

Chapter 21: The Golden Age Bequest

“- Namikaze Minato, Fourth Hokage of the Village Hidden in the Leaves .-“

“-bring my old kunai out of storage and put them next to the sealing supplies. Tell me immediately we get word back from the Capital, also the border reports will be a priority until further notice, but change nothing of patrol routes or what else for now, we’re going to pretend business as usual for as long as we can. I do want outgoing nin to take my kunai with them, make it two for each team, one to keep and one to plant along their route, they can use their best judgment. Just make sure at least twelve are left for my own use. Do we have any of Lord Jiraiya’s blood in storage? Good, what about Lady Tsunade? She destroyed it before leaving, damn. Then-“

“Not necessarily, Lord Fourth,” interrupted Morino Ibiki, one of very few ninja not knocked *entirely* senseless by his miraculous return from the dead. “While she did destroy all the samples she – and we – knew of, the possibility of Danzo having some squirreled away should not be ignored. With permission, I will defer on interrogating the captured ROOT nin to resume search of the base.”

Kami bless Hiruzen for managing to stop the self-destruct. “Granted. Hound, assign him the ANBU most fit for the job, I’m counting on you both.”

“Yes, sir!” Ibiki shunshined away with the masked nin as soon as Hound wordlessly summoned them into the room.

“Shikaku, where did Sarutobi keep his files?”

“I can report the contents of the ones here, however there were some at his home I could not unseal.”

“Collect the ones here and meet me there. Yamanaka, relay the rest of my orders. Hound, with me.” Minato grabbed the ANBU-in-chief and teleported away. The Kyuubi had destroyed much of the village, and even more of his seal anchors had been lost with demolitions and renovations, but not all of them. “Take off your mask,” he said on appearing in front of the Sarutobi Clan front gate. When the man obeyed, he grabbed him by both shoulders. “Kakashi. I know my revival is a

lot to process and we need to talk at length, but there's no time right now. I need to know I can count on you."

"Of-of course sensei – sir!" Were the first words Kakashi had said since he laid eyes on him.

"I'll have need of you soon, your eye will be the key to retrieving the Third, Obito has the kaleidoscope sharingan which means you do as well. Clear out Training Ground 22." A cross-seal initiated the kage bunshin technique. "My clone will take you but has its own tasks. I want *you* to practice with your eye to see if you manage to activate the advanced stage. I've already sent Itachi on ahead, he will help you. If you can't do it, don't worry, just do your best."

"U-Understood."

"Go."

Kakashi gave him one last intense look before his clone flashed him away.

Minato refreshed the chakra keeping his sleeping son from falling off his back and entered the Sarutobi clan compound. Naruto didn't stir, though his half of Kurama did. A sharp contrast to his own, Minato's half of Kurama was wholly silent. He'd thought they had the beginning of a possible accord, but the fox had completely closed itself off since his release from the shinigami's stomach. Unfortunate, but he had more urgent things to worry about.

He paid his respects to Lord Third's daughter, powered through her wide-eyed wonder at his return, accepted her offer to mind Naruto while he worked – always within his line of sight – and wasted no time going through the Third's paperwork, both professional and personal. He and his clones were examining and matching individual pages with each other when Shikaku arrived with the ones from headquarters.

"I already applied all the codes passed down to the Jonin Commander, Lord Fourth," Shikaku said cautiously. "By the Third and you both."

"Yes, but he might not have shared all of them. Jiraiya-sensei came up with certain characters and words that might let one in the know pick out additional details by skipping lines and pages – like this."

Minato laid out the pages that stood out to him from both stacks and began to circle specific characters with a pencil. Some messages were obsolete, others had to do with other missions – those he memorised – and finally he found what he was looking for.

“‘White needles stuck deep in the third’s bad attitude’ except ‘third’ is not written in Sarutobi’s usual choice of characters, or even the cursive we use here in Fire. It seems Jiraiya-sensei has been on a deep cover info gathering mission in the Land of Water, which could mean the message simply didn’t find him yet-“ a clone’s clone suddenly popped, “-or that he’s dead or in the middle of mortal combat this very moment! Shikaku, gather me his blood and signal me through the kunai when you have it!”

“It will be done!”

The Hiraishin took Minato to the all-new secret room in the Hokage Mountain where Masanari Hanzo was hidden. He dropped Naruto on the spare bed there and was out and away before his son had time to wake up in a panic. He’d be fine, even with Hanzo incapacitated Shisui and Enma were both there, and though he might not know it, the dragon was with Naruto too, shapeshifted into the top button of his shirt.

“Gamabunta!”

“Minato-boy?!” The colossal form of the Boss Toad moaned deliriously where Minato’s clone had summoned him, bloody and battered black and blue. “I can’sh belief it, never ‘ad thish hallush’nashun b’fore, thiss stuff is fire!”

“Bunta, what happened to you?!”

“Whaddaya thunk’it, blasted Jiraiya-boy, keep tellin’ th’old farts ‘e’s suicidal since you’se died but they dunna listen none!”

He was addled with painkillers, damn! “Who is he fighting?!” And what could Jirayia be facing that Bunta would cross over in full, if he’d just made a clone as normal none of the wounds would have transferred and-

“Whoya thunk it, ain’t just anybodeh that can slap ol’ Bunta ‘round in ‘is natural ‘habits, bastard ain’t even got th’ parss fer a fair figh’, jus’ spikes an’ – prongs ‘n’ crest prickles!”

That – what – Jiraiya was fighting the *Sanbi*? “Dismiss summons. Shinobi!” He barked through the dispersing smoke of Buntas disappearance. “To me!”

Kakashi and Itachi appeared in front of him. “New orders?”

“Kakashi, get me Tenzo. Itachi, grab on.” He hiraishined away the moment they obeyed, left Itachi in the Uchiha district, flashed to Shikaku to get Jiraiya’s blood, flashed to Ibiki hoping he’d found some of Tsunade’s – he hadn’t, and they’d raided all the likely rooms – then jumped to Hanzo’s sickroom again. “Shisui, with me.”

Shisui obeyed, despite the conflict with his prior orders, and Minato dropped him in the Uchiha compound with Itachi. “I need you both geared for an S-rank assault mission, extreme water jutsu expected, be ready to match against hostile sharingan genjutsu. You have five minutes.”

“Yes sir.” “Understood.”

Minato jumped eight more times, visiting all his secret hideouts that were still serviceable and stashed with old supplies, including his old incognito ANBU disguise, before he was back in the training ground.

“Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!” With all the other clones running around the village and beyond, Minato had more than exceeded the total number he’d been willing to risk before his death, but he still felt no strain. “You, make a blood jutsu-shiki. You, try the blood summoning again.”

He had four more minutes until he had to retrieve his Uchiha ninja.

Minato sat down cross-legged, closed his eyes, and reached for the power of nature. He’d barely begun to dabble in sage mode before his death, but now it came so much easier and faster that he both could and couldn’t believe he’d left it by the wayside before. Already he could sense the whole village and well beyond it, such was the absurd power of the First Hokage.

Masanari Hanzo had taken *many* liberties with his DNA sample when he built him this body, sparing no expense to himself. Ceramic carbide ossification, cell walls reinforced with carbon nanotubes, the ability to switch between the best eyesights in the animal kingdom, the hearing acuity of a great wax moth, the jewel beetle's ability to sense fire, the cat's ability to sense motion and air currents through hair filaments, even predict the weather based on static, redundant nervous system, redundant circulatory system, greater stature to accommodate them, and a bigger thoracic

cavity to allow bigger lungs, which in turn sustained higher blood oxygenation levels necessary for increased physical and cognitive function, optimized axon and synapse action potentials, many, many things besides....

All of it *somehow* optimised to work together as well or better than Minato's old body, and at the same time on less biomass and energy than before, so that he *could* function at normal or below human capacity if required. Because while the 'anami cell souls' had proven intrinsically tied to Hanzo's existence, and Minato would not be able to cultivate his own from blanks – because he needed to keep his chakra system or risk ground zero Kurama detonation – Minato was 'forced' to 'resign himself' to 'merely' 'settle' for Hashirama cells.

His clone trying to summon Jiraiya burst from chakra overuse, despite having many times as much as Minato's total before his death. Deeper in Konoha, Kakashi retrieved Tenzo and the two turned towards his location. In the Uchiha compound, Shisui and Itachi had reconvened.

Minato flashed to the last two and brought them back with him, just as his clone finished writing the Hiraishin formula in Jiraiya's blood. "Wait here." Minato put on his black cloak and Seagull ANBU mask, created a sage mode clone, sat back down and tuned back into nature's aura. "Clone," he said entirely for the listeners' sake. "Scouting mission, prioritise battlefield intelligence over rescue, execute."

His shadow clone flickered onto the large seal scroll it had spent the last while writing, activated the array and was instantly transported far and away. When new memories didn't immediately come, even from a clone of a clone created only for that purpose, Minato knew the distance was well beyond the maximum range of Shadow Clone memory transfer. Even so, he continued to wait.

Masanari Hanzo was wrong about a lot of things – the value of shinobi, moral and not, the importance of people versus importance *placed* on people, on ninja, on him, the importance he placed on them or himself compared to everyone else, his enemies, allies, friends, Konoha, the whole world.

He was wrong to resume his de-escalation attempts as well, after winning his first battle. Hanzo *could* have neutralized the enemy, Obito could only stay intangible for approximately five minutes and could not use Kamui for teleportation at the same time. In the brief moment between when he

solidified and when he teleported, Obito was vulnerable. Had Hanzo looped his chains through all his intangible body parts a few more times, had he used a different layout for the adamantine chains, if he'd trusted in offense *just* a little bit more than containment, the end would have been very different.

Unfortunately, Masanari Hanzo did not think enough like a ninja. His attempt at reverse psychology failed him, his hope that Obito would rethink his life betrayed him, Obito just ate the damage with his plant side and made a very brief tactical retreat instead. Minato didn't hold it against him, not when he would have tried to reason with his student as well, not when he wanted to do so even now, but it was still a mistake.

Most important to here and now, Hanzo didn't understand ninjutsu as well as he thought. He was completely wrong about there being a 'keep adding chakra until it works' space-time jutsu in the forbidden scroll. Or anywhere else. After a certain range, not even the best sensors could feel where their chakra went, and they certainly couldn't control it. The failure of Minato's clone to reach – or retrieve – Jiraiya that way wasn't his first failure. It was failure 106 of 106 attempts in the last half hour and counting, each done with a different person under different circumstances by his shadow clones scattering all over Fire Country and beyond.

Whatever power Hanzo had stumbled upon that let him teleport to people, it was either a property of his special chakra, or whatever epiphany he'd achieved while dead.

Fortunately, the underlying principle of Hanzo's technique wasn't itself incorrect. In fact, blood had been an essential component in the *precursor* to Minato's final version of the Hiraishin. Which his ANBU clone had just used. Minato shouldn't need it, he'd tagged everyone important with his jutsu-shiki while alive. But for reasons he didn't have time to speculate on, both Jiraiya and Tsunade had somehow removed it.

He'd tried to reach Obito's too, to even less luck. He had a clone constantly trying just that, to no response. Either he'd also removed it, or he wasn't in this dimension. If not both.

The ANBU clone's memories finally reached him then, because his own theory that shadow clone memory transfer might be able to piggyback sage awareness was apparently correct.

The clone had been destroyed almost immediately. By water pressure.

Minato opened his eyes and created a new clone. “Stand in for me.” He then flickered to stand on top of the large scroll himself. “Itachi, Shisui, stand by.”

Time distended around him, no differently than during the Hyuuga’s highest-level Eight Trigrams space-time taijutsu. This was the first and most crucial element of the Flying Thunder God space-time technique. The second was the ability to zero in on his target, which ideally was the jutsu formula already in place at the other end.

His clone had used Jiraiya’s blood, and died. But it had also taken along one of his three-pronged kunai.

Minato appeared on the other side with a second kunai already wreathed in wind.

Sage Art: Harbour Master’s Magnificent Ocean Tides Shearing Wind Slicing Sea Subdivider

The sea split.

The water parted violently, the miles-long trench reached all the way to the shore of Water Country’s capital island, twice over on either sides of the Three-Tailed Giant Turtle that reeled back from a slice on its armored nose. Back and away from the now slashed ball of earth on the ocean floor.

Minato flickered down, punched through the earth shell, ignored Ma and Pa’s genjutsu croaks thanks to newly superior biology, dodged the reflexive backhand of a battered and tired Jiraiya trying to enter sage mode – again – and teleported everyone back to Konoha just as the waters rushed back in.

Jiraiya was discovered, Fourth Mizukage managed to intercept his escape, with considerable help given the bodies floating in the distance and auras on the shore, battle has been going on for some time, Obito responsible? Most likely, coincidence is too convenient.

Minato released the three and flickered away from the flailing bodies to his backup. “Itachi, Shisui, ninshu update now!” Unlike with Hanzo, Itachi had no reservations about opening up to him. “Brace yourselves, we’re jumping in.”

“Ready.” “Roger!”

This time, Hiraishin deposited them in free fall far above the sea, because Minato had let his sea-splitting knife fly free straight up. “Brace!” He threw Itachi up, boosted Shisui the same way with a kick, then kicked off the air with wind manipulation straight for the Three-Tails.

Primary mission already complete, Minato thought grimly. But I can afford a minute to ruin this one scheme.

He landed not on the turtle shell but on water, a thick, dense, rapid-moving layer that prevented direct contact, and was too charged with tailed beast chakra to let him water walk. This defence was why he judged the Three-Tails one of the worst matchups to his skills among the nine, after the Six-Tails’ corrosive sweat and the Four-Tails’ lava secretions. Unfortunately for the creature, he had wind chakra nature and the ability to turn his kicks and punches into hurricanes even without it.

The Sanbi’s water defense blasted apart under the second stage of Rasengan shape transformation, allowing him to latch onto its shell.

Sealing Art: Master Rule Impose Demon Sealing Pact Unmaking Mutuality

The seal Minato used on Obito on that night wouldn’t necessarily work here, since the Sanbi wasn’t a *summoned* beast, but Minato had long since developed other solutions for scenarios like this.

The script spread across the Sanbi’s form. It was temporary, seals could interfere with each other catastrophically, especially when one of them contained a weapon of mass destruction, but even a moment was enough. The Three-Tailed Giant Turtle flinched as self-awareness returned. It sagged. It squirmed in panic so frantically that Minato was almost thrown loose even as a sage.

But he’d had ample reprieve to prepare, even for an ability he had almost no training in.

The adamantine sealing chains erupted from Minato’s back, far and wide, curled around the Sanbi’s tails, its limbs, trapped it, tied it up until it couldn’t swim. It spat a jet of water, but he was beneath it and out of the way. Shape manipulation curved the water blast to hit him anyway, but lost too much of the force to knock him loose thanks to sage toughness. The beast shook, writhed, roared in distress. Finally, it exhaled all air and tried to use its water manipulation to sink under the surface of the sea.

It failed. The chains could become rigid at need, like poles, even support beams fixed in place.

Itachi landed first, on the lower front edge of the gigantic monster's inner shell. He managed to latch on with his feet before it could refresh its watery defense. By the time it finally tried, Minato had figured out how to use the chains to suppress its powers. Itachi managed to meet the Sanbi's eyes with his Mangekyou Sharingan, and the creature froze.

“Tsukuyomi.”

Young Itachi's report on this technique was even more frightful than what Hanzo had conveyed to Minato during his revival, but Itachi didn't use it that way because he was a good ninja who followed orders. Minato had told him to choose duration over function, he didn't want the Three-Tails catatonic and traumatised into hating mankind forever, he wanted to give it time enough to calm down. And explanations.

When Itachi released it from his technique, Isobu looked around in disbelief, then realisation, then a relief so powerful Minato could practically taste it, before its form lost cohesion and drew inwards in a rush of salt water and foam.

Karatachi Yagura had barely enough time to vainly struggle against Minato's contracting chains, when Shisui appeared in front of him on the waves and captured his attention with *his* sharingan.

“Hitorigami!”

Kotoamatsukami was not a technique Shisui could use often, certainly not the next day. Fortunately, the permanent long-term memory alteration was merely the apex power of *one* eye. Also, both it and the repeatable short-term memory version could be adapted towards the inverse application.

“Genjutsu undone,” Shisui grunted, voice raw as his eye bled red through his fingers. “I've got him reliving his life, without the impaired judgment from Obito's constant manipulations.”

Minato caught the now unconscious Fourth Mizukage, flickered to shore to leave him somewhere he wouldn't drown, then teleported himself and the others back home before what remained of the local backup could react.

Much as he'd love to capitalize on this foreign policy victory, Konoha's domestic affairs took priority.

“-. .-“

He caught up with Jiraiya as best he could, but he couldn't justify more personal time than strictly necessary while the crisis continued. He left a clone to bring his old teacher up to speed, and two more to oversee Kakashi's practice and learn wood release from Tenzo, while Minato finalized preparations for the true mission.

He found that Naruto hadn't woken up when he returned to Hanzo's sickroom, so he just dropped Shisui off, checked that the room's air was as good and charged with the strongest energies as Enma said he'd keep it – the room had no doors or windows – then teleported to the unremarkable patch of forest a hundred meters above, where Hyuuga Hiashi had interpreted 'station your best sentry' as being there himself.

“Any changes?”

“None, Lord Fourth,” said the Hyuuga Clan head. “He hasn't even twitched. His protection field is alive and active, but that is pure inference based on Uchiha Shisui's periodic handsign reports. If Masanari does have your area denial technique active even while comatose, I cannot say. The byakugan is as blind to his powers as ever.”

Minato would have left it at that, but he wasn't one to overlook the inner conflict of his shinobi.

“And what of your own concerns?”

“... It will sound callous, but I am... not glad but relieved. Not that he is unwell, but rather to see that he does have a limit.” Hiashi grimaced. “Perhaps it is cowardly of me, but I should not like to imagine a world where anyone can achieve such things as he has without repercussions. Even our closest allies.”

To bring Minato back *without* a living sacrifice, Hanzo had needed to build a new body wholesale. Which needed him to activate all his mental and physical resources, essentially doing what he said he needed to never do again for at least two years. His Yin had been ripping and tearing even *before* the Uzumaki-bound Shinigami tried to slay him. The only reason the medics and Yamanaka nin hadn't judged him beyond saving was because they couldn't take accurate brain readings.

Minato was glad he remembered everything his clone inside Naruto's seal did, because all *his* interactions with Masanari Hanzo boiled down to the man wheezing "Fix This!" before he closed his eyes and didn't open them again.

Granted, it hadn't been that long, but Minato was sure this wasn't going to be any mere nap.

On a whim, he teleported to the tri-kunai one of his clones had left near the site of Hanzo's battle with Orochimaru. The Fourth Hokage had to take a few moments just to stare at the massive structure. Not only was it the largest wooden statue ever created since Senju Hashirama, but it might also be a full transcription of reality's code as rendered in hand seals. Minato was torn between petitioning the Daimyo to turn it into a national monument, and destroying it right now to deny others the possible knowledge.

Also to prevent the rumors about the First's return from spiralling even more out of control.

He flickered to the upturned palms where Hiashi had reported the vision. A big purple man and a golden multi-armed demon. A stark contrast from the normal looking men Minato had glimpsed in Hanzo's brief and hasty ninshu info dump, before he fell into his coma.

Minato teleported to his hideout, the last one he'd used before his death, where Kushina had last been and which had never been discovered by any allies or enemies. He gave himself a few moments to take in their wedding picture. Then he took off his ANBU disguise, regretfully left aside his old clothes that no longer fit, and pulled on his flaming coat that still did.

From today on, the Fourth Hokage lived again.

He picked up the large scroll with Hanzo's 'special delivery' for Hiruzen, which Minato *could* bypass the security on and snoop though. Once again, he decided against it for now. Perhaps it would prove a mistake, but the man had prepared it months ago and only told Shisui about it 'in case anything happened to him.' The odds of it carrying any actionable information were small enough that Minato was willing to allow himself a little sentimentality.

"Mokuton Bunshin no Jutsu."

Wood clones weren't the simplest technique, but Minato had certain advantages that Tenzo lacked. His shadow clone had successfully comprehended it almost five minutes ago, even if it couldn't be cast without base cells.

It took several minutes and two dozen failures, but eventually a wood clone grew out of his side, holding an identical copy of the scroll. Minato hung the large copy behind his back and flashed to Shikaku to hand him the original just in case, because he was serious about allowing himself only a *little* sentimentality.

By now he'd decided on a course of action, so he teleported back to Hanzo's saferoom, intending to pick up Shisui and Enma for deployment.

His plan had to be put on hold, though, because Naruto was awake now.

Minato did his best to hold and comfort his son, now that he was finally beginning to realize that his father's return wasn't without cost. As grateful as Minato was for Hanzo's care of Naruto, he was also conflicted about how blunt the man always was, and especially had been in the talk that preceded it. On the one hand, if Hanzo hadn't explained to Naruto just why the villagers really shunned him, Minato might not have figured it out either, yet, and he'd hate Konoha a little himself too. It was beneath his intelligence, but Minato never claimed to be entirely rational where his family was concerned.

On the other hand, when Hanzo asked Naruto to choose between having a dad and *everything* he'd had before, he was completely honest about that too. He was saying that the two were mutually exclusive, and he had meant it literally. Naruto was beginning to realize that now, and he wasn't taking it well at all.

Then it dawned on Naruto that he'd practically forgotten all about his 'uncle' in the excitement of having his dad back, which overcame his resolve not to be a crybaby anymore.

"Why?" Naruto finally blubbered when he exhausted his latest 'this is just the worst' ramble. "Why isn't he getting better?"

Minato wanted to point out it hadn't been all that long, but he didn't want to lie to Naruto either. He couldn't afford to do a worse job than a literal stranger, not if he wanted to call himself a father. "Consciousness – it takes a lot of energy, Naruto. That's why the older you get, the slower you get. You walk slower, think slower, start to lose track of time, can't pay attention as well, you feel like time moves too fast or too slow, you can even start to fall asleep at odd times. What Hanzo

did – it basically sped that up a lot for him. He needs a lot of rest now.” And he might not be the same when he wakes up-

“But how *much*? It’s still too early for a good night’s sleep, and it’s been *hours*! You either sleep less than forty minutes or more than eight hours to be healthy and strong, uncle says so! Except that eight hours is, like, just two for him, and it’s already been longer than that! And he doesn’t move, he doesn’t turn, he almost doesn’t breathe, he doesn’t even scowl when I poke him in the nose, he’s dying!”

“Not reacting to all these loud noises either,” Minato dryly said to immediate regret, dammit, Kushina would have been so much better at this! “Well – I mean-“

“I knew it, he’s dying! He’s dying, he’s dying, he’s dying, there’s gotta be stuff you can do!”

“He’s not-“

“But he is!”

“Naruto-“

“He is, don’t lie to me, I can tell!”

It took longer to calm Naruto down than it had taken to re-invent the Hiraishin, find Jiariya, and fight the Fourth Mizukage combined, including all of the aftermath.

Finally, *finally*, Naruto settled into softer sniffles, which allowed Minato to put him back to sleep with a subtle nerve pinch. Hopefully his son would think he cried himself to sleep again, or if he didn’t he’d not hold it against him too much.

“Shisui,” Minato murmured as he tucked Naruto back in his own bed. “I’ll be needing you again for a while, despite Shikaku’s prior assignment.”

“I’m at your disposal, Lord Hokage.”

“Lord Enma,” Minato turned to where the Monkey King had neither stirred nor twitched out of his meditation the whole time. “I would have your help as well.”

The Monkey king opened one golden eye. “All risks are, of course, yours to weigh.”

“They have been,” Minato said and he held out his arm.

Enma rose and took it. Shisui did the same right after.

He flashed them back to training ground 22, brought Hiashi as well after having him assign a replacement for himself, dropped off ANBU to stand guard over Hanzo in Shisui's stead, checked that Jiraiya, Shikaku, Tenzo, Itachi and Kakashi were also all present, raised a sound-trapping barrier around everyone gathered, and laid out his plan.

It wasn't the plan he wanted. He had Jiraiya, but they didn't have any more actionable intelligence than they started with. They didn't have Tsunade, who was the only medic whose ability Minato felt confident enough in to also treat as a combatant. His vague hope that his clones might have found her through sage awareness during their dispersal through Fire Country hadn't paid off, not in the time he was willing to wait.

He'd had to bring in Doctor Hirano to do the eye transplants he would have had Tsunade do as well.

Against all hopes, Kakashi had neither the chakra nor the intuitive Uchiha understanding for how to use his sharingan eye. It was extremely fortunate that Hanzo had pre-empted the massacre of the Uchiha bloodline, because otherwise Minato wouldn't have the logical alternative on hand.

"I am done, Lord Fourth," Doctor Hirano said with remarkable aplomb, considering she'd only just found out Minato was back among the living. "Both transplants were a success."

"Report."

"No differences that I can feel," Kakashi grunted, robbing beneath his eye. "Shisui?"

"I have it," said the shinobi with the longest experience wielding a Mangekyou Sharingan, eyes closed in concentration. "It's a taxing jutsu, but most of it goes into the gravitational pull and keeping the portal open. Even then, it's less strain than my Kotoamatsukami. With your permission, Lord Fourth, I can still add my other skills to the mission."

"Denied, I need you here to open the door back out, or send backup if we go missing as well, Shikaku has the lead in my absence as normal. How many times do you think you can do this, and how long to recharge?"

“No cooldown for the ability, it’s all down to chakra capacity. After recent expenditures, I can use it once now and will have to wait until tomorrow. After that, three uses per twelve hours, provided I don’t do anything else, my chakra capacity has never been the highest I’m afraid, Commander Hatake still has me more than beat there. A soldier pill regimen will allow double that though.”

“That will be up to Commander Nara.”

“Understood.”

“Alright. Jiraiya-sensei, take Lord Enma, Hiashi, Tenzo and my wood clone with you. With my Hiraishin, you should be able to get to your destination in one, ideally no more than two hours despite the long distance. Please hurry, we-“

“Just wait a fucking minute!”

Everything came to a stop at Jiraiya’s outburst.

“Stop. Just stop, I – you can’t just – I can’t – you can’t expect me to just-“ Jiraiya-sensei couldn’t find words for what he wanted to say. He made several more false starts, covered his face with a hand in a vain attempt to stem his tears, then stumbled forward with stained cheeks and hugged Minato like he couldn’t believe he was real.

Minato... Minato decided to allow himself this small bit of extra sentimentality, if only because he knew other people needed it more than him. Jiraiya-sensei needed it more than him. He couldn’t ignore that, even now, here. Not if he expected anyone to return the favour when it was about Naruto or Kushina. Even if it made him slow and prone to hesitate if he dared let his own feelings loose.

Finally, Jiraiya-sensei managed to draw away, but he didn’t seem willing or even capable of completely letting go. Or do anything else. Anything at all.

“... Jiraiya-sensei,” Minato held out a fist. “Do you think you can be completely open with me for a moment?”

The other man didn’t understand, but he sniffled wetly and bumped fists.

The many changes that came over his face were breathtaking. Like only Shisui and Itachi had managed with Minato till then, Jiraiya, too, proved capable of being completely open with him.

Unlike Shikaku, whose recent experience with Hanzo had left him subconsciously unwilling to open himself that way again. In this, at least, the universe decided to be kind to Minato without more attached strings.

Finally, Jiraiya smiled wetly and pulled away. “I-we’ll have a long talk about this – about everything!”

“When this is over.”

The older man wiped his tears. “Then let’s finish this fast.”

Despite himself, Jiraiya-sensei was able to take lead on the mission Minato gave him, and left Konoha with his team full speed.

“Itachi, Kakashi and Doctor Hirano, you have one hour to be kitted out for an S-Rank extraction mission, with heavy assault as secondary objectives. Doctor, you will be avoiding combat if at all possible and will have my wood clone for protection. Any questions?”

All answers were negative.

“Make sure everything on these lists is included. Go.”

They went. Minato returned Shisui to Hanzo’s room for the duration, and spent the hour practicing his wood release techniques. In between, he coordinated with Shikaku and the shinobi that didn’t take Minato’s revival at his word, while his clones refreshed his other jutsu.

Finally, it was time.

“I trust you’re all equipped and kitted as discussed?”

“Indeed.” “Sir.” “Yes, Lord Fourth.”

“Shikaku, I leave things here to you.”

“Understood, Lord Hokage.”

“Shisui, now.”

Uchiha Shisui opened and activated his new eye, shaped into the figure of a windmill.

A dark, fathomless portal burst into being in the middle of the clearing, an empty colourless hole in space.

“Be quick,” Shisui grunted. “It’s taking all I have to keep it from sucking everything in at this size.”

“Let’s go!”

In a single bound, Minato and his team were on the other side.

The portal closed behind them, leaving them alone with nothing but silence and stillness to surround them. No one and nothing was in sight. Not the slightest shape of a person, not a creature or plant, not the faintest breeze, not even a sound. Just an innumerable amount of randomly arranged and differently sized rectangular prisms, amongst a dark and seemingly endless void.

“I was afraid of this,” Minato murmured. Since Hiruzen had been taken so close to Konoha, he’d hoped he’d still be within easily reaching distance, but that no longer seemed to be the case. Minato hoped this was just a quirk of the place, instead of the other possibility which was that Obito had reality warping powers here, or something similarly ludicrous.

He mentally searched for the jutsu-shiki on Obito, but felt an odd interference he never experience before, or perhaps a gap – like a connection that *should* exist... didn’t? Couldn’t? Yet, or at the moment? Or perhaps it was more related to space than time, like it only formed half-way, or only half of it was on this side, Minato had no frame of reference for the feeling. This was nowhere within expectations.

Checking his compass, he found the needle spinning aimlessly. This *was* within expectations, they weren’t within Earth’s magnetic field anymore.

But for Obito’s ability to function as intuitively as it did, Kamui’s dimension had to have at least directional consistency with the outside world.

Based on their vector of insertion, North-North-Northeast would be...

That way. “Kage Bunshin no Jutsu.” Four identical solid clones appeared around him and dashed in all four directions in a square. “Stay alert and on guard, manji formation.” The Fourth Hokage

sat down and reached for the power of nature, or whatever the equivalent was in this place. “Seems this will take a bit more work than I had hoped.”

As he had feared, he’d taken too long to get here.

It was on the fifth generation of sage clones that he finally caught something at the edge of his range.

Time elapsed from the start of his second life: 2 hours and 42 minutes.

Terrible time-to-objective, he needed serious retraining.

