

## Chapter 23: The Boustrophedonic Precipitate

“- September 12, 8 ANB .-“

I woke up in an unfamiliar bed, in an unfamiliar room, to the sound of an unfamiliar voice chattering like a gatling cannon right next to my bed.

“-he just can't understand how lucky he is that I didn't – why I oughta – And that's not even the worst part! Because of that whole stupid-head talk, I had a dream about running over the Kojiki Scrolls all over the village, nine years gone so low as half price – it was so dull too, the Nihon Shoki I mean – and somehow I still paid everything I had, it was a sale! I bought twelve percent under half price – they cost forty one yen each Kiki – all for twenty thousand and I put them into twenty-one cases for the Water Islands and sent a hawk – a hawk! Across the sea! It's insane, even my dreams weren't so crazy before I met him, you won't mind if I give him a concussion, will you? The kyuubi will just heal it! Not that you could tell if he gets brain damage – AH!”

The little girl with rose eyes and even redder hair gasped loudly on finally realising I'd sat up in bed.

I took in her appearance, and the DNA data from shed hair and skin cells all over the place. “Who are you?”

“Uzumaki-sama!” The girl squealed and jumped off her chair to gush rhapsodically. “Such an honour, I'm so excited to meet you, I can't even – welcome back to the land of the waking! Can I get you anything, food, drink – oh, water! Here's some water, and anything you want just say the word and it will be done!”

I blinked and accepted the glass of water, which I drank in one long gulp. Then I drank another one while waiting for her to answer my question. It was all quite futile. “So?”

“Yes?” The eight-year-old girl asked eagerly.

*Well isn't that just cavity-worthy.*

I decided not to react to her starry-eyed hands-clasped-under-her-chin most-devoted-of-all-fangirls pose. “You still haven’t given me your name.”

“Oh kami, you’re right!” In a flash, the little girl straightened and coughed into her fist before bowing in a much more pretend-I-didn’t-just-do-that fashion. “Of course, Lord Uzumaki! My name is Uzumaki Karin, junior nurse in training, at your service Lord Elder! I *knew* you’d wake up one day, our crimson hair is a mark of resilience, a symbol of the indomitable spirit of our clan! The whirlpool of fate may toss us, but we Uzumaki always rise to the surface!”

I diverted all my sanest reactions to secondary and tertiary mind threads while discreetly looking around for a panic button. Where did she memorize that from? Why? I suppose the Uzumaki must have had some philosophical traditions...

I knew things had gone sideways since I clocked out, you don’t loiter in the afterlife without *someone* visiting that died more recently than you, but even so... “Shouldn’t you be in Kusagakure?”

“Oh that’s old news, we moved here almost two years ago! Mom doesn’t talk to me about it, but I’m pretty sure Lord Fourth did something to spook the Kusakage into trading us off, we’re hardly the only Uzumaki the Death Slayer collected you know! You do know, right? You’re the one who told him about us, and the others, you must be! I asked Naruto and he went all shifty, he’s a terrible liar you know!”

*Not even three minutes and I already want my comfort dragon.* I looked down and found that my generic sickroom robe had an unusual attachment in the form of a white tie that shimmered slightly blue if you turn it the right angle in the light. *Ah, good. Yemo wasn’t lying when he started spending all his sleeping time on the other side with me, he really didn’t get himself killed.* I hadn’t really doubted him, but it was nice to get this last bit of confirmation that I didn’t abandon my newborn kid for the first two whole years of his life. We’d just – swapped spending his awake time together for the sleeping hours.

Even if he did all the work. If I still had him as a reason to worry about on this side, I’d have come back sooner.

Probably.

“Lord Uzumaki!” An older feminine voice preceded the appearance of a medic nin in her thirties, also a redhead and clearly related to the girl. “It’s a miracle!”

“Yes,” I said dryly at the sight of a woman who’d once been fated to die in prolonged, inhumane exploitation hundreds of miles away. Her sleeves were folded back but her arms had only the most faded bite marks. “A miracle indeed.”

The woman didn’t blush, but only because she used medical chakra on herself to control her reaction, I sensed it clearly.

My wife was laughing on the other side, I didn’t need to hear it to know it anymore. I ignored her. I was already here against my real wishes, I needed to find amusement on this side wherever I could. “I assume this place has a restroom, Miss...?”

“Oh pardon me, my name is Uzumaki Akari and I will be your doctor today. As for a restroom, certainly My Lord, I will show you. My daughter will get you some clothes ready in the meantime, won’t you Karin?”

“Okay mom!”

“Let me help you, sir, your muscle tone was preserved remarkably well but after so long abed you’ve surely... or perhaps not.”

I’d already tossed my sheets aside and stood up next to the bed. The hospital robe was the sort with an open back, unfortunately, but I couldn’t begrudge that. Even though I’d not, in fact, excreted anything because my biology doesn’t waste much of anything anymore.

I still changed it to a full-back one. Transmutation wasn’t the hardest application of charged particle manipulation, but it did require some solid multitasking. I wasn’t... *all* here yet, not even mostly here yet. I hadn’t even decided if I’d stay, I really didn’t want to after...

But I may as well test out my abilities, if I could be bothered to. Try to get a refresher on...

Well, everything.

By the time I finished cleaning myself up, I decided I was, indeed, in the best possible shape. The little ones, as always, did excellent work. I took a moment to focus only on them, to see if any –

yes, there was, indeed, a surplus of anami spirits, and their unified proto-consciousness felt very ready to... expand their frame of reference.

Still didn't want to leave me, though. They wanted... well, more *me*. Which made sense, a symbiotic life form will want more of the same life form it grew symbiotic with, and there was a notable lack of such.

I hadn't decided if I was going to do anything to change that either. At least soon. Objectively speaking, it was probably the best idea going forward, but my motivation was still mostly all back in the afterlife.

Akari busied herself outside the door and updated me on what was clearly a heavily sanitised version of latest events.

I was in some fancy healing quarters with private bathroom directly attached. This was, it seems, a building created specifically for me. As she spoke, I spread Trito out invisibly, even more than it had been all this time in the anti-Kamui field I'd last left it in. Soon it engulfed the entire property, and a fair bit beyond.

What I saw on the ground above was what looked like a grocery store – no, it *was* a grocery store, even though the shopkeeper was an anbu and our own facility was underground. This was essentially a private clinic with facilities on par with the best Konoha had available, but created with earth and wood techniques so that it was completely sealed.

Seems I was something of a big deal, even two-years dead.

Effectively.

Turning my gaze outside, I saw something of the rest of what Akari was telling me. We were near what *used* to be the edge of Konoha, but the whole hidden village was bigger now. I had to extend Trito very far off to get a proper vantage, but there was a second wall some way out now.

*Minato's been busy.*

And was keeping himself very busy in more ways than one.

This place had no doors or windows. The shop above did, it was a genuine shop, but this facility was effectively cut off from it and everything else. The only things linking it to the outside were

the utilities, water piping and powerlines running through the ground from the shop down to this place.

It was probably the only reason they bothered to do it this way at all. The spot was probably chosen because it was easy to disguise as just another landline connection to the new city district. Otherwise, Minato probably would've stashed me in one of his many hideouts, seeing as distance was no issue for him and he... had just appeared in the other room just now. He was personally bringing people in and out?

Well don't I feel flattered.

On a hunch, I aimed my Mind's Eye of the Anchorite at Akari. Under the strong flavor of medical ninjutsu, her chakra had definitive doton undertones. She was probably able to open a way out with earth techniques then. Good.

Akari, of course, had fallen quiet upon the Hokage's arrival.

I used a bit of wind manipulation to dry myself off, some biomanipulation to fix my beard and my hair, and some charged particle manipulation to turn the sick robe and a couple of towels into proper clothing. Let's see, underwear came without saying, a shirt and pants I wouldn't feel awkward being seen in public in. Let's do a pair of nice sandals out of the straw hamper nearby, while I'm at it.

I exited the bathroom.

"Masanari-san," Namikaze Minato said upon seeing me. He looked, sounded and felt genuinely glad to see me on my feet. "Welcome back."

"Feel free to pretend I said 'good to be back' or whatever else you think will be believable to whoever you talk to."

Minato's face smoothed over with a thoughtful frown, then he sighed faintly. "I was afraid it would go something like this. With everything else, an ominous warning from beyond is more or less the one thing that *hasn't* come to pass. You're the messenger, I assume."

"Not at all."

The Fourth Hokage blinked. "Do I need to solve any riddles?"

“Hardly,” I smiled wryly. “Where do you think I’ve been this whole time?”

The younger man frowned in thought for a few seconds, then his expression lightened, and darkened again with the self-aware empathy of someone realizing there’s nothing they can do. “I see. This must be quite difficult for you then.”

“Umm.” Uzumaki Karin, as children often did, chose that moment to interrupt a heavy meaningful moment. “I guess you won’t be needing these clothes after all?”

Thankfully, the knee-jerk reaction of weary frustration with yet another child being foisted on me without my say so didn’t materialise. I had no problem experiencing feelings properly anymore, but...

Now that I could, none of them really measured up.

I was alive, healthy, surrounded by people who wanted to do as right by me as they could, who *had* done so for the entire time I’d been gone. I was even someone important enough for the Hokage himself to personally see to my safety and wellbeing. After, apparently, he’d taken the initiative to follow through on that journal I’d given Shisui way back. No strings attached either, from what I could see so far. All of that and I had only been awake ten minutes.

Ten minutes of everything going right but I still only felt sullen that I had to wake up at all.

Barely ten minutes and I already wanted to go back to sleep.

“-. .-“

I’d woken up one and a half years into the Cold War.

Well, technically it was a *real* war. Obito’s neutralization didn’t halt everything he’d set in motion, and Akatsuki in particular was never his brainchild, just one of the things he co-opted. Like he had done to Water Country through Yagura’s brainwashing. Besides that, Cloud Village and *especially* Rock Village wasted no time launching infiltration attempts and probing strikes into Fire Country, when they found out that Konoha’s leadership had been decapitated.

Minato had considered a disinformation campaign, but ultimately decided that not enough would be gained from delaying the news of his return. Also, he needed people to not just believe it, but also that he was every bit as dangerous as ever. He decided shock and awe tactics would be most productive, so he just captured all the belligerents in the same hour and dropped them off back in their countries of origin in the same day. Very publicly.

In line with his expectations, the entire world completely lost their minds when they found out the Yellow Flash was, indeed, back among the living. Contrary to his hopes, however, his return only galvanised Earth and Lightning countries to war. Apparently, his mercy in not killing the infiltrators was misinterpreted as weakness, so they wanted to capitalize on the time window left open by the chaos in Konoha 'before the Yellow Flash recovered his full strength.'

It was also discovered, sometime later, that there had been a powerful rumour going around too, about what really happened to the Uzumaki. Worse, that Minato now knew and was out for revenge, so peace was impossible regardless. The Konoha intelligence divisions were certain that rumour had not proliferated organically.

Because shinobi are all liars, the other villages painted Minato's counter-intelligence action as a war declaration. Lightning promptly tried to renew its alliance with Water, which didn't work because the Hidden mist Village was in the middle of a coup d'etat – Yagura had been assassinated by 'someone' while he was unconscious after Minato neutralized him, and now it was a power struggle between one Momochi Zabuza and everyone else.

Lightning's overtures to Earth proved more successful, Hidden Stone had already moved in to establish a clandestine base of operations in Rain Country. They even managed to launch a massed attack into Fire Country that allowed the Raikage A, with B's help, to penetrate all the way to the 'Thousand-Armed Enlightened Buddha Statue of Firefly Forest' that I had left behind during my failed enlightenment bid. Everyone was sure, apparently, that it was involved in Minato's resurrection and potentially the one thing keeping him alive.

Minato responded to this by coming to the statue's defense as if that was true. He completely thrashed the both of them at the same time, cut all of A's tendons beyond what medical jutsu could heal, altered B's Iron Armour Seal so that he couldn't synchronise with Gyuki anymore, and dumped them both off in A's office back in Kumogakure in a single yellow flash, proving that

he'd somehow gotten in there at some point to tag the place. The rest of the invading forces suffered similar fates, except they were instead dumped in ones and twos in the waiting rooms of hospitals all over Lightning Country's towns and cities.

This was set to make the whole world explode, unfortunately, even after the Fire daimyo sued for peace. The Raikage was too proud and offended to back down, calling Minato a soft weakling for not finishing the job even as he tore down his own headquarters in order to build a non-hiraishined replacement. Meanwhile, Stone had just too much hate of the Yellow Flash for Third Tsuchikage Onoki to control even if he wanted to.

Minato once again decided to pre-empt escalation on his own terms. He even had all his ammunition already handed to him by his enemies. And me. He published my 'findings' about the fate of Uzumaki clan remnants, used mokuton to expand Konoha by around fifty percent surface area, and proceeded to visit all his allies and invade *every single enemy country* all by himself.

Thereupon he persuaded, negotiated, intimidated, coerced, and even killed whoever got in his way. Within the span of just three weeks, every single redheaded person in the known world that *hadn't* chosen of their own free will to stay where they were had been collected in Konoha. Even Juugo's clan, because Minato decided better safe than sorry and took all the orange-haired people too.

All the while, he continued to cripple literally every ninja he personally engaged from the other belligerents. He very deliberately continued to refrain from killing any of them in order to stall the Cycle of Hatred, but nonetheless rendered them incapable of taking the field even with medical ninjutsu help. He equally pointedly made sure to neutralize the other kage in their command tents – or in the case of Kusagakure in his own office – just so everyone got the full message.

Thus it was that, to the shocked dismay of everyone *not* from Fire Country, hostilities fizzled out one month into Namikaze Minato taking the field.

It escaped no one that he could have achieved the same result by killing everyone who did him wrong on the first day. And that he still could.

Namikaze Minato had not started the hostilities, but he was ready to terminally end them at any moment he liked. He had the entire world at his mercy, and everyone knew it.



Finally, *finally* it was looking like the daimyos of Lightning and Stone countries were going to disclaim the whole mess as a complete misunderstanding, or ninja acting beyond their authority. Some of the nobility even had very personal reasons to desire peace – a number of them, and even a couple daimyo, had been using Uzumaki as broodmares and concubines, not just their shinobi. There was even serious talk about forcing the Raikage to step down, after all he had nothing going for him *except* combat ability, which he'd now lost. Anything to restore the status quo.

That was when the joint operation that Stone and Lightning had set up in Rain's territory was eradicated in one night. It was an attack carried out by merely three people, a picture of whom was taken by one of just two survivors. A man the attackers deliberately let flee to spread the word.

The other survivor had been Onoki of Both Scales, the Tsuchikage himself, who'd retreated from the site of battle and soon after the whole country of Rain.

The Fourth Shinobi World War had since turned into a slog between Stone and Lightning on one side – along with their various satellite countries – and Amegakure on the other. The latter currently held a narrow upper hand, despite being a single ninja village from the poorest buffer state on the continent.

I examined the photo. Yahiko's corpse looked broadly like I remembered from my prior life, vague as the resemblance was to that hand-drawn Japanese art style. However, he wasn't flanked by anyone even vaguely resembling the Preta and Human paths I recalled. Instead, he was accompanied by a blonde woman studded from toe to head in Nagato's black chakra receivers, and a bearded red-haired man who wore an odd three-pronged hat and *didn't* have any of the receivers.

While everyone was distracted by Minato, Nagato had gone all the way into Lightning and Stone countries and taken their jinchuriki. Only one of whom resisted.

I paged through the summaries that Minato had freely given me when we arrived at his office, after a very public and visible walk across town. I found that Han, the host of Kokuo the Five-Tailed Giant Horse, was the only other jinchuriki unaccounted for. Fu, at least, was still in Takigakure, likely because Tea Country was an ally of Fire so everyone knew Minato would take exception to her abduction. So, Flying Beetle Lucky Seven Chōmei was still safe at least.

Some pictures of *some* of the Akatsuki existed too. I only recognized Sasori and Kakuzu though. No photos of Konan, but that made sense if she was still playing Angel in Amegakure, and Nagato clearly wanted to make a point.

I set the files aside and returned to the photo of the Ame debacle.

Yugitoo Nii. Kumogakure's jinchuriki of Matatabi, the Two-Tailed Blazing Monster Cat. Unwilling.

Roshi. Iwagakure's jinchuuriki of Son Goku, the Four-Tailed Giant Rockfire Ape. Willing.

"Best as we've been able to figure out, Roshi was most incensed by your findings about his origins, not because of the shocking nature of the information, but because he'd reached similar conclusions in the past only to be persuaded otherwise by the Tsuchikage," Minato told me when I looked up from the photograph. "He was always on very poor terms with the Tsuchikage, his so-called meditative retreat was actually borderline sedition even before then. In light of that, and the fact he was always as stubborn as Onoki himself, he began to wonder how he'd let himself be persuaded at all."

"So he had an epiphany," I scratched my beard. "Or a breakdown."

"We're unsure. It was *some* manner of revelation, but that's as much as we can categorically confirm. We suspect some manner of mind alteration jutsu in play before then, likely not cast by Onoki at all. Either Roshi finally communed with Son Goku enough for the bijuu to end whatever technique it was, or Pain did something when he found him."

Obito wasn't planting his mind spiders just in Water, which made sense. Why only use a tool once, if it was so effective? "Or before then," I mused. "Akatsuki have been playing mercenary, right?"

"You believe Stone hired them at some point, leaving Pain with sufficient familiarity with their lands and operations to infiltrate with impunity," Minato nodded. "I have some suspicions of similar bent, but have decided not to pursue them. Any records of such will have been eliminated by now, and at this point it no longer matters."

I dropped the photo back on Minato's desk. "What's this about my statue?"

“Still where you left it. The daimyo intends to build a new tourist town around it, though I’ve been having some success warming him to the idea of granting the land to the Uzumaki instead. Now that you’re awake, you can work your particular brand of charm on him if you like.”

I shook my head. “No, dealing with all the Uzumaki remnants is going to be uncomfortable enough.”

“How so?”

“I was in the afterlife long enough for someone to visit that knew why we were banished.”

Minato’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “You were banished? Your family, you mean? That’ll be quite the story, I bet.”

“Not much of one actually.” I grimaced. “Suffice to say, great-grandpa stole another clansman’s would-be wife. She wasn’t *entirely* unwilling, which is why she was banished with him, though he was the only one whose chakra system was sealed as punishment. Either way, it’s not an auspicious history. Certainly not one that gives me any claim to the clan.”

“Your candor never fails to amaze, Hanzo,” Minato said with a wondering smile. “You won’t be able to persuade anyone that you don’t deserve a pardon, at this point. I hope you realize that.”

“I’ll not say no to one, but being accepted back and being put in charge are two different things.”

“Well, I’m afraid you might have woken up a bit too late to fight either matter.” Minato got up, walked to a cabinet near the wall and pulled a drawer open, from whence he drew a booklet. Returning to his desk, he held it out for me to take.

I did.

It was the Hidden Cloud bingo book.

My heart sank.

“Stone have an entry as well, with similar information.” Minato ‘helpfully’ supplied, because Naruto had to get it from someone and it sure as hell wasn’t me. “The bookmark should already be at the right page.”

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## Hattori Hanzo (S)

T: ?B+(S)    G: S    N: S

Int: S    Str: B+(S)    Stm: S    Spd: B+(S)



**Known Aliases:** Masanari Hanzo, Makul Finnu

**Born:** January 2, 780

**Family:** Wife (deceased), son (deceased), daughter (deceased)

**Affiliations:**

- Konohagakure – Civilian (?), Hokage Advisor (secret, informal, ?), all-around VIP
- Fire Country – Living National Treasure (Secret?), Businessman (Aspiring ?), Nobility (Pending ?)
- Uzumaki Clan – Elder, Clan Head
- Salamander Hanzo of Amegakure – unknown (blood relation has not been categorically disproven)

**Titles:** Exalted Loremaster, Master of Samsara, Sage of Spirits

**Bloodline Limit:** Uzumaki Vitality, Uzumaki Adamantine Sealing Chains, unspecified Biomanipulation bloodline (instant regeneration from fatal wounds demonstrated alongside flesh shedding for the purposes of evasion and escape, at will), Mokuton (Senju connection?)

**Abilities:**

- Taijutsu (Body Techniques) – B+ (S with Celestial Gates)
- Genjutsu (Illusory Arts) – unknown (none demonstrated, S-rank resistance displayed)
- Ninjutsu (Ninja Arts)
  - Katon (Fire Release) – unknown
  - Doton (Earth Release) – unknown
  - Fuuton (Wind Release) – unknown
  - Suiton (Water Release) – unknown
  - Raiton (Lightning Release) – S
  - Mokuton (Wood Release) – S (at least one Hashirama-level feat demonstrated)
  - Inton (Yin Release) – assume S (see Other)
  - Yoton (Yang Release) – assume S (see Other)
  - Onmyōton (Yin-Yang Release) – assume S (see Other)
  - Other – Kami Manifestation (?): individual is known to have invoked a giant four-armed guardian spirit on at least one occasion, capable of both offense and defense on par with the best jutsu of the Konoha elite, as well as channelling his unique abilities through himself and others. Explicitly not a summoning technique.
- Strength: B+ (S with Celestial Gates)
- Stamina: S (all combat feats listed in this profile occurred on the same day)
- Speed: B+ (S with Celestial Gates)
- Sensor Skills: unknown (assume B-rank or better, possibly S-rank based on past Uzumaki feats)

- Subterfuge – S (was able to pass as a completely powerless and unremarkable civilian while training S-rank skills and building influence to the highest levels in Fire Country and Konoha for decades)
- Intellect – S (known feats indicate genius mind impossible to assess reliably)

#### **Notable Feats:**

- Invented a chakra-independent autonomous vehicle
- Invented a heavier-than-air flying craft
- Invented remote-controlled versions of both of the above
- Invented chakra-independent weapons capable of firing c-rank projectile technique equivalents
- Invented mathematical methods capable of predicting the future
- Rediscovered lost Uzumaki secret techniques (specifics unknown)
- Masterminded the Uzumaki Clan Second Founding
- Alongside the Hyuuga and Uchiha Clan Chiefs, managed to survive the same decapitation strike that succeeded against the Third Hokage (nominally)
- Exhibited ability to open the Eight Celestial Gates at will
- Killed Orochimaru of the Sannin single-handedly
- Created the Thousand-Armed Enlightened Buddha Statue of Firefly Forest (purpose still unknown, presumed involvement in Yellow Flash resurrection)
- Brought the Yellow Flash back to life (method still unknown)
- Replicability of all the above assumed

#### **Noteworthy allies and connections:**

- Uchiha Shisui of the Body Flicker – Friendship, Paternal relationship (?)
- Uchiha Clan – benefactor, blood-sworn allies
- Third Hokage Sarutobi Hiruzen – secret (?) sponsor, patron (?) (turnaround in Third Hokage late-term governance attributed at least in part to subject)
- Fourth Hokage Namikaze Minato (Yellow Flash) – honor-bound patron, sworn ally, distant family relation by marriage through Fourth Hokage's wife, Uzumaki Kushina the Red Hot-Blooded Habanero, possible direct blood kin (grandparents were contemporaries with Senju Hashirama and Uzumaki Mito, Mokuton source?)
- Konoha Jonin Commander Nara Shikaku – co-conspirator
- Head of the Hyuuga Clan Hyuuga Hiashi – apparent social rival, blood debt (subject saved life of heiress during aforementioned decapitation strike)

**Psychological profile:** Subject is known to exhibit a dry, fatalistic self-deprecation in general interaction, but veers into condescension and outright contempt when challenged in his areas of expertise. Conversely, subject was never part of any armed forces and never had formal shinobi

training. Reported non-militant. Potential pacifist. Feats of prowess, though notable, are outnumbered by the rest, and they all took place in either self-defense or defense of allies. Subject to date has never initiated combat. Has chosen to pursue de-escalation in all known confrontations, only resorting to violence when all attempted overtures for peace had failed. **NOTE:** This assessment may be completely erroneous in the face of the rest of the data, which suggests instead that this is all just a front for a tricksome, manipulative, highly devious character underneath the underneath. Irreverence towards everything and everyone up to the Hokage themselves is apparently norm, not exception. Given connections now known, subject's public persona, and possibly entire history may be (and likely is) entirely fabricated.

**Threat Level:** Extreme. In the abstract, potentially catastrophic – subject may be capable of empowering others in ways similar to himself, and his inventions promise to shatter the current world order.

**Bounty:** Unlisted

**Standing Policy:** Do Not Engage

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*That's not how you say Finn MacCool*, I thought blankly as I stared at my Bingo Book entry. Every possible emotion was fully experienced at the same time, then in a line and all together through a myriad of parallel mind threads, even as the greater part of my brain processed the implications the same way.

When I was done reasoning through all the information and its possible sources, assuming that it wasn't Konoha itself that leaked any of this... There was only one person *not* from Konoha who knew about everything in that list, especially that I might be able to permanently empower others. "Orochimaru's alive."

"Most probably."

As I'd feared, Orochimaru must already have had phylactery seals on backup patsies. Also, at least one person in his employ would have been entrusted with – and capable of using – the revival function in them. Was Kabuto in his employ already? Possibly among the ROOT agents too, the ones who tried to frame Akatsuki for the attack and attempted kidnappings.

Shikaku told me back then that at least a couple of them had escaped. But it was still early in the timeline... "This might be a reach, but during whatever you did with ROOT, did you find out anything about one Yakushi Nono?"

Minato frowned in thought. “I cannot recall the name off hand. Why?”

“Danzo and Orochimaru were playing a really fucked up psychological experiment on her, regularly delivering her fake photos about her de facto son Kabuto growing up, so she wouldn’t recognize him when they met again. From what I know, they planned to send the kid to kill her after her long-term infiltration in Earth country ran its course.”

Minato looked at me narrowly. “Something you got from Orochimaru during your harrowing suicide ploy?”

I gave Minato an equally earnest smile. “Sure, let’s go with that.”

A puff of smoke produced a shadow clone that promptly teleported away. “My clone will look into that. If nothing else, she should be extracted at least, if she is still alive.”

I re-read my Bingo Book entry with very mixed feelings, some of it irony and none of it fear. “I was wondering when this would happen,” I huffed finally. “Hattori Hanzo indeed.”

I had expected this to happen *only* for the last few months before my coma, but even before then the irony of my name hadn’t been lost on me. ‘Masanari’ was the real name of Hattori Hanzo back on Earth too, during my first life. Though for him it was his first name, not the surname. Also, Hattori Hanzo was literally known as the Second Hanzo.

If I ever let someone make a story of my life, this will probably be the most blatant non-reveal ever written. I can’t imagine that anyone will fail to instantly make the connection the first time they see my name written down on page.

*It looks like I’m being ennobled too, soon, I thought wryly. That’s the only thing left before I can declare myself a samurai, then the parallels will be complete. Might have to wage a war too, if the Land of Iron takes offense. Very in theme.*

“Does this mean my research is out there now? I know Hiashi retrieved the stuff Orochimaru stole, but I don’t know what happened with it after that.”

“No.”

I looked up from the book in surprise. “I’m pretty sure at least *some* of that stuff is written in a language you or Naruto can understand. And I know the Third kept tabs on all the stuff I’ve done



since my thesis, especially the things Shisui was there for. You're telling me none of that was leaked?"

"Not of that was *allowed* to be leaked. By me." Minato beheld me seriously. "I am not Hiruzen, I am not you, and you were not dead. When I became Hokage, I had no greater vision than protecting Konoha. But you clearly do. Now that you are back among us, I am ready to cast my bet."

Well damn. I – no, no bones about it. "I am very touched to hear that."

Minato nodded graciously. "I did, however, take the liberty of letting the Daimyo know of your business aspirations. Now that you have recovered, I can update his Majesty and you two can schedule a meeting and discuss the particulars at leisure."

... Go me for bypassing the bureaucracy without even trying? "Maybe later." I cleared my throat. "So. There aren't attack helicopters flying all over the place then?" Admittedly, the internal combustion engine wasn't entirely straightforward to adapt. Neither it nor the capacitor and battery technology I'd played with was laid down on paper either. Not in a readable language anyway.

No doubt someone would have figured something of them out, if given free reign, and especially with Naruto's help and whatever Minato got from me during our Ninshu back then. Doubly so if they took apart Sasuke's toys.

But then, those would be clan property now, wouldn't they?

I sat back, closed my eyes and combined the awareness of senriki with the Third Eye of the Anchorite to scan the entire village. There was... amazingly little tension to be found, considering we were technically in a state of world war. Since my combination of sensory powers let me even distinguish shapes and bodily motions, I could even identify people I'd never been in the presence of before, based on images and deductive reasoning.

I didn't find Jiariya, but traces of chakra with toad-like flavor were recent enough around the hot springs that I could trace his exit from the village, and even tell it had only happened yesterday. A powerful Yin-flavored chakra that could only be Senju Tsunade was in one of the new hospitals in the new outer district, either tending to or examining one of Juugo's kinsmen.

Almost on the opposite end of the village, Sarutobi Hiruzen was practicing calligraphy alone in a room, though there was a man keeping vigil in seiza in an adjacent room, playing shogi on his own

with a single thin straw paper wall between them. By the shape of him and their similar chakras, it was probably Asuma. To rooms farther off, a woman was entertaining a toddler. Also close to the others in terms of energy nature, more so than the rest of the Sarutobi clan around the place. Konohamaru and his mother then.

The Uchiha clan was no longer in the old compound. Instead, it was in the process of relocating to the inner ring of the village, where the police section and prison had once been. It was more space, and solved the last of their optics problem in one fell swoop. Itachi was talking to the foreman. Shisui... He was in the forest by a river, practicing kunai and shuriken throwing blind.

Looking outward, I had to scan the underground – already a tall task – and couldn't see more than a meter into the new facility I found. It had been built where Danzo's ROOT base had once been. That would be the new prison then, and Minato had clearly come up with new security measures if even I couldn't see through them lightly. I did have more options than this, but they were hardly necessary.

Finally, after another full scan of the village, I was able to locate my toads. Absentmindedly stroking the shapeshifted form of Yemo hanging from my neck, I gave my now huge creations a thorough once over. They were in the Forest of Feath, living in a large but very heavily defended site with all the essentials. By the traces of energy all over the place, I could tell that Jiraiya had summoned someone there recently, and that Naruto dropped by at least once a day to take care of them. I love that boy.

My house was intact, with most everything where I'd left it. Freshly dusted too. Chakra traces suggested that Shisui had taken it upon himself to keep it right as I'd left it. Whether my notebooks and scrolls were still there, that I'd have to check in person. Probably not. Minato had already told me that they carried out my ANBU pass contingency, so my research had probably been moved somewhere safe.

Good. Better safe than too stupid live.

Hatake Kakashi was among the ANBU hidden around the room, and there was a couple more outside the tower. I did, of course, know where everyone was.

“There's just one thing I still don't get,” I said when I finally opened my eyes again.

“That being?”

I held the bingo book open at my entry for him to see. “What the heck is up with this picture? I’m absolutely positive that I never looked this good in my life.”

“That was Shikaku’s contribution to my retaliation on your behalf,” Minato said wryly. “Since Cloud insisted on trying to ruin your future, I decided to be petty while collecting your scattered clansmen. I spent my off-time sneaking into printing presses and changing as many trays as I could find with ours.”

I stared at him in disbelief.

“It was Naruto’s idea,” Minato waved me off as if that excused anything. “I would have gone after the leaks, or just stolen or sabotaged production of the Bingo Book until they gave up. But they managed to get the information out to too many people before we finally found all the facilities, and they could always produce some by hand just to spite us. This demon is well and truly free of its seal, I’m afraid.”

“So this is a photo of Shikaku under the transformation technique?” I shook my head in disbelief. “Is he a genius artist too, or something?”

Well, since the bunny’s already loose...

I decided to re-groom myself right then, adjusting my hair and my beard to the right length and gloss, and transmuted my clothing too, to reflect the picture. I had to play a bit with the tone and lustre of my skin, which took longer than I thought it would. Even though I didn’t need to change any of my bone structure, it took me over a minute to get everything right, even with all my advantages. “How’s that?”

“A vast improvement to Naruto’s ‘Uncle Hanzo in the lab’ transformations.”

“Oh yeah, those are probably a right fright to look upon.”

Minato shrugged. “I personally don’t see it, but I’ve been told by reliable sources that my tastes for aesthetics can be out of tune with the rest of humanity.”

*If they weren’t you wouldn’t be the Messiah.*

Well, the prototype, anyway.

Or maybe not? Minato was a much better fit than Naruto for Gamamaru's prophecy. Naruto had to earn the destiny his father abandoned when the latter chose – foolishly, in my opinion – to use the Death Demon Consuming Seal. You know, instead of just letting Kushina seal the Kyuubi back inside herself and be the *only* one who died along with it, like she'd wanted.

Ah, but I don't have a very good opinion of prophecy to begin with. The world would be a much better place – and the other realms too – if the toads and everyone who went along with them had gotten off their asses, instead of settling down to wait for a thousand years for Gamamaru's vision to happen. Waiting for a future saviour is just an excuse not to do anything to make things better *now*.

Of course, Minato's insistence on dying unnecessarily was foolish regardless.

But I was sure I didn't need to have that talk with him at this point. He'd seen for himself the result of his 'sacrifice.'

Speaking of sacrifices.

The bouncing human missile that had been all but cannonballing in our direction since the moment he got out of the Shinobi Academy finally barrelled through the thankfully open window.

“UNCLE!” Hollered one Namikaze Naruto. “YOU'RE ALIVE!”

“OOOF!” I grunted as the kid literally slammed into my chest so hard I toppled backwards along with my chair.

CRASH

The chair broke under me because I was heavy as hell and didn't bother negating my own mass in the presence of friends, don't you know.

“You're alive, you're alive, you're alive, I'm so happy! I knew you'd be back, you never give up, you always win, I knew it! I-I'b so habby!” Naruto burst into hiccupping tears, which he promptly swallowed along with his snot. “Nob! I'b not gonna gry!” Trying again, he-

He somehow managed to actually do it, incredible.

“I'm not gonna cry! I'm not a baby, I'm a ninja! Dad tell him, Uncle you gotta believe me, believe it! Don't listen to that stupid-head Karin, I don't care what she says, she doesn't know anything

and she makes stuff up all the time and she *lies!* She just came to the Academy to brag about playing nurse for you! She still expects me to believe her that she gets to take care of you when I only get to visit once a week! Like I'll believe that! Tell him Dad!"

Minato rubbed the side of his nose with self-consciousness so fake that it completely flew over Naruto's head. "I told you, Naruto, as Hokage I cannot afford to comment on what measures may or may not be in place to secure the Uzumaki Clan Head's life and wellbeing."

"But that's so dumb!" Naruto complained, sagging like a pile of flubber on top of my chest where I lay on the ground. "If that's true, why haven't you locked Karin up for lying about it? When I become Hokage that's the first thing I'll do!"

*Because misinformation? Maybe?* I thought vaguely as I sat up. I held Naruto close to me with all the full-heartedness I'd not been able to feel for anyone since my wife and kids died. Finally, I was once again a fully functional human being.

Even though I still wasn't all on this side yet. Not even mostly.

"What took you so long anyway?!" Naruto demanded when I crossed my legs under me and he finally had something to stand on that put his face level with mine. He hopped up and pointed accusingly. "You just went to sleep and didn't wake up! For two years! It's crazy, how could you, Uncle?"

I smiled sadly. "No one wants to come back from Heaven, Naruto."

"Whu – you were in HEAVEN?!" Naruto immediately turned starry-eyed. "That-that's *awesome!* What was it like?! you have to tell me – no wait! No! No, that's not gonna work, not this time, I'm onto you now! You can't distract me from being upset with you anymore! You abandoned me! And-and-AHA!" He pointed at my shimmering tie then, even more accusingly. "See, even the magic tie agrees with me, why else would it be so clingy and not come out to trip me or something? It always does something when I say something bad about you! Even it knows I'm right!"

Magic tie? What-?

A ninshu nudge from my 'magic tie' let me know through that somehow, I didn't know how, Naruto had *still* never seen my 'magic tie' be anything but a magic, 'occasionally-a-button-but-

usually-just-a-cool-tie thing' that sometimes moves randomly when he's not looking. Worse, everyone else seemed determined to play into this running gag.

I looked at the blond man across the desk. "You are a cruel man indeed, Namikaze Minato."

I was entirely serious. It was a bit too much to pull this trick on Naruto on top of everything else. Alongside the preferential treatment afforded to Karin and her mother. Which, alright, that was clearly down to their special chakra, special duties were only given to them in case I had to bite them and recover from fatal injuries, if security on me failed.

But it was still one step too far. Sure Naruto was a loudmouth, but the mobile security on him was hardly inferior to the static one on mine, wasn't it?

Oh well. Maybe Naruto had done something to earn this as a long-term lesson while I was comatose, he's certainly the type-

"See, see Dad, Uncle totally agrees with me, I told you he would!" Uzumaki Naruto triumphantly misunderstood everything. "This is why I like the Old Man More than you!" He lied. "I mean sure, he's crazy now, but Uncle can just heal him now that he's back! You'll do it, right Uncle? Just like Shisui-san! You already got to him, right? I *know* he still plays bodyguard no matter what anyone else says, even though he's going blind and his chakra's all wonky now too. He's not as bad as Scarecrow, and he still gets to be in ANBU! I know! We'll go do it all right now! We can, right? Let's go!"

... Eh?