





Sound Ideas

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Sound Ideas

by [Lestrucsdeboomy](#)

Summary

A fanfiction of a fanfiction of a fanfiction of a fanfiction. Set in the Otohime AU, where Shikako has been kidnapped as a baby and given to Orochimaru.

Inspired by 'Sunshine in Sound' by Elelith

Inspired by 'In Which Someone Attempts to Kidnap Shikamaru, Instead' by Donahermurphy

Inspired by 'Dreaming of Sunshine' by SilverQueen

Sasuke

The girl was hunched over the sleeping man's body, collecting samples in vials that she then handed to him. (Sasuke refused to refer to her as Oto-Hime, even in his thoughts, so until further notice she would be "the girl")

He had become good at hiding his confusion. A vital skill nowadays. The girl handed him yet another vial - this one containing a patch of the man's skin - that he sealed in yet another "pocket" of the multi-compartmented storage scroll she had handed him. (He had never seen this model ; a new one ?)

After giving it some thought, he asked:

"Why do it this way?"

The Snake had become interested in an obscure clan in the land of the Moon, whose members were rumored to be more flexible than average (as if the Snake wasn't flexible enough already, with the Soft Physique Modification jutsu, and the unhinged body-mods he had inflicted on himself). He'd send Sasuke and the girl to "investigate" - the girl was in charge. They had stayed hidden for hours, choosing a target, then waiting for him to be alone and asleep. They had used a rare and expensive toxin to make sure the man would not wake up for a few hours. And now, she was painstakingly healing the man after every sample she took.

Sasuke understood stealth (he was a *ninja* thank you very much), but this was weird. Anyone else in Sound would have just killed the target, put the body in a scroll, brought it back to the Snake and called it a day. This was just a *civilian* clan after all.

The girl was neither soft nor weak. He had seen first hand how brutally efficient she could be.

She maintained her healing jutsu active while looking at Sasuke, assessing.

"Killing people tend to make their loved ones want to come after you for revenge." she said like she was his sensei and he was a slow student.

He scoffed. She was not even trying to be subtle. But to be fair, before meeting her, he would not have been able to recognize the emotional manipulation for what it was: make him reminiscent of his trauma so that he would be just a bit too angry to think clearly.

This was a deflection then (look underneath the underneath.) She was hiding her true goals.

"And I suppose that the data feedback you get from healing each and every part of his body is just a lucky side effect?"

The girl did not smile, did not reply, and went back to her work.

Oto-Hime

She needed more time.

Orochimaru had kept her insanely busy, putting her in charge of... well, everything (except for the labs).

Every day was filled to the brim with meetings, negotiations, logistics, resource management, and so much paperwork. There were also the occasional mission, and the *Oto no Hebi*. And then there was her own training regimen. Orochimaru would *not* be happy if it looked like she was not keeping up with it.

And while she stayed focused on those things, she had no time to stop and *think*. No time for extra plotting, no time to study and replicate all the interesting jutsus she saw, or to learn how to build more complex seal arrays through trial and error.

(She refused to leave a paper trail, so she was limited to what she was able to maintain in her tired mind)

Her master's incredible wealth of knowledge was all around her, within arm's reach, but her hands were tied with daily tasks.

No time to reflect on her situation. No time to rest. No time to prepare for the upcoming end of the world.

That was why she had decided to cheat, just a little. She now spent about 10% of her mandatory meditation time planning her own curriculum instead of strengthening her spirit (she hoped that such a small slowdown in her progress would fly under the radar.) Her first secret project, at the very top of the list, was to find a way to have more time.

Therefore, she was now considering the shadow clone jutsu.

Standard illusionary clones could follow instructions in real time, but they were not *agents*: it was still your own brain that was doing all the thinking. This was nothing more than advanced multitasking.

Shadow clones were autonomous.

In the manga, Naruto had even been able to learn through his clones. Meaning: the clone would experience stuff (training, fighting, spying, whatever), and said stuff would leave an imprint on the clone's cognitive and behavioral patterns, and *then* when the clone was popped his newfound knowledge would *be sent to the main body*.

The idea of clones being able to learn without a brain would have once put her through an existential crisis (a lifetime ago). Now she knew a lot more about reincarnation, about the "spirit" component in chakra, but she was still puzzled: minds were *complex*. In order to

emulate a mind, to make it run on a chakra-construct "hardware", you would need the construct to have a lot of computing power - and where would that come from?

No, she was still approaching it with the wrong framework. There was no clear hardware/software distinction here: the chakra in the clone *was* the mind, probably, as it contained spiritual chakra. Wait, slow down. She did not need to reinvent the jutsu from scratch (thankfully).

What she needed was a plan to learn the shadow clone technique. Sasuke obviously knew it, the sharingan being such OP bullshit. It was only a matter of time before the Sannin learned it too - if he hadn't already. Once he did, it would not take long for him to realize its full potential. Orochimaru would soon get even stronger, study and train even faster, be even more *everywhere* and she would become even weaker by comparison. Maybe she should just ask?

Orochimaru would probably not give her the technique, as he wanted her to stay under his control. If she asked Sasuke there was a risk that his new sensei would hear about it. Bad idea: the Sannin would then need to find new ways to keep her on a leash. Also, on the unlikely chance that Orochimaru had forgotten about the shadow clone technique, best not to draw attention on it.

Trick the boy into using it in front of her.. now that could work.

That was so unfair.

She had planned everything just right: first, a joint training session with Hebi and Sasuke, a 2v1 fight against her pupils while she was watching (focusing her chakra sense, her Sage-adjacent-mode sense, and her normal senses on the kid), and she got enough of a starting point. She now knew the hand seals, and had a rough idea of what to do with her chakra while forming the jutsu.

From here, she had used what she knew about jutsu creation, and what she remembered from her previous life, and she had been able to piece together something that seemed right. She had spent days fine-tuning it in her head - in her head only: she did not want to be seen experimenting with it - as she waited for her next solo mission.

And then, when she had finally been alone and far enough from Sound, she had tried it. According to her calculations she had enough chakra for exactly one clone (she did not want to use nature chakra for a first attempt at an experimental, possibly incomplete jutsu.)

And it had worked!

"Well, that's weird" they both muttered at the same time. Then the clone went out of sight, where it (she?) would throw a die 9 times, memorize the sequence, and dispell itself.

And she had been knocked unconscious by the rush of her own chakra returning to her coils.

She could not use the shadow clone technique. Not in combat, and not in her everyday life where she was surrounded by adversity. Her clone risking to be popped at the wrong time was too much of a liability.

That was so unfair.

Self pity was not useful. She attempted to discipline her mind and orient it in a more productive direction.

Maybe if she had depleted the clone's chakra instead of just dispelling it, the feedback would have been manageable. Better: this hypothesis was actually testable. And if she was right it meant she could still *practice* the jutsu. Whenever she was in a context where she could afford to waste half of her chakra reserves. Right. What else?

She could remember the dice sequence. That was another piece of good news. She had managed that part at least.

Also, actually casting the technique had given her new insight. The chakra-expensive part of the jutsu was clearly the "let's make a construct with its own reserves and functional chakra system" part, and not the "let's make a copy of my mind" part.

She set off again to her mission site, and kept on thinking.

She had started making a clone every night, before she fell asleep. While her actual brain was resting (strengthening synapses and cleaning up residual neurotransmitters and whatever other maintenance the brain does when it sleeps), half of her chakra - detached from the main body - was still awake.

The clone would spend a few hours working, then it would silently train until it was chakra exhausted and could not sustain itself anymore.

When the chakra backlash happened during her sleep, the only side effect (so far) was a mild headache in the morning. And the benefits were huge. She could afford to sleep more, for starters.

It was still risky. When she was 4 the Sannin had taught her a mental technique to identify the flaws in a plan. It went like this: "Pretend this is the future. Pretend you have learned for a fact that your plan has lead to disaster. Can you guess what happened?"

Orochimaru had explained that when someone gets a bright idea, they tend to think more about what could go right than about what could go wrong. Thus when you were plotting (when you had time to plot) you should always be extra pessimistic. Over-correcting was way better than losing, in this line of work.

Framing things this way forces your brain to be pessimistic enough to actually see the flaws in your plan *before* it is too late.

So she knew: a possible scenario where her nightly sessions lead to disaster was if someone sends an assassin again, she wakes up (Orochimaru had taught her when to wake up), and then the assassin pops her clone.

She would be incapacitated, and die shortly after.

She had made it very clear to her enemies that assassination would not work on her, and the attempts had (apparently) stopped, but that was still a huge weakness. A *risk*.

(Another disaster scenario was if Orochimaru found out she was using shadow clones to keep up with everything.)

She was already planning the next step that would solve the problem: for the past few nights her clone had been working on a version 2.0 of the shadow clone technique.

"Spirit Clone no Jutsu!"

The chakra construct was taking shape slowly. The jutsu almost destabilized halfway through but she forced it into completion with an effort of her will.

To an outside observer it would look like she was grinning proudly after forming a standard illusionary clone (she quickly hid her emotion.) But there were two major differences with the academy level technique:

First, the clone she just created was autonomous. She had finally, *finally* managed to transplant the "mind" part of the shadow clone technique into an illusionary clone.

It turns out that minds did not like being incorporeal. Cognition needed a substrate, otherwise it became all *weird*. It could be in flesh or in chakra but it had to be incarnate.

So it all boiled down to chakra density: too little and the copied mind would evaporate before it could take hold of the clone ; too much density and the clone became tangible - which meant it would be vulnerable to physical attacks, and that would defeat the whole purpose.

She had tried for hours to find the right balance - well, her shadow clone had, while *she* just slept - and finally they'd given up and decided to cheat once again.

She had written an anchor seal on a pebble which she hid under her room's floorboards. She could only cast this jutsu here in her room anyways. And now it worked: the spirit clone was both stable and intangible. It could not move away from the anchor, but that would not be necessary to test the second main feature of the technique.

Any moment now.

<4294967296>

The answer dropped into her thoughts. The answer to a math problem *she* had not solved. And the spirit clone was still here. She had to hide her smile again.

The illusionary clone technique came with a mental link between the main body and the clones: you could "pilot" them by sending mental orders their way.

If thoughts could travel *via* this mental link, maybe she could tinker with it to make it a two ways street? She thought she had succeeded, but since illusionary clones don't have a mind there was no way to test it.

No way to be sure, until now.

The spirit clone had solved the math problem she had telepathically sent to it, then it had sent the solution back to her: the improved mental link was working!

Which meant it was time to begin phase three.

There were still some problems with the spirit clone technique.

The clones had no sensorium. They were blind and deaf, and the idea of making sentient copies of herself to torture them with sensory deprivation felt morally icky.

Moreover, they had no chakra system. They could not train, and they could not even dispel themselves on their own.

She had increased the bandwidth of the mental link, so that she could share her sensory inputs in real time with her spirit clones (as long as they were within range.) They could now share other things too, like memories and emotional states, and even complex abstract ideas.

It took a lot of getting used to, but that's what shadow clone training was for.

She also had managed to strip the technique of its visual component, making her spirit clones marginally harder to detect.

She still dispelled them every time she left her room in the morning. It seemed kinder than forcing her invisible think-tank to spend a whole day in the dark and silence once the main body got too far to broadcast her sensorium.

She had just given an unsealed byakugan to Orochimaru: eyes that could see through walls, for hundreds of meters all around their bearer, and detect all things chakra. This was the end of her nightly clone-based shenanigans.

But it was worth it.

This also meant she should assume there was no such thing as a private conversation anymore (he could almost certainly read lips). Any move that could be interpreted as insubordination, from her or from her team, might be seen by the Kage's (possibly) all seeing eye.

But it *was* worth it. There was still one place where a spirit clone would probably not be detected: she could form it *inside* her chakra coils. She had a brand new seal on her body, an improved anchor compressed to the size of a dot so as not to be easily deciphered, just above her navel.

The new anchor would allow her "clone" (if you could still call it that) to remain stable in the tumultuous environment of her own chakra system. It also allowed her to cast or stop the technique without hand seals, just by feeding it chakra.

As she feels the mental link appearing between herself and her hidden self, she remembers lyrics from another life:

*We all do what we can
So we can do just one more thing
We can all be free
Maybe not in words
Maybe not with a look
But with your mind*

Orochimaru

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who took the time to read and comment on the previous chapters — your thoughts, theories, and reactions mean a lot to me and really help keep me motivated. 💜

Also, I ended up creating a music mashup while writing this chapter. If you're curious, it's here: https://youtu.be/jnU_MX0vtPg

Somehow, his decision to defeat death had turned the entire world into his enemy.

First, his medical research had been deemed unethical by his former village, and now he was a "missing-nin".

(As if he were a coward or a traitor. As if letting death win were more "*ethical*" than fighting it)

((He still shuddered at the sheer hypocrisy, even today. Every single Hokage had the blood of thousands on their hands, directly or indirectly. Each had spent their life fighting to survive one more day, killing, maiming, and later sending others to do it in their stead once they'd taken power. And they were worshiped as heroes.))

((*(.Hiruzen claiming the moral high ground, as if killing to advance medical science was worse than doing it for money and political power..)*)))

He notices that he is getting emotional and crushes the bitter feeling: not useful.

Fact 1: death was bad.

Fact 2: the by-default scenario was that everyone died.

Conclusion: any incremental chance of saving *some people* was infinitely better than the status quo.

Fact 3: No one was doing anything to actually fight death.

(Correction: people in life or death situations *did* try to prevent their own immediate demise, which was evidence for fact 1)

((But no one seemed to *actually try* to *defeat* death. Even Tsunade - who had done more than most to keep people alive - had opposed him resurrecting her loved ones.))

((Granted, they would have had no agency; but it would still have been them! Their personality, their memories, their values, their feelings, instantiated in the world once again!))

((*..Tsunade wailing, covered in her family's blood...A white snake on his parents' grave..*)))

Not useful.

Fact 4: people were actively trying to stop him from fighting death.

Conclusion: he was the only reasonable, ethical, *sane* person in the entire Elemental Nations, and he could only rely on himself to win.

And it was getting worse, as more and more people were aligning against him.

His relationship with Akatsuki had soured after the... *incident* with the Uchiha and now they were openly at each other's throats.

The failed coup in Konoha had driven his old teammates back together. Even his partnership with Danzo had been strained since then.

And to top it all off, the Shinigami itself had descended to the mortal plane to fight him!

(That probably meant he was doing something right)

And he had survived. Still lived.

(That *definitely* meant he was doing something right)

He has acquired an entire country's worth of resources, income, and manpower. But he never forgot that he was alone in this- that he had no true allies, not even in his own home.

Obviously, the prisoners and the test subjects would flee given the chance.

The civilians didn't have much of a choice either: they could protest (and they did, abundantly) but that was about it

A flock of ninjas had come to work for him, lured in by the things he could offer them: strength, control, purpose, identity, vengeance, whatever. They were using him as much as he was using them, and they fear him as much as he despises them.

Even his closest lieutenants are not really allies.

Kimimaro wants to offer his life in service of a strong master. Which meant he does not *really* share Orochimaru's goal of defeating death. He does not get it.

Kabuto *does* get it. In fact, he is very much like Orochimaru, and therefore untrustworthy: he puts his own survival first and everything else second.

The Nara girl hates him. She is adequate at hiding her emotions but he has seen her grow so he can easily read each flicker of her microexpressions. Somehow, she remembers the time *before* synaptic pruning (and how was *that* not a bloodline limit?) and she resents him for the kidnapping. He does not blame her.

She is useful, though, very useful. That's how she ensures he does not remove her: as long as she's "in charge", he actually has time to focus on research.

Not that she does not have her own agenda of course. He'd seen her subtly probing for some of his secret techniques.

("Sensei, look at this new plant, it'd be useful to have a lot of it right now, do you know a way to make more fast?")

("Sensei, this guy died during interrogation before giving us critical intel, we still have the corpse, is there a way to access his memories?")

("Sensei, I think we could reduce the hospital's transplant failure rate if we made copies of the patients' organs...")

So far, he found it amusing so he hadn't punished her.

He had checked up on her at random times with his new eye and had seen no evidence of betrayal, but he had not expected her to leave any. She was thorough.

Anyway. He is making progress.

The toolbox of jutsus he has mastered, combined with his body enhancements, make him immune to the usual causes of death.

((But any ninja worth their salt would be able to go for *unusual* ones when facing him))

If that fails, he has made many backups over the years, of many types.

((But he still hadn't solved the consciousness discontinuity problem, and that's a major drawback))

In just a few years, the next batch of clones will be old enough for him to possess, freeing him from the need to take over a host every other year or so.

(Getting used to a foreign body, only to be rejected by it shortly after was so tedious. So sub-optimal.)

Those were not bunshins, but actual genetic doubles of his original body (plus a few upgrades here and there), with a functional nervous system - otherwise you could not inhabit it - but crucially *without* a mind.

(He had learned his lesson from the gen. 1 debacle, where every single one of his like-minded clones had gone to incredible lengths to prevent him from getting in.)

((Getting overwritten was the same as dying after all))

Gen. 2 was currently growing in pods hidden here and there, and each body has a specially modified cursed mark on it, just in case.

He was getting close. He just needed a bit more time.

The ever so competent Nara girl was here.

He was able to run an entire country with just a couple hours long meeting with her every week. Having the girl as a proxy was such a blessing.

As usual, she is tense under her controlled, composed demeanor. But she is "this is an important meeting with an important person" tense and not "I am one bad day away from breaking down" tense or "I hate the Kage's guts" tense - and *that* is new.

She also seems more *centered*. Was it because of that kid she had all but adopted?

She gives her report with concision, and he knows that she has come prepared to elaborate on anything that would hold his interest.

A new building for this, a new trade route for that, a successful "negotiation" with a political opponent, people getting promoted, demoted, this policy works, that one doesn't, an update on their finances. Nothing important.

He says nothing, he smiles.

Then she shows him her two new seal designs.

(How she finds the time to design seals is beyond him)

The first is a mere combination of very basic seals: a large area barrier (a very weak one), a thermostat feedback loop, and an adaptation of the thermostat loop but for humidity. The only half-interesting part being the addition of a sort of "door" into the barrier. She calls it a "greenhouse seal."

He greenlights it.

The second is much weirder and she has to explain what she was trying to do with it. With Tsunade back in Leaf, the village will soon produce large numbers of state-of-the-art medics, making their combatants significantly harder to defeat.

So the girl wants to cheat, basically. She wants to fast track Sound's medical students' training by putting a seal on them that would allow them to read faster.

First, the seal gives you 10 minutes of perfect photographic memory every day (more would risk damaging the user's brain). It allows visual inputs to be recorded with high fidelity. One glance at a page, and you'd have it memorized.

But you wouldn't have *processed* any of it yet, or turned it into actual knowledge. The student would still need to recall the images from their episodic memory, and then take the time to reflect on them.

To actually *read* the book they'd have memorized. And then to practice.

She says it would cut something like 6 months of training, maybe more if they reworked the curriculum, and her calculations look sensible.

There's just one problem: her sealwork is riddled with misconceptions, and the current version would make the students go insane in weeks, if they used it daily.

The idea is promising though, so he gives her some pointers.

(He had previously looked into something similar, as a plan B if he failed to acquire a sharingan. He expects that once she manages to make a safe prototype, she will add it to the collection of seals on her own skin.)

((He would be disappointed if she didn't.))

And of course he will increase her workload again - wouldn't want her to grow too quickly.

Sasuke 2

Chapter Notes

CW: This chapter contains references to non-graphic mental torture, sensory pain, loss of bodily autonomy, and invasive illusion-based techniques (genjutsu).

Sasuke has been concealing his progress with his eye techniques for weeks, deliberately holding back during the (strangely frequent) sparring sessions with the girl, all to take her by surprise.

He really wants to best her at least *once*.

And he will! Today, in front of all her students. He has a surprise for her. His plan is simple:

Step 1: Before entering the dojo, cast a minor false surroundings jutsu, modified to mask only his eyes, to make it look like his sharingan is *not* already active.

Step 2: Cast his **new technique** on her the split-second *before* the sparring match begins.

Step 3: Torture her inside her own mindspace for as long as needed, so that the mental strain makes her unable to fight in the real world once he releases her.

He has a prerecorded scenario for the torture - it saves a lot of attentional resources to just display it (on loop if needed), instead of constructing it in real time.

...actually, not even "real time": he's managed to slow time down within the jutsu by a factor of a hundred. 10 minutes of subjective time inside the illusion would only last 6 seconds in the real world.

And the best part: he has managed to make it so that it's the victim's own chakra system that powers the genjutsu. She can't dispell it by dislodging his chakra from her system, because it's essentially fused with hers.

Trying to retro engineer the Tsukuyomi had really brought a lot of valuable insights. Moreover, Sasuke is sure that watching someone like *her* attempting to counter it will bring even more. She was... resourceful.

He had been stuck in *that man's* red skied nightmare for *a long time*.

(Forever)

(Never again)

He challenges her, she nods, he ensnares her.

The girl is in a prison cell. The walls are made of dark metal, the cell door is made of heavy vertical steel bars. The floor is covered in dark water that's dropping from pipes on the ceiling.

She is chained to the back wall, and he knows that she couldn't break those chains, not even if she could move (which she can't)

He is just outside the cell and he watches as she realizes what's happened to her. Then he activates the pain.

(He doesn't care for graphic mutilation, so it's "just" raw, decontextualized pain: nociceptors firing at maximum yield and at pseudorandom intervals)

She cries out, startled, as the first wave of pain hits. Clearly, the technique is working. He steels himself and does not wince.

Suddenly, he is not alone outside the cell.

The girl is beside him - and also still inside the cell. A clone?

She shouldn't be able to use jutsus in here.

"Come with me, there is a lot we need to discuss" she says, all business-like, and starts walking away.

Taken aback, Sasuke follows her.

They are now in a vast hall and he still follows the girl. This wasn't part of his illusion. He has no idea where they are. They walk past a bunch of clones of the girl.

One is in a comfy chair, immersed in a book ("*Indra and Asura, a Historical analysis*")

Two clones are apparently debating in front of a white board covered with seals.. discussing what appears to be the reproduction of a part of the cursed seal.

One clone is meditating, an other looks deep in thoughts, eyes unfocused, hands forming a circle.

(Just like Shikamaru during the Chunin exams)

Sasuke hides his confusion. He records everything with his sharingan.

"Could you please turn off the pain you're inflicting to the main body? It's... distracting."

Sasuke puts it on stand-by, sets it up to start again full force the second he wills it to. All the clones in sight visibly relax.

"Thank you."

"Hn."

Back in the prison cell, two clones have silently appeared a few seconds after Sasuke's departure. The first one is running a battery of tests and pointing strange measuring instruments at the chained girl, at the chains, the walls, the air. The second is taking notes at a feverish pace.

In the dojo, the silence stretches as Oto-Hime stares straight into the Uchiha's sharingan for one. full. minute.

Neither of them is moving.

The *Oto no Hebi* are getting worried. They say nothing (they don't need to).

(She can't possibly break out, can she? The Sharingan is a thing of legends. Even the Snake fears those eyes.)

(Should they intervene?)

Then their teacher blinks. Blinks again. Offers the seal of reconciliation.

The Uchiha kid takes it, looking unfazed by the sheer impossibility of what just (apparently?) happened.

(What?)

Oto-Hime 2

I have a lot of things to tell you, and that genjutsu of yours is pretty much the only way we can have a private conversation. So. For starters, when I was 18 months old, a dissident branch of the Konoha ANBU kidnapped me...

I'm fine Gin, really.

...Number 36, can we learn to detect when we are under the Partial Tsukuyomi, and design an alarm signal that would work even when our whole sensorium has been hijacked?

Number 37, are there ways to keep moving our body when we are under its influence?

Number 38, look at the records and find ways to locate / bypass / destabilize / replicate that strange, sticky genjutsu anchor that has been impossible to get rid of.

Number 39, would any of this translate when facing the actual Tsukuyomi or even the Infinite Tsukuyomi?

She makes another batch of Spirit Clones.

Number 40, establish mental links with Number 30 to 39, you are the hub. Make a list of all our hypotheses on Partial Tsukuyomi, and design experiments to test them next time.

Number 41, what should we tell Sasuke next time, and what should we 'accidentally' let him see...

Requesting permission to make an interface that allows seals to be operated via mental commands instead of chakra inputs. The civilians would be able to use the greenhouse seal, for example, and this would allow our chakra-able personnel to focus on more important tasks...

...but Kimimaro-San, what if there was a non-zero chance that I could extend your lifespan? Wouldn't that be worth pursuing, instead of looking for the most useful way to throw your life away?

Honorable clan leaders, honorable village elders, delegates from the guilds, and elected civilian representatives, I thank you all for attending this first session of the new Sound High Council, which I will preside over as the depositary of our Kage's authority. I see many familiar faces in the audience, most of you have already worked with me at some point, and I look forward to our continued partnership. Our first item on today's agenda is: delegating a commission to write a proposition for a Civil Code of Rules and Regulations. I have already prepared an outline...

...Requesting permission to take him as my patient and test experimental seals on him, provided that the expected risk-reward balance remains strictly positive... why are you laughing, Sensei?

...then there's Kimimaro. He is zealously loyal to his master, and he has nothing to lose. If he sniffs even a hint of disloyalty from us, we are in trouble. I am already working on it though.

Your osteokinesis works by continuously supercharging your bones with chakra, to fuel a super fast mitosis in your bone cells. However, some cells fail to replicate properly and they become cancerous cells instead. Basically, your body is exhausted because it is constantly producing and fighting bone cancer. There is probably no way for you to get better with your blood limit, but you could *probably* be healthy without it. I can seal it for you. You could still be a Jounin and work for the village. I know it's a lot to take in. Just... think about it ok?

I will support your candidacy. I can provide enough funding that you won't need anyone else. I want two things in return, however: first, once you come into office, I want you to ask the Sound High Council for clearer guidelines. You will explain that leaving the arrests, the fees, the requisitions and seizures to the agents' discretion has lead to a tradition of corruption and harassment. The second thing I want is for you to be smart in covering your tracks. No witnesses, no receipt or contract, no names. To you, I will remain a mysterious hooded figure. Do this and you will never hear from me ever again. Do we have a deal?

Good morning class, and welcome to the Sensor Brigade training. You have been selected because you possess sensory abilities above the average Chunin. Perform well during this training and you will be hired into the village's brand new ninja division, and promoted to Special Jounins. I won't often be able to teach you in person, so I have put your whole curriculum in writing. There will be five components to it: speed, stealth, strategy, combat ability, and of course: sensing. If you have trouble with any of it, Karin here will be taking questions every morning between 9 and 11. Your first test is due in two weeks. Class will be split into two groups. Each group must give me the exact headcount of the people living in Sound Village. Newborns count as people. Think of ways to make sure you don't miss anyone, and you don't count anyone more than once. Put your work in writing. Any form of sabotage is strictly forbidden and will be severely punished. Do you have questions?

His skill as a medic-nin is irrelevant. According to the CCRR, your hospital's prime directive is to do no harm to the patients. If Doctor Amachi has infringed on it, he *will* go through a disciplinary commission, or I will hire a director that can actually fulfill their mission.

I am not threatening you, I am *scaring* you. There's a difference.

Orochimaru 2

Orochimaru was confused.

Confusion was always useful; it was a signal that something you believed was false. He had trained himself to notice when he was confused, and to never be lazy - to never just dismiss the feeling.

The Nara girl's project should not be progressing so fast.

A universal, purely mental interface allowing random *civilians* to operate her seals? That was an overwhelmingly complex endeavor, one that should have taken her years to complete - and that was if she worked on it full time.

He had allowed her to try, because he'd *wanted* her to be overwhelmed.

She showed him her first version one week later. It relied on detecting the minute fluctuations in magnetic field induced by electric current in the brain. That was a really good insight - few people were able to make the conceptual jump from "mind" to "electromagnetism", especially outside of the Yamanaka clan. So good in fact, that it would have been suspicious coming from someone else... but she had had those dazzling strokes of genius since before he even knew her.

In any case, this one brilliant insight would not suffice *at all*. Isolating one mental command from the neverending noise of millions of neurons firing at the same time was a nightmare onto itself. Interpreting it was harder still.

Predictably, her first version did not work.

That was expected: with time, mental discipline, in depth anatomical knowledge, introspection, and a lot of trial and error, you could learn to fine-tune *your own* sealwork to *your own* brainwaves. Eventually.

He had not *explained* where she's been wrong so much as viciously mocked her sealwork. A week later, she presented him with version 2.0: a hat covered in seals that worked on one out of three civilians. A bunch of dismissive remarks and cryptic comments had been enough for her to infer how she could drastically improve her design. Wasn't that just fascinating?

She'd acquired encyclopedic knowledge of neuropsychology in just a week, but that too had been expected. He had already predicted she would use and abuse her Ten Minutes Perfect Photographic Memory seal.

(He sighed internally at the thought of her appalling naming skills.)

But that should have been nonsense to her, since she could not *possibly* have had time to understand the materials - genius or not. She should have been merely able to parrot strings of words that held little to no meaning to her.

And then there was the apparent ease with which she had conceptualized the whole signal-processing device. Either she had spent a long period of time getting familiar with computer programming, unbeknownst to him, or...

(Or what?)

((I notice that I am confused))

She had cheated, of course. Instead of reading your thoughts, her seal was attuned to detect only two different mind states:

[I imagine my fist closing AND my hand is not moving], let's call it signal A.

[I imagine seeing the color red AND my eyes are closed], that would be signal B.

Signal A opened the barrier of the greenhouse seal (closed it if it was already open)

Signal B started the thermostatic and hygrostatic effects (stopped them if they were already running)

And that was it. The tech looked deceptively simple, but he knew better. That was *at the very least* one order of magnitude smarter than what she'd shown so far.

(((..Smarter than him..)))

And she was not slacking on her other duties either! She was so efficient in fact that it started to have undesirable side effects.

The change had been slow at first. Sound Village getting richer meant there were fewer beggars and prostitutes. The orphanage she built meant there were fewer street kids.

He had not minded, at the time. The flow of income outweighed the increased inconvenience to find test subjects.

There'd been the thing with the slave peddlers, the reform of the police department, the thing with the hospital...

She had written her laws and codes and now everyone in Sound had registration papers, and was supposed to renew them regularly. Sure, this would make Sound's counter-intelligence's job easier. But it also meant that from now on, abductions within the village would leave paper trails.

(How did she do that? The report said she just came to work one day and produced an almost perfectly accurate list of every person in the village. Where did she find the time to do that?)

((She *didn't*, he'd checked her schedule))

There was always a sound reasoning behind each of her decisions, so he could not even be sure that she was actually *trying* to slowly maneuver him out of his pool of test subjects.

(Probably not. But she probably didn't mind, either.)

((Wicked imp))

She slept way too little, had an enormous amount of responsibility, very little autonomy, and she *cared*. All he knew about psychology told him she should be burnt out by now.

Something he believed was false. What could it be?

Orochimaru was scared.

Fear could be useful, sometimes. It was like a light in the dark, showing you what to fight or flee from. Too much of it and you would get blinded, unable to see clearly. Not enough of it and you would not see the dangers coming either.

Fear was neither something you should blindly obey, nor something you should just ignore, so he took the time to acknowledge his guts feeling and started to think.

The Akatsuki had started moving and had acquired the Waterfall jinchuriki, host of the Seven-Tails.

Which meant they were done playing the friendly-ish S-rank mercenaries, selling their services to the hidden villages.

Which meant Nagato was confident in their ability to take on literally everyone, having put comfortable error margins - he wouldn't have attacked otherwise. As much as the man was misled, he was far from incompetent.

Which meant Orochimaru was *probably right* to be scared.

"You will be going on a classified long-term solo mission. Your target is Akatsuki"

She tenses when she hears that last word. And in a split second she is composed again, her body language under control.

"This is an ANBU-type mission. Use at least three layers of camouflage at all time. Collect intel without being identified, ideally without being detected. Send reports, using these

encryption protocols."

He hands her a scroll.

"The scroll does not leave this room."

(He senses her chakra move very faintly, which was further evidence for the hypothesis [she uses a perfect visual memory seal], so he mentally adjusts its likelihood.)

"If you see ways to disrupt their operations without the interference being detected, do so. If you find ways to assassinate your target, do so."

She does not blink, even though they both know she had been in good terms with some of its members.

She wouldn't defect. Not when he holds her new family within his grasp.

"Understood. Requesting permission to delay departure by 12 hours to finish an experimental seal that would allow me to instantaneously send you detailed reports from anywhere in the elemental countries and receive new instructions in real time. Add 6 more hours and I could make the signal encrypted with the specified parameters, and also one order of magnitude harder to detect."

(The timing is suspicious. How long has she been sitting on this tech?)

((Unless she is like him and she has hundreds of unfinished projects lying around, drafts she plans to go back to when she has the time))

"Permission granted. You leave in 18 hours. After that you will contact the base and report every 10 hours. Dismissed."

Interlude: Karin

Their Hime had spent hours at her desk, then left without a word.

After a while, since she didn't come back, Gin got bored and decided to "search for clues". Karin followed him, mostly to lecture the nosy boy. That's how they'd found the letter in a drawer, written in the secret code she had taught them, and addressed to them.

*Asahiko, Gin, Karin, Kaoru, Misaki, Suigetsu,
My dear students,*

The Kage was watching so I could not speak to you directly. I will be on a secret mission for the foreseeable future. Attached to this letter are six seals, one for each of you. These are my most complex creations so far, and I have not been able to test them. Here's what they do:

First, the seal transfers from the paper to your skin, migrates to the inside of your ear, where it will hide itself by shrinking down to the size of a tomoe.

Second, it creates a mental link that allows you to command it with your thoughts.

Third, it has a radio function. If you turn it on, I will be able to hear what you say, and vice versa. You will also be able to talk with each other, there are different channels, I am sure you will figure them out easily.

Fourth, it includes a distress beacon. When activated, it will broadcast your location and vitals to everyone with the seal.

I added some 'quality-of-life' features, like an audio recording function that will allow for asynchronous communication, volume control, and similar conveniences.

Finally, the seal has a "remove" function, that permanently erases it from your skin.

I will be reachable literally 24/7, so I will let you decide when it's more convenient to contact me. If you decide to use the seal, please be discreet: no one outside of Hebi must know about it, not even the Kage.

Let me restate that those seals have not been tested yet.

If any part of this makes you uncomfortable, you can - and should - choose not to use it.

*I don't know when I will be back,
Be good.*

Gin was already applying his seal to his skin.

Oto-Hime 3

The main body had buried herself underground in a deserted valley in the Land of Rivers, and was sleeping.

Her mindspace looked like a series of rooms (a meeting room, a library, a research and development lab...), at the center of which was a command center.

In a corner of the command center was an imposing communication device: a large console, with several headsets connected to it. That was the manifestation of the Long Distance Radiocommunication Seal™ she had designed in the hours before she went on her mission, and left at her desk hoping her team would find it.

She had wanted to make them a telepathy seal, but that had proven to be too hard for such a short amount of time. So, she'd settled for the next best thing: a mentally operated radio, with a recording function.

While on the road, she had spent quite a bit of time recording herself saying commonly used words and syntagma. Now she could mentally string her recordings together into coherent sentences, without having to actually move her lips in the real world - which was always useful for stealth.

It also allowed her Spirit Clones to handle communications with the Oto no Hebi, and through them, keep an eye on - and a hand in - Sound Village politics.

Right now, Asahiko was the only one on the line. He was getting thoroughly briefed for the next Sound High Council.

In another part of the room, a big screen showed only darkness, occasionally interrupted by a few minutes of the main body's dreams, when it entered a paradoxical sleep phase.

A couple of clones were tinkering with a second monitor, trying to bring it online. This was *supposed* to display images from the prototype surveillance seal that she had put above ground in the real world, not far from where the main body was hidden.

So far, it had shown only static. The clones had several hypotheses as to why, only some of which could be tested from inside her mindspace.

A map of the Elemental Nations on the wall showed one shining red dot, six shining yellow dots, and four pairs of shining blue dots, that were the last known locations of Orochimaru, Hebi, and Akatsuki members respectively.

Itachi and Kisame
Deidara and Sasori
Hidan and Kakuzu
Konan and Nagato

Some of those were weeks old, so not that useful. Still, it was a start.

(She had yet to find any information on Tobi and the Zetsus' whereabouts)

A few dozen kilometers to the east, a Shadow Clone was infiltrating the Kage tower in Suna, to drop a detailed file on the Kazekage's desk. It contained in-depth description of all Akatsuki members' abilities, as well as a map of their known bases and a list of their bijuu-related operations.

Avoiding the sensory sand that was floating everywhere had been a pain - would have been flat out impossible without her own sensory abilities. There were easier ways to make sure Suna got the memo, but she'd chosen to do it this way to show that their security could be beaten: that Gaara was *not untouchable*.

She had to hurry, only an hour left before the main body must wake up and report to Orochimaru. She did not want to risk getting dispelled when that happens.

In the mindspace command center, one Spirit Clone was reviewing the content of said upcoming report. Which was not a lot: she was still alive, still undetected as far as she could tell, still tracking down Hidan and Kakuzu as they went from one bounty office to an other, she was probably about eight hours behind them, would probably have eyes on the targets soon if everyone kept pace.

(She would not mention her other, self-appointed missions)

The clone was using the 'premortem' technique: pretend you know for a fact that making *this* report lead to disaster...

(..He finds out the scroll I gave him is a lesser communication seal..this mission was a way to get rid of me and he orders me to attack..I am now close enough to the targets for them to detect the lesser communication seal's activation..)

...If the main body kept following the immortals, she might eventually end up in Amegakure - which may or may not already be under Pein's dominion, and if so was impossible to infiltrate.

(Well maybe not *impossible*, but hard enough that spymaster Jiraiya would die trying.)

They needed an angle to either (a) dodge Ame entirely, or (b) survive its infiltration.

She sent two separate memos via mental link. The first one went to her "hub", with both the curated version of their report and a note saying that she was now looking for a reasonable sounding excuse to justify losing track of Hidan and Kakuzu. The other memo went to R&D, asking for ways to evade the Rinnegan.

The reply from R&D came almost immediately, in the form of a non-verbal feeling of "no duh". Looked like they were already working on it.

The to-do list for the R&D team kept getting longer. Near the top of it, were items like:

- Find ways to counter and/or evade the Sharingan, the Byakugan, the Rinnegan, and 'all their OP BS eye-techniques'.
- Find ways to counter each of the six paths of Pain, especially the one that *could eat souls*.
- Find ways to sever the voodoo-like sympathetic connection that allowed Hidan to transfer injuries through blood.
- Figure out what the deal was, with that huge (clearly demonic) blindfolded wooden statue, and somehow counter *that* too.

Those were all very important, but the hub of R&D, whose role was to allocate resources, had estimated that the best opening move would be to find a way for the Spirit Clones to use chakra.

It was not clear why they could not already do so. The rules of conceptual space were...weird.

On a down-to-earth level, all these rooms and all these clones were mere chakra constructs in the main body's chakra system. But. It seemed like the place was gaining ontological weight - that it was getting less abstract, more *real*.

It seemed that when the Partial Tsukuyomi had first forced her mind(s) to coalesce into a jail, it had also kickstarted a process she didn't fully understand. A process that made her mindspace *at least a bit* like a real place. Kind of. Somehow.

(A "real place" that changed its shape depending on her mood, but still.)

The R&D team was currently giving top priority to answering questions like: why doesn't this place *already* have chakra, (even though this place *was* chakra)? How to give it access to chakra? What happens if they do?

That was why, ever since she left Sound, the Spirit Clones had been working non-stop on a project that would hopefully provide some answers, and increase the main body's operational ability at the same time.

So far, the seals that could be operated via a mental link had (mysteriously) been given a 'physical' form inside her mindspace. The radio console. The surveillance screen that only showed static.

What if they created a mentally operated chakra storage, something like Tsunade's Strength of a Hundred Seal? What form would it take *in here*?

She already knew the principles behind the SoaHS. Those techniques needed you to process your chakra again and again, refining it, compressing it, iteration after iteration, so that it took solid form.

She estimated that, with her chakra density as a basis, it would take between 700 and 800 cycles. And even with her *almost* perfect control, she would lose a small percentage of chakra each time, and there would be none left way before it had a chance to crystallize.

But. Maybe she could cheat with seals (she could usually cheat with seals). Maybe she could design some chakra circuits that would help with the trickiest parts of the refining process.

If she could reach a 99.7% efficiency rate, she would end up with a (ridiculously inefficient) storage seal that would keep roughly one unit of chakra for every ten units she'd put into it.

The design they had tested yesterday in the real world had plateaued at 99.2%, and the R&D team had spent the night trying to improve on it.

The hub really hoped today's design would work.

Suddenly, the whole 'building' started to shake, and the 'lights' flickered. Then the shaking stopped, as quickly as it had started. Every Spirit Clone now had a headache.

The Shadow Clone in Suna had dispelled herself.

Her mission was a success.

It was time for the main body to wake up.

Sasuke 3

The Oto no Hebi had no idea what their Hime's secret mission was - as was usually the case with secret missions. That did not stop them from speculating.

As a result, every noteworthy event, every strange new rumor from anywhere in the Elemental Nations became clues as to what she was currently doing.

A huge Great Fireball Jutsu had been cast one night above the Kazekage tower, for no apparent reason (the caster had supposedly never been found.)

A failed kidnapping attempt on the Five-Tails's jinchuriki had turned into a fight that had destroyed a mountain in Land of Earth (the jinchuriki had allegedly barely escaped.)

A sea monster the size of Manda had been spotted near Kirigakure (no one had seen it directly — but everyone seemed to know someone who knew someone who had.)

A coup over here, a skirmish over there... even last week's - admittedly large - thunderstorm in the bloody *Land of Lightning* would be treated as a relevant piece of evidence, and integrated into their increasingly complex (and less than consistent) web of theories.

Sasuke had no interest in such wild speculations and adamantly refused to take an active part in it, but Hebi was making a better-than-average effort to collect fresh information, and *that* could actually be useful.

That was the main reason he kept socializing with the Girl's team, more than with anyone else in Sound.

It had been almost two whole months since the Girl left Otogakure.

He had used this time to verify what he could about the intel she had overwhelmed him with when they were inside his Tsukuyomi. So far, everything checked out, but that didn't mean he should trust her.

After their very first sparring session, the Girl had made that exact point when he'd accused her of manipulating him.

("Yes. And manipulating people with the truth - especially a truth that can actually be verified by the target of the manipulation - is one of the most dangerous and underhanded methods of control there is.")

He needed a way to compartmentalize better: to isolate the truth from the deception. Manipulation attempts were aimed at him from all sides: from her, from the Snake, from everyone.

From his hometown too, because the Girl was a Nara. Once you've noticed it, it couldn't be more obvious.

So there was - or had been - something rotten in Konoha. Someone had been complicit in Orochimaru's horrendous experiments. Someone had attacked *at least* one of the Village's historical clans, and had taken *at least* one of their children on the Snake's behalf.

Someone had the means to prevent the Nara from retaliating.

In short: the world was more complex than what he previously believed.

He needed a method to investigate, a framework to make sense of all these contradictory pieces from all these different puzzles, lest he become like the Hebi morons: unable to distinguish the signal from the noise.

Maybe he would hang out with them again after training, just so he could learn what not to do.

Ever since *that man* had taken *everything* from him, Sasuke had clung to values like determination, focus, sacrifice, effort, like they were a lifeline and he was drowning.

Those values unfortunately did not leave a lot of room for doubt. For too long, he had seen doubt as an obstacle between his vengeance and him: something he must overcome through strength of will, just like fear was something to overcome with bravery or hatred.

That... might have been a mistake. He now saw that doubt could be a tool - *should be* a tool, when you were surrounded by manipulators. He probably should master it too.

He guessed that, like any tool that's truly useful, you would hurt yourself if you mishandled it. He had to be careful, since he couldn't just *ask* someone trustworthy to teach him.

((not anymore))

He still had to be strong enough to defeat *that man* - who *was* a world-class combatant, unhinged and powerful enough to take on his entire clan, conspiracy or not.

That part had not changed: he needed to become stronger than him.

But when he confronted him, Sasuke would ask questions first - if he could.

Interlude 2: Prototype No. 3

(6 weeks ago)

Prototype No. 3 had almost arrived at the Fire Temple, where she hoped she could become a disciple. She carried a generous - but not outrageous - donation for the monks, and a letter of recommendation that said her name was Naomi.

Her target was Chiriku, former member of the Twelve Guardian Ninja, current leader of the fire monks, and whose head was worth 30 *million* Ryo on the black market.

(4 weeks ago)

Life as a novice disciple was deliciously simple. Not *easy*, per se - you still had to follow rules and obey your superiors, there were still chores and training and mandatory meditation and so on - but oh so simple.

The absence of moral dilemmas for each and every action was something she could really get used to.

She *was* connected to the Spirit Network, but she watched the others from afar. Her role was to blend in, to keep watch in case Akatsuki showed up, and to die buying time when that happened.

(She was being dramatic. Shadow Clones didn't "*die*" - they just returned to the main body)

(She was not an ordinary shadow clone, however)

In any case, *she* was allowed to take a breather, while the rest of her many selves struggled to save the world.

(2 weeks ago)

Her sisters in the Spirit Network had told her a new room had appeared in mindscape: a shrine room.

That...kinda made sense? Every seal that was linked to the Spirit Network ended up having a physical manifestation in mindscape, and she was - at her core - a seal.

(That was no figure of speech: inside her chest was a small metal tablet with an anchor seal whose role was to make chakra constructs such as herself as stable and resilient as possible.)

Hidden in her ear was the Long Distance Communication Seal v2.3, which mentally connected her to the Network, even hundreds of kilometers away from the main body.

The Spirit Clones had begun going in the shrine room to meditate - they said it felt better. She could feel her sisters' spirit when they did, so maybe she *was* the room?

(Now)

She was meditating.

Her spirit selves were meditating within her, and the monks and disciples were meditating around her.

The energies of the temple resonated and reverberated, all across the Network and through mindspace.

And at every other end of mindspace, the main body and the other prototypes were meditating.

There was harmony.

There was connection.

There was beauty.

All of her selves smiled.

(6 months later)

Novice disciple Naomi was feeling calm.

The Immortals were here.

Time to protect her target.

Interlude 3: Mei

Mei closed her eyes and tried to think fast.

Five of her own ANBU were hidden in the room, ready to kill or capture her 'guest' if they breathed wrong - so she could afford such a luxury.

(Also there was currently an invisible barrier between "ANBU Bat" and herself, sustained by the seals carved on her desk)

((Her money was on "male", based on Bat's figure, but you could never be sure with ANBU))

Focus.

She had a bad gut feeling about this, which could mean one of two things.

Either her hindbrain was a few steps ahead of her conscious mind - it had picked up on enough suspicious details to draw its own conclusions..

.. Or she feared that what Bat had just told her was actually true - and her mind was flinching away from acknowledging such catastrophic news.

Alright, gut feeling wasn't enough. She needed to tackle the question from a different angle.

The problem was, she hadn't been Mizukage for long enough to have a solid sense of base rates. Did this happen often? An unknown ANBU operative just knocks on your door and asks if they can talk to you?

She had no idea.

Reorient. Different angle.

She was in one of two universes.

In Universe A, two missing-nins from Akatsuki were two hours away from stealing the Three-Tails, currently dormant 30 kilometers northwest of the island. And a friendly (??) third party had sent an actual ANBU to warn Kiri.

In universe B, the unknown ninja kneeling in front of her was lying through their teeth, for reasons yet unknown.

(A true ANBU would never reveal which village they worked for - that was the whole point: plausible deniability - and a fake one would just lie. So she hadn't bothered asking.)

Kiri had already begun prepping a capture operation. They just needed to wait for a few days for some key operatives to return from their respective missions.

If Bat was telling the truth, Mei had to launch the operation *right now*.

That would mean committing a lot of resources - no, a lot of *people* - and she would probably need to go herself since she was the only one in the village currently capable of fighting at Bijuu level.

That would mean leaving the village temporarily vulnerable to enemy action, with almost everyone deployed. That would mean exhausting herself in the open, while something very loud and dangerous drew everyone's attention - which would be a perfect window of opportunity for an assassination attempt.

In Universe B, launching so early was a losing move.

Of course, she'd already sent a squad to investigate - a few hand signs beneath her desk, back when Bat was still mid-explanation.

(One of the perks of having been in a secret rebellion together: she and her troops knew how to communicate fast.)

But if she waited for them to report back, and Akatsuki *was* coming - and the scout team wasn't spotted and killed - then it would be too late to act. Kiri would lose the Three-Tails, and with it, most of its military power - and its shot at returning to its former glory.

In Universe A, waiting was a losing move.

So. What would be observably different depending on which universe she was in?

Plenty of things, obviously. But she needed to decide now, and there would be no such observable clues *right here right now in her office*.

Which meant that "Universe A or Universe B?" was in fact the wrong question.

Reorient.

What she needed was a move that was good in both universes.

Mei opened her eyes.

"Bat, I have a mission for you"

Mei was watching the horizon, while hundreds of her ninjas were frantically finishing preparations at the ambush site on the outskirts of the village.

Setting up sealing and restraining devices, chains, nets, traps, raising fortifications, reinforcing anchoring points, drawing barrier seals, layering contingencies upon contingencies.

The beast's roars reverberated strangely through the mist surrounding the island, making it sound like it came from everywhere at once.

The academy students should be nearly done evacuating the civilians to the southern shelters.

She could sense the Bijuu's chakra moving toward them, even though the mist prevented her from actually seeing it yet. It was following the expected path - the one described in Bat's mission briefing.

Good. No betrayal so far.

Drawing the Three-Tails closer to the village, that had been her plan. Luring it away from the (allegedly) near-invincible S-rank monsters that were (supposedly) coming for it. Leading it straight into a place where they would be ready for it.

If an invading force was planning to attack Kiri, they would get a nasty surprise or two: the main defenses were thirty *seconds* away, not thirty kilometers. They would fall back *fast* to defend the village if needed. Also there would be a rampaging Bijuu following them.

And if assassins were lying in ambush out there to take her down, they would need to come to *her* ambush site instead.

Suddenly, a figure appeared on the horizon, bursting from the mist. ANBU Bat was rushing toward the ambush site, running on water like hell itself was chasing them.

And behind them, as large as a tidal wave, the shape of a very angry Bijuu started to become visible.

That had been way too close. Far, far too close. They had almost failed to seal the beast in time.

Mei had seen the two missing-nins from Akatsuki in the distance. They showed up just as the last thread of Bijuu chakra vanished into the seal. Bat's files identified them as Tobi and Deidara.

She'd seen them reassess the situation, apparently argue - too far for her to hear - and then, reluctantly, turn back and leave.

She wasn't sure her side could have won if they hadn't: everyone looked either exhausted, injured, unconscious, or worse. Based on her estimates - and if Bat's intel was accurate - it would have been a toss-up.

She had lost track of their brave informant somewhere in the chaos.

(Well. Plausible deniability, right?)

She gestured for everyone to return to the village.

Orochimaru 3

The name of the game was preventing Akatsuki from acquiring any more live Jinchuriki.

The score stood at 8 to 1: only the Seven-Tails had been caught.

But really, the score was 0 to 1 - because none of the targets were out of Akatsuki's reach. They could try again, and again, until they succeeded. Which meant merely playing defense was not "winning", it was delayed losing.

There wasn't much else he could do, however.

Fact 1: if you killed a Jinchuriki, the Bijuu would respawn a few years later.

Fact 2: if you killed a Jinchuriki, their village would turn against you.

Conclusion: killing the Jinchuriki was an option he needed to save for last - a contingency in case the game was already lost.

He was considering swallowing his pride and asking the major villages for their help.

(It's in their best interest too.)

((Of course, none of them would agree to be the first to move - because he was "evil" and they still vastly underestimated how dangerous Akatsuki really was.))

He did not want to risk them asking too many questions, however. Namely: *why* Akatsuki was collecting Bijuus.

The Villages could not be trusted with the intel: once they knew about Nagato's Bijuu-powered superweapon, they would just try to be the one to control it, instead of destroying it.

(Danzo most definitely would, in any case)

((Planning to be alive for a *long time* really gave you perspective. Any move that made the world more fragile was a *reckless* move - unless you wanted to spend your immortality in a wasteland.))

He couldn't go after Akatsuki's operatives either, not directly, not without unacceptable risk.

In a one-on-one fight, the Nara girl would lose against any of *her* targets - and they always moved in pairs.

Besides, even if she *did* have reasonable odds to take one of them down, attacking openly would only make things harder in the long run. The main reason Akatsuki's score was not higher was that they apparently still had not figured out that all their bad luck was due to enemy action.

That, and also the Communication Scroll was amazing.

Even weeks later, he still hadn't fully figured out the science behind it. From what he'd gathered, at the core of each of the twin scrolls was a "switch" that could flip several thousand times per second. And the two switches were somehow... entangled on some level. No matter how far apart, they always mirrored each other's state - one or zero.

He still had no idea *how* or *why* that part worked.

The rest of the seal were just "soundwave to binary" and "binary to soundwave" functions, along with an encryption block.

The Communication Scroll was an incredible tool, and the hours the Nara girl had requested to finish it had absolutely been time well spent.

For instance, he'd been able to inform her that the Three-Tails had resurfaced near Kirigakure, soon enough for her to get there before the enemy. The rushed operation had succeeded just in time, and Kiri now had a brand new Jinchuriki to protect.

But Akatsuki *still* had eight very big targets to hunt, and all the time in the world. Even with his Communication Scroll, it felt like trying to hold back the tide.

So he had made copies of the scroll - with slight variations so that they wouldn't interfere with each other - and *almost* given the copies to other operatives.

Then - thankfully - he'd stopped to think. Then he'd destroyed every single copy.

This tech was too disruptive; in the wrong hands it would be world-breaking. A good strategist could hide *anywhere*, stay safe, deploy agents *everywhere*, receive near-real-time updates on the big picture, and adjust the mission parameters in seconds.

If any major player got their hands on it, the global power balance would be shattered. If Akatsuki got it first...

He had spent a long time weighing the expected utility of 'her keeping the scroll' vs 'her carrying on the mission without it'. In the end, during their next call, he gave her detailed instructions for modifying her end of the device.

He made her add an explosive tag, wired into a circuit that would only trigger if the scroll "heard" a certain code-word from his end. He also increased the frequency of her reports to one every three hours.

Now that he could detonate it remotely if needed, he felt safer using the scroll around Akatsuki.

He'd decided to update his priorities.

From now on, 10% of his research time would go toward developing counter measures for when someone else rediscovered the tech's underlying principles. That was bound to happen, if he lived long enough.

(This still counted as steps taken against death.)

So far he had managed - with some effort - to retro-engineer enough of it to build a triangulation device - one that could locate *her* scroll specifically. That's how he knew about her little transgressions.

Every time he approved a detour through a village or a city - usually for food or gear 'acquisition' - she would also slip into the local library and spend up to an hour inside. That wasn't that bad, as far as transgressions went.

She was always on time for her reports, always punctual at mission sites, yet she had still managed to carve out a bit of leeway - and used it to read.

((So very on brand.))

The mission success rate of the Oto no Hebi had not declined, even without their sensei - in fact they all performed remarkably well in the field, especially when they were in the same team.

Sound Village was doing well too. The wheels kept turning, the crime rate continued to drop, infrastructure was improving, the mission desk kept dispatching, and the economy was thriving.

A more naive leader (or a lesser scientist) reviewing the data might conclude that since the variable [Girl present / absent] had no visible effect on how smoothly things are running, then her job must have had little to no impact.

It reminded him of an experiment he had conducted decades ago, when he was just a junior scientist. He'd wanted to know if loud noises affected cognitive functions, and if so, which ones and to what extent.

Pretty straightforward in theory: two groups are randomly selected. One group (experimental) solves a series of problems in a noisy environment, while the other (control) does so in a silent, but otherwise identical, setting.

Then you compare the groups' average scores, throw in a math formula, and you have your answer.

He had been quite surprised to find no significant difference in performance between the groups, despite a robust sample size. Apparently, noise had no impact on people's ability to focus. That was confusing.

(And confusion was always useful: his model *had* been flawed.)

But in order to figure that one out, you had to step outside of the lab, and go downstairs to visit the cells where the test subjects were kept. When he finally did, he understood that his experimental group had already been exposed to loud noises for weeks. They'd had to learn how to function despite the constant screaming and wailing and thunderous protesting of the more lively ones.

The true underlying mechanism that explained his observations had not been the immediate environment of each group during the experiment - however carefully controlled - but instead all the adaptive work that happened before it.

If he hadn't acquired such a fine mastery of his facial expressions, he would be blushing at the memory of his past foolishness.

(Embarrassment *could* be useful when handled correctly: it helped you learn better. You avoided the negative stimulus of 'shame' by making sure you didn't make the same mistake twice. But it was a double edged sword, and you needed to make extra sure you had *correctly* identified said mistake.)

So, lesson learned: sometimes, the present was not enough to explain the present.

The most likely hypothesis was that, if Sound Village was self-sustaining today (or at least: *not immediately self collapsing*) it was thanks to all the hard work she had put into it over the years.

He'd just received a report from an agent in Iwagakure saying that Han, the Five-Tails's Jinchuriki, had been deployed on a mission 4 days ago. That was unexpected.

According to the girl's last report on the topic, Han had been seriously injured during his fight against Hidan. The immortal had been aiming to capture, not kill, and had been arrogant enough to fight alone — his teammate merely stepped aside and watched without intervening.

The girl had been able to intervene discreetly, making it seem like their fight triggered a massive rockslide. She used the confusion to extract the now unconscious Jinchuriki, making it look like he had escaped under his own power

She had dropped him at a Rock Village advanced outpost, but the dark priest had managed to complete his ritual with Han's blood. Hidan could now remotely inflict any wound he wanted

on him, any time he felt like it.

All this had happened several weeks ago.

Had Rock Village find a way to lift the curse? Otherwise the man would not be considered mission-capable, right?

In less than an hour, he would send the girl to investigate.

Interlude 3a: Prototype No. 1

Chapter Notes

I hadn't planned for this interlude to get so long, but as it kept growing, I decided to split it into two parts here. Thanks again for your kind comments and theories, they're really motivating!

After the battle of Kirigakure, the Main Body had decided to change her approach.

(If you find yourself acting as bait for a turtle-crab Kaiju, it's probably time to rethink your life choices.)

The Main Body had created Prototype No. 1, given her the mission gear, the communication scroll, and the still forming experimental chakra storage seal. Being a Shadow Clone, No. 1 could not regenerate her own chakra - so she wouldn't be charging the seal, since that would mean depleting *herself*.

But she would be the one dealing with Akatsuki firsthand from now on, so every tool would count. This extra bit of chakra could come in handy.

Then, strand by strand - very carefully in order to avoid triggering any alarm mechanisms - they had also transferred the cursed mark to her. Since the Main Body and No. 1 had the exact same chakra, the relocation *could* go unnoticed. They didn't know for a fact that the mark contained a tracker, but it seemed not-unlikely, so the risk felt worth taking.

The operation had been so long that they had a meeting report with Orochimaru in the middle of it. Thank the Network for the ability to multitask!

Once the transfer had been completed, they had drawn a few other seals on her "skin", then the Main Body left to do its own thing - but Prototype No. 1 was not alone.

The Network was here to assist her. And on some level, Orochimaru was here too, remotely micromanaging her.

Her role was to be his obedient little tool, while the rest of her selves went behind his back and followed their own plan.

Someone in the Network had theorized that one benign act of disobedience would be less on the nose - more "in character" - than behaving like a complete mindless drone.

So, her role was to be his obedient little tool - except for the occasional unsanctioned library break.

(She didn't know if Orochimaru had eyes on her, but it seemed wise to assume that he did, or would at some point.)

Her room-self had manifested in mindspace as a verdant patio with a pond in the middle.

She'd immediately had an intuition as to what the pond *was*: a very literal mana pool. And she had been right: when the Spirit Clones immersed themselves in its water, they were able to use chakra.

At last.

They could finally do some actual training from *inside* mindspace.

The Spirit Clones would not be doing anything too intensive, to avoid depleting the storage seal/pond. So, chakra control exercises it was.

As a Shadow Clone, she didn't need to eat or sleep. She used the extra time to train with elemental chakra. She had decided to focus on that first, because she was attempting to recreate two techniques that would help significantly improve her durability: Rock Armor, and Water Body. If she mastered those, she might become able to do some fighting without getting immediately dispelled.

For now, she was experimenting with turning small parts of her construct-body into elemental chakra, and then back again. The stabilizing seal that was at her core would send a feedback signal if she made a wrong move and the stability of her shadow clone body became strained - so she was gradually increasing the area of the changes.

She was back to tracking the immortals through bounty hunter offices.

She was days behind them, and that was fine with her. She wasn't particularly looking forward to catching up to them.

She had suggested to Orochimaru that his spy network should look for rumors of unexplained flashes of light, thunderclaps on clear days, very short earthquakes, as those could be leads into where Deidara went after Mist Village.

She wouldn't mind interrupting her current tracking to go chasing shadows and rainbows instead. She *might* even end up creating these rumors whole cloth through another Prototype if needed.

The Rock Armor and Water Body were advanced techniques, and she needed to master them enough to keep both techniques active, while remaining able to fight.

The Rock Armor should be the easiest of the two, since she had a high elemental affinity for earth.

Covering your body with sheets of chakra and turning them to stone was the easy part. Stone was harder than earth - pun intended - but well within her ability. Compressing the earth to an acceptable level of hardness was non-trivial, but manageable. The real challenge was the joints.

You needed to keep track of all the moving parts. They had to have the exact right shape to interlock and allow unimpeded movement. Lose focus on that, and the plates would start grinding on each other - worst case scenario, you'd get stuck.

(That was one of the reasons why ninjas didn't usually wear armors - that, and the noise.)

To sum up: the Rock Armor technique needed you to focus on Earth chakra, and shape stability.

The Water Body technique was theoretically easier for her than for anyone made of flesh and bones. In her case, she just needed to convert the Yin and Yang chakra her construct-body was composed of into water-natured elemental chakra. The hard part was not the transformation, it was being able to move afterwards.

When you grab an object, you don't have to think about which muscles to contract, or how to orient your wrist, open and close the fingers, exert the right amount of pressure, etc.

You just think "imma grab this" and the '*how*' is, thankfully, automated.

But when in Water Body form, she had to move her water "manually." Mentally. That made sense, in retrospect: a Shadow Clone was made of Yin and Yang chakra, that is to say a type of chakra specifically about body-and-mind interaction. Quite logically, converting your chakra-type brought another set of properties, and some features would be lost.

Long story short: the technique needed you to focus on Water chakra and shape *mobility*.

Keeping this active together with the armor and the stealth was flat out impossible for her. That felt like juggling, dodging kunai, and doing math - all at once.

Maybe if her affinity with water was higher it wouldn't be so tedious? But she really wanted the Water Body, more than the other elemental alternatives, because it could theoretically regenerate after taking a hit - once her mastery of the technique got high enough.

She had asked Suigetsu for pointers, and it seemed that in his case the whole process was mostly subconscious, with his bloodline limit doing the heavy lifting for him.

That had given her an idea.

She had enrolled two Spirit Clones, made them permanent residents of her mind-room, had them sit in her pond, and asked each of them to focus on one technique.

An extra-strong pair of mental links allowed them to pour the resulting streams of instructions directly into her thoughts, without needing *her* to pay attention.

She would think of an action (like "imma grab this") and the first Spirit Clone would translate that into water movements, while the other would make sure the armor never impeded said movements.

And *that* had given her another idea.

Naomi had gotten herself a name, maybe she should too?

Trinity decided that she should.

There were plenty of books on armor smithing lying around in civilian libraries, and each region seemed to have its own style.

Studying all those variations had allowed her to refine her design to make it as close-fitting as she could - so that the armor would be invisible underneath her clothes.

After a few days, moss appeared on the two Spirit Clone assistants.

After a few weeks they had turned into statues.

Trinity assumed it meant the different sectors that composed her partitioned mind had merged - that the Spirit Clones became an integral part of the room-self.

They didn't feel like mental black boxes anymore: if she wanted to, she could access the complex mental operations that were happening in the twin statues, and it felt like *she* was

doing the thinking.

She'd just finished a briefing call with Orochimaru: new mission parameters. Han has been deployed on an as-yet unspecified mission. Either the curse has been lifted, or Iwagakure has found a workaround. Investigate.

Trinity's thoughts whirled as she changed course and started to run towards Iwagakure.

Step 1: obtain Han's mission parameters.

Communication between Oto and their agent in Iwa was slow, and the report hadn't specified the "what", the "where" and the "how long" of Han's mission. Maybe they didn't have that information, or maybe they did but had thought it was unimportant.

The quickest way to obtain further details was to send *her* to ask them in person - and investigate the mission desk herself if that didn't work.

Orochimaru had given her the identity of the agent in Iwa (!) and the protocols and passwords for making an unscheduled contact with Oto spies (!!).

Those would change soon if Kabuto was good at his job - which he was - but they would stay valid at least long enough for her to use them. She immediately sent the intel to the Network, ~~No. 2~~ Rukia would probably find it useful.

She distractedly pulled out a scroll and began inscribing a seal on it while her mind kept focusing on the mission.

Four days ago. About 36 hours to get to Iwa if she hurries. Locate the agent, establish contact... Depending on *his* mission, she might never catch up to the Jinchuriki.

She'd better find Han fast, if she wanted to avoid running into Akatsuki.

Rock Village had limited paths in and out due to the terrain. To increase her odds, she would go to Iwa through the most likely route for Han to have taken when he left it.

[Meanwhile, in the command center]

The large map on the wall was activating.

On her previous trip to the Land of Earth - and also everywhere else she's been to - she had used short bursts of her Perfect Visual Memory Seal whenever she found herself in a vantage point.

That had allowed her to greatly enrich the map, which now had a "zoom in" function.

A few annotations bloomed to life on its surface, as the Network kept on thinking: outposts, elevation gradients, chokepoints, likely patrol shifts...

She was almost at Iwagakure and she hadn't crossed path with Han.

That had been a long shot anyway.

She hadn't sensed anything chakra-wise either, but she hadn't really expected to. No chakra trail would last that long - not unless he'd fought or bled or done something loud.

It was almost 2 PM, which meant the most likely place for her contact to be right now was at work.

Mizuki's Spice Basket was indeed open. She could sense two small chakra signatures inside - most likely Mizuki and his assistant. No client then. Good.

Trinity entered, took out a coin, brushed it against one of her sleeves, and said:

"Good evening. I am on an errand run for my Shisho and he wants some rare spices."

She made a show of looking at her scroll and added: "Do you have saffleaf resin?"

"I think so. We usually keep that in the back - give me a moment," said the vendor.

"Mizuki-San will be back in 5 minutes", added the assistant after a few seconds, a professional smile plastered on her face, while her hands hurriedly signed: *Here - Negative - Safe - Risk - Hearing range*

"I'm in no hurry. In the meantime, can you look at the rest of my shopping list?" *Orders - Intel - Urgent - Priority - Take this*

"S-sure!"

And Trinity handed her the scroll she had been preparing. It *looked* like a shopping list, unless she wanted it to look otherwise. Right now, the scroll read: Orochimaru wants all the details available on Han's mission.

Two seconds later, it was entirely blank, and Trinity made the hand-sign for *Write*

The assistant started writing.

Step 2: catch up to Han ASAP

She was lucky: his mission was to escort a diplomat all the way to the west of the Land of Earth, to a party set to be held in the secondary palace of some insanely rich merchant. And then escort him back.

Which meant they would probably move slowly, make frequent stops, eat and rest in expensive places, maybe say hi to local dignitaries along the way. In other words: they would be absurdly easy to track.

By dusk, Trinity estimated she was far enough from Iwa to start asking some questions without raising suspicion.

She slipped into the persona of a courier - mud-stained, annoyed, late. One of the few roles that could justify being seen and ignored at the same time.

"Big guy in armor? Yeah, saw him. Scary type. Didn't say a word. Just stomped through like he owned the trail. Got me spooked: Iwa doesn't usually send out the beasts of war unless something serious is happening."

Trinity was starting to feel just a tinge of confusion.

(The Snake had drilled it into her to always notice these feelings)

Why send a Jinchuriki to escort a diplomat? That would make their top combatant unavailable for weeks...well - okay, maybe it made sense from a political standpoint. Maybe the diplomat paid *really well*.

But... parading their most important military asset in the open like this, immediately after he barely survived an Akatsuki attack... Rock couldn't be *that* stupid, right? Or was their curse-breaking that good?

Or maybe the escort mission was there as a cover for the real mission. Which would explain why Han acted like he *wanted* to leave a trail of witnesses.

In any case, she would probably be able to get to the bottom of it tomorrow.

The chakra was wrong.

That was *not* the chakra signature of the man she had saved from Akatsuki last month.

And the "diplomat" was concealing his own chakra to make it seem like a civilian's. Which meant...

Yup. Now that she was looking for it, she could sense other chakra signatures, quite well hidden, surrounding the man in armor. Guarding him.

Right. So.

That was a trap meant for Akatsuki then - and it might actually have worked, if only their target had just been a pair of Elite Jounins. But Akatsuki members were in another league, and Trinity doubted that Iwa had brought enough firepower to defeat them.

They would never fall for this trap in the first place. They might pretend to, however, just for shits and giggles.

What should she do next?

Interlude 3b: Prototype No. 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"... they are making themselves very slow and obvious targets. I can sense twelve operatives lying in ambush, plus the two impersonating Han and the diplomat. I have no idea what Akatsuki's ETA is - could be as soon as right now - nor who they might be sending. My assessment is that the Iwa forces won't be able to defeat most of the possible Akatsuki pairs. Do we have reinforcements in the area? Over."

A stretching silence. Then:

"I will look into it. Your orders are: stay close to the impersonators, wait for Akatsuki's arrival. If they decline to spring the trap, go to Iwa and look for the real Han. If they do attack, stay hidden. If you see an opportunity to take one down while they are engaged, do so. Keep the line open at all times until further notice. Hide the communication scroll on your person. Keep absolute radio silence, except for an infrasonic ping every five minutes. If I don't receive the ping as scheduled, I will initiate a twenty-minute countdown to exploding the scroll. State your orders now. Over."

Trinity repeated her orders.

Her room-self patio was getting a bit crowded.

In the pond, sitting in a circle around the twin statues, five Spirit Clones were practicing.

One had her hands stretched in front of her, electrical arcs crackling between them. Another Clone was circulating a flame between her fingers. Another was holding a green quartz crystal in her palm, turning it into powder and then back to solid form, over and over. Another was attempting to move a small toy boat by generating air currents around its sails. And the last one was constantly changing the shape of a mass of water floating in front of her: sphere to cube to sphere to tube to sphere to shuriken to sphere...

Around the pond, a pair of scientists from R&D were pointing measuring instruments at the water, and frowning slightly.

A bunch of other clones were lying in the grass, reading or meditating, and enjoying the warmth of the sun.

(Her mindspace was not limited to a series of rooms floating in the void. Her room had a sky. It had a sun. She had no idea what that meant.)

Trinity tasked one of the meditating clones with keeping track of the time, and turned her attention back to what was happening in the outside world.

Trinity didn't fear death. To her, it was mostly just an inconvenience.

Worst case scenario, she gets spotted and dispelled. The Network allowed her thought patterns to be shared in real time: everything important that ever went through her head - new ideas, values, experiences, intel - had also passed through her sisters' minds, including the Main Body. That was why, if her construct-body was destroyed and the very final state of her mind sent back to the Main Body, she would not be harder to integrate than a regular Shadow Clone.

There *would* be continuity of consciousness, in the sense that everyone in the Network already *was* part Trinity, just like she was part everyone else. So in a sense, that would be more like a hivemind losing one of its bodies than a ninja team losing a member.

The situation was still a bit scary though.

This fear response *was* a useful heuristic for flesh-humans that were, say, about to face an overwhelmingly stronger enemy. Your body cranked your alertness to the max, paused some subsystems, and redirected the resources to those most likely to help you survive immediate danger.

Trinity didn't have a heartbeat to quicken, however. She didn't have lungs. A distant memory bubbled up to the surface.

((("You think that's air you're breathing now?")))

She smiled, then refocused.

The biggest problem was the question of her cursed mark. What would happen to it if she got popped?

What kind of feedback would be sent to the Snake if one of the bearers of his mark suddenly disappeared? She couldn't just assume the answer was "none."

Seals tend to get weird when they get old, especially the ones with strong mental overtones, so even if she had unraveled all the cursed mark's secrets - which she hadn't, yet - she couldn't be certain how it would behave in such an atypical situation.

One of her sisters was already en route from Land of Grass, to either take Trinity's place during the fight, or - more likely - deal with its aftermath.

Anyway. While it would not be *tragic*, being "killed" here would definitely be bothersome, so she was gonna try to-

-suddenly she was staring into the Sharingan-

-Oh shi-

She is dropped into a warped version of her own mindspace - familiar and wrong. The pond is dry. The sun is a blood-red disk, frozen in place. The Twin Statues are cracked and half-buried, whispering fragments of failed missions and broken timelines. The sky is full of eyes.

"Itachi!"

She is alone.

"Itachi, are you watching?"

Silence.

"Itachi it's me, Kumori!"

Nothing.

The Network too is silent. No feedback, no hum of shared thought. For the first time since she became "Trinity", she is singular. Cut off.

There is no pain at first. Just... stillness.

This is a very good thing, since most counter-measures she has in stock need her to be clear-headed. A stupid oversight - the kind that gets you killed. Lucky for her, Itachi apparently likes to put some theatricality in his messed-up scenarios.

She closes her eyes out of habit. The world remains visible.

This feels weird.

Right: this reality is being injected straight into her consciousness, bypassing her sensorium. But that raised an interesting question, since she never had actual *eyes* in the first place: how had closing them ever had any effect...

Focus!

The world of the Tsukuyomi prevented you from accessing your chakra. But Trinity was not like the other intended victims: she didn't just have chakra, she *was* chakra. And she'd gotten quite proficient at converting her own self into different chakra types.

So, she takes an approach that the caster of the jutsu has not accounted for, and turns *herself* into medical anesthetic chakra.

Just in time for the show to begin.

Trinity was incredibly glad that the medical chakra worked, because everything else had failed. The genjutsu probe was a slippery, oily, unreachable thing that had escaped all her attempts to isolate it from her system.

Her room-self had no door anymore.

After some hesitation, she had tried to dig a hole on the ground, in a part of the floor that used to be covered in grass. She couldn't even dislodge a speck of dust.

All the while, she had been struck at random interval by senbons coming out of nowhere. Their origin point was always *just* out of sight.

Even without the pain, that's impressively frustrating, she thought as she removed one from her jaw for what felt like the hundredth time and threw it on the pile.

She sat cross-legged in the dust where her pond used to be, hands resting on her knees.

Nothing moved.

The air didn't breathe.

She sighed.

"Okay," she said aloud. "Think."

A senbon lanced through her collarbone. She didn't flinch. Without the pain, they were just background noise - and she was getting used to them.

Back in the real world, she had sent a ping to Orochimaru about two or three minutes before the attack, so she had at least 22 real-world minutes before the communication scroll self-destructed.

Could she make an estimation of the time-distortion factor?

Keeping track of the time here was a challenge in itself. The unchanging black sky provided exactly zero clue. The eyes in it didn't even blink. Her internal clock tentatively estimated that she'd been here for 16 to 24 hours, and it seemed like nothing had exploded yet.

She tried to remember; in the manga, Itachi and Kisame had attacked Konoha, hoping to find Naruto (while said Naruto had been on a trip to bring Tsunade back to the village.)

A bunch of Konoha jounins had tried - and failed - to stop them, and Kakashi got hit with the Tsukuyomi. In his case, the torture had lasted for 72 hours. Or was it 7 days?

"There was a seven somewhere, I'm sure," she muttered, plucking another senbon from her ribs.

And only a few seconds had passed in the real world. Definitely less than a minute. To Kurenai and Asuma, it had looked like Kakashi went from fine to utterly drained in an instant. Which meant that Tsukuyomi slowed time by a factor higher than 4320.

If the same parameters applied to the current illusion, she didn't need to worry about the scroll before at least two months - and that was for the "fastest" possible scenario. The real deadline was probably around two years.

Okay.

What should her priorities be in the meantime?

Priority 1: don't go insane.

She was better equipped than most people would be in her position. She wouldn't feel the need to eat drink or sleep. She might not even suffer from mental exhaustion in the traditional sense of the term. And thanks to her little trick she didn't feel pain either.

The experience was still incredibly taxing. The prolonged isolation alone would be enough to damage the mind.

"Not to mention being constantly harassed by those... pricks," she added as she threw yet another senbon against the wall.

Dispelling herself would be troublesome, sure, but still leagues better than getting PTSD. She was confident that she could destabilize her construct-body enough if needed, and escape before this whole thing really started to affect her sanity. Then she got another idea and froze.

"What if that damned genjutsu anchor is still mixed with my chakra when I get sent back? Wouldn't that..."

Wouldn't that just inflict the Tsukuyomi onto the Main Body?

Scratch that plan then.

Maybe... maybe she should make herself a meditation routine to help dealing with stuff?

Naomi had been taught a ton of new concepts that Trinity could try.

The fire monks practiced a meditation style that was about balance, letting go, acceptance, and blurring the boundary between you and the universe. They called it the 'welcoming

approach.'

In contrast, Orochimaru taught a meditation technique that was about focus, introspection, mental discipline, a clear self-image, and growth.

She would practice both and see if it helped.

Okay. What else?

She also had hundreds of books perfectly memorized. They would be an invaluable shield against the crushing boredom that would submerge the victim if they ever found a way to fully ignore the senbons.

It's at that moment that the sound began.

...OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO...

It sounded almost like a human voice, but no pair of lungs could last that long.

She did her best to ignore the noise and went back to her thinking.

Priority 2: New ideas to get rid of the anchor.

Were there things that the Main Body hadn't tried already against the little brother's Partial Tsukuyomi? Were there things that only Trinity could try?

Could she filter the sensory inputs somehow? But where would be the intervention point, if Tsukuyomi ignored the usual channels and acted directly on her consciousness?

The genjutsu had fused with her chakra, her chakra interacted with the spirit, so the intervention point should be in her chakra system.

Probably.

In her case, it might have infected her whole chakra construct-body.

The background noise ended, distracting her again.

And just as the unnatural drone finally fell silent, she felt its meaning bloom into her mind. That never-ending howling had been a word.

The word "you."

...AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA...

"I don't need to listen, if I magically get the answer at the end. Looks like a design flaw, Itachi dear," she said to... the sky.

Then she proceeded to ignore the voice.

After some time, the word "*are*" intruded into her stream of thoughts.

And then the word "*cut*"

"No, I'm not," she snapped. "I am *punctured*!"

What was the point of this? Why go through the effort of baking a half-telepathic voice message into your torture illusion that annoyed your victims by being slow and wrong? Was that an announcement of the next round of nice things that awaited her in Itachi's macabre show?

In any case, being cut would be no different from the current "death by a thousand pricks", as it would neither harm nor hurt her.

She was even a bit hopeful for some novelty.

"from"

Huh.

You. Are. Cut. From. The. Network. Attempting. To. Reconnect. Shit. Time. Distorsion. Right. Here. Is. One. Second. Ping. Ping. We. Have. Memory. Active. Can. Unpack. Even. Very. Fast. Messages. Can. You. Right. Ok. Sending. Books.

The panicked sister was apparently doing her best to think through the implications of Trinity's situation fast enough to be useful.

From her point of view, this "sentence" had lasted for almost a day - more than half of it being the one second interval.

They would probably be too slow to help much. According to the updated estimates on the distortion factor, if she asked the Network to do a 5 second task, she would get the results 70 hours later.

Might as well do it herself.

She would still be sending reports and memory packets, data on the world of Tsukuyomi, but they would probably take several minutes to unpack. Which meant *months* on her end. That was more of a legacy thing than a dialog.

That was still something. It *counted*, to know that you weren't alone - even if the others could not solve your problems.

Orochimaru's meditation style and the welcoming approach may have looked antithetical at first glance: control VS letting go, reaching in VS reaching out, immanence VS transcendence.

But Trinity had found out that taking steps on one path did not set her back on the other, and sometimes it even seemed that one approach provided insight to overcome roadblocks on the other.

Maybe those were like Yin and Yang: opposing but complementary principles?

A noise, like something cracking.

She looked around and saw no movement. Was that the next act of Itachi's show?

She decided to ignore it and went back to her musings.

In a sense, Orochimaru's approach was reminiscent of the Rock Armor. It required precise control, technical knowledge, elegant mechanisms, and it set a hard frontier between the self and the outside world. While the Fire Monks' approach was a lot like the Water Body: accept the things that come at you, let them flow through you, and restore your equilibrium afterward. If you framed things that way...

-CRACK-

The Twin Statues now looked brand new, and stood proudly at the center of the room, as if in defiance to this world.

Progress!

Chapter End Notes

It still kept getting longer, so I cut it again. See you soon for the third and last part of Trinity's arc!

Interlude 3c: Prototype No. 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Trinity was doing katas under the red sun, under the unblinking stare of a thousand eyes, letting her thoughts wander.

...

The Rock Armor and the Water Body were both amazing counters to Itachi's senbon-based nightmare. Now that she could use the techniques, she spent half her time letting the senbons pass harmlessly through her, and the other half blocking them with the armor. That seemed like decent enough training.

...

She was now reasonably sure that she had been here for more than seven days. So Itachi had been going easy on Kakashi, by setting a time limit on his Tsukuyomi. And also by staying with him all along to make sure things didn't get overboard.

Or was it the transplanted Sharingan that had offered some form of protection?

All that felt too distant, the memory too blurry.

Anyway, *she* apparently got the deadly version, the one meant to break your spirit so much that you wouldn't be there anymore at the end of the process.

Itachi had no reason to hold back with Iwa nins after all.

She guessed that this version would run indefinitely.

...

How come the cursed mark had no manifestation in her mindspace? It was a seal, and it was supposedly connected to her thoughts, so it should be here in some form or another.

(Sasuke's mark *definitely* had had an influence on his thoughts.)

She had never truly untangled the cursed mark's inner workings - not because of its complexity alone, but because of the mind that had shaped it. Orochimaru's thinking was embedded in every fold of it: a jagged, damaged kind of reasoning, full of alien premises and unsettling leaps that shouldn't work but somehow did. That made the seal feel less like a construct and more like a sickness made manifest in ink and chakra.

...

She didn't want to call it "Orochimaru's meditation style" anymore. Too much of a mouthful. She'd rather call it the Focusing Approach.

...

Now that she had a clear research question, and a lot of time on her hands, she decided to take another look at the mark - after she finishes her katas.

(Good thing she had "perfect-memorized" it in its expanded state, because without access to chakra she could not expand it *here*.)

Sometimes you don't see what's in front of you until you ask exactly the right question.

Now that she knew what she was looking for, she realized that her mark felt incomplete.

Like someone had taken a complete mark, hastily stripped out all the parts that interacted with the bearer's mind, and slapped that version on her.

The Nature chakra processing unit was still there, powering the part that orchestrated the pseudo-sage transformation.

The switch that allowed a bearer to *use* the mark was still there, linked to the part of the seal that would kick your metabolism into overdrive, like a crazy soldier pill.

There was an impressive amount of redundancies, code correctors, feedback loops, and alarm systems that made it robust against tampering.

There was even an array that she was fairly sure was the possession backdoor.

But everywhere it looked like there should be a passive mental component - like a template of the Snake's mind meant to slowly twist some part of the bearer's thinking into something Orochimaru-compatible - there was nothing.

He was not in here with her.

Orochimaru had removed himself from her mark.

"Why, Sensei?" she said, absently rotating a senbon in her hand.

Since she wasn't paying a lot of attention to them anymore, Trinity didn't notice right away that the number of senbons in the room had stopped increasing.

Now, for every new one that appeared, another vanished.

Trinity closed her eyes.

The world was still visible.

First, she tried the Welcoming Approach.

She recited a mantra the Fire Monks had taught her:

"If in your heart you believe you already know, or if in your heart you do not wish to know, then your questioning will be purposeless and your skills without direction. Curiosity seeks to annihilate itself; there is no curiosity that does not want an answer."

She patiently examined the words' meaning, letting them in, waiting for each part of the message to make sense and truly settle within her.

The world was still visible.

She tried again.

"If my eyelids are opaque I want to believe they are opaque. If my eyelids are transparent I want to believe they are transparent. Let me not become attached to beliefs I do not want."

The world was still visible.

Focusing Approach then.

"I notice that I am confused."

For the thousandth time, she blocked her sight with her hands. It still worked.

(Replicability is good, but at this point it's probably safe to assume you already know how your hands work)

I believe that either this world's visual stimuli are going through my eyes, and I should see my eyelids, or they are plugged directly into my occipital lobe, and I should see through my hands.

My model of the situation did not predict my current observations, therefore something I believe is false.

She focused on momentary belief suspension.

The world was still visible.

Try again.

Why had she ever blinked, in the real world? Her not-eyes didn't get dry, so she didn't need to.

Why did the Shadow Clone jutsu include eyelids? That was more complexity for less functionality - even the split second duration of a blink could be used against you in a fight.

Hypothesis:

Maybe the jutsu did not contain complex instructions like "put opaque chakra for eyelids here".

Maybe it used your own self-image as a blueprint, and if you thought of yourself as a blinking entity, your clone would blink.

If you knew that your eyes *should* see, then the chakra in your clone's eyes would be able to see.

And if you knew that you *shouldn't* see when blinking, your clone's sense of sight would stop when blinking.

(Maybe not by blocking the light but by blocking her *perception*?)

If that was the case, if there was a mechanism in herself that had the ability to block her perception, she should try to access it - to activate it.

She put all her strength of will behind it.

The world was still visible.

Don't stop yet.

You needed more than the serenity to accept the things you couldn't change, and the discipline to change the things you could.

You also needed the wisdom to tell which was which.

She didn't feel very wise. In fact, she had so many unanswered questions.

Why had her construct-body worked the way it did, back in the real world?

How could she see without eyes, then, and how did her not-eyelids prevent her not-eyes from seeing?

How had she felt fear before the Akatsuki attack, despite having no adrenalin or sympathetic nervous system?

Her best guess was: because she had expected things to work this way. Had been used to things working this way.

(You think that's air you're breathing now?)

It felt like her construct-body behaved the way she *expected* it to behave, at least sometimes, instead of following a consistent and predetermined set of rules. The mind influenced the chakra, and vice-versa.

And now that her chakra was corrupted, her construct-body also obeyed some of Itachi's rules.

(But the rules are inconsistent!)

Confusion.

That's because the Tsukuyomi too was piggybacking on her to work, she realized.

It was fueled by her own chakra, and it relied on her own assumptions, her expectations and heuristics, to save on processing power.

(And since she already had a mindspace, it had used *that* as a basis too.)

Instead of computing an entire simulated pocket dimension, down to the last ray of light in real time, it cheated. Tsukuyomi provided the scaffolding, and her own mind did most of the world-building.

Except for her eyelids. Itachi had wanted to forbid the victim from closing their eyes, so the eyelids didn't block the "light" anymore, even though she had expected them to.

...saving processing power...

...not really air...

Why had gravity worked on her before?

Sure, Water Body and Rock Armor had mass, but why did it work on a Shadow Clone body?

...there is no eyelid...

...beliefs I do not want...

... rule is neither intuitive nor logical...

The world got dark.

Do not lose focus yet.

Do not lose curiosity yet.

What happened? Had the full and deep acknowledgement that one of the rules *did not make sense*, been enough to lift it?

Had she lost her sight?

She opened her eyes and the world reappeared.

She closed them again. Darkness again.

Okay!

Okay, next question. Why is there no water in the pond?

There was once again water in the pond.

Trinity was almost sure she had found a way to get out of Tsukuyomi. But should she?

A few months ago she was complaining about not having enough time. Now, she had literally as much time as she wanted.

(At least until she had to wake up and get rid of the Communication Scroll before it blew up in her face.)

But there were *probably* other people out there, stuck in their own mental hell, without anesthesia or armor.

If there was a way to help them, instead of leaving them to their fate while she trained...

"Test your hypothesis first, moral dilemma later"

"Spirit Clone no Jutsu!"

A smiling copy of herself stood in front of her.

The water in the pond had dipped a little.

About half the senbons in the room and half the eyes in the sky had disappeared.

Trinity laughed.

She may not be able to break out of the simulation, but she was now pretty sure she could *crash* it.

Once she was out, every second would count. For every second she wasted, other people would be tortured non-stop for about *fourteen hours*.

The miniature network - the Spirit Clone, the Twin Statues, and Trinity - reviewed the plan once again.

Trinity's real body jerked awake.

She did not bother to stand up.

Her armor instantly turned to dust, and fourteen water tentacles emerged from her Water Body.

Each tentacle rushed toward one of Akatsuki's victims, that were lying around.

Six of them stopped mid way, because Samehada did not leave survivors.

The other eight connected with the intact bodies, and a seal bloomed on the victims' skins at each contact point.

(One of them was already dead, so its tentacle retracted back into Trinity's body.)

The seal was meant to drain their chakra as fast as possible, including the genjutsu anchor.

(She'd never found a way to isolate it, so she had to remove everything)

Then, before the Iwa nins went into cardiac arrest from chakra exhaustion, the water tentacles started chakra transfusions.

She did not give them a lot, just enough for each of the survivors to have a decent chance to wake up on their own.

Eventually.

Then she got up.

Reformed her armor.

Sent a ping to Orochimaru.

Started to run towards Iwagakure.

Chapter End Notes

The first mantra comes from the Twelve Virtues of Rationality.

The second mantra is a variant of the Litany of Tarski.

Sasuke 4

How do you defeat an opponent who can hit harder than you, defend better than you, and use a more varied set of techniques? Someone who might take you out with a single hit if you let them?

That was one of the lessons he had learned from his fight against Gaara - you needed three things:

- To be faster, and agile enough to evade their attacks
- To be able to get at least some hits in from time to time, so that the chip damage would accumulate
- To have enough stamina to fight the long fight

Sasuke suspected that The Girl was doing something similar - at least in spirit - with her multi-threaded thinking. She could plan, learn, develop tech faster than the Snake, thus staying one (or ten) steps ahead of him even though he was undoubtedly stronger, meaner and tougher than her. Sasuke suspected that over the years she had woven layers upon layers of plots and plans that would eventually add up to Orochimaru's demise. He also suspected that if the Snake realized what she was doing and decided to stop her, she would go down hard and fast.

And he himself was one of these plots. He understood that much, at least. She was planning to use him, and she needed him to be strong in order to be useful - just like the Sannin did.

But unlike his, her plan apparently ended up with him still alive, so he had a strong preference for her side.

But.

Now that she was away, far from her team and her political allies, unable to keep control over what was happening in the village, she was probably wondering if he had revealed her secrets to the Snake.

Which was bad news, because if she believed he was starting to get cold feet, she might try to... tie up loose ends. And if he believed *she* was starting to panic, the right move was to spill the beans to the Snake and get protection.

How could they solve this coordination problem, when they couldn't even talk anymore? Should he avoid hanging out with the Oto no Hebi from now on?

But what if this change of behavior was deemed suspect?

His train of thoughts was interrupted. He'd sensed her presence of course, but it hadn't really registered, as she usually just watched him from a distance without interacting.

"Er... Sasuke..."

A blushing Karin, handing him a short pile of presents.

Right. The birthday thing. Today.

"This one is from Sensei... she left it for us to find on our last mission..."

He opened the box, and found two wristband bracelets. They were covered in intricate sealing patterns, so his first instinct was to hurl the box across the room. Then he saw the message written at the bottom of the box:

"Notice how *I* am giving you a choice, and not putting it directly on your skin?"

The bracelets were similar to training weights, except they somehow made your whole body heavier, not just your wrists. Well, not exactly *heavier* - gravity only went downward. The seal resisted movement in every direction. It felt more like you were moving under water, but without the buoyancy.

You could choose the intensity of the effect, and stop it with a thought when you needed to fight at full strength. You could also project a small but robust illusion to overlay the wristband, so that the sealing array would be hidden.

Most of the Oto no Hebi members were wearing them. Sasuke decided he would secretly swap his set with one of theirs, just to be safe.

He wanted his own enhanced-thinking technique.

Sasuke figured he could build upon the Partial Tsukuyomi - or rather, deconstruct it. Strip it from everything but the time-dilation effect, and then cast it on himself.

Most importantly: remove the part that hijacks your sensorium, and the one that convinces your subconscious mind that your chakra is now out of reach.

He *probably* had a working version - on paper. He was fairly sure the theory was sound.

He'd called it the Secret Binding Technique.

Still. There was a huge difference between "probably working" and "definitely working."

You don't cast a mind altering jutsu on yourself unless you have made extra-sure you know what you are doing. Just like you don't tie yourself up unless you're 100% sure you can get out of binds at any time, in any scenario - and even then, that was still a dumb idea.

Sasuke didn't get the feeling he knew what he was doing.

But the potential benefits were huge, so he had to try eventually.

The technique had many drawbacks.

Even with help from the Sharingan, his mind struggled to process the world while bending its flow. When he was under the Secret Binding, every noise, every movement became a puzzle to decode or ignore.

There was also the fact that his instincts, drilled from early childhood, resisted the technique.

Also the fact that the Secret Binding still *felt* a bit like when *that man* had cast the full Tsukuyomi on him, which made some part of him want to gag and tear the genjutsu apart.

Balancing control and surrender was a delicate dance he was still learning.

And on top of everything, the technique was exhausting. After a few thousand seconds of subjective slowed time, he'd get a splitting headache. That made sense: he was basically forcing his brain to work a hundred times harder than his normal baseline.

The Snake couldn't know that he was exploring alternative hypotheses about the Uchiha massacre. Their deal relied entirely on the fact that Sasuke was willing to pay absolutely any price to have a vengeance that started and ended with *that man*.

If it looked like Sasuke was having second thoughts, the Snake would most likely decide that the next best way for him to get the Sharingan was to try to take it by force.

So, how to get intel on Danzo and *that man* without raising any concern?

The Snake was staying silent, watching.

(Don't panic. Don't add anything. An innocent Sasuke wouldn't have added anything.)

His request made sense. An innocent Sasuke would have asked for Konoha-style ANBU training too.

That was because *that man* had ANBU training, and Sasuke needed to be prepared for his whole bag of tricks. That was the only reason he was asking. Definitely *not* because he hoped to catch some clue, some insight of what life had been like for *that man* at the time - something that could help him untangle the (possible) web of lies that surrounded the Uchiha case.

(It feels long because of the Secret Binding technique.)

(Don't panic.)

"Fine."

Only now did he realize how perfect The Girl's gift had been.

(Took you long enough)

In the same motion she had signaled she was still willing to ally with him, sent a message to those able to decipher it that she was still able to influence things in Sound, and had provided him with the perfect training device to complement both the Secret Binding technique, and the Sharingan in general.

((*"You are too slow. Your eyes may be quick enough to keep up with me, but if your body cannot follow, what good does it do?"*))

That was so elegant.

Which raised the question: how predictable was he, really?

And had *this* question been expected too?

Rethinking his thinking had been a challenge. Building a new reasoning framework was like trying to dismantle your boat to build a new one *while you're still at sea*.

At no point of the process are you ever 'not in your boat.'

If his cognition was flawed, then his metacognition probably was too - and the new mental framework he was trying to build might end up just as flawed.

Still, he felt like he was making progress.

If you wanted to learn how your eyes worked - but had no mirror - a good approach would be to study other people's eyes, and assume yours worked roughly the same.

By paying more attention to how other people thought, he had figured out five **Guidelines To Better Thinking** so far.

1) Anger was an amazing source of motivation, but if you let it guide you, you got stupid. It should be a horse, not a map.

This one *should* have been more obvious, since Kakashi sensei had made an habit of taunting his enemies and opponents for this very reason. He had demonstrated time and again how he outplayed anyone that went at him with their thinking clouded by poorly compartmentalized anger.

The Girl too had pointed that one out to him after their first sparring session - "*keeping your passions so close to the surface makes you very easily baited and manipulated.*" It was high time he updated on that.

2) He should accept that things were sometimes blurry. He had previously refused to even acknowledge the blurry parts in the picture, because it felt like losing focus. As a result, said 'picture' had huge gaps and holes in it.

Blindspots.

3) From now on, he shouldn't think of things in terms of "true (or false) until proven otherwise", but rather place ideas somewhere on a continuum - from 'very likely' to 'very unlikely'.

He may or may not be living in a world with undetectable, mind-bending, enthralling jutsus. Whatever the topic, there should always be at least *some* doubt - the tricky part was: how much?

4) In order to become less predictable, he needed to always have at least two plans for each scenario. Make at least two equally solid plans, whenever he could, and then chose one randomly by flipping a coin or rolling a die.

While trying to get better at Guideline No. 4, he had noticed something that had led him to Guideline 5: he had trouble making plans for scenarios where Danzo was the one behind it all. He found himself unable to seriously entertain the notion of that man... of *Itachi* not being the ultimate evil.

5) He had to acknowledge that there were things he wouldn't want to acknowledge - if they happened to be true. Things he hoped were false. And so, his mind didn't want to *actually investigate*.

Sasuke figured it was because of all the costs he had already inflicted on himself, on his team, on his friends, in order to increase his chances of avenging his clan.

Everything he had abandoned so he could keep training at a punishing pace every day. The constant mental discipline to nurture his anger, to never lose focus. Always doing what he must, even when he really didn't want to. And in the end, brutally cutting ties with his few remaining loved ones, and deserting.

He did not want those sacrifices to go to waste.

But the thing was, they were already made. The price was already paid - and whatever he had bought with it, if anything, had already been bought. Owning up to that would not change anything.

Reconsidering his plans might *feel* like losing his stake, but in truth it was already gone.

So.

What should he do if Danzo was guilty?

Oto-Hime 4

Prototypes No. 1 to 3 were off doing their own thing, and the Main Body was planning the next steps.

A bit of quick bounty hunting earned her more than enough funds to rent an unremarkable house in an unremarkable small town in the Land of Grass, not far from Kusagakure.

What if No. 1 ended up "KIA"? Ever since she'd put her in charge of continuing the mission, the possibility had been hanging over her. The most likely outcome if she suddenly turned into a cloud of chakra would be Orochimaru realizing the original had deserted - and branding her a traitor.

But of course, switching places back with No. 1 was out of the question too, now that the whole operation was looking more and more like a suicide mission.

A much better scenario would be if No. 1 could leave behind a real corpse, still bearing the mark. If Orochimaru believed her dead, that would open up a whole range of opportunities.

So she had made No. 4, and tasked her with designing a Flesh Clone jutsu *before* No. 1 got... "dispelled in action."

Their best guess at how to get there quickly was that, if she became good enough at healing jutsu and designed a seal able to keep stem cells alive outside a body - and provide them with enough nutrients - she might be able to "heal" those stem cells into a full person.

So far, she had only managed to turn small amorphous heaps of cells into bigger amorphous heaps of cells. But it was a start.

She had initially planned to make more Prototypes, of course - as many as possible. But after linking No. 5 to the Network, her mindspace had started to feel... strained. As if it were being stretched thin.

She had decided to wait for it to stabilize before adding anything new.

A couple of weeks later, she'd discovered what was happening. Over the span of the next few days, five new rooms had begun taking shape in her mindspace.

There was a patio, a shrine room, two extensions to R&D - a seal research room and a hospital/medical lab - and an annex to the archives that seemed to be turning into a library.

Her guess was that since the Prototypes were incarnate, had their own sensoria, and were existing for longer than regular Shadow Clones, they had started... diverging. Following their own path and becoming just a little *individualized*.

They had even baptized themselves, in a frankly spectacular display of naming skills. Four of them had named themselves after - admittedly badass - fictional characters. No. 1 was 'Trinity' (the Main Body still cringed at the lack of numerical consistency), No. 2 chose 'Rukia', No. 3 went with 'Naomi', and No. 4...

["No. 4" is a medic-slash-fighter currently researching the interaction between the Water Body jutsu and healing chakra, so yes, Katara is a perfect choice thank you very much,]
Katara cut in.

[Could you remind me why you chose to be "ANBU Bat"?] added the Network.

Anyway.

No. 5 claimed the name Itachi had given her all those years ago.

("Your name is Kumori. For your clan's shadows remain with you wherever you wander.")

The mindspace had apparently adjusted to all this by creating more complex interfaces - the new rooms - to connect her main self to her... other selves.

The Prototypes were integrated-but-separate, and she didn't dare make more. She didn't know why but she felt like she had dodged a kunai by listening to her instinct and stopping at five.

They posed as a family of three, and except for Kumori, they rarely went out.

Officially, Kumori was a famous foreign writer that came to Grass with her wife and daughter to work on her next book.

Her cover identity as a writer was the perfect justification for her spending long periods of time in the town library, and requesting books on obscure topics through the inter-library exchange program.

She also went out covertly to study the layout of the trading infrastructure. The reason the Main Body had chosen *this* unremarkable small town was because it exported local crops to the neighboring Land of Rain. Kumori was especially interested in the shipments headed for Amegakure.

Meanwhile, the Main Body stayed home, focusing on two things. First: physical conditioning - strength, endurance, flexibility, all the things you could only train if you had a flesh body.

And second: finding a new way to enter Sage Mode now that she didn't have her cursed mark to help her process natural energy anymore.

As was often the case, insights on Sage Mode had come from all over the Network.

Naomi's newfound wisdom gave clues about how the Fire Monks did it. Trinity's breakthrough in deciphering her cursed mark had helped them understand how Orochimaru did it. Her fading memories from *before* revealed how the Toads did it.

One Spirit Clone pointed out that the Twin Statues in Trinity's mind-room were staying perfectly still while focusing on complex mental tasks - and statues probably wouldn't mind if an unbalance of energies turned them into stone *again*.

Another remarked that if it had been possible for Spirit Clones to get access to chakra from within mindspace thanks to the storage seal, it might be possible to design a seal that allowed them to do the same with natural energy.

And the keystone that brought everything together came from Katara, when she not-so-innocently told her: "We can't keep calling you Main Body - especially if I succeed in giving everyone a flesh vessel. So what should we call you?"

A lost memory began to resurface.

And eventually, the main body replied:

"I am Shikako."

There was a new room in mindspace: a dojo. It came equipped with weapon racks, training weights, and padded mats on the floor.

Torches on the walls cast a light that constantly shifted and shimmered, throwing ghostly shadows everywhere, as the flames danced to non-existent air currents.

Shikako was sitting still while Kumori and Katara painted a massive seal array: thousands of symbols arranged in dozens of concentric circles, with the anchor on Shikako's back at its center. The array was far too large to fit on her skin - at least until it got compressed - and the writings sprawled across the floor all around her.

Meanwhile, in the dojo, a team of Spirit Clones led by Rukia were painting a pattern of black lines on the walls, that made them look like giant printed circuit boards.

The seal array was almost complete.

Katara straightened up, stretching her back with a groan even though her construct-body was technically unable to get sore.

Natural energy was gathering around slowly, invisibly - but Shikako could feel it. Like a pressure building just behind her skin, a shimmer in the air, a hum beneath her bones.

In the dojo, Rukia's voice came through the Network.

[Circuit patterns are ready. Waiting for go.]

[Confirmed,] said Trinity. [Network bandwidth stable.]

[Standing by,] added Naomi from the shrine room. [The Sisters are deep in meditation. Katara, you sure the regulator modules won't fail us?]

"You have access to the same data as me," Katara deadpanned. "Yes, I'm sure. Mostly."

"Then we are go," said Shikako.

The Network went quiet.

A soft hum began to rise from the floor. The ink from the seal began to glow faintly, threads of pale green and gold crawling inward like veins pulsing with light. Symbols shifted, restructured, as the compression sequence activated - drawing the glyphs toward Shikako's spine.

She felt it at once.

Her awareness deepened - now encompassing the way her muscles tensed, the way her blood moved, the way each thought echoed through mindspace like a bell toll.

And above it all: energy. Raw, living, ancient. Natural energy. Not rushing at her like a tsunami, not flooding her like fire. It moved like roots growing into her. Steady. Anchored. Patient.

"You're stable," said Kumori quietly.

“We did it,” Katara whispered.

Shikako opened her eyes - and saw *everything*.

She could see the tiny fractures in the floor. The motes of dust floating in the air. The way the shadows curled unnaturally around Katara’s feet.

She was in Sage Mode.

Her Sage Mode.

It wasn’t borrowed from a Summon or stolen through a cursed seal. It was hers. Born of sealwork and spirit and shadows and science.

She laughed.

Interlude 4a: Naruto

Naruto was bored out of his mind. The Pervy Sage had left *again* on one of his missions, telling him *again* to stay behind in some stupid empty field, and practice "the basics."

At least this time Naruto was pretty sure it was an actual mission, and not harassing women or creeping on them at the nearest onsen.

Still lame though. Everyone was probably learning cool new jutsu, while he was stuck doing the Substitution Technique all day.

He let out a long sigh.

Suddenly, he realized the Weird Lady was standing right next to him, and a startled yelp escaped his throat.

- "Hey Weird Lady Senpai! You're here! I thought you were on a super secret mission with the Old Pervert?"

- "Hey Naruto. You're right: Rukia *did* go on a mission, and she left me behind."

Naruto frowned. Then he gasped.

- "Oooh! Are you a Shadow Clone? Awesome! I can make Shadow Clones too..."

Then he trailed off. A sad thought had crossed his mind, making him stumble over his words. But he pulled it back and added, with a big grin:

- "How many can you make?"

Rukia's clone nodded, and seemed to hesitate.

- "He *is* here too you know? Jiraiya sent a clone on the mission, and the original is currently watching over us very intently because he does not trust me. He wants you to be safe."

- "What?! No way! How do you know that?"

- "That's a good question, and you are right not to take everything I say at face value."

Naruto smiled proudly. Then paused.

- "Thanks, Weird Lady Senpai. You didn't answer my question though."

- "Ah right. I *know* he's here because I am a sensor - I can feel his chakra. But even if I couldn't, I'd have *guessed* that he would not leave you unattended, because he cares about your safety. And he would not be the legend he is today if he were as clueless as he pretends to be."

- "Then let's go find him and tell him to train me, instead of lazing around!"
- "Actually, he probably wants to stay hidden so he can ambush anyone who tries to target you."

That... did not make a whole lot of sense. Rukia was weird - but that was okay. Talking with her was way more enjoyable than training alone.

- "Also, calling me a 'Lady' feels off. We're the same age. Maybe just call me Weirdo?"
- "Hmmm, 'Weirdo' sounds kinda mean. How about I call you Rukia?"
- "I'd like that."

They fell silent for a moment, but it wasn't awkward. After a time, Naruto spoke again.

- "Say, Rukia... wanna spar?"
- "Aren't you supposed to practice the basics?" she replied playfully.
- "The basics are stupid," Naruto pouted.
- "Are they now? Let's make a bet then. I'll spar with you using only the basics: Body Flicker, Transformation, Illusory Clone, Substitution, and taijutsu. You can use anything you want."
- "But you're just a clone!"
- "That I am! If you manage to pop me, or make me admit defeat, or if I use anything else, I promise to teach you a cool jutsu when Rukia comes back. If you can't, you'll be my slave for a day and you'll have to do *everything* I say."

Naruto was conflicted. If he dispelled her, he'd be alone again. Risky. But if he said no...

- "What's wrong, Uzumaki? Chicken?"
 - "No way! I will make you surrender in no time, believe it!"
-

Naruto startled awake and groaned. Next to him, Rukia's clone closed her book, and asked:

- "How did I beat you?"

His cheeks burned with humiliation, but he managed to keep his voice steady.

- "You hit like a mule." He thought for a second. "My clones get popped when they hit that hard. How do you do it?"

- "That is a good question. I might teach you someday. But that's only part of it. *You* didn't need to hit hard to win."

He took a deep breath. He knew where this was headed.

- "You were impossible to catch. I couldn't land a hit, even after I got serious."

- "Correct. Now imagine if all your clones could do what I did. If each of them could dodge and feint and escape and deflect like me. If each one was just as hard to pop - and could *also* hit super hard several times."

Naruto could imagine it.

- "And now you're gonna tell me I have to practice the basics, just like everyone else?"

- "Well... yes and no. What I *will* tell you, is that you have to obey me now. Mwahaha. Have you recovered enough to make five clones?"

He had, and he did.

- "You five are Team Blue. You," she pointed at one of them "you're the Runner. Your job is to stay alive as long as you can. The other four are the Hunters. They have to dispell you. You can use the same jutsu I used during our spar, and nothing more. *They* can use everything *but* the basics. You get a ten seconds headstart. Go."

- "What do you-"

- "Nine... eight..."

The Runner ran.

Rukia was definitely weird, but Naruto found he didn't mind playing along with her strange ideas.

- "Make sixteen clones. Good. You guys are Team Square. Draw numbers and run a tournament. One-on-one, taijutsu only, no weapons. Go!"

- "Ah."

- "What happened?"

- "The Runner from Team Blue finally got caught."

She was watching him, like she was waiting for something. He had no idea what. After a while, she smiled wickedly and said:

- "Right. Make another one, then."

He did.

Interlude 4b: Various

The seventh Runner from Team Orange was the first to successfully evade his Hunters for over two hours.

(Naruto took it as proof that orange was the best color.)

He didn't mind following Rukia's orders, after all. Her ideas were fun - especially the blindfolded taijutsu team deathmatches. If the Pervy Sage had really been hiding nearby all along, as Rukia claimed, at least he had something entertaining to watch.

But Naruto was starting to feel a little guilty about not training all week.

So today, he was definitely going to beat Rukia in sparring.

Satoshi was glad to see Kumori-San approaching his library - glad that she also loved books, on top of everything else.

Everyone else in town had been giving her the cold shoulder, ever since she moved in *with her wife*.

She did not seem to care - or even notice.

(He himself hadn't dared get too friendly with her, for fear of second-hand ostracism)

She'd never even shown any unease, as far as he could tell. The townspeople would ask questions - in a roundabout way of course - everyone trying to confirm the rumors. And she'd just... talk about it, as if it were no big deal.

Kumori-San could apparently look shame in the eye, and say "Not interested." That gave Satoshi hope that one day Ren and he could do the same, and stop hiding.

Today, he decided, he'd ask her about the books she'd written. After all, as a librarian, it was his job to provide his townspeople with access to books.

If you didn't pay close attention, they sounded like two seal masters enthusiastically swapping trade secrets.

But if you looked past the laughter, banter, and technical terms, it became clear Jiraiya did not trust her. He had never mentioned a glyph she hadn't brought up first, or discussed a circuit pattern she hadn't already explained.

Rukia didn't blame him. On the contrary, she was impressed by how he kept deflecting without ever sounding reluctant or guarded - and she was totally fine with Konoha learning all about Orochimaru's sealing style.

Besides, hearing the Sannin reframe her knowledge and reflect it back was *fascinating*. Far more than she would have guessed. It was like hearing a story you already knew, told from a different perspective.

(And boy, did Jiraiya and Orochimaru have different perspectives!)

Sure, you *could* get bored of hearing things you already knew. But if you combined the two viewpoints instead, it became like binocular vision: everything suddenly had new depths.

In her mind-room, and across R&D, the Spirit Clones were going crazy. Paradigm shifts. New ideas. Improvements on existing ones. Misconceptions that had caused roadblocks, suddenly lifted.

And so, on their way to their next target, Rukia and Jiraiya kept talking.

Special Jounin Rika Kurogane - rank: Captain - was on her way to work at the Iwagakure Intelligence Center (usually shortened 'I2C' or 'eye to see'). She was mentally reviewing the evidence surrounding the *Operation Han* fiasco.

The real Han was still hospitalized. The I2C had shown his file (anonymised, of course) to all kinds of experts - medical or otherwise - and served as a proxy to run the tests and treatments they suggested.

The most recent consultant, a phony curse-breaker named Baba Yaga, had told them to drain all his blood ("to the last drop") and then give him a transfusion. They were really scraping the bottom of the barrel here.

Only six operatives had come back from *Operation Han*, and two of them were still unresponsive.

The description of the genjutsu and the wounds on their dead teammates were indicative of Uchiha Itachi and Hoshigaki Kisame, respectively.

But every other account of Itachi's genjutsu in the archives said it was unbreakable. And now, suddenly, six people had broken out of it at the same time, with no idea how they did it, two of them while in a coma?

No. She found it hard to believe.

Either Itachi went back and lifted his own jutsu, or there was a third party involved.

(And let's not forget that *someone* had also apparently saved the real Han from his unidentified curse-casting attackers)

That third-party hypothesis might explain why every survivor had been chakra exhausted, despite not having fought, and Itachi's genjutsu not being known for depleting its victims.

Someone had managed to break them out by draining them dry of chakra.

(Maybe they *should* try this Baba Yaga's idea, just in case.)

R&D *finally* had a working version for the surveillance seal, and the screen in the command center *finally* displayed more than just static.

The seals were basically ink-based surveillance cameras, that sent their feed directly to the network. Kumori had put them everywhere.

In and around the house, at the main entrance of the town, at strategic locations on the road to Amegakure (but only on this side of the border, because she thought she remembered that the rain was a huge detection and surveillance jutsu.)

Most importantly, she'd put them on carts that transported crops to Ame.

The Oto no Hebi were on an escort mission, protecting Sound's huge caravan that was loaded with grain, books, medicines and cosmetics.

For the next month or so, the merchants would be touring the elemental nations, selling goods, making friendly appearances, securing trade deals if possible, and buying everything that seemed interesting.

(Otogakure and its surroundings were getting ever closer to full autonomy for all their basic needs, but that didn't mean they couldn't sample what the neighbors had to offer.)

Karin thought it was quite nice that they were all getting to go on this trip together. And they - mostly - followed her orders, which was good too.

She felt a 'ping' at the edge of her perception range.

[Gin, incoming. At least two, chakra and speed are Chunin Level, ETA: thirty seconds]

They all eventually had learned to replicate their Sensei's "telepathy" by mastering the voice recording function of their communication seals.

[On it]

[Me too]

Kaoru and Suigetsu were best positioned for a pincer move.

[Priorize capture if possible,] Karin said.

Katara's first breakthrough had come when a Spirit sister had suggested using a Shadow Clone as scaffolding for the stem cells.

If you did that, the cells *did* differentiate. Then you could "heal" them - meaning speeding up mitosis until the cells formed tissues, then organs, then systems. And instead of a pile of goo, *at best* you obtained a very very sick body that died instantly.

The reason for that was that a Shadow Clone was not a blueprint of your body - as Trinity had discovered. Rather, it was a blueprint of "how your subconscious mind thinks your body is like."

Suffice to say that her subconscious mind was mistaken on several fronts.

Katara's second breakthrough - still a theory so far - had come from Shikako's new Sage Mode. If you infused the Shadow Clone with Nature energy before filling it with stem cells, then - once they finished their supercharged reproduction - you might obtain a body that was just healthy enough, barely.

A body that might live long enough for you to keep healing it with your actual, conscious, anatomical knowledge (and perfect visual memory): reshape the heart first, then the lungs, then the lymphatic system, etc.

Meanwhile, the Shadow Clone would certainly get the mother of all headaches, as part of their consciousness migrates from their chakra body to their currently empty brain.

She had not tried yet, because making a new permanent copy might overload the Network-mindspace thing, so it had to be tested on Prototypes. And the process was far from perfect. Hence the "still a theory so far" part.

For example, there was still the problem of aging. Replicating the cells until they filled the Flesh Clone frame would make them years older - biologically - than the body they were forming. That was... suboptimal. And if she wanted to keep using the technique later in her life, that would become a big problem.

She'd like to solve that one at least, before giving flesh bodies to her sisters. And she was reasonably sure that Orochimaru had researched the issue thoroughly at some point or another - which meant that Rukia might end up being the one behind her third breakthrough.

For now, Naomi preferred to keep her chakra-construct body anyway.

If and when she fought Hidan, she'd rather not give him access to their blood.

Tetsuya thought he had felt something.

His job was to wait in the middle of nowhere for the cart to arrive, check the merchandise for anything suspicious, put everything into storage scrolls, pay the merchants, and bring the scrolls to Amegakure while making sure he wasn't being followed.

And he *thought* he might have felt a faint chakra trace on one of the wooden crates - way too weak to be a human. Maybe a seal or a very small summon.

And then the feeling vanished. He couldn't sense anything anymore.

Maybe it was nothing.

Maybe a spying device.

He tried to recall his classes on seal theory, to assess how plausible it was that a seal could erase itself when detected. That seemed far-fetched.

Protocol still required him to mention it in his mission report.

The problem was: if he put it on the record, this would go into his file. And he had applied for a promotion to Special Jounin in the Sensory Corps. If it turned out to be a false alarm - as was likely - it might hurt his chances.

He had a thought for his Jounin sensei who had taught them that "*A hundred false positives are preferable to one intruder.*"

He decided that he would double-check everything extra thoroughly, and then forget the whole thing.

Orochimaru 4

((*"You should give me Konoha-style ANBU training"*))

The boy had smelled like fear and forced composure, even though his face had been neutral and the request itself was quite reasonable.

Different from his usual scent of grief and rage.

Orochimaru had hesitated. Clearly, something was going on.

Pros: refusing without a valid reason would risk undermining their arrangement, and Orochimaru couldn't find a convincing excuse. Also, the more of his skill-set he could instill in the boy now, the less effort it would take for him to get to full strength once he was in control.

Cons: the boy was hiding something - and ANBU training would teach him scent-block, which would make his emotions harder to read. Also, ANBU training was relatively short, but intensive. It would require someone to teach him 24/7, so Orochimaru couldn't do it himself.

Kabuto, perhaps? But he and his agents were currently tied up dealing with Jiraiya's ongoing onslaught on their safe houses, outposts, caches - and even one of their secret labs.

He *could* ask Danzo to lend him one of his thralls for a couple of weeks. He didn't trust the man with Uchihas, but Orochimaru could just avoid revealing the identity of the trainee - beforehand or at all. The training was masks-on, after all.

Besides, the Oto Secret Services could use a bunch of new recruits.

Now, what was the boy plotting?

He had been pressed for time, and had given the Nara girl the current protocol and passwords for an unscheduled contact between undercover agents.

Roughly thirty-six hours later, Jiraiya had most likely used the same protocol to extract intel from an undercover operative in Land of Tea. The agent was now MIA, making this part of the story uncertain.

What *was* certain however, was that since then Jiraiya - and his mysterious masked partner that may or may not be the Nine-Tails Jinchuriki - had been getting the upper hand in their decade-old game of cat and mouse.

Correlation didn't always imply causation, but it *did* justify asking more questions. Had the Nara girl leaked the intel to his old teammate? But when?

Orochimaru had followed her position all along, and she had never appeared to stray from the path he'd set for her. Every time she was sent somewhere with an Oto operative nearby, Orochimaru had received confirmation that she was exactly where she was supposed to be.

(But he'd been following her position by triangulating a tech that allowed *instant long range communications*. A tech that *she* invented.)

Also, a few days ago the boy had suddenly become afraid for no identifiable reason - and had requested the one training that would allow him to mask his emotions.

Right. So.

There might be a mole in Ootogakure. Possibly the Nara girl (Hypothesis A), possibly the Uchiha boy (B), or someone else entirely (C).

Or the null hypothesis: Jiraiya's recent successes might be unrelated.

Hypothesis C could be left to Kabuto - he was pretty much *always* investigating hypothesis C - and Orochimaru would look into A and B himself.

Naturally, he'd had operatives on Uchiha-monitoring duty from the very beginning. After reading their reports, it appeared that the boy's pastimes revolved around training, brooding, and hanging out at the Oto no Hebi's headquarters.

The Nara girl had even somehow found time to spar with him on a semi regular basis, before her current mission.

And wasn't that interesting? The boy was supposedly a misanthropic loner. The girl, supposedly drowning in work. And yet...

Which meant any increase in the probability of hypothesis A should also raise the probability of hypothesis B - and vice versa.

Which also meant the Hebi members should be brought to him ASAP. Whether as witnesses or as hostages remained to be seen.

Turned out the Oto no Hebi were all out-village, on a long-term mission. That was not *implausible* - their performance record as a unit was impeccable, it made sense not to split them. But the timing was... inconvenient.

Their bloodline brat was also gone, but that too would be expected under the null hypothesis: the kid was too young to stay unsupervised long-term, they'd need someone to look after her at a non-obvious location.

Still no definitive evidence one way or another.

Observation alone would not help: the boy was clever enough to maintain a façade, which meant Orochimaru couldn't reliably predict behavioral differences under the competing hypotheses.

And he didn't want to damage their relationship with direct "interrogation." Not yet anyway.

(Experiment, then)

What would be different whether the boy was innocent or guilty?

"Hello, foolish little brother"

The Uchiha boy immediately charges at "Itachi," growling under his breath, electric arcs flashing from his right hand.

He does not question what "Itachi" is doing in Orochimaru's office. No hesitation, no double take, the boy took no time to *think*, which was very good news.

Lying and acting were easy - just not *fast*. You had to "manually" inhibit your brain's first output, and generate a plausible replacement that fitted your story - and that took hundreds of milliseconds.

The boy's reaction time had been far shorter than that. Not congruent with hypothesis B.

The prisoner that Kabuto had artfully modified to resemble the elder Uchiha brother desperately tries to dodge, but still ends up pierced by the Chidori. Sad, but necessary: the boy's eyes could now pierce through most illusions - possibly even all of them.

Orochimaru mentally adjusts the probabilities of hypotheses A and B, and steps into view.

The boy stands panting, one hand pressed to his forehead as if fighting off a headache. He shoots him a reproachful glance.

"Was that a test?"

"Yes, and also... let's call it a tradition. Congratulation, Sasuke-kun. Here are your mask and your cloak. You are not to take them off until your ANBU training is over. It starts in an hour at training ground six."

The boy hides his confusion.

"Hn."

Interlude 5: Fukuro

Chapter Notes

I went back and edited this chapter to fix a plot hole that had been bothering me.

I've been trying to finish the story before classes start again, but it's looking less and less likely that I'll manage to. So there might be a hiatus coming up.

Fukuro looks at the blank trainee masks staring back at him.

Six cadets have the right hair color. That means little.

Four have a body type that's within parameters - Sasuke Uchiha was still going through puberty when he deserted, which complicates things. Body type is harder to fake than hair, but still child's play for someone like Orochimaru.

Apparently, every trainee had learned a voice-modulating jutsu beforehand - or maybe the masks are doing the distortion.

He makes his own voice strong and flat.

"You may think you are here to become perfect killing machines. If so, you are mistaken on several counts. The ANBU division is the machine. You are here to become perfect cogs. Run around the training ground until I tell you to stop."

They run.

"From this point on and until told otherwise, your first and last words whenever you talk will be 'Sensei' - is that understood?"

A half-hearted chorus follows: "Sensei, yes, sensei."

"A good cog does not argue, complain, negotiate, waver, or break. It doesn't get distracted by fear or anger, jokes or ambition, friends or family."

He watches for any sign of emotional reaction in the trainees as he says these last words. Nothing. He continues.

"Would you be a more efficient operative if your arms demanded a reason before obeying your head?"

"Sensei, no, sensei"

"Rule 1: Unless your handler specifically requires it, independent thinking is not useful to ANBU ninjas. It gets in the way of efficiency. It is to be replaced by obedience."

"Sensei, yes, sensei"

(This is an oversimplification. Autonomy *is* useful in an agent - they will need to be able to adapt in situ. But that part comes later. First they need to get rid of their bad mental habits.)

"From now on, anyone who breaks Rule 1 will lose one hour of sleep."

It's nearly midnight. Most cadets can barely stay upright.

"At ease."

Half of them drop to the ground. Fukuro activates a sealing scroll, revealing a stack of identical books.

"These are dictionaries of our sign language."

(This is not the real Oto ANBU sign language, of course. The real one will be given to them after Fukuro has returned to Konoha.)

"Learn it - you'll need it tomorrow. You may not leave this training ground. See you all in five hours - except for trainees 3, 11, and 12, who will come with me and do laps for one more hour."

When he comes back at 1 AM, most cadets are still studying. Two of them are asleep. He takes note.

When he wakes everyone up at 3 AM, some cadets protest. He reminds them of Rule 1 and they quickly shut up.

Of course they can't learn an entire language in three hours, especially not when they're sleep deprived. But if, by chance, someone could, it would be weak evidence of the presence of the Sharingan. So he punishes harshly anyone who misunderstands his signed orders. None of the trainees suddenly becomes fluent.

There's no food or water on their training ground.

There is, however, a building, a few hundred meters away. It looks abandoned but it's not, not really. That's where the cadets go to eat and drink. He is not allowed there.

Their schedule has been planned beforehand with Kabuto. Fukuro will send them to the building every other day-ish, and while they're there he will probably be watched - to make sure he doesn't sneak a peak at the maskless trainees.

By Day 4, Fukuro estimates they are exhausted enough that their sense of self should be mostly undefended - even if some of them are adults. Time for Rule 2.

("In ANBU, you have no name. You have no feelings. You have no past. You have no future. There is only the mission.")

He makes them repeat it, over and over, for hours, while they do mind numbing physical conditioning.

When waking up on the fifth day, he decides to start actually teaching them.

One by one he shows them the different layers of camouflage jutsu: advanced silent movement, chakra masking, footprints masking, visual camouflage, scent blocking, heat blocking - and voice distortion just to be thorough.

He looks for trainees that learn suspiciously fast, but finds nothing.

He tells them they can sleep once they manage to maintain the whole technique for 5 minutes while moving. They don't sleep that night.

He teaches them advanced sensory techniques, and tells them to track him while he's under camouflage. They can't, so he makes them track each other.

They get better.

By Day 10, they all have reached a passable level of skill.

From Day 11, he teaches them about assassination techniques, sabotage and explosives, infiltration theory, interrogation, poison detection, and then he quizzes them.

All along, he gives them stupid orders and punishes those who think before obeying. He does not, however, punish those who adjust to context so they can better fulfill the mission. The nuance is subtle, but crucially important.

All along, he makes sure to keep them physically and mentally tired.

All along, he makes sure to drill rules 1 and 2 into them.

All along, he tries and fails to locate Sasuke Uchiha.

And then it's time to return to Konoha.

He kneels, waiting for Shimura-dono to arrive.

Mission failure is bad, and he feels it.

"Report."

"This operative has successfully delivered entry-level generalist ANBU training to twenty Oto operatives. This operative has failed his main objective: to locate Sasuke Uchiha among the trainees. This operative has gathered some evidence that none of the trainees were Sasuke Uchiha..."

Fukuro winces internally. He just contradicted his mission parameters. That was a punishable offense. Shimura-dono does not react, so Fukuro continues.

"Consequently, this operative has failed his secondary objective: to retrieve Sasuke Uchiha's eyes. This operative has not been discovered."

"Close your eyes and remove your mask"

Fukuro pointedly does not hesitate, and obeys.

"Show me your tongue"

Fukuro obeys.

Fukuro wakes up with the worst headache of his life. The pain knocks him out almost immediately.

He wakes up again, with the second worst headache of his life. This time he manages to fight through it, and opens his eyes.

He is in Ootogakure, training ground 6.

He finds a note saying "**Don't report me and I won't report Danzo**"

Apparently, it's Day 5 - and Trainee Number 7 is now missing.

Fukuro doesn't report him.

Sasuke 5

Sasuke had decided he deserved a break.

Under the cover of his new ANBU stealth, he left the village and headed into a nearby forest.

Five days ago, he'd deliberately killed an unarmed, probably innocent man.

The man's death had likely been more merciful than what usually happened to the Snake's prisoners and/or test-subjects. But that thought had come long after the decision to kill.

He should not lie to himself by reframing it as altruism. He was trying to get better at understanding his own thoughts, after all.

Of course he'd activated Secret Binding before any interaction with the Snake.

Which meant he'd had a few (subjective) seconds to decide.

((And that also meant the memory would never fade))

All his instincts had screamed at the same time - it's *him* / onii-san / run / *kill him* / it's a trap / you're gonna die / it's not him / you're not ready / attack *now* /

Then came the thought: *Things don't add up, ask questions first.*

And only then, the realization: *This man is not Itachi - and that's a test. I either kill him convincingly... or I die.*

If so, there was no time for methodical thinking: he had to strike immediately.

Which he did.

((*"Killing people tend to make their loved ones want to come after you for revenge."*))

He sighed and lay down under a tree, still hidden under the Camouflage Technique.

For a while, he observed the sunlight playing through the leaves above.

Eventually, a question crept in: how exactly did this work? How could he see while camouflaged?

(That was one of the limitations of learning jutsu through the Sharingan: it gave you enough knowledge to wield a technique, but not enough wisdom to truly understand it.)

Either the light was currently passing through his body, retinas included, which should prevent him from seeing, or it *did* hit his retinas, which should make *them* visible.

He mentally chastised himself: he should be wary of false oppositions like that. They sound so clean, so logical, it usually feels like they cover all possibilities. Except they usually didn't.

Maybe the jutsu *did* allow the light to hit his retinas - and just his retinas - so that he could see, but prevented the rays from bouncing back so that his eyes couldn't be seen.

Maybe the light wasn't passing through at all. Maybe it bent and went around him. Maybe his assumptions were completely off.

((Maybe there *had* been more options than just "Kill the fake Itachi" or "Get found out and die"))

...

He began reviewing everything he knew about the case, mentally sorting it into four categories: "Things I've seen and/or experienced myself," "Things I've seen and/or experienced myself *with the Sharingan active*," "Things other people have told me about," and "Things I infer from the rest"

Fukuro had a seal on his tongue. More accurately: Fukuro's *self-image* within the Partial Tsukuyomi had a seal on his tongue - making it even less likely this was just a temporary disguise.

Orochimaru and Danzo were allies, even though Fukuro's mission implied they were the kind of allies that sometimes betrayed each other.

Their collaboration probably went way back, if The Girl had really been taken from the Nara clan as a baby.

Why hadn't the Nara retaliated? The girl claimed Danzo had an undetectable way to influence minds long-term. The kind of all-encompassing explanation that's almost impossible to prove or disprove.

Itachi had joined ANBU at eleven, and Danzo had been his handler for years when... when *that* happened.

Danzo's recruits were - at least in some cases - brainwashed into absolute obedience, if Fukuro's methods and behavior were any indication.

After leaving Konoha, Orochimaru and Itachi (and probably The Girl too!) had become part of an organization called Akatsuki.

...the Snake...

...The Girl...

...the puppet-master...

...*Big Brother*...

Sasuke drifted to sleep.

What should he do now? He had nine days before the end of ANBU training.

First, options. Whether or not they are good options didn't matter yet, just - as many options as possible.

- Go back and finish the training.
- Go back and help the trainees resist the brainwashing.
- Report Fukuro to Orochimaru.
- Report The Girl to Orochimaru.
- Stay away from the training, report nothing, pretend nothing happened.
- Tail Fukuro until he leads him to Danzo.
- Leave Sound.
- Go back to Konoha and ask for forgiveness.
- Go to Itachi and ask for answers.
- Go to The Girl and ask for mentorship.
- Go somewhere else and find a new - less idiotic - way to get strong.

His imagination was running dry.

Then: goals.

The primary objective was still avenging the Uchiha clan. That meant several secondary objectives: survive, get stronger, and find out who was really responsible, and to what extent.

Surviving currently meant not getting found out by the Snake - or deserting Sound. Maybe, with ANBU stealth, that was finally on the table.

Getting stronger meant finding a powerful mentor - and he was running out of options. The Girl was probably weaker than Orochimaru. Otherwise, wouldn't she have overthrown him by now?

As for the truth behind the Uchiha massacre... that meant untangling the web of lies and manipulation that had been spun around him for years.

Some answers were in Oto. Some in Konoha. And some... wherever Itachi was now.

What option aligns best with the goals?

The Girl was an ally. He wouldn't even know about Danzo if it weren't for her. Reporting her was out of the question.

Leaving Sound was unfeasible - not with the Curse Mark. He'd have to get rid of it first, and it's not like he could amputate his own neck.

Reporting Fukuro would alert the Snake that Sasuke knew something was wrong with Danzo. Bad idea - maybe as a last resort.

Helping the other trainees would be the right thing to do. But the risk was far too high.

Every other option had some merit... but also serious drawbacks. Now which one...

Then he slapped his own forehead - hard.

No false oppositions!

He winced at the headache that followed, but couldn't help a small smile. It reminded him of the way Sakura used to hit Naruto when he was being stupid.

...Wait a minute.

Sasuke's reserves were large enough to manage two Shadow Clones and still be in decent fighting shape.

Clone A would stay in Sound and discreetly observe the remainder of the ANBU training from a distance. His job was to make sure Fukuro didn't try anything new this time - and that he didn't report Sasuke, either. If possible, he'd quietly look after the other trainees' well-being.

If there was more to learn, he would learn it.

Once the training ended, he'd try to follow Fukuro to the rogue ANBU headquarters. That part would probably fail - but if it didn't, the rewards would be huge. So he had to try.

Clone B would go after Itachi. Or rather, he'd rummage through the Snake's archives looking for leads on Itachi - because he highly suspected that Orochimaru was withholding information from him - and then, if he found something, he'd go after the most promising lead.

Sasuke himself would remain in the forest: find a good hiding spot, build a small camp, rest, plan, do light training, test out techniques he didn't want to show in Oto, and wait.

Clones A and B would come back periodically to report their progress as their missions unfolded. If anything happened to them, he'd create new ones.

After that, if Fukuro stayed silent, Sasuke would go back to Oto like nothing happened.

Like a naive Uchiha waiting to be slaughtered.

Interlude 6: the Network

Of course, everything was happening all at once.

Trinity was sprinting silently toward her next mission objective. Beside her, Kumori - who had come all the way from the Land of Grass - was keeping pace, absorbed in a complex task involving a sequence of seals and all kinds of medical jutsu.

Orochimaru had ordered Trinity to eliminate the nearest Akatsuki operative - whoever it was - and to once again keep the communication scroll active at all times. Translation: the Snake was onto her.

That had been expected, of course - just maybe not this early.

Kumori was carrying a vial of Shikako's cells, and was attempting to give Trinity a flesh body - so her suicide mission would actually leave a corpse behind.

And that would already be complicated enough if she were standing still!

[Sorry,] thought Trinity [we must assume he has a way to pinpoint our location in real time. I can't stop now.]

Thousands of kilometers from here, Naomi was grabbing a panicked monk by the shoulders, telling him to gather the kids, have them hide in the kitchens until the two immortals are engaged in a fight, then evacuate everyone quietly and run to the nearest Konoha outpost.

In a deserted plain in the Land of Grass, a surveillance seal detects something unusual.

Rukia swears under her breath, then swears again.

After a quick mental calculation, she turns to her teammate and says:

"I'm sorry Jiraiya-San. Something just came up, and I will need to leave in less than five hours. Non-negotiable. If there's something you absolutely need me for, it's now or never."

As far as Trinity knew, the nearest Akatsuki operatives were Itachi and Kisame. She had started tracking them specifically, right after she'd gotten access to Han's medical file.

That had been part of the plan: against many members, a physical body was a liability. Sasori and his human puppetry, Hidan and his blood curse, Kakuzu and his masks, Zetsu and his Edo Tensei...

About half the Akatsuki were basically necromancers!

If she wanted Orochimaru to find a convincing corpse, her options had been limited.

Thousands of kilometers from here, Naomi was slashing at Hidan with a Water Blade.

The man - clearly used to being the only one in a fight who didn't care about pain or injury - looked a little taken aback.

Just a little, though - and the nascent grin on his face hinted that he was starting to enjoy himself.

A rain cloud was advancing over the grassy lands of the Land of Grass. It was coming from the west, and it was headed to an unremarkable town.

It was moving upwind.

[Done! Let's hope the Snake is not paranoid enough to check your telomeres. Good luck with the headache. Remember, medical painkiller chakra makes you high when in a flesh-body.]

[Lovely.]

[Upside: you get to generate your own chakra now! Also Sage Mode! But maybe don't use it, just in case the Mark can detect it.]

[Yup. Now we just need one more piece of intel...]

It had been water, on Hidan's scythe, instead of her blood.

He had tried to cast his curse nonetheless, and it felt like it did *something*, but it was clearly malfunctioning. The fact that Naomi lacked nociceptors probably wasn't helping.

The dark priest was standing there, with a self-impaled heart and laughing in confusion.

Behind Naomi, the head monk - Chiriku - was losing ground against Kakuzu and his masks.

The rain made it hard to see, but six silhouettes were moving in perfect sync with the cloud, directly below it.

"I'm sorry. But you know I won't forget you, right? You must have realized by now."

Naruto squints, and stays uncharacteristically silent.

"Let this be my final lesson then: when a clone is dispelled, all their memories go back to the main body."

"Yeah, I know. I realized I've been getting better at the things my clones were practicing. I'm still sad though, because the real Rukia will remember me, but she won't be you."

The Shrine Room was cut off from Mindspace.

The last memory sent to the Network had been of Naomi, throwing herself in front of a huge spear of lightning release, that was about to obliterate Chiriku.

In a house in Land of Grass, Shikako hastily makes a Shadow Clone, and paints a seal on the clone's not-skin.

Naomi opens her eyes, as the Shrine Room opens its door.

Relief washes through the Network.

[Yay, we can come back!]

[That's seriously, *seriously* good news, I must say.]

[I know right?]

[Well, now that we know the shortcut is available, you may go - they'll need your help getting ready. I will destroy your inner plaque after you leave.]

[Right. Have a good death!]

[Thanks! G'death to you too!]

Oto-Hime 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

In the command center, everyone is in position.

The Network has decided to meet the Paths before they reach the city, because Shinra Tensei is basically a bomb.

They have set up surveillance seals everywhere ahead of time, and Spirit Clones are monitoring every angle of the chosen battlefield.

While they waited, they worked together to design and inscribe a very specific seal onto one of those giant scrolls - which Shikako is now carrying on her back.

Naomi and Kumori both have brand new flesh-and-bones bodies. Trinity Katara and Rukia have decided to fight in their Prototype construct-bodies.

The rain is here.

Six cloaked figures meet six identical-looking girls.

"Greetings mortals, I am the Six Paths of Pein."

She knows it's silly - but she can't resist.

"Hello, mister Pain, I am the Six Paths of Joy."

"..."

"Seriously, Nagato, you don't recognize me?"

"...Orochimaru's little shadow? You've... grown."

"I am my own shadow now."

"You have been spying on me."

"I have. I happen to disagree with your plan, which makes you my adversary."

"You dare question a god?"

"Oh come on Nagato, none of this with me. We're obviously the same. We're not *gods*, just humans with the ability to break a few rules."

"I have the will and the power to reshape humanity's destiny. You... are probably not like me."

"That's not a-

-god, that's a-

-tyrant, and-

-we *do* share-

-a few traits-

-you and me."

While they talk, the Network tries to locate the "eat-your-soul-with-a-touch" Path.

Their memory is spotty: they remember a *Shinra Tensei* Path, a "Spam Giant Summons" Path, and one that can resurrect the others.

They also immediately sensed there was a "My Body Is A Puppet" Path.

That means one remains unknown - a Path with mystery powers. Hopefully, it's not worse than instant soul consumption.

Do the Sisters have separate souls? Probably not, right?

They are determined not to find out today.

"I am nothing if not a rational god. If you are convincing, I *will* be convinced. State your case."

Shikako takes a deep breath.

First, she needs to show that her disagreement doesn't stem from misunderstanding his views

"You are morally horrified by all the suffering happening in the world. You've arrived at the conclusion that this is the default for mankind - that left unchecked, we will always tear each

other apart. You want to stop the destruction in its tracks by uniting everyone under a strong master - yourself - who will usher an era of peace."

She pauses, assessing, but he says nothing.

"You are building a weapon so overwhelmingly powerful that it can terrify even the most fanatical into submission. In order to fulfill its role, the weapon will have to be used *at least* once - but more likely twice in a row, to prove that it can be wielded without limitations. You have steeled yourself and are about to sacrifice millions on your own altar. You deem this sacrifice to be the better of two evils. Am I correct so far?"

Nagato's vessels nod, somewhat reluctantly.

"Great. Then here are the *other* problems with your plan. Your world would be relying on fear, not on trust, so you can literally never rest. And you *think* you've accepted that. But what happens if someone takes the weapon from you? What happens if someone builds another one? What happens if someone stronger unites the world against you?"

She pauses again to let him digest this, then continues:

"Those are not mere execution problems to be solved. It's not a case of "doing the right thing even if it's hard." Your plan *needs* you to think long-term, and make absolutely sure that the horrific weapon that you created - that YOU fucking brought into this world - never escapes your grasp. So you would *need* to take all the world's many voices - their rich, labyrinthine harmonies - and force them to sing in unison, out of fear of dissonance. You would *need* the future to remain predictable, therefore your world cannot accept growth, creativity, change - not even curiosity. It would have to stand still, forever."

They hold their breath, waiting.

"Those are valid points," he says at last, "but you have only shown my world to be less than perfect - which I never claimed it was. You have yet to demonstrate how my world would be *worse* than yours. In your godless, chaotic world, how will you prevent the strong from preying on the weak? How do you prevent Orochimaru from torturing people in his so-called 'labs'? How do you prevent wars between villages? How do you defend your world against people like me?"

Nagato is wrong about that last point: this world is plenty strong already, even without her. She knows that in a parallel timeline, Konoha defeats him - and the whole continent unites to defeat the many secret masterminds behind him.

But that is not the best answer to give right now. Better to bait him into hinging the debate on a fight - as planned.

"Would it reassure you if I were stronger than you?"

"That would surprise me greatly. And while not reassuring *per se*, it would make me reassess a few things."

Her bodies move into battle formation.

"Shall we then?"

"We shall."

Several pairs of ears transmit his "We shall" into the Network.

Opening move: position herself so that Shinra Tensei would hit the other Paths before her.

What follows is a storm of impact and momentum.

Summoner identified.

Ignore the giant panda with Rinnegan eyes for now, it can be dealt with later.

Respawn Guy is likely one of these two hanging back. The other one - maybe his bodyguard?

Every piece is in position for the next step.

Naomi lunges - not to strike, but to be struck. One of the Paths grabs her and stabs a black metal rod into her leg.

The pain is overwhelming. She barely manages to stay focused. All the Sisters close their eyes as Naomi grits her teeth and activates the trap.

Glyphs light up on her skin, and quickly migrate to surround the rod in her thigh

Suddenly, she is plugged into *his* Network.

She has access to his sensorium, she sees herself through his many eyes.

She senses his intent to strike before he even moves, and Trinity dodges a blow that would have taken her head off.

She turns her attention to the links between the vessels and the Overself. She sees a dark room...

The rod goes inert. The connection severs.

She's been kicked out.

The Spirit Clones got what they needed before the link was cut. They triage and relay the intel to the bodies.

[The target is here, go go go!]

A kaleidoscope of screens show Shikako sprinting to the soul eater - apparently Nagato calls him the *Human Path* - and slamming the giant scroll at his feet.

She darts away from the blossoming ink as fast as she can.

Instead of escaping as well, the Path tries to grab her.

She feels the soul-eating technique activate - centimeters from her face.

She dodges.

The Human Path seems to realize he should probably not stand there.

Too late.

The seal is quite simple. Its outer layer is a mere hemispherical barrier. Inside, she just stacked every "status effects" she could think of.

There's a knockout tag, a paralysis tag, a chakra inhibitor *and* a chakra drain, a gravity-slash-resistance effect, a mix of non-lethal airborne poisons, and an elaborate multi-layered genjutsu.

Oh, and experimental anti-summoning wards.

She hopes it will keep the Human Path busy long enough for her to deal with the rest.

And since the one trapped inside is not dead, hopefully his buddies won't be able to resurrect him.

It *feels* like they have been battling for days. It's probably only been a few minutes.

Naomi's thigh throbs where the rod pierced her.

Another summon barrels in - a massive ox, eyes glowing. It charges straight at her.

From the side, Katara leaps in and strikes it under its jaw. It goes down hard.

The Puppet Guy's hand detaches with a mechanical click and dozens of missiles (*what?!*) roar skyward. They home in on Katara just as she regains her footing.

She jumps backward to gain some distance.

She twists her wrists and water whips lash out of her sleeves to strike the missiles mid flight. She only misses one, that hits her dead center in the chest.

She gets blasted away, her Rock Armor shattered into gravel and dust.

(They can't keep it up for long.)

Kumori gives the signal.

(Thankfully, they don't have to.)

Shikako rushes to help Naomi heal her leg, leaving the dome - and the Human Path trapped inside - undefended.

One of the bodies (the Preta Path, according to the Network) rushes there and starts draining chakra from the seal.

He doesn't flinch when a giant millipede crashes just behind him.

He doesn't react when Trinity hurls a Giant Fireball Jutsu at the Respawn Guy he was guarding seconds ago.

"Shinra Tensei!"

The fireball is snuffed out like a candle.

The summons disappear.

Six human bodies are sent flying.

Three are turned into puddles of water and immediately start to regenerate into human forms.

One vanishes into chakra mist.

Nagato stops.

"A Shadow Clone?"

"Yep!"

That gives him pause.

"Am I correct in assuming that your real body is not here with us, and that you can only control five vessels at a time?"

Her bodies shake their heads, some of them catching their breath.

"No, Nagato. You seem to think that my way is an inferior one, since it gives me less control. But you are wrong. I do not puppeteer my bodies: *I* am many and *we* share our thoughts. Your way exerts total control over dead beings, turning them into a mockery of life. My way embodies autonomy, synergy and harmony between selves."

"And yet, you are now outnumbered. Do you still think yourself stronger than me?"

"That is the wrong question. In a way, I really *am* the six paths of Joy, you know? So, where do you think my sixth body is right now?"

In a dark room, Kumori drops her camouflage and reveals herself to an emaciated man sitting alone on his throne.

"Hello again, mister Pain. We need to talk about single points of failure."

Chapter End Notes

Fight scenes are hard.

Interlude 7: Konan

The two "gods" had been talking for hours, and Konan was still figuratively holding her breath. She knew she was witnessing a historical event.

Their exchange had gotten pretty high-concept, pretty fast, as both Nagato and this "Kumori" clearly had a thing for moral philosophy. Some irreverent part of her mind couldn't help but think of it as "nerding out."

"...but standard trolley problems don't map perfectly to the real world. No thought experiment does, really. Because in the real world you can only guess at the rules, and then guess again at the consequences of your choices. You don't *know* that pulling the lever will lead to scenario B, because in our case it's not a lever - it's people. People are complex. You can't fully understand someone to the point where you could predict how they will react with 100% accuracy - because that would mean having the cognitive resources to fully emulate their entire brain *within your own*. So all we have are approximations. Guesses and heuristics. And over a long enough time frame, laws of probability say you *will* guess wrong eventually."

Nagato's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Yes. You will guess wrong eventually. But inaction guarantees worse. You speak of humility like it's a virtue. Sometimes it is. But too often, it's just fear wearing the mask of wisdom."

He leaned forward slightly, his posture rigid, his voice unwavering.

"We live in a world where the powerful write the rules, and the weak suffer the consequences. If we wait for perfect information, evil continues unchallenged. *They* don't pause to reflect on heuristics or probability curves. They act. Boldly. Brutally. And if we're too busy agonizing over epistemic uncertainty, then we let them win by default."

Kumori opened her mouth, but Nagato didn't give her the space.

"You say moral certainty is an illusion. I say it's a necessity. Not because it's true - but because without it, you hesitate. You compromise. You would make peace with evil, because you're afraid of becoming it yourself. I've seen that path. I've walked it. Pain made me see the truth: peace doesn't come from dialogue. It comes from equilibrium. You make people understand by making them feel. If they suffer as we suffered - if they know what it costs - then they'll change. They will finally know empathy, not because they chose to, but because they were made to."

Konan felt the silence like a weight in the room. She had heard these words before, but it was different hearing him say them to someone who didn't already agree.

Kumori gave a faint smile. Not smug. Not superior. Just... tired?

"What I'm saying is, we should factor moral uncertainty - and consequences uncertainty - into our models. See the world as the beautiful mess it is, rather than relying on clean and simplistic thought experiments to decide what to do."

She took a breath, as if choosing her next words carefully.

"But you're right: action is necessary. We must act - we have to. But we must do so with humility - knowing our information is incomplete, our logic imperfect, and our perspective limited. That's not an argument for inaction. It's an argument against dogmatism."

She met Nagato's eyes directly.

"In Grass, you asked me how I would stop Orochimaru from torturing people without becoming a tyrant myself. Do you predict it can't be done, then?"

Orochimaru 5

Chapter Notes

This update includes two chapters released at the same time. Don't forget to read the previous one!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Orochimaru looked at the corpse lying on the metal table. The girl had obeyed his orders - challenging his expectations one last time - and thrown herself at the Uchiha-Hoshigaki team, dying in the process.

(And on the same day, Jiraiya had ceased his series of raids.)

He was confused - which meant he would have to perform the autopsy himself.

The autopsy was almost finished, and it hadn't cleared anything up. Orochimaru allowed his thoughts to wander.

The Uchiha boy had been caught while he tried to infiltrate the archives. Orochimaru had expected it to happen either in his first days in Sound, or not at all.

The fact that it happened *now* was unexpected. And since he hadn't *expected* it, it meant that something he believed was false.

Kabuto had killed the shadow clone before he could dig up anything too important, and sent the Sensory Brigade after the original.

Interestingly, the boy hadn't been at ANBU training - like he was supposed to - but was found camping in the woods.

Long story short, the boy was currently waiting in a cell, and Orochimaru would interrogate him as soon as the autopsy was over.

(He might show him the Nara girl's head, if he was uncooperative)

He felt someone approaching the morgue - someone who should definitely *not* be approaching the morgue.

The door opened.

"Orochimaru, I've come to bargain."

"Kai!"

"..."

"I'm listening."

"I have the thing you want most, and I'm willing to give it to you if you meet my demands"

"Demands, hmm? And what, pray tell, would those be?"

"Keep what I'm about to tell you a secret, release Sasuke, give up on stealing his body or anyone else's forever, stop all experimentations on non-consenting people forever, help me set a trap for Danzo, and step down from the Otokage position."

"Ku ku ku...HA HA HA! And here I was, thinking that you would never surprise me again. And why should I do that, little girl?"

"Because I have solved the consciousness continuity problem."

Orochimaru stayed impassible, but his thoughts went racing.

"Good for you. So did I, years ago."

"That's a lie, Sensei. You wouldn't need to bother with the possession approach if you had.

Phenomenal consciousness was poorly understood, to say the least. Orochimaru had spent decades reading *everything* that had ever been written on the topic. No one had even managed to give it a functional definition, much less find its location in the brain.

He was the foremost expert on qualia and information theory on the whole continent.

And she was supposed to have figured it all out? In only a few months, while fighting Akatsuki? Preposterous.

((But he'd seen her solve apparently impossible problems before))

"Well, the obvious hypothesis is that you're an impersonator, and the obvious test for this hypothesis is to kill you and compare your body to the one on this table. You don't mind, do you?"

"Wait! Be smart about this. Before you kill me, ask me a question or give me a password or something."

That last sentence almost made him reconsider - until he realized that it was exactly the point. But he had to give it to her: that was *also* the exact thing she would have said, if she was attempting to prove her good faith.

The impersonator really sounded and looked like her, down to the micro expressions.

Well, no harm in playing along.

"Which one of your inventions was also a hat?"

She didn't even try to defend herself when he struck her down.

"Orochimaru, I've come to bargain!"

Things were getting interesting. As far as he could tell, both the DNA, the residual chakra signatures, and the brains had been almost perfectly identical.

(Or *strictly* identical. All he knew was that the difference - if it even existed - was smaller than the margin of error of his instruments.)

The only thing that allowed him to differentiate the two bodies was that only the first one was bearing his mark.

So much for the obvious hypothesis.

Moreover, it couldn't *just* be someone who had figured out how to modify their body to an insane degree. If you changed your *brain* into the brain of the person you were impersonating, you were *becoming* this person.

(Or maybe someone had found a way to duplicate the Nara girl *and* puppeteer the body remotely, bypassing its entire central nervous system... But that should leave *some* marks, right?)

Something non-trivial was happening.

"Also, the answer is: the mental interface for the Greenhouse Seal."

"Correct. Of course, you could just have been listening in."

"I was listening. I was *there*."

Before this third version came in, he'd set as many privacy wards as he could in the room. No living thing, no summon, no seal, no hidden tech in a hundred-meters radius would escape detection.

He had also activated his Byakugan, to be thorough. There was *probably* no one around to eavesdrop, this time.

He cast a blocking technique, that prevented all vibrations from leaving the room.

"What happened when you were two years old?"

Then he killed her again.

The next one appeared twenty-three minutes later, after he'd completed his third autopsy of the day.

"Orochimaru, I've come to bargain."

He sighed.

"You do realize you are wasting an extraordinary amount of resources... *if* what you're saying is true."

The girl smiled brightly. "You're the one doing the wasting, Sensei. Also, the answer is: I got kidnapped by one of Danzo's thralls. Also, I was one and a half, not two."

That was the moment he felt it: not doubt, but *friction*. An internal tension between belief and evidence.

"What is the last memory you can recall from your previous body, with full sensory detail?" he asked.

She answered. Without hesitation, without contradiction.

If she was telling the truth (*if*), he had no reason to refuse. All she was asking him to abandon - the labs, the hat, the boy - were means to *this very end*, means to defeat death. It would be illogical, to say no to his goal just to keep those.

Still, something in him was trying to flinch from giving up all these resources, all this hard-earned power.

"What's the catch?"

"No catch. This method is accessible to anyone with chunin-level chakra reserves and control. I will need a bunch of your stem cells. That's about it."

"Give me a minute to think."

"Sure."

He noticed that he was hoping for it to be true, and forced himself to *calm down*.

(Now was not the time for motivated thinking. If the hypothesis was true, then this was the most important decision of his life.)

What could explain what he was seeing, beside her being functionally immortal?

A Yamanaka style Mind-Body Switch? But the technique relied on forcing the caster's spiritual chakra on the target's system. He would have sensed the foreign chakra.

A Genjutsu? One so strong that he could neither detect it nor break it? But if that was the case, if he was inside an illusion, he wouldn't *really* be stepping down or freeing his prisoners, would he? What would be the point?

(Unless they could also switch him in and out of the illusion without him noticing, in which case he had already lost.)

((Who's "they"?))

That left only one possibility: she was transferring something between iterations. A preserved mental state, a preserved identity - something that went deeper than knowledge or appearance. Something that persisted.

And if so, the implications were - of course - staggering.

Because if she was - if this was possible - then maybe *he* could... he wouldn't *need* to...

"Would you like to learn True Resurrection, Sensei?"

"Yes," he said, the word slipping from his lips before he could stop it, his voice almost a whisper. "Please."

Chapter End Notes

And that's where we end it. This has been my first time writing anything even close to this long - and also my first time writing in English.

I want to thank everyone for your kind messages; they've truly made me very happy.

From the beginning, I had planned for this to be the end of the story:

<https://m.fanfiction.net/s/11488707/2/>

Go there if you'd like to read the epilogue!