb the Third Hokage's calligraphy time. The Third, however, was transfixed.

Incredible. A boy his age, and not only has he studied ninjutsu, genjutsu, and taijutsu, but he's studied politics, law, treaties...He is training in every discipline I lay before him. He's been at it for days straight, and has made good progress. A reward, perhaps...

"Kuchiyose! Summoning Jutsu!"

It was Yuji's fiftieth try. The Third smiled- this time, he felt the chakra line up correctly. It would work this time.

POOF! A monkey appeared- Kintaro, the fifth son of Enma the Monkey King. He was the monkey with which Yuji had made a contract, almost a year ago now, when the Third Hokage had taken him to visit the Monkey Sage.

The young man smirked once, then fell forward, exhausted.

Sarutobi gathered up the young man. "Kintaro, you may leave. Please give my regards to your father..."

Kintaro bowed his head. "Of course, Lord Third. The young man has progressed."

Sarutobi smiled. "Yes, yes he has. I thought I was too old for a pupil, but he has made a fine student. And, I think, a fine Hokage someday."

Kintaro gave a toothy grin, then disappeared. Sarutobi pulled Yuji over to the padded area where he had been practicing calligraphy. The boy was unconscious, but he had left a scroll out. Sarutobi frowned, not recognizing it. He peered at the title.

"ShoBu...To win and lose...his philosophy, perhaps?"

Sarutobi didn't find it strange, despite the size of the scroll. The contents were all jutsu Yuji had created

with help. An entire series was dedicated to the “Dragon Trio” he’d been working on most recently. They were powerful jutsus.

Yuji had distinguished himself in combat already. His other instructors all gave glowing reviews. He had been promoted quickly to jonin. He had taken on jobs in the village- exam proctor, instructor at the academy- to earn experience. He was part of a jonin strike squad, as well as one of Sarutobi’s bodyguards. Team Hayate- with the young rogue, Ryofu- stayed together, but they did not bond.

Yet the boy was not a genius.

All his power has been earned honestly, through hard work and sacrifice. His body and mind have been battered; he has given up his childhood.

Sarutobi wondered if that was okay. Giving up a childhood was not a decision to be made lightly.

“...Chiyoko...” Yuji said in an unconscious stupor.

Sarutobi put his doubts aside. This young man’s motivation was as pure as any, and his “Will of Fire” was strong. The girl hadn’t caused that, but her love had forced him to name his “Will of Fire”. It did not burn in self interest; rather, in the interests of others.

Sarutobi drafted a scroll to the elders, giving Yuji a seat on the jonin council. A valuable opportunity to learn, which the boy would value.

It made Sarutobi smile and frown at the same time. In the battle Sarutobi knew he would face someday, he must keep this boy away. Orochimaru could not be allowed to kill the future. Yuji would insist on fighting by his side; Sarutobi would have to keep the boy occupied elsewhere.

I must teach all I can now. I wish I could give the boy years of training, but that may not be what fate wills. He must be told things that others cannot know. The secrets of the Uchiha...Orochimaru’s betrayal...and of Naruto...

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Yuji woke up suddenly, his brow sweating. He had fallen asleep...

No. More memories. They’ve surfaced. And I feel the pull. The agitation today...it must have somehow pulled these memories out from the genjutsu barrier I used on them...I can remember my training...I can remember Asuna and Miko...

Yuji’s head fell again. His body slumped against his companion.

Chiyoko looked at him sadly. Being a resurrected “person”, she did not need sleep. She watched the man she loved sleep, his face against her shoulder.

“...It wasn’t fair, Yu. You and I should have been together forever. I shouldn’t be here now...not like this,

anyway...Will I only make this fight harder for you in the end? I don't want to...but I don't want to let you go again, either. Would it be so wrong? If I were to stay alive...here, with you...this body lost it's soul, and I didn't get to live a life. This body was at least that of an adult, who got to live more than I...It breaks every law, doesn't it?

...

Damn it, Yu. I just want it to be like back then...We only got one kiss. We deserved more..."

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Fire Temple

Yuji: Age 9

Miko was smiling. Yuji had just performed a jutsu...he couldn't remember now, but when he woke.

"We always thought that was a kekkei genkai, but you did it!" Miko told him happily. "This jutsu will purify even the blackest darkness. And it takes whatever form you need!"

"That's so cool!" Yuji said. But why? It was so important to remember why!

"You know, I could teach you archery, too," Miko offered. "I don't have anything else to do but practice. It would be fun to teach someone else for a change."

Yuji bowed in thanks. "Are you...lonely? Are you lonely, too, Miko?"

Miko's smile wavered. "Maybe a little...but you help, Yuji. I know you'll always be there for me. I wish I was allowed to do more than just talk with you..."

Yuji didn't understand at the time. He understood now what she meant. But it wouldn't have been allowed.

"My blood is wrong, isn't that what the adults said? I don't have a warrior lineage...I'm the first one in my family to be a warrior...I don't even have a 'clan'."

It had been so sad to say back then. The real Yuji felt a memory fall into place. Why that jutsu was so "Cool"; why it was important.

BOOM!

The village was under attack!

Yuji and Chiyoko exchanged glances.

"Stay hidden for a while. I'm going to engage her," Yuji said, running for the door before Chiyoko could answer.

She watched him run, the smile on her face turning happy again.

"I guess that's why I fell in love with you. You've never once put yourself first where others are concerned. I can't imagine what that did you to when I died. It must have hurt, though. A guy like you, with such pride...Even now, when I'm already dead, you want to keep me safe."

She could remember when he discovered his new found power. The time he'd taken to hone it. When Annako had tried to take her soul, Chiyoko had been allowed to see- Yuji's memory loss; his torture.

"But memories make us who we are, Annako," Chiyoko said aloud, getting up and trying to get used to an adult size body. "And you've given him the means to get his memories back. That mistake will cost you."

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There was no time to gather up his allies. Yuji ran across the village, tapping into power he hadn't been conscious of for years. His feet scarcely touched the ground. His left hand formed a circle at his waist. His right hand braced itself in front of the circle.

Annako was ahead, and she had a whole group of enslaved beings.

You cannot save them all, Yuji. Not unless you take her down at the start. If you commit to that, you know what will happen.

It didn't matter. Nothing did anymore. Yuji had, by his own choices, condemned his beloved to death. Whether or not Azami was already dead, he couldn't be sure. But Annako would make sure, were she to lose, that she would leave him with nothing. His reputation would be destroyed- he'd have to murder this little girl on the streets, in front of people who trusted him. As a matter of politics, those with power in the village would have to disown him- even those who knew the truth. He would have to cast aside all his friends to protect them.

And Azami would still be gone.

It must have been this hard for you, Itachi. Knowing you were effectively ending your life. But you had a plan for after. I don't have that. I will lose everything-

But my conscience will be clear.

Yuji cut through the pack, ignoring weapons swung at him. Annako's stunned face turned to him. From his left hand, he produced a sword that materialized out of nowhere, from nothing. He drew the sword at a full run.

"Light Style: Sun Rising Sword!"

He found his sword blocked.

Azami.

“Shadow Style: Sun Setting Sword!”

Their swords blocked, Azami attempted a kick.

“Tatsunokuchi Jutsu!” Yuji called, his left hand forming a half-tiger sign. A statue of a dragon sprang from the earth, halting Azami’s foot. It snapped its jaws shut on her ankle, but she had disappeared into a shadow.

Yuji swung for Annako again, this time finding his strike halted by a mirror.

“Ninja Tool: Yama Oroshi (Mountain Storm) Mirror!”

Yuji had heard about that ninja tool. Very powerful, very hard to use, and very dangerous in the wrong hands.

“Ryuuza: Dragon Constellation Jutsu!” Yuji called, a new jutsu striking from the sky. Points of light in the shape of a dragon crashed into Annako, who reflected the attack with the mirror. It was the second of Yuji’s “Dragon Trio”.

“Ah! You bastard!” she screeched, the mirror spinning through the air.

Yuji’s left hand again held a weapon from nowhere. “Light Style: Kyudo (Archery)!”

A bow six feet tall appeared. Yuji shot an arrow from it. Pure light streaked toward the mirror, knocking it miles away.

“If you were to use that mirror, you could unleash the Black Death Jutsu to any place with a reflective surface,” Yuji stated calmly. “You would kill too many people for that.”

Annako swore. “Where is Azami?!”

Yuji’s face didn’t change. “My Ryuuza Dragon Constellation’s effect is keeping her away. Light creates shadows, but this light is so pure that the shadows are erased. It’s a jutsu I forgot I knew...”

Yuji bit his thumb, casting a Summoning Jutsu. A large monkey appeared, holding a sword and shield.

“Yuji, it’s been so long! Why haven’t you summoned me, at least for sake!” chided the monkey. “Don’t tell me you’re living a peaceful life...”

Yuji shook his head. “We can catch up later, Kintaro. For now, I’ll just apologize for not calling on you. My memories were sealed, and they’re just coming back. I’m remembering who I was before KEKOBÉ. When I was the student of Lord Third Hokage, Hiruzen Sarutobi.”

“That’s crap! You’re the same person you’ve always been!” Annako shouted, furious. “Fire Style: Cremation!”

“Earth Style: Mud Wall!” Yuji countered. The fire hit the wall and baked the mud, but did not pass.

“You’re wrong. There was a time when I was set to be somebody else. A time when being Hokage wasn’t a dream that was being forced on me. The other kage from the time will remember Sarutobi’s youngest bodyguard- they were the ones who gave me the nickname that I foreswore when I took to the shadows!”

“AHHH! FIRE STYLE: GRAND CREMATION!” Annako screamed.

Kintaro jumped in the way, his shield blocking the flames. Yuji slapped the ground, performing a second summoning jutsu.

A small Chinese water dragon appeared. The Kuchiyose was the third of Yuji’s “Dragon Trio”.

“Umisu! Water Style: Water Wall!” Yuji called. The dragon understood, it seemed, because it’s tiny body bloated-

And released a torrent of water far greater than should have been possible.

“It’s all thanks to you, Annako. Restoring my memories made me remember- I once had potential. I gave it up for all the right reasons, but that may have been hasty.”

“WHAT ARE YOU?!” she screamed.

“I’ve been named “The Catalyst”, for performing jutsu by using existing elements and interacting with them. But the name that earned respect was ‘Dragon Boy’- Third Lord Hokage’s subordinate who used dragons in combat.”

Azami appeared, running from a distance away. Yuji blocked her strike with a hand coated in light.

“But I evolved. Dragons were one thing- Light Style was another. It was you reminding me of Miko and Asuna that made me remember what they taught me. A jutsu that judged the user’s intentions and would not perform for those with dark intentions. Light Style- the most versatile of all styles, thought to be a Kekkei Genkai. But that isn’t quite true- it IS a learned trait, when taught by two of pure heart.”

Azami swung with another Setting Sun Sword. Yuji dropped into a shadow, reappearing behind Annako.

“Finally, my fiance taught me Shadow Style. I now have Light Style, Shadow Style, and my own Fire Style and Earth Styles. Thanks to you, Annako, I’ve gained such power that I could do just about anything. But the best part is, my goals have never changed. To protect this village and it’s people, I will use all power at my disposal. And you’ve given me so much, that I think you deserve to feel all that I can muster!”

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Hisako and Ryofu hacked their way through Annako’s minions, sparing who they could. Sakura and the other medical corps weren’t far behind, healing the damage.

Ryofu took aim at one large group of maybe fifty people.

“Blood Manipulation Jutsu!”

They people froze in their tracks. Ryofu held the jutsu, straining as he did. Hisako lined the group up:

“Water Style: Water Prison Jutsu- Stockade!”

Manacles made of water appeared and wove their way around the limbs of the captured. They would stay here until the Sealing Corps or Yuji could release them from Annako’s jutsu.

One large man broke free, running screaming at Hisako and Ryofu. Both cursed- Ryofu was still reeling from using the blood manipulation on so many for so long. If he had killed them, as the jutsu was originally intended, there was less “recharge” time. His chakra was rebuilding, but too slowly, and his muscles already ached. Hisako’s handsigns weren’t finished yet; the water stockade was only partially formed. If she didn’t finish the signs, then the jutsu would fall apart.

BAM!

“Gotcha covered!” called a cheerful voice.

Ryofu’s eyes widened to match Hisako’s. He had never been this shocked before. That was a first for him. So was the fact that someone he had killed was standing in front of him, having just saved his life.

“We’ve got lots ta talk about, Ryofu!” Chiyoko told him, her smile wavering just slightly. “But right now, I think maybe we’d better support Yu. You know how he is if we leave him alone, Hisako!”

Hisako found her voice after a couple tries. “Right. You got it.”

35 - Chapter 35- The Deciding Moment

Yuji side-kicked Annako in the back as hard as he could. He heard her spine crack as she flew forward, blood flying from her mouth.

Azami retaliated with her sword. Yuji knocked it aside with his Light-style coated hand. Her legs instantly tangled with his, aiming for a takedown. He pulled back, biting his thumb. The next time Azami attacked, He blocked her blade and palmed her in the face.

“Kuchiyose! Summoning!”

A brown monkey wearing plate armor appeared, blocking Azami’s return strike with his yari (spear).

“Yuji? It’s been so long!”

Yuji bowed. “I’m sorry, Kintaro. I’ll explain later over sake. For now, please guard that child over there. She’s dangerous, so please be on your guard...”

Kintaro instantly obeyed, holding his spear at Annako’s neck.

But Annako was looking completely defeated.

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How is this possible? I was told to unlock his memories; that they would weaken him! Was I lied to? His strength has tripled! And worse, he’s his old self! The new him was riddled with doubts; the old him had the full confidence of the Third Hokage! This is bad!

Annako felt her spine, amazed that she was in one piece after the vicious kick.

He didn’t kill me. He could have. But he didn’t. Why? Why couldn’t he kill me? Is it because of Azami? Or something else?

By now, a crowd of Leaf shinobi had gathered to watch. Someone had the good sense to erect a barrier using ninjutsu. But they were all watching, in complete silence.

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“Is that really Yuji?!”

“Wow! I never knew he could do that!”

“He wasn’t even like that against Pain...”

The two elderly village councilors were watching, though there was little in the way of surprise on their faces.

“...Perhaps he WOULD have been a good choice, after all, Koharu...”

“...I know Sarutobi wished it. But he was so young at the time; still just a boy. After the latest Kazekage, though, I wonder if we should have let him run the village, and allowed Tsunade to focus on the medical corps...”

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Yuji showed no flicker of happiness at his apparent victory. Instead, his eyes drifted to one of the people who had showed up with Annako, supposed under her control.

That person was now weeping and begging forgiveness.

A lot of them were.

In fact...I was right. My memories didn't lie about her, either.

Yuji moved backward, using a Shadow Clone Jutsu. He disappeared into the shadows while his clone ran forward, engaging Azami in a stalemate. He managed to block her Jutsu and grab her with one hand. Azami felt her chakra paralyzed by Yuji's.

Yuji popped up behind her, and he and his clone executed a two-man barrier ninjutsu.

Azami stopped moving.

“...So, you figured it out, did you?”

Yuji stared her down. “...My memories returned. More memories than you planned, right?”

Azami lowered her gaze, a smile on her face. “Well, yes. But that was more as a kindness to you...After all, how would a proud man like you feel if he'd fallen for the wiles of a kunoichi who had no love for him at all?”

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Yuji- Age 17

Azami- Age 15

Yuji was Azami's prisoner. He had sent his black ops team ahead, allowing himself to fight this unwinnable battle one on one.

They were sitting on the porch of the building where Yuji had helped Azami defeat her slavers-her parents included among them.

She turned to kiss him.

“My memories end here...then pick up when we say goodbye...” the current Yuji thought, watching his younger self. “Now I can remember...That kiss...”

Azami kissed Yuji. In his “original” memory, it was a passionate, but still child-like kiss. Now, that memory was changed...

Azami grabbed Yuji and kissed him, but her tongue slipped into his mouth. Yuji had felt her hand moving. Now, it was so clear:

A Jutsu. She was using a jutsu while she kissed him.

“It must be a memory jutsu...now I know...She used me from the start.

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“...It feels like I’ve been raped. Humiliated, betrayed...there exist no words...” Yuji told her. “Once I realized it, I had to face you again, to see for myself- were you in control, or did you control Annako? Now I know- both.”

Azami laughed- a loud, cruel laugh. “Yes, we were both in control. I feigned obedience to her, pretending to be one her pawns to lure you into this exact spot!”

Yuji’s senses suddenly flared. He leapt backward, spinning around just in time to block a knife hand strike that would have pierced his chest. He felt his clone disappear, having been destroyed by an Azami clone.

“This village...you were all so good to me when you thought I was reformed. But now that I am what I am- a consummate shinobi- what do you think now?!”

Yuji disengaged, his face impassive.

“...I think that I have made nothing but errors in judgment, in hopes that you and I were really meant to be. And I think I have to fix that.”

Gotta get back to my roots. Things she doesn’t know about me yet! Think back!

Yuji attacked her, and they began to trade taijutsu strikes. A barrage of kicks and punches, attempts to grab. Yuji waited patiently, remembering his old style. He let himself slip to the defensive, letting Azami be the aggressor. Until...

Now! Genjutsu: Ensnaring Darkness!

An incomplete attempt to copy the Second Hokage’s Genjutsu “Infinite Darkness”, Yuji had created this variant. It was an S-ranked genjutsu because of the risks.

Yuji’s mind engaged in a tug-of-war with Azami’s.

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Azami could see a yawning pit of darkness in front of her. Yuji was pulling her toward it.

She began to struggle, pulling back as hard as she could. Yuji was pulled towards the pit. He raised one hand, focusing his chakra, and:

Genjutsu: Hell Viewing Technique!

Azami suddenly felt a sharp pain in her back. A wall of spikes was pressing into her spine, pushing her forward toward the pit of darkness. She knew it was a genjutsu, but she couldn't break it.

"A genjutsu within a genjutsu?! I've never heard of such a thing!" Azami yelled, trapped between the wall and the darkness.

"Back then, I didn't trust you completely. I didn't tell you everything about me. My abilities were originally manifested chiefly through genjutsu. But after a defeat at the hands of Itachi Uchiha, I focused on the other arts. I had forgotten I knew such jutsu...until you helped me remember."

Yuji and Azami stared at each other, completely focused. Yuji raised two fingers in real life, and he tapped a scroll near his heart.

I'm exhausted...all these jutsus...I haven't trained for them. But I can't use anything I learned in the past few years against her- not if I want to win. I have to be my younger self again. The one whose heart was pure; untainted by all the death and destruction! The child who wanted to be Hokage more than anything, but would gladly yield that dream to Naruto because it was his dream.

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POOF!

Chiyoko, Hisako, and Ryofu appeared. They knew the code Yuji had tapped onto the scroll. They moved as one.

"Water Style: Four Pillar Jutsu!" called Hisako.

"Water Style: Water Barrier Jutsu!" called Ryofu.

"Wind Style: Wind Blockade!" called Chiyoko.

A pyramid-shaped barrier sprang up around Azami and Yuji, who were still engaged in their genjutsu battle.

"I remember when Yu invented that combo...when he tried it in training against Hayate-Sensei..." Chiyoko said quietly. "...He's a different guy now. But I can still see the guy I fell in love with...and maybe

it's because of the jutsu, but I feel what he feels..."

Hisako shook her head. "No. It's because your death caused him to develop empathic abilities."

Chiyoko looked at Hisako. "Empathic? Like, emotions?"

"Yes. He grieved you, staying awake for days. Something happened in his mind. He could sense emotions. It's saved a lot of lives over the years, but it's caused him a lot of pain, too. He never got over you, Chiyoko. Not even with Azami."

Chiyoko looked at Ryofu. "You know...I want to fight you when this is all over. But more than that...Why did you kill me?"

Ryofu returned her gaze. "...Because you were the strongest of your group. I knew. It was never anything personal. I told Yuji as much. But I never told him you were the strongest. After I killed you, I realized that he needed to feel like he was the strongest. Whether he was or not, he needed it. If I had told him the truth...he would have followed you to the grave, Chiyoko."

Chiyoko broke her gaze. "...Huh. I guess my death did a lot for you and him."

"It was the catalyst for a lot of change," Hisako added. "Yuji forced himself to learn to kill. He decided that if he could have killed Ryofu, then you wouldn't have died."

Hisako looked to Ryofu. "That's why he's never forgiven you. In his mind, you forced him to abandon his childhood naiveté before he was ready. He's given up on his dreams because of you. Ironically, he's closer to achieving those dreams now *because* of you."

The conversation stopped- the action inside the barrier started up again. But more than that- the entire village was watching. A battle with no consequence to the village was being waged, and a man they'd once condemned as a traitor was fighting it with a strength that hadn't ever seen.

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The genjutsu battle continued. Yuji pressed hard, pulling Azami toward the pit of darkness. Azami was remarkably composed for being caught in a double genjutsu trap. She seemed to be speaking to herself. Her hands began to move in handsigns. Yuji clasped his hands; a tentacle came out of the blackness and pulled her hands apart.

"...Yuji, do you remember the reason you fell for me?" Azami asked. She didn't give him time to respond. "Because I was strong than you. *In-every-way!* Genjutsu: Living Memoriam!"

Yuji was assaulted suddenly with mental images.

Chiyoko was dead, a sword thrust through her stomach. The life left her as blood poured out of her mouth.

Miko was dead, a golden halberd stained with her blood nearby. Her chest wound was deep, exposing

tissue and even bone.

Asuna was dead, a-

“RELEASE!” Yuji managed. His chakra had been so agitated by the surprise assault that his genjutsu were released, too.

By now, both combatants were breathing heavily, mentally exhausted. Azami recovered faster and rushed Yuji. He leapt backward, weaving signs faster than anyone had ever seen him.

“Tatsunokuchi Jutsu: Takiotoshi!”

The Dragon-Gargoyle head sprang up from the ground. From inside it’s mouth, a torrent of water was released toward Azami, courtesy of Yuji’s summon, Umisu the Chinese Water Dragon. The water hit Azami dead on, but her Replacement Jutsu dropped her behind Yuji. She swung at him with a kunai. He dodged backward, but a small cut formed on his cheek.

With no wasted movement, Yuji threw a scroll in the air, used his thumb to wipe the blood from his cheek, then ran it down the length of the scroll. POOF! In his hands, a wooden boat oar appeared.

Azami stopped her attack. “You’re still not serious about killing me if you brought that out. Why not bring out your sword?”

Yuji extended the oar. “I’ll be the one to kill you, but there are things I have to understand first. Which means a longer battle than I would like...”

They began high-speed weapons based combat, each of them striking and parrying expertly. Azami closed the distance between them, leaving Yuji on the defensive again. But something was different, she decided. Her strikes felt wrong, somehow. Empty.

I have to wrap this up. He’s remembering his old fighting style more with each passing moment. At this rate, he might actually beat me! I can’t control his strength anymore! Not while he’s like this. But what changed?!

“I can’t lose. Not with all of them watching me this time! Against Pain, we both fell. But this time, I will protect the village. As a former *Soke* of the Village Hidden in the Leaves, I WILL NOT FALL!”

Azami shifted, using a new jutsu. “Wind Style: Art of the Elongated Blade!”

Yuji swung for her head, but his strike fell short.

The kunai in Azami’s hand appeared to have lengthened, and she had stabbed him through the midsection.

“You’ll fall,” she said breathlessly. “You have no choice but to fall! You’re not strong enough to defeat me! But I’ll let you in on a secret: If you had stayed your path, you would have become strong enough! As powerful and interesting as you were as “Ten no Kishootsu”, you had much more power this way!

Your power isn't a "lonely" power- you'll only see it when you have to protect something! You yourself told me as much when we first met!"

Yuji began to waver.

"Your body is still worth quite a bit to the right buyer. You might even make the journey alive if we live now..."

Now! First Gate: Gate of Opening: RELEASE!

Azami never saw it coming. Yuji ran himself down the length of her blade, his right hand extended. He caught her by the throat. In one violent motion, he lifted her off her feet and slammed her into the ground head-first.

37 - Crestfallen

Azami hit the ground hard. Yuji hadn't held anything back.

"...Guess you were stronger after all..." she murmured, sounding amused even as blood dribbled from her mouth. "I'm...happy for you...I know...there's no more deserving...a man...than you. Kiss...for the road?"

Yuji snapped the blade that had run through his midsection with crossed palms. He stared down at Azami. His face was cold, as were his words:
"Go to hell by yourself."

Yuji shifting his chakra use from attack to healing. Azami smiled-
Then her head rolled off, her smile frozen in place.

"Guess my chakra was the only thing holding you together, huh?" Yuji said darkly. All the same, he took off his shirt and laid it gently over her face. "Everything you said may have been a lie. But for me, it was all real, and I meant all I said and did..."

He turned his back and walked away. Ryofu, Hisako and Chiyoko dissolved the barrier they had put up; Sakura ran up to heal Yuji. She had to do so as he walked, because he kept moving until he reached his summon, Kintaro, and Annako.

He looked at the now-frightened girl, his face blank.

"I can hear your emotions...I trust that, if I seal your chakra, you won't use your abilities for evil?" Yuji asked quietly.

Annako didn't answer. She let her emotions speak. She instead began to speak of something else.
"How...how is it that you're so strong? The emotions...they hurt! You know what other people are capable of thinking! The evil thoughts! Lusty, greedy, horrid thoughts! Why didn't you lose your mind?"

Yuji finished his handsigns. "...I'm supposed to tell you that I've "seen the good in humanity", or some such nonsense," Yuji told her. His fingertips were glowing with chakra. "The truth is, I know a handful of good people personally, and I know a few who really do want to change the world for the better. I'll give them every chance. My strength comes from a desire to protect them. If they were to falter, I would cut them down. Someone like me...has no right to choose his sins anymore. I've taken far too many lives, and shed far too much blood. My sin is killing those who would do harm, and to never stop until I am dead. Out of empathy for you, though, I won't kill you. And maybe, you'll learn."

Yuji placed his hand gently on Annako's neck. Her chakra tightened up and stopped flowing correctly. She had enough chakra only to stay alive, and to use slightly enhanced taijutsu.

Yuji offered her a small smile. "You know, I think we can chalk this little mishap up to your age. Maybe

you just need to learn the ways of the world.”

Yuji stood back up, turning to face the village. He looked at the group congregated. He bowed deeply at the waist, then sank to his knees.

“I’m sorry.”

No one was quite sure what he was sorry for. Yuji himself wasn’t sure, but he felt an apology was due.

He got up, and the village was beaming at him. He didn’t know who, but someone said:

“He’s one of the best of us.”

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Everyone gave Yuji space for the next few days. He walked around like his old self- the young man who radiated confidence and strength. He had even started wearing a standard jonin uniform again, though one arm always had on a set of black metal gauntlets- a tribute to the Third Hokage.

If Yuji wasn’t alone, then “Chiyoko” was with him. Together, they visited Chiyoko’s parents. They hadn’t spoken to Yuji since Chiyoko’s death. Now, they wept openly as their daughter got a chance to tell them about her last moments.

“...So, really, Yuji did everything he could. He loved me, ya know?” Chiyoko told them, her voice both sad and cheerful at the same time. She clutched Yuji’s hand. “I wanted ta be with him, too. I loved him, and I don’t want you to not get along with him because he survived and I didn’t.”

For Yuji, the days were spent in contemplation. He felt himself teetering on the brink of an important decision:

Do I trust anyone, ever again? Everyone I care about dies on me, or they lie to me and betray me.

When I’m with “Chiyoko”, I know that’s the right answer. But when I’m alone...

When I’m alone, I think that this is better for me. I may say “light”, but my heart veers toward the “dark”. Maybe I should embrace that. After Azami, how do I recover? Why SHOULD I recover?

A week Yuji spent pondering this, and he was no closer to an answer. Not until the last day, when Chiyoko and Ryofu were going to fight.

“This is goodbye again, huh?” Chiyoko told Yuji as they sat beneath a blossoming cherry tree. “But I’m glad I get ta beat up on the guy that killed me!”

Yuji looked at Chiyoko, and his heart fluttered with happiness. “You’re so happy. You know how this will end, but you’re okay with it. I wish I could make my peace with it. I’ll never be over you, Chiyoko. I suppose I should be grateful that I get this time with you. Even though we can’t really do anything...physical...I think I understand what it means to be in love. You’ll always be the first, Chiyoko.”

Chiyoko kissed Yuji's cheek, smiling at him in her carefree way. "You'll be fine. Just remember that I did get to love ya, even if it was just a little bit! And, hey, when you do bite it, you an' me get to fall in love all over again! How many people get an opportunity like that?!"

Chiyoko patted Yuji's leg, then got up. "I've gotta go fight him now. You probably shouldn't watch..."

Yuji put a smile on his face. "And miss seeing Ryofu get his @\$@ kicked? No way! That's the only good thing about this!"

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Chiyoko stood across from Ryofu in the big, open field, smiling in her friendly way. She was dressed the way everyone remembered her- the incredibly short red shorts with the two little white stripes on them, and the short sleeve white shirt. She was standing with her hands on her hips, seeming to have the energy of her thirteen year old self.

Ryofu was more somber than usual. He didn't feel guilt about killing Chiyoko- that was a risk they all took during the chunin exams- but he didn't feel right about this, either. NOW it felt wrong to kill her- now they were on the same side, not vying for any title or prize. Now it was wrong to kill her.

"Ryofu, huh? Still got your big sword, huh? I hope I dodge better this time!" Chiyoko called over, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "Let's see what ya got when I'm not all tired and beaten up!"

Ryofu agreed, but he did something out of character for him- he didn't go for the sword right away. In fact, he charged straight in.

Chiyoko was taken aback enough to almost be caught. She'd been nothing shy of brilliant when she was alive, and apparently that shone past the grave as well. She kicked Ryofu in the hip, causing his strike to go wild when he lurched. She snapped her elbow down on his head, but stopped shy of using any force.

"Now's not the time to be a gentleman," she chided him gently, leaping backward. "C'mon, bring that sword out! I'll bet Yuji didn't tell you that I'm the one who taught him to use his eku (oar)!"

Yuji was caught flat-footed. He didn't remember that at all.

Why don't I remember that? I thought my memories had all come back? I would definitely have remembered her and I practicing...

"Hey, Yu! Um, since I'm dead and all, d'ya think I could borrow your eku? Mine's all...missing."

Yuji looked at her stupidly for a moment before he selected a scroll and withdrew the weapon. He walked it over to her, staring at the weapon.

I know how to use this weapon...but I don't know HOW or WHY I know...how could I have forgotten something so important? Is it a sealed memory, like the other ones?

Chiyoko took the weapon, placing her hands over Yuji's.

"See? There we are!" she said, turning the oar over so Yuji could see the flat of it.

'Chi + Yu 4 ever' was carved into it.

"You did that," Chiyoko told him gently. She put a hand on his face, feeling a light covering of stubble beneath her hand. "You don't remember yet, do you? It's okay, ya know? It isn't your fault. It'll all come back."

Chiyoko took the oar gently. Yuji didn't move.

What else have I forgotten? And my empathic abilities...they're out of whack right now. I can't sense Chiyoko. Not Ryofu, either. Something's wrong...

The fight resumed. Yuji watched intently, and little by little he could see his own fighting style mirrored in Chiyoko.

No, it's the other way around...

Reinforced with chakra, the wooden oar stood up to Ryofu's sword. Chiyoko swung it expertly, jabbing at Ryofu, then rearing back and slapping him with the flat of the "blade". She brought the edge down-hard- and Ryofu barely dodged backward, landing on one foot, preparing to shift his weight to attack.

Chiyoko snapped the butt end of the oar into the ground. A rippling shockwave caught Ryofu's foot and heaved him off balance. He recovered, spinning around to meet the attack Chiyoko was launching.

Chiyoko was still standing back, the oar where she'd left it. She stepped into a deep stance, as though riding a horse.

"Wind Style: Wind Arch!"

A needling wind shot toward Ryofu, tearing up the grass as it did. He rolled to the side, narrowly missing getting his head sliced off. As it was, a tear appeared on the back of his vest.

"Thought I had ya!" Chiyoko said in her cheerful way- from right next to Ryofu. She swung the oar, and he managed to react by throwing his sword in the way as a block. Chiyoko kept pressing her attack, wind pressure pinning Ryofu down.

"Yuji taught me this one."

Chiyoko's hand shot toward Ryofu's neck, seizing him, and slamming him into the ground. In the same motion, she dropped her knee onto Ryofu's stomach, knocking the wind out of him.

"You know how this has to end, Ryofu," Chiyoko told him quietly. "If you don't finish me, then he'll never move on. Since you took me away, it's your job to protect him now. He's at an impasse..."

Chiyoko stood up, letting Ryofu up. He charged her, catching her around the waist and smashing her into the wall.

“What do you think I’ve been doing?! I befriended the miserable bastard because I ruined his world!”

Chiyoko went limp and swam from his grip, catching his arm and pinning it behind his back, pushing his face against the wall.

“Then fight me like you mean it. I may have to hold back, but you don’t. In fact, you don’t have the *luxury* of holding back!”

Chiyoko punched, and her fist stuck into the wall, just a half-inch away from Ryofu’s head. A warning shot. Chiyoko released him and leapt back across the room-

Just in time to dodge the Water Clone that was swooping down from above her. Ryofu wasted no movement- he turned the Water Clone into a Water Dragon Jutsu that began to chase Chiyoko around.

Haven’t been pushed like this in a long time...not since the chunin exams, anyway.

I’m enjoying this.

The water dragon chased Chiyoko around. She bounced around the room gracefully, knowing that the longer this Water Dragon jutsu went on, the more it drained Ryofu’s chakra. He knew it, too, and he wasn’t stupid.

Which means, Chiyoko knew, He’s up to something...

That “something” became apparent as the Water Dragon put on a burst of speed and caught up to Chiyoko.

“Wind Style-” she started, but then the dragon evaporated. Chiyoko landed back on the floor, ready to move again, when the rest of Ryofu’s trap was sprung.

“Water Style: Water Prison!”

The evaporated water condensed instantly into a solid, nearly opaque sphere around Chiyoko. Moving his hand, Ryofu raised the water sphere into the air, taking Chiyoko away from any surface she could push off of.

“Hmm...I think ya might have me!” Chiyoko called. “Though I bet I could’ve countered if I’d lived longer. Ah, well! Since I’ve gotta die anyway, you might as well finish me off,” Chiyoko said pleasantly. “Especially since I’ve got more stamina than you. You’re really strong. At least I didn’t lose to a wuss!”

Ryofu bowed, and readied his sword.

“NO!”

The short, powerful word burst from Yuji's lips. He had been sitting quietly on the sideline, but couldn't anymore. He dove for Ryofu, and was instantly restrained by Naruto and Sakura.

"You can't interrupt! You promised you wouldn't!" Naruto protested.

"I promised that no one else would die! I promised that I would protect her! And I killed her! I killed her!" Yuji wailed, still struggling. "I can't lose Chiyoko! Not again! I'll really be alone this time!"

Ryofu looked to Chiyoko. She breathed out, and looked over at Yuji and smiled.

"With all these wonderful people...you aren't alone. You never were."

She nodded to Ryofu.

"No!"

SCHUNK!

The sword was thrust through Chiyoko's midsection. In the same instant, Ryofu used a tag to seal her body.

"She had to go," Ryofu said. "She would have killed you if she had stayed. You know that. She belongs in the afterlife- you don't."

"THE HELL I DON'T!" Yuji shouted. He stuck his tongue out at Ryofu, in what everyone thought was a childish gesture.

Then he bit down on his own tongue and closed his mouth tightly.

"Yuji! Damn it, he's trying to kill himself!" Sakura shouted. "Naruto, get him to open his mouth!"

Naruto did the only thing he could think of: He smashed Yuji in the stomach with a low-powered Rasengan. Yuji's mouth opened involuntarily, blood pouring out of it. Sakura tapped his jaw, pouring chakra into it to keep it open. She found the severed portion of his tongue and held it to the remaining part. She used her chakra to stitch the two together while staunching the bleeding.

Yuji's chest heaved, and his head drooped to his chest.

"...Why? Why couldn't you just let me die? I just...I wanted to be with her. Chiyoko...her life was more unfair than mine could ever be...I can't do this without her. I just...I can't..."

38 - The Turn

*You have arrived at the truth.
Yuji's memories are going to be restored.
The truth of this world will now be laid before your eyes!*

The Okuden Chronicles

The hospital bed that held Yuji was uncomfortable, but it was familiar. He felt the rough blanket; the uncomfortable pillow beneath his head...

This is real...

He took inventory of his limbs. Feet, legs, hands arms- they all worked. He listened for sounds next: the bed crinkled; the birds outside chirped. The blanket felt rough; the pillow lumpy. He could smell disinfectant. Now to open his eyes...

Yuji opened his eyes, the world awash with color. His disorientation scared him, but only for a moment. He sat up slowly, finding the room dark and empty. He moved to get out of bed. He felt pain, but nothing prohibitive. Then he felt a chill.

He was naked.

There were no clothes in sight. Yuji frowned. It seemed to him that he knew where clothes would be...Ah! The dresser! He opened the drawer, and sure enough, he found loose-fitting clothes, like the medics wore. He pulled the clothes on, looking at his body as he did.

He had a few scars. His skin was pale. But everything was where it should be. For a moment, Yuji couldn't remember if he was thirteen or in his twenties. His body told him he was in his twenties, though, judging by body hair, among other things. A scruffy beard had grown in on his face that he couldn't recall ever having.

There were a pair of slippers near the door. Yuji put them on, still disoriented. He opened the door into the hallway, wondering why he was alone.

He saw a collection of people waiting for him. All of them looked worried. There were more females than males (that pleased him)...Sakura, Hisako, Tsunade, Ryofu, Yuugao...the list went on.

Then:

It was her. A sound escaped Yuji's mouth. The others turned to him.

"Ch-"

Yuji shook his head. His mouth was dry. Someone held a glass of water to his lips. He drank, choking, apparently swallowing a skill he didn't quite remember perfectly. Or maybe it was excitement. The second the glass was gone from his lips, Yuji had eyes for only her.

"Chiyoko."

He said it that time. He felt no pain in his tongue- that must have been a dream- but his chest ached with feelings; with passion. This was the girl he'd fallen in love with almost eight years ago now. But she couldn't be here. She was dead.

Or am I dead? he wondered.

Chiyoko, still dressed as she always was in her very short shorts, her ringed t-shirt, and a loose jacket, stepped toward Yuji. She hadn't changed- she'd been so beautiful at thirteen; she was still beautiful now.

"Yuji...I'm glad...I thought we'd lost you this time..." said her voice, cheerful but still stunted with emotion. "You must be confused."

Yuji nodded slightly. "The last thing I remember...was committing suicide. Because I watched you die for a second time..."

Chiyoko nodded understandingly. "It's okay; it's temporary. What happened to you...what happened to all of us...is something we'll talk about. This story...it's fragmented for you, isn't it?"

Yuji thought back- he remembered the chunin exams, but his most vile memory- Chiyoko's murder- had begun to mesh with another memory. Ryofu killed her in one memory, but in another Yuji was able to save her...but what jutsu on earth could do that? Yuji didn't know.

Chiyoko's eyes had since teared up. She suddenly held Yuji's face, studying it.

"...I thought I'd lost you forever. The real you, I mean. The one here, now. I'm such a terrible person!"

Yuji didn't know quite how to react. He looked at the others. All of them wore expressions of pity.

"...Chiyoko, there's nothing you could do that I couldn't forgive," Yuji said gently. "Whichever "me" you think you've hurt..."

"...Yuji...I betrayed you. When I thought you weren't coming back...I met Yasu, and..."

Yuji felt like he'd been stabbed. His world was upside down again. At the same time, he understood.

"...You couldn't have waited around forever for me, Chiyoko," he said gently. "Please, don't cry over something like this...your happiness is what I would wish for, however I've been shaped by what's happened to me. Okay? So don't cry..."

Yuji was crying himself, but he wasn't going to let Chiyoko see. He fought the tears back by sheer will.

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Little by little, Yuji pieced his story back together.

It had been during his time as the Soke of the village. The Akatsuki infiltrator, Midori, had poisoned him back then, and his world split. He'd been kept isolated, given memories of events that didn't happen. Being killed by Pain had been real; his time in Kekobe; his capture by the Akatsuki- all real. Chiyoko's death, however, had been his mind blurring facts while his chakra fought off the invading chakra of the deceased Midori, who had managed to "curse" Yuji by implanting her chakra in him as he killed her. Her attack was actually a neurotoxin. Yuji's chakra, however, was strong enough to contain it, unconsciously preventing himself from being wounded fatally. However, it caused a rift in his memories. Each time he experienced a trauma- his own death at the hands of Pain, for example- another rift appeared and caused his memory to fragment.

It was ultimately Sakura who managed to find a cure for the neurotoxin, after years of searching. The key had been her innate link with Yuji, from when he sealed her memory. That shared mental experience gave her an insight to him; to somehow be able to sense why he was suffering.

At least, from the neurotoxin. Eventually, only Sakura, Tsunade, and Shizune were left in the room.

"...Your condition has been treated, but the damage that has already been done is...significant," Shizune explained gently. "It will bar you from a return to active duty."

The words struck Yuji like a physical blow.

"I...see. Will I die?"

"Oh no, no! In fact, the damage is really already done. Your chakra level is low, and will remain that way. But you won't die..."

Yuji stood up. "Just my luck. My life is gone. I can't die in my hallucinations or in real life."

The three women didn't even try to console him- they knew their efforts would fall short. Yuji was a warrior who was just robbed of his ability to fight.

"You'll be able to do basic chakra manipulation. Walking on water, slightly enhancing your defensive capabilities...basic jutsu, such as the Chakra Scalpel, should still be possible. Maybe even basic genjutsu..."

"Take the fangs from the snake..." Yuji murmured. "Is there any hope of treatment?"

"If you take time enough to build up your physical strength...maybe. But it will be grueling, and it will be a one time thing. If it doesn't work, then you will never recover."

Tsunade's struck Yuji like a physical blow. But somehow, he felt...alright. Because he was completely alone in his mind. There were others in his life, but there was one voice that always guided him unflinching. It spoke now:

Or is this intentional? Your memories are fabricated...your chakra is gone...what if it wasn't an accident? What if they're trying to keep you in check. You got too powerful; too influential. That run for Hokage...you came closer than anyone thought...

Aloud, he said: "I understand. I'll get to work right away. But I suppose there are some things I need to do first..."

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Dressed in his best uniform, Yuji looked at his gathered team. Ryofu, Hisako, and Chiyoko, along with Yasu. The years had certainly changed them. Hisako looked more or less the same, but she'd grown into an almost "big sister" role with Ryofu and Yuji. Chiyoko was dressed in ANBU armor- her new posting, she explained. Yasu stood behind her silently. He was tall, with a thick black beard and a cigarette in his mouth.

"Well then, all of you here are Jonin class or above..." Yuji began. "I, however, no longer have the right to be numbered among you. So, I'm naming my replacement..."

Yuji walked toward Chiyoko. Her eyes went wide, but he walked past her.

To Ryofu.

"I think...I owe you considerably more than an apology," Yuji said, and he was quite honest. He bowed low, even lowering his eyes. "I am sorry. And now, I'm imposing on you again: You are the new leader of Squad Four, formally under the command of Hayate Gekkou. Congratulations...Captain."

Yuji stood up, his face a stone mask again. "I know you'll do well with this group."

Yuji looked toward Chiyoko and Yasu. "I've asked for permission for the two of you to be part of this squad in the interim, until the new Captain can find two replacements. If you accept, then I thank you for your service."

Chiyoko's eyes met Yuji's. She studied them hard, but found only an affable smile in them- a look he reserved for her. A look she hadn't seen in seven years. Then he blinked, and the look was gone.

"Well then...that's that, I suppose. Now, I'm off to train my body for at least a year, to prepare for this treatment. Good luck to you, and Godspeed."

Then he was gone, walking away without a backward glance.

Ryofu narrowed his eyes, then turned toward his team.
His team.

"...Did anyone else see what was wrong with that picture?"

No one could say for certain. Certainly, it was out of character for Yuji. His attitude was...positive. He seemed upbeat. Almost...too much so.

"His speech was genuine enough..." Hisako murmured. "But you're right...that wasn't right."

Chiyoko exchanged glances with Yasu, who was silent. She looked to Ryofu. "I think I have an idea...and it's my fault. I never once talked to him about what happened. And we never really got the chance to have...closure. I mean, he woke up from a coma and I broke up with him..."

Ryofu closed his eyes, and relaxed. "Well, nothing to be done about it. It takes a real man to apologize, and he's done just that. So I'll honor his wishes."

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It took more than a year before Yuji was ready. He trained daily, and spoke with advisors almost as frequently.

He refused any military appointments, knowing they were the equivalent of "modified duty", and were hollow offers. He had military expertise, true, but it would be inappropriate to employ it, given his situation.

Isao Nakamura, a white-haired man who was really only in his thirties, stood on one side of Yuji. He was tall and very imposing. He was dressed in western clothes- a military uniform. On the other side stood Kagami, a young woman with black hair and pale skin. She was pretty, but had a somber air about her. She kept her hair in a ponytail and was dressed in a western military uniform, complete with a hat.

Behind them were two more: A monk and a priestess- a somber brother and sister, both with brown hair. They did not speak, except to Yuji. Both were still dressed in their religious clothes, although both had affixed black bands to their forearms. They were both also openly armed- the monk with a staff and the priestess with a spear. They both wore somber expressions.

"You have no doubts?" Kagami asked Yuji. She slid her arm around his.

Yuji shook his head. "How could I? With you, and the others with me? Not at all. This is just what has to be done."

Kagami gently hugged his arm. Yuji turned to her and kissed her black-painted lips.

"It will all be fine."

The silent priest and priestess each took one of Yuji's arms.

"Goro, Hasu...I'm ready."

The entire group disappeared.

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Tsunade waited with Sakura, who was ready to perform the operation. It had been thirteen months. In that time, Yuji had steadfastly refused to come in for check-ups. They only saw him once a month, when he withdrew funds from his bank account.

Suddenly, five people appeared in front of them. They appeared in a set formation. In the front was a white haired man, kneeling in a position of deference. Next to him was a tall, pale woman who was clutching somebody. In the back where a monk and priestess, both very angry looking.

The uniforms on the two in front were unfamiliar to Tsunade. They were from the west, she knew, but she couldn't name any country. The pants were black with a white stripe that from down the length of the sides of the legs. A white shirt and black tie, over which a formal jacket was buttoned up with large, brass accoutrements. The woman wore a military-style cap.

In the center was Yuji, dressed in his Leaf village uniform.

"Yuji! Are you ready for surgery?" Sakura asked, trying to keep the wavering out of her voice. **Who are these people?**

Yuji closed his eyes. "Yes. I'm ready. It took me a long time, but I'm ready..."

His eyes snapped open, and everyone but the woman leapt into attack postures.

"Ready to destroy you and Tsunade, and anyone else who has deceived me."