

## Chapter 16: The Observances of Leaping Shadows

“- July 23, 6 ANB .-“

“- 10:34 PM .-”

“- Shikaku Nara, Jonin Commander of Konohagakure, Interim Commander-in-Chief .-“

The chamber of the Konoha Barrier Team was not the best place for a debrief, especially when even Top Secret didn't feel confidential enough.

But it was the chamber where you wanted to be if you needed to get the best response time to any assault, especially when you found yourself suddenly leading the country's armed forces because the hokage was missing in action. Moreover, it was the room with the greatest concentration of sensory abilities even *before* the gathering of every senior jonin and clan head in Konoha. Finally, and most importantly, it was the room with the brightest walls in the building that wouldn't also fold at the first hit. Even if certain rogue Uchiha nin with untenable space-time powers could pop just an eye or ear into existence to spy on them – which, thankfully, there was no evidence for – it would not go unnoticed here.

He'd still ordered half of the ANBU to look outward, though, constantly scanning the walls, ceiling, and empty space between them. Just in case.

Shikaku listened to the last situation report and waited for the casualties and damages to be written down by their record nin. Then he signalled Mouse to raise the one-way privacy barrier. “I will now summarise the events that led to our current situation, as they are best understood presently.”

The ninja sat up at attention, even those that had been adding their own efforts to surveying the premises.

“The present FUBAR appears to be the result of three operations that unfolded nominally at the same time, but with little to no prior knowledge of each other. The first, and the only one that was not clandestine, was ‘Operation Fortitude,’ which was enacted by the Hokage and the Special Tactics and Assassination Squad. This is also the only operation of the three that seems to have actually been fully successful. Its purpose: neutralizing Shimura Danzo and the ROOT organisation. The former lord Shimura was previously found guilty, in a closed-door trial, of gross

insubordination, dissension, sedition, insurrection, and treason against the previous Hokage, Konoha, and the Land of Fire itself.”

There was no little rustling at that, which Shikaku observed stoically. He could have told them that the sentencing in question was dated November 2 six years ago, practically the same day that knowledge of the Uzumaki child’s jinchuuriki status leaked to the public. He could also have told them that the main impetus cited in the verdict was the complete disaster in the Land of Rain with Hanzo – the other one – and Akatsuki the year prior.

Six years were a long time to allow and *pay* a convicted traitor to continue thumbing his nose at your authority, never mind at the village’s expense. For anyone who knew the Third, it would not be entirely unreasonable to assume he, in his sentimentality, might have left the date blank as an excuse to put off filing the paperwork indefinitely, as verdicts could technically qualify as *not* ratified until that point. At the Hokage’s discretion.

But Shikaku had only just found out about these things from the sealed Hokage records. As he lacked all the context, he was more than willing to defer on tarring the Third’s image. Until told otherwise, he was going to assume the verdict was much more recent and was only given the date in question sometime in the past few days. The Third was known to indulge in irony once in a while too.

“The second operation was an infiltration of Konoha by a heretofore assumed dead Uchiha missing nin, as well as Orochimaru of the Sannin and an unknown third individual, now deceased. This group has tentatively been identified as Akatsuki, but may *not* necessarily be that group, nor acting on its behalf or that of the Land of Rain. Best as we can figure, the group’s aim was mainly information gathering, with *likely* designs to eradicate the Uchiha clan – if not today then at a later date – and kidnap a nominally civilian target in Masanari Hanzo. The essentials are summarised in the debriefs in front of each of you.”

That was no small thing either. It wasn’t every day that that a civilian citizen garnered the same level of importance as one of Konoha’s two major clans. Formerly, at least. Maybe.

Shikaku carefully didn’t let his eyes linger on Uchiha Itachi. The boy was one of only two people present not a jonin, but as the new head of his clan he was entitled to a place there. “Based on Orochimaru’s involvement, Shimura Danzo and the rogue Uchiha may or may not have been allies

of convenience in this plot, which brings me to the third operation, which we have tentatively pieced together based on investigation and deduction. This third operation was a plan by ROOT to massacre the Uchiha outright – and collect all awakened sharingan thereof – while framing it on the aforementioned Akatsuki organisation. Abducting the other clan heirs present at the party also may or may not have been a secondary goal. Based on their Cursed Tongue Eradication seals, two of the now deceased Uchiha at today's celebration were ROOT as well. This was, in fact, known to the village leadership beforehand as ROOT standard counter-espionage. We now believe their true goal was to facilitate the kidnappings, and likely expose the Uchiha rogue and/or his accomplice at the same time, to make the framing stick. This would have had the side benefit of raising ROOT's own credibility."

"That's insane," said Inuzuka Tsume. "ROOT aren't dogs, they're snakes and rats. They'd never do this out in the open, hell, they'd never do this if there was the slightest chance a stray ray of sunlight would stink up their tracks."

"I have to agree," grunted Hodo Ise. "They disgust me as much as the next person, but they only got a pass for so long because they were competent."

Shikaku nodded. "We believe a night-time clandestine operation was the original design, but the Uchiha proved impossible to control or predict, which forced Danzo's hand. The current working assumption is that Danzo hoped either the rogue Uchiha or Orochimaru would keep our forces busy enough to compensate. Either way, he was willing to settle for a partial success in his prime objective."

"The Sharingan," young Itachi said in a deathly tone. "As many as he could get his hands on."

On top of the ones already in his head and that arm of his. Which probably contributed to his judgment calls, if you could even call them that. Implanting eyes into your arm was insane to begin with, but Hashirama cells and who knows what else? There was no way that was done without insane quantities of literally brain-scrambling drugs. But Shikaku was still keeping that need-to-know.

He allowed the gathered shinobi to process their reactions to the scale of the treason, even as he leaned into the feeling of relief that he could be confident in his assessment of Danzo at all. As small as the tongue seal was in its final form, its functionality was extremely complex, and so the

script in its pre-cast form was commensurately extensive. Too extensive to recall and replicate without reference material. Whatever else he was, Shimura Danzo didn't have perfect memory. Thankfully.

“The chain of events, as best as we could piece them together, are these: First off, the enemy group infiltrated the village, in order to gather information on what set back their pre-existing plan to massacre the Uchiha Clan and collect their sharingan eyes for their own purposes. ROOT assisted them in the infiltration – with or without Orochimaru playing go-between as a double agent – while in reality Danzo was planning to conduct his own massacre tonight, with a secondary goal of abducting the other clan heirs at the party, either for leverage or indoctrination. While this was happening, the Third and the ANBU were moving in position to storm the main ROOT compound. OPSEC success on all sides means that none of them knew of the true plans and activities of the others.”

Danzo, as galling as it was to admit, was the only one who actually knew what *one* of the others was planning. He didn't know to plan around the Third though.

“Masanari Hanzo, through classified means unique to him, became wise to the infiltrators, while at the same time Hyuuga Hiashi did the same through deductive reasoning. The ensuing counter-action by Lords Hiashi, Fugaku and Hanzo was only partially successful. The unknown member was killed despite his byakugan-proof concealment and wood release capabilities, but the rogue Uchiha proved capable of space-time teleportation superior to the Fourth Hokage, as well as literally intangible to all attacks, including the top Juuken techniques *and* the Uzumaki Chakra Chains before escaping – twice over, as both Uzumaki Naruto and Hanzo himself unleashed them upon the enemy at different points.”

He let the revelation of the Uzumaki bloodline's resurgence settle in for a moment. When, to his surprise, no one asked about Hanzo's 'Susanoo', Shikaku continued. “The Uchiha's technique has been assessed to be dimensional in nature. Specifically, the nin displaces himself, either partially or totally, in a different dimension. He is thus reportedly capable of teleporting or becoming intangible at will, like a ghost. Thankfully, he cannot be both at the same time. Despite this, he proved to have mastered his limitation enough that it did not matter. Further, there was no one on hand to exploit his theoretical weakness to Yin release.” The first time at least. “This all happened

roughly at the same time as the ANBU were storming the main ROOT base, and in fact the battle between Danzo and the Third concluded just minutes before the one at the Uchiha Compound.”

And what a confounding battle, even Shikaku wasn't sure what all he should classify, or at what level. Shikaku had sent Yamanaka Inoichi to debrief the VIPs bunkering in the Uchiha council house, while he was doing the mop-up of the ROOT-disguised-as-Akatsuki attackers. The headache from the ensuing memory transfer had been more than physical. Masanari had been surprisingly frank about what all he did, even though he knew his way around bloodline secrecy clauses, but his terminology wasn't the most familiar.

Shikaku got the essentials though, which consisted of the man somehow possessing Hashirama-level healing of his own, being able to paralyze through skin contact, having created a device capable of shooting deadly projectiles faster than gun jutsu, and being capable of manifesting something eerily similar to an Uchiha's Susanoo... somehow. Only it was seemingly less defensive and more offensive oriented. At least when 'Trito' wasn't healing people instead. Excruciatingly painfully. Of everything up to incurable poison that was actually a swarm of nano-sized flesh-devouring bugs.

The Hokage's sealed records had everything Hanzo-related labelled 'top secret', but that no longer applied after such a public display well beyond what was in there. And that was without even touching on the man's very late toad.

Anything to do with Uchiha Obito would ideally be buried in the deepest hole too, but the missing nin had just as publicly exhibited superior techniques to the Fourth in his escape, only to use and abuse the same ridiculous powers and equally shocking wood release to come back for a decapitation strike right away. And on that note...

“What occurred after the seeming retreat of the Uchiha missing-nin has only been reconstituted through investigation that is still ongoing, and mind scans of the hokage guard platoon, now killed in action. I will now pass to Yamanaka Inoichi.”

Inoichi sat forward. “The events were pieced together from the fragmented last visual memories of Raidō Namiashi, Genma Shiranui and Iwashii Tatami. I will weave an illusion technique of the events as best they could be pieced together.”

Three chunin whose understanding of space-time techniques was necessarily the best in Konoha after the Hokage himself, and even they had only witnessed parts of the whole. When put together, their last moments were the reason why Shikaku was so blazingly angry and yet so much more distressed at Konoha's prospects.

And horrified.

No, call it was it is, he was literally afraid for the future.

Inoichi cast his genjutsu, and Shikaku allowed himself to be swept in it. He was suddenly the leader of all ninja forces, so his only avenue for punishing his utter failure as Konoha's strategic mastermind was self-flagellation. He was rather like Hatake Kakashi in that respect, though unlike the man – whose skills and position as ANBU commander made him more valuable leading the infiltration sweep and lockdown enforcement, seeing as he had been debriefed already – Shikaku couldn't afford not to be here right now.

Witnessing the memories again only enforced Shikaku's initial conclusion that Uchiha Obito hadn't planned to go back to the party, or do anything else. The man liked to talk, or his put-upon persona was one that liked to talk about himself, so he let slip quite a few things, despite how quickly he went about his murders. Uchiha Obito had been fully willing to wait a while before coming back for a second round, if only to eliminate the 'new Hashirama' when there weren't so many distractions and obstacles around anymore. When everyone thought they were safe.

As disturbing as it was to imagine that Konoha's chain of command had been decapitated on a *whim*, it really did seem as if Obito had only gone off to mess with Danzo on the way out, in retaliation for his sudden and characteristic betrayal. Perhaps loot Root as his consolation prize, since he had been exposed and denied his main prize.

But the missing nin stumbled right into the aftermath of the Third's attack on the base, just as an ANBU had finished reporting to the Third about the disturbance in the Uchiha compound. And because Uchiha Obito can apparently exist only when he wants to, and because he was apparently an unstable, whimsical bastard, he decided to take a shot at the Third. Just as the Hokage guard platoon were distracted with setting up the sealwork to send the Third to the Uchiha Compound with the Flying Thunder God technique.

It was just their luck that Shimura Danzo had spent the last few years building up a literal bioweapon known as the Jar of Poison technique. A bioweapon made of Aburame Torune's unique nanoscale insects, and which Danzo himself had chosen *not* to unleash despite the fatal threat coming for him. A bioweapon that Uchiha Obito decided to use... because what? Because he liked the irony? His cover was blown anyway so he may as well go out swinging? Because it might just kill *him* too, and he was curious enough to find out?

Finally, the genjutsu replay reached the fateful moment. The one-eyed Uchiha went intangible the same moment when he popped the cork. The poison cloud burst out so fast it was too quick for even Shikaku's trained eyes to track.

And then, in the most tragic irony for all of them, the Third Hokage overperformed.

Shikaku watched grimly as Lord Sarutobi Hiruzen used shadow clones to combine various elemental and sealing techniques to contain the thrown bomb, while the three engaged the new enemy. The Third contained the whole thing, and even forced the nano-bugs back into the jar and put the lid back on, seals and everything. But while he was doing that, Obito had a comfortable time window to pick off Namiashi, Shiranui and Tatami.

Then he managed to grab onto the Third just as the latter was finishing his extremely exhausting and lifespan-cutting jutsu combo. Which, in a feat that made Shikaku bite his own tongue from more emotion than even he could process, made it impossible for the Third to defend himself from a grapple on top of everything.

The Uchiha grabbed the Third and vanished with him in a whirlpool of shadows. Then he reappeared moments later and noticed the Jar of Poison restored for a second use. To Shiranui's dying ears, the rogue Uchiha's idle musings sounded like he had been given a sign from the gods. If the 'good' guys were every bit as prone to engineering their own future's destruction as the 'bad' ones, how could Obito not help it along?

Shikaku was shamefully grateful than the other Konoha ninja were even more horrified than himself. And afraid. It let him look as if he was waiting for them to regain themselves, instead of needing all that time for himself.

“... How can anyone be so powerful?” Breathed Hamaki Mimura. Which was no small thing from one of just four ninja who survived an ambush by an entire battalion of Iwa shinobi during the war, until the Fourth arrived to relieve them. “No, how can anyone become so powerful without us knowing he even exists?”

Shikaku considered his options. “What I am about to reveal *should* be classified, but it is too late since the secret has already been revealed.” By Masanari back at the party, which was definitely the right tactical *and* strategic decision, though *how* he knew was something Shikaku was still extremely anxious to find out. “The man’s name is Uchiha Obito. We are certain now that he is the same man that fought the Fourth and unleashed the kyuubi upon Konoha on that night.”

Even Konoha’s jonin couldn’t completely maintain their composure at that revelation, and it only got worse when one of them realized out loud that this was Hatake Kakashi’s former teammate, and the Fourth’s own student. If the scale of Danzo’s treason was unconscionable, there was literally no fathoming this one.



*Konoha always produces geniuses, Shikaku thought darkly. But it has trouble keeping them.*

Shikaku watched grimly. His ninja would not reclaim their emotional balance for some time after that disclosure. He'd much have preferred leaving that topic for last, but it couldn't be helped. He could only conclude the briefing now and hope they mastered themselves with their usual efficiency, since he had neither the energy nor time to coddle his forces. Especially their leaders. "While all this was unfolding, either as part of a contingency plan or for his own reasons, Orochimaru was slithering his way through the village and 'salvaging' what he could."

"'Slithering' is right, the scum, he should never have been allowed to escape in the first place."

Shikaku cast a quelling gaze over the collected shinobi, just so he didn't need to linger on the speaker in particular. He was thankful that the Hokage's daughter had already been benched from the ANBU before this mess, due to her pregnancy. But her being present as the sole representative still left of the Sarutobi main family was only a reminder of their dire straights. "Whatever his reasons, Orochimaru decided to throw his lot in with the Uchiha Obito completely at this point, and backed him up during the follow-up attack on the Uchiha Clan grounds. I will now lay out the butcher's bill from today's -- completely unsalvageable clusterfuck -- unfortunate events."

A missing Hokage. A crippled command structure. Dozens of sharingan eyes stolen from hundreds murdered, either by Orochimaru, Obito, or any of the unknown number of ROOT agents that escaped amidst the confusion of Obito's follow-up. And what may end up the first and only fall from grace to ever be suffered by one of Konoha's three royal bloodlines.

While the standoff had been going on at the party grounds, Orochimaru had been picking off members of the police force elsewhere. The twenty-eight deaths there weren't crippling by themselves, but they *were* from among the more formidable, and fifteen had fully mature sharingan eyes which were now missing. Added to that were forty-three killed as collateral -- not counting the silenced witnesses *not* Uchiha, which were still being found in ones and twos down sewer grates and back alleys.

An additional pair of mature sharingan were missing from the mother of Uchiha Shisui, who was now among the deceased as well. As she had been honorably discharged on health grounds in the early days of the last war, and had been visiting her favorite bakery to pick up ingredients for a surprise cake for her son when the fights broke out -- which happened to be in a completely

different part of the village where none of the trouble otherwise reached – she could only have been singled out deliberately. The only question was whether it was some *other* completely undetectable accomplice of Obito's, ROOT – on behalf of Danzo – or Orochimaru. All three had potential motive. Petty and spiteful motive, but both men were known to be petty and spiteful on occasion, even if one of them did his best to pretend otherwise.

Most seriously, a further two hundred and two Uchiha had died to the ROOT insurgents and Obito's follow-up biological weapon attack, some of whom now had their eyes missing as well.

Masanari's attempt at containing the rinkaichu poison jar bomb had gone much more poorly than his last-ditch healing technique. The collateral damage from the rest was quite widespread as well, up until Uzumaki's possession by his father's chakra ghost (Shikaku still wanted to know how was that even possible). With their total number dropping from 702 to 428, and many of their best among the deceased, the Uchiha clan would have a hell of a time keeping their standing.

Especially next to the Hyuuga Clan who *hadn't* just lost a third of their number and clan head.

Shikaku could only hope Uchiha Obito had retreated in earnest this time. Not that they had any way to make sure, with the man's absurd powers. The barrier team could only monitor the barrier itself, not what was inside it or outside, and even that surface area was a strain, it was why their shifts were so short.

Shikaku had ordered half-hourly reports on the states of the Uchiha corpses. If any of them turned out missing eyes later, they'll know the bastard was still lurking around. Stalking them. Taunting them. Disrespecting their dead. So *many* dead, the toll was worse than any mission in any war where Lord Minato wasn't on the field.

Worse than most of *those* too. On both sides. Combined.

“We are at war, gentlemen,” Shikaku finished grimly. “The opening strike was more devastating than any other Konoha has suffered in its whole history. Worse, we don't even know with whom, or why. While we scramble to rectify that, I'll be relying on you all to come up with – and do – whatever it takes to best limit who else decides to join in while we're reeling.”

Wind was nominally allied with them, and Water *might* be too caught up in its own problems depending on how bad the bloodline-related strife had grown. But Lightning were opportunists

with more ego than sense, and it didn't matter what the Stone Daimyo wished because Iwagakure wanted nothing more than for everyone in Konoha to suffer and die. Not necessarily in that order. Also, the Uzumaki bloodline was very openly and loudly involved. That might tip Water into aggression all by itself.

Shikaku didn't fool himself – a mere day's events had brought Konoha and the Land of Fire to the very cusp of complete ruin.

The worst part was that they were stuck in reactionary mode on all fronts. There was already no way to cover up the sudden death – *disappearance* – of your Kage, but on top of everything else? Even if people didn't see the smoke rising from all the way in the capital when dawn broke, the news would reach them faster than Lady Tsunade's presence in the nearest casino.

Just the lockdown alone was a red alert to the rest of the world. They had dozens of clients or their representatives stranded here in Konoha while it was on lockdown. Maybe they could at least delay news on that front, but it was pointless. Both Obito and Orochimaru had successfully escaped – never mind their *prizes* – and an unknown number of ROOT agents were unaccounted for as well. There wasn't the slightest hope of information containment. The news was probably going to reach the farthest ends of the country by sunrise.

Shikaku glanced at the clock.

So about six hours.

Shikaku rose to his feet.

The other ninja did the same and stood at attention.

“I am initiating code orange. A full muster will be deferred for now, but this may yet change within the tenday. As of this moment, all shinobi on the rolls are called to duty, all the nin on missions below A-rank are recalled, and all reserves are to be on standby. Your immediate responsibilities are in the briefs provided. Report for duty immediately.”

“Yes, sir!”

The gathered shinobi saluted and went to fulfil their written orders.

Soon, only Shikaku and four others were left in the upper level of the Detection Division chamber. The Interception Division would normally be on standby there, but they were out adding their expertise to the scouring of infiltrators until further notice.

As the other two thirds of the unbeatable Ino-Shika-Chou formation, having Yamanaka Inoichi and Akimichi Chouza on hand was both expected and good sense. Shikaku asked Chouza to escort the new – hopefully only temporary - Lady Sarutobi back home.

That left him and Inoichi with Uchiha Itachi. He wasn't a jonin, so he could not be invested with any executive authority outside his clan or eventual mission team, the latter of which was no longer applicable. The boy's ANBU employment and even more standard shinobi prospects had been cut short by his new position.

Nevertheless, there were some blind spots and gaps in knowledge that Shikaku still had himself, which could yet prove ruinous. For better or worse, Itachi was the one in the best position to fill them.

Itachi approached, his face a deathly mask. "Lord Nara. I have the preliminary findings from the investigation you requested."

"Lord Uchiha," Fugaku nodded. "Report."

"Lord Hanzo's dome has somehow healed everyone tossed inside of literally every imperfection, and it may be that their health will be even better than before once they recover from the stress."

'Stress' and 'health' were both putting it mildly. The man had somehow given Uzumaki-level vitality to a whole bunch of people. As a *side* benefit to a mass body purification technique he wasn't even there to oversee. Cast through a *frog*.

"Nevertheless, while the strain was too much for most to endure while conscious, the same was not true of my father, if only thanks to his briefer exposure to the poison insects. He was able to muster enough strength to rejoin the battle mere minutes after administration. Soon after I delivered Shisui there, my father joined the battle against the enemy and launched his own counter-ambush on Uchiha Obito. By this stage, Uzumaki – or the Fourth – appeared to have disrupted Obito's ability to activate his techniques consistently, with whatever Yin technique the Fourth's mental clone devised."

So far it was all things Shikaku already knew, but he wasn't going to chastise the boy for following protocol. There were worse anchors for an elite child genius to latch onto in an emotional crisis that could very well make him completely snap.

“My Lord-Father proved somewhat more successful than Lord Hyuuga in his ambush, and the missing nin burned to death.” Wait, did he really, but then-? “Unfortunately, the madman had taken a moment to ‘acquire’ a pair of replacement eyes from one of our newly deployed guards, just moments before he launched his second assault of the day. He was able to cast Izanagi a second time while none of us could see through the fire. More so, my father and I were on opposite sides of the battlefield by that point.”

Shikaku hated where this was going.

“Somehow the Fourth still reacted in time when Obito appeared behind my father, despite how badly Uzumaki was flagging at this point. Unfortunately, Obito decided to accept the harm in order to stab my father in the back of the head.” Sage above, how many more reverse cards did that madman have? “Then, when Minato-sama finally seemed to have disrupted his techniques once again, and Obito was finally pinned down and chained, the enemy activated Izanagi again to appear fully restored several feet away, before vanishing in a whirlpool of shadows for good.”

How did he-? “A pair of eyes,” Shikaku realized. “You said he'd made a stop to acquire a replacement *pair*. He'd only used one.”

Itachi nodded woodenly. “And replaced it with his last spare while intangible in the fire.”

Shikaku made sure not to react, and was glad Inoichi was not in Itachi's field of view. “I see.” The Jonin Commander mentally added mid-battle transplant surgery to the missing nin's increasingly daunting list of abilities. How the hell were they going to defeat this man?

Well, it was his job to find out, wasn't it? He'd need more than a few minutes of thinking to figure that one out, that was for sure. If they could even find him. And somehow communicate with whatever was left of the Fourth in the Uzumaki boy, if anything, to see if they could learn whatever technique he employed. The fox was not responding to requests to ‘bring me into the seal’ and the boy himself was unconscious. It didn't look like any painless or peaceful unconsciousness either. If nothing changed soon, Shikaku might just have to risk Inoichi doing a mental dive into the seal.

Any other day he might have brought Shisui in breach the seal defenses and force answers out of the fox with his special sharingan, since the kyuubi had a known and proven vulnerability to it, even through the best fuinjutsu. But after everything he'd seen and learned lately, the Uchiha relative to the nine-tails were now a last resort.

What irony, that he still agreed with Shimura Danzo on some things. "And the last matter?"

Itachi's face was practically carved from stone. "No one knows who killed Uchiha Mikoto." Uchiha Mikoto. Not 'mother'. Itachi had been on much more agreeable terms with her than his father, what did it say about his emotional state that he only acknowledge *his* relation? "Since this was after Orochimaru escaped Konoha with Lord Hanzo, but after the Fourth – through Uzumaki – engaged Obito, we can only assume the deed belongs to one of the ROOT attackers escaped."

Or the same person who went after Shisui's mother, Shikaku thought but didn't say. "Thank you, Itachi."

Itachi nodded shallowly. "Was that all?"

"It was."

"Then with your leave I shall go see to my clan." Itachi turned, but stopped to look back over his shoulder. "Shisui bid me ask that you keep us specifically informed of any information regarding Lord Hanzo." The three tomoes in his red eye grew long and sharp until the sharingan looked like a pinwheel. "For my part, however, I will be equally satisfied by news on the whereabouts of his abductor. And the *traitor*."

*Shit.*

Shikaku waited until Itachi was out of the room, then reactivated the privacy barrier. "Inoichi, check me for tampering."

Inoichi turned grave, but did as asked. He found nothing untoward in his mind or memories, which was a greater relief than it should have been.

"Should Itachi be watched?" Inoichi asked.

"... No." Shikaku decided. Having the Uchiha put on suspicion based on one man's personal bias was what brought them to the current mess. "I don't actually suspect Itachi of anything, but with

what Shisui can do at a glance – which I’m going to keep classified beyond even your current clearance – I’m not taking chances. Especially now.”

“Very well.” Inoichi looked at the door and back. “What happened to the Uchiha is a disgrace, and what it did to that boy is worse. I don’t want to think how young Sasuke must be taking it.”

Or Shisui. “How’s Ino?”

“Scared and unable to sleep, but not traumatized, thankfully. She didn’t get a direct view of any blood or dead bodies before she was evacuated. How’s Shikamaru?”

“Ashamed he didn’t spot the man in the tree.”

“Not even the byakugan did.”

“I told him the same, and he said it didn’t matter because if a civilian could do it, he has no excuse.”

“He’s a civilian too, and a small child on top.”

“I told him that too, but he told me it didn’t matter because we’re Nara, so we’re supposed to see through stuff like this. When I pointed out I didn’t see through it either, he said he was closer so he should have noticed, because if the next generation doesn’t do at least as good as the last, he’s a failure.”

“... I’ll have another talk with Ino.”

“Bring her over when you do. I’ll ask Chouza to bring Chouji as well. Maybe if Shikamaru hears it from someone else enough times, he’ll believe me.”

Inoichi sighed. “At least we got off easy.”

Unlike half the other children and especially Hyuuga Hinata, who was skewered to death if not for Masanari taking the hit with his guts. She didn’t end up sprayed with blood at least, but Shikaku didn’t want to return to that world where they had to constantly settle for just the smallest mercies.

*All the clans may very well ramp up security back to where they were when they first joined the village, in their compounds.*

It had taken decades for the clans to finally trust that the others really *were* letting bygones be bygones in favor of a better and happier life. The village’s own defenses were supposed to shelter

that trust. Now, the Will of Fire itself had been exploited for what could have been *total* ruin, instead of the partial one of now. Were the shinobi of the Leaf going to return to that hypervigilance and mutual suspicion from the clan war days?

*Am I going to be the one to lead Konoha through the final death of Senju Hashirama's dream?*

Shikaku sent Inoichi back to comb the brains of the T&I prisoners while he summoned Ibiki for his own report. It could essentially be summarised as 'we can't get anything out of them so long as the seal on their tongue persists, and the only way to get it off is to rip out the whole tongue, defeating the purpose.'

"Any word on lord Jiraiya?" Ibiki asked when he was finished.

"None."

"Damn. By your leave then, I'll get back to work."

"Dismissed."

'Damn' was right. According to Lord Hiruzen's hokage-eyes-only records, he'd sent a recall order to Lord Jiraiya almost a week ago. However, to avoid tipping Danzo off, he'd told the Sannin to come in secret and not enter the village. Instead, Jiraiya was ordered to wait in Shukuba-Machi, the first of Konoha's supply stopways *outside* its immediate surveillance grid. It was located two hours out of Konoha at ninja speed. Shikaku supposed it was also the least likely of all available options to spook Dano – and ROOT – into turtling even if they did learn he was in the area.

Unfortunately, Lord Jiraiya was nowhere to be found, nor was there a sign he had been there in the past six months. Shikaku still had people looking.

The record didn't say if a hawk or nin had been dispatched with the order, which was frustrating because it could have dramatic implications on strategy. Either the order had been intercepted, or Lord Jiraiya himself had been. If the former, it meant traitors that may or may not have already been caught. If the latter, Shikaku could only *hope* Orochimaru was behind the delay. The alternative was that an outside power was involved from *not* among those they already knew, meaning that the Fourth Great Ninja War had already started.



Shikaku seriously considered executing Danzo just to see if the seals on the ROOT nin tongues disappeared with his death. The sealing division hadn't come back with a report on that yet.

For better or worse, that decision had to be put off while he met with the advisors Homura and Koharu – if only to tell them they were sidelined from decision-making until it was determined how Danzo-adjacent they'd been – and the next batch of Jonin. He was not looking forward to doing more of the same over the next few days, but that was his job now. On and off every time enough of them returned from outside the village. The sensei currently out on missions with genin teams weren't the *most* sensitive issue, but they were up there. Shikaku hoped they, at least, made it back before the usual suspects decided it was prime time for strategic asset denial.

Thank the Sage that they were between Chuunin exams, because he didn't even want to imagine the nightmare of saboteurs and hostages that would have invited.

Finally, Shikaku found himself alone behind the Hokage's desk.

*What's the most critical objective, and what's the next one?*

Get back the Hokage and prevent World War Three.

Shikaku spent the next while breaking both down into smaller segments. Smaller and smaller segments until he decided that he'd need a better response time than the Hokage Tower provided if he wanted to remain tactically relevant while considering strategy.

He returned to the barrier room to do his thinking in there instead, up on the mezzanine where he could see the barrier in miniature and reassure himself that, at least, was still whole and intact.

Finally, a plan took shape. If one of the Third's children were willing to sign their father's contract, they could at least make contact with the Apes of Mount Huaguo. Lord Enma would certainly attempt a reverse summoning. It shouldn't matter where the Third had been taken. Failure would indicate his death, in which case they could at least move on to succession, instead of being paralysed in such a critical state.

Lord Sarutobi's daughter was ANBU so she would follow orders, but she was also pregnant and barely had the chakra capacity for summoning Noble Beasts during her last assessment. It was why she had come up with pre-sealed stone golems as a substitute to begin with. Both the child and her life would be jeopardized, but she would do it if ordered. That was why she had joined the

ANBU despite her father's misgivings – she wanted to prove that she did have loyalty to her father, unlike her brother.

Said brother, however, definitely had the chakra. Asuma Sarutobi. The man was estranged from his father due to personal disagreements, which was why he went to serve as one of the Daimyo's Twelve Guardians instead of staying in the village. His position wouldn't have been granted if he weren't on par with their most elite jonin, unlike his sister who was still a chunin. He would set whatever differences he had with his family aside to save his father's life, surely?

It was while Shikaku was debating whether to wait until morning or not, to send word to the capital, that the barrier nin gave a start.

“Contact barrier, north-western sector!”

Shikaku twitched. The adrenaline was like a wash of ice down his spine. He jumped down. “Report!”

“It's strange – it felt like the barrier was prodded, somehow, but – there it is again! Contact third, fourth... fifth now-”

“It doesn't feel like anyone or anything is coming through,” the second of three barrier nin said. “None of the chakra interacting with the barrier is, at least.”

Shikaku blinked, then felt his hypervigilance teeter between spiking and thawing. It was a disconcerting feeling, but he recognized it. Could it be? “Do you have precise location?” He asked while he took out a scroll and brush. He had a hunch. “Is the contact mobile or stationary?”

“... We can detect no *presence*, exactly, if it's chakra interacting with the barrier, it is so well controlled that not a trace of it lingers within the barrier's footprint... but the intruding pressure seems to be reprising in the same spot, section S-13, exterior, base of the outer wall.”

Shikaku considered dispatching a capture team, but hesitated when he recognized the location. That stretch of wall was right behind where the Uzumaki Clan's mask storage temple was located. He knew this because it had come up in conversation with the Third as another potential meeting place between Hanzo and Lord Jirayia. With the general expectation that Masanari Hanzo would be confirmed part of Clan Uzumaki in the near future – if not its regent – and the well-known fact that he was growing giant toads *not* part of the Toad contract, there was a fairly widespread

expectation among the ranks that those two men would have to meet. As such, it had come up in both casual and professional discussions more than once. “Tell me precisely when the pulses happen.”

The ninja obeyed, and soon Shikaku was confident in his earlier assumption. “It’s Wabun Code. Continue relaying the pattern, be as precise as you can.”

They did as ordered, and soon Shikaku had the full message written down. He couldn’t believe his own brushstrokes. He felt a sudden onset of giddiness bubbling up in his chest from somewhere, entirely inappropriate in their current crisis.

*‘This is Masanari. Should I go through barrier, beneath, over, or use gate? Please advise.’*

Shikaku covered his mouth lest he break out in utterly inappropriate laughter. Then his moodlift abruptly took a nosedive again. If Masanari was going this far to be circumspect, did that mean he was alone? What happened to Hyuuga Hiashi? And Aburame Shibi? He’d sent them out specifically to retrieve him, at their own request too. Was it a mistake? Was it also a mistake to let them fill their own team vacancies on the way out? Had they brought down the mission? “... Can the barrier be manipulated from here?”

Also, since when could Masanari see it, never mind poke it? Nobody should be able to do that.

“Manipulated how?”

“Can you pulse it in a desired pattern?”

The three ninja exchanged looks. “The barrier’s power is stabilized from remote anchors, precisely so taking out one – or our team itself – does not disrupt it. But...”

“Two of us should be able to send a shutdown command while the third vetoes it. The feedback will not be pleasant for us if done for an extended period, but past stress-testing indicates that a minute or two should be safe enough. There will be a momentary dimming effect each time this is done.”

Shikaku quickly jotted down his own Wabun code. “Pulse the barrier precisely when I tell you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Begin on my mark.”

They began and the message went out.

*'Lockdown in effect. No perimeter breaches. Meet at southern gate. Shikaku out.'*

Wabun code was standard knowledge across shinobi forces, so there was no way the barrier nin didn't know exactly what had been said in that back-and-forth. Alas, it couldn't be helped.

They waited for a reply, and sure enough it came.

*'Understood. Am due debrief anyway.'*

Well.

At least *someone* was being helpful today.

It was in theme too, at this point. The Uzumaki had always been the problem child of shinobi clans. It was always just a matter of time before they next drew attention from the most troublesome places.

More importantly, the barrier was supposed to be invisible, and in fact everyone who awakened the byakugan or sharingan was ordered to try and see it every time their bloodline advanced. So far, nobody had in all of Konoha's history. If Masanari could somehow see it now, could anyone else? And if so, how big a vulnerability was it?

"Obviously, what occurred here just now is need to know," Shikaku ordered as he returned his writing supplies to his pouches. "Let me be clear: other than the three of you and myself, no one needs to know. Not your replacements, not the hokage's former advisors, not the Daimyo, not anyone save the Hokage, whether the Third or the next one."

"Understood." The three hesitated. "Good luck, sir."

Shikaku accepted the goodwill in the spirit it was given before leaving with all speed.

Hanzo's bizarre approach to contact probably meant he had escaped and made his way back to Konoha alone.

Hopefully that didn't also mean that the Hyuuga and Aburame clans had also lost their clan heads today.